



# Democracy Lab: Call for city challenges - guidelines

**Grenoble Alpes Métropole,  
25-27 March 2025**

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# Context

## About Nets4Dem

[Nets4Dem](#) is a novel initiative to foster collaboration among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers across Europe to enhance civic deliberation, participation, and democratic innovation. Recognising the pressing need for democratic renewal in the face of challenges such as citizen dissatisfaction, polarization, and technological disruptions to civic discourse, Nets4Dem seeks to address these issues by facilitating better connections, collaboration, and knowledge dissemination.

The initiative acknowledges that traditional approaches to democratic renewal have not been sufficiently impactful and that there's a lack of consistent and meaningful democratic practice. This is exacerbated by fragmented knowledge and siloed work among practitioners, researchers, and organisations. Nets4Dem aims to bridge these gaps by establishing a European community focused on fostering inclusive societies and resilient democracies through collective action.

Key objectives of Nets4Dem include promoting greater connectedness among diverse stakeholders to facilitate holistic conversations and mutual learning, providing better access to research and knowledge resources, and fostering collaboration and innovative partnerships across sectors and levels of governance. Additionally, Nets4Dem is committed to empowering countries, populations, and communities that stand to benefit the most from civic engagement efforts.

[Eurocities](#) is one of the twelve founding members of Nets4Dem. Next to Eurocities, the project consortium consists of [Democracy Reporting International \(DRI\)](#) – project coordinator, [Demos Helsinki](#), [Democratic Society \(Demsoc\)](#), [European Partnership for Democracy \(EPD\)](#), [Coglobal](#), [Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory of the University of Belgrade](#), [OpenSource Politics](#), [Trans-European Policy Studies Association \(TEPSA\)](#), [Egmont Institute](#), [Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra](#), and [People Powered](#).

The initiative creates a range of possibilities for local government officials and policymakers to train their democracy muscles and enable mainstream democracy innovations across urban policy-making through capacity-building programmes and initiatives. Democracy Lab, coordinated by Eurocities, is dedicated to urban actors to foster peer exchange and capitalise on the broad Nets4Dem network of democracy experts and practitioners. The second edition of Democracy Lab will take place from 25-27 March and is co-organised with and hosted by the Grenoble Alpes Métropole.

## About Grenoble Alpes Métropole

Grenoble Alpes Métropole has been at the forefront of climate engagement by putting the Climate Action Plan as a cornerstone of all public policies with, among others, the commitment to the 100 Climate-neutral Cities initiative. Consequently, GAM is engaging all its participatory processes towards that goal. From the public consultations (Zone à Faible Emission, urban renewal consultations in Grand-Alpes, to name a few), to the work the C2D conducted on forests and transport, and the citizen climate convention and follow-up, the Métropole has decided to tackle the issue with a larger-scale citizen participation projects. The aim is to work on a fair climate transition with and for the people living in our territory.

## About these guidelines

These guidelines are to help local government officials and other interested entities understand the process of applying their local challenges to participate in the Democracy Lab. The guidelines outline the event format, objectives, requirements, and selection criteria.

This call for challenges aims to select up to six cities/regions/affiliated local actors to present their challenges and act as team leads and challenge owners at the Democracy Lab in Grenoble Alpes Métropole. The call is open **until 13 December 2024**.

# About Democracy Lab

## Background

Cities face complex societal challenges, from housing crises to rising inequalities to the threats of climate change and environmental degradation. These issues often stem from interconnected systems involving and impacting multiple stakeholders with diverse perspectives and needs. Addressing these challenges in a democratic fashion creates opportunities for people from all walks of life to be heard and seen. Democratic innovation encompasses various participatory approaches, empowering citizens to actively engage in decision-making beyond traditional electoral cycles. It allows for the engagement of community members in shaping policies and solutions that directly affect their lives, thus improving the quality and impact of policy. By embracing democratic innovation, cities can tap into the collective wisdom of their residents, leading to more sustainable, fair, and effective outcomes that reflect the needs and aspirations of communities

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*Democratic innovations are processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence. (...) We identify four families of democratic innovations: mini-publics, participatory budgeting, collaborative governance and referenda and citizens' initiatives, while highlighting the proliferation of hybrids often aided by digital participation. (Elstub & Escobar, 2019)*

The Climate Democracy Lab will explore the critical intersections between democratic governance and climate action, emphasizing the unique challenges cities face in balancing environmental goals with the social, economic, and political realities of urban life. Local authorities are tasked with addressing climate imperatives while navigating the paradoxes inherent in sustainable development. These paradoxes include managing both long-term and short-term priorities, addressing local needs in the context of global challenges, ensuring social equity in environmental policies, and fostering both individual responsibility and collective action. Democracy Lab in Grenoble will revolve around four focus areas, each reflecting a pressing dilemma for climate democracy and providing a framework to develop solutions collaboratively.

- **Long-term/short-term**

Today, local authorities have to make ambitious and binding decisions to take care of future generations. These decisions concerning district planning, flood zones, buildings retrofit, or sustainable transport, often lead to social tensions. We must create favourable conditions for dialogue to prevent societal rifts.

*How can we discuss urban transitions with residents?*

*How can we take the time to involve civil society and the various stakeholders in large-scale projects?*

*How can we give children and young people a voice in the climate debate?*

- **Local/Global**

Natural resources like water, land, and forests are under increasing pressure, requiring local communities to rethink how they manage these common goods within their territories. While these resources are critical to local life, their use and preservation also have broader implications, affecting global ecosystems and climate resilience. To address this dual responsibility, local governance must prioritize sustainable practices that balance immediate community needs with global stewardship, fostering resilience to climate-related disruptions and ensuring that access to resources is fair and equitable.

*How can we locally manage common goods, which have a global impact?*

*What governance is needed at a local level to preserve these natural resources?*

*How can we ensure that nature's perspective is part of our decision-making?*

- **Rich/Poor**

Climate change primarily impacts the most vulnerable populations. Run-down housing and living conditions make them more susceptible to rising temperatures, flooding, and various other climate risks. Public authorities, therefore, need to involve the most vulnerable communities in their decisions to develop fairer and more inclusive policies.

*How can we take into account and avoid injustices in the transition through citizen participation?*

*How can we work together with people in precarious situations to ensure fairer decisions?*

*How can we better account for injustices when making decisions about transition?*

- **Individual/collective**

Making the transition requires not only a change in individual behavior, but also far-reaching structural and collective decisions. Climate democracy aims, on the one hand, at bringing about a change in individual behavior and, on the other, at shaping new systems.

*How can we support local residents in the behavioural changes needed to meet the challenges of climate change?*

*How can we support local residents in their efforts to become collective actors in bringing about structural change?*

## Overview

Democracy Lab serves as a platform for local government officials and democracy practitioners to promote collaborative problem-solving and democratic innovation at the local level. The event takes place in **Grenoble from 25 to 27 March 2025**, bringing together diverse stakeholders to delve into democratic innovations by jointly working on the real-life challenges presented by cities – the challenge owners. Selected cities will come to the Lab with a specific challenge they

face. They will work in small teams of peers, assisted by a facilitator, to design actionable, ready-to-implement democratic interventions to bring them back to their administrations. In this creative effort, the teams will be assisted by mentors: democracy experts and practitioners from the Nets4Dem network, Grenoble Alpes Métropole staff and experts, and local stakeholders. To ensure learning exchange and breadth of perspectives, participants will take part in study visits and speak with local community members. The working language of Democracy Lab is English. Participation in the event is open to cities and towns in the EU and Horizon Europe countries<sup>1</sup>.

Participating cities will also receive assistance in post-event solutions development and implementation: They will be invited to participate in the capacity-building programme [Democracy Accelerator](#) and/or get tailored mentorship through the [Rising Stars](#) programme. There will also be periodic (online) meetings for the cohort, where participants can discuss the implementation progress and get feedback.

Solutions developed during Democracy Lab will be featured in a Democratic Innovation Toolbox – an open-source digital dissemination resource encompassing policy recommendations for embracing democratic innovations and promoting impactful real-life approaches. Cities participating in a Lab will also be entitled to compete for the Democratic Innovation Award, granted towards the end of the Nets4Dem project (mid-2026).

## Objectives

Democracy Lab aspires to empower cities to address complex societal challenges in a democratic spirit by facilitating peer collaboration, enhanced by the involvement of experts and communities affected by the issue. This way, we aim to encourage policymakers to view issues from diverse perspectives and engage directly with citizens. This process enables a holistic understanding of the issues and ensures solutions are rooted in real-world experiences.

The Lab is specifically intended for two groups of civil servants:

- 1) Experts & practitioners in charge of citizen engagement looking for new ideas and approaches to engage citizens in the climate transition
- 2) Climate/environment/sustainability policy experts & practitioners for whom the question of democratic engagement in climate decision- and policymaking is taking an increasingly important place

Expected outputs:

- actionable implementation plans / frameworks / roadmaps addressing challenges presented by challenge owners
- a set of novel approaches to addressing pressing urban challenges in a democratic way
- a set of learnings to feed into development of policy recommendations on mainstreaming democratic innovation at different levels of government.

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<sup>1</sup> Albania, Armenia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Faroe Islands, Georgia, Iceland, Israel, Kosovo, Morocco, Moldova, Montenegro, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Tunisia, Türkiye, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

## Participants

The event will bring together 50-70 participants. There will be 6 teams, each comprising 5-7 participants, including 1-2 challenge city representatives (challenge owners), 1 facilitator, and 2-4 peers and/or experts. This structure ensures a flow of ideas, expertise, and experience. Teams will be assisted by mentors representing the Nets4Dem network and host city staff members.

### Participants categories:

- Local government's representation (technicians, policymakers, or representatives of other entities affiliated with the local administration) – **challenge owners**
- Local government's representation (technicians, policymakers, or representatives of other entities affiliated with the local administration) – **peers** joining the teams as practitioners and experts to share experiences and learn from one another.
- **Stakeholders** – practitioners and experts from academia, civil society organisations, activists, and community and business representatives
- **Mentors** – Nets4Dem members, Grenoble Alpes Metropole staff and experts
- **Facilitators** experienced in group process, supporting teams with effective collaboration and ensuring they reach their goals

## Format guidelines

The Democracy Lab concept draws from the social hackathon methodology that brings together multidisciplinary teams who collaborate intensively over a short period to develop prototypes of solutions. Leveraging expertise from the Nets4Dem network, the Lab provides a unique opportunity for cities' staff members to co-create action plans alongside diverse partners, including peers, democracy innovation experts from civil society organizations and academia, and community representatives. Integrating tried and tested methods from Eurocities, the Lab incorporates site visits, guest interventions, and mutual learning to inspire and develop solutions collaboratively with those directly affected by the issues. Teams will be guided by experienced facilitators who understand the group process and are grounded in the principles of design thinking to navigate the iterative process of solutions development.

### Indicative agenda

	<b>Tuesday 25 March</b>	<b>Wednesday 26 March</b>	<b>Thursday 27 March</b>
<b>Morning</b>	<i>Participants arrivals</i>	Site visit(s) Prototyping workshops I	Final presentations and feedback session Event conclusion
<b>Lunch</b>	Welcome lunch	Networking lunch	Lunch and departures
<b>Afternoon</b>	Welcome and introduction Setting the scene: Keynote address City challenges presentations	Prototyping workshops II	<i>Optional hike for volunteers</i>

	Teams formation and problem-framing		
<b>Evening</b>	Optional – informal dinner in newly formed teams	Optional – joint dinner for all participants	

## Guidelines for submitting city challenge

### Who is the challenge owner?

The challenge owner is a representative from a local government entity, such as a city or region, or organisation affiliated with the local government, tasked with presenting a specific urban challenge at the Democracy Lab. The challenge should be relevant: reflecting the specific context and problems faced by the local administration, with a strong likelihood that the solutions developed during the Lab will be implemented to address the issue. The Challenge owner's role is central to the lab's collaborative problem-solving process. Challenge owners provide real-life context and insights into their city's issues, ensuring that the discussions and solutions developed are grounded in urban experiences.

### What's in it for your city?

Acting as a challenge owner, these representatives will lead their city's participation in the Climate Democracy Lab, working closely with a dedicated team of peers, experts, and facilitators to co-create actionable solutions (5-7 participants per team). They will present their challenge, contribute to problem framing, and guide the team through the iterative process of developing democratic interventions. This role offers several benefits:

- **Enhanced Problem-Solving:** By collaborating with a diverse group of stakeholders, challenge owners gain new perspectives and innovative approaches to addressing their city's challenges. This is a unique opportunity for cities to work on their projects with an unusual group of collaborators, with the support of diverse experts and in an experimental setting.
- **Capacity Building:** The process provides valuable learning opportunities, equipping challenge owners with new skills and methodologies in democratic innovation and digital transformation.
- **Networking Opportunities:** Challenge owners will connect with experts and peers across Europe, fostering relationships that can lead to future collaborations and support.
- **Implementation Support:** Beyond the event, challenge owners will receive assistance through initiatives like the Democracy Accelerator and the Rising Stars programme, which ensure that the solutions developed during the lab are effectively brought to life.
- **Policy Influence:** Involvement in other Nets4Dem activities, such as policy dialogues, providing input for recommendations to mainstream democratic innovations at different levels of government.
- **Visibility and Recognition:** Solutions and successes from the lab will be featured in the Democratic Innovation Toolbox, giving cities recognition for their efforts and contributions to advancing democratic practices.
- **Competing for the Democratic Innovation Award:** Challenge owners can compete for the Democratic Innovation Award, granted by a jury of democracy experts and peers.



- **Reimbursement:** Travel and accommodation expenses for one representative of the challenge cities will be reimbursed. Further information will be communicated to the selected cities.

## How will the challenge owners be selected?

The selection will be carried out by the Democracy Lab organisational team, comprising Grenoble's team and Nets4Dem representatives, based on the following criteria:

- Overall quality of the application
- Relevance of the challenge to the lab theme: Climate Democracy. To help applicants define their challenge, we advise reviewing the four main focus areas on pages 4-5.
- Geographical balance between participating cities to ensure diversity of contexts.
- Commitment to follow-up and implementation of the ideas developed during the lab in your administration.
- Commitment to taking an active part in the Lab over its entire duration and preparing quality materials to effectively guide your team's work.

## What is expected of the challenge owners if selected?

If your city challenge is selected, you are expected to:

- Delegate one or more representatives to travel to Grenoble for the whole event and actively engage in teamwork
- Participate in an online preparation meeting with the organisational team member to help you understand your role and prepare for the event. You will be asked to present your city and challenge to all participants, and answer their questions.
- Prepare a poster presenting your challenge and background document (one-pager), based on the guidelines provided by the organisational team.
- Contribute to a follow-up with Eurocities to evaluate how participation in the event has improved democratic practices in your city. You may be invited to participate in or provide input for Nets4Dem initiatives like policy dialogues, working groups, conferences, etc.

## How to apply?

Cities interested in submitting their challenge are asked to complete the [online application form](#) by **Friday, 13 December 2024**.

All applicants will be notified about the application results by mid January 2025.

If you have questions regarding this call or Democracy Lab, please contact the Nets4Dem coordinator at Eurocities, Aleksandra Ziętek, at [aleksandra.zietek@eurocities.eu](mailto:aleksandra.zietek@eurocities.eu).