



iDEM's recommendations for increasing accessibility in democratic processes



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Content

What is iDEM?	3
The motivation behind this guide: implementing inclusion	4
How this guide was created	5
Barriers affecting participation identified by experts	6
Recommendations	10

What is iDEM?

iDEM [acronym for Innovation and Inclusive Democratic Spaces for Deliberation and Participation] is a Horizon Europe project formed by 12 European partners and coordinated by Pompeu Fabra University, in Barcelona, Spain. The goal of the project is to create a technological solution to reduce linguistic barriers to participation and deliberation in democratic spaces, as well as to elaborate a protocol of intervention that guarantees that participation processes are inclusive at all stages. The linguistic complexity found in political spaces, documents, and processes often prevents groups with disabilities or those in need of greater communication support from having their voices heard in democratic societies.

Challenges in understanding political information and the lack of accessible formats in relevant documentation can exclude people with language difficulties. These may include those with cognitive disabilities or migrants who are not fluent in the language of their new country. This exclusion results in their political underrepresentation and diminishes decision-making quality by failing to incorporate the diverse interests of people facing language barriers.

iDEM is creating an App that uses Artificial Intelligence and Natural Language Processing to simplify complex texts. Its aim is to make deliberative spaces more accessible by transforming complex information into easier to read and understand formats, enhancing democratic inclusion in Europe. Additionally, in order to truly promote accessible citizen participation processes, iDEM is also carrying out a campaign with the public and its stakeholders to raise awareness of the political exclusion caused by language barriers. This document is part of this campaign, since including public administrations in this process is essential to successful and true global democracies.

The motivation behind this guide: implementing inclusion

The iDEM project was created to foster innovative and inclusive democratic spaces for deliberation and participation. The project is directed to anyone who experiences language barriers and who has not been included in democracy as a result of inaccessible processes. One of iDEM's objectives is to contribute to bridge the lack of trust between public administrations and the people they represent as a result of political exclusion.

The European Union Agency for Human Rights (2024)¹ and reports on observations of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Spain (2019)², Germany (2023)³, France (2021)⁴ and Sweden (2014)⁵ by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities identified several obstacles to democratic participation for people with disabilities. Among them we highlight:

- digital voter registration,
- the need for medical documents attesting that people have what third parties consider to be 'capacity to vote',
- living in residential institutions,
- poor accessibility and/or assistance in democratic procedures.

iDEM created this mini guide directed at public administrations looking to raise awareness to increase the inclusion and accessibility of all people in democratic participative and deliberative processes. The objective of this guide is to provide actionable items in an accessible and practical format.

¹ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. Political participation of people with disabilities – new developments. (2024, September 9). European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/political-participation>

² Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2019). Concluding observations on the combined second and third reports of Spain (CRPD/C/ESP/CO/2-3). United Nations.

<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g19/137/18/pdf/g1913718.pdf>

³ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2023). Concluding observations on the combined second and third reports of Germany (CRPD/C/DEU/CO/2-3). United Nations.

<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g23/190/54/pdf/g2319054.pdf>

⁴ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2021). Concluding observations on the initial report of France (CRPD/C/FRA/CO/1). United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3942590?ln=en&v=pdf>

⁵ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2014). Concluding observations on the initial report of Sweden (CRPD/C/SWE/CO/1). United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/779625?ln=en&v=pdf>

How this guide was created

To ensure adequate and sustainable recommendations, six iDEM members (link: <https://idemproject.eu/en/who-we-are>) held 13 interviews with experts working with different social groups experiencing barriers to participation and mistrust in their administrations.

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 organisations representing older people, and three advocated for people facing a risk of social exclusion (such as homelessness).

The questions the interviewees were asked explored the following themes:

- barriers to participation,
- the support they feel from public administrations,
- trust in local authorities,
- role of civil society in engaging public administration,
- initiatives to promote participation,
- discrimination and stigma, etc.

Due to the ethical and legal considerations that have been taken for the project's research, these interviews were completely anonymous, the names of the interviewees and thus the institutions they represent will not be shared in this document. Moreover, the conversations were also not recorded, their responses have been paraphrased.

For the sake of brevity and accessibility, this guide provides an overview of the outcomes garnered from the interviews with experts. More detailed research on accessibility of information and linguistic barriers can be found in the publications section of the iDEM website (link: <https://idemproject.eu/en>). We have also conducted public interviews with experts in various fields and self-advocates from different communities, which are available on the interviews section of our website (link: <https://idemproject.eu/en/news/interviews>). The barriers identified in this document also vary between digital and physical spaces; more information on digital inaccessibility is available in this report by EDF 'Access Denied: The (in)accessibility of European Political Party websites' (link: <https://www.edf-feph.org/publications/access-denied-the-inaccessibility-of-european-political-party-websites/>). Material on the inaccessibility of physical voting can also be found in [Unequal voting: persons with disabilities face barriers during EU elections](#) (EDF, 2024) (link: [https://www.edf-feph.org/publications/access-denied-the-inaccessibility-of-european-political-party-websites/](#)).

<https://www.edf-feph.org/unequal-voting-persons-with-disabilities-face-barriers-during-eu-elections/>).

Barriers affecting participation identified by experts

The responses given during the interviews were categorised into 8 main issues identified by the groups being represented. These can be found in the graph below. To simplify the results, the graph uses common terminology that encompasses the described barriers.

Circular graph showing the main barriers identified in interviews and their prevalence. The results are:

- Intersectionality of conditions leading to political exclusion: 14.6%.
- Lack of accessibility in public spaces and participation processes: 14.6%.
- Language or communication barriers: 12.5%.
- Limited technological skills: 8.3%.
- Limited understanding of information and the functioning of public affairs: 8.3%.
- Mistrust of public administrations: 16.7%.
- Underrepresentation: 12.5%.
- Discrimination: 12.5%.

This guide presents the reasons the interviewees provided for these barriers to democratic participation. In most cases, the barriers to accessibility could impact several or all communities, which is why this guide has not differentiated between groups. Accessibility is a universal right and must be addressed holistically.

Intersectionality of conditions leading to political exclusion

Intersectionality refers to the ways in which different aspects of a person's identity can expose them to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation⁶. The

⁶ *Understanding intersectionality*. (2021, February 8). vic.gov.au.
<https://www.vic.gov.au/understanding-intersectionality>

interviews highlighted a series of converging situations to consider when creating accessible digital and physical democratic spaces:

Practical and Economic Barriers

- Care responsibilities: Some people can't join due to childcare or eldercare. In case of care workers, their own availability may also affect the people they accompany.
- Time constraints: Work, family obligations or care responsibilities don't allow many to participate in processes with fixed schedules.
- Class-based exclusion: financial constraints or limited access to services exclude many from attending certain processes.

Physical and Digital Accessibility

- Mobility challenges: Venues are not always accessible. This does not only affect people with disabilities, it may affect mothers, older people, or those using temporary mobility support needs (crutches).
- Poorly designed websites: Some official sites are not user friendly to those experiencing language barriers or with cognitive or intellectual disabilities.
- Limited digital skills or access: Many online processes assume a level of digital competences that are unrealistic for many people.
- One-size-fits-all accessibility features: Standard accessibility measures often don't meet everyone's needs.

Communication and Language

- Complex official language: Forms and documents can be hard to understand.
- Language barriers: Not everyone has the same level of linguistic comprehension. Migrants, for example, are learning a new language.

Social and Systemic Barriers

- Homelessness: Without stable housing, it's hard to access services or information.
- Chronic illness or cognitive differences: Online and offline participatory processes are often inaccessible for people with health and cognitive needs.
- Administrative systems: Complex processes can block participation.
- Gender dimensions: Women often take charge of care responsibilities. Furthermore, non-conforming gender and transgender people may feel unsafe or unwanted in spaces with governmental authorities.

Lack of accessibility in public spaces and participation processes

Accessibility barriers can vary from basic design defects to more intricate problems related to technology, communication, or infrastructure. They affect all sectors of the population and must be addressed holistically.

- Poor signalling and non-universal design inhibit general access to physical and digital participation.
- Lengthy processes:
 - Can lead to the loss of interest on the part of participants, especially those with cognitive disabilities.
 - May require a significant financial and personal investment on behalf of participants (need for personal assistance, lack of time for other activities, etc.)
- Information provided online and offline lacks cognitive accessibility, making it difficult for some people to understand or use.
- Poorly structured website layouts.

Linguistic and Communication Barriers

Due to the very existence of language diversity, complicated terminology, inaccessible systems, or fragmented bottom-up systems, many people are unable to express their needs. These difficulties are aggravated when there is no technological proficiency. Some people encounter physical, sensory, or cognitive barriers that limit their ability to participate in these processes when they take place online.

Incomplete Understanding of Information and the Functioning of Public Affairs

Complex language prevents people not only from participating in political life but also from carrying out basic and necessary administrative tasks. Bureaucratic processes are long and complex and often generate fatigue or frustration.

Mistrust in public administrations

Mistrust in public administrations is both a barrier to deliberative participation and a result of other obstacles impeding integration in public and democratic life.

People who feel mistrust toward their institutions do so because of experiences such as the ones described below. However, this is a barrier that can be overcome through transversal approaches that focus on the population's well-being.

- People experiencing homelessness referred to hostile policies, such as fines or purposefully exclusionary design of public spaces. In a similar sense, many migrants feel unsafe and distrustful with government bodies or in processes where they are included due to current policies regarding regularisation or deportation.
- Perceived lack of understanding by government bodies of the needs of people in situations of political exclusion.
- Past negative experiences.

Underrepresentation

Underrepresentation leads to feelings of alienation, isolation, lack of motivation to participate, or a sense of insecurity regarding certain procedures. In the case of people with intellectual disabilities, underrepresentation is perceived as a cause of the stigmatization of the community.

Discrimination

Discrimination is caused by underrepresentation or biased representation by public authorities, as well as by exclusion from social life. This situation leads to the stigmatization and stereotyping of many people. It also generates a sense of alienation that results in a lack of motivation to participate in social and political life. Moreover, this dynamic contributes to the creation or perpetuation of systematic exclusion from political participation for certain groups.

Recommendations

Every interviewee proposed solutions to the lack of accessibility and inclusion of democratic processes. Most identified existing local initiatives as a positive step forward, but recognised the need to go further. This guide provides a selection of examples, guides, and services that have been identified by the iDEM consortium as good practices. Many more initiatives such as these exist. These are just some that may inspire public administrations seeking to enhance accessibility and inclusion to their processes and spaces.

Recommendations addressing the impact of intersectionality

- **Analyse what specific accessibility measures could be implemented through a comprehensive approach that includes an intersectional perspective.** To avoid the one-size fits all approach to accessibility, experts recommend public administrations to ensure a baseline accessibility in all public spaces and processes. Supported by the provision of tailored adaptations based on the needs of specific groups.
 - Find more information on Ireland's provision to be accompanied while voting. Link: <https://www.electoralcommission.ie/accessible-voting/>
 - Refer to Spain's Guide to accessibility for the 2024 European elections. Link: <https://info.eleccioneseeuropeas2024.es/en/accesibilidad/guia-accesibilidad>
- **Increase representation of people with a variety of support needs in public spaces and administrations.** The integration of people with diverse support needs in both public environments and government institutions increases the representation of diverse people in positions of power, challenges stereotypes and ensures that they are actively shaping policies and public attitudes. This can provide a more intersectional approach to policy-making throughout the board.
- **Increase in the quality of citizens' awareness raising and education.** Public awareness campaigns and advertisements run by public administrations featuring people with intersecting identities and their needs can make the public conscious of accessibility needs they had not previously thought about.
 - Get inspired by the dissemination materials found in the Spanish General State Administration's transparency portal. Link:

https://transparencia.gob.es/transparencia/transparencia_Home/index/Gobierno-abierto/sensibilizacion-formacion/Materiales.html

Recommendations addressing accessibility

- **Implement policies that guarantee universal accessibility in digital and physical public spaces.** Ensuring accessibility to digital and physical public spaces is vital in building a sense of community with people traditionally excluded from social life. Access to spaces such as public universities, administrative platforms or parks (among many other examples) ensure equal participation in public and social life.
 - Learn accessible practices in the AccessibleEU Online Campus. Link: <https://accessibleeucentre.criteria-campus.com/>
 - Find resources and best practices in [AccessibleEU](https://accessible-eu-centre.ec.europa.eu/content-corner/good-practices_en). Link: https://accessible-eu-centre.ec.europa.eu/content-corner/good-practices_en
- **Hire care professionals to promote independent living.** Promoting the independent living of people with disabilities accessibility by encouraging individuals with disabilities to live autonomously and participate fully in all aspects of life. Advocating for the removal of societal barriers promotes access to behaviours and spaces that many people with disabilities have been excluded from.
 - Find the European Commission's recommendations for Member States in their Guidance on Independent Living for People with Disabilities. Link https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-guidance-independent-living-persons-disabilities-2024-11-20_en
 - Find inspiration in Spain's CEAPAT Assistive Products for Independent Living youtube channel. Link https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLsqikzfQjXGN_I7SaseCbfHAYLJtgtjx3

Recommendations addressing language accessibility, information and administrative processes

- **Develop and use accessible communication methods and systems by public administrations.** Integrated and inclusive methods of communication between public institutions and their citizens makes the

flow of information much simpler. It also makes information and administrative processes more accessible, which can lead to a healthier relationship between institutions and their constituents.

- Refer to OECD's publications for accessible and inclusive public communication. Link: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/accessible-and-inclusive-public-communication_222b62d9-en.html
- Get inspired by the communal administration of Schaerbeek's (district in Brussels) easy language option on their website. Link: <https://www.1030.be/falc>
- Refer to the EU's easy to read guidelines. Link: <https://op.europa.eu/documents/d/accessibility/easy-to-read-guidelines>
- **Design procedures that are easy to understand and which use Artificial Intelligence to democratise information.** Long-lasting and low-maintenance systems that use AI to simplify information can address the need to make public platforms and information accessible, as well as streamline administrative processes by omitting unnecessary or complex text.

Recommendations addressing mistrust

- **Increased inclusion in culture, leisure, and the labour market.** Culture, leisure and work are essential parts of social life. Being active in one's community and surrounded by peers creates a sense of belonging that prompts a higher level of trust in administrations brought about by seeing your wants and needs met.
 - Promote accessible tourism in your city or town such as Madrid Accesible. Link: <https://www.esmadrid.com/en/accessible-madrid>
 - Get inspired by the accessible beaches in the Valencian Community (link: <https://serviciossociales.gva.es/es/web/discapacidad/playas-accesibles760>) and City of Barcelona (link: <https://www.barcelona.cat/ca/que-pots-fer-a-bcn/banys-i-platges/acc essibilitat>), Spain.
- **Outreach programmes.** Outreach programmes are based on the premise of going where the people are. This means individuals do not need to look for support because public bodies actively seek out individuals who may benefit from a specific service. Oftentimes public social programmes require long administrative processes which make people feel like they

institutions don't want to help. Outreach programmes prove that governmental bodies care for the people.

- Focus Ireland launched a Voter Registration Drive in 2024 to increase voter registration among people who are homeless. Link: <https://www.focusireland.ie/advocacy-campaigns/voter-registration-drive/>

Recommendations addressing underrepresentation:

- **Create and stimulate mechanisms of representation.** Mechanisms of representation refer to formal or informal processes or systems that allow individuals or groups to express their views and interests in organizations or political systems. Innovative mechanisms of representation can stimulate conversation among voices traditionally not heard.
 - Establish migrants' councils such as The Barcelona Municipal Immigration Council. Link: <https://oidp.net/en/practice.php?id=1289>
 - Promote public citizen participation platforms such as Decide Madrid. Link: <https://decide.madrid.es/>
 - Find good practices by the Municipal Innovations in Immigrant Integration (USA). Link: https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/RI_Innovational_magrantIntergration_10.pdf
 - Establish community councils such as the Lisbon Elderly Council (link: <https://www.lisboa.pt/en/>) and the Copenhagen Elderly Council (link: <https://courban.co/project/cityforall/>).

Recommendations addressing discrimination

- **Improve participatory spaces where people feel safe.** Experts refer to a feeling of unsafety for many people in physical and online spaces of deliberation. People used to experiencing racism, sexism or hatred based on stereotypes often don't feel safe voicing their opinions. Public spaces created to protect all people can assist in empowering people to participate in deliberation and society.
 - Refer to the Toolkit for Equality: The Local Level, by the Training and Research Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (ETC) Graz. Link: https://www.etc-graz.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/TOOLKIT_Survey-Report.pdf

- Provide integrated care services. Integrated care services involve the cooperation of several actors, namely governmental and public institutions and NGOs. In terms of discrimination, these services involve multidimensional actions in psychosocial support, legal advice and resources for victims of discrimination.
 - Find inspiration from the Non-Discrimination Office of the Barcelona City Council. Link:
<https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/oficina-no-discriminacio/en/>



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