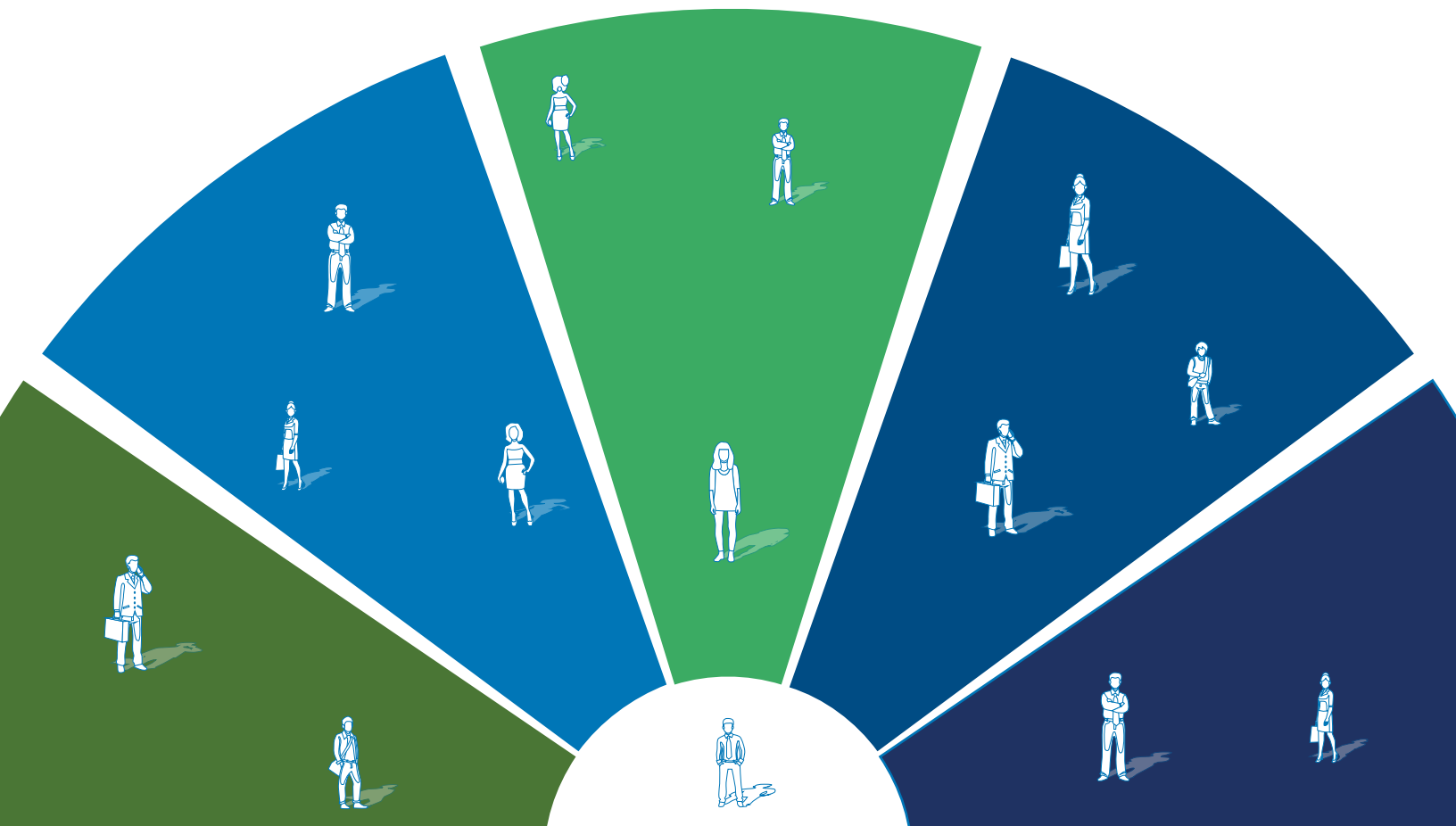


# Ágora, A Methodology for Inclusive Citizen Participation



A tool that makes it possible to contribute to and monitor national and regional development policies using digital technology.



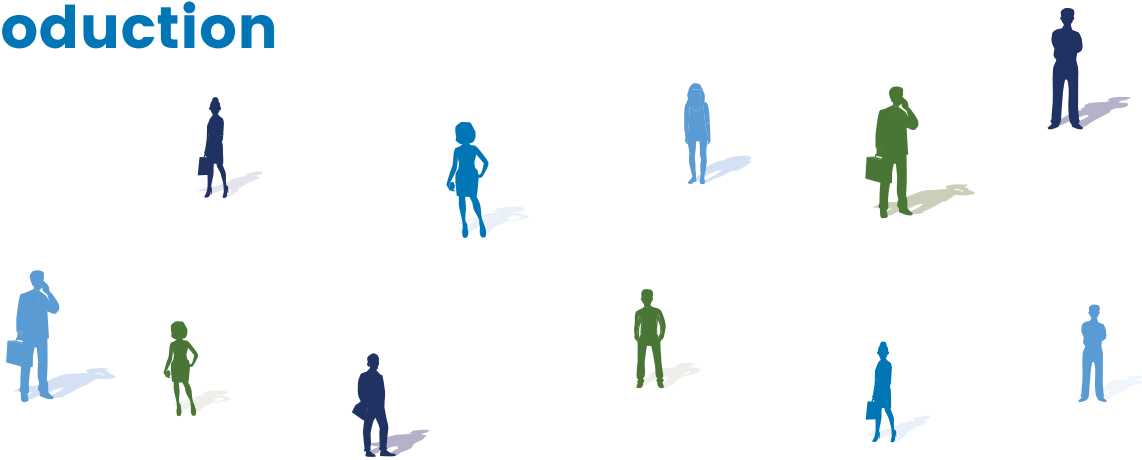


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# Introduction



**Throughout the world, demands have multiplied for participation and a say in decision-making and policy-making processes that affect and concern citizens.** It is no longer sufficient for representative groups to sit down in well-defined physical spaces to discuss and draw up public policy agreements on behalf of the majority.

Citizens in all their racial, ethnic, age and geographical variety **demand to participate**. They demand accountability from the state and the ability to monitor implementation and results.

The devastating effects of the COVID-19 health crisis on health, education, development and many other matters have intensified these demands for a say in building new democratic and sustainable societies, and have opened up opportunities for the development of digital innovations that enable people to participate and interact.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is committed to strengthening democratic institutions and processes in order to achieve an inclusive, open public sphere with greater participation. This implies working for representative democracy until it becomes direct democracy.

Therefore, at its office in Panama, UNDP designed **Ágora, a methodology that enables citizens to propose, express their opinions and monitor state policies and initiatives for national and regional development that affect them.** **Ágora** addresses the design and development of online platforms and the use of digital technology to enable and broaden the participation of citizens in the different stages of the participatory processes in which the methodology is applied.

This document discusses this methodology as a useful, adaptable and accessible tool that can provide countries with support to reduce social conflict and make local government management more efficient.

The tool's application is also described in the process of the Bicentennial Pact: Closing Gaps organized by the Government of Panama to build a new Social Pact aimed at narrowing development gaps and including the lessons learned.

## New Governance Models

**Cross-cutting citizen participation is key to achieving all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda**, because the active involvement of citizens is required to design policies, programmes and initiatives in areas such as education, health, the environment, the economy and inclusiveness, not to mention monitoring and accountability.

Development of digital innovations is a strategic focus area for UNDP to enable citizens to formulate proposals in a free, but orderly manner for development and/or institutional policy in a public space with maximum transparency. The more people have access to technology, the more people can be included in decision-making processes.

In addition, technological tools can help ensure that all input, information, decisions and actions are public, which promotes transparency.

The post COVID-19 scenario has involved citizen participation in decision-making processes, identifying and discussing the causes of inequalities, drawing up agreements to develop regional plans and drafting public policy guidelines.

To ensure inclusive, impartial development, contributions, discussions and agreements should begin at the most basic geographic level (e.g. provinces, departments, municipalities and communities) and continue to the more complex national level.

## Challenges of Democracy: The Case of Panama

**The health crisis caused by COVID-19 highlighted the major challenges involved in redesigning development models** in order to close existing social, economic and regional gaps.

In the case of Panama, two obstacles were identified on the road towards a new development model: people's distrust of decision-makers (especially politicians) and the limits imposed by social distancing to fight the spread of COVID-19.

The Ágora methodology thus emerged as a response to these two challenges as a way to empower citizens individually and collectively so they could directly formulate public policy and development proposals, without mediators or interpreters, using digital media (web-based platform accessible by computer, tablet or mobile phone). The aim was to promote transparency and help address the problems of social distancing caused by the pandemic.

This methodological proposal of UNDP Panama for the construction of public and development policies was presented and accepted by

Laurentino Cortizo, the country's president, for the construction of a new social pact called: Bicentennial Pact: Closing Gaps.

## The Ágora Concept

**Ágora is a Greek word that means “open meeting place”.** In Ancient Greece, it was an area such as a public square, where the citizens of a city could gather to discuss politics and listen to civic announcements and reports on military campaigns. The term was also used in other city-states to designate public spaces where current

affairs were discussed, traders had their shops and craftspeople sold their wares. Therefore, an agora is also an assembly of people, as well as the place where they meet. UNDP digitally recreated this concept as a space open to all citizens to exchange views and formulate proposals for their future<sup>1</sup>.

## Citizen Participation Through Ágoraa

**The Ágora methodology includes the design of online platforms** based on new communication technologies in order to inclusively enable and encourage citizen participation in the formulation of national and local public policy proposals.

However, it is essential to overcome the common misconception that Ágora is simply the latest technological gadget. Ágora can represent an important step in the evolution of the concept of democracy, which cannot and should not be ignored, in order to seize the opportunity to re-establish a foundation of trust and effective communication between politics and citizens.

In the case of countries like Panama, public power comes from the people. It is exercised by the state as established in the Constitution, through the legislative, executive and judicial bodies, whose individual work is limited and separate, but in harmonious collaboration<sup>2</sup>.

Public power is mainly exercised directly or indirectly through the election of representatives in executive, legislative and judicial bodies. In Panama, as in other countries, this mechanism is facing a crisis, mainly due to the inability of these three powers to interpret and assume the concerns of a large share of the population.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldhistory.org/trans/es/1-512/agora/>

<sup>2</sup> Article 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of Panama.

Studies and surveys agree that there is a rapidly widening gap between representative power and citizens, resulting in citizens' distrust and intolerance of political and institutional leaders. This feeling can undermine the foundations of a democratic country like Panama, and the pandemic may have been a catalyst that accelerated this process, with no clear indication of what the end result might be.

Ágora is a response to this sociopolitical risk. Its technological tool can be used by citizens to perform two basic actions:



**Directly and publicly propose ideas, actions, policies and strategies in real time**, with all citizens as "listeners and opinion-formers" without the need to be a member of an important organization recognized by institutions. This does not prevent structured organizations from formulating their own proposals. However, with the Ágora online platform, all these proposals are public and made available to citizens, who can form their own opinions about them. In other words, Ágora is a vehicle for direct participation, but also a way to learn about the proposals of others without mediation or filters.



**The Ágora platform provides a space for discussion between different viewpoints, ideas and options.** Comments on each proposal can be uploaded and differences can be expressed in a constructive, respectful atmosphere. This interactive process helps improve, expand and modify proposals and back them up with better arguments. Finally, all the information (proposals, comments, satisfaction indices) is broken down by province and county, thus restoring the importance of the regional approach in public policies.

The platform does not aim to address subsequent steps in the process, i.e. how the ruling powers take up the proposals after analysis, mediation and filtering, in order to turn them into institutional actions. However, it is the first step towards providing people with a form of inclusive participation in the destiny of their country through a virtual agora that encompasses the entire country and its people.



# The Ágora Methodology and the UNDP Strategic Plan

The Ágora methodology forms part of the United Nations Development Programme Strategic Plan 2022-2025. The three key areas of systemic change are reflected in Ágora, although the main emphasis is on leaving no one behind:

- **Structural transformation:** This involves working with countries to bring about change in the systems and structures that shape a country's sustainable development. The demand generated by citizen participation leads to structural transformations.
- **Leaving no one behind:** This focuses on empowerment, inclusiveness, fairness, human development and people's ability to take action. Citizen participation is mainly oriented towards existing gaps, which are the most obvious indicator of different speeds of

development. It also indicates the number and profiles of those who were left behind.

- **Building resilience:** This involves strengthening the capacity of countries and institutions to prevent, mitigate and respond to crises, conflicts, natural disasters, and economic, social and environmental shocks. The basis for building resilience is understanding the causes that undermine it. The voice of citizens who are aware of and affected by the lack of services is essential to guide national policies towards resilience.

Ágora goes perfectly with two of the three catalysts identified for scaling up countries' development impact:

- **Digital Transformation:** Support for countries to build inclusive, ethical and sustainable digital societies. As mentioned above, the methodology's main tool for citizen participation is the online platform of the same name.

- **Strategic Innovation:** Enabling governments and communities to improve the performance of systems as a whole to make them more adaptive and resilient. Ágora represents a challenge for countries. One of the most important strategic innovations for any country is knowing how to integrate citizens' contributions into national and community policies in a new vision of democracy as a harmonious system that blends representative and direct democracy.

# Fundamental Methodological Principles

## General Principles

Ágora is based on the five key general principles in the work done by UNDP:

1

**Empowering people for continuous participation:** The Ágora methodology opens up spaces for dialogue so that individuals and civil society can participate in decision-making processes, either individually or as an organization.

2

**Transparency:** It ensures that processes are open and transparent. Everything that happens during the different process stages is public and accessible on online platforms, which ensures transparency and accountability.

3

**Regional Approach:** This principle provides the basis for building from the bottom up, one of the premises of the methodology. It implies that citizen input is focused on pointing out gaps in development, problems and solutions that reflect the living situations of the regional environments. The bottom-up construction of public policies has

overturned the traditional approach of designing public policies from the top down, based on a national perspective, and then analysing their impact on the regions.

This top-down approach to development design and governance is one of the main causes of citizens' alienation from politics and is also the basis of widespread distrust of institutions affecting democracy across the continent. Ágora is based on citizen participation, i.e. the geographical and cultural place where citizens live every day and form their own opinions, identify their problems, measure and suffer the gaps that affect them, and learn the clearest and most transparent way to solve their problems and project their hopes.

The region is therefore the scope closest to citizens and it is also the scope that makes it possible to directly analyse problems more carefully and provide solutions tailored to real needs.

# 4

**Use of Technology:**

Developing online citizen participation platforms that are accessible on a computer or mobile phone is vital to facilitate and expand inclusive participation in all stages, including initial

contributions, monitoring and follow-up. Growing use of the Internet and mobile phones has diminished the perception among most of the population that technology is a tool of social exclusion. For many years, this perception marginalized the poorer and less educated strata of the population. Digital technology is now part of everyday life and has become a powerful tool for inclusion. This made it possible to design and implement the Ágora methodology based on citizen participation as a result of digital transformation. In this methodology, there is extensive use of online tools for citizen participation and managing the whole process.

These include the web-based platform, accessible by computer, tablet or mobile phone; artificial intelligence programs for the classification of contributions and proposals; virtual platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Team for meetings of the committees and different teams in charge of the process; and social media to disseminate the results.

# 5

**Inclusiveness:**

Including vulnerable groups such as minorities and people with disabilities is taken into account. It is therefore necessary to develop communication tools (such as videos in

indigenous languages and sign language) and to enable people to make proposals in audio and video when feasible.

## Stages of Participatory Processes Applying the Ágora Methodology

**The Ágora methodological process is organized in three different stages**, each with its own defined goal.

The three stages indicated below do not vary, regardless of the goal pursued by citizen participation processes or the stakeholders involved (design of public and development policies or as support for local governments). However, variations may occur in Ágora online platforms, through which the citizen participation process

is implemented while showing full respect for the principles set out above.

The first stage is for proposal formulation. Citizens individually or collectively use the Ágora platform to formulate their contributions (e.g. priorities, proposals, investment proposals), and point out gaps to be closed and other problems).

When a contribution is uploaded, it is published within 24 hours, so it can be read and commented on (positively or negatively) without restrictions. At the end of this stage, if necessary, the contributions are classified by topic and regional scope, and proposals are separated from complaints and nonconformities.

The **second stage is for decision-making**. The contributions received and classified are examined by committees (whose scope and composition are defined for each situation and country) in the case of public policies, or by technical teams in the case of local governments. The committees are made up of representatives of the active forces of the regions accompanied by thematic experts. Only contributions from the proposal stage are considered by the committee.

Committee members reach agreements based on complaints about gaps and proposals validated by citizens for solving problems. This ensures that public policy guidelines are drawn up with a bottom-up approach and without external interference in the citizen process.

In the case of local governments, technical teams examine the feasibility and coherence with the local development plan and budget. Based on these parameters, they issue their opinions, which are validated by citizens through the platform.

In the **third stage**, the relevant institution is expected to convert what has been agreed and approved into specific action plans corresponding to the spending identified as part of the defined regional scope. In this stage, **actions are monitored** as decided in each case. Monitoring action plans is very flexible and defined based on the goals of and agreements between stakeholders.

Flexibility in the design of the monitoring mechanism does not affect the way in which citizens participate during monitoring. Through the Ágora Monitoring platform, people will be continuously informed about the progress of the different actions to be carried out and will be able to express opinions and assessments from the perspective as citizens.

The three stages require the use of the Ágora online platform (in its different versions) as the tool to guarantee citizen participation by offering people the information they need to be able to form an opinion and make contributions, comments and complaints in public.

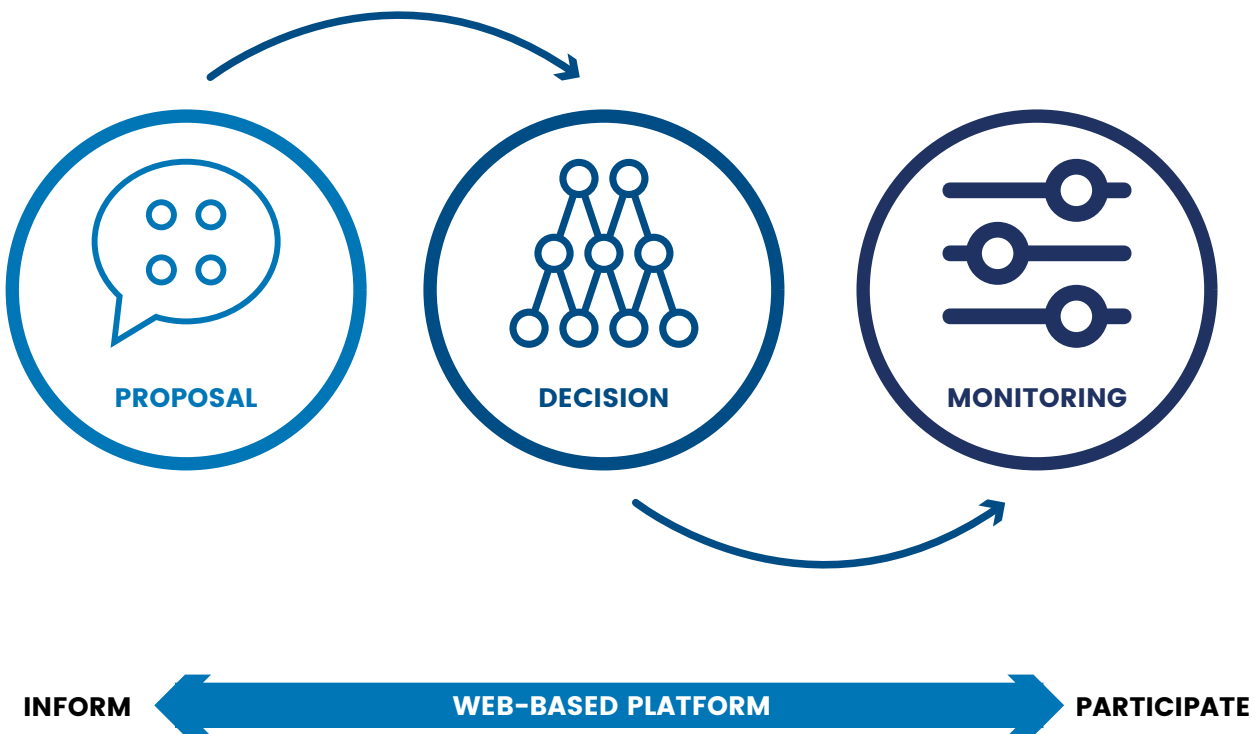


## Structure of the **Ágora** Methodology

**Management of processes applying the methodology is based on a management and coordination structure**, which may vary depending on the size of the country and the regions involved,

the structure and complexity of the process, and the time frame of activities. The process has three main operating areas.

*Figure 1. Stages of citizen participation processes*



**Methodological Area:** adapts the Ágora methodology to the specific context, monitors evolution of the process, implements the necessary adjustments, and monitors progress from the point of view of the ultimate goals to be achieved.

**Digital Area:** designs the platform architecture in accordance with the specifications of the Methodological Area. It specifically develops the platform (front end and back end) and connection channels, maintains strict control of platform use, produces additional statistical reports, feeds the corresponding information to stakeholders and citizens with all the non-sensitive information that the platform receives as a result of the process.

**Communication Area:** designs and implements the communication strategy.

All of these areas report to the management team, which is made up of four or five people. The functions of Coordination in the process generally include:

- **Administration and logistics**
- **Methodological team:** responsible for assessment, monitoring and process adjustments
- **Communication team:** can be internal or external, with the role of implementing the communication strategy throughout the process

- **Virtual platform expert:** provides technical support to ensure virtual meetings run smoothly
- **Ágora platform management team:** usually from UNDP; manages the platform and does not report to Coordination, but forms part of process management
- **Enabling and writing team:** provides support, facilitates virtual meetings, and draws up the minutes and agreements reached, as necessary
- **Writing and final reconciliation team:** in charge of drawing up and publishing final agreements when reached

Depending on needs, the Coordination team may hire specialists in different areas to ensure technical expertise and maximum support throughout the process.



## Support Structures

**In order to develop processes efficiently and effectively**, it is advisable to identify some support structures, which may vary according to needs

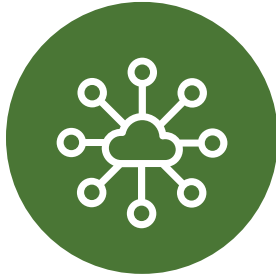
Public policy-making processes (and municipal governance) are characterized by high political/partisan content. These processes are generally launched by the government (local or national) and/or a public institution (e.g. ministry, authority, secretariat).

The political origin of their launch can lead to the perception that they are rigged and that their results are unreliable. In order to mitigate this risk, it is advisable to create an **Advisory Council or Board of Guarantors** made up of community figures of recognized independence, professional and social background, and moral authority. The role of the Advisory Council is to monitor development of the whole process and ensure that it is properly carried out. The Advisory Council can make suggestions to the Coordination team to improve process management. When many contributions are received in the proposal stage,

it is important to make use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in the classification stage to facilitate work. It is also necessary to have a scientific-technical team made up of experts in different disciplines to create a **scientific-technical committee**.

The committee's role is to ensure that classification using AI is consistent and relevant by checking the results of this stage.

In addition, it is important for the committee to draw up a report on the results to guide the subsequent stage (reaching agreements). If it so decides publicly and in advance, the committee may make scientific-technical feasibility assessments of the proposals received. These assessments are non-binding, but they are undoubtedly essential input for reaching agreements.



## Database: Critical Point

**Almost all countries have legislation on personal data protection.** This may change in some respects, but regulations must be followed regarding personal data.

In Panama, this subject is regulated by Law 81 of 26 March 2019 and its regulation by Executive Decree 285 of 28 May 2021.

Article 42 of the Constitution of Panama provides that “(...). This information may only be collected for specific purposes, with the consent of the data subject or by order of a competent authority based on the provisions of the law”

*Law 81 confirms this provision from the Constitution and more precisely defines the concept of “sensitive information”, which is precisely what is processed by the Ágora platform.*

*The law defines sensitive data as data that refer to the intimate sphere of the data subject, or whose improper use may give rise to discrimination or entail a serious risk for the data subject.*

(...)

*Law 81 states that sensitive data may not be transferred without the holder’s explicit consent when it is necessary to safeguard the life of the data subject and he/she is physically or legally incapacitated, when it refers to data that are necessary for the*

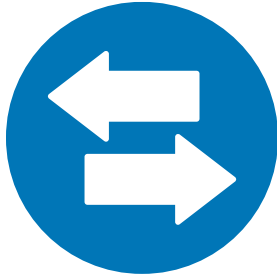
*recognition, exercise or defence of a right in a proceeding with competent judicial authorization, or when it is for historical, statistical or scientific purposes, in which case measures must be taken to dissociate data from identifiable personal data.*  
(...)

*The scope of application of this law includes the databases located in the territory of the Republic of Panama that store or contain personal data of Panamanian nationals or foreigners or where the data controller is domiciled in the country are subject to application of this law and its regulations<sup>3</sup>.*

The way in which users’ personal data is stored and processed must be handled very carefully and in accordance with the laws of each country, because it can become a critical issue. In general terms, the challenge is to ensure that the database of personal data of users is never accessible to political or commercial stakeholders in the country in order to avoid improper use and violations of the law. Ideally, the database should be hosted by UNDP or an independent international organization, which should be the only party with access to the platform’s administrative modules.

3 <https://www.icalaw.com/es/reglamentacion-de-la-ley-de-proteccion-de-datos-en-panama/>





## Communication

**The key to the success of any process involving citizen participation is ensuring that people are aware of the process and its implementation.** To participate fully, it is essential for people to know and be informed that this opportunity exists. In order to achieve the desired objectives of citizen participation, a structured communication strategy with a detailed action plan must be established from the outset, along with defined tools and methodological design. **Failed communication signals the failure of participatory processes.**

It is advisable to design and implement the communication strategy as if it were a project within the project with its own focal points. Communication issues should focus on the following key aspects:

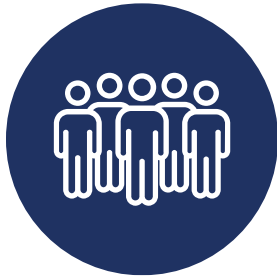
1. Importance of citizen participation
2. How to participate (tools and times)
3. How to stay informed about everything happening in the process
4. How to make quality contributions (e.g. proposals, complaints)
5. How to find out about results and agreements, and how to follow up on their implementation

To achieve the highest level of citizen participation, it is essential to design communication campaigns that target the general population, as well as specific groups such as young people, women, the elderly, ethnic groups, specific regions and people with disabilities.

It is also essential to measure the impact of campaigns in order to make any necessary adjustments. The statistics module of the Ágora platform is a very important source of measurements, as it provides participation results by region according to age, gender, etc. Based on these data, it is possible to strengthen specific communication actions.

With regard to working with the media, there are no set rules, so it depends on the country and population segments to be reached. We recommend that all media (traditional and innovative) at your disposal be used, including social networks, WhatsApp, meetings at social meeting points and high traffic areas in the community, printed material and digital material.

The ultimate goal is for Ágora to become known as the most famous brand on a commercial level. This can be measured by sample surveys and polls of the population. It is considered a good result if 40% of the population is aware of the process. A figure of 60% or more is an excellent result.



## Political Forces and Social Organizations in Process Management

**Among the greatest challenges of starting a participatory process in which the Ágora methodology is applied is making it clear to the political forces that it is a citizen process,** that transcends party boundaries to ensure that the direct voice of the population is heard.

If the process is organized by governing parties, all opposition parties are likely to try to disqualify it by downplaying its importance and considering it to be rigged or manipulated. When there is no controversy arising from negative public positions of opposition parties, there is likely to be distancing and a lack of interest, which translates into a lack of participation.

It is therefore important to involve all political forces and social organizations in the process from the outset. It is not about negotiating privileges or special conditions, but about explaining, clarifying and convincing people that the Ágora methodology involves a transparent participatory process in which everyone, including political forces and social organizations, can or should participate, along with the population. Ágora is a showcase for the whole country and its population, as well as a platform through which proposals and ideas, regardless of where they come from, can reach all levels of society. The goal is to break with the paradigms of closed-loop politics (still existing today) and replace them with an innovative vision of politics open

to all in order to strengthen democracy and the institutional community.

This point is of fundamental importance. The challenge for today's society is to find the point of balance between citizen participation and political-social organizations. The responsibility for finding this point rests primarily on the organized part of the country (political forces and civil society) while citizens continue to perform the function of monitoring and assessing the results.

True commitment from political and social forces is an essential requirement for the results of the process to become state policies and thus guarantee continuity over time and prevent any stakeholders (citizens, political forces, organized civil society) from feeling short-changed. To achieve this goal, it is essential for processes implemented by Ágora to be independent and led by people recognized for their skills and independence with the support of an international organization dedicated to development such as UNDP.

Finally, a citizen participation process based on the Ágora methodology should be based on the convinced and conscientious commitment of decision-makers. The essence of Ágora is to make a space available for the participation for all citizens to contribute ideas and make complaints about existing gaps. The only consequence of distorted use of this tool for specific purposes

or interests is an increase in citizen frustration, which can cause protests and labour strikes, and lead to violence, which undermines democratic

coexistence and the institutional strength of a country.

# Ágora and the Bicentennial Pact: Closing Gaps

**The Ágora methodology was first applied in the process of the Bicentennial Pact: Closing Gaps**, organized by Laurentino Cortizo, the President of the Republic of Panama. The process was carried out in Panama, between November 2020 and November 2021, with the support of UNDP.

That process was consistent with the conceptual construct described above. However, some aspects were underestimated during implementation and have provided useful lessons learned.

**The President of Panama appointed a group of people of recognized professional experience and independence with the support of UNDP**, which provided the necessary resources, with no interference and under the management and responsibility of process management. UNDP administered the necessary funds in coordination with process management.

An executive secretary, appointed by Executive Decree, was ultimately responsible for the process. She was a prominent Panamanian academic with a long career in international cooperation.

The process adopted the three pillars of Ágora:

1. **Citizen participation** in the stages for presenting proposals and making decisions.
2. **A regional approach** when preparing and discussing public policies
3. The **use of technology** to increase participation.

Two support structures were defined:

- **The Advisory Council**, made up of 25 citizens representing different sectors of Panamanian society and considered guarantors of the legitimacy, trustworthiness and transparency of the process.
- **The Scientific-Technical Committee**, in charge of classification, categorization and social, economic and cultural contextualization of proposals.

# Process Management Organizations

**The Pact relied on a number of different organizations** to manage the entire process.

**Executive Secretary:** the executive secretary was appointed by Decree by the President with the support of UNDP, whose functions included logistics, administration, and political and content management of all stages of the process.

**Coordination of the Pact:** the members included the executive secretary, UNDP, methodological experts and the head of the Stage 2 enabling teams.

**Enabling Teams:** made up of an enabler, a writer and an expert in virtual environments (all meetings were held remotely), and entrusted with the task of providing support to each of the 11 thematic committees (one for each focus area) in the four regions and the national level.

**Platform management teams:** reported to UNDP and were responsible for administering and managing all aspects of the Ágora platform.

**Communication team:** in charge management of the Pact communication process, made up of experts from outsourced firms contracted for this purpose with the support of a UNDP communications expert.

**Platform Development Team:** the functional design and process flow of the Ágora-Bicentennial Pact platform was carried out by UNDP Panama. For development, UNDP relied on GovRight, an organization committed to increasing collaboration between citizens and governments through the use of technology to promote participation. GovRight provided support during the entire Bicentennial Pact process.

In its two versions developed for the Panama Proposes and Panama Decides stages, the Ágora platform was hosted on government servers under the responsibility of the Government Innovation Authority (AIG), the location of digital services of the entire country's public administration.

Prior to placing Ágora on the government server, the AIG subjected the platform to a series of cybersecurity and stress tests, which were passed and allowed the platform to be given the go-ahead for placement in the cloud.

# Bicentennial Pact Process Flow Chart

**The two main stages of the Pact process were organized by stage and action** as summarized in Figure 2.

The figure does not show the stage prior to launch of the Pact, which was characterized by methodological design of the process, definition of the 11 thematic focus areas for classification of citizen contributions, design and development of the platform, and design of the communication strategy.

The Pact was formally launched by the Pres-



## Stage 1: Panama Proposes

Panama Proposes was a proactive, innovative stage in which citizens freely expressed ideas, concerns, aspirations and proposals through the Ágora online platform.

The Ágora 1.0 platform enabled citizens to express their concerns from anywhere in the country using different technological media. The proposals were presented in different formats - text, audio and video - in a range of thematic categories, individually and collectively, i.e. through formally organized groups.

ident of Panama on 30 November 2020. The Panama Proposes stage of collection of citizen contributions through the platform ended on 28 February 2021.

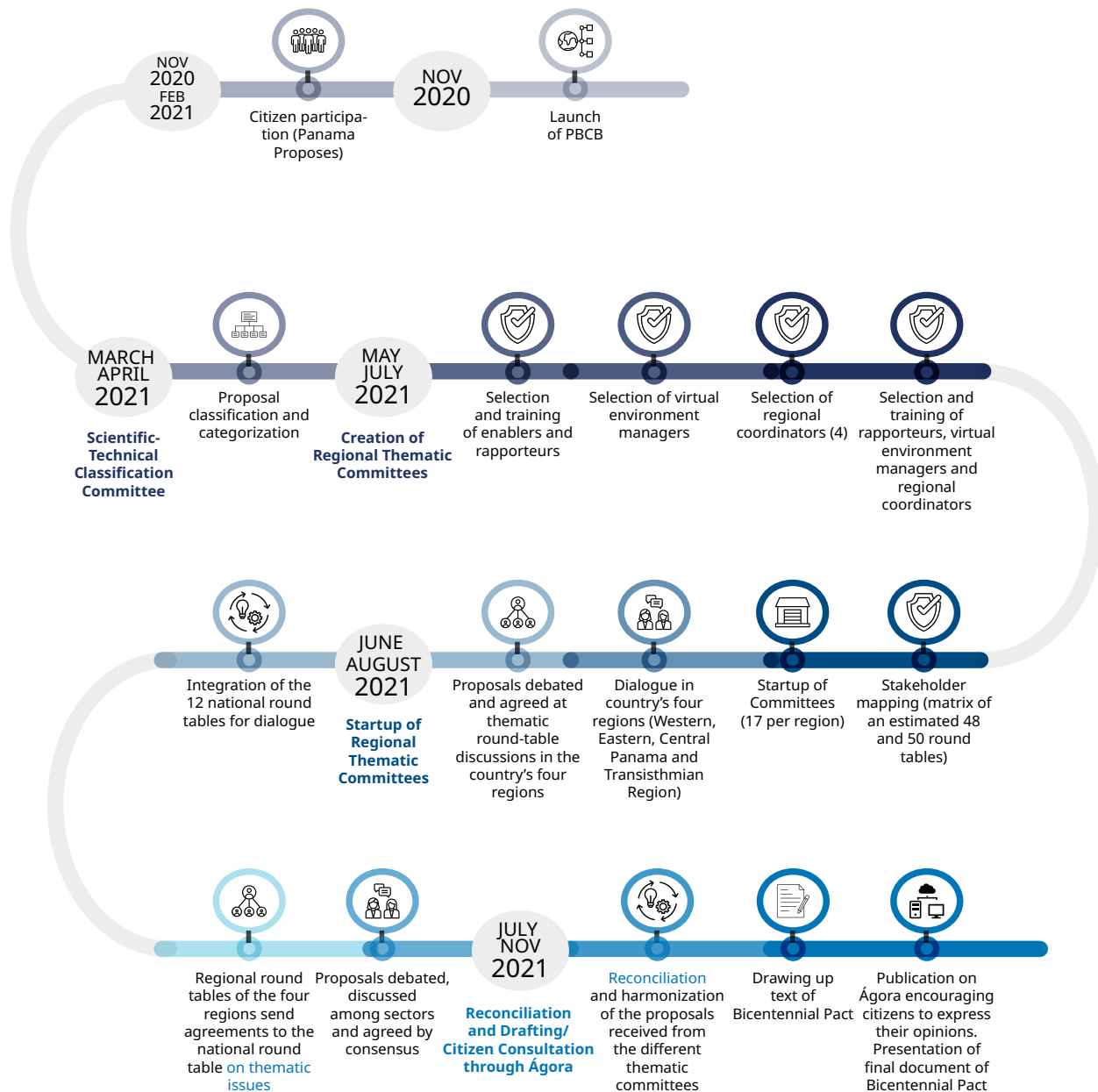
After the classification stage, the second stage, Panama Decides, began in May 2021. The regional and national committees analysed citizens' proposals and, based on this analysis, reached the agreements in the Bicentennial Pact, which culminated in November 2021 with public presentation of the results.

All participants had to identify themselves on the platform, where the respective contribution was encoded as a means of ensuring the traceability of all participation.

Gráfica No. 2

# Process of the Bicentennial Pact: **CLOSING GAPS**

2020-2021



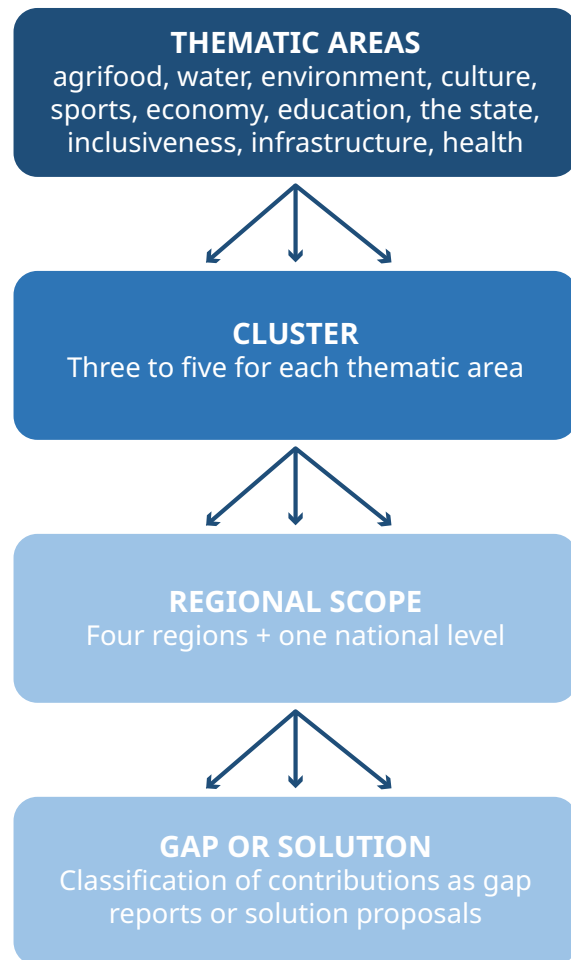
All the information contained in Ágora 1.0, made up of the contributions and comments initially received, was processed based on specific parameters to eliminate information of no use (spam) and offensive comments.

The final result of the filtering left a database of 175,922 contributions distributed in eleven thematic areas: agrifood, water, environment, culture, sport, economy, education, the state, inclusiveness, infrastructure and health.

This information was passed on to the Scientific-Technical Classification Committee, which marked the beginning of a stage of classification and categorization into sub-themes and in terms of the social, cultural and economic context. The Scientific-Technical Classification Committee was made up of Panamanian nationals with recognized research careers in various disciplines and experts from prestigious institutes in the region.

Considering the huge number of contributions received, all groups responsible for classification relied on artificial intelligence programs, the results of which were compared to produce the final tables made available for Stage 2.

Classification of the contributions was carried out according to the following sequential scheme:



In order to ensure the confidentiality of sensitive information, the information contained in the user database remained in the safekeeping of UNDP and was never published. This information was used exclusively to compile statistical graphs, which, by their very nature, are completely anonymous and general.

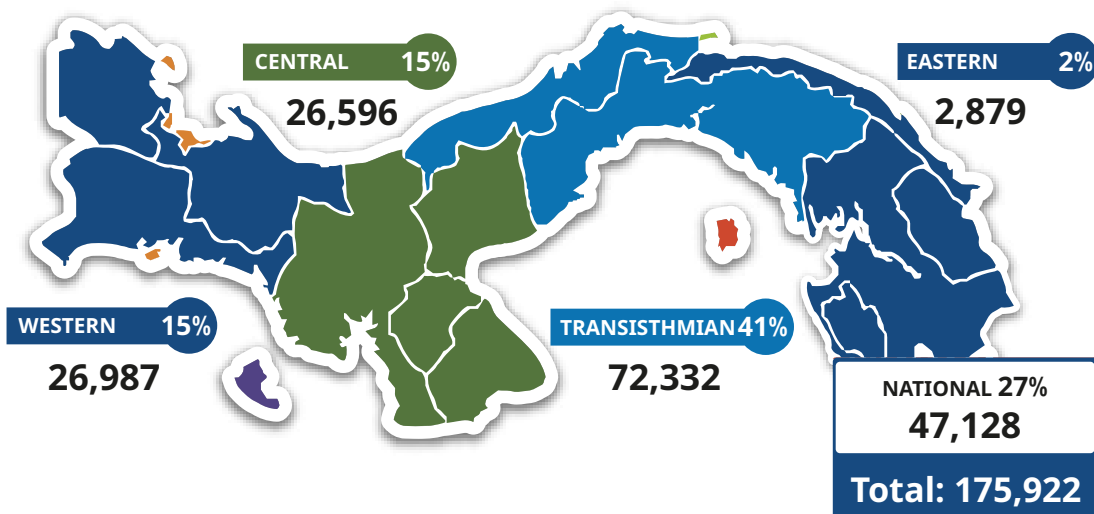


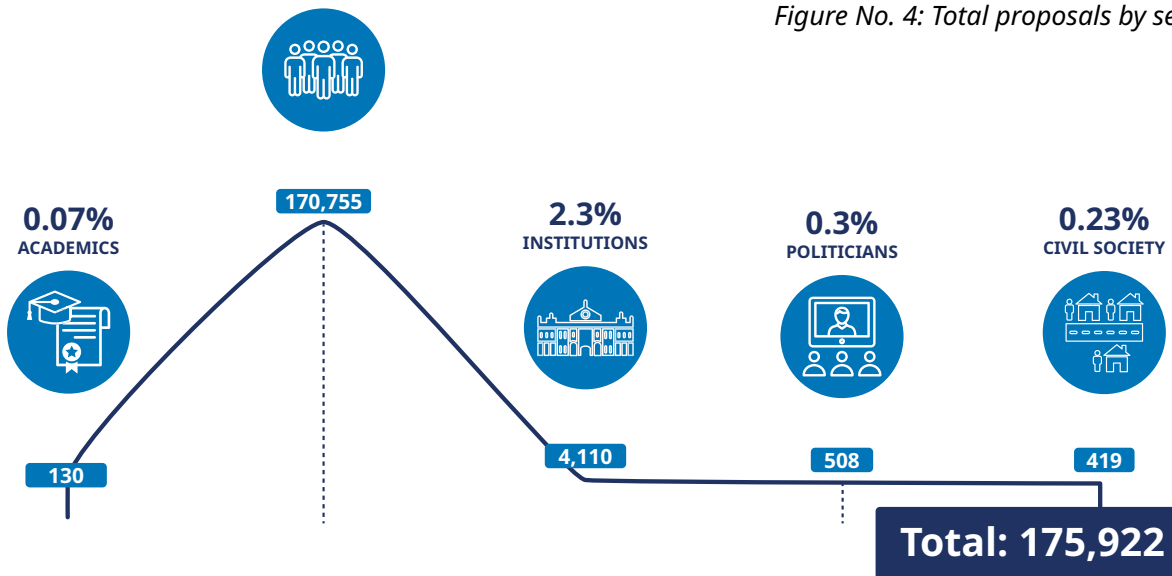
## Results of Stage 1: Panama Proposes

- A total of **186,182 contributions were received in the 11 thematic areas proposed**, which surpassed all expectations and traditional dialogue schemes.
- **212,573 people signed up** on the platform and participated, representing 5% of the country's adult population and 10% of the voters in the 2019 general election.
- **175,922 proposals moved on to the discussion stage** after being classified.
- **97% of the proposals** and statements of needs came from **individual** citizens.
- **76% of contributions** were made by **mobile phone**.
- Contributions in the 11 thematic areas showed significant gaps for citizens in the regions with regard to infrastructure for roads, the community, health, education, power, as well as access to drinking water, the Internet and the public authorities for security and institutional matters.

The figure below summarizes the results of Stage 1:

Figure No. 3. Total proposals by region

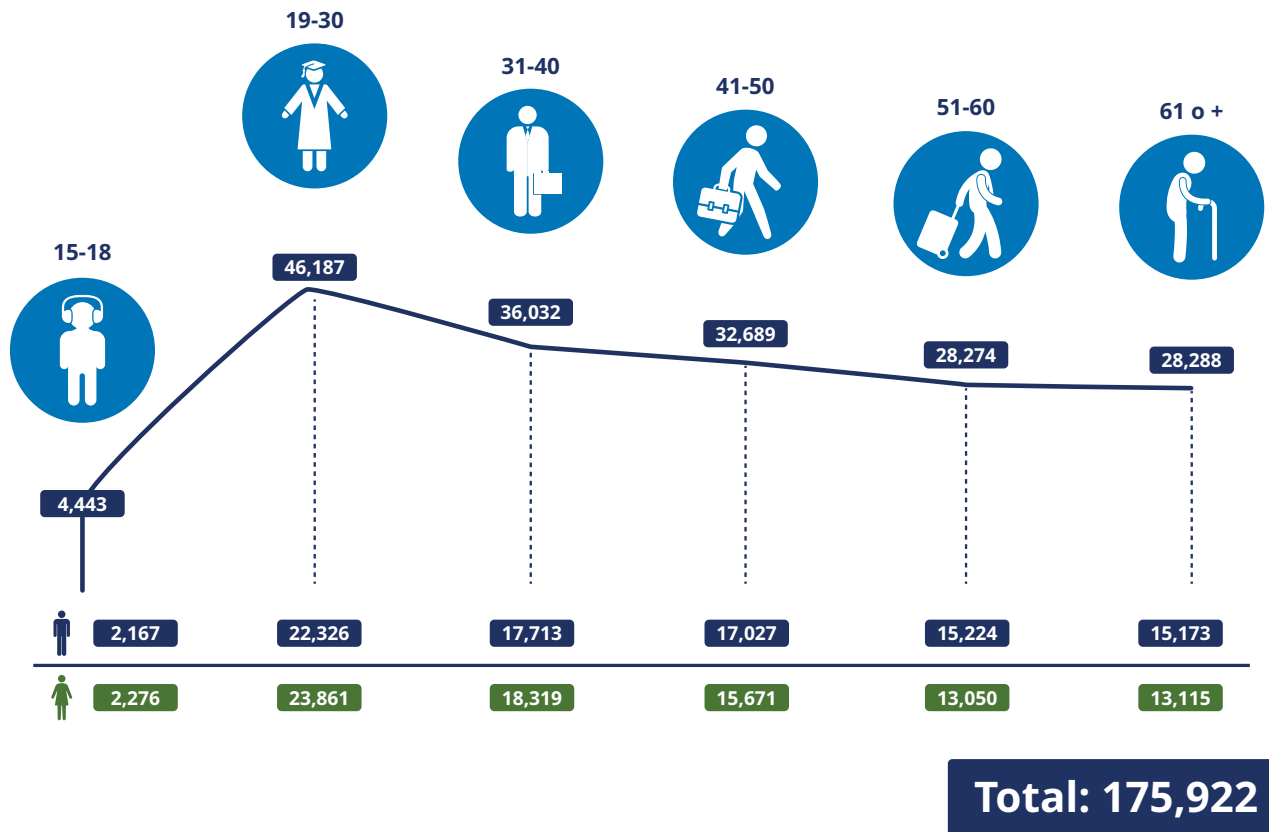




Ágora made it possible to access data, including: participation by population segment, geographic area, sex and age, thus revealing results such as the high participation of young people (27.8%) and the parity between contributions from men (51.6%) and women (48.3%), as well as the development concerns of each gender.

**Total proposals by age and gender**

*Figure No. 5*



The bottom-up approach made it possible to reach agreements that addressed the reality of each region and community, and to agree on proposals that affected the whole country, thereby enabling the regions to contribute to the country's overall vision.



## Stage 2: Panama Decides

Stage 2 of the Bicentennial Pact, called **Panama Decides**, was characterized by committee work in which citizens' contributions to the proposals previously classified by focus area and region were analysed, discussed and summarized.

Based on these 11 focus areas, 55 committees were created, i.e. 11 for each of the country's four regions and 11 national committees.

The committees reached agreements on the development of public policy guidelines based on classified contributions. It is important to highlight that the work of the committees was focused exclusively on proposals and complaints from citizens through the Ágora platform during the Panama Proposes stage. No other topics were taken into account.

The national committees were supplied with contributions from citizens and the agreements of the regional committees.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the methodology designed for the Bicentennial Pact used Microsoft Teams as a tool to hold the meetings of the regional and national thematic committees.

The committee members were selected through a stakeholder mapping exercise involving all sectors. All committees were supported by a team made up of enablers, rapporteurs and coordinators trained in the Ágora methodology and moderating dialogues in virtual environments. Each of these regional committees was made up of eleven enablers, eleven rapporteurs, eleven observers and a national coordinator, who worked in an integrated manner on eleven thematic committees (agrifood, education, health, economy, the state, infrastructure, water, inclusiveness, environment, culture and sport) in total correspondence with the classification previously carried out by the Scientific-Technical Classification Committee and the methodological guidelines designed for this purpose and that provided support and guidance for the work to be carried out.

Proposals were placed on the agenda of each regional thematic committee, whose meetings were held remotely, so that they could be submitted for consideration based on the reality of each macro region within the context of its possible startup, i.e. its consistency and feasibility to design, draw up and implement a roadmap aimed at closing the major gaps that exist in the country and that

divide Panamanians into five different groups.

Within each regional thematic committee, detailed work was done on the content of citizen contributions so that specific proposals could be formulated based on consensus.

To keep citizen participation active, a new version of the platform was developed: Ágora 2.0.

Once an agreement was reached, regardless of the type of committee, the text was uploaded on the platform with information about the committee that formulated the agreement (thematic area, regional scope of the committee, regional scope of the agreement, i.e. national or regional). In

addition, the platform indicated the code of the citizen contributions through which the agreement was formulated.

In this way, the citizens who made proposals could be reflected in the agreements reached.

For a period of 7 to 10 days, the agreements were open for public comments and feedback. At the end of this period, based on the opinions received, the committee could modify the text of the agreement or keep it in its original version.

In both cases, the agreement was considered closed and ready for publication in the Bicentennial Pact.

## Results of Stage 2: Panama Decides

- The 44 regional committees reached **1,361 agreements**, of which 481 were national in scope.
- The 11 national committees reached **181 agreements** on policy guidelines.

Figure No. 6

# THE ROAD TRAVELLED TO AGREEMENT

## 1 DAYS 1-7 PUBLICATION OF THE AGREEMENT

The Ágora (FORMAGOR) forms containing all the agreements were published on the platform and made available to citizens for their comments, likes and dislikes. Once the five days had expired, the option to comment was disabled.



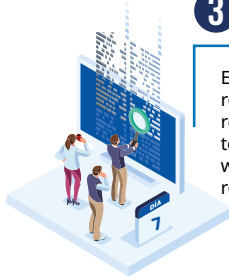
## 2 EIGHTH DAY

The Ágora team sent Executive Coordination a report with the comments received on each agreement, including likes and dislikes.



## 3 NINTH DAY

Executive Coordination reviewed the report received and forwarded it to the national coordinator, who forwarded it to the respective committee.



## 4 EVERY WEEK

Each week, the committee held a working session to consider the contributions and suggestions received through Ágora, adjust the agreements and, if necessary, draw up the text of the agreements reached.



## 5 EVERY WEEK + 1 DAY

The regional coordinator sent the final version of the agreement in FORMAGOR format to the Executive Coordination team.



## 6 EVERY WEEK + TWO DAYS

The Executive Coordination team sent the final agreement to the Ágora team in FORMAGOR format.

Within 24 hours, the Ágora team published the final agreement on the platform so it was open only to likes/dislikes.



Figure No. 7: Agreements by Thematic Area

SUBJECT	CENTRAL REGION		WESTERN REGION		EASTERN REGION		TRANSISTHMIAN REGION		GRAND TOTAL
	CENTRAL REGION	NATIONAL	WESTERN REGION	NATIONAL	EASTERN REGION	NATIONAL	TRANSISTHMIAN REGION	NATIONAL	
Agrifood	70	5	20	23	16		26	26	185
Water	50		14	13	7	2	8	1	95
Environment	18	1	45	13	2		28	5	112
Culture	4	8	23	6	24		32		97
Sports	10	13	11	11	12	11	1	8	77
Economy	21	3	16	19	10	2	3	13	84
Education	10	12	17	18	49		10	1	117
The state	14	38	17	3	16	4	8	6	106
Inclusiveness	15	12	19	4	12		50	6	118
Infrastructure	16	65	43	25	9		57	6	221
Health	19	66	13	18	13		3	17	149
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>238</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>1361</b>

# Ágora – Monitoring the Bicentennial Pact

**On 30 November 2021, the creation was announced by Executive Decree of a High Level Commission (HLC)** in charge of designing the mechanism for monitoring the Pact's agreements.

The established guidelines indicated that the monitoring system, to be presented by the committee, should include the bottom-up approach by means of an online platform that allowed continuous citizen participation monitoring the actions implemented in compliance with the Pact agreements.

The Decree established that UNDP would provide support to the work of the HLC and be in charge of the design and development of the monitoring platform.

During the time indicated by the Decree, the UNDP provided the HLC with support defining the system for monitoring agreements, based on the same principles that characterized the Pact process and, more generally, the Ágora methodology. The design of the region-based monitoring system and the Ágora platform for monitoring the Pact were delivered on 1 July 2022.

# Final Reflections

**The Bicentennial Pact process based on the Ágora methodology was innovative.** However, now that the process is over, it is necessary to take stock of the risks that emerged and how Ágora can be improved.

Processes like this one are very dynamic and cannot be forced into rigid categories. The evolution and constant updating of content, design and tools form part of the Ágora methodology.

Based on the experience of the Bicentennial Pact, some critical issues and caveats became clear and can be used to refocus the methodology in general.

Specific critical issues:



**Communication strategy:** a process based on inclusive citizen participation should ensure that citizens are informed about the opportunity and about how to participate in all stages of the process. The communication strategy should be designed in advance based on a 360° approach. It should include campaigns to encourage participation, provide information and show accountability for the process. It is important for the necessary resources to be allocated to ensure sustained implementation of the strategy.

Furthermore, communication must be inclusive and address indigenous groups and people with disabilities.



**Processing times:** when Ágora is not used on a permanent basis (as in the case of Ágora monitoring and Ágora Municipalities), but for a specific, well-defined purpose (as in the case of the Pact), regardless of the magnitude of the issue, it is advisable to define times that do not affect citizen interest. If the process drags on for many months or an entire year, the level of citizen interest and participation rapidly declines. Today's society is characterized by its speedy consumption of any product, including those with a social purpose. To meet the need for shorter time frames, it is indispensable to have a working team as large as required by the challenge of implementing Ágora without long delays.

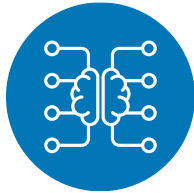


**Composition of committees at the agreement stage:** the mapping stage to determine the members of the regional and national committees should be carried out in advance. An attempt



should be made to break away from traditional structures and find fresh voices in society.

The organization of the work of the committees should also be highly creative; meetings lasting several hours every day are a thing of the past. The use of a virtual environment and online tools allows for more effective and efficient use of committee members' time.



**Artificial intelligence:** AI software was used in the Pact process to classify citizen contributions. It makes sense to continue exploring new options in this area with a view to having more precise programs (or their configuration) to enable the human work of review and control.



**Citizen participation:** in the Panama Decides stage: there was a significant drop in citizen participation during the agreement stage. Several factors may have contributed to this decline: the length of the process (at this stage, seven months had passed since the Pact was launched); the difficulty understanding the role of citizens in the agreement stage; citizens' lack of trust in being listened to; citizens' difficulty moving from reporting on gaps and making proposals in one stage to analysing agreements to suggest mod-

ifications in the next; and the lack of resources to implement the communication strategy in this stage.

With regard to the Ágora methodology in more general terms, the experience of the Pact provided some warnings about use of this tool in the future. It is important for all political stakeholders to understand that Ágora is a **methodological tool that is neutral and, above all, independent** of partisan views and interests. Ágora makes it easier to give citizens a say in a public, transparent way. There is not just one opinion among citizens, but as many as the number of citizens who participate. However, it is healthy for the democracy of any country and for the action of any political force to have access to direct information about what citizens think in order to respond to the requests received. The people in charge of managing the whole process should all embrace this approach, and the people and organizations that provide the greatest guarantees of independence should be favoured.

In relation to the previous point, the communication strategy should be designed to take into account the **level of public distrust** of political parties, governments, parliaments and state institutions.

For Ágora to work effectively and produce the anticipated results, it is essential to determine the form and content of messages, as well as public management of the process, to ensure the independence of management and results.

In any area where the Ágora methodology for citizen participation is to be implemented, there should be a sense of **public commitment so that the institutions involved** (executive, legislative, local governments, civil society) meet the expectations of the population. Participating citizens do

not necessarily expect their recommendations to be accepted in their entirety. However, ignoring the voice of citizens or consenting to citizen proposals and then failing to follow up with action can lead to social conflict. Ágora is a tool for dialogue and participation to avoid social conflict.

The success of Ágora involves **changing the traditional way of considering politics** as a decision-making area reserved for the elite. It also forces state bureaucracy at all levels to question how it works. Placing the citizen at the centre of state action entails a different and more modern way of conceiving the citizen-civil servant relationship. This may be perceived by many as a tsunami and generate great resistance to change. It is essential to have the convinced backing of the country's top hierarchy.

In processes using the Ágora methodology, there are two key stakeholders who must be involved from the beginning and throughout the process as committee members on the Advisory Council or by setting up a committee of guarantors to monitor proper application of the methodology.

These stakeholders are:

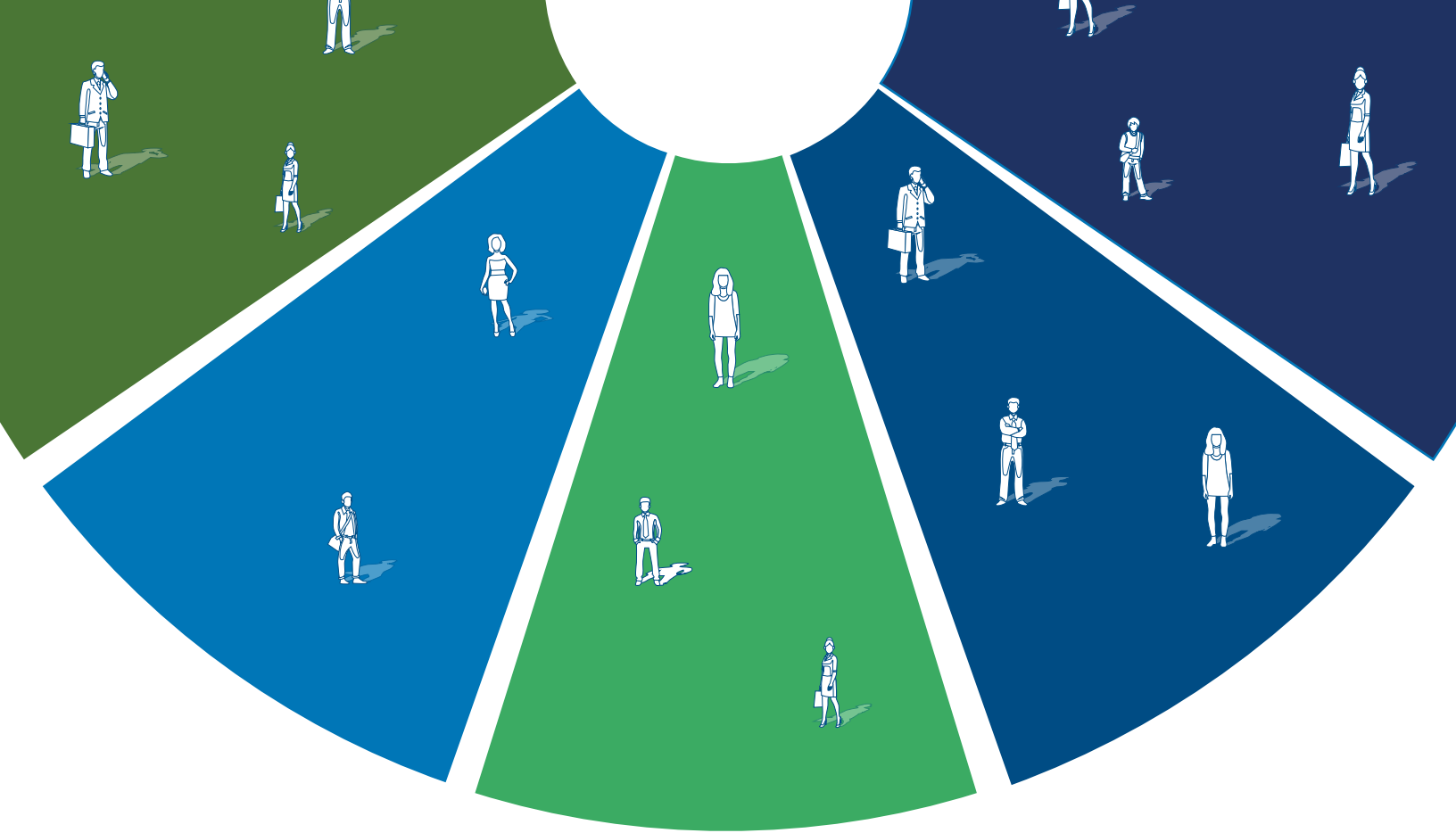
- Political forces, i.e. the main recipients of the results of the process due to their role in

the legislative body and the electoral arena.

- Organized civil society, although this does not mean that its members renounce their right to independently protest, negotiate and make proposals. Otherwise, Ágora can be a valuable tool for validating ideas, receiving suggestions and legitimizing proposals. In this case, it is necessary to leave our comfort zone and accept the changes and new challenges that the liquid society and mass digitalization have imposed on everyone.

Political forces and organized civil society, institutions and citizens can become the three pillars of a new model of society that combines representative democracy with direct democracy.





# Ágora, A Methodology for Inclusive Citizen Participation

