



CITIES AS ARENAS OF POLITICAL INNOVATION IN
THE STRENGTHENING OF DELIBERATIVE AND
PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

EUARENAS POLICY BRIEF

MANAGING DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND LONG-TERM ENGAGEMENT IN URBAN PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES

December 2023



Photo credit: Uja Malinska-Mark

SUMMARY

This Policy Brief is dedicated to local authorities, European cities representatives, and practitioners who are willing to engage in democratic participatory processes with citizens and want to have insights on how and in which direction to trace their route to success in implementing co-governance. Preliminary results from EUARENAS activities and research have already highlighted some crucial factors that have an impact on the implementation of deliberative democratic initiative at the local level, which are: diversity, inclusion, and engagement. At the core of this document, pilot cities indicate how they have dealt with different challenges as part of their participatory exercises. From these experiences we have identified a number of policy relevant messages that target the issues of inclusion, diversity and longer-term engagement.

ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

EUARENAS stands behind the EU's commitment to upgrade democracy at every governance level striving to build trust in communities and to safeguard freedom through citizen participation by:

1. *providing better policies*, especially in facing the challenges of climate change and digital transformation;
2. *rebuilding a strong link* between citizens and institutions, countermeasures against populism, polarization and disinformation;
3. *strengthening citizen identification* with European identity in its diversity.

We will highlight the experiences of three local governments that, as part of the EUARENAS project, have carried out participatory pilot actions in their localities. The City of *Gdansk (Poland)* has placed particular emphasis on tackling inclusion, *Voru (Estonia)* has focused on diversity and *Reggio Emilia (Italy)* on establishing long-term engagement. From these experiences, this Policy Brief identifies a series of policy recommendations and change-making tools that can be used by European cities to improve their own participatory practices and innovations.

PROMOTING INCLUSION IN GDANSK

In the city of Gdansk, a participatory process was initiated to innovate in urban planning through inclusiveness. The focus here was on a masterplan for the Piecki-Migowo district. Workshops were organized and primarily facilitated by a prominent local activist who is widely recognized within the district and possesses years of experience as a community worker. Through his persistent efforts in engaging key local stakeholders and gathering relevant materials from the municipality, he successfully curated a collection of resources that were accessible to most participants. However, during the meetings, some gaps were identified, particularly in the utilization of specialized maps for city development plans and specific architectural/urban knowledge.

To address such gaps, additional moderators were involved in the workshop. These moderators were either regular or temporary professionals employed by the municipality office, or they were participants themselves. Each working group in the workshop also comprised activists or citizens with advanced specialist knowledge, and they willingly shared their expertise not only for their own benefit but also to assist others who faced challenges in understanding certain concepts.

Here, there are two primary approaches to fostering inclusivity in participatory processes:

1. Creating a safe and empathetic space – a space that nurtures trust and mutual recognition among all participants is key for the success of the initiative. Information should be presented in a simple and accessible manner, ensuring that knowledge gaps and misunderstandings are minimized. Stakeholders should be encouraged to offer their expertise in a friendly and supportive manner.
2. Active role of moderators and facilitators - They have a dual responsibility in the process. On one hand, they must ensure a balance of voices, actively encouraging less confident or introverted participants to contribute and participate equally. On the other hand, they are responsible for facilitating timely and efficient discussions, considering the often-limited time available. Striking a balance between these two objectives is essential for maintaining inclusiveness and effectiveness while striving for fairness and impartiality that satisfies all stakeholders.



MANAGING DIVERSITY: THE EXPERIENCE OF VORU

Diversity describes the need to engage stakeholders from different backgrounds, including minorities and usually underrepresented constituencies as well as removing barriers that can prevent the contribution of various participants. In Voru, the location of the EUARENAS piloting project known as the *Vunki Mano Hackathon*, the focus was on addressing the issue of youth and their aspirations for and local attachment to their county. Although initially the Hackathon targeted young people as participants, the authorities and organizers agreed that the fate of the county should not rest solely on the shoulders of the youth. It was recognized that achieving the desired outcome requires the involvement and commitment of all citizens and stakeholders. Through intergenerational cooperation, the goal can be realized, as older individuals also possess valuable resources to contribute to local development. They bring experience and knowledge of local institutions, a better understanding of the labor market, and, importantly, as current or future parents, they also share a desire to shape their environment into a welcoming and vibrant place for their families to flourish.

There are various reasons why people might be reluctant to participate.

1. **Marginalized groups**: these groups, often the target for ensuring diversity, frequently lack the material and social capabilities to engage in a deliberative process on equal terms, which can discourage their involvement.
2. **Privileged groups**: a struggle has also emerged in engaging the most privileged individuals or corporations, who prioritize their individual, "private" citizenship over the common good.
3. **Skepticism from conservative groups**: we have also observed repeated failures to invite representatives from conservative think tanks or media who may not be supportive of politics based on participatory and deliberative practices. This can lead to a progressive bias in decisions reached through these processes and raise concerns about their legitimacy from those whose interests may be challenged by the outcomes (e.g., fuel corporations via environmental decisions or large developers in public city planning).
4. **Institutional mistrust from discouraged citizens**: populism and anti-politics have spread distrust in governmental institutions all over Europe in the last years, fostered by a sense of abandonment of citizens to economic and social crises. Co-governance at the urban level is seen to be a practical way in which confidence and a sense of community can be re-built, although institutions must ensure the openness of the process and be held accountable to bring these citizens back on the track of democracy.

While it is common practice to consider factors beyond the usual demographic measures (e.g., age, gender, education, and district) to diversify the group according to the issue under deliberation (e.g., preferred modes of communication), this alone does not always ensure immediate willingness among individuals from less – or more - privileged positions to participate. Therefore, for processes in which participants are selected from a broader pool of volunteers, additional measures should be taken to ensure that people are not only willing but also able to effectively engage in the participatory process.



ASSURING LONG-TERM ENGAGEMENT IN REGGIO EMILIA



The experience of the city of Reggio Emilia corresponds to the 'polycentric level of co-governance', where polycentric connotes the presence of many centers of decision-making that are formally independent from one another, and where a plurality of urban actors is represented. Here, some of the main objectives of the pilot were to strengthen the link between the local administration and the inhabitants and give representation to the different quarters and neighborhoods by establishing new systems of democratic engagement, i.e., creating the co-governance bodies known as *Consulte*.

Consulte in Reggio Emilia involve the active participation of various public officials, community workers, and citizens in a long-term journey of co-creation and participatory governance. However, the success of such an endeavor can be attributed to Reggio Emilia's longstanding history of participation and a shared understanding of the city and the public sphere as a common good.

The issue in Reggio Emilia has been to assure the sustainability of multi-actor commitment to co-governance and a co-governed city:

1. Multilevel engagement – Ideally, citizens could be engaged in all aspects of the participatory process, shaping its organization, assessing needs, debating options, proposing recommendations, and overseeing implementation. However, even when their involvement is focused on specific steps, ensuring their sustained engagement throughout the process can be challenging and requires careful preparation and implementation of appropriate measures.
2. Continuous engagement – In order to avoid perceptions that participatory and deliberative democratic innovations are tools with which to boost the image of politicians, these innovations need to be communicated as continuous processes. In fact, the development of democracy based on collaborative governance emerges from long-term engagement that encompasses a long-term learning process, enhancement of competencies, adaptation of methods to local circumstances, and, importantly, fostering a proactive mindset among citizens to become co-creators of public processes and policy decisions. For meaningful and democratic participation to take place, this perspective needs to be embraced and embedded in long-term planning, compelling politicians and decision-makers to focus on methods and relationships that extend beyond singular issues and avoid reactive reliance on citizens' input.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Starting from the experiences described above in pilot cities, in each of the proposed areas (diversity, inclusiveness, and engagement) we propose a set of policy recommendations that might be implemented at the local level so that the processes are effective and democratic.

Tackling DIVERSITY, key policy recommendations:



LET YOUR DIVERSITY BE REALLY DIVERSE: Define a diversity goal deemed at incorporating a variety of voices, interests, and worldviews, not just based on the demographics of your city.



WANT THE UNWILLING: Engage people from marginalized groups, or specific city areas, as well as those who may be unwilling to participate for various reasons. If necessary, design the process in a way that requires their participation, rather than simply allowing it as an option.



INVEST IN DIVERSITY TO ENRICH THE PROCESS: Allocate resources to support and remunerate the participation of underrepresented groups, including provisions such as daycare and elderly care services, convenient transportation options, interpretation services, and accommodations for individuals with disabilities.

*tips from our
experienced
facilitators*

REMUNERATION OF PARTICIPANTS

Citizen involvement and participation in democratic processes enables decision-making to be more nuanced, diverse and representative of the communities served. To ensure that participation is equitable it is vital to be able to remunerate and recompense people for their labour and expenses incurred due to their involvement. When working with citizens – particularly diverse communities – there is not a ‘one size fits all’ approach to this. Instead, a diversity of options are needed to ensure inclusion. These could include:

- Payment for people’s time and contributions (i.e., labour and expertise)
- Travel and subsistence expenses
- Costs incurred in order to participate (i.e., childcare, carer costs)
- Access and inclusion costs (i.e., PA support, translation)
- Other forms of recognition of contribution such as vouchers, payment or access to relevant training and conferences, donations to preferred charitable caused etc.

It is important that there are both systems in place within organisations to process such forms of remuneration AND that funders/commissioners of participatory processes allow for such practice



DIFFERENT MEDIA FOR DIFFERENT TARGETS: Diverse stakeholders implies different ways to reach for them. Use multiple communication channels to reach out to a wide range of stakeholders, leveraging bottom-up support for the process through community leaders, local associations, and media. Foster and utilize personal relationships that have established trust between local administration, NGOs, and marginalized groups to invite diverse voices. To accomplish this goal, it is useful to establish a permanent advisory table with these stakeholders.



DIVERSE STAFF: Extend diversity goals not only to participants, but also to experts, commentators, and other stakeholders.



MONITOR FOR DIVERSITY: Monitor participant demographics and identify gaps in representation. Transparent measures should be implemented to address these gaps.

Tackling **INCLUSION**, key policy recommendations:



SKILLS, SKILLS, SKILLS: Not everyone has the necessary or specific skills to lead a participatory process. Invest in capacity-building (training programs) for moderators and facilitators involved in participatory and deliberative processes. Municipalities could hire professionals or train their own staff in this regard. Third-sector organizations might be also involved in the process, it is crucial to ensure that they possess the necessary skills.



BUILDING GROUPS IS BUILDING TRUST: Incorporate relationship-building activities and awareness-raising exercises into the process to foster participant engagement and empathy. These activities should address special individual needs within the group and develop the necessary skills for active participation. One potential tool is that of Community Reporting which has been used in the EUARENAS project ([Download here](#)).



LISTEN TO SPECIAL NEEDS: To accommodate participants with limited cognitive stamina, design the process to last no longer than three hours per day, with 10/15 minutes break according to their needs. Avoid overwhelming participants with excessive information and educational materials within this short timeframe. Instead, extend the process over multiple days and employ active learning methods. The venue should also reflect the needs of neurodivergent people (dimmed lights, proper acoustic conditions, etc.).



ALWAYS BALANCE COMPLEXITY: Consult and train experts and other involved parties to present their knowledge in a comprehensible manner, that does not overwhelm participants through an excessive presence of academic terminology.



EASY LANGUAGE: Ensure that all information provided during the process is presented in plain language. Try to offer additional services such as text-to-speech descriptions of presentations for individuals with visual impairments or other special needs.

Tackling LONG-TERM ENGAGEMENT, key policy recommendations:



TO GO BIG, START SMALL: Approach participation as a long-term endeavor that necessitates experience and adaptation to local conditions. It is advisable to begin with multiple small-scale participatory events, rather than large and costly deliberative assemblies that, without a solid foundation, can deplete the financial and motivational resources of all stakeholders.



BE MINDFUL OF WHAT YOU ASK FOR: Exercise caution and moderation when determining the capabilities of participatory and deliberative bodies. Selecting a well-defined issue (preferably a focused question or a decision between 2-3 pre-selected scenarios) enhances the likelihood of providing valuable recommendations and, consequently, implementing the results. Initial success fosters greater engagement in future participation.



PEOPLE MAKE THE DIFFERENCE: Establish dedicated staff who take "ownership" of the participatory process and is well motivated to be successful. Their role is crucial in building trust and engagement among participants and other stakeholders, as it requires time and unwavering commitment. They should closely oversee the entire process, anticipate potential challenges, and exert pressure on government to implement the outcomes of such processes.



CO-GOVERNANCE ROUTINES: Maintain ongoing communication with participants beyond the participatory process. Regular channels such as email newsletters or face-to-face meetings should be utilized to keep participants informed about the developments of the participatory process. Continuous engagement helps sustain interest by creating a 'participatory routine' and generates institutional accountability to attract other participants in the processes.

ABOUT THE DOCUMENT

Name: D7.4 Policy Brief 2

Authors: Sofia Eliodori, Manfredi Valeriani, Christian Iaione, Raffaele Marchetti |
Luiss Guido Carli
Wojciech Ufel | SWPS University
James Scott, Matti Fritsch | University of Eastern Finland
Hayley Trowbridge | People's Voice Media

Editor: Trang Nguyen | University of Eastern Finland

Collaborators: CRN, UG, EUTROPIA, REGGIO, MIAGDANSK, VORU, E35

Publication date: December 2023

EUARENAS investigates the ways in which social movements coupled with local government reform initiatives, manifesting themselves in local-level experiments, create momentum for political change that include more inclusive and participatory forms of governance.



For more information:

euarenas.eu



Grant Agreement	959420
Duration	January 2021 – October 2024 (46 months)
Coordinator	University of Eastern Finland
Contact	Professor James Scott (james.scott@uef.fi)



EUARENAS has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement N° 959420.