
Renová el Parque Caballero: A multi-modal civic engagement platform to revitalize an iconic public park of Asuncion

Jorge Saldivar

Barcelona Supercomputing
Center (BSC)
Barcelona, Spain
jorge.saldivar@bsc.es

Cristhian Parra

United Nations
Development Program
Asunción, Paraguay
cristhian.parra@undp.org

Luca Cernuzzi

Catholic University Nuestra
Señora de la Asunción
Asunción, Paraguay
lcernuzz@uc.edu.py

Luis Godoy

Oficina Comunitaria de
Arquitectura
Asunción, Paraguay
luis@oca.com.py

Abstract

This article reports on an experience of a multi-modal participatory process that aimed at deliberating on proposals to revitalize a public park in Asuncion and which led to the formation of a community of activists that are today actively participating in the restoration of the park.

Author Keywords

Civic Engagement; Civic Technology; Urban Planning

Introduction

Democracy in Paraguay has developed over the past 30 years within a socio-cultural context of low participation and engagement of its citizens [1, 4]. Indifference and distrust in public institutions influence the perceived apathy of citizens to get involved in public affairs [3].

However, the pervasiveness of today's technology, especially smartphones and social media, is changing this by equipping Paraguayans with a variety of tools that facilitate engagement, from allowing access to public information to coordinating mobilizations [5]. Still, the use of technology for participatory democratic deliberation and decision making has been scarce.

In this paper, we discuss lessons learned from one experience designing and implementing a participatory process that combined digital platforms and offline

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(a) The Caballero Park in its apogee



(b) The Caballero Park today

Figure 1: Appearance of the Caballero Park today and in the past. Photo: ABC Color

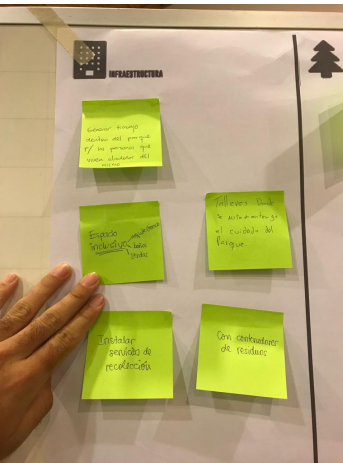


Figure 2: On-site ideation workshop

deliberation spaces to revitalize an iconic public park in the capital of Paraguay, Asuncion.

The Caballero Park

Built-in the 1920's close to the city center of Asuncion, the park General Bernardino Caballero has been for decades a place of social recreation, sports, and cultural events for residents of Asuncion. In its splendor, this park of almost 20 hectares served as the epicenter of school class trips, family gatherings, civic and sports encounters.

The former president of Paraguay, Juan Natalicio González, described the park facilities in the decade of 30s with these words *“The Caballero Park offers landscapes of rare attractiveness. The fresh breeze from the river runs through its murmuring avenues. A coffee plantation bloodies of fruits in the fall. Yerba mate trees form artificial mounds. The strong lapachos with pink and yellow flowers are born along the routes. The water sleeps in the ponds and sings in the waterfalls, while some hieratical and long-legged bird meditates on its banks”* [2].

For generations of *Asuncenos* (citizens of Asuncion), the Caballero Park represents more than just a park is the iconic and historical place where they spent unforgettable moments of infancy and adolescence in the company of their lovely ones. It was at the beginning of the 90s when the situation of the park started to decline. The negligence and indolence of the several municipal administrations of different political signs destroyed all of the cultural, historical, and social legacies that the park symbolizes for the Asuncion's population. Figure 1 contrasts the current situation of the park with its appearance in its golden times.

Inspired and motivated by this place's historical value, we set up a participatory process where we invited the citizenry of Asuncion to discuss ideas and present proposals on how

the Caballero Park can be revitalized to become a landmark in the Asuncion's social life again.

The Multi-Modal Participatory Platform

To achieve this goal, we set up a multi-modal civic engagement platform that combines online and onsite participatory channels. For the four months of experience (from April to August 2018), the process was structured in sequential activities that facilitate the participation: ideation, deliberation, refinement, and voting.

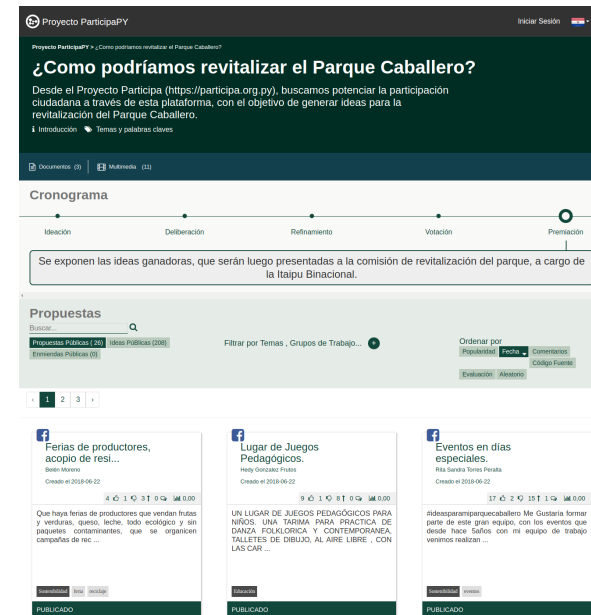


Figure 3: The AppCivist platform employed for ideation, proposal refinement, and voting. The Facebook icon indicates that the idea was originated on Facebook and replicated on AppCivist

First of all, we asked the participants to focus their

contributions on proposals to recover the infrastructure, landscape, nature, safety, sustainability, sport, culture and history, integration with the city, and education of the park.



Figure 4: Deliberative workshop

In the ideation stage, citizens were invited to post ideas and opinions about revitalizing the Caballero Park. Ideas could be proposed through a Facebook page and via the participatory platform AppCivist. A face-to-face event was also organized in the park's vicinity to collect ideas and proposals from the neighbors on how the park can be recovered (see Figure 2).



Figure 5: Face-to-face voting event celebrated in the dependencies of the park

At the deliberation stage, a deliberative workshop was organized. During the workshop, a set of pre-selected ideas were presented, and the participants had the opportunity to give feedback about the strengths and limitations of proposals.

In the refinement phase, the deliberated ideas were presented to the public on the AppCivist platform (see Figure 3). Authors of the ideas were invited to use the AppCivist's collaborative editing tool to expand ideas, turning them into proposals. They were instructed to consider, whenever possible, the feedback collected on the online platform and in the deliberative workshop.

The process finished with the voting phase. Here, the participants were invited to express their support or disapproval of the refined proposals. Voting was conducted both online, through the AppCivist platform, and in-person. We adopted a 1 to 10 scale for voting, and the participants were asked to evaluate the need, benefits, and feasibility of the proposals. During this phase, neighbors of the park were invited to a voting session celebrated in one of the park's dependencies. They were instructed to indicate with post-its their favorite ideas (see Figure 5). The top-five most voted proposals were presented to the municipality of

Asuncion to be included in a recovery plan for the park.

Results

Almost 80% of the ideas during the ideation phased were shared through Facebook. A Facebook page was used to campaign the initiative. The participants primarily used the comment section of the promotion posts to left their opinions and ideas. In total, 346 people participated using both Facebook and AppCivist. They generated 212 ideas, 159 comments, and 404 votes.

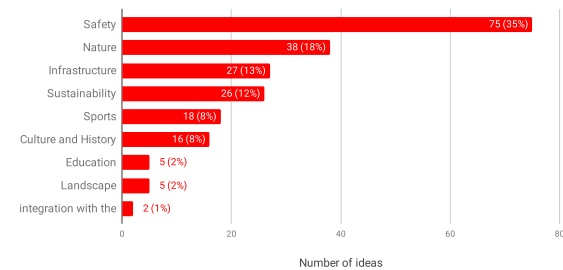


Figure 6: Distribution of ideas by topic.

Almost half of the participants submitted ideas (44%, 154 out of 346) on renovating the Caballero Park. Less than 15% of the 346 contributors focused their participation only on voting for the ideas and opinions, while 7% posted opinions on other participants' ideas and comments.

Security was the topic most commented on by the participants, 35% (75 out of 212) of the ideas were related to this issue, as shown in Figure 6. The participants' interest in the park's safety is not surprising since the Caballero Park ceased to be a space for recreation and citizen gathering mainly because of severe security problems; from some time now, robberies and assaults were registered more and

Profile of the participants.

About 10% of the 346 participants filled out a post-experience survey, which inquired about their demographic characteristics and motivations to participate. The group of participants was divided between men and women in a ratio of 70-30, respectively. The average age was 43 years.

Almost half of the survey respondents stated that they were attracted by the possibility of improving the park's situation. One-third of the respondents manifested that they were motivated by civic duty and the opportunity to contribute to a collective effort.

In line with the patterns of participation, almost 80% of respondents manifested that they used Facebook to contribute to the initiative. Among the reasons they argued are: ease of use, familiarity, daily use, and little effort to keep abreast of process updates.

more frequently in the place. Notably, the most voted idea was not related to the most discussed topic but to promote sports activities in the park. Along this line, the idea that concentrated most of the comments was associated with recovering the park's nature by reforesting native trees.

For the deliberation phase, the 203 ideas generated on Facebook were uploaded to AppCivist. Four ideas already existed in AppCivist, so the site was loaded with 207 ideas collected during the ideation phase. For a week, the ideas remained in AppCivist available to receive comments or votes. At the end of this period, the deliberative workshop was held to discuss a set of ideas, which were selected based on a combination of the following criteria: i) the number of comments received on AppCivist by the participants, ii) the engagement of the ideas' authors during this part of the process; iii) the level of detail contained in the idea, in relation to other ideas of the same topic. We also made sure that all topics were included in the selection. As a result, 26 out of the 207 ideas were selected.

The workshop was attended by 11 people, including four public servants, three authors of ideas, and four citizens of Asuncion who got to know about the event and decided to attend it. The authors of this paper facilitated the workshop. Figure 4 shows the participants of the workshop during the reflective moments. The participants were asked to contribute with opinions about the strength and limitations of the ideas. They were also required to provide feedback on how ideas can be improved. The goal was to use the workshop's inputs to guide the refinement phase later down the road.

After the refinement phase, the five most voted proposals were: i) organize in the park playful events on weekends; ii) build facilities for skating in the park; iii) improve the entrance area of the park; iv) organize public events on

special days (e.g., holidays, national day); v) recover the pools and pond.

Discussion

Renová el Parque Caballero was one of the first participatory processes in Asuncion that used a mix of digital and physical participation. The resulting multi-modal posed challenges for organizers. That is to say, combining and analyzing multiple input sources while also enabling a highly engaging process that outlived its initial purpose through a new community of local activists who remained committed to the cause restating this park to its past glory.

Although not at the scale of other participatory processes, for the context of this community, the theme, and the relatively low amount of effort we invested in communication, the initiative's reach was surprising. Key to this reach was the use of Facebook as one of the means to collect ideas and comments, and the role of a communicator who actively engaged with the participants. A broad user base and good support for smartphones are two factors that make Facebook an interesting platform for scaling the audience of a participative process.

The unstructured nature of Facebook posts and comments, however, introduced the need for data extraction, transformation, load, and analysis before we could engage in productive deliberation and proposal development. The need to develop data processing and analysis capacities (both in human resources and tools) is a feature of these processes that integrate social networks.

Besides, we realized that Facebook is not the most appropriate means to deliberate and develop proposals in depth. Offline workshops and assemblies remain a better way to engage in deep and rich conversations. The offline events were also an excellent community formation strategy.

People from the community came together, met, and later, by a WhatsApp Group, remained connected and engaged. The group *Amig@s del Parque Caballero* (Friends of the Caballero Park) remains active to this day, and it is even in the process of formalizing as an association to promote the restoration of the park. This is an unexpected lesson of this process: messaging platforms and groups are useful mechanisms to use when community formation and engagement is one of your goals.

Finally, but not least, one of the failures of our process represents also a key insight. Throughout the process, we were able to engage decision-maker actors in some moments (e.g., Municipality Mayor) but could not secure their commitment to take up projects to include them in the master plan for the park. The political will to establish binding participatory processes remains a challenge in Paraguay, making this type of participatory processes mostly not viable. The formation of the community and the active engagement of some of its members is probably the only reason why this process did not end in frustration, as most others do when participation does not influence decisions significantly.

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