



DATASHIFT



PROMISE TRACKER

CASE STUDY

INITIATIVE NAME:
PROMISE TRACKER

ONLINE PRESENCE:
[HTTP://PROMISETRACKER.ORG/](http://promisetracker.org/)

GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE:
BRAZIL

Photo taken from <http://promisetracker.org/2015/08/10/monitoring-paraty-with-the-nucleus-for-new-media/>

Promise Tracker is a mobile data collection application that enables citizens to monitor the performance of their local governments on issues that matter to them.

The application was created in 2014 at the Center for Civic Media by the MIT Media Lab, headed by Ethan Zuckerman. Since then, the application has been used by local organisations and communities in nine Brazilian cities. These organisations have sought to **monitor promises made by local governments on a diverse array of issues**, including basic infrastructure, sanitation, health and education.

Zuckerman describes his clear vision of this project:

“The use case for Promise Tracker is simple: if the mayor of a city makes an electoral promise that roads in a neighborhood will be paved during her time in office, Promise Tracker helps the local community collect data on the condition of the roads and monitor progress made on the promise over time. If the mayor meets her goal, Promise Tracker offers proof, generated by the community that has benefitted. If the government is in danger of falling short, Promise Tracker offers an open, freely shared data set that citizens and officials can use to consult on solving the problem.”¹

CITIZEN MONITORING & DATA COLLECTION

The Promise Tracker application allows citizens to design a mobile survey; distribute the survey to community members’ phones; collect data using a mobile app; visualize it on a map and use the resulting data to advocate for change on local issues.²

Thus, it is communities and their residents that are responsible for using the Promise Tracker tool. The data that they collect can take many forms, including quantitative information, qualitative descriptions, photos or geo-localizations. The mobile phones can collect photographic data and stamp it with location information and a timestamp, and data collected can be released to public repositories under a Creative Commons Zero license.³ Crucially, this means that the **data collected through Promise Tracker is released as a public good**, giving other citizen groups the chance to use it in their future advocacy and monitoring.

In practice, this means that a resident can go to the location of a proposed health clinic, photograph the site and then take action if a related “promise” has not been fulfilled. Subsequent actions can take many forms, including engaging with civic leaders on lack of progress, recruiting others to help collect data or passing on stories about unfulfilled promises to journalists.⁴

This process has engaged those who are typically excluded from collecting, accessing and disseminating data and information in the monitoring and assessment of political commitments. It has given civil society and local governments an opportunity to discuss what has been promised, what has been delivered and what has driven progress or caused constraints.

1 Ethan Zuckerman, “Promise Tracker and Monitorial Citizenship”, January 24, 2014, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2014/01/24/promise-tracker-and-monitorial-citizenship/#sthash.gUeq1cDJ.dpuf>

2 <http://promisetracker.org/>

3 Zuckerman, op. cit.

4 <https://civic.mit.edu/promise-tracker>

CO-DESIGNING WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The Media Lab team connected with its first interested user in 2014, when Zuckerman presented the idea of a community-powered application at a meeting. Afterwards, he was approached by community organizers from Brazil who helped shape the application.⁵

Throughout 2014, the Promise Tracker team conducted **workshops** with partner organisations in Brazil to guide the Promise Tracker tools' development and testing. Run by the Media Lab team, these workshops introduce the local partners to the tools and launch the data collection campaigns. They have run workshops in nine Brazilian cities, each with a different project determined by local communities.

The **co-design methods**⁶ used are central to the workshops' success. This approach ensures that the issues being monitored are ones that the community cares about, rather than ones imposed by an external team or the technology chosen. It also means that the projects are more likely to be sustainable after the original intervention has ended.⁷

The Center for Civic Media has held workshops in cities across Brazil, including Sao Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Brasília, Sao Luis, Belem, and Paraty. Since the Promise Tracker tools were launched in São Paulo in March 2015, they have been used for projects such as:

- **Education:** monitoring the construction of elementary schools in Sao Luis, in partnership with the organisation Nossa Sao Luis.
- **Transport:** monitoring the accessibility of bus stations and accuracy of bus arrival times in Belo Horizonte, in partnership with Nossa Belo Horizonte.⁸
- **Government accountability:** monitoring promises made by Mayor Fernando Haddad of São Paulo.

While the issues local communities choose to track differ from place to place, the driving principle is the same: **empowering organisations and communities to monitor local governments' progress on their commitments.**

By collaborating directly with local residents, the Promise Tracker team was able to work with people:

“that are deeply invested in their communities and actively engaged in local civic spaces. They believe in the potential of creating change through local councils and were willing to embrace the political goals... as a necessary point of departure for advocating for accountability.”⁹

5 Oded Grajew, a celebrated Brazilian social entrepreneur and innovator, one of the founders of the World Social Forum, and founder of Rede Nossa Sao Paulo, “Our Sao Paulo Network”, a network of community organisations dedicated to transforming and improving that remarkable city.

6 Promoted by MIT Media Lab colleague Sasha Costanza Chock see <http://www.media.mit.edu/research/groups/4720/codesign-toolkit>

7 Zuckerman, op. cit.

8 The workshop took place in a neighborhood called Aglomerado Santa Lúcia, a group of favelas, located in central Belo Horizonte surrounded by more affluent neighborhoods.

9 Emilie Reiser, “Piloting Promise Tracker in Sao Paulo”, December 8, 2014, accessed September 10, 2015, <https://civic.mit.edu/blog/emreiser/piloting-promise-tracker-in-sao-paulo>.

LESSONS LEARNED

The MIT team is documenting outcomes, assumptions and lessons learned on their website: www.promisetracker.org. According to one team member, one of the most interesting results has been witnessing “participants become **more effective advocates**...as their ability to organize their thoughts and articulate the challenges and factors related to a given issue improves.”¹⁰

Importantly, the team found that evaluating local officials and offices’ performance can be framed as a “value-add” rather than a detrimental stand-off between citizens and government. Moreover, where public, private and community members were involved in the project, the team found that bringing all actors together in an assessment of the data showed the local government “that this type of monitoring could benefit a range of other services, and help City Hall stay in front of issues affecting the city that they may not have the man-power to actively assess.”¹¹ Ultimately, the process can result in a huge win for all, setting the stage for future collaborations.

THE FUTURE OF PROMISE TRACKER

The Media Lab continues to gather feedback on the platform and methodology. Promise Tracker tools are continually being adjusted and improved, and there are plans to announce new features in the coming months.

The platform is thinking of going global. Promise Tracker has already generated interest from other countries, and the team plans to create a web and mobile app system that cities around the world can customize according to their needs.

DataShift is a multi-stakeholder, demand-driven initiative that builds the capacity and confidence of civil society to produce and use citizen-generated data to monitor sustainable development progress, demand accountability and campaign for transformative change. Ultimately, our vision is a world where people-powered accountability drives progress on sustainable development.

DataShift is an initiative of **CIVICUS**, in partnership with **the engine room** and **Wingu**. For more information, visit www.thedatashift.org or contact datashift@civicus.org.



¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Emilie Reiser, “Citizens & City Hall Monitor Sanitation in Belem”, August 21, 2015, accessed September 10, 2015, <https://civic.mit.edu/blog/emreiser/citizens-city-hall-monitor-sanitation-in-belem>.