



Innovative and Inclusive Democratic Spaces for Deliberation and Participation  
HE-101132431

## D5.5 Methodology conduct the trustworthiness and awareness dynamics

<b>Dissemination Level</b>	Public
<b>Contractual date of delivery</b>	31/12/2024
<b>Actual date of delivery</b>	23/12/2024
<b>Work package</b>	WP5 Communication, Dissemination, & Exploitation
<b>Tasks</b>	T5.2 Trustworthiness and awareness, rebuilding the relationship between administrations and citizens.
<b>Approval Status</b>	final
<b>Version</b>	1.0
<b>Lead Beneficiary</b>	CIB
<b>Contributing Beneficiaries</b>	Nexus, BOO, ANFAAS, IMPD, PIM, AAIT

### Summary

This document is deliverable 5.5, which describes the methodology and results of Task 5.2. This task focuses on: 'Trustworthiness and awareness, rebuilding the relationship between administrations and citizens.' The aim of this task is to help bring together public administrations and individuals facing marginalisation. To identify the way to do this, the consortium decided on interviewing experts or professionals from organisations working with disabled, migrant or older persons, as well as others facing marginalisation, who could highlight the barriers to participation faced by the communities they represent. This report is the result of these interviews. The aim of the report is to show what causes people facing language barriers to be politically and democratically excluded and what potential solutions can bring positive outcomes. The next two phases of this awareness-raising strategy are also detailed in this deliverable. The following step in this strategy will be the creation of a mini guide for public authorities on how to be more inclusive.

*This document is part of a project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation program under the Grant Agreement No. 101132431 .*

*Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them*



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### **Plain Language Summary**

Deliverable 5.5 shows the work done for task 5.2.

This task is done to find ways to bring public administrations and individuals together.

To do this correctly, the iDEM partners interviewed experts that work with people who have difficulties participating in democratic processes.

This report is the result of the interviews.

The aim of the report is to learn why they experience these difficulties.

It also has solutions to the difficulties.

A guide for public authorities will be created with the information from the report.

Next year this guide will be shared with authorities.

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<b>Document History</b>			
<b>Version</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Revised by</b>
V0.1	26/11/2024	First draft for review	CIB
	03/12/2024	internal review provided	Serge Sharoff - UOL
	10/12/2024	internal review provided	Eleonora Severa - ANFAAS
V1.0	10/12/2024	Final version prepared	CIB
	20/12/2024	Final version reviewed	CIB
	23/12/2024	Submitted	Sandra Szasz - UPF

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<b>Acronyms</b>	
AAIT	ActionAid International Italia ETS
ANFFAS	Associazione Nazionale Famiglie Di Persone Con Disabilità Intellettive e Disturbi del Neurosviluppo
BOO	Sindicatura de Greuges de Barcelona
CIB	Fundación Cibervoluntarios
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
DOA	Description of action
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
iDEM	Innovative and Inclusive Democratic Spaces for Deliberation and Participation
IMPD	Institut Municipal de Persones amb Discapacitat
M	Month
NEXUS	Nexus Institut für Kooperationsmanagement und Interdisziplinäre Forschung GMBH
PIM	Plena Inclusión Madrid
T	Task
UPF	Universitat Pompeu Fabra
WP	Work Package

## 1. Introduction

The goal of iDEM [Innovation and Inclusive Democratic Spaces for Deliberation and Participation] is to create a technological solution to reduce linguistic barriers to participation and deliberation in democratic spaces. The linguistic complexity inherent in political spaces and processes often prevents vulnerable or marginalised groups from having their voices heard in decision-making. Challenges in understanding political information, whether written or spoken, along with barriers to producing similar forms of discourse, exclude individuals facing linguistic difficulties, ranging from people with cognitive disabilities to migrants who may lack proficiency in the language of their host country. This exclusion results in gaps in democratic representation and diminishes decision-making effectiveness by failing to incorporate the diverse interests of people facing language barriers.

Therefore, work package 5 Communication, Dissemination and Exploitation aims to share the project's general objective with the main social and political stakeholders. This includes EU governments and public administrations (at national, regional, municipal and community levels), communities facing exclusion (through their representative organisations and associations, NGOs and different civil society groups) as well as the general public. In this way, their effective interaction is promoted in advance, which constitutes the viability and success of the iDEM project.

To do this, this document takes into account the previous work and results of the project. Among the different project work packages, WP1 and WP4 have been particularly considered: while the first analyses issues related to the theoretical foundations of power structures, inequalities and intersectionality, the latter contributes to better understanding engagement among all key actors in participatory and deliberative democratic spaces.

In this regard, T5.2 'Trustworthiness and awareness, rebuilding the relationship between administrations and citizens', and its first result in this deliverable D5.5, has the objective of rebuilding the relationship and trust between these stakeholders, as stated in the project's application. This working dynamic between citizens and their administrations can either be a barrier or an opportunity for increased participation. Hence, this task and this first document are crucial for the future of the iDEM project, to the extent that it prepares the conditions that make democratic spaces open, accessible, inclusive and, above all, trustworthy places for everyone.

### 1.1. Connection with the overall project

WP5 integrates a diverse collection of objectives, in which communication plays a fundamental role, not only to disseminate the project and ensure its future exploitation, but to allow communication, as the core of deliberative democracy, to take place. For this reason, it is

appropriate to detail the contributions that this document draws on, as well as the initiatives it is developing.

As previously mentioned, the connections with WP1 are evident. Promoting trust and communication between actors in democratic spaces is based on the reading of D1.1<sup>1</sup> in which the principle of equity is established as a key to the quality of democratic institutions and processes, according to which, all parties are, in some sense, equal, regardless of their personal conditions (economic, political, sociocultural or any other nature). This equality is the fundamental principle of trust in exchanging arguments with others.

However, democratic spaces can encounter barriers (some more obvious than others) that limit representativeness and final deliberative quality. In this regard, D1.2<sup>2</sup> carries out a detailed analysis of the barriers to democratic participation of people with cognitive disabilities when it comes to contributing with their voice to decisions. The interviews held for D1.2 were held in a similar informal manner as the ones for D5.5. The results of this deliverable, however, add to the results of the previous one by addressing the barriers faced by other groups of people, such as migrant people, older people, people with disabilities or people in situations of vulnerability.

Other research deliverables such as D1.3<sup>3</sup> explain the intersectional considerations that must be taken into account when analysing citizen participation in democracy. Taking into account that oftentimes people face more than one barrier to social participation (which may be related to gender, age or disability) allows us to address in a much more precise way the reasons that, until now, have prevented their voice from being taken into account on equal terms to those of others. This constitutes a persistent source of distrust in democratic processes for increasingly large segments of people. And that is why including these people in all phases of the iDEM development process is a fundamental principle of the project.

The qualitative approach that will be presented below, and that constitutes the core of this document, has also been fed with the general recommendations that every professional or researcher involved in the iDEM project must follow to guarantee the equity, ethical and legal principles that allow these difficulties to be resolved. First of all, D1.4 must be mentioned to the extent that it prevents some of the common practices that can undermine the agency of participants in any activity (not only in piloting activities but also in interviews, as is the case), as well as recommending best practice examples that facilitate, from the beginning, the trust between citizens and their administrations.

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<sup>1</sup> D1.1 – Report on epistemic and legitimacy standards.

<sup>2</sup> D1.2 – Report on barriers, strategies, and support

<sup>3</sup> D1.3 – Report on power structure and intersectional barriers in democratic spaces

Although also indirectly, as it is oriented towards the design of the pilots, the comprehensive evaluation carried out by D4.1<sup>4</sup> on the engagement of vulnerable social groups, offers interesting takeaways that have been incorporated to the methodology of T5.2. Likewise, significant details have been recovered from T4.2<sup>5</sup> to the extent that inclusion by facilitators is applicable, in an analogous way, for this task.

All these efforts, including the task pertaining to this deliverable, would be distorted if they were not carried out under the strictest ethical standards and protection of the rights of the people who participate in the development of iDEM. For this reason, WP6<sup>6</sup> dedicated to ethical principles (which includes legally mandatory mentions of legislation relating to the protection of personal data) are part of the work routines of this team. All activities carried out with third parties have punctually followed the recommendations made by the Ethics Committee, disseminated through specific training<sup>7</sup> and reflected in its protocols<sup>8</sup>.

## 1.2 Objective of the deliverable

There is extensive research on the unequal participation of people with disabilities, migrants and older people in democracy. This deliverable aims to carry out its own informal research to identify the barriers that are relevant to iDEM's direct target groups so that these issues can then be shared with relevant administrations in order to foster their participation. It was considered that the project's impact and sustainability would be greater if it could encourage change at institutional levels. According to Mattila (2018) 'political participation is affected by a person's overall level of well-being, social networks and life situation'. Since iDEM's target beneficiaries are often considered to be vulnerable populations, T5.2, and the results ensuing, were considered to further advance these communities' access to participation.

The need to advance iDEM's goal to promote access to information as well as to participation, is also highlighted by Mattila (2018) when he explains that 'knowledge about politics is often considered to be a key factor in the involvement of ordinary people in the democratic process'. Many, like Troitiño (2022), believe that the technological developments in ICT can provide access to digital information and foster the participation and inclusion of communities facing political exclusion, such as the ones represented by iDEM. This statement needs to be interpreted in context, as for ICT to be a helpful tool it has to comply with accessibility standards. Reports like the one written by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Human Rights' (FRA) (2024) develop this idea, as it identifies that few member states comply with accessibility regulations regarding 'information and communications technology'.

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<sup>4</sup> D4.1 – Report on engagements of hard to reach groups and vulnerable populations

<sup>5</sup> T4.2 Enhancing the production of inclusiveness by facilitators (analysis/research).

<sup>6</sup> WP6 - Ethical Principles & Procedures

<sup>7</sup> D6.3 – Ethics Training and Support Materials

<sup>8</sup> D6.1 – Ethical Protocols

When breaking down the barriers that iDEM's main beneficiaries face in political participation, people with disabilities have been the focus of much institutional research. According to the European Council's (2024) infographics, in 2023, 101 million EU citizens had some form of disability. This constitutes '27% of the EU population over the age of 16' (European Council, 2024). This means that there is a large percentage of people who face different barriers in democratic participation. The FRA's (2024) report identifies that while most member states have prohibited legal barriers that would not allow people with disabilities to vote, 'people with visual, hearing or intellectual disabilities still face considerable barriers' (FRA, 2024) in voting processes.

The FRA (2024) and reports on observations of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Spain (2019), Germany (2023), France (2021) and Sweden (2014) by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities identified several obstacles to democratic participation for people with disabilities:

- digital voter registration
- the need for medical documents attesting that people have, what third parties consider to be, capacity to vote
- institutionalisation
- poor accessibility and/or assistance in democratic procedures
- lack of representation in democratic processes.

While the countries with legal restrictions on the voting rights of people with disabilities are quickly diminishing, this is not so the case for migrant people. In 2020, out of the 56 countries that were part of the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), immigrants in 31 of them had no right to vote. The report also indicates that in the case of many EU countries, non-EU citizens have limited local voting rights (MIPEX, 2020). The EU28 countries scored an average of 28/100 in 2019 for political participation of migrants according to the MIPEX (2020). In their research, Riniolo and Ortensi (2020) found that out of 13,254 people aged 14–35, 69.2% of those from first and second generation migrant families were not politically active. This might be due to the obstacles to participation that Riniolo and Ortensi (2020) identified in their text, namely language proficiency and naturalisation (citizenship), social trust and sense of belonging, and family relationships with politics as crucial in the political participation of young migrants. For migrants attempting to vote in their country of origin, Adamson (2007) reiterates the importance that knowing the native language has in political participation, as well as the impact of possible post-traumatic stress disorder of some migrants, illiteracy, and cultural gender norms in engagement.

The impact of gender, socio-economic status, health, or ethnicity play a major role in the intersectionality of every person's exclusion from politics. This is especially highlighted in research regarding the political inclusion of older people. Serrat, Scharf, Villar and Gómez (2019), identify the need to analyse civic participation of older people considering age as a system of inequality that interacts with other power structures such as disability, race or gender. Existing

research solely regarding age and older people's exclusion from society is often focused on their issues with digitalisation. Pirhonen, Lolic, Tuominen, Jolanki and Timonen (2020), state that while older people in Finland and Ireland enjoyed technology and found positives to digitalisation – mostly regarding the access to information and possibilities of digital socialisation – the level of technological adoption varied between countries. Furthermore, the rapid development of technology often makes them wary to use it and devices are not created with the declining functional abilities of this demographic in mind (Pirhonen, et al., 2020). The heterogeneity of this group, however, cannot be left to a side when discussing the impact of digitalisation on older people, social position and life-experiences can either make them hopeful of technology or distrustful and excluded (Pirhonen, et al., 2020).

Szulecki, Bertelli, Erdal, Coşciug, Kussy, Mikiewicz, and Tulbure (2021), found that the three aspects that can be used to investigate the political participation of people are 'because they want to, because they are mobilised, and because they can'. The objective of the deliverable is to find out the barriers that would lead to not wanting to participate in democracy or the inability to do so. This report also wants to add to the existing literature regarding political participation of vulnerable communities in Europe through direct and informal interviews with iDEM's network. This approach was thought to possibly produce a different perspective to the one found in the interviews held in other iDEM work packages that investigate barriers to participation. These conversations were meant to create a closer relationship among iDEM and the organisations working with its target beneficiaries. Furthermore, in the initial project proposal, the lack of political participation among these groups was understood to be linked to a varying degree with a potential feeling of mistrust between them and their administrations. Task 5.2 was created to bridge this gap between authorities and those they represent. The interviews in T5.2 should serve to know the current state of trust between people and institutions and, above all, to minimise their distrust.

Initially, the structure of this task, as indicated in the proposal, was to conduct a qualitative methodology approach based on focus groups, in-depth interviews and group discussions with local administrations. This was intended to make local administrations aware of the different barriers that people experience when participating in democratic processes and the possible reasons for mistrust between both parties. The next step in this strategy was to support the trust-building of civil society organisations (CSOs) and their users with local administrations through workshops, interviews or focus groups. In order to do this, this deliverable is the collection of feedback received from 13 interviews and its analysis.

### **1.3 Outline and document structure**

During the first stages of the project, it was decided that the double aim of this strategy would be achieved more efficiently with more in-depth development of the first two stages and the addition of an extra step. Essentially, it has now been developed further through three stages, each corresponding to one year of the project.

First, the partners involved in this task would interview CSOs representing their target beneficiaries. This way the consortium can better understand the language barriers experienced by different groups of people, how this impacts their relationship with administrations, and what solutions could be considered by administrations to overcome this situation. Another key aspect of this first phase has been understanding other intersectional barriers – beyond language – that may further alienate marginalised groups from participating in democracy. Having agreed that this plan results in better task performance and that it better aligns with its objective, this deliverable is the result of this first step.

The second step will use the information gained in these interviews to create a guide for local administrations. This guide will highlight the reasons for and possible solutions to political exclusion. The aim is to share this information with administrations through meetings and group discussions. Providing administrations with an analysis of the barriers to democratic participation and a short practical guide on how they can better support their citizens will be the priority for this second phase. Clear, actionable points will prove most useful for administrations to implement positive change in their services. This extra step to provide a tangible product for administrations was added to the initial plan presented in the application to ensure maximum impact of this task.

The third and final step is to organise small-scale events in partner countries involved in this task to be able to implement the guide. The current plan, which may be subject to change and improvement, is to organise small-scale events (whether online or in-person) where CSOs, potential end-users of the iDEM App and local administrations can meet, interact, and share their experiences. At this stage of the project, it would be ideal if a version of the App is ready for users to test directly during these events and put the project's vision into action.

As can be deduced from the previously stated plan, T5.2 will extend throughout the entire development of the project and this document D5.5 responds only to the first of its three phases. This being so, this deliverable, 'Trustworthiness and awareness campaign: methodology', will explain the procedure used during this research task. It will show:

- What partners were part of this task.
- The way the interviews were carried out and the base questions the partners were given as inspiration.
- The barriers to participation identified by the experts during the interviews. Table 2 indicates in how many interviews each barrier was mentioned. These were mentioned either as direct responses to posed questions or transversally while discussing other barriers.
- These are then divided into three topics of analysis:
  - institutional impact on political engagement
  - intersectionality and its impact on political engagement, and finally,

- technological and structural barriers to political engagement.
- Solutions to aid in the inclusion of these communities in participation processes were also identified and reflected in each of the three sections.

The second phase and third phases of the strategy map out the next steps for this task. Namely, the creation of a guide with the results of this report and workshops to explain the guide and eventual app among public bodies and iDEM's beneficiaries.

## 2. Trustworthiness and awareness campaign: strategy

The objective of the interviews from phase 1 responds to the initial objective presented in the project proposal. The improved structure merely ensures a more profound impact in the inclusion of iDEM's target groups in participation processes. These processes, specifically the ones that can have an effect on policies, are overwhelmingly held by public authorities. For this reason, the iDEM project considered that the development of the iDEM App had to be done in conjunction with awareness-raising activities alongside administrations. This strategy hopes to provide administrations with both the digital tools (through the iDEM App) as well as the skills to ensure that processes and services are more accessible for people with disabilities, migrants and older persons. The knowledge gained from these interviews will be added to the results from D1.2, D1.3 and D4.1, which have found significant similarities. The informal approach undertaken from a communication perspective was considered to round out the more academic research undertaken in other work packages.

### 2.1 First phase of the strategy

This phase took place during this first year of the project, 2024. Six members of the consortium Fundación Cibervoluntarios (CIB), Nexus, Plena Inclusión Madrid, ActionAid Italia, Institut Municipal de Persones amb Discapacitat - Barcelona and Barcelona Ombudsman Office participate in this task, CIB being the leader. They each interviewed two organisations, except CIB, who interviewed three. These interviews were a valuable source of information regarding the barriers to civic participation of iDEM's target groups. The interviewees also identified solutions to the barriers they mentioned. Interviewing partners shared the results of these activities in a contact log which CIB then analysed for this deliverable.

The initial objective of this task, based on the project proposal description of it, was to have a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the challenges faced by politically excluded communities informed by experts working in NGOs and CSOs representing vulnerable populations. From the start, it was set to promote a healthier relationship among these groups and their public administrations. Developing this task outside an academic environment and without strict

academic guidelines also ensures that the entire process correlates with the needs and expectations of the beneficiaries of this research: administrations, civilians and CSOs.

## **2.2 Second phase of the strategy**

During Year 2 (2025) of the project, from January to March, M13-M15, partners responsible for this task will draft a short guide based on the information gathered in phase 1. This guide will present the identified barriers to participation, the reasons citizens mistrust their administrations, and proposed solutions to better include people in these communities. The consortium will then review this document and provide feedback. The improvements will be made collectively to ensure that the expertise of every partner is reflected in the guide. This guide will be available in the four project languages and written following easy language principles.

From March (M15) to November (M22) 2025, partners will engage with local administrations through online or in-person events, such as meetings or group discussions, to share and explain this guide. These events along with the findings identified in the guide will provide local administrations with concrete, actionable initiatives to include all communities in their processes and services. These administrations will then be able to evaluate what changes they are able to implement.

## **2.3 Third phase of the strategy**

To take the efforts made in the events during Year 2 of the project a level further, Year 3 will provide partners involved in this task the opportunity to engage with different target groups. Ideally, a series of very small in-person or online events (such as workshops) will be organised by the different project partners involved in this task, bringing together people experiencing language barriers, CSOs, and members of local administrations. As mentioned at the beginning of this deliverable, the objective of these events will be for all parties to share their experiences, bring all stakeholders together and explore how iDEM could be a support tool for the inclusion of people experiencing marginalisation in democratic processes.

The motivation behind this is to foster the inclusion of migrant people, older people, people with disabilities and people experiencing marginalisation more widely in participation processes. These meetings are foreseen to be safe spaces that will allow for informal communication and conversations to arise between participants. The participants will be able to discuss their needs and aspirations in a way that does not seem bureaucratic or forced. This further advances iDEM's intentions of inclusion.

### 3. Methodology of the first phase

The first step of Task 5.2 was for the participating organisations to create and feed a stakeholder map with organisations working with people with disabilities and intellectual disabilities, migrants, older people, as well as other groups facing social exclusion.

Each member of the consortium interviewed two organisations or professionals from the organisations or institutions identified in the stakeholder map or working with the aforementioned groups. In order to comply with the ethical requirements (explained in detail below), they paraphrased the information they received in a spreadsheet created to act as a contact log. Members of CIB, as leaders of this deliverable, then analysed the results and developed them in this report. For the sake of the brevity and clarity of this report, common terminology for each identified barrier was identified and structured in a table. During the analysis of the interviews, a simple tally chart was used to identify which barriers had been highlighted to affect which group and by how many organisations working for the same communities.

#### *How did the interviews take place?*

Each of the aforementioned partners had to interview a minimum of 2 organisations representing one of the target groups that will benefit from iDEM. A total of 13 European organisations and professionals were interviewed. Five of these interviews were carried out with experts in disability (mostly intellectual disabilities), three were with professionals working with migrants, two were done with an organisation representing older people, and three advocated for people facing marginalisation more generally (such as people experiencing homelessness or several intersectional barriers).

iDEM partner	Population the interviewee works with, represents or supports	Position of the interviewed
Fundación Cibervoluntarios	Populations facing social exclusion	Policy expert
	People with disabilities	Accessibility expert
	Older people	Social worker
Nexus	Vulnerable populations	Expert in public participation and inclusion of marginalised groups

	Vulnerable populations	Expert for self-help in intercultural contexts
Plena Inclusión Madrid	People with intellectual disabilities	Community connector
	People with disabilities	Social worker
ActionAid Italia	Migrant people	Migration expert
	Migrant people	Migration expert
Institut Municipal de Persones amb Discapacitat - Barcelona	People with intellectual disabilities	Disability and accessibility expert
	People with intellectual disabilities	Disability and accessibility expert
Barcelona Ombudsman Office	Young migrants	Social worker
	Older people	Social worker

*Table 1. Area of expertise and role of each entity's interviewees. Own elaboration*

This broad range of interviewees – as all of iDEM's main target groups were represented – has enabled us to collect diversely rich information which will directly inform the guide that will be developed next year.

### ***How were the interviews carried out?***

Individual interviews were chosen as the methodology to carry out this task. To ease the process for interviewees and simplify the drafting of the guide, project partners agreed that these interviews would be used anonymously. To ensure ethical considerations were upheld, partners discussed the format of these interviews, which were carried out in accordance with the ethics procedures developed for work package 6 and an internal consultation that concluded that participants would have to provide their written consent via email to participate in these interviews, expressly agreeing that their input would be used anonymously. To ensure homogeneity among partners, the wording regarding this consent was provided by NEXUS and shared by partners to the interviewees (translated into Spanish, Italian or Catalan depending on the primary language of the interviewee). To respect the participants' privacy and GDPR, these consents were kept internally by each partner organisation involved in the task. All participants agreed that 'their image, voice, name, or quotes will not be used publicly'. The name of the organisations they work for was also assured to be kept confidential. Anonymity is extended to

all the results of the interviews, including this report, the mini guide and the workshops. The conversations were also not recorded and their outputs have been paraphrased.

Considering that there is some overlap with the interviews that were carried out in the framework of WP4, it was decided that these interviews would take a more flexible approach. CIB, as leaders of the task, produced interview guidelines, with a set of questions for partners to ask interviewees. However, partners were free to ask follow up questions that arose from the replies of participants and select new questions when adapted to the particular sector or area of expertise of the interviewee. This method ensured a wide range of answers and feedback that could be used for the drafting of the interview guide.

These were the questions included in the interview guidelines:

- a. What would you say are the main barriers that the people you support face when participating in democratic life?
- b. Do the people you support feel included in their local communities?
- c. What actions do you think local administrations could implement to reduce the stigma that people with disabilities/migrants/older people face?
- d. Are you aware of any initiatives in your area that have promoted the inclusion of your users?
- e. Do you think that the people you support trust their local authorities to support them? Why or why not?
- f. What role do you think that organisations like yours play in promoting political participation, institutional trust and reducing stigma?
- g. What steps do you think that local policymakers and politicians should make to promote the participation of disabled people/migrants/older people?

#### **4. First phase of the strategy: analysis of the challenges to participation for people experiencing language barriers, trust dynamics and levels of awareness among administrations**

The first phase of our strategy was to analyse the responses catalogued in the Task 5.2 spreadsheet and categorise the main issues identified by each of the groups being represented. The interviews also rendered solutions for the consideration of public administrations. The table below depicts the barriers identified in the interviews more than once. To streamline the results, since the information was paraphrased in a common spreadsheet, the table uses common terminology that englobes the described barriers. Beside the type of barrier, it also identifies the times that specific obstacle was mentioned.

The barriers were then divided into three topics of analysis: institutional impact on political engagement, intersectionality and its impact on political engagement, technological and

structural barriers to political engagement. Additionally, solutions to each of the barriers were identified.

Barrier identified	Number of times identified	Distribution by target group
Mistrust with public/local admins	8	1, 2, 3(2), 4, 5 (3), 6.
Intersectionality of conditions leading to political exclusion	7	1, 2, 3(2), 4, 5, 6
Poor accessibility of public administrations	7	2, 3, 4, 5 (3), 6
Underrepresentation	6	1, 2, 4 (2), 5, 6
Linguistic or communication barriers	6	3, 4(3), 5, 6
Discrimination	6	3, 4(3), 5(2)
Limited understanding of political contents and workings	4	4(2), 5, 6
Technological illiteracy	4	3(2), 4, 5

Table 2 - Quantitative results of the interviews

Key: 1. Organisation representing people facing homelessness. 2. Organisation representing people with disabilities. 3. Organisation representing older people. 4. Organisation representing migrant people. 5. Organisation representing people with intellectual disabilities. 6. Organisation representing people in vulnerable situations.

### 3.1 Institutional impact on political engagement

This section encompasses mistrust of public administrations, underrepresentation and poor accessibility on the part of public administrations. It has been identified by these experts that people with physical and intellectual disabilities, migrants and other marginalised people generally do not trust their representatives. Due to the intersectionality found among older

people, it would be more accurate to say that many were identified not to trust their political representatives. Organisations representing people with intellectual disabilities mentioned this barrier 3 times out of the 7.

The common factor in most interviews was the lack of trust due to a perceived lack of understanding on the part of governmental bodies as well as past negative experiences. Hostile policies such as fines or purposefully exclusionary design of public spaces were found to impact future interactions and their hope in public administrations. In the case of migrants, many not only do not trust their public administrations, they do not feel safe with them or in processes where they are included due to current policies. It was also reported that since the organisations representing them depend on subsidies that are usually a year long (such as in Spain for example), the institutional aid does not match the needs of people going through long migration processes.

The underrepresentation of people from these groups was identified as causing feelings of alienation, lack of motivation to participate, or feeling unsafe with certain procedures. In the case of people with intellectual disabilities, underrepresentation was seen to lead to the stigmatisation of the community, which in turn makes people with disabilities invisible in many areas of public life.

Without the proper public representation and top-to-bottom communication, accessibility is often lacking in public spaces and procedures. Not knowing whether the spaces where participation processes are held are truly accessible means that people with physical and intellectual disabilities are hesitant to attend. Poor signalling and non-universal design do not allow people with disabilities to participate. The duration of the processes also leads to the loss of interest on the part of participants, especially those with intellectual disabilities, as oftentimes long processes require a significant financial and personal investment on behalf of participants (e.g. potential time off work, need for personal assistance, lack of time for other activities, etc.) Lack of cognitive accessibility in terms of information and website layout was also mentioned as a challenge for anyone experiencing language barriers, namely people with disabilities and migrants.

### ***Proposed solutions***

Every interviewee provided solutions to alleviate the mistrust that the communities they work with feel towards institutions. Most identified existing local initiatives as a positive step but recognised the need to go further. The most mentioned solutions, regardless of the difference in target groups, were increasing representation in public spaces as well as providing more visibility and awareness for the need for dialogue and communication.

For people with disabilities and intellectual disabilities specifically, the more prominent solutions were inclusion in culture, leisure and the labour market; outreach programmes and hiring care

professionals to promote independent living. Another suggestion was the implementation of policies that guarantee universal accessibility in public spaces.

### 3.2 Intersectionality and its impact on political engagement

Representatives of each target demographic mentioned the issue of intersectionality in one shape or another. In some instances the intersectionality that leads to exclusion was identified in terms of time, class, and economic barriers. In other cases the relevance of gender and health was highlighted further. An example in which all of these are true, is older people. It was exemplified in one of the interviews with the case of older women, as they are sometimes more likely to be less visible in public spaces when they have care duties towards other members of their families for instance. However, this observation deserves to be nuanced as another participant, expert in the field of older persons, mentioned that older women were sometimes more engaged in the social life of their communities than their male counterparts. It is important to note here that significant changes in social interactions can be seen depending on the country and even local region.

Another of the interviews also highlighted that people with intellectual or physical disabilities tend to face economic problems at a higher rate, which sometimes leads to homelessness. One interviewee referred to the hidden homelessness of migrants, caused by economic problems that can lead to sofa surfing or staying with friends. In the case of older people, they struggle to participate in lengthy participation processes due to care responsibilities or economic hardships on top of mobility challenges. These, added to possible cognitive impairments, language barriers or poor technological literacy, intersect in their exclusion to political participation.

Intersectionality of physical and health conditions affects accessibility to public spaces since often there are generic solutions to exclusionary architecture, technological design or social behaviours. One of the representatives from an organisation working with people facing marginalisation, highlighted the 'one size fits all' approach to accessibility problems. The needs of older people, migrants or people with disabilities who also have chronic illnesses are rarely considered. 'Accessibility features' are implemented without a deep understanding of the many disabilities and illnesses people have and what each needs to be included.

This is also applicable to linguistic barriers identified in the interviews. All of the interviewees identified issues with the accessibility of language in official documents or websites. For people with disabilities, the more prominent issue was the complex language in documents and poorly constructed official websites. This correlates with the findings regarding inaccessibility in political european websites identified in the EDF's report 'Access Denied: The (in)accessibility of European

Political Party websites' (2024)<sup>9</sup>. For some migrants, a different language in their host countries is added to the previously mentioned barriers. While technology is often viewed as a way to lessen the previous barriers among the communities referred to in this report, it can also be a major barrier for them. The interviews highlighted migrant women and older people as disproportionately affected by digital barriers. According to Age Platform Europe, '[w]hile nearly 90% of people in the EU use the internet at least once a week, only 54% had basic or above basic digital skills in 2021' (Age Platform Europe, 2024, citing Eurostat 2021)<sup>10</sup>.

### **Proposed solutions**

It is worth mentioning that the solutions suggested in the other sections would of course apply to those who find themselves at the intersection of different communities facing social barriers (for example: a migrant woman with a disability will likely experience intersecting barriers to social participation). A suggestion that is particularly relevant to the issues explained in the previous sections is an increase in the quality of education. Increasing awareness of the power dynamics of discrimination and how intersectionality plays a role is crucial to this process. Education on the various support needs of different illnesses and disabilities was also highlighted throughout the interviews.

Throughout the interviews, increasing the representation and inclusion of people with different support needs in public administrations was highlighted as key. Analysing what specific accessibility measures could be implemented through a comprehensive approach that included an intersectional perspective was also identified as being an important solution that administrations had to consider.

### **3.3 Technological and structural barriers to political engagement**

This last section involves language or communication barriers, limited understanding of political contents and workings, technological illiteracy, as well as discrimination. All interviews identified at least one of these issues as affecting their beneficiaries, and those working with people with disabilities and migrants highlighted it to a higher degree. According to the experts interviewed, migrant people, marginalised people and people with intellectual disabilities face disproportionate language and communication barriers that exclude them from participative processes. Linguistic obstacles entail a broken bottom-up communication system, meaning that people who are excluded from democratic processes are often not able to share their needs.

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<sup>9</sup> European Disability Forum, 2024, Access Denied: The (in)accessibility of European Political Party websites. <https://www.edf-feph.org/publications/access-denied-the-inaccessibility-of-european-political-party-websites/>

<sup>10</sup> AGE PLATFORM EUROPE, 2024, Digitalisation and older people: our call to EU Policy Makers. [https://www.age-platform.eu/content/uploads/2024/07/AGE\\_Paper-on-Digitalisation-and-Older-People\\_June-2024\\_FINAL-1.pdf](https://www.age-platform.eu/content/uploads/2024/07/AGE_Paper-on-Digitalisation-and-Older-People_June-2024_FINAL-1.pdf)

Not understanding information or bureaucratic processes makes it difficult for people to not only participate in political life, but also undertake basic and necessary administrative tasks. One interviewee highlighted that one bureaucratic process tends to lead to another, which eventually makes many people quit the process altogether. For people with intellectual disabilities, these hurdles become bigger when these processes are held online. Older people, migrant people (especially women) and people with intellectual disabilities are seen, in the interviews, to be disproportionately affected by their technological illiteracy when it comes to political participation.

The final structural barrier identified in the stakeholder interviews is discrimination. In terms of political exclusion, this affects mostly migrants and people with intellectual disabilities. Due to underrepresentation or misrepresentation by public authorities and exclusion from social life, people in these communities often face stigmatisation and stereotyping, which lead to their active discrimination from participative processes. It also creates a feeling of alienation, which translates into a lack of motivation to participate in social and political life. For people with intellectual disabilities, this also translates into the creation or continuation of measures and policies that systematically exclude them from participating in political life. This observation is supported by the recent Inclusion indicators report 2024 published by Inclusion Europe, a report based on data about people with intellectual disabilities in 31 European countries. In 11 European countries today, 'legal capacity can be fully removed and the right to decide is not respected' and in '16 countries legal capacity can be (partially) removed and the right to decide is not respected', for example.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Proposed solutions***

In order to alleviate the negative impact that technological and structural barriers have on political engagement, solutions to participation were provided. Primarily, better communication by public administrations. An interesting suggestion, highlighted by an organisation representing people with disabilities, was the creation by administrations of participatory spaces where people feel safe.

This correlates with what an organisation working with migrants identified as a barrier to the participation of their users, namely the fear of judgement and of not being able to express certain situations for fear of possible retaliations. Mentoring programmes for migrant young people were also identified as a solution to feelings of exclusion, which may also apply to other target groups.

Designing procedures that are easy to understand and using AI to democratise information were also solutions mentioned by an organisation representing people with intellectual disabilities,

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<sup>11</sup> Inclusion Europe. (2024). Rights and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in 31 European countries. <https://str.inclusion.eu/17d0cedb3ec6748196eed9f05.pdf>

but also apply to other communities experiencing language barriers. Language is a common barrier to communication and participation in political life, and the use of AI text-simplification tools and other communication devices was identified by one of the interviewees to allow the user to take breaks and function in a calm and stress-free environment.

#### 4. General conclusions

This report has shed light on the different ways iDEM's target groups are excluded from political and democratic life. By interviewing experts, the consortium gained insight into the barriers faced by people facing marginalisation, the reason behind these barriers and the situations that have resulted in a mistrust of public authorities. Many of these barriers align with the existing literature on the topic, which reflects shared problems across target groups and countries. They also align with those identified in D1.2 and D1.3, as those deliverables also highlight the multilayered nature of exclusionary barriers. These observations underline the importance of administrations moving beyond the one size fits all approach for accessibility initiatives.

This report has also conveyed the solutions to the identified barriers to participation proposed during the interviews. The suggestions by accessibility experts and experts working with vulnerable populations, as well as the context gained from these interviews, will be able to shape the solutions and initiatives that will be included in the mini guide. In this sense, authorities will better understand the importance of including all citizens in their processes and services.

In total, 8 barriers were identified more than once during the interviews: mistrust with public/local administrations, intersectionality of conditions leading to political exclusion, underrepresentation, poor accessibility of public administrations, linguistic or communication barriers, discrimination, limited understanding of political contents and workings, and technological illiteracy. Each one was identified by at least two different target groups, which indicates the same issue affects several communities.

In direct relation to the iDEM project, these interviews have also identified several linguistic barriers, whether directly or transversely. The most prominent one was the difficulty of the language used in official documents and websites. Not being able to understand information or procedures leads to many people quitting democratic processes or not entering to begin with. The lack of accessible channels for communication is also a linguistic barrier mentioned during the interviews. This fact, added to the poor understanding of information and procedures, may also lead to the identified feelings of mistrust that exclude these communities from democratic participation.

The solutions proposed varied, but most were focused on changes that can be implemented by public bodies. An increase of accessibility features, representation, and education were all identified as ways to raise awareness among the public of the different barriers each person

faces and the support needs that might arise for each one. Other more specific solutions include safe spaces, mentoring programmes or publicly funded support workers. Improving communication and making language accessible was also recurrently mentioned as solutions to the barriers faced by almost all the communities represented in the interviews. These solutions will be passed on to public administrations to promote a healthier relationship between them and the citizens they represent.

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