

**Mahallae: Learning How to Build Digital Tools for Civic Engagement**

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# 1. Why Use Technology for Civic Engagement?

As the availability of digital technology increases all around the world, it is becoming increasingly clear that it is shaping our lives and communities in numerous ways. The powers to access information with unprecedented ease, to communicate and associate with others more efficiently than ever, to gather and map data in both great quantity and detail, and to overcome barriers and old hierarchies are shaping the ways in which we think, communicate, and live.

In this rapidly changing landscape it is necessary to explore the ways in which the power of digital technology can be utilized to stimulate civic engagement and social change. Not doing so would mean not only missing out on great opportunities to achieve our goals, but also being out of touch with the communities we serve. By not paying attention to the behavior and needs of our communities, we risk designing initiatives with low impact and little reach. A major lesson of using digital technology for social change is the need to be adaptable to the reality and needs of your community and agile in your responses to them.

Of course, using technology for civic engagement and social change will not produce magical solutions. It requires work and commitment just like other approaches, maybe even more so as the learning curve is steep. Working with digital technology to affect social change means changing the approach and the perspective one has on this type of work. It means adopting an iterative development process centered on cycles of prototyping and testing and learning what works and what doesn’t from the users. It means letting go of preconceived ideas and using data to inform your decisions. It means working out loud and being in touch with the community from the first stage of developing an initiative. And it means not being afraid to admit failures, learning from your mistakes, and trying again.

Mahallae, our digital platform for civic engagement, set out to experiment with the use of digital technology for civic engagement through a series of challenges aiming to recruit citizen expertise in finding the best technology-enabled solutions for some of the issues faced by their communities. The first set of challenges has been completed and this report charts the lessons learned throughout the process based on the experience of the Mahallae team and the five solution teams.

# 2. The Challenges Process

The Mahallae Challenges were designed to provide a space for citizens to envision and develop technology-enabled tools to generate social change within their communities. At the heart of the Mahallae Challenges lies a commitment to encourage and support citizens to engage more deeply with the issues that affect them and develop solutions to tackle those issues effectively.

The structure of the challenges process was developed to support the goals and mission of the Mahallae Challenges. The open process of the challenges, that allows everyone to contribute ideas with little effort, ensures that the needs are formulated by citizens at the grassroots level. At the same time, the community engagement aspect, that allows users to shape the shortlisted ideas through comments, endorsements, and contributions, is a first application of principles of user-centered design that are vital for developing viable solutions.

Moreover, throughout the different stages of the challenges, support is offered to applicants through webinars, meet-ups, consultations, and workshops. This approach ensures there’s a constant dialogue with the teams and the extended community and helps build capacity locally for innovation and the use technology for social change.

## 2.1 What worked?

Citizen expertise

One of the essential pillars of carrying out civic engagement and peacebuilding work around the world is engaging grassroots support for defining the most pressing needs and issues in the affected communities. The openness of the Mahallae Challenges created opportunities for citizen experts to come up with ideas within very broad thematic areas, thus encouraging innovation and creativity in an effort to find the ideas with the most impact. The five solutions that were put into practice are innovative, community-oriented initiatives that could only have been developed by citizen experts (architects, researchers, writers, civil society practitioners or entrepreneurs). Each solution has a distinctive character shaped by the expertise of the team on the ground, their insights regarding the issue being addressed, and their connection with their community.

Community engagement

**Recommendation:** Continue the outreach to citizen experts to discover the most pressing needs and the most viable ideas for addressing them. The open character of the challenges and their commitment to innovation from the ground up is the key to developing impactful solutions.

Designing social change initiatives with the input of potential users and the extended community is a central component of the Challenges Process. Asking people what they need instead of assuming what they need is a first application of principles of user-centered design that are vital for developing viable solutions. Discussions around the properties and potential of a tool can help improve it, while in-kind contributions can enhance the shared ownership of a digital tool for social change. By incorporating these avenues for community engagement directly into the Challenges Process, Mahallae has tried to improve on more traditional approaches that are missing a feedback loop between the design of an initiative and the community it is meant to serve.

**Recommendation:** Continue improving the channels of communication and engagement available to the public. Improve the endorsement functionality to mean more than a simple vote of support. Find new ways in which endorsements and contributions can become really meaningful throughout the development stage and not remain suspended at the concept stage.

Mentoring and support

Mentoring is at the heart of the Mahallae Challenges process as a way of redefining the relationship between donors and partners on the ground. Mahallae mentors supported the development of concepts and solutions through specialized workshops, regular consultations, testing and feedback, and outreach support. In private consultations, all five teams reported that being in constant communication with the Mahallae mentors and receiving hands-on support was very beneficial for the development of their tools. This process of co-creation exceeded their expectations in comparison with more traditional ways of donor relationships.

**Recommendation:** Continue implementing mentoring as a core function of the Challenges Process and facilitate co-creation as a new way of rethinking donor relationships. Provide mentors with the tools to carry out the work required, through specialization and skill development so they can, in turn, support the solution teams.

## 2.2 What can be improved?

Need for privacy

Coming up with innovative ideas can be a very difficult task. Innovation needs really good problem definition, capacity to understand the needs of the affected groups, and a creative spark. For this reason, social innovators may feel overly protective of their ideas and be reluctant to share them on an open platform such as Mahallae. This concern for privacy may limit the number of submissions and, potentially, the information submitted by innovators at the idea stage which may, in turn, impair the ability of the panel of judges to make the best decisions.

**Recommendation:** If the privacy issue becomes a big concern, the process could be modified to allow public view of submitted ideas only after the deadline for submission has been reached. To still maintain an overview of the number of submissions, an idea counter could be added to enable visitors to see how many ideas have been submitted so far to a particular challenge.

Transparent decision-making

The Mahallae Challenges can be seen as Olympic Games for social innovators, where teams compete in designing the most socially impactful digital tool. It is therefore important that the rules of the competition are as transparent and easily accessible as the ones of sport competitions. A clear decision-making process eliminates controversies and builds a culture of trust among participants. An important part of this process is knowing who the decision-makers are.

**Recommendation:** Provide information about the panel of judges for both the ideas stage and the concepts stage. This information could be added either on the challenge page itself, in the guidelines, or publicized on social media and would reinforce the values of openness and transparency central to the Mahallae Challenges.

Engaging the runners-up

The process of submitting a final concept to a Mahallae Challenge can be a time-consuming one especially if shortlisted teams have a great initial idea but are finding it difficult to shape it further into a concept. Because of that, runners-up can feel really disenchanted once they don’t find themselves among the winning teams. Since they are part of the larger innovation and social change community, they should be engaged further and provided with support and incentives to continue working on their idea to further develop it.

**Recommendation:** Ensure that during the evaluation of finalists, clear feedback is provided for the runners-up to help them further develop their ideas. Moreover, in an effort to support innovation for social change, opportunities to further engage the idea and concept teams that have not been rewarded funding should be devised, such as workshops and networking opportunities.

## 2.3 Recommendations

1. Continue the outreach to citizen experts to discover the most pressing needs and the most viable ideas for addressing them. The open character of the challenges and their commitment to innovation from the ground up is the key to developing impactful solutions.
2. Continue improving the channels of communication and engagement available to the public. Improve the endorsement functionality to mean more than a simple vote of support. Find new ways in which endorsements and contributions can become really meaningful throughout the development stage and not remain suspended at the concept stage.
3. Continue implementing mentoring as a core function of the Challenges Process and facilitate co-partnerships as a new way of rethinking donor relationships. Provide mentors with the tools to carry out the work required, through specialization and skill development so they can, in turn, support the solution teams.
4. If the privacy issue becomes a big concern, the process could be modified to allow public view of submitted ideas only after the deadline for submission has been reached. To still maintain an overview of the number of submissions, an idea counter could be added to enable visitors to see how many ideas have been submitted so far to a particular challenge.
5. Provide information about the panel of judges for both the ideas stage and the concepts stage. This information could be added either on the challenge page itself, in the guidelines, or publicized on social media and would reinforce the values of openness and transparency central to the Mahallae Challenges.
6. Ensure that during the evaluation of finalists, clear feedback is provided for the runners-up to help them further develop their ideas. Moreover, in an effort to support innovation for social change, opportunities to further engage the idea and concept teams that have not been rewarded funding should be devised, such as workshops and networking opportunities.

# 3. The Development Process

One of the first lessons the Mahallae solution teams are taught is the need to adopt an iterative approach when developing their tool. No one can design the perfect tool at once. The initial design is just the first in a long chain of prototypes obtained through cycles of prototyping and testing that help improve, refine, and adjust the tool to the needs of the users. This flexible, agile process that includes users from the very start of the development process is crucial to the success of the final products.

Prototyping is key to having a viable digital tool that people will be happy to use. But so is working with the developer to transform the prototype into a compelling user experience. Developing a digital tool for social change is not easy, but it can be made easier through best practices that ensure everyone is working towards the same goal. Initial research about the needs of the digital tool is essential in finding the right developer. Staging development around paper prototypes, and alpha and beta digital versions is crucial to allow for changes and fixes based on feedback from users. Focusing on perfecting the core functionality will ensure the final product will be useful to users, while secondary features can be added or improved at a later stage.

## 3.1 What worked?

Specialized workshops & events

Throughout the development period, Mahallae supported the solution teams with specialized workshops and events. The Prototyping & Pitching Workshop organized during the first month helped set down a common language for all teams and introduced them to principles of prototyping, user-centered design, and community engagement. All teams reported that the Prototyping Workshop helped them have a good start for their tool development process. The prototype testing workshop that followed allowed teams to test each other’s prototypes and provide feedback as well as share knowledge and experience about the development process. The beta versions public testing event was also an important opportunity for solution teams to engage with the Mahallae community and receive crucial feedback about their tools and helped shape the final products.

**Recommendation:** More specialized workshops could help with preparing some of teams in areas that they may be needing help in such as technical aspects about building and running a digital tool, or new media communications and outreach strategies.

Inter-disciplinary collaborations

Innovation has a much better chance of happening when people from different fields come together to work on a common goal. Sharing expertise and comparing and integrating different perspectives can be very fruitful. Four out of five Mahallae solution teams reported that it was very beneficial to work with people from other fields, and that this interaction contributed to the richness of their projects.

**Recommendation:** Continue to facilitate inter-disciplinary contact by building a network of associates and collaborators from different fields that can be accessed based on needs and compatibilities.

## 3.2 What can be improved?

Working with developers

An important part of developing a successful digital tool is finding a developer that will understand what the tool needs and have the technical know-how to take the best decisions for fulfilling those needs. When the development process is launched, non-technical teams might struggle with identifying the needs of their tool. In order to prevent potential problems arising from not working with an optimal developer, preparations should be made to identify the most compatible one.

**Recommendation:** A research period for identifying the technical requirements needed for the development of the digital tool and support from the Mahallae team should be included as an initial preparatory stage. A compatible developer can help with prototyping and testing, can provide solutions for deadlocks encountered, and advise on the best way to design the user journey and user experience.

Prototyping, testing, adapting

The most important lesson that a team developing a digital tool can learn is that they need to be flexible about changing their initial idea in response to user feedback. Teams always have to be aware that they are not building a tool for themselves, they are building a tool for their audience. If done correctly, the iterative approach can be a very efficient way of using resources as teams learn quickly what works and what doesn’t and adapt accordingly. Following this approach, the first prototypes should always be paper prototypes and should be tested with the user community. Digital prototypes should only be developed when the paper prototypes testing has yielded satisfactory results. Digital prototypes should be tested in closed testing groups.

**Recommendation:** Integrate more prototyping into the life of a project and set prototyping events as milestones. Mahallae mentors should support the teams with effective tools for testing and capturing feedback as well as incorporating feedback into the next prototype. Insist on the importance of paper prototypes before the tool goes into development.

Setting timeframes

Different projects have different rhythms and this is not any different in the case of developing digital tools for social change. Mahallae solution teams were given a 9 month implementation period. Four out of five teams reported that they struggled to keep to the timeline, due to the nature of their development process. Moreover, projects were finalized when the digital tools were launched without planning for the most important phase, product usage. Digital tools are different from other kind of civic engagement work and in order to be successful they need to be used.

**Recommendation:** Adapt implementation periods to the nature of each project, case by case. Account for potential delays within the development phase, some stages can’t be rushed. Include a post-launch period of at least six months for outreach, product usage, and sustainability to make sure the product has a chance to fulfil its potential.

## 3.3 Recommendations

1. More specialized workshops could help with preparing some of teams in areas that they may be needing help in such as technical aspects about building and running a digital tool, or new media communications and outreach strategies.
2. Continue to facilitate inter-disciplinary contact by building a network of associates and collaborators from different fields that can be accessed based on needs and compatibilities.
3. A research period for identifying the technical requirements needed for the development of the digital tool and support from the Mahallae team should be included as an initial preparatory stage. A compatible developer can help with prototyping and testing, can provide solutions for deadlocks encountered, and advise on the best way to design the user journey and user experience.
4. Integrate more prototyping into the life of a project and set prototyping events as milestones. Mahallae mentors should support the teams by effective tools for testing and capturing feedback as well as incorporating feedback into the next prototype. Insist on the importance of paper prototypes before the tool goes into development.
5. Adapt implementation periods to the nature of each project, case by case. Account for potential delays within the development phase, some stages can’t be rushed. Include a post-launch period of at least six months for outreach, product usage, and sustainability to make sure the product has a chance to fulfil its potential.

# 4. The Support Process

The Mahallae Challenges set out to change the way in which people think about social change initiatives, but it also aimed to change the working framework between funders and initiatives on the ground. The Challenges aimed to transform this traditionally hierarchical relationship into a mutually beneficial process of co-creation. In order to achieve this goal, Mahallae mentors were tasked with working closely with the teams and supporting them throughout the development process. Moreover, workshops for skill development and outreach events were organized as complementary, enhancing activities.

## 4.1 What worked?

Close interaction with mentors

Mentors have a crucial role in the development of Mahallae solutions. They work closely with the teams and support them through consultations, workshops, testing, and outreach. In this way, they become part of the team rather than outside evaluators. The traditional monitoring and quality assurance functions are embedded within this process of co-creation along with the new functions. In private consultations, all five solution teams reported that working closely with the Mahallae mentors has been very beneficial for the development of their digital tools.

**Recommendation:** Continue implementing mentoring as a core function of solutions development. Recruit mentors that have the know-how required for performing the support functions as well as the monitoring and quality assurance functions. Support structure and predictability through regular weekly meetings and clear team responsibilities.

Opportunities for developing skills

Teams coming up with innovative ideas for achieving social change through the use of technology don’t always have all the expertise required for all stages of development. Moreover, the process of development usually requires a lot of time and presents difficult challenges and even failures as well as repetitive tasks such as testing and monitoring. All these can be detrimental to focus and motivation. Offering opportunities for skill development can make the teams feel they are part of a large learning process even when things don’t necessarily feel that way. Skill development through specialized workshops is a powerful way to keep teams engaged and focused throughout the long process of development.

**Recommendation:** Continue offering skill development opportunities for solution teams to keep them motivated throughout the development process and build capacity for the use of technology for social change. Plan the workshops and working sessions in advance to ensure that teams are available and are able to attend.

Communications and working out loud

Communications and community engagement in the early stages of development are essential to post-launch success as they help shape the community of users and create a narrative about the team, the tool, and the importance of the work being done. Adopting a ‘work out loud’ approach helps to build up interest and a critical mass of users and promoters around the product. Staring early is important and the Mahallae mentors have supported all five solution teams in thinking about their new media channels and messages and developing communication and outreach strategies.

**Recommendation:** Continue supporting the inclusion of communications and community engagement in the early stages of development of each tool. Provide teams with training on which channels are best suited to their needs and their target groups and on framing the messages in the optimal way. Encourage teams to engage in strategic communication and discussions with their community, rather than online monologues.

## 4.2 What can be improved?

Reporting and evaluation mechanisms

When working on the development of digital tools, classic evaluation and reporting mechanisms can be outdated. These procedures may require a lot of time in order to capture the complexity of the development process. In private consultations, all five Mahallae solution teams reported some difficulties with the reporting procedures, pointing out that they were not flexible enough and were too time-consuming.

**Recommendation:** Review reporting procedures and adapt them to better support the process of developing digital tools. Implement monitoring mechanisms specific for digital tools that bypass the need for time-consuming procedures such as screenshots-based reporting and allow for rapid learning and adapting.

Team Commitments

Project-based work has its advantages, but when dealing with the development of digital tools for social change, not having permanent staff can hurt the project in the long run. Working on different unrelated projects at the same time can diminish the focus and motivation of team members, while having permanent staff can have the opposite effect and lead to faster development and faster delivery at a higher quality.

**Recommendation:** Explore possibilities to employ teams full-time for the development of their digital tools with faster development and faster delivery rates. This will increase the overall quality of the products and foster more ownership and accountability from the teams.

Feedback

Proper testing and feedback procedures are essential when adopting an iterative approach for the development of digital tools for social change. The mentors have a responsibility to ensure that the tools are properly tested and need to use their expertise to provide critical feedback to account for any blind spots of the teams caused by being too closely involved in the development. External feedback is also important, especially from other experts in the field that can draw on their experience to reflect on the products at crucial points in their development.

**Recommendation:** Include permanent feedback loops into the development process. Approach external experts that can provide strategic feedback at crucial points in the development process. Expert feedback should complement end-user feedback in the processes of prototyping, developing, and refining.

## 4.3 Recommendations

1. Continue implementing mentoring as a core function of solutions development. Recruit mentors that have the know-how required for performing the support functions as well as the monitoring and quality assurance functions. Support structure and predictability through regular weekly meetings and clear team responsibilities.
2. Continue offering skill development opportunities for solution teams to keep them motivated throughout the development process and build capacity for the use of technology for social change. Plan the workshops and working sessions in advance to ensure that teams are available and are able to attend.
3. Continue supporting the inclusion of communications and community engagement in the early stages of development of each tool. Provide teams with training on which channels are best suited to their needs and their target groups and on framing the messages in the optimal way. Encourage teams to engage in strategic communication and discussions with their community, rather than online monologues.
4. Review reporting procedures and adapt them to better support the process of developing digital tools. Implement monitoring mechanisms specific for digital tools that bypass the need for time-consuming procedures such as screenshots-based reporting and allow for rapid learning and adapting.
5. Explore possibilities to employ teams full-time for the development of their digital tools with faster development and faster delivery rates. This will increase the overall quality of the products and foster more ownership and accountability from the teams.
6. Include permanent feedback loops into the development process. Approach external experts that can provide strategic feedback at crucial points in the development process. Expert feedback should complement end-user feedback in the processes of prototyping, developing, and refining.

# 5. Results

## 5.1 What did we achieve?

The Mahallae Challenges resulted in the development of five digital tools for social change: [Hands on Famagusta](http://handsonfamagusta.org/) - a hybrid platform that helps shape conflicting priorities into a vision of a unified Famagusta, [i-Vee](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=net.cocooncreations.ivee.android&hl=en) - a mobile game application promoting the culture of volunteerism, [The Socialholic Typewriter](http://socialholictypewriter.com/) - a creative writing tool promoting cultural diversity through collaborative storytelling, [We-Me](http://www.womenpowerproject.eu/) - a platform linking women mentors and mentees for personal and professional development, and [YuBiz](http://www.yubiz.org/) – a web-based ecosystem geared to help young entrepreneurs cooperate and initiate their professional career.

The tools were developed over a period of 10 months as part of an effort to address issues in the areas of [youth entrepreneurship](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWFBwS1qdhQ), [women and dialogue](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5pFS_HhPV8), and [building a common vision for the future](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YI8ocyEnCcU) in Cyprus. The process was a learning experience for everyone involved, as Mahallae experimented with the development of digital tools for social change in Cyprus and the adoption of new approaches that included prototyping, user-centered design, and working out loud. Most teams reported that the results achieved exceeded their initial expectations and that the journey helped them see the implementation of social initiatives in a new light, develop new skills, and collaborate with people from different fields.

All tools are now launched and have entered the product usage stage, trying to build up their community of users and generate social change. As part of their mentoring and support function, the Mahallae team has carried out private consultations with each team to help them explore possible plans for development and set up goals for the future.

## 5.2 Into the future

After developing and launching their tools, teams now face the equally important task of ensuring that the tools will be used and will contribute to social change in their respective areas. All teams have plans on how to take their tool further and have determined what they want to achieve.

Hands on Famagusta

The Hands on Famagusta team aims to have their platform exploring visions of a unified Famagusta become an important tool for the ongoing political negotiations in Cyprus. The Hands on Famagusta platform can become a powerful way for people to envision what a unified city could look like and can allow Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot residents to develop a common vision of the city together. Moreover, the platform raises crucial questions about the future development of the city in a changing world and can catalyze public discussions around issues of private and public space, shared infrastructures, sustainable development, and ecology. As such, Hands on Famagusta can act as a link between citizens and decision-makers and position itself as an advocate for reconciliation, cohabitation, and sustainable urban development.

i-Vee

The i-Vee mobile game aims to encourage the culture of volunteerism among Cypriot and Egyptian youth. The team hopes that through contacts with international organizations as well as local institutions such as schools and NGOs the game can become an important tool for inspiring young people to get involved in volunteering. Moreover, since the initial version of the game is relatively small, the team is exploring possibilities for developing it further, adding more content and challenges in order to make it a more compelling experience for young users.

The Socialholic Typewriter

The Socialholic Typewriter team envisions that their platform will become a useful tool for highlighting the value of literature and fiction in supporting the diversity of cultural expression and raising inter-cultural awareness. The team plans to work with schools to launch writing competitions on different themes and organize more workshops around the island to promote their platform and their creative writing methodology.

We-Me

The We-Me platform brings women mentors and mentees together in an effort to support the empowerment of women in their professional lives. Following great reception among women interested in turning the spotlight on the issues they face in their professional lives, the team now hopes to attract more women to sign up on the platform and and enlarge their community of mentors and mentees. They also plan to organize more networking events to support the online dimension with an offline component. Moreover, they hope that the We-Me platform will help young women become more empowered as they learn from their mentors and thus more able to be part of decision-making processes.

YuBiz

The YuBiz platform aims to support young entrepreneurs develop robust business ideas through mentoring, knowledge sharing, and access to funding. The YuBiz and CyRIC teams hope that YuBiz will become a great resource for the entrepreneur community and that it will become linked to established processes. The team is already in conversation with the Ministry of Commerce of the Republic of Cyprus for YuBiz to become a focal point for researching governmental funds available for entrepreneurs. Moreover, the team hopes to build up its community of users and mentors organically and eventually support the incubation of ideas identified through the platform.

# 6. List of annexes

1. Workshop Presentation | How to Generate Innovative Ideas in 5 Easy Steps
2. Workshop Presentation | Prototyping & Activation
3. Mahallae Challenges Guidelines
4. UNDP Technology for Citizen Engagement Guidelines
5. Concept Form
6. Logo Guidelines
7. Prezi | How To Guide: Mahallae Challenges: <https://prezi.com/ta4ilzrcfw53/how-to-guide-mahallae-challenges/>
8. Prezi | Concept Development Webinar: <https://prezi.com/ifeg7qjg0t6_/concept-development-webinar-undp-technology-for-citizen-engagement-challenge/>