

CROWDLAW FOR CONGRESS

INTERVIEW WITH LUIS CUETO

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What was it, what problem was the problem that Madrid wanted to solve when a decided bet was made on all these series of participation initiatives. What was the problem, the void that you wanted to fill or solve with that?

It was essential to complement the lack of credibility from classic representation with new systems that once again gained legitimacy through the participation of citizens, who would not see "them and us", would see that their city is not that of politicians or civil servants, but that it is a city in which they can make decisions too. It is hooking the people in, that is the most important challenge.

What would you be, if you had to summarize it, the achievements of which the mayor and her team feel more satisfied with everything you have done these years?

Break taboos. I believe in making mistakes that others avoid because they are afraid. Learning from the experience of Madrid allows others to build on what we have done. We have made mistakes when making consultations and we already know how to do them. We know that, although in Spain the referendums we make are not binding and that greatly lowers the enthusiasm of the people for participating, the fact that the city council has committed to doing what citizens vote has made more and more people enter the platform, leave their electronic signature, sign up to give solutions; and we already have 400,000 people from Madrid within the platform decides.madrid.es. And the second thing we are very proud of, besides having opened the way, is that we have shared our platform with 70 cities and governments globally through an open software platform called Consul (for "consultation"), that even cities like Buenos Aires or countries like Uruguay or many cities around the world are using it as a global platform to work. That, among other things, I believe that motivated the United Nations prize for the most outstanding public service of the year 2018.

What surprised you, what you did not expect, that is, of all this process or of the results or of what you have you found along the way, what are the elements or the element that has surprised you the most, in the good sense or in the bad sense?

Well, I think that what surprised us the most is that when you join the citizens, they do have a clear idea of what they want. What they do not have is the instruments to know how to carry that out or turn it into public policy, but they know what they want for their neighborhood. Many times, what is done in a district is motivated by the priorities of the administration, the citizen is last in the queue. Here what we do is that, what surprises us is that the neighbors, when you let them speak, have a lot to say.

How did you start, that is, or how were the first steps for all this activity, where do we have to start?

Well, I think it helped a lot, in our case, that the one who is governing in Madrid is not a political party, since from the beginning the citizen candidacy was to give voice to the citizens and not to be constricted to the political party system, because many times political parties are suits that prevent even their best leaders from getting out of that suit. The city council of Madrid is headed by a leader of great credibility and a number of politicians who are there not because of the party they come from, but because of what each one of them are capable of contributing to the community.

How did it work?

The Consul platform—which, through digital signature identification, enables three types of citizen involvement: propose things and if 1% of the population supports you, the municipality is obliged to pronounce on it. That's bottom-up, the second is top-down: 'what do you think of this thing that we want to do?' And the third is: decide the fate of 100 million euros in participatory budgeting.

What difficulties or obstacles have you found, on the one hand at the institution level, of what is the legal-organizational framework of the institution and then outside that, that is, in the city itself?

The main internal difficulty is that civil servants are often so convinced that they know what is needed for the city that citizens become bothered, because citizens try to alter their priorities. So, the professionals, what they say is: "do not complicate my life, give me money and give me resources that I know the city needs, I do not need the citizens, who are not very well aware and they only talk about their little issue, their neighborhood block, they do not have the vision of the city, I do have it". Well that is not true, citizens know their priorities very well and administrations are a technical instrument but we have to open ourselves to channeling citizens' desires. The second thing we have found is that, sometimes, officials do know how to interpret what is most necessary for the city because they receive complaints from citizens, they do surveys, they know the reality after working 20 years in the city, but what they never know how to do is to interpret the dreams of citizens. Participatory budgets are things that go beyond what I need, it is what makes me feel proud of my neighborhood and my city.

What would you recommend to a particular congressman, but to a public official in general who wants to initiate an initiative or a series of initiatives like those that Madrid has done, what would you say to them, that is to say what would you recommend, what would be your message for them?

Well, the first thing is that they come to see us, and they see it in their own experience, because sometimes the abstract ideas that are valid for one city are not valid for another. But what I would

recommend for them is to identify a project and guide the neighbors for one week, 10 days, 15 days. For example, when in a Madrid neighborhood, we have created a library, a classic library that professionals already know how to do because they have done 100 of the same. And suddenly the citizens, when designing with you, when you accompany them, not only "tell me what you think and then I'll see what I can do" but, I spent a whole month with you, making a first model, the neighbors say, "no, it was not that, it was something else", you break that model and make another, at that time you end up discovering that those neighbors say "it's not the City Council's library, it's our library". So I think what I would recommend is an experience, taking off your tie and going down to the street.

Would you do it again?

Of course, I say that citizen participation is the baby of public policy. It never has to be a substitute for representative democracy, but participation adds so much value to transparency, it adds so much credibility to public management when we do not have "them and us", but have the city of all. And I think that not only would we do it again, but with what we have already learned, we would go much faster because there is not as much time, with so many populist vectors and so much intermediation of less and less credible media, as to re-legitimize democracy, It is urgent to legitimize democracy, we would do it again, faster.