Are Democratic User Groups More Inclusive?

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ABSTRACT

User groups form an important part of the Wikimedia movement and ecosystem. They gather a big number of free knowledge enthusiasts both online and offline, having either a shared geographical location or thematic interest, or both. At their creation, these structures and their volunteer founders did not receive any formal introduction nor guidelines on ways of working. Governance of these groups lies then between the hands of their founders, who can have different proceeding methods and approaches, depending on their background and vision.

Several conflicts related to user group management have occurred, where words such as "transparency" and "democracy" were mentioned as solutions to the current gaps and lack of inclusivity in the groups. The current paper intends to investigate the veracity of this claim, through detailing and understanding the concept of democracy, most specifically in digital online communities, such as Wikimedia volunteer user groups. Since the question remains open, the paper's addition is the elements provided to enrich the discussion, highlighting the concerns raised in different communities.

KEYWORDS

Democracy, Inclusivity, User Group, Volunteering, Wikimedia

1 Introduction

Wikimedia user groups (UGs) are affiliates intended to be simple and flexible, with less requirements than other types of formal groups within the movement [1]. With this flexibility comes a number of challenges. In fact, these informal structures can witness a number of issues related to unclarity and lack of information. Among these issues one can mention the absence of inclusivity in several groups. In this context, the claim of implementing democracy to enhance inclusivity was raised [2]. The following paper reshaped this claim to formulate its research question: Is democracy the solution to address more inclusivity in Wikimedia User groups?

In order to answer this question, we start by providing an extensive background in section 2, presenting the Wikimedia movement and some of its key elements, necessary to understand the area (Wikimedia Foundation, Affiliation Committee, and User Groups). Once the background is set, section 3 explains the theoretical framework to be used in our analysis, by introducing the concepts of digital governance, online democracy pillars, inclusivity, volunteering, and user group. These definitions will be central for mapping our forthcoming comparisons and analysis. In section 4, we present examples of current governance problems related to inclusivity occurring in user groups and analyze their causes. These issues will be then mapped in section 5 with democracy pillars, concluding that democracy alone is not enough to address inclusivity challenges. Given this result, section 6 is dedicated to sharing recommendations for improvements in the current routines and processes, to guarantee a better inclusivity in Wikimedia user groups, and solve the identified challenges. Finally, section 7 concludes this work by summarizing it and opening the path for future work.

2 Background

The Wikimedia movement is a complex ecosystem featuring several actors, with different levels of implication and responsibilities. The present section aims to introduce some relevant stakeholders that are central to the question we are studying. First, we present the Wikimedia Foundation, the organization supporting the movement and the Wikimedia projects. Then, we explain the background and the concept of a Wikimedia User group, before introducing the Affiliates Committee, the entity responsible for approving and guiding user groups. Finally, processes of user group creation and management will be presented as they are the main subject of this work.

2.1 Wikimedia Foundation

The Wikimedia Foundation (acronym WMF) is a USA-based non-profit organization that supports Wikimedia projects and communities. It was established in 2003 by Jimmy Wales in order to financially sustain Wikipedia and its sister projects through a non-profit solution. The WMF receives donations from free-knowledge supporters across the globe, and its strong economy allows it to engage an important number of employees (over 450) and drive several departments and projects worldwide.

The WMF is overseen by a board of trustees (BoT), having the ultimate corporate authority over it. Among the work that the BoT coordinates is the creation of new linguistic versions of Wikipedia and sister projects (through the Language Committee "LangCom"), and the creation of new Wikimedia affiliates in different regions of the world (through the Affiliations Committee

"Affcom"). The full list of Wikimedia committees can be found at their Meta page [3].

2.2   The Affiliations Committee

With the emergence of first affiliates, the WMF's Board of Trustees appointed in 2005 a "chapter coordinator" in charge of liaising and coordinating with the chapters and whose tasks were later delegated to a "Chapters committee" which was constituted by the board in 2006.

In 2012, the Chapters committee changed its name to the "Affiliations committee" (AffCom) in order to include the newly-recognized forms of affiliates (i.e. thematic groups and user groups), thus evolving its field of action to become the entity in charge of reviewing requests of affiliation, recognizing and supporting movement's affiliate [4].

Nowadays, the AffCom is a community-run committee made of ten voting members elected by the movement for a two-year term [5], assisted by non-voting members comprising Board's liaisons and Foundation's staff.

2.3   Wikimedia User Groups

The Wikimedia Foundation distinguishes three types of affiliates, differentiated by their focus and legal status: chapters, thematic organizations, and user groups. In fact, early forms of affiliation to the WMF were national chapters, emerging mainly in Western Europe with Wikimedia Deutschland and Wikimédia France in 2004.

In 2012, the Foundation's Board of Trustees recognized new models of affiliation, following a two-years consultation with the community to redefine the roles and responsibilities within the movement; hence alongside the national (or sub-national) chapters, thematic organizations and user groups became other forms of affiliation; the first being similar to the chapters in terms of conditions (legal incorporation, approval of the Board, etc.) but having a thematic focus instead of a geographical implantation, while the second was meant to be more flexible with lesser requirements [6].

User groups (UG) were defined as "open membership groups with an established contact person and history of projects, designed to be easy to form. User groups may or may not choose to incorporate and are granted limited use of the Wikimedia marks for publicity related to events and projects." [6]

The current process of creating user groups requires the gathering of at least three people having each over 300 edits on a Wikimedia project with a registered account of more than six months, in order to be able to submit the application to the AffCom. This request should clarify the motives and determine the future plans for the new UG, while agreeing to the "User Groups Agreement and Code of Conduct" which stipulates, among other things, designating two points of contact with the Foundation, "behaving transparently" in the deliverables as well as complying with the WMF Guiding Principles and Friendly Space Policies. As of December 2021, 136 user groups exist in the Wikimedian community.

It is important to note that user groups are not the only structure under which Wikimedia communities can gather. As we saw, communities can also create chapters, as well as thematic groups. Since the latter have different contexts and processes, the scope of our work will strictly regard user groups. We do however encourage future research to investigate the other structures as well.

3   Theoretical Concepts

3.1   Digital governance – Dictatorship – Meritocracy

In the Oxford English dictionary, governance is defined as "the activity of governing a country or controlling a company or an organization; the way in which a country is governed, or a company or institution is controlled" [7]. In the digital world, the definition is not different, but a layer of complexity is added given the different stakeholders involved, and the nature of interactions. In fact, it is usual to face anonymous profiles online, or different kinds of misleading information, from parts presenting themselves differently than what they are in real life (a group presenting itself as a person, paid staff presenting themselves as regular citizens, people giving wrong age, etc.). These challenges, combined with the decentralized nature of the Internet, require a special effort to be studied.

Internet governance as a concept saw the light in 2005. Initially, it was defined as "the development and application by Government, the private sector, and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programs that shape the evolution and use of the internet" [8]. This definition was later shaped to cover additional aspects and actors. In the context of this work, our interest is in open-source communities, Wikimedia being one of them. The two reference models used to study these communities are the benevolent dictator [9] and the meritocratic [10] governance models. In short, these models explain that online projects either remain dictatorships under the control of a small self-appointed core team or are willing to share power with those deserving it, by offering decision-making possibilities to them.

Two of the main challenges in digital governance are inclusivity and democracy [11]. Both concepts will be defined in subsequent sections.

3.2   Definition of Democracy online – its pillars

Democracy is a broadly studied concept, with a rich documentation covering all its aspects. Common definitions of democracy include "a system of government in which the people of a country can vote to elect their representatives" and "fair and equal treatment of everyone in an organization, etc., and their right to take part in making decisions" [12]. We assume that these definitions do not vary from offline to online.

In this paper, the definition of online democracy that we chose to use was the one established in [13], presenting the concept as a set of five pillars needing to be fulfilled. These pillars are: (i) open

participation, (ii) transparency, (iii) equality, (iv) accountability, and (v) democratic dispute management.

3.3   Definition of inclusivity

Inclusivity is also a broad concept that can be applied to different contexts and is subject to interpretation depending on the nature of existing variables and involved stakeholders. It is generally defined as the fact of "including and embracing people from various backgrounds" [14] or "including people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized" [15].

In social sciences, inclusivity serves as basis by which issues at stake can potentially be solved; in fact, the UN advances the term 'social inclusivity' to refer to "the process of improving the terms of participation in society […] through enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights" [16]. Similarly, some layers can be given to the initial definition to designate a specific or complex situation, such as 'process inclusivity' to refer to direct or indirect participation in decision-making and also 'outcome inclusivity' to address people's concerns [17].

Inclusivity, on the other hand, poses a number of challenges and limitations, including decisional effectiveness, taking in consideration that no "work can be done" if persistent demands take over all discussions. Some scholars such Adam J. Table go further and even question whether inclusivity requires democracy [18]. Such dilemmas will be closely regarded in subsequent sections.

In this paper, we define the concept of inclusivity precisely as 'process inclusivity' to refer to inclusiveness in User groups, and by extension in the Wikimedian community.

3.4   Definition of volunteering

Volunteering refers to "any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization" [19], through which the individual commits to contribute for the common good or get involved in collective structures to strengthen his personal skills. Despite being prevalent across the world, volunteerism is limited to a specific segment of the society and is sometimes viewed as subsidiary.

Online volunteering, being its extension in the digital communities, does not differ too much from the traditional form, if not the nature of existing interactions. It is defined as "a type of civic engagement where the volunteers perform their tasks using the Internet either from their home or other offsite locations" [20] and can include activities such moderating a social media page or creating an article on a collaborative encyclopedia, etc. This kind of volunteering seems to be both a remedy for existing inequalities and a means of strengthening social participation in societies turned towards new technologies [21]

In between, there is hybrid volunteering involving both online and offline activities and which also seems to attract many people attempted by a mobilization in different forms. Activities of the Wikimedia movement's affiliates are the best illustration.

Such activity, despite being conducted for free, brings considerable benefits to both the individual and the structure. Wilson and Musick [22] consider that there are individual benefits to be gained from the voluntary activity that can go beyond the work itself and persist after leaving that role. Similarly, Meier and Stutzer [23] argue that for an extrinsically-motivated volunteer the activity is rewarding in terms of higher life satisfaction and increases individual's well-being, noting at the same time that the latter can be negatively impactful for a volunteer whose status remains unchanged.

This paper considers volunteering and its dynamics as a central piece in understanding the present subject in its broader context.

3.5   Understanding the concept/model of a User Group

3.5.1 The Model and structure. User groups are defined from the Wikimedia Foundation side, as groups of Wikimedians interested in coming together and working offline in a specific geographic area, or a given thematic area. From a community perspective, interpretations are however diverse, depending on the context, knowledge, experience, motivation, availability, and network of each group. While some affiliates remain as a virtual gathering of volunteers with few activities, others operate as associations with bylaws and regular meetings. In between are many groups navigating in an unclear area, where members meet in-person, but without having a given legal status in their country, and not knowing how to operate strategically their team, and no governance support offered proactively.

The lack of clarity for user groups governance reflects in their structure. Unless a group is a legal association with bylaws (a minority [24]), the situation is that a lot of confusion is happening on different roles and responsibilities between the members, ultimately creating several challenges and problems.

3.5.2 Skills vs representativity. As any working team, skills and knowledge are important criteria for driving work in affiliates. The different operated projects and initiatives need good management and documentation skills, requiring sometimes external members to join and enrich the group. On the other hand, it is important that community members form a consequent part of the affiliate, as they are aware of the movement dynamics, and on their local online context.

3.5.3 Decision-making processes. Since the user groups governance is left to interpretation depending on the group, decision making processes become therefore unclear. In some affiliates, decisions are made top-down, with a leadership deciding and communicating to the other members, while a bottom-up approach is adopted in other groups, where members are involved in decision-making, through mechanisms such as voting.

4 Current governance problems related to inclusivity in User Groups

4.1 Examples of problems and cases related to inclusivity

Governance, defined as the action of governing and taking decisions, is key for the well-functioning of any organization or group. A bad or unclear governance is a problem catalyst and can generate difficult conflicts that take a lot of time and energy to be solved.

Wikimedia user groups are not an exception compared to the different other structures in terms of governance problems. Historically, several issues were reported through the years, either internally inside groups, or between several of them. Inclusivity (and its absence) is one of the challenges experienced within several groups. We have been members of Wikimedia Morocco user group since 2015, and have participated in several Wikimedia movement events and discussions, where we have seen and noticed issues of a lack of inclusion in user groups that have informed this work.

Among the problems that we witnessed in the inclusivity area one can mention:

• *Issue 1: Non-inclusion in information sharing and decision-making* - Several group members report no or little internal communication within their user groups channels. Sometimes, the contact persons[1] keep the messages and e-mails they receive to themselves, or answer in the name of the whole group without gathering different opinions. This results in conflicts related to participation in conferences and contests, grant applications, and general communication issues between the group and other stakeholders assuming they are talking with the group, while they might be talking only with one or two people. The lack of accountability for user groups encourages this sort of behavior, as there is no formal and mandatory process to follow in terms of internal communication.

• *Issue 2: Non-inclusion as a consequence of bad management and unclarities* - Being informal, and not obliged to follow any formal or official structure, many Wikimedia user groups do not have clear roles and responsibilities shared between their members. Although a number of groups have roles cited in their description pages, the volunteering nature of the activities makes it optional to commit to the different tasks needed. In particular, different people have different schedules. Some expect others to volunteer "full-time" to address all their needs, while others think that all need to be present and active as much as them. This creates a situation of confusion and frustration, between those who think that they are the only ones working, those expecting the "volunteer leaders" to work more, and those who are seen as "inactive" and not producing value. Many do not feel included in the group, as they are lost, and do not know what to do in terms of tasks.

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[1] User groups Contact persons - https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wikimedia_user_groups/User_Group_Primary_Contact_Rights_%26_Expectations

• *Issue 3: Non-inclusion for "personal interests"* - Creating a Wikimedia user group holds several benefits that can be interesting for many. Every year (before Covid-19), a person from each Wikimedia user group could attend the Wikimedia Summit, organized in Berlin. The less people a group has, the bigger probability a member has to attend. Groups can even be created for that purpose! Not only the Berlin conference is a reason to create a user group and keep it for oneself, but also the need for recognition (being called a founder is not the same as joining an existing group) and the uniqueness and exclusivity coming with it. Many conflicts intra-groups happened when different Wikimedians created user groups within the same country, for the same exact purpose, and refused to merge with each other. Claims of non-inclusion and refusal of collaboration can lead to affiliate de-recognition as the case of two user groups in Brazil in 2018 **[25]**.

• *Issue 4: Non-inclusion in group access and membership* - Although one of prerequisites for user group creation is to be open for community members to join, there is a possibility to set up barriers for new members once the recognition phase is complete. An example of these hurdles can be the implementation of filters (ex: forms to be filled in, interviews) where decisions are made later about if potential members can join or not. It can be logical that a level of compatibility might be required to join certain groups (ex: speaking a language, being interested in the main group thematic, etc.), but these filters can easily be misused by individuals creating groups and not wishing others to join. There are currently no detailed guidelines or best practices shared with the established user groups on how to recruit members (besides the mention that they should be open and inclusive), or which governance and decision-making tools shall be used when assessing applications from potential new members.

4.2 Causes/Origins of the problems

Lack of inclusivity is not always an intentional choice. It can come as a consequence of different contexts and situations. Below are examples of causes that might be related to the problems mentioned at the earlier section.

4.2.1 Lack of information and transparency. By construction, user groups are simple structures, with no governance guidelines. According to the Affcom: "there are no specified bylaws or governance guidelines for User Group affiliates. This is because User Groups are the simplest affiliate model with no requirements for regional non-profit status, Board, or bylaws. This structure allows groups to function as recognized bodies" [26]. The fact that user groups are the simplest structures pushed even some former chapters to willingly ask to transition to a user group status, as chapter requirements are more strict in the Wikimedia movement [27] [28].

Given the definition provided by the Affcom, as well as field experience from user groups, there are no general governance guidelines from Affcom to the established user groups. There are in fact no practices to be followed in terms of leadership rotation or elections. Each user group is left to itself, and to the discretion of its members to choose the most suitable governance model. The only interventions from Affcom come in case conflicts or

problems are reported. However, several unhealthy behaviors can perdure without being reported, especially in the smaller and most isolated affiliates.

The lack of onboarding comes also in the form of no formal introduction provided to user groups. Most user groups are created by Wikimedia enthusiasts, who would like to collaborate with each other in their context. Many of them might be new to the movement and lack information and background that could be good to know. Formally, the only introduction given to user groups is an email sent by the Affcom to the Wikimedia mailing list, informing about the acceptance of the group. After that, the only contact will be regarding the status of the yearly report that should be provided in order to keep the active status of the user group. Meanwhile, the group members might not have received the required information to understand what their structure is, nor how it could be best developed, or whom to contact in case of needing help or mentorship. Many user groups do not know the roles and responsibilities within the movement, not what the Affcom role is (besides recognizing them).

Not only roles and responsibilities are not communicated, but they are also unclear. Several areas are not transparent, and information cannot be found about them. An example is the contact people within a user group. How are decisions made about contact people of a user group? If a user group would like to have more than two contact people, where is this point discussed? and with whom?

In addition to the lack of information, the language barrier adds an extra layer to the challenging situation for many, who are not comfortable in communicating in English, and might find the communication level of the Affcom too formal and not simple to understand.

4.2.2 Unhelpful local context. The local context also plays a decisive role in shaping affiliates' governance, particularly if unfavorable, since it has an impact on the behavior of individuals who are supposed to contribute to the good management of the groups. Many affiliates and members are impacted by their local context where democracy is (or was) not applied which can take different forms, either implicitly through an anchoring of non-democratic practices in popular culture, and therefore the transposition and persistence of unconventional methods of management and governance within groups; or quite simply by finding oneself in situations involving the use of fraudulent techniques to try to get authorizations or any other documentation difficult to obtain but necessary for the holding of any activity. Either way, the individual must show exemplarity in his actions and align himself with the code of conduct and guiding principles accepted during the creation of the UG.

The unfavourability of the local context can also lead to other situations unique to the Wikimedian context - which may be shared to some extent with other similar online movements - related in particular to the lack of viable options for community mobilization at the local level. The impossibility of holding general assemblies or face-to-face meetings leads some groups to renew the same board virtually, without consulting and including in this process the members involved in the group, and thus ended up with the same leadership since the launch. In this sense, the very existence of several user groups having the same leadership, or even created by the same person to ultimately serve the same interests and ends, was noted by community members [29]. For such a scenario, it suffices that a small activity be noted around a thematic or a geographical area that can take a different twist with the involvement of experienced Wikimedians capitalizing on the previous realizations and turning it into a group recognized by the WMF. The contribution of the latter - who either have close personal links with those really established in the geographical area or have a superficial attachment to the given thematic - intervenes mainly to bypass the conditions of eligibility for the creation of UGs (cf. background section). We can label this kind of affiliates as "satellite user groups", since they serve as a platform for their "godfather" to further satisfy his interests, by ensuring more votes during elections (whether being voter or candidate), participation at international conferences, and also grants from different sources.

4.2.3 Volunteering. The current model of volunteerism within the movement can also be seen as problematic. Despite the innumerable positive aspects that this type of engagement brings, and even if several initiatives have been tried to better support volunteers **[30],** there are still some unseen anomalies and shortcomings that can be a source of problems affecting the performance of the groups, and therefore of its activities.

Volunteering, in itself, is an element that makes commitments and organization much more difficult, as it is particularly related to the person and their degree of interest and involvement, not to a particular team or project for instance; thus the absence of a contract or commitment with the volunteer implies that the only remaining agreement is the "honor" or oral commitment, and trust, which does not make it impossible for volunteers to be absent without prior warning at critical moments in the implementation of projects.

Therefore, for fear of the absence of volunteers at any time and due to lack of confidence in the concept of volunteering, serious and long-term projects cannot be scheduled within the framework of limited voluntary work.

On another level, through engagement within a user group, volunteering easily turns into an unpaid work. As volunteers join the Wikimedia movement primarily to contribute to online projects, they find themselves overnight embroiled in administrative matters that need to be sorted out and resolved, ranging from processes of creating groups and associations, to the management of projects requiring daily monitoring, through the exchange of emails, organization of meetings and preparation of reports and similar documentation. Those tasks require a great commitment and attention from the volunteers, although they are not susceptible to be responsible for such kind of work but find themselves obliged to perform them due to the nonexistence of alternatives, especially in the Global South.

5   Is democracy the solution?

In order to answer the central question of this section, it is important to understand the problematic it is highlighting. From one end, we have a problem that was described earlier, while from

another we have a concept that is claimed to be its solution. This section summarizes first the problematic and its main stakeholders (user groups) situation, before mapping the concept of democracy with this problematic to see if it solves it indeed.

The Wikimedia movement gathers volunteers and enthusiasts from all parts of the world, with different cultures, interests and backgrounds. This variation in contexts is reflected in the user groups' situation and their ways of working. As noted earlier, user groups are entitled to be the most flexible type of grouping within the movement, having lesser administrative constraints and more room for self-organization and management. Therefore, and unlike chapters and thematic organizations who are formally incorporated and operate either geographically or within a thematic, UGs can encompass both scopes while having different ways of mobilization and inclusion. Thematic user groups have more ability to attract potential members from different backgrounds and having similar interests, as they rely on profiles of Wikimedians already accustomed to working within affiliates and find in the user group a means of coordinating efforts on the same subject. However, the four barriers to inclusivity remain relevant to such groups despite the favorable environment.

Territorial user groups are moreover confronted with the realities of their local context and culture. They might be the first experience of coordinating for their co-founders, who experience several challenges. Groups created by new Wikimedians have indeed different governance issues than those having experienced contributors who might have been involved in other initiatives earlier. This diversity of profiles and backgrounds adds an extra layer to the complexity of the problematic we are investigating and is overlapping with some of the different topics identified earlier.

Does democracy solve the "lack of inclusivity"?
The main question raised in this work is if democracy is the solution to the lack of inclusivity in user groups. To answer it, we will be mapping each of the four inclusivity challenges that we identified earlier, with the five pillars of democracy. If one of these pillars solves a challenge, then this means that this issue is solved by democracy. On the other hand, if none of the five pillars seems to address the core of a challenge, we will be able to conclude that the issue is not solved by the concept of democracy.

- Problem 1 (Lack of Transparency)

(ii) Transparency - This pillar is the appropriate solution to address this problem. It can guarantee, by definition, an access to information, its sharing within the group, and can facilitate making fully informed decisions.

- Problem 2 (Unclear Roles and Responsibilities)

(i) Open participation - This pillar means that anyone can participate in the work. It does however not address the unclarity of roles and responsibilities, that does not necessarily come from an open participation.

(ii) Transparency - One of the definitions of transparency is the absence of secrets **[31]**. Similar to the first pillar, it does not really address the problem. In fact, a group can be fully transparent but with unclear roles and responsibilities.

(iii) Equality - Having equal voices within a group is important in many aspects but does not imply that roles and responsibilities will be clarified and is not its trigger.

(iv) Accountability - It can seem that it is the solution for this problem. However, and remembering the absence of guidelines for user groups, there is no guarantee that a user group will have defined roles and responsibilities just because they are recognized by the Wikimedia Foundation. The only item user groups are indeed accountable to provide every year is an activity report, as well as a financial one if any grants were provided. Accountability in this sense does not imply a clarity of roles and responsibilities in a user group.

(v) Democratic dispute management - This principle is enabled only in case of disputes. In case of a group with unclear roles, and assuming that no disputes are happening about this point, this pillar will not help clarify these roles per se.

After mapping the five democracy pillars with this problem, and seeing that none of them addresses the issue, we can conclude that implementing democracy in a user group does not necessarily mean that roles and responsibilities in that group will be clearer.

- Problem 3 (Personal Interest)

Both Open participation and transparency are pillars ensuring that anyone interested can take part in the ongoing work, which is shared openly. This prevents the lack of inclusivity due to hiding information. We can therefore conclude that this problem is solved by democracy.

- Problem 4 (Group's Inaccessibility)

(i) Open participation – it may seem as the way to allow more participation, but that does not really solve this issue, as it can certainly make it easier for people to apply to join the groups, but not necessarily to access it. Moreover, for some communities, accepting the participation of socially under-represented or marginalized individuals can be extremely difficult or even a limitation, because the affiliate wouldn't be tempted to violate the laws of the country, as it can have strong consequences on the activities carried out or even be considered as outlawed by the authorities.

(ii) Transparency – This can partially attempt to solve this problem, without however being the solution. Having a minimum of clarity on the membership or selection process can be crucial for the individual wishing to join, as it implies at least a sharing of information and therefore a potential means of interaction, however it cannot guarantee an access to the group.

(iii) Equality – Having fair and equal representation within the affiliate is a goal in and of itself. It can be achieved only when there will be a willingness from the "group leadership" to review their modus operandi and the filters they set up for joining the group. This pillar, alone, cannot address and solve this issue.

(iv) Accountability and (v) Democratic dispute management – These two pillars are only valid to address a few problems that are specific to them; non-fulfillment of responsibilities for the first and in case of conflict arising for the second; and are thus not suitable to solve this issue related to group's inaccessibility.

Table 1 in the next page summarizes the findings of this section, by showing the results from mapping the democracy pillars against some inclusivity issues, to conclude if democracy solves the problem.

Problem / Solution	Open participation	Transparency	Equality	Accountability	Democratic Dispute Management	Solved by democracy
Lack of transparency (#1)	N/A	✓	N/A	N/A	N/A	Yes
Unclear roles and responsibilities (#2)	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	No
Personal interests (#3)	✓	✓	N/A	N/A	N/A	Yes
Group's inaccessibility (#4)	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	No

Table 1. Inclusivity challenges vs. Democracy pillars

6   Recommendations for improvements

Results from the previous chapter explain to us that democracy is not always the solution for the inclusivity challenges that were identified in certain Wikimedia user groups. In particular, we saw that two issues ("Unclear roles and responsibilities" and "Group's inaccessibility") need more than democracy in a user group in order to be solved. In this section, we are presenting a number of recommendations for areas that can address these challenges, so that eventual actions are taken by parts interested. The recommendations we share are the following:

• *Include More than two contact persons per group*
When creating a user group, two of the (minimum required) three co-founders are requested to sign a "User group agreement and Code of conduct" which designates them de facto as contact persons vis-a-vis the Foundation. This extends automatically following UG's annual renewal, or at the request of the group to change one of their contacts or both. The agreement, which is also renewed automatically, should in our view be more flexible for groups wishing to have more than two contact persons. We believe that will certainly allow more information sharing within the group, instead of it being concentrated in the hands of a few individuals, and subject to their judgments and good-will. This recommendation can help address the lack of transparency (challenge 1) and prevent personal interests (challenge 3).

• *Capacity-building for user groups*
Currently, once a user group is created and recognized, its members are "left to themselves", without receiving any guidance, in terms of governance, or any other areas. This disconnection is certainly the source of several challenges that could be solved with more communication and follow-up.

Among the helpful activities that could be thought about, one can mention capacity building. Nowadays, user groups benefiting from these activities are either those in proactive contact with the WMF, or with bigger chapters. Even in these cases, it can be that only some group members are benefiting from it, not sharing it with others. The sixth recommendation of the Wikimedia 2030 strategy (Invest in Skills and Leadership Development **[32]**) encourages clearly developing skills for all community members. In a user group context, this implies that training and tutorials need to be made publicly available for all members, not only for

some. In particular, education in management and leadership is an aspect to be considered in priority for user groups. Currently, user group leaders and contact persons are not offered any support in management skills, except for affiliates where problems are arising. We do not believe that it is an efficient approach, as "prevention is better than curing". A good implementation of this recommendation and having trained leaders and group members can help address both lack of transparency (challenge 1) and unclear roles and responsibilities (challenge 2).

The outstanding question for this recommendation will be regarding who will prepare the training material and take the responsibility for implementing this work.

• *Create tutorials and guidelines*
Today so many groups are created, and they all must go through the same trajectory while reinventing the wheel all the time because there is no template, tutorial or guide provided to them as to how to run the groups.

One of the notorious examples is the preparation of annual reports, which are mandatory for the renewal of the recognition of affiliates, group leaders are left to themselves as volunteers, which can either create burn-out or lead to inactive groups.

Also adding the development of tutorials, which we feel is essential, to accompany groups in good governance by giving examples of good practice so as not to leave individuals on their own. This need came up several times during the consultations with the Wikimedian community at different stages of the iterations of the 2030 strategy, and is now reflected in the fourth recommendation (Ensure Equity in Decision-Making) and more precisely in the initiative 27 "Guidelines for board functions and governance" **[33]**.

The setting up of these tutorials and guidelines, and their accessibility in several languages, could easily help overcome the first two challenges - lack of transparency and unclear roles and responsibilities - provided that they are well implemented to meet the needs of stakeholders.

• *Encourage recruiting volunteers with skills*
The Wikimedia movement, and more particularly the affiliates with the UG status, is based on the model of volunteering for the fulfillment of tasks and the execution of missions. However, as mentioned earlier this presents some limitations related to the individual himself or the surrounding environment or context. The sustainability of activities, and therefore of groups, is reflected in the interest in opening to other profiles - not only Wikimedians - in order to mobilize their expertise and skills for the sake of the groups and members who compose them. This is particularly relevant for areas requiring given skills, such as documentation, project management and event organization.

One particularity of the user groups concept is that many UG members are also active editors. Volunteering online and offline have different routines and ways of working, with boundaries not often clear or understood by all. Organizing local edit-a-thons requires different preparations and skills than creating items on Wikidata, but both people performing these tasks are called "Wikimedia volunteers". It is not automatic that being a skilled online volunteer implies that one will be doing well offline, and

vice versa. However, when creating a user group, the only requirement asked is to have 300 (online) edits, with no mention of any offline skills, even if the group itself will be working offline and driving offline activities.

In such a context, and beyond diversity that must be observed, there is a balance that needs to be carefully respected by the groups and encouraged by the community; between expertise, knowledge, motivation, dedication and representativity.

Overall, there should be a mindset shift, from only talking about democracy or presenting it as the "one-size-fits-all" solution, to encouraging certain skills, which are crucial for good governance of user groups. Encouraging the recruitment of skilled volunteers will reduce the risk of the persistence of the personal interests of the few (challenge 3) and will break the group's inaccessibility (challenge 4).

Given that the initial idea behind the concept of a user group is to have the simplest possible structure, and since this recommendation can seem to require a heavy workload for leading volunteers, it could be worth investigating if an intermediary structure could be put in place by the Wikimedia Foundation, easier to manage than a chapter, but more elaborated than a user group.

• *Perform check-ups*

Volunteer management is a difficult task, given the particularities that this work implies [34]. Although volunteers have freedom to choose how and what to work on, and that there is no binding legal contract for them, it does not mean that anything could be done without accountability.

In several contexts, problems in user groups were reported after years from when they happened first. Usually, the reason being that a new member identifies the problem and reports it. We do not believe that this is optimal, especially that many volunteers are not aware nor familiar with the different reporting paths or existing teams that can help them act on problems they are noticing.

Currently, there is no proactive way to identify and follow-up the user group health on a thorough level. It might be that many UGs have one of the four challenges we identified, but not many are aware about it because it had not been reported. This is particularly relevant for challenge 4 (Group's Inaccessibility), where access can be locally blocked without many people noticing it.

In the same prevention spirit shared in earlier points above, we strongly recommend here that such situations are prevented by performing regular checks instead of waiting for members to report problems. We also recommend that checks are not in the form of surveys sent to groups, as a group with challenge 4 (closed group) will always report that it has a good situation. One suggestion can be to create a volunteer committee with this aim and provide it with the needed resources and tools to perform this mission. Having a good follow-up is key for a better inclusivity and can solve all the four identified challenges if implemented in a structured and well thought way.

Table 2 below summarizes our recommendations and the challenges that they could address if implemented.

Recommendation / Challenge	Lack of Transparency (#1)	Unclear Roles and Responsibilities (#2)	Personal Interests (#3)	Group's Inaccessibility (#4)
Include More Contact Persons per Group	✓		✓	
Capacity-Building for User Groups	✓	✓		
Create Tutorials and Guidelines	✓	✓		
Encourage Recruiting Volunteers with Skills			✓	✓
Perform Check-ups	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 2. *Recommendation for addressing inclusivity challenges*

7   Conclusions and future work

This paper has sought to move forward in understanding the dynamics in the Wikimedia movement, in this case the User groups. In the first sections, a number of concepts were presented and discussed, including online democracy and its pillars which was our basis to address the research question. Specifically, we examined using empirical analysis whether democracy solves the "lack of inclusivity" through either open participation, transparency, equality, accountability, or democratic dispute management. We proceeded by testing those five pillars with each identified inclusivity challenge.

The results suggest that only two issues can be solved through democracy; that are the lack of transparency and the personal interests. These findings bring to a conclusion that democracy is part of the solution, but not all solution. To the best of our knowledge, this paper represents a first attempt to tackle governance-related issues in Wikimedia User groups.

We believe that more attention needs to be devoted to investigating such questions in the future, as further research can check other issues apart from inclusivity and other challenges related to volunteering such as burnout. To this end, we also believe that future work should be carried out to see how the situation will evolve with the upcoming setting-up of regional and thematic hubs within the movement, as well as investigate concrete models of tutorials and material to be shared with User groups. Another suggested way forward could be performing a qualitative coding of user group practices that could provide some strong data to underpin the discussions. The Wikimedia Universal code of conduct gives an interesting set of criteria to evaluate these practices. [35]

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