

ERSAR Mobile App

In partnership with the OECD Studies on Water: Stakeholder Engagement for Inclusive Water Governance

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Organisation: The Water and Waste Services Regulation Authority (ERSAR)

Country: Portugal

Level of government: Central government

Sector: Environmental protection

Type: Communication

Launched in: 2014

Overall development time: 4 month(s)

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

In Portugal, the Water and Waste Services Regulation Authority (ERSAR) has recently developed a mobile app aimed at providing relevant information to the water and waste services users in Portugal. This mobile app contains thorough information about the quality of service provided by each provider, so that any user living in that area has all the information to compare his/her service to the service provided in other geographical areas.

The information is displayed for the 278 municipalities in mainland Portugal. It includes data and indicators for the quality of service, drinking water quality, tariffs, as well as some practical information about water and waste services, such as news of the sector, tips and advice on how to reduce water consumption or waste production, among other information.

ERSAR collects information from every operator, in different regulation cycles, and analyses it, performs onsite audits and finally issues an annual report, which is the basis for all the information published in the mobile app.

This mobile app was one of the communication channels chosen by ERSAR to disseminate the 700 000 data collected annually, because of the easy to use interface and the possibility to reach the citizens anywhere and at any time. ERSAR's intention is to perform a satisfaction survey on the mobile app, integrated with the satisfaction survey of other tools used to communicate with stakeholders.

Why the innovation was developed

- The major idea underlying the development of the “ERSAR” mobile app was the intention of reaching a wider audience, in particular, end-users and citizens.
- ERSAR already produced and published all the information which was made available at the app, however, this information became much more accessible and easily understandable by any citizen, because of the visual analysis and the interactivity the app allows.
- One of the conclusions we have reached in past surveys and studies is that there is still a lack of knowledge between users regarding this information, and with this app we want to bridge that knowledge gap.
- Sharing information is one of the main guiding principles of ERSAR because it allows to accomplish the objective of reducing the asymmetries of information between the several stakeholders.
- Information is one of the most important mechanisms for the regulator to empower the end-users of a service, because it allows them to demand better services by comparing their service to other services.
- This, obviously creates a lot of pressure on the lowest performing operators, which have to justify to their own users why they are performing worse than others, allowing for a steady improvement of the services.
- This is a very relevant role of the regulator, by trying to induce competition through benchmarking of operators, in a sector where competition is limited due to the fact that the users do not have the possibility of changing their service provider (natural monopolies).
- Governments Service providers
- Civil society
- Water institutions
- Regulators
- Financial actors
- Science, academia, and research centres

Results

Effectiveness

- The tips and advice on reducing water consumption and waste production can have a positive impact in users, since they also help to create awareness about these topics in their own communities.
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Service quality

Accessibility:

- Individuals tend to have more willingness to do something when they are provided with more knowledge. This tool will contribute to have a better perception of water and waste services.
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Other improvements

- Induction of more efficiency and of the improvement of the services, through benchmarking of operators. Faced with publicly exposed poor figures, the operators tend to work towards improving them.

Development

Design

ERSAR was the promoter of this tool as part of its responsibility of disseminating sound and transparent information to everyone interested in the water and waste sector

Every stakeholder is being provided with a huge amount of information which can be used for their own analysis, comparison and use. Probably governmental institutions will use the information for their own decision making, service providers will use the information to understand with whom they may learn in terms of improving a given indicator and the citizens from a given municipality will use the information to demand an improvement in the service in order to reach the same quality as in the nearby municipality where there is even a lower price.

This will empower every stakeholder in order to reach their own conclusions and hopefully it will bring more democracy to the water and waste services provision.

Testing

- No methods were used to test the innovation.
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Implementation

Tools used:

- ERSAR's mandate establishes this responsibility of collecting, analysing and disseminating relevant information for the water and waste services. So, the operators are legally obliged to report the information to ERSAR and it is ERSAR's duty to share that information with the society.
- In any case, even when it was not a legal obligation for ERSAR, it was already usual to collect some information from areas which were not yet under ERSAR's supervision. This information was then used to benchmark different types of models for service provision.
- The case study refers to the provision of information in order to empower consumers. A widespread publicitation of this tool is yet to be done, since other than the presentation of the app at the IWA Congress & Exhibition the information about the app has mostly circulated under a "word of mouth" approach and some news in the media.
- We also rely on the operators to spread the message to their clients that the app is now available and can be used to check on the service they provide.

Resources used:

- ERSAR has fully funded the development of the app within its budget allocations.
 - ERSAR's budget stems from levies charged to the operators, which are then reflected in the tariffs charged to the end-users of the water and waste services.
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Challenges and solutions

- Conception/design: The major bottleneck was the narrow timing for the project to be developed. From start to finish the project took less than three months which was a very short period for specifications, development, testing, training and communication. Additionally, there were several discussions on how to better address the target audience and who would be the target audience of this tool. In the end, the final product was overall very satisfactory.
- Evaluation/monitoring: The most difficult task regarding this project is the communication and the outreach activities in order to make sure that everyone knows about this tool and is able to use it. This creates also some problems in the evaluation of the project since the potential public is significantly larger than the effective public.
- In order to solve this communications issue, we have tried to work with several media, some more specialized, as well as TV and national newspapers to reach as many people we can. These communication activities are now undergoing and we expect them to be successful in increasing the awareness and the usage of the "ERSAR" mobile app.

Lessons Learned

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- Operators are reactive to more information published and to more transparency.
- Operators will work harder to correct any inefficiency that is publicly shown to the general public.
- It is important to reach consumers with user friendly tools and to address them providing the proper amount and detail of information.
- This tool can be additionally simplified and adapted to what consumers consider important in the service that is provided.
- That is the future challenge: to have more directed information on the areas which are more valued by consumers.

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