

# ‘Come together?’ Citizens and civil servants dialogue and trust

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## Abstract

Trust is a key element in the co-creation of solution for public problems. Working together is a gradual learning exercise that helps to shape emotions and attitudes and to create the foundations of trust. However, little is known about how institutions can promote trust. With the intention of going deeper into the subject, this paper focuses on a local experience in Spain: Madrid Escucha, a City Council initiative aimed at stimulating dialogue between officials and citizens around projects to improve city life. Three are our questions: who participate in these spaces, how the interactions are, and what advances are achieved. Based on qualitative research, empirical findings confirm a biased participation in this kind of scenarios as well as the presence of prejudices on both sides, an interaction characterised by initial idealism followed by discouragement and a possible readjustment, and a final satisfaction with the process even when results are not successful.

## KEYWORDS

attitudes, citizens, dialogue, official, trust

*Having contact with citizens gives one ideas as a technician, it refreshes you and gives you interesting things. You see what is going on outside... I hope I have conveyed to [the citizens] a sense of reality and helped to delimit their work, ground projects, fit them into reality. The important thing is that they know the correct way to engage the public administration, that someone within feels responsible for the project and sponsors it, and that person is then in charge of making it cross-sectional and trying to realize it. (Interview with municipal technician. Madrid, June 6, 2017).*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This statement from a municipal technician after his participation in a Madrid City Council collaborative workshop, which had brought together local officials and citizens to jointly design solutions to improve life in the city, points at different ways of understanding the co-creation of policies. For technicians, it is an opportunity to acquire knowledge and information; for citizens, an opportunity to learn strategies on how to introduce a project to the administration. Despite these conflicting views, there is a consensus that, first, governance should involve citizens in public affairs; second, such involvement requires new institutional spaces that promote collaboration (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Creighton, 2005; Leach, 2006; O'Leary & Vij, 2012).

This paper focuses on a specific experience: *Madrid Escucha* ("Madrid Listens"), a Madrid City Council initiative held in May and June 2017, to stimulate the dialogue and promote trust between citizens and municipal technicians<sup>1</sup> through the design of prototypes<sup>2</sup> that offer solutions to public interest issues. This programme presents two features that make it especially attractive to study: on the one hand, it is inserted in a municipal government strategic line to encourage participation and, on the other, it is developed in a civic laboratory: Medialab-Prado,<sup>3</sup> archetype of a new institutionality that, through innovation, seeks to foster an active citizenship.

The ability of these programmes and scenarios to transform, train, and shape traditional behaviours is key to advancing towards more cooperative models that respond to the expectations of greater democratization (Della Porta, 2013, Fung, 2012), collaborative governance (Pollitt, Bouckaert, & Löffler, 2007), and open public administrations (Brugué, 2004).

Knowing what happens when public employee and citizens come together becomes our object of study, with three specific objectives: (1) to identify participant profiles and attitudes, as well as preconceptions about the other; (2) to study actor interactions and analyse if these get to overcome initial prejudices; (3) to make a balance of the prototypes progress.

The structure of the paper is as follows: First, we present the theoretical issues that arise with these processes that are related to our objectives. Second, we describe our case study, the methodology, and the research techniques we used during fieldwork (interviews, surveys, and participant observation). Third, we analyse the empirical information obtained, laying out the most significant findings from the observed behaviour of officials and citizens and the logic of their interaction. Finally, we propose a balance between normative premises and practical reality.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

The theoretical backdrop of our analysis is (1) theories of participatory, inclusive, and deliberative democracy that the political representation crisis has opened and draw attention about the need to look for new ways to involve citizens in public affairs (Accetti et al., 2016; Della Porta, 2013; Elster, 1998; Máiz, 2006; Waylen, 2015); (2) the studies of trust, the precondition for cooperative relationships which enables people to interact with others and suspend uncertainty (Güemes, 2016; Hardin, 1992; Herreros, 2004; Luhmann, 1979; Offe, 1999; Ostrom y Ahn, 2003, Pollitt et al., 2007; Sztompka, 2000; Van de Walle and Lahat, 2012); (3) collaborative governance, the institutional response that includes dialogue and cooperation as organisational keys and new approach about public management (Aguilar Villanueva, 2006; Brugué, 2004; Jessop, 1996; Pollitt et al., 2007); (4) open institutions and labs as a new morphology, which involve ways of working that include learning and listening (McGann, Blomkamp, & Lewis, 2018; Mulgan, 2014; Tönurist, Kattel, & Lember, 2017).

Taking into account this general framework, our concerns are about if the dialogue have the power to (1) change the attitudes and biases among public employees and citizens and (2) generate cooperation and create the base of collaboration and trust.

It is assumed that dialogue allows people from different backgrounds and initially distant positions to approach each other and establish strategic commitments around common objectives, undergoing a gradual process of cultural adaptation that favours the creation of shared meanings (Levine, Fung, & Gastil, 2005). Different experiences show that dialogue between actors allows them to elaborate better diagnoses, to identify priority topics and possible courses of coordinated action, and to integrate existing resources and strengths, taking advantage of the knowledge and skills of every individual (Berkowitz & Gagnon, 2017; Huxham, 2003; Sjoberg, Mellon, & Peixoto, 2017; Smith, 2010).

On the one hand, citizens feel involved, contribute ideas and see how the administration responds to their demands. On the other hand, public employees see their sources of information increase, access spaces they did not reach before and, to the extent that they appreciate these positive outcomes, they are more receptive to continue collaborating (Cooper, Bryer, & Week, 2006). Officials assume then a role that resembles that of facilitating leaders rather than bureaucrats or managers and begin to see themselves as true community builders (Nalbandian, 1999).

However, dialogue does not always occur. From experience in participatory forums, Escobar (2011, p. 13) enumerates a series of communicative patterns that tend to hinder dialogue: dominant voices, specialised jargon, pre-packaged arguments, polarising or confrontational exchanges, or oversimplification. These are the reasons why dialogue requires training, especially if it is to be considered an exercise aimed at strengthening civic muscle and building the confidence to work together.

To this dialogue emerge between citizens and officials, Brugué, Feu, and Güemes (2018) point out certain conditions that institutional scenarios have to include

1. The design of the process supposes clear rules and an honest management of the expectations, without waking up false hopes or hiding potential problems and limitations.
2. The conduction of the process being capable of generating mutual respect, in which a common ground is provided on how to approach disagreement and establish a way to manage and coexist with those differences.
3. There is enough time to debate and build relationships, with a leisurely calendar and opportunities for continuous interaction that allows knowing and recognising the other.
4. There is active participation of public managers and technicians with decision-making capacity to give credibility to the process itself and allows responding better to the questions and proposals of the participants.

Trust is the missing link between dialogue and collaboration because trust is needed to move from a non-cooperative to a cooperative situation (Rothstein, 2000). According to Corbett and Le Dantec (2018) trust is an ecology of people and institutions, of distances and risks (that are associative), of expectations and power, which is subject to growth, evolution, and regression. There are practices that initiate trust, practices that consolidate it, and practices that retain it.

When there is trust, the uncertainty about the behaviour of others is reduced and the fear of being deceived neutralised, saving time and resources in monitoring and controlling what others do. In other words, trust makes the behaviour of others more predictable, providing peace of mind and a sense of security for social actors, and reducing the risks of social interaction (Hardin, 1992; Luhmann, 1979; Offe, 1999; Sztompka, 2000).

In most cases, cooperation comes first: participants exchange information, ideas, or tasks and share resources to achieve a common purpose but participants remain autonomous. In collaboration, the group is interdependent, mutual respect evolves into trust, and everybody is willing to learn from each other to become better. That requires a substantial time commitment and very high level of trust. Developing collaborative ways of working depends on establishing a high degree of trust among members and thus is a very time-consuming process (Keast, Brown, & Mandell, 2007).

Our objective is to get more empirical knowledge about the encounters between citizens and officials.

Regarding our first objective: identify participant profile, attitudes, and prejudices, previous studies indicate two common limitations in the profile of those involved in these processes. On the one hand, the low social representativeness of the participants who, in general, enjoy medium-high incomes and higher education, or are interested in politics, with pre-defined points of view and extreme preferences (Fung, 2006, p. 67; Wojcieszak & Alarcón, 2012). On the other hand, there is participatory bias in favour of certain groups (e.g. associations) (Navarro, 2000, p. 18). Likewise, it is relevant to know which public officials participate in this type of initiative (their hierarchical level and capacity for influence), since this increases the probability that an idea can be tested and achieve continuity (Font, Wojcieszak, & Navarro, 2015; Fung, 2006). A third limitation is related to the initial attitudes and emotional predisposition of the actors. Preconceptions limit cooperative potential and capacity to trust others are to be expected (Del Pino, Calzada, & Díaz Pulido, 2016; Van de Walle, 2008).

As to the second objective, we want to study how officials and citizens interact when working on the same project and to analyse when these interactions let overcome the initial prejudices. In that sense, the stereotypes and bias are cognitive shortcuts that impact on social relations. On the one hand, citizens often refer bureaucracy to someone (or something, in terms of organisation) that operates incompetent, indifferent, oppressively, devitalised, ritualistic, and obstructionist (Goodsell, 1985). On the other hand, it is common for officials to see citizens as irresponsible, disinterested, short-sighted, and uninformed (Yang, 2005). Sometimes, these prejudices disappear after positive encounters and experiences or when people access to positive information, but other times they persist even when that (Berman, 1997; Del Pino et al., 2016).

Finally, regarding our third objective, that is examining the progress of the final prototypes results from these interactions, it is interesting to know what advance progress has been made in relation to the initial objectives. Works such as Talpin's (2012) argue that experiences with disappointing or frustrating results feed cynicism and reinforce negative stereotypes, whereas positive results increase commitment and trust while incorporating new argumentative skills and repertoires.

## 2.1 | Research design, data, and methods

A case study research design was employed in this work to provide empirical knowledge to new phenomena. Specifically, we focus in a single case, a novel experience in the Spanish municipal sphere: *Madrid Escucha*, a Madrid City Council initiative aimed at creating a meeting place for citizens and public employees to put the demands of the former together with the technical knowledge of the latter, and thus create better solution to public problems through mutual knowledge and the creation of trust. Its goal is to develop prototypes in a collaborative way.

*Madrid Escucha* is an exercise in participation in which citizens and professionals representing the administration volunteer to meet and think together, without committing to reach decisions to be implemented at the end of the process. The participation of citizens in this kind of exercise is usual, but not so that of the professionals representing the administrations.

The experience began in March 2017 with a public call for initiatives that could become part of it. A total of 30 projects were received of which nine were selected. Those proposals that had the

greatest potential for collaboration were prioritised within three areas: public space, environment and sustainable mobility, and child rearing.<sup>4</sup> The following initiatives were chosen:

*Centro de Recuperación de Maderas* ('Wood Recovery Centre'), to establish a collection point that recovers, classifies, and stores wood to give it a new life.

*Biciescuela* ('Bicy-school'), to design contents and a methodology to teach citizens how to cycle safely in the city.

*Reinstauración de la Fiesta del Árbol en Madrid* ('Reinstatement of the Tree Festival in Madrid'), to recover the tradition of celebrating a tree festival, with activities aimed especially at children.

*Escuela de Ciudad* ('City School'), to establish a protocol that improves the quality of the public spaces close to schools, with the participation of the educational community and their neighbourhoods.

*Tómame un Descanso* ('Take a Rest'), to design a folding seat attached to the wall to offer pedestrians a rest in narrow and steep streets in the historic centre.

*Iniciativa Fiestopolitana Madrileña* ('Madrilenian Party-politan Initiative'), to simplify the procedure required to organise and celebrate events and neighbourhood parties at the initiative of citizens.

*Cubiertas Escolares y Huertos Agroecológicos* ('School Rooftops and Agroecological Gardens'), to prepare the rooftops of pre- and primary school education centres to establish ecological community gardens.

*Madrid Cría* ('Madrid Rears (Children)'), to adapt public spaces to rearing babies and children and create solidarity networks around them.

*Jardinería Vecinal en el Espacio Público* ('Neighbourhood Gardening in the Public Space'), to provide fences around tree feet to avoid dirt and banks to create meeting places.

The workshops relied on the following figures:

- promoters, the person or group (official or citizen) who presented the initiative;
- collaborators, people (official or citizen) who joined the initiative once approved;
- coordinators, Medialab-Prado staff who acted as articulators and producers of the workshop;
- mentors, specialist provided by Medialab-Prado who support people guiding the groups and dynamising their work; and
- itinerants, as we have called the public officials specialised in the workshops' areas of action who sporadically attended sessions to advise the groups on technical issues.

Public officials who participated in *Madrid Escucha* either as promoters, as collaborators, or as itinerants did so on their own initiative, voluntarily and not on behalf of the city council.

Our fieldwork covered the 6-day meeting phase of the workshops (23–25 May and 6–8 June 2017). We propose an approach to empirical reality based on a triangulation of qualitative techniques that would allow us to (a) obtain information in different ways and reduce possible subjective biases and (b) capture participants' perceptions, and the expectations and interactions arisen (Denzin, 1970). For this purpose, we used semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, participant observation, and documentary analysis.<sup>5</sup>

For the interviews, we wrote an open script for each type of participant. Although we pre-set some questions, we also left room for new ones. We conducted a total of 27 interviews between the three workshop coordinators, the nine promoters (three officials, six citizens), the five mentors, and ten of the itinerant officials. In the case of coordinators and promoters, the interview was conducted at two different moments, the first and the last day, to analyse how their perceptions evolved.<sup>6</sup>

The questionnaires were distributed among the project collaborators at the beginning of the workshop so that they could be answered anonymously (using an alias). We designed a template participants had to briefly fill-in. Of those registered (75 in total), 38 returned the questionnaire complete (eight officials, 30 citizens).

To complement that information, two of us wrote field journals using participant observation. We distributed between us the different work groups and took notes on their interactions. At the end of each session we put the data in common and contrasted our notes, adding comments to the margins. Additionally, we collected the presentations the groups gave at the end of the workshops, showing the results achieved and the status of each of their prototypes.

Once the field work finished, we tackled the information using an inductive process that consisted of three phases. First, we identified the incidents we considered relevant, isolating the most significant topics, references, and terms. Second, we connected those incidents, comparing differences and similarities. Third, we integrated them by building categories and we delimited according to level of theoretical saturation. This procedure allowed us to capture regularities and establish behaviour patterns that we linked with the theory. In this way, we have designed categories in the form of ideal types, conceptual instruments with a heuristic value aimed at capturing essential features of social phenomena (Weber, 1982).

### 3 | FINDINGS

#### 3.1 | Participants profile, initial attitudes, and preconceptions about the other

The predominant socio-demographic profile of the promoters, collaborators, and mentors interviewed was that of professionals in areas requiring technical or specialised knowledge (71%), with an average age between 40 and 45 years, and living within the main city ring road, the M-30. By gender, the participation of women (57%) was higher than that of men (43%), whereas the participation of citizens (76%) tripled that of officials (24%).

In relation to this last aspect, one of the main difficulties the coordinators of *Madrid Escucha* encountered was getting specialised officials to participate with the citizens in a continuous manner. The initial idea was that the number of municipal employees would be similar to that of citizens, and that, from the beginning, technical specialists would always be present to advise the groups, not just on an itinerant basis.

About these itinerant officials, half of those interviewed corresponded to intermediate positions (head of department, unit, or office) in the local administration (50%), whereas the other half was divided among municipal technicians (30%), executives (director or deputy director general) (20%). By areas, the one with the greatest presence was environment and mobility (50%), followed by sustainable urban development (30%), and territorial coordination and public–social cooperation (20%). Regarding gender, men (80%) predominated over women (20%).

To characterise the main attitudes, we relied on the analysis of questionnaires given to collaborators, the interviews conducted at the beginning of the workshop with promoters and coordinators, and the interviews with the itinerant officials. From this analysis, we have generated a typology of attitudes for each case. They are ideal types with some common features attending to the personal situation of the participants (civic servant/advisor, employee/unemployed, militant) and their commitment (with someone or some specific institution, with the workshop, with participation processes), and motivation (meet people and networking, gather information, employment purposes) about the workshop.

Among citizens, the following types of attitudes are identified:

1. *Enthusiasts-dreamers*: Despite emotional ups and downs, they keep wanting to change the world, beginning with a specific project. They are generous and hopeful.
2. *Demanders of change*: They are hypercritical about the world around and are angry at how the administration and politics operate. They know and demand their rights and want change to make them effective.
3. *The Precariat*: Their participation is conditioned by their life situation. They have a precarious work situation and are either looking for a job in these spaces (based on the success of the initiative) or are networking to find one.

For officials, we identified the following typology:

1. *One-day wonder*: They comply by attending the workshop and being available for a while. They have little commitment to the project and are there to make someone happy. They assume that their participation will be episodic, temporary, and fleeting. They can provide some information to the participants, but in a general way, without being committed to the future.
2. *Solver*: They officiate as shepherd, teacher, and consultant, the ones showing the greatest commitment. They strive to understand the initiative, transmit knowledge and explain how the public administration and its procedure work. They offer specific information and their contacts within the town hall to the participants.
3. *Compassionate and empathetic*: They acquire the role of psychologist, demonstrating closeness, but their commitment is superficial. At first contact, they try to leave their technical persona behind and present themselves as “just another citizen” (also a victim of the complexities of the public administration). They enable group catharsis and transmit their experience but do not provide specific solutions to the initiative.

To inquire into the initial prejudices of citizens (35, between promoters and collaborators), we asked how many had participated before in similar processes. The majority (66%) had been part of participatory budgets, neighbourhoods activities, or thematic workshops in which they had performed technical tasks, that is organisation, promotion, dynamisation, or consultancy. According to their answers, their experience with the administration had left mixed memories. The main positive memories included the dialogue that was generated and the free exchange of ideas, the learning process and the empathy, and opening of the mind experienced. Among the negatives, they mentioned, at the personal level, the need for ego management, the persistence of prejudices, and the difficulty of understanding others; and, at the structural level, the time pressures, the work overload, and the slowness of some of the procedures.

Based on these memories, the citizens' predominant perception of the administration and the whole process was characterised by caution and a certain level of distrust. They attend full of expectations, albeit fearing wasting their time in ‘just another workshop’ (CI), falling into sterile ‘participationism’ (II), or being used by the city council, whom they mistrust as being more interested in legitimating itself by implementing the project than in actually opening up processes: ‘listening is biased’ (CPI) and ‘sometimes we have a sense of being manipulated’ (CCS). In general, three views on public administration are detected: as client, this is a project in which I work with others and I want to sell it to the city council; as a rival, I come to look for loopholes and blind spots in the administration so that the project prospers; as an ally, where there is prior knowledge of specific departments and people in the city council, with whom there is already a relationship of trust.





**FIGURE 1** Some citizen perceptions about officials [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)] *Source:* Selection of drawings painted by the collaborators at the beginning of the workshop, in response to the question of questionnaire: ‘If I say public official, what is the first idea or image that comes to mind?’

In citizens’ perception of public officials, some classic stereotypes take force (see Figure 1):

- About the individual behaviour of the officials: ‘they do not understand the vocabulary of where [sic] things happen, they are arrogant and think of themselves as super-powerful’ (CPI), ‘certain rigidity, a kind of initial coldness and distrust towards our proposals’ (CCS), ‘they are all talk and very little work’ (CCS), ‘getting (them) to sit with us is very complicated, there are no channels of communication, and when you do, (there is) little operability’ (CPI).
- About the limitations imposed by the administration: ‘(officials are) overworked, overwhelmed, (they have) very little time. They set meetings at times that are not feasible for the people who are working on these issues as voluntaries’ (CPI), ‘departments are compartmentalised and there is a lot of confusion about how the institution is organised’ (CCS).

Officials, for their part (11, between promoters and collaborators), have all been involved in similar participation processes, either as municipal employees, or as citizens about their ordinary lives. They consider that these spaces are positive and serve to ‘nurture new ideas’ and ‘get to know the needs of citizenship’ (II). They value collaborative work and believe that it is possible to obtain new information and learn many things, ‘even at not being right’ (II).

From their previous experiences, and according to their answers, we can identify a general degree of fear towards citizens. There is a perception among officials that citizens always ask for things that, in many cases, do not fall under their purview or exceed it, and that a negative response incurs their anger, which makes them be somewhat cautious:

- They consider that citizens sometimes become hyper-demanding and even selfish, ‘they ask whomever they encounter for things’ (OPI), ‘watch out for their individual interest, for example moms and dads who want their children to be first’ (COS).
- They find it difficult to communicate with citizens and to explain how procedures work without them getting angry: ‘it is very difficult to materialise the ideas that arise from these processes, and then someone has to be responsible’ (COS), ‘these then creates embarrassment and a sense of time wasted’ (COS).



- Their assumption is that citizens have a bad image of them, ‘citizens do not realise that officials are at the service of the public and they are the object of too many negative campaigns’ (OPI).

This perception of officials leads to three visions of citizens: as beings with imagination, information, and useful resources; as students to whom they must explain how the administration works and where the limits of its competencies are; and as subjects with whom to empathise when criticising the structural limits of public management.

### 3.2 | Participant interaction

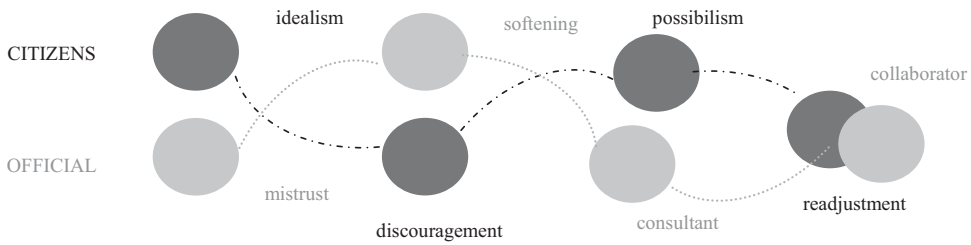
Based on the analysis of the field data we collected using participant observation, we identified three general patterns of interaction in the workshop, two related to socio-demographic factors, and one to the specific dynamics of the work groups. The first was gender: Women were more receptive and open to dialogue, so that communication was more fluid in those groups with a majority of women than in those that were male-dominated, where some obstacles in establishing common ground were encountered. The second was age, as it was easier for those who belonged to the same generation to engage in dialogue than for those that did not. The third is related to the management of group expectations. Almost all groups began the workshop with large discussions on general aspects and then, gradually, became less idealistic, limiting themselves to specific issues, such as regulation or logistics, debating in a more detail-oriented way. Alongside, the presence of technical specialists to advise them on their project, which was expected by most participants from the first moment in the project, meant that their absence caused discouragement. All these aspects generated a plethora of expectations and waxing and waning of motivation, which resulted sometimes, in initially very active participants, in more passive attitudes or even the abandonment of the project altogether.

Using these factors and contrasting our observations with our interviews with the itinerant officials, mentors, promoters, and coordinators after workshop participation, we have distinguished a series of phases in the interactions between officials and citizens.

For citizens, four stages of interaction can be distinguished. Note that that not all participants completed the sequence and some stayed in the second or third phases, mainly due to the how they managed expectations:

- *First phase: Idealism.* They start the workshops excited when first meeting in the groups and the beginning of the dialogue process, wanting to change the city and open spaces for participation.
- *Second phase: Discouragement.* They begin to perceive the difficulties in executing the initiative and experience the first limitations of group work. They deflate as they become aware that they will have to give up certain expectations.
- *Third phase: Possibilism.* After the reality check, they reconsider the situation and rethink questions and the possible courses of action. Several of the participants went on to stay in this phase, analysing possible outputs for the initiative.
- *Fourth phase: Readjustment.* Expectations are adjusted and a pragmatic vision adopted, formulating the initiative in new terms that allow it to and achieve execution, either as a prototype or as a concrete goal.

For officials, the general tendency of interaction was to alternate between a can/cannot attitude. Both the interviews with itinerant officials and the official promoters at the end of the workshop allowed us to conclude that officials tend to reinforce their initial attitudes: Citizens neither know what the



**FIGURE 2** Evolution of interactions between officials and citizens

administration can or cannot do, nor understand the reasons for its complexity (the value of the public and of the general interest, its impersonal character, or the difficulties of changing norms).

As those of citizens, the attitudes of officials varied during the course of the workshops, going back and forth in their degree of approximation to the citizenship. Again, not all officials went through the four stages we identified. Officials' stages of interaction were closely related to those of citizens, a true approach only occurring when both citizens and officials managed to reach what we have characterised in both cases as a fourth phase (see Figure 2).

- *First phase: Mistrust.* Officials begin interaction by explaining the value of the public (the responsibility of the public administration and the values it pursues) and the complexity of public management (rules and procedures). Their position is one of caution, transmitting it by highlighting the impediments, to reduce expectations. They position themselves as agents external to the group.
- *Second phase: Softening.* Seeing how the group becomes discouraged, officials take citizens' side, seeking an empathetic attitude. They begin to talk about their own experiences and position themselves as one more actor in the group.
- *Third phase: Consultant.* Officials assume a more technical and impersonal profile, offering details, tips, and data on how the administration operates. As citizens ask questions and seek continuously advice or contacts, officials provide the information demanded. Here, they are again positioned outside the group.
- *Fourth phase: Collaborator.* This last phase was only reached in a few cases, since most officials stayed in the previous one. Here, officials step into a collaborative position, making commitments, embracing the initiative and feeling part of the group, as they are all on the same boat and work towards the same goal.

Despite most participants having experience of other participatory processes, they went easily from idealism to frustration, and from 'possibilism' to 'readjustment'. We know that the psychology of the participants, their expectations, and the nature of their starting positions affected the 'temperature' of the deliberations, their effectiveness and their evolution. We do not know why this happens, except that it is a regular issue in local participation, but we were nonetheless able to learn some things. The processes in which this kind of participatory experience involving officials and citizens occurred is sometimes called 'local forum' or 'participatory budgeting' by the authorities. All of them take place in traditional official spaces such as schools, public libraries, or civic centres, where formal and informal institutions (institution understood as a norm). In contrast, our participatory process took place in a lab, which was a new institution for the participants, that also happens to be an open space. Additionally, the participants were in a neutral zone in conditions of formal parity, that is they all had equal opportunities to speak, and they did not have to follow structured rules, that is they were engaged

in a discussion whose goal was to find some common ground, without set ways to behave. We observed the same dynamics in both cases.

### 3.3 | Results of the meeting

On the last day of *Madrid Escucha*, the nine groups presented their progress, sharing their end prototypes. Analysing these presentations together with our field diaries and interviews with promoters, coordinators, and mentors, we have identified three types of results.

The first corresponds to those initiatives – four out of nine – that made substantial advance in the design of their prototypes: *Tómate un descanso*, *Fiesta del Árbol*, *Iniciativa Fiestopolitana*, and *Jardinería Vecinal*. During the workshop, it had been possible to define essential project aspects and some kind of synergy between citizens and officials had been generated, leaving the door open to further collaboration. Projects had in common:

1. Well-defined goals from the onset: A physical prototype was built in two cases (a folding seat and an oak-seat) and, in two others, documents were written (one regulating neighbourhood festivities; one recovering the tree festival).
2. They adapted to the lines of work of the city council, achieving synchronicity between their objectives and those of the administration, for example environmental issues, mobility in the public space and so on.
3. They were not resource-intensive.
4. They found allies within the local administration that considered them suited for their departments.

The second type refers to two initiatives, *Escuela de Ciudad* and *Cubiertas Escolares*, which made minor progress in the design of their prototypes. In both cases:

1. Interaction with officials was purely informative: They provided data and contacts within the local administration but did not commit to the continuity of the project.
2. Information allowed the groups to broaden their vision of the proposal and to introduce modifications in the design of the prototype, giving it a guide format.
3. The projects were broader, aimed at creating new meanings in the public space, than those of the first type.
4. They involved a greater number of actors, especially parent association networks, and different areas of the city council.

The third type of results corresponds to those initiatives for which the workshops did not advance their objectives in a significant way. Two of these initiatives, *Centro de Recuperación de Madera* and *Madrid Cría*, had in common:

1. Few interactions with officials and, when occurring, hardly any dialogue, transfer of useful information or commitment generated, ‘the idea was not captured or the project embraced, and we did not see any motivation’ (CPI), ‘technicians only tell their side of the story and that is not cooperating’ (CPI).
2. The workshop served more to create or strengthen networks between collectives and citizens than as a meeting place with public employees.
3. Their main objective was to have a municipal space ceded, in one case to create a wood recovery centre; in the other, to promote spaces suited for rearing children.

4. The sheer scope of the goal conditioned the project's reduced success, as it demanded increased resources, competencies and coordination between government areas in relation to previous ones.

The third of the initiatives, *Biciescuela*, achieved little progress for two reasons:

1. It sought to give continuity to a European project that had ended and no longer had resources allocated, 'being that the City Council wants to spend as little as possible, the project would have to be undertaken by some cycling association that does it for free and that we could publicize if it had a workshop etc., or by paying someone from the association world' (OPI).
2. It did not manage to connect with the collaborators because it consisted of a very defined proposal, 'there was an initial idea and it was never proposed to modify it, and the collaborators limited themselves to supporting or expanding it... they thought of solutions first and of its problems only as an afterthought. The group decreased in size and each member had some personal objective at stake' (MI).

## 4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Under the premise that trust is fundamental for the success of co-creation of solution of public problems, we began this article highlighting the importance of promoting programmes that enhance the dialogue between officials and citizens.

Using qualitative primary information sources, we placed the focus on (1) identifying participant profiles, their attitudes, and prejudices about others at the time of entering the dialogue; (2) studying the interactions between the different actors and analysing if they alter their initial attitudes and preconceptions throughout the workshop; and (3) examining the final prototype results and the advances.

There are some remarkable findings:

1. Those who usually attend these processes are 'professionals of participationism' with similar profiles and some experience in this kind of activities. We also found that (a) although new citizen voices were incorporated, a majority of participants (70%) came from socially privileged strata (the professional middle class, with a higher level of education and living within the M-30); (b) it was difficult to attract municipal technicians on an ongoing basis.

The participants' initial attitude was very conditioned by the work situation and the commitment and motivation with which they attend. In that sense, as the workshop responds to their needs, their involvement will increase.

Despite the experience, participants maintained some preconceptions: officials believe that citizens demand without knowing the administration's values, how it functions or how limited its resources are; while citizens picture bureaucracy as horrific, its officials unaffected by what happens outside, out of touch with the times, intransigent, and slaved to case files. This results in an initial perception of caution and vigilance, and the activation of a behavioural pattern in which each actor seeks to change the other's way of thinking and understanding things and, from that, his behaviour.

2. Stereotypes about others work in both directions (civil servants–citizens), and their first interactions tend to reproduce the common patterns of interaction between them: a 'can/cannot' formula for officials (i.e. 'must be done in this way' or 'talk with this person') and 'ask/buy' one for citizens. Officials' evolution can be summarised as initial suspicion followed by a softening and settling into a consultant role and, in the best of cases, a collaborating one. In citizens, we

perceived an initial idealism followed by discouragement, then a phase where things are newly attainable, followed by a possible project readjustment.

These findings highlight the importance of the external dynamisation of the groups. From an actor (in this case a mentor) capable of helping the participants to leave the critical points while at the same time guiding them emotionally to deal with the differences and promote the development of new more cooperative attitudes.

3. In most projects, no relevant output was made: only three groups obtained significant advanced in the prototype. This degree of advance was related to (a) no large inputs or public resources being required, (b) the objective was clear and feasible, (c) the prototype adapted to the city council's lines of action, and (d) the group was able to find a counterpart within the administration.

Despite these results, participants were satisfied with the experience and noted the importance of meeting and working together. This is relevant outcome, noteworthy of attention. Addressing and reversing inertia demand a gradual learning process that has to be regularly exercised over time to shape emotions and attitudes.

We deal with a small number of people and cases, so there is not enough variation to reach strong conclusions, which is why the results are not conclusive or do not enable us to generalise. However, they do point in a direction that demands further future research. Being aware of this limitation, our conceptualisation of different categories of participants has not been constructed from sample design and not contrasted with other cases. We try to formulate ideal types in a Weberian sense, that is they serve to order an empirical reality, entail a theoretical accentuation of certain elements of reality, and synthesise a great many diffuse and discrete individual phenomena into an internally consistent mental image. In that sense, such concepts have no particular exemplifications in empirical reality; they are 'unrealistic'.

Based on these findings, we propose some keys for future experiences:

1. Consider carefully selection practices: for citizens, to focus on traditionally less represented sectors; for officials, to promote positive incentives to stimulate their attendance and abating their fears. Tools linked to nudges can be useful at this point (Jilke, Van de Walle, & Kim, 2015, Van Deun, van Acker, Fobé, & Brans, 2018).
2. Taking into account the permanence of strong stereotypes and an unstable evolution of emotions in this kind of processes, it would be necessary an external dynamisation through mentors in two directions: (a) the creation of conditions and a common language that allows participants to feel comfortable and able to communicate and (b) a design that allows longer times and meeting spaces before and after the workshop. Playful or socialising activities could help in this regard (Brugué et al., 2018).
3. In the case of projects that are not directly realisable, these workshops should give greater support to the groups to reconfigure their initial objectives and be able to adjust expectations and propose a viable prototype. Besides, future studies would need to look further into what happens with the projects arising from this type of initiatives, if they move forward towards more comprehensive programmes or if, on the contrary, they eventually die as a consequence of bureaucratic routine or survive as small isolated projects, more as tokens that examples of a real exercise of policy creation (Font, Smith, Galais, & Alarcon, 2018).

We are not sure whether the creation of trust and cooperation between the citizens and public officials depends on the outcome of their interaction or on the fairness of the procedure, because it is very

difficult to measure trust in such a short period. However, we believe that a programme that encourages the dialogue between those two groups (especially if they are sustained in time, attention is paid to the restoration of balance against disparities, and the participants are helped to avoid prejudice) could create the conditions for cooperation and the base for mutual trust (Güemes & Resina, 2018).

Although *Madrid Escucha* was a pre-structured process, this did not compromise its informality. On the contrary, the organisational framework was set up to stimulate the development of informal relations and to eliminate those barriers that are frequently present in non-structured interactions between citizens and officials, for example of language or knowledge. The goal of these kinds of deliberation programmes is to create a learning process in the participants in the sense of trying to open up a conversation among them. This is a complex and difficult purpose. The positions of the participants could either be well-defined and structured, with few doubts, or ill-defined, uncertain, and/or surrounded by doubts. Accordingly, a 'suspension of judgment' is not always possible and, thus, a demand for the work of mediators or facilitators is created, to restore balance and enhance participation, while at the same time avoiding prejudice (Bobbio, 2010).

To conclude, our objective was limited to exploring the specific *Madrid Escucha* experience, knowing that (a) the creation of trust requires long periods of time and the continued exercise of new interaction practices and (b) a single initiative is unable to change things overnight. There is one lesson learned: the dialogue between officials and citizens needs an innovative and open space to happen, plus continuous training, as the learning process is gradual.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article, we will talk about municipal officials and technicians in an indistinct way, referring to all those who have a statutory or contractual relationship with the city council and that in general terms call themselves civil servants.

<sup>2</sup> Prototyping is a process that integrates the voice of those affected to understand a problem. It is a design method that help to increase engagement and to activate people enabling them to shape their own products, services, and living environments (Mulder, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Medialab-Prado is an experimental space founded in 2000 that depends on the Culture and Sports Department of the Madrid City Council.

<sup>4</sup> Among the 30 proposals received, eight were promoted by municipal employees and 22 by citizens. From the final selection of projects, three were municipal and six from citizens. The projects were selected by a committee composed of the social innovation working group of Medialab-Prado, the coordinators of the workshop and technical staff of the municipality competent in the subjects of the proposals presented. The main selection criteria were originality, degree of innovation, technical feasibility, sustainability and replicability of the project, and those proposals that stimulate the collaboration between citizens and municipal employees. After selecting the projects, the next step was to open a new call for collaborators interested in joining one of these nine initiatives. In total, 75 people



signed up (ten municipal employees and 65 citizens). For a more detailed description of the selected initiatives, see <http://medialab-prado.es/article/proyectos-madrid-escucha>.

<sup>5</sup> We had access to the workshop as researchers. *Madrid Escucha* provided us some financial support to prepare a report. Their coordinators introduced us to participants during the first day. To access the templates used for interviews and questionnaires see: \*anonymized\*.

<sup>6</sup> Given the confidentiality agreed with the participants, their names will be omitted and we will use the following coding for the interviews and surveys: coordinators interviews (CI), official promoters interviews (OPI), citizen promoters interviews (CPI), mentors interviews (MI), itinerant interviews (II), collaborators citizens survey (CCS), and collaborators officials survey (COS).

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