Digital Participation and GIS in Local Governance: Practical Models for Inclusive Citizen Engagement

Frank FRIESECKE, Hamidreza OSTADABBAS, and Mohammad HOSSEINGHOLIZADEH Germany

SUMMARY

Citizen participation plays a central role in democratic governance and local decision-making. Despite its acknowledged importance, many municipalities struggle to implement effective participation processes due to limited resources, staff capacity, and technical expertise. As a result, participation often remains fragmented, symbolic, or disconnected from everyday planning practice.

This paper examines how digital participation platforms supported by Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can help municipalities and citizens collaborate more effectively. By combining spatial visualization, location-based feedback, and digital communication tools, GIS-based participation platforms improve transparency, inclusivity, and efficiency in urban planning, land management, real estate development, and urban renewal processes.

The paper introduces three practical participation models—the Information and Transparency Model, the Co-Creation Model, and the Integrated Governance Model—that reflect different levels of ambition and organizational maturity. These models illustrate how participation can evolve from basic information provision toward meaningful collaboration and institutional integration.

The conceptual framework is complemented by an implementation section describing a modular, service-oriented participation platform currently supporting approximately 350 urban planning and redevelopment projects. Finally, future work is outlined, focusing on the integration of Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies to enable immersive participation formats.

The paper demonstrates that GIS-based digital participation platforms provide a scalable and sustainable approach to strengthening local democracy, improving trust, and embedding citizen input into everyday decision-making processes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation is widely recognized as a fundamental component of democratic governance, particularly at the local level where planning and land-related decisions directly affect everyday life. Urban development, land-use planning, real estate development, and urban renewal projects increasingly require public legitimacy, transparency, and social acceptance to succeed.

Despite this recognition, municipalities continue to face significant challenges in implementing meaningful participation. Traditional participation formats—such as public meetings, workshops, or written consultations—often reach only limited segments of the population. They are time-consuming to organize, difficult to document systematically, and challenging to integrate into routine administrative workflows. As a result, participation is frequently perceived as an additional burden rather than an integral part of governance.

At the same time, citizens increasingly expect transparency, accessibility, and opportunities for involvement. Digital services, online communication, and geospatial technologies have reshaped expectations regarding how public institutions provide information and engage with stakeholders. Against this background, municipalities are seeking new approaches that allow participation to be organized more efficiently while maintaining democratic quality. Digital participation platforms enable broader and more inclusive civic engagement by allowing citizens to participate asynchronously, improving transparency, and supporting continuous involvement beyond traditional in-person formats (United Nations Development Programme & People Powered, 2025).

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) provide a particularly promising foundation for digital participation. Spatial data and maps offer intuitive access to complex planning and land-related information and enable location-specific feedback. When combined with digital participation platforms, GIS technologies help bridge the gap between technical planning processes and citizens' everyday spatial experiences.

This paper explores how GIS-based digital participation platforms can support local governance by reducing complexity, improving transparency, and embedding participation into planning and land-management workflows. Rather than proposing a single solution, it introduces practical participation models that reflect different levels of engagement, resources, and institutional integration.

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2. CHALLENGES OF MUNICIPAL PARTICIPATION

2.1 Resource Constraints and Organizational Limits

Municipal administrations operate under increasing pressure to deliver services efficiently while complying with regulatory requirements and responding to political and public expectations. Participation processes often compete with core administrative tasks for limited staff time and financial resources. Consequently, participation may be postponed, simplified, or reduced to minimum formal requirements.

This situation creates a tension between normative expectations of participation and practical feasibility. While participation is widely considered desirable, questions remain regarding who should organize participation, how it should be structured, and how it can be sustained over time with limited capacity.

2.2 Complexity of Planning and Land-Use Processes

Urban planning, land management, and cadastral processes involve technical, legal, and procedural complexities that are difficult to communicate to non-expert audiences. Planning documents are often text-heavy and abstract, making it challenging for citizens to understand spatial impacts, alternatives, and trade-offs.

Without appropriate visualization tools, citizens may struggle to interpret planning proposals, reducing the quality of feedback and reinforcing perceptions that participation has limited influence on outcomes.

2.3 Fragmentation and Lack of Continuity

Participation activities are often organized on a project-by-project basis. Feedback, spatial data, and documentation are stored in different systems or formats, limiting reuse and institutional learning. Citizen input may be collected but not systematically linked to decision-making processes, undermining transparency and trust.

3. THE ROLE OF GIS IN DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

GIS technologies provide a spatial framework that connects planning and land-related information to concrete locations. Maps act as intuitive interfaces that translate abstract planning concepts into understandable representations. When embedded in digital participation platforms, GIS enables:
- Interactive visualization of planning and redevelopment projects
- Location-based feedback and spatial annotations
- Integration of cadastral data, land-use information, and open geodata
- Transparent documentation of participation outcomes

By lowering barriers to understanding and communication, GIS-based participation platforms make complex planning topics more accessible and inclusive. Importantly, GIS platforms support modular system architectures that can be adapted to different participation goals, planning phases, and resource levels.

Figure 1. Stuttgart-Weilimdorf City Participation Platform built on modern 2D and 3D GIS technologies (Source: STEG, City of Stuttgart)

4. MODELS OF GIS-BASED DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

To address varying municipal contexts, three participation models are proposed. These models represent increasing levels of engagement and institutional integration.

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4.1 Information and Transparency Model

The Information and Transparency Model focus on providing clear, accessible information to the public. GIS dashboards and interactive maps are used to display project boundaries, land-use plans, redevelopment areas, planning phases, and timelines.
This model requires relatively limited resources and is suitable as an entry point for digital participation. While citizen interaction is primarily passive, improved transparency can reduce misinformation, manage expectations, and build trust in public institutions.

4.2 Co-Creation Model

The Co-Creation Model emphasizes active engagement and collaboration between citizens, planners, and local stakeholders. GIS tools enable location-specific comments, surveys, thematic discussions, and comparison of alternative planning scenarios.
By grounding discussions in spatial context, this model improves the quality of feedback and supports mutual learning. Citizens gain insight into planning constraints and land-management considerations, while planners benefit from local knowledge and experience. However, co-creation requires additional coordination and moderation to ensure constructive outcomes.

4.3 Integrated Governance Model

The Integrated Governance Model represents the most advanced level of participation. Digital participation platforms and GIS tools are directly integrated into internal planning, cadastral, and land-management systems. Citizen input becomes part of everyday administrative workflows.
This model supports continuous feedback loops, long-term knowledge accumulation, and data-driven decision-making. While implementation requires organizational commitment and technical integration, it offers the greatest potential for sustainable and effective participation. Taken together, these three models illustrate a progressive pathway for municipalities to develop digital participation depending on institutional capacity, resources, and strategic ambition.

5   PARTICIPATION AS A RELIEF MECHANISM FOR MUNICIPALITIES

Municipal participation is often caught between ambition, limited resources, and daily operational demands. GIS-based digital participation platforms can ease this burden by standardizing workflows, reducing duplication of effort, and providing reusable participation formats.
Instead of organizing participation as isolated events, digital platforms support continuous participation processes aligned with planning timelines. External operation and maintenance of participation platforms can further relieve municipalities by shifting technical responsibilities—

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such as system updates, hosting, and data security—away from local administrations. This allows municipal staff to focus on content, decision-making, and coordination. Municipal initiatives such as the Toolbox Smart Participation project in Dresden demonstrate how digital tools can be combined with local governance processes to support inclusive and context-specific citizen engagement (Smart City Dresden, 2024).

6 IMPLEMENTATION

6.1 System Architecture Overview

The participation platform is implemented as a modular, service-oriented web application designed to support interactive urban planning and urban renewal processes at scale. The platform currently supports approximately 350 planning and redevelopment projects, each characterized by different spatial extents, thematic focuses, and planning phases.

The architecture follows a strictly decoupled frontend–backend paradigm. The backend is implemented as a REST-based service layer, while the frontend is realized as a single-page application (SPA). This separation enables scalability, maintainability, and multi-device support. The platform is currently deployed in numerous municipal participation processes in Germany and supports use cases such as information provision, interactive mapping, appointment booking, and thematic discussions. Practical implementations can be found in urban development and renewal projects, including Stuttgart-Kaltental, where digital participation is integrated into everyday planning workflows (STEG Stadtentwicklung GmbH, 2024a).
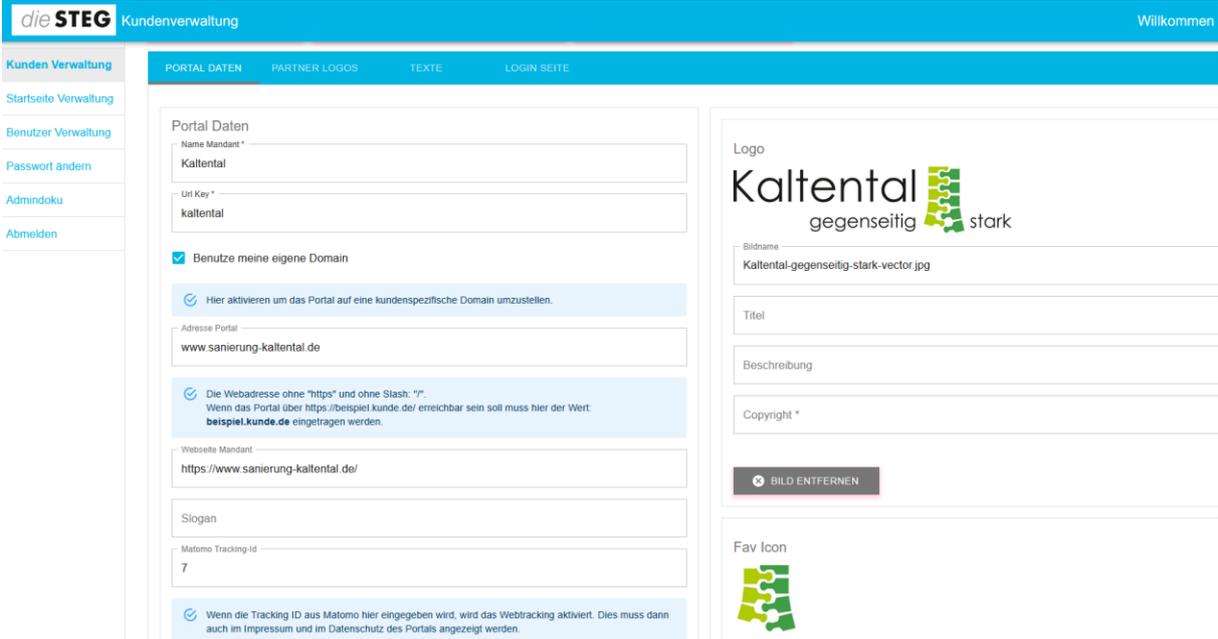

Figure 2. Project development in the administration portal of the STEG Stadtentwicklung participation platform.

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Figure 3. Thematic and project-based citizen participation within the Stuttgart-Kaltental urban renewal process (source: www.sanierung-kaltental.de).

6.2 Backend, Data Modeling, and Persistence

The backend is implemented using a Django REST API and provides standardized endpoints for project metadata, spatial datasets, cadastral references, and participation content. Projects are modeled as structured resources containing descriptive metadata, spatial references, and participation elements such as documents, images, comments, and feedback entries.

A relational data model supports complex relationships between projects, spatial entities, and participation content. Versioning mechanisms ensures traceability of planning data and documentation over time, which is essential for transparency and accountability in land management and urban renewal processes.

6.3 Frontend and Geospatial Visualization

The frontend is implemented using React.js with component-based architecture. Usability and accessibility are prioritized to ensure that the platform can be used by non-expert users.

Large-scale 2D visualization is implemented using WebGL-based technologies, enabling efficient rendering of complex spatial datasets. Three-dimensional visualization is supported through CesiumJS, allowing realistic representation of buildings, terrain, and urban form. Users can seamlessly switch between 2D and 3D views.

The frontend supports interactive, location-based participation formats that allow citizens to explore planning content and provide feedback directly within a web-based interface, as demonstrated by municipal participation projects implemented on the platform (STEG Stadtentwicklung GmbH, 2024b).

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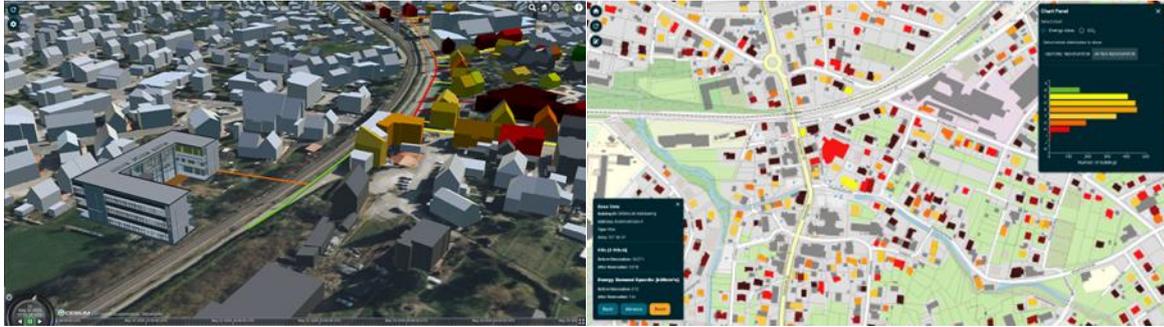Cape Town, South Africa, 24–29 May 2026

Figure 4. CesiumJS-Based 3D Visualization for Buildings, Terrain, and Urban Form

6.4 Performance and Scalability

Performance optimization includes server-side filtering, optimized data serialization, and client-side rendering. Lazy-loading mechanisms reduce network overhead. The decoupled architecture allows backend services and frontend clients to scale independently, particularly during intensive public participation phases. In combination, the described backend, frontend, and performance mechanisms provide a robust technical foundation for scalable, user-friendly digital participation across a wide range of planning and redevelopment projects.

7 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR SURVEYING AND LAND ADMINISTRATION (FIG PERSPECTIVE)

From a surveying and land administration perspective, GIS-based digital participation platforms provide significant added value for transparent and inclusive spatial decision-making. By linking citizen input directly to geoinformation, cadastral data, and land-use planning systems, participation processes become spatially explicit, traceable, and better integrated into formal governance structures.

For surveyors, planners, and land management professionals, such platforms enable the combination of authoritative datasets—such as cadastral boundaries, zoning plans, and land-use regulations—with locally grounded knowledge contributed by citizens. This integration supports more informed decisions in urban renewal, real estate development, and redevelopment projects, where social acceptance and spatial accuracy are equally important.
Interactive maps and dashboards improve communication between municipalities, professionals, and the public by visualizing planning intentions and land-related impacts in an accessible manner. In this way, GIS-based participation platforms contribute to good land governance by strengthening transparency, accountability, and trust—core principles promoted within the FIG community.

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8 FUTURE WORK: INTEGRATION OF AR AND VR

Future development will focus on integrating Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies into the participation platform. AR will enable on-site visualization of planning proposals within the physical environment using mobile devices or AR-enabled headsets.

VR-based extensions will allow immersive exploration of planning and redevelopment scenarios, including virtual walkthroughs and comparison of alternative designs. Participation mechanisms will be extended into immersive environments, enabling spatial annotations and feedback in three-dimensional space.

Future research will address challenges such as spatial alignment accuracy, real-time rendering performance, and usability across heterogeneous hardware platforms. Evaluation studies will assess the impact of immersive participation on understanding, engagement, and decision-making quality.

Figure 5. Using AI and VR in a modern participation platform. (https://www.unisg.ch/en/newsdetail/news/how-ai-could-revolutionise-urban-planning/)

9 Conclusion

GIS-based digital participation platforms offer a practical and scalable approach to strengthening local governance under real-world constraints. By reducing complexity, improving transparency, and embedding participation into planning and land-management workflows, these platforms help municipalities manage participation more effectively.

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The participation models presented in this paper demonstrate how digital participation can evolve from information provision toward co-creation and integrated governance. Combined with modular system architectures and future immersive technologies, GIS-based participation platforms support more inclusive, transparent, and resilient spatial decision-making.

In the long term, such platforms have the potential to strengthen trust, enhance democratic legitimacy, and empower citizens to actively shape their communities.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Dr. Frank Friesecke
die STEG Stadtentwicklung GmbH
Olgastraße 54
Stuttgart
GERMANY
Tel. +49 711 21068-118
E-Mail: frank.friesecke@steg.de
Website: www.steg.de

Hamidreza Ostadabbas
die STEG Stadtentwicklung GmbH
Olgastraße 54
Stuttgart
GERMANY
Tel. +49 711 21068-195
E-Mail: hamidreza.ostadabbas@steg.de
Website: www.steg.de

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Mohammad Hosseingholizadeh
die STEG Stadtentwicklung GmbH
Olgastraße 54
Stuttgart
GERMANY
Tel. +49 711 21068-153
E-Mail: mohammad.hosseingholizadeh@steg.de
Website: www.steg.de

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