



Nets4Dem
Innovating democracy, together.

Annual Report 2024

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1	Top 5 Needs and Challenges of Practitioners	14
About Nets4Dem	2	Rising Stars: Sample Work Focus	15
Introduction	3	Shaping Policy	17
Nets4Dem in Context	4	Embedding Democratic Innovations in Policymaking Institutions.....	18
A Sustainable Network for Democracy in Europe	5	Top 8 Insights from Policymaker Research	19
New Global Strategy for Democratic Renewal	7	Democratic Innovation at Multi-Governance Levels	20
Connecting Knowledge	9	Developing Solutions	22
Building a Comprehensive Database on Democratic Innovation.....	10	Co-design for Democratic Practice: The Democracy Lab	23
Top 5 Trends and Gaps in Democratic Innovation Research	11	Barcelona Lab 2024: Democratic Innovation in Digital Transformation:.....	24
Building Capacity	12	The Scaledem - Nets4Dem Alliance for Lasting Democratic Change	27
Strengthening Participatory Action	13		

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the key research findings, insights, and outputs generated across Nets4Dem over its first year of project implementation.

The report describes the research patterns and gaps in the existing research on democratic innovations based on Nets4Dem's [multi-dimensional framework for democratic innovation](#). The analysis shows that most democratic innovations are implemented at the subnational level and are often linked to decision-making processes taking place within existing policymaking structures. More effective strategies are needed to embed innovative models in existing institutions, however, in order to strengthen their effectiveness and sustainability. The analysis also reveals challenges related to low levels of citizen engagement in existing innovative participatory processes, calling for more effective awareness raising amongst diverse audiences.

The report also describes the recurring needs and challenges faced by practitioners and policymakers when implementing democratic innovations in their specific contexts. This includes the need to overcome barriers to the

inclusion of minorities in participatory processes, the need for knowledge about how digital tools can be used for such processes, and strategies to overcome resistance from public administrations to accept and include participatory programmes proposed by civil society organisations as an essential part of decision-making processes. The report further explains how Nets4Dem's [capacity-building programs](#) are designed to accommodate these needs and challenges.

The report provides insights into the key findings from Nets4Dem's [First Policy Report](#), based on interviews with European policymakers from across the political spectrum. Recommendations include the tactical use of different narratives, as well as an evidence base, for democratic innovations as a key to helping policymakers navigate complex, changing, and often conflict-ridden power relations with various actors in a democratic ecosystem.

Finally, the report features insights from our first policy retreat, highlighting the potential for deeper integration and collaboration between national parliaments and the European Parliament to advance democratic innovation.

About Nets4Dem

Nets4Dem is a meta-network of civil society organisations, research institutions, and public bodies advancing democracy in Europe and beyond. Together, we work to strengthen our joint capacity to implement innovative democracy initiatives at the local, national, and European levels.

We consolidate knowledge, build capacity, and shape policy for democratic innovation. We develop new solutions and help move from ideas to execution. We also connect groups and regions traditionally underrepresented in the democracy conversation.

At Nets4Dem, we believe that our democracies must become more inclusive, participatory, and effective to rebuild trust with citizens and help depolarise society. Such renewal requires our societies to experiment with innovative forms and practices of democracy.

For us, democratic innovations are processes that increase and deepen citizens' engagement and participation, strengthening their influence over how they are governed. This includes adapting traditional democratic mechanisms and institutions, and developing new, complementary approaches.

Through its 12 initiating members, the network already covers 200 cities, 50 think tanks and universities, 320 civil society organisations in 38 European countries. As of publication, 65 further networks and organisations have applied to join Nets4Dem as members.

To become a member, please visit nets4dem.eu, or [sign up here directly](#).

Initiating members of the network



Introduction

By Rieke Wönig, Democracy Reporting International

Nets4Dem's first year since its launch in July 2023 has coincided with many consequential events for democracy in Europe and its wider neighbourhood. Russia's brutal war against Ukraine continues to reorder lives, societies, and economies. Similarly, the ongoing war and human rights violations in Gaza and the wider region are bringing further instability to socio-political landscapes beyond its geographical boundaries, including in Europe.

The past year also saw rising support for far-right parties in the region, with substantial electoral gains in the EU Parliamentary elections, as well as in national elections in France, the Netherlands, and Serbia.

At the same time, French voters prevented a far-right majority in its National Assembly in an unprecedented mobilisation of pro-democratic forces. In Poland, a new government focused on restoring the rule of law was elected, fostering hope for the possibility of a pro-democratic backlash against current trends.

In these times of crisis, "democratic innovation", referring to processes that increase and deepen citizens' engagement and participation, is often touted as the silver bullet to restore citizens' commitment to democracy, depolarise society, and boost engagement on the local, national and European levels.

But how can we determine which types of innovations and practices are needed to achieve these goals? How can we create an ecosystem of innovative democratic practices and stakeholders in the field, effectively complementing the traditional practices and institutions of representative democracies? And how can the already existing solutions be spread and effectively implemented across local and national contexts?

Nets4Dem has made substantial first steps in answering these questions. We established the comprehensive Knowledge Database on Democratic Innovation, allowing deep insights into the trends and gaps in the research, as described in Chapter 1. Nets4Dem also launched several capacity-building programmes that guide and support practitioners and policymakers in implementing their own democracy initiatives.

Chapter 2 presents their approaches, as well as the real-life challenges faced by practitioners when implementing democratic innovations on the ground. Chapter 3 describes the policies needed to embed democratic innovation in existing democratic institutions. Finally, Chapter 4 focuses on the challenges and possible solutions for local administrations when it comes to participatory decision-making on the ground.



Nets4Dem in Context

A Sustainable Network for Democracy in Europe

By Anthony Zacharzewski, Democratic Society

During the first year of Nets4Dem, participatory practice in Europe has continued to grow, and the need for greater connection between the different actors in the democratic space has grown with it.

Participation is now becoming more mainstreamed into policy making processes. At the European level, the EU's National Energy and Climate Plans, mandated by the EU, require citizen participation in their creation. At the local level too, Europe's Mission Cities must demonstrate active public engagement as they work towards achieving Net Zero. And this trend is also set to continue. The mission letters sent to the new European Commissioners make a strong reference to the continued role of citizen panels in EU decision making, and democracy is a dedicated brief for one Commissioner, alongside rule of law and justice.

During its first period of work, Nets4Dem has developed on a membership process and operating model which will allow the growing membership to operate with mutual trust, and to connect a broader community into the network without heavy process, to benefit from the learning and opportunities that Nets4Dem provides.

As Nets4Dem accelerates its work and further builds and connects its network in coming months, following its setup phase, we are focusing on responding to **3 challenges in the democratic participation field.**

- 1. Defending the foundations of democracy.** The first is ensuring that the necessary focus on democratic resilience, fair process and the rule of law is complemented by action on democratic innovation. The defence of democracy requires constant innovation to ensure that it lives up to citizens' expectations, and develops as society evolves.

As we move past the era of standalone citizen assemblies and towards the building out of more complex democratic infrastructures, we need to make the work of the sector more robust. A participatory process with significant funding attached will need to be as robust as a parallel parliamentary process. The transparency of recruitment, issue choice, facilitation and action will need to be increased.

If our ambition is to embed participation and build public trust, we need to ensure that there are solid evaluation and accountability arrangements. Our members are leading in innovative participative practice, and Nets4Dem enables them to learn from each other more easily, while its trans-sectoral membership allows different types of organisation to draw expertise from each other.

- 2. Mainstreaming knowledge.** The second is building the field, ensuring that we spread learning and leading practice across the network and beyond. This is ever more necessary as increasing numbers of participation exercises put strain on organisations and the limited supply

of well-trained facilitators. Participation organisations are often small, disconnected from each other, and unable to spare the time to engage with research. Academics struggle to reach practitioners with the outputs of their work, or to form partnerships, and government actors are constrained inside purchasing frameworks. Nets4Dem is focused on finding new ways of connection.

3. Embedding participation in existing structures. The third is ensuring that participation is built into governing systems as an essential, not an afterthought. Participation exercises can no longer be standalone, they have to enable long-term engagement of citizens, and accountability for citizens. If we create governance and administrative systems that have citizen participation at all stages of policy and action built in, we will reshape policymaker and citizen expectations, and contribute to the growth of trust.

This is not an overnight job. Being an innovator in an organisation can be a lonely task. Institutions are slow to change and develop, even where intentions are good. Our rising stars mentorship programme and programme of Policy Labs ensure that the institution-shapers of tomorrow are able to learn about participatory practice at an early stage in their careers, and find support and advice when they may feel like they are fighting on their own.



A New Global Strategy for Democratic Renewal

By Josh Lerner, People Powered

Nets4Dem is part of a global struggle for the future of democracy. In the face of rising authoritarianism, Nets4Dem is one of the world's most ambitious efforts to renew democracy. Around the world, advocates are shifting their approach to democracy renewal. While defending elections, they are also pushing for a transition to a deeper and more participatory system of democracy. This transition requires a more coordinated strategy, and Nets4Dem is a promising first step in this direction.



Before discussing Nets4Dem, however, we should be clear about the stakes. While Nets4Dem is promising, the most coordinated democracy strategy so far has come from anti-democracy movements. Billionaires and autocrats are bankrolling a powerful global network of think tanks, universities, media, hackers, activists, and lobbyists to prevent government by the people. They are funding efforts to sow division and distrust, prevent people from voting, overturn election results, and downsize government. The rise of authoritarianism is terrifying, but it also offers essential lessons. We are applying these lessons in Nets4Dem, to expand and deepen democracy across Europe.

First, we must be visionary. Anti-democratic forces have invested in a powerful long-term vision of societal change, one that offers to protect anxious citizens from existential threats. Authoritarian movements have supported structural change organizing with a time horizon of decades. In contrast, pro-democracy forces have typically focused on defending the existing flawed system, and on isolated short-term pilot programs. Nets4Dem, however, is focusing on longer term movement building and policy changes, to expand our vision and practice of democracy.

Second, we must be global. Anti-democratic forces are global, rapidly learning lessons from each other, exchanging strategies, and building on each others' work. Pro-democracy forces likewise need to learn lessons and draw support from allies around the world. Rather than reinventing the wheel, Nets4Dem is building on existing global infrastructure for democratic

innovation. My organization People Powered has served as the primary global connector, helping Nets4Dem use and expand the existing resources, mentorship program, and accelerator programs that our global members have developed. This makes Nets4Dem stronger, while contributing back to democracy beyond Europe.

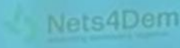
Third, we must be systemic. Anti-democratic forces have connected isolated efforts into broad campaigns. Three year pilot programs, which come and go with funding cycles, do not necessarily add up to systemic changes. Neither do fragmented movements for deliberative, direct, participatory, and electoral democracy. Nets4Dem is building a broader coalition of organizations that play different roles and support different democratic practices, in order for us to have greater impact together.

Nets4Dem is changing how we renew democracy, but this system change work takes time. In the past two years we have forged strong relationships, built a foundation for collaborative work, and provided critical resources and programs to support democratic innovation. Connecting different networks, each with their own practices and logics, is a messy endeavor. By investing in this work for the long term, Horizon Europe can pave the way for a bright democratic future.





#EPDAC2024



Session 6

Citizen Participation Beyond Elections

- Anthony Zacharzewski, President, Democratic Society (Demsoci)
- Ingrid Godkin, Cabinet of the Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, European Commission
- Christine Altides, European Elections 2024 Secretariat, Directorate General for Communication, European Parliament
- Moderator: Sahib Singh, Senior Expert, Demos Helsinki

Introduction to the Nets4Dem network: Paul Zoubkov, Program Manager, Democracy Reporting International (DRI)



Connecting Knowledge

Building a Comprehensive Database on Democratic Innovation

By Tara Tepavac, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, IFDT, University of Belgrade

The establishment of the comprehensive Knowledge Database on Democratic Innovation is an important first milestone in Nets4Dem's work to systematise and classify extensive knowledge generated within academia and civil society on topics related to inclusive democratic innovations.

The Database was created to organise and classify extensive knowledge from EU-funded projects related to inclusive democratic innovations, spanning over more than two decades (2000-2022). This timeframe was chosen to track how research on democratic innovations evolved alongside major developments such as the technological revolution, digital participation, the crisis of representative democracy, globalisation, and responses to global challenges, such as climate change and migration crises. The methodology, corpus selection, coding, and data collection are detailed in the Nets4Dem Democratic Knowledge Database Report.

Overall, 1,163 projects and related documents were reviewed for relevance, resulting in 346 documents included in the database and categorized across

11 metadata and seven content-related categories. These provide systematic insights into democratic innovations, aiding future analysis and knowledge access. The methodology also allows for easy replication and expansion to new data sources.

The first working paper, the Multi-Dimensional Framework for Democratic Innovation, by the IFDT team, analyses patterns, themes, research gaps, and the effects of democratic innovations in EU-funded research on democratic innovations, with a focus on the most common themes, findings, gaps, and under-researched areas, as well as effects of democratic innovations.

In the coming years, we will build on this first edition of the Knowledge Database on Democratic Innovation, adding further datasets, including from projects funded by the EU and from research developed by civil society stakeholders. Researchers worldwide will be able to openly access and add to the Database, facilitating further research on democratic innovation.

Top 5 Trends and Gaps in Democratic Innovation Research

- 1. Citizen Engagement at the Subnational Level:** The subjects and themes most often addressed and explored in the analysed documents include citizen engagement, urban policymaking, the crisis of representative democracy, research and innovation in governance, public services and co-production, electoral innovations, and deliberative innovations. The analysis shows that the majority of democratic innovations are conducted at the subnational level, highlighting the local level as a “laboratory of democracy.” This suggests that local governance is where the most dynamic and experimental approaches to democracy are being developed and implemented.
- 2. Rooted in Representative Structures:** The most frequently documented type of democratic innovation remains strongly rooted in representative structures, such as consultative, deliberative, and electoral innovations. This emphasis on representative structures comes at the expense of research exploring direct engagement processes. While representative structures remain important, the research highlights the need for more exploration into how direct citizen engagement can complement these traditional approaches.
- 3. A Collaborative Approach to Citizen Engagement:** The findings suggest that more inclusive processes and better policies cannot be achieved merely by offering more opportunities for citizen participation in policymaking. Instead, they demand a more collaborative, profound, and timely approach to citizen engagement. This involves creating spaces where citizens can engage meaningfully with policymakers, and where their input can have a tangible impact on policy decisions.
- 4. Current Gaps in Research:** The current gaps in research call for a better understanding of innovations in direct democracy, more focus on early and meaningful citizen engagement in policymaking, and the need to find ways to integrate structured deliberation into policymaking processes. These gaps indicate that, while there is significant work being done in democratic innovation, there is still much to learn about how to make these innovations more effective and impactful.
- 5. Institutionalisation of Democratic Innovations:** Despite the initial enthusiasm for the effects and potentials of democratic innovations, such as participatory budgeting, citizen juries, and citizens’ assemblies, these models frequently struggle to become properly institutionalised. This lack of institutionalisation limits both their effectiveness and their legitimacy. The insights gathered through this research underline the need for more research related to the institutionalisation of democratic innovations, ensuring that these innovations can be sustained over time and have a lasting impact.




Nets4Dem
Innovating democracy, together.
Presented by:
@nets4dem

 **EURO CITIES**


European Capital of Democracy
Barcelona 2023-2024

Building Capacity

Strengthening Participatory Action

By Juan Francisco Suárez, Coglobal

Nets4Dem has successfully launched several initiatives dedicated to strengthening the capacities of governments and organisations across the EU's Horizon Europe countries. These efforts focus on the design, set up, and implementation of innovative participatory processes. Tailored and personalised programmes have been initiated, and tools have been enhanced to provide access to the most up-to-date and useful resources in each country.

These activities provide expert and specialised support and training for developing participatory action plans adapted to specific challenges, as well as to local and national contexts.

- [Online Resource Centre for Participatory Democracy](#): The first steps have been taken to expand this curated selection of top tools, guides, and materials on participatory democracy. We have added diverse resources, all of which are available to any practitioner or professional, in 12 European languages.
- [Rising Stars Mentorship Programme](#): In the Rising Stars (RS) programme, each selected participant (mentee) is assigned the best mentor from the available profiles in the Nets4Dem network. The matching process

considers various criteria, such as language and expertise in a specific participatory process, to ensure the best-tailored support. Mentors study the needs and challenges of their assigned mentees, and provide up to five one-hour sessions to help participants with their participatory programmes. In the first year of Nets4Dem, we launched the first cohort, consisting of participants from Czechia, Germany, Italy, Spain, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom.

- [Democratic Innovations Accelerator](#): In the Democratic Innovations Accelerator (DIA), participants receive mentorship sessions, combined with guided use of the Participation Playbook, to design a Participatory Action Plan. They also study various online training courses focused on participatory democracy topics. These combined activities and tools help participants overcome their challenges in a personalised way. The DIA will be implemented during the next year, and the first call for applications was launched in May 2024. This programme is oriented towards governments and civil society organisations aiming to develop and deliver an action plan for implementing a democratic innovation that enhances public participation in policymaking and governance.

Top 5 Needs and Challenges of Practitioners

Participants in the capacity-building programmes come from a diverse range of governments and civil society organisations across EU and Horizon Europe-associated countries. They address a variety of topics and challenges through different participatory processes. Based on Nets4Dem experts' experience and the voices of practitioners from the first development cohort, the practitioners' main challenges include:

- 1. Low Levels of Citizen Engagement:** Many participants struggle with a lack of participation or low levels of citizen engagement in their participatory processes. This challenge is often compounded by difficulties in reaching out to and involving underrepresented social groups, such as youth and women, in these processes.
- 2. Inclusion Challenges:** Developing more inclusive participatory programmes that involve a wider range of society is a recurring challenge. Participants frequently express the need for strategies to ensure that their programmes are truly inclusive, engaging a diverse array of citizens.
- 3. Digital Skills and Platforms:** There is an identified need for greater knowledge and skills regarding the use of digital platforms for participatory processes. Many participants face difficulties in utilising these platforms to create inclusive and effective programmes, particularly in environments where there is resistance to digital innovation or where stakeholders have insufficient digital skills.
- 4. Resistance from Public Administrations:** Participants often encounter resistance from public administrations when trying to implement participatory programmes. This resistance can be manifested in various ways, including a reluctance to accept and include programmes proposed by civil society organisations as an essential part of decision-making processes.
- 5. Renovating Participatory Programmes:** There is a need to renovate long-standing participatory programmes to regain trust and make them innovative and appealing to citizens once again. Participants seek to revitalise these programmes to ensure they remain relevant and effective in fostering citizen engagement.

Rising Stars: Sample Work Focus

Topic	Challenge	Participatory Process
Cyberbullying and harassment/abuse of young people in Spain	Developing a creative and participatory methodology to overcome cyberbullying.	Legislative theatre
Implementing a digital platform for online participatory processes in local government in Germany	Addressing resistance due to fears and insufficient digital skills among stakeholders, overcoming structural barriers in data protection, and reaching diverse audiences.	Participatory policymaking
Participatory local climate policies and actions in Türkiye	Increasing participation and ownership of citizens in the decision-making processes, who feel alienated from local and global challenges.	Citizens assembly
Participatory policymaking in the health sector in Czechia	Expanding participation to a broader range of NGOs – especially those that work on health system issues such as patients’ rights and quality of care. Making the Citizen and Civil Society Council more inclusive and reflecting a wider diversity of life experiences.	Participatory policymaking
Sustainability and active citizenship in Italy	Advocacy and engaging policymakers to implement more participatory processes in cities.	Participatory policymaking
Participatory processes at the organisational level of a charity in England	Ensuring organisational participation is truly inclusive and sustainably empowers diverse voices throughout the decision-making process, fostering a sense of ownership.	Participatory planning
Renovation of long-functioning participatory budgeting in Iceland	Regaining trust and interest in the programme, by making it more innovative and relevant to citizens.	Participatory budgeting

Voices from the Ground

Insights from the Rising Stars Programme



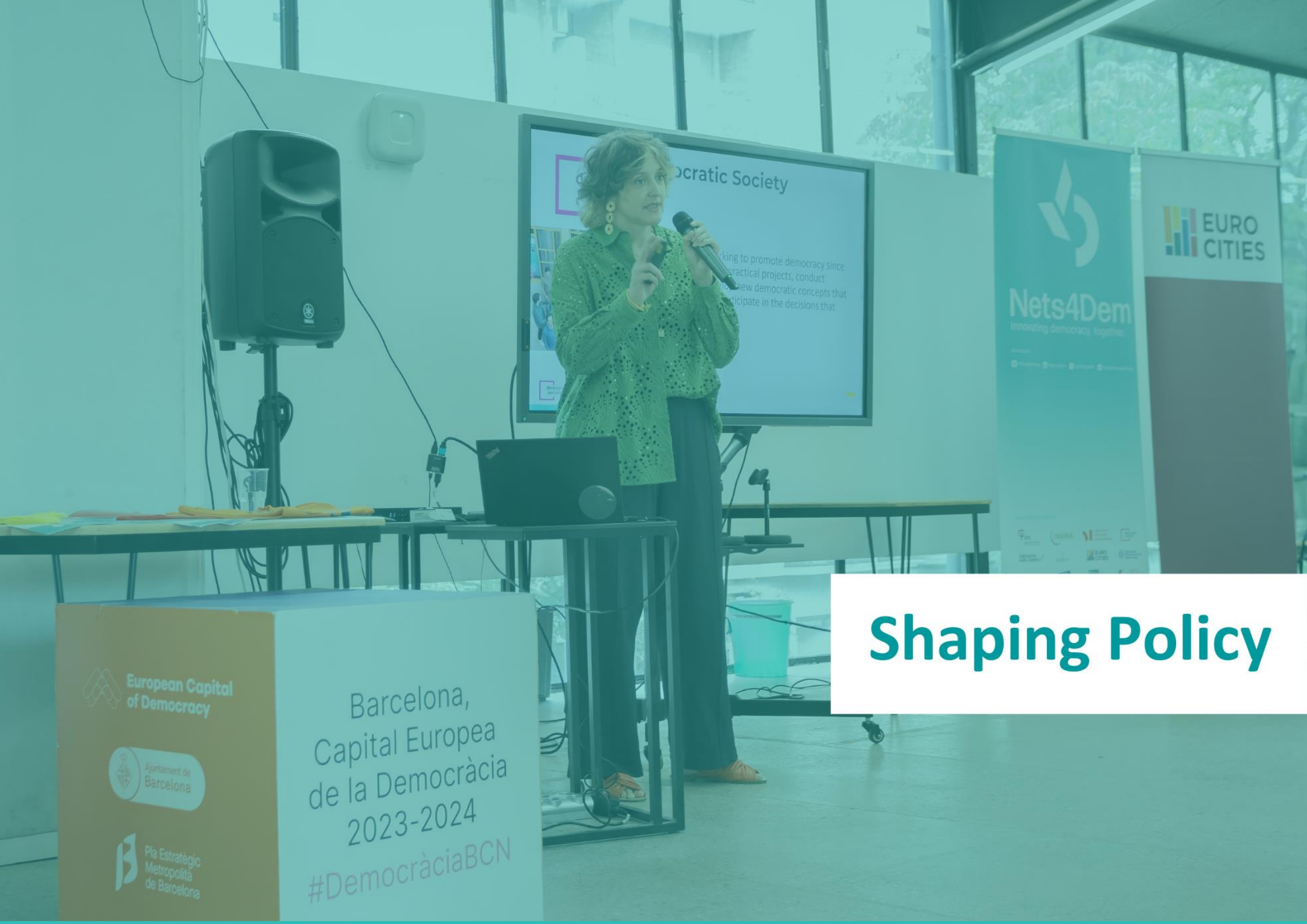
Andrés Falck,
Executive Director at
Coglobal and
Rising Stars Mentor

What are the main topics, needs, and challenges of your mentee in the Rising Stars Programme?

My mentee is the founder of an organisation that supports children's participation in local institutions in rural areas of Spain. Over time, the organisation built a strong alliance with a specific local government, allowing it to grow and expand its influence. However, the local elections in May 2023 brought a new government into office that has shown no interest in maintaining the previous alliance. As a result, my mentee is now focusing on leveraging her expertise to find new territories and partners with whom her organisation can continue working. This transition has been challenging, but the Rising Stars Programme is helping her navigate these changes.

How is the Rising Stars Programme helping her to overcome challenges?

At Coglobal, we have experience in the same field of practice and similar environments as those of my mentee. In our conversations, we discuss how Coglobal and other organisations have overcome similar challenges. We have addressed topics such as fundraising, outreach, partnership strategies, cost-effectiveness in project design, evaluation, and networking. Each session allows us to identify specific needs and queries, which we then address in-depth in subsequent sessions. This tailored support has been instrumental in helping my mentee overcome the obstacles she faces and continue her important work.



Democratic Society

Working to promote democracy since
practical projects, conduct
new democratic concepts that
participate in the decisions that

Nets4Dem
Innovating democracy, together.

Facebook Twitter LinkedIn YouTube

EURO CITIES

European Capital of Democracy

Ajuntament de Barcelona

Pla Estratègic Metropolita de Barcelona

Barcelona,
Capital Europea
de la Democràcia
2023-2024
#DemocràciaBCN

Shaping Policy

Embedding Democratic Innovations in Policymaking Institutions

By Sahib Singh, Demos Helsinki

As democratic innovations proliferate and gain traction in policy circles and public debates, there is a growing recognition of the need to strengthen efforts to integrate democratic innovations in policymaking cultures and institutions across Europe.

The purpose of Nets4Dem's policy work is to contribute to and complement these efforts, while also bringing to light the tensions and contested nature of democratic innovations. In this first year, Nets4Dem has focused on scoping the current state of the field, with a particular emphasis on how democratic innovations have been and can be better embedded within diverse democratic ecosystems across Europe.

We have explored how leading policymakers approach the integration of these innovations, the barriers they encounter, and the policy areas in need of further exploration. Through a deep exploration of peer reviewed and grey literature, as well as extensive interviews and engagements with both leading policymakers and practitioners across Europe, we have gathered key insights on both the challenges and learning associated with embedding democratic innovations. In contrast to previous analyses, this has been done across and within local, national, and supranational contexts.

In conducting this research, we have used two important lenses to guide our findings. First, we have chosen to elevate the highly contextual attitudes and practices of policymakers. Despite being key agents and drivers for the embedding of democratic innovations, scant attention has been paid to their perspectives, needs, and practices. Participation or democratic innovations

mean something quite different to different policymakers, depending on their specific contexts. For example, the attitudes and practices of policymakers in Dublin differ significantly from those of their counterparts in Budapest or Tirana. We have centred the highly contextual nature of the practices of embedding democratic innovations. The feasibility and usefulness of these innovations depend on the nature of the administrative state, its democratic and political histories, and local cultures. Policymakers' attitudes and practices necessarily emerge from and respond to these contexts.

Second, we have focused on what it means to embed democratic innovations into a societies' democratic ecosystems. This lens is broader than simply looking at the mechanisms and structures for institutionalising democratic innovations; it also encompasses how these innovations can be rooted in the cultures, processes, and structures of public administrations, as well as how they can be better integrated into political societies.

Based on these lenses, Nets4Dem's First Policy Report offers a detailed exploration of the perspectives and realities of policymakers. Our hope is that this Policy Report will act as a vehicle for creating alignment amongst key stakeholders in Nets4Dem, as well as the field of democratic innovations more broadly – whether these are policymakers, advocates, practitioners, politicians, or researchers. It aims to offer guidance for future policy directions, so that democratic innovations can develop more nuanced and deeper roots, and coalitions of actors can take concrete steps towards creating more vibrant democratic ecosystems.

Top 8 Insights from Policymaker Research

- 1. Rooting Change in Public Administration Cultures:** Policymakers primarily focus on rooting change for participatory methods in the cultures of public administration and various institutions of government.
- 2. The Tactical Use of Narratives and Evidence:** The tactical use of different narratives, as well as an evidence base, for democratic innovations is key to helping policymakers navigate complex, changing, and often conflict-ridden power relations with various actors in a democratic ecosystem.
- 3. Addressing Capacity Challenges:** Policymakers face continuous and far-reaching capacity challenges, which range from having insufficient financial and personnel resources, to a lack of relevant skills across government, to insufficient and siloed organisational structures in place, to the use of participatory methods. This is particularly acute at the national and international levels.
- 4. Anchoring Policy Results:** Policymakers can struggle to identify where and how the policy results of democratic innovations ought to be anchored, in terms of the relevant government institutions, which phases of the policy cycle, and whether on strategic issues.
- 5. Contextually Tactical Approaches:** Across Europe, a contextually tactical approach is necessary with regard to whether advocates, practitioners, and policymakers take an apolitical or overtly political approach in their advocacy and implementation of democratic innovations.
- 6. Reimagining Regulatory and Policy Environments:** There is an identified need to deeply re-imagine regulatory and policy environments within and for both governmental institutions and local communities.
- 7. Connecting with Existing Actors and Spaces:** Democratic innovations need to connect with a community or society's existing actors and spaces of engagement, as well as to better align community concerns with institutional priorities on a continuous basis.
- 8. Fostering Appropriate Relations:** There is a need for policymakers to foster appropriate relations with democratic innovations and participatory practices organised with little coupling to the state, whether these are commissioned by civil society, social movements, or communities.



Sonia Chabane,
Project Manager,
TEPSA

Democratic Innovation at Multi-Governance Levels

Insights from the first Nets4Dem Policy Retreat

Nets4Dem gained valuable insights during its first democracy retreat on “Innovating Democracy: The Nexus between National and European Democracy”, co-organised by the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) and Egmont. The retreat, on 26 March 2024, showcased several effective strategies for advancing democratic innovations. It took place alongside the 71st Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC) Plenary and convened 42 participants from a diverse array of members of parliamentary delegations, practitioners, academics, and think tanks. Discussions centred on enhancing and revitalising democracy within the EU, addressing the complexities of governance across multiple levels, and exploring novel approaches to democratic practices.

Key takeaways

- **National and European parliaments can benefit from deeper integration and collaboration.** Existing mechanisms, such as the yellow and orange cards allowing national parliaments to voice concerns about proposed EU legislation, were highlighted as underutilised tools that could foster greater coordination and a more collaborative partnership in advancing democratic innovations. The Belgian Presidency's initiatives were particularly noteworthy, showcasing the constructive role of national parliaments. For instance, Belgium pioneered the use of citizen panels during its presidency, such as the **EU citizen panel on artificial intelligence** in the context of the 2024-2029 EU governance period. These panels engaged 60 randomly selected citizens directly in decision-making processes, illustrating how diverse citizen participation can bolster democratic legitimacy and provide collective insights on public issues. This approach aligns with broader recommendations for rotating presidencies to actively involve citizens, thereby promoting a more inclusive democratic process.

- **The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE, 2021-2022) would have benefitted from a genuine interface between citizens and institutions at both the national and European levels.** Almost three years later, the CoFE still represents a significant effort in democratic innovation, aimed at facilitating extensive citizen engagement across the EU. Designed to foster dialogue between EU institutions and citizens through a series of citizen-led debates and discussions, the CoFE sought to gather diverse perspectives on the EU's future trajectory. However, discussions with delegations from national parliaments at the retreat highlighted several shortcomings in its implementation. Criticisms centred around its organisational structure, where the EU was perceived as the primary host, and national parliaments as guests. Despite these challenges, the CoFE was recognised for its innovative approach and impact beyond its immediate lifespan.
- **Transnational and permanent citizen assemblies can foster continuous dialogue between citizens and institutions, and ensure that public input is consistently integrated into policymaking.** For example, “Democratic Odyssey” set out in a crowdsourced and decentralised manner. Launched officially in 2023, this initiative seeks to institutionalise a permanent “People’s Assembly for Europe”, providing a structured platform for citizens to engage in European governance on an ongoing basis.
- **Integrating technological advancements into innovative democratic practices is a key priority.** Embracing open and safe digital platforms to facilitate informed assemblies and combat dis- and mis-information is essential in today’s digital era. In democratic contexts, extremist and populist parties benefit more than actors “in the centre” from social media to promote their agendas. There is, nonetheless, a potential to harness these platforms for constructive engagement and informed discourse. Implementing strategies to counter disinformation and effectively engage citizens through social media or other digital platforms is vital for cultivating an informed and participatory public sphere.
- **Continuous experimentation and learning in the space of democratic innovations is key.** Initiatives such as Nets4Dem play a crucial role in providing spaces for connection, information sharing, and fostering a shared sense of purpose.



Developing Solutions

Co-design for Democratic Practice: The Democracy Lab

By Aleksandra Zietek, Eurocities

In the first year of the Nets4Dem project, we aimed to develop a new approach – the Democracy Lab – to complement our other initiatives, such as capacity-building and policy recommendations. The goal was to connect capacity-building efforts with the development of practical solutions in an ambitious and innovative way. Leveraging Eurocities' network of over 200 European cities was key, providing a platform to link local governments at the forefront of democratic innovation.

To understand local governments' needs, we conducted a baseline assessment, engaging city technicians and politicians through round table and Eurocities events. In Lyon, we gathered experts on social issues and migration; in Marseille, we discussed citizen engagement needs of cities; and in Rotterdam, we focused on inclusive digital services and democratic decision-making.

The assessment revealed that many cities struggled with moving beyond project-based engagement to more sustained and impactful citizen involvement. This work also surfaced the need for structured frameworks that cities could adopt to ensure continuous citizen participation and trust-

building, especially among traditionally disengaged groups, such as migrant residents and senior women. Another key finding was that cities often lacked the necessary tools and methodologies to integrate citizen contributions into long-term governance strategies effectively. This gap underscored the importance of providing local governments with practical solutions tailored to their unique contexts, ensuring a clear and effective path forward.

With these insights, we created the Democracy Lab, fostering an environment for cities to share challenges and co-create solutions with peers and experts. The Lab, inspired by the social hackathon methodology, will bring together diverse stakeholders to tackle real-life challenges over two and a half to three days. Participants will engage in study visits, discussions, and workshops aimed at creating actionable democratic interventions.

The Democracy Lab promises to ignite new ways of thinking and doing within local administrations across Europe. Our mission is to help cities take a bold approach to addressing urban challenges, by encouraging policymakers to view issues from diverse perspectives and engage directly with citizens.

Democratic Innovation in Digital Transformation: Democracy Lab 2024 in Barcelona

Our first step was to select a host city for the inaugural Democracy Lab, in autumn 2024. After a call for applications, Barcelona was chosen by the Nets4Dem jury, comprising Eurocities, Coglobal, and Demsoc, due to its strong focus on democracy innovation in digital transformation. Five cities – Cascais, Istanbul, Rotterdam, Sofia, and Vilnius – brought specific challenges faced on the ground to the Lab.

Democratic digital transformation is complex, and often misunderstood as just online communication. Together with Barcelona, we aim to help cities adopt a broader approach, using technology to strengthen local democracies through true collaboration and a holistic understanding of democratic principles in the digital age. The focus of the Barcelona Lab would be on four key areas within the realm of democratic digital transformation:

- **Civic Tech:** Exploring the potential of civic technology, such as the Decidim platform, to support online and in-person citizen engagement. Participants will learn how these tools can facilitate participatory processes such as budgeting, urban planning, and crowdsourcing.
- **Open Data and Smart City:** Understanding how open data and smart city solutions can drive democratic decision-making. This area will highlight the role of data in improving urban life, the ethical use of data, and how it can foster community-driven problem solving.
- **Artificial Intelligence in Government:** This session will explore Barcelona's AI Strategy, which involves collaboration between government, academia, and civil society. Participants will explore the

implementation of ethical AI regulations and the creation of citizen committees to design and evaluate AI policies.

- **Democratic Culture in the Digital Era:** This area emphasises the importance of digital literacy and ensuring that technology benefits all citizens. It will focus on strategies to bridge the digital divide and integrate digital education into community practices.

[The first Democracy Lab](#), held on 17-19 September 2024, served as a test field for the Democracy Lab format and its underlying assumptions. We are committed to a thorough evaluation process to refine and improve the format for future editions. The next Democracy Lab is already on the horizon, scheduled for March 2025 in Grenoble, France.

We are also focused on building a robust support system for participating cities. This includes post-lab assistance through programmes such as Democracy Accelerator and Rising Stars, ensuring that the ideas generated during the Lab are implemented and sustained. Regular follow-up meetings will provide ongoing support and a platform for cities to share their progress and challenges.

The pilot process of the three Democracy Labs organized in 2024-2025 will culminate in an awards ceremony. This ceremony will recognise and celebrate the most impactful initiatives developed during the Labs and implemented afterwards.



Arnau Monterde,
Director of
Participation and
Democratic
Innovation at
Barcelona City
Council and
Democracy Lab
mentor

Cities at the forefront of democratic innovation

Insights from the first Nets4Dem Democracy Lab

Why is democratic innovation important and how can it help tackle key challenges faced by our cities?

Enhancing citizen participation and developing innovative approaches to democracy is crucial because cities are the closest administrations to the citizens and play a fundamental role in managing public affairs. This proximity allows for direct involvement in the co-creation of public policies and the implementation of specific projects in collaboration with the citizens.

Cities and their inhabitants possess the experience, knowledge, and skills to jointly imagine and build the cities of the present and future, making them more liveable, sustainable, just and democratic. Through citizen participation, it is possible to address priority challenges such as urban transformation, inequality, climate change, housing, public services and digital policies. This collaboration between cities and citizens contributes to more open governance and a culture of shared responsibility, capable of addressing current and future challenges in a sustainable and inclusive manner.

If we don't continue to innovate our democratic approaches, what will the consequences be?

Firstly, we could see a decline in citizens' trust in democratic institutions, leading to increased discontent and social polarisation. Additionally, without democratic innovation, cities might struggle to effectively address current challenges such as inequality, climate change and digital transformation. Innovating is not just about doing new things; it also involves recovering the memory and practices of its inhabitants to imagine desirable futures. The lack of innovation could also limit cities' ability to engage citizens in the co-creation of public policies, potentially resulting in solutions that do not serve the entire population and common interests.

What innovative democratic actions is the city of Barcelona taking to boost citizen engagement?

Among the most notable initiatives currently being undertaken in Barcelona are the participatory budgets, which allow citizens to decide on a portion of the municipal budget. Additionally, Barcelona has launched several randomly selected citizen assemblies, such as the deliberative youth assembly, where participants are chosen to debate and propose solutions on issues that affect them.

The city has also established the Ateneu of Digital and Democratic Innovation, a space dedicated to promoting innovation in collaboration with the city's social fabric, and the Decidim platform, a digital technology designed to facilitate citizen participation and democratic governance of institutions and organizations. This platform, developed in Barcelona, is used in more than 30 countries and by over 500 organisations worldwide.

These actions are part of a comprehensive participation model that seeks to promote democracy at the local level and position Barcelona as an international benchmark in participation and democratic innovation.

Why is it important for cities to lead this work? Isn't it the job of national governments?

It is important for cities to lead this effort because they are the administrations closest to the citizens and have a unique capacity to involve them directly in decision-making processes. Cities are the pioneers of democracy, enabling more direct and immediate participation in public affairs on a scale that is both close and sustainable. This proximity facilitates the implementation and consensus on public policies tailored to local needs.

While national governments play an important role in governance, cities are better positioned to lead democratic innovation and foster citizen participation due to their proximity and rapid response capability.

At the same time, cities are spaces where emerging innovations by social organizations, movements, and citizens through popular self-organisation already occur. Being attentive to these emergences, listening to them, and reinforcing them is a prime democratic challenge, and the city is the ideal place for this to happen.

Additionally, leading this effort allows cities to share experiences and join forces to address common challenges, creating networks of mutual support that strengthen democracy at both local and global levels, turning cities into spaces that provide the highest guarantees of fundamental rights.

The Scaledem - Nets4Dem Alliance for Lasting Democratic Change

By Camille Dobler, Missions Publiques

In mathematics, the Fibonacci sequence is a series in which each number is the sum of the two preceding ones, resulting in exponential growth and tending toward the golden ratio, symbolized by " ϕ "—a concept often associated with universal harmony and aesthetic perfection.

Much like the Fibonacci sequence, Scaledem—a new Horizon Europe project, strategically linked with Nets4Dem—aims to exponentially scale democratic innovations, building on previous achievements. It also strives toward its own ϕ : ideal state where democratic innovations are deeply embedded in decision-making processes, political culture, and society, without compromising quality or impact.

Beginning in late 2024, and led by Missions Publiques, Scaledem brings together 13 leading organizations from research, civil society, and practice, all committed to advancing democratic innovation. The project will result in the following:

- **Knowledge Map**, centralizing information on democratic innovation, also based on Nets4Dem's effort to connect knowledge.
- **Translation Hub**, transforming research into concrete political actions. Open to all, the Hub will nurture a global community of over 500 democratic innovation end users - researchers, civil society, policymakers, practitioners, science communicators, and cultural institutions.
- **Scaling Grounds**, including two cohorts to test the scalability of innovations in new contexts. In 2026, SCALEDEM will finance and accompany with follow-up support at least 13 democratic innovations, involving over 39 third parties through open calls.

The Nets4Dem coordinator (Democracy Reporting international) is formally a part of SCALEDEM, linking its efforts to that of the growing Nets4Dem network.

The two initiatives share a common research focus on citizen engagement and democratic innovations, and a commitment to support the transition from scattered ad hoc actions to a sustainable ecosystem of innovative democratic practices.

Like Nets4Dem, Scaledem builds on two decades of research and experimentations, hundreds of recommendations, toolkits, educational material, methods and practical solutions. Like Nets4Dem, it believes it is time to tap into this knowledge, and to move beyond experimentations. Rather, we need to work to facilitate the uptake and impact of those solutions, that we know are effective, across new contexts

There are also many synergies to explore between Scaledem upcoming Scaling Grounds and Nets4Dem Rising Stars Mentorship Program, Democracy Accelerator, and Democracy Lab. The Scaling Grounds will support third parties to implement innovative solutions via Twinning Coalitions and Pilot Actions, generously supported via cascade funding. Doing so, they will provide a launching pad for the Network members and capacity-building programmes.

Alongside Nets4Dem, Scaledem has also established key strategic partnerships with the European Capital of Democracy City Network (ECoD), and the DemoReset Network.



[Website](#)



[Newsletter](#)



[LinkedIn](#)



[X / Twitter](#)



This publication was produced as part of Nets4Dem, funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

18 March 2025



This publication is available under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International license.



**Funded by
the European Union**