



Democratic innovation in cities: Resources for local action

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Introduction by the **Mayor of Ghent, Eurocities President**

Democracy is under pressure. Across Europe, we are witnessing worrying trends: growing political polarization, declining trust in institutions and the rise of populist and anti-democratic movements.



Voter turnout is falling in many countries, and surveys show that citizens feel disconnected from decision-making. While digital technologies create new opportunities for engagement, they also spread disinformation, fuel hate speech and allow manipulation. These risks weaken public debate, erode trust in institutions and make societies more vulnerable to polarization.

These pressures are intensified by global and regional instability. The war in Ukraine and the unjust imprisonment of mayors in Turkey and Bulgaria remind us that democracy is fragile. It is not a given and must be defended and renewed every day. When democracy weakens, rights and freedoms erode. Without strong democratic foundations, progress on prosperity, sustainability and inclusion becomes impossible.

In this context, cities play a unique and powerful role. They are the level of government closest to people's daily lives, where trust can be rebuilt and participation made tangible. Cities are not only service providers, they are democratic laboratories: testing grounds for new ways to involve residents in shaping decisions that affect their neighbourhood. This proximity allows us to reach those who are hardest to engage: people who feel disconnected from politics, who rarely vote or who believe their voice does not matter. When we succeed locally, we strengthen democracy globally.

Ghent has embraced this responsibility for decades. Our city's approach to participation is rooted in the conviction that citizens are the city and has included pioneering tools such as participatory budgeting, alongside neighbourhood citizens' panels and neighbourhood managers who act as bridges between residents and decision-makers. Soon, these efforts will be complemented by a new Neighbourhood Barometer to better understand local needs. For us, participation means creating concrete opportunities for

residents to influence decisions and see results, whether through co-designed projects, direct dialogue in neighbourhoods or collaborative problem-solving. This approach builds trust and ensures that policies respond to real experiences, making democracy tangible in people's everyday lives.

The lessons we learn in Ghent, and in cities across Europe, are valuable well beyond the local level. They provide practical examples that can inspire democratic renewal at national and EU scales, offering practical models for inclusive governance and resilience against populism. Initiatives supported by Nets4Dem, such as democracy accelerators and mentorship programmes, amplify this impact by connecting cities, sharing knowledge and scaling solutions.

Countering mistrust in politics by bringing people closer to decision-making is essential, and it happens best at the local level. That is why defending democratic values and investing in participation must remain a top priority. Not only for cities but for Europe as a whole.

This publication showcases what is possible when cities lead. It is a call to action: to learn from each other, to innovate boldly and to ensure that democracy remains vibrant, inclusive and resilient, starting from the ground up.

Mathias De Clercq
Mayor of Ghent
President of Eurocities

Foreword by **Managing Editor, Cities Today**

Over the past 18 years reporting on cities around the world, I have covered many of the pressures reshaping urban life: housing shortages, climate adaptation, mobility transitions, fiscal constraints and rapid technological change—including most recently AI. Increasingly, another challenge sits behind all of them: democracy itself.



Across Europe and beyond, trust in institutions is under strain. Public debate feels increasingly polarised. Disinformation spreads faster than ever. Many people, particularly younger generations and communities that have historically felt excluded from political processes, question whether traditional democratic systems are listening to them at all.

Yet if there is one lesson I have repeatedly encountered while reporting for Cities Today, it is that some of the most interesting democratic innovations are not emerging from national capitals or supranational institutions. They are emerging in cities. Cities occupy a distinctive position in democratic life because they operate at human scale. Residents may never interact with a national parliament, but they experience local government every day through schools, transport systems, parks, neighbourhoods and public services. Local leaders often hear frustrations directly and see immediately where systems are succeeding or failing.

This proximity gives cities something valuable: permission to experiment. Around the world, I have seen cities test new models of participation that move beyond traditional consultation exercises. Increasingly, local governments are creating opportunities for residents not simply to comment on decisions but to shape them. Citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, neighbourhood panels and community co-design processes are shifting democracy from periodic participation towards more continuous engagement.

The examples featured in this publication reflect that evolution. They show democratic innovation not as an abstract theory but as practical work embedded in everyday life. Whether involving young people in policymaking, engaging residents in climate decisions or reaching communities often overlooked by conventional political processes, cities are demonstrating approaches that can make participation more tangible and meaningful.

Importantly, many of these initiatives recognise something that national systems often struggle with: participation cannot simply be offered. It must be designed intentionally. The most successful approaches increasingly start with accessibility and trust. They meet people where they are, physically and socially. They create informal spaces, work with trusted local actors and remove barriers that prevent participation. Crucially, they also provide visible outcomes. Citizens quickly disengage if participation feels symbolic. People remain engaged when they can see their contributions influencing decisions and producing real change.

That is where Europe has an opportunity to learn from cities. Too often, democratic innovation remains isolated within pilot projects or individual programmes. Yet local governments across Europe are generating valuable evidence about what works. Cities have become practical laboratories for democratic renewal, producing transferable models that deserve broader support and attention.

European institutions increasingly recognise the importance of democratic resilience. But strengthening democracy cannot rely only on defending institutions against external threats. It also requires investment in the everyday infrastructure of participation: the local spaces, relationships and systems that help people feel connected to democratic life.

Cities have already started building that infrastructure. The question now is how Europe helps scale and sustain it. As this publication demonstrates, many of the ideas already exist. The challenge is ensuring that local innovation does not remain local for long.

Jonathan Andrews
Managing Editor
Cities Today

Introduction

Democratic innovation is one of Europe's answers to declining trust, participation and democratic engagement. Recent key policy initiatives show a growing institutional commitment to participatory and inclusive policymaking. This is particularly true at the local level.

Polarisation is hardening public debate, civic space is shrinking, disinformation is weakening trust, and many elected representatives are facing intimidation both online and offline. The response to democratic backsliding cannot come only from national parliaments or European Union institutions. It is also being shaped where democracy is most immediate: in cities, neighbourhoods, schools, housing blocks and public spaces.

Europe is not immune to democratic pressures, both from within and from outside, but can count on active citizens, committed local governments, independent civil society and institutions that continue to invest in democratic renewal.

That combination matters. While many people feel distant from political institutions, local governments can create direct opportunities for residents to shape decisions that affect their everyday lives, from climate action and housing to schools, public space and social inclusion.

For cities, democratic resilience is not an abstract concept. It is built through practical work: listening to residents, protecting civic space, supporting local media, involving people beyond election cycles, and making sure participation leads to visible results.

Besides representative democracy, cities increasingly integrate other forms of democracy, more data-driven, networked and collaborative. Digital platforms, artificial intelligence and civic data infrastructures are offering new opportunities to strengthen the relationship between citizens and local policymakers.

Through training and mentorship, Nets4Dem is helping turn ideas into action. Between 2024 and 2026, Nets4Dem hosted three Democracy Labs in Grenoble, Barcelona and Bilbao. Local government representatives tested new approaches to tackle complex challenges ranging from climate policy to youth participation. Democracy Labs focused on collaboration and practical experimentation.

This publication features trends in democratic innovation in cities, as well as six innovative city practices. These are transferable and can be adapted to specific local contexts. However, key principles remain: active listening, shared decision-making power, creation of impact, accountability and transparency.

It also provides concrete recommendations to local policymakers and practitioners on fostering democratic innovation. It reflects a shared effort from Nets4Dem partners, bringing together the work and commitment of a diverse network.

Trends in democratic innovations in cities

Cities have long played a central role in the development of democracy, serving as spaces where citizens interact directly with public institutions and collective decision-making. As urban populations grow and societal challenges become more complex, cities are increasingly at the forefront of efforts to strengthen democratic participation, inclusion, and public trust. In this context, democratic innovation has emerged as an important tool for rethinking how citizens engage with local governance and shape cities' future.

Democracy is rising on the urban policy agenda

Results from the June 2026 Eurocities Pulse Mayors survey (Eurocities flagship annual survey, drawing on 88 responses from city leaders) are clear: democracy is a top priority for mayors in 2026.

'Democracy and services for citizens' sees one of the most striking year-on-year increases, rising from a mid-ranking position in 2025 to 33% in 2026, now tied with affordable housing as the second-most frequently cited priority (the first one being climate action). This reflects growing concerns over democratic backsliding, political polarisation, disinformation, and citizens' trust in government.

In their responses, mayors' top priorities are: strengthening local democratic processes, expanding citizen participation, improving transparency, and ensuring accessible and efficient public services.

'Democracy and civil engagement' are the second most common source of pride, after infrastructure and mobility projects. In a year of political volatility in several countries, many mayors highlight strengthened democratic participation, civic mobilisation and community resilience. Munich celebrated mass pro-democracy demonstrations, while Essen and Istanbul highlight the role of community-led social cohesion initiatives. Several cities invested in new participatory practices, citizen dialogues or inclusive governance reforms. These achievements underline the crucial role cities play in defending democratic values, especially at a time of rising polarisation and institutional fragility.

Building democracy from the ground up

Democratic participation is strongest when it is rooted in everyday spaces and shaped by people, not just formal institutions. Participation becomes meaningful when people can clearly see how their input leads to tangible outcomes in their communities, strengthening trust and engagement in democratic processes.

Examples such as the Safe at Home project in Budapest's K22 social housing block and the YUVA Association's Climate Citizens' Assembly in Izmir show how this approach works in practice. In Budapest, residents, professionals, and decision-makers collaborated to develop a shared vision for housing improvements, including participatory budgeting and renovation planning. In Izmir, citizens helped shape local climate policy by producing recommendations that could be implemented by the municipality. Similarly, in Timisoara, students took part in participatory budgeting, gaining firsthand experience of how public decisions are made. Together, these initiatives demonstrate how democracy becomes more inclusive and resilient when it is built from the ground up through active citizen involvement.

In May 2026, the three above-mentioned projects received Nets4Dem Democratic Innovation Awards, celebrating projects that have been improved, developed or implemented with support from the Nets4Dem project's capacity-building programmes.



What we can learn from local examples

One of the most important shifts is the movement from episodic participation (public hearings, consultations, surveys) toward ongoing co-governance models. Cities increasingly involve residents beyond expressing their opinions: residents are getting more active in agenda-setting, policy co-design, budgeting, monitoring implementation, and evaluating outcomes of local policies. Examples include citizens' assemblies, neighbourhood governance councils, civic innovation labs, participatory budgeting and urban commons initiatives.

For local administrations, this move comes with new ways of working with citizens. Participation formats need to be designed for the margins: creative, low-threshold formats and practical accessibility have become key to engaging those least likely to get involved.

Effective participatory processes depend on the quality of engagement itself, but also on the strength of the relationships and institutional structures that last over time. Long-term investment in trust-building and collaboration with local partners is essential for ensuring legitimacy, continuity, and community ownership. Rather than relying on short-term or project-based interactions, successful initiatives are typically rooted in ongoing relationships that enable mutual learning and responsiveness to local needs.

At the same time, participation is most impactful when it is meaningfully connected to institutional decision-making and accountability mechanisms. Participatory exercises that lack clear links to policy uptake or follow-up risk generating frustration and disengagement among participants. Embedding accountability from the outset (including clarity on responsibilities, feedback loops, and implementation processes) helps bridge the gap between civic participation and tangible policy outcomes.

The design of participatory spaces also plays a significant role in shaping both the quality and inclusiveness of engagement. Physical settings, facilitation methods, and social dynamics influence who feels able to participate, how dialogue unfolds, and whose perspectives are ultimately reflected in outcomes. Attention to the spatial and social dimensions of participation is therefore key to fostering constructive deliberation.

Finally, transparency and documentation are central to extending the impact of local initiatives. Approaches that are well documented and adaptable are more likely to inform broader policy development and replication across different local contexts.

City initiatives: Inspiring practices in democratic innovation across Europe

- **Bilbao**, Spain
- **Ghent**, Belgium
- **Montpellier**, France
- **Grenoble-Alpes Metropole**, France
- **Vienna**, Austria
- **Warsaw**, Poland

Bilbao Hiri Gaztea: Reimagining youth participation in local democracy



Background

A city in constant transformation, Bilbao, with around 347,000 residents, is the main economic engine of Bizkaia and a key player within the Atlantic macro region. The city is a hub for innovation and industry.

Its economy is stable with GDP growth of around 2%, and is driven by sectors such as manufacturing, digitalisation and the energy transition. It is internationally recognised for its urban and cultural transformation, symbolised by the Guggenheim museum; however, Bilbao is facing challenges linked to an ageing population, demographic decline and the impact of climate change. The city is addressing these through policies focused on resilience, inclusion and urban innovation.

The participation of young people and their involvement in decision-making processes is one of the most significant challenges facing Bilbao's democratic system. A key priority for the city of Bilbao is to address young people's issues such as disengagement, distrust in institutions, and the lack of access to participation spaces and channels that reflect their realities.

According to the latest surveys conducted by the Bilbao City Council, 66% of young people aged 18 to 30 have little or no interest in municipal affairs, while 74% are unaware of the municipal channels for citizen participation. Young people rate the City Council's willingness to listen to youth opinions at 5.5 out of 10, and only 36% say they are aware of municipal policies aimed at them. Only 9% belong to an association, mostly in the cultural or sports sectors.

In response, the municipal government has set three priorities:

- Improving young people's perception of municipal management and regaining their trust.
- Providing effective channels for information and dialogue that match young people's habits and expectations.
- Increasing youth participation in shaping local decisions and giving them the opportunity to co-design projects that directly affect them.



Practice in democratic innovation

A local youth agenda - 'Bilbao Hiri Gaztea' - was developed in 2020, during the most difficult year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite significant challenges, the City Council set up a working group bringing together municipal technical staff and young people aged 16 to 30. Using online tools and regular discussions, they took part in a participatory process that established the Local Agenda and provided key insights for its implementation.

The launch of the 'Bilbao Hiri Gaztea' marked a shift in the relationship between the City Council and young people in Bilbao. The main measures adopted so far include:

The launch of Bilbao Hiri Gaztea marked a shift in the relationship between the City Council and young people in Bilbao. The main measures adopted so far include:

- La Perrera, opened in 2022, is a citizen lab for youth policy experimentation and co-creation. It promotes participation, critical thinking, collaboration between young people, and support for youth-led initiatives. The space is free and open to everyone, offering services such as a youth information office, emancipation support, study rooms, a library, makers space, robotics and AI labs. It is also the headquarters of the Bilbao Youth Panel, a workspace for youth associations, and home of the municipal youth department. In 2024, a second youth facility, Ramoni, was launched with a similar purpose in one of the city's lowest-income neighbourhoods.
- New information and communication channels were created by the City Council, including a website and social media channels.
- A support programme for youth associations and groups, encouraging youth activism through advice, funding, resources, and support for the promotion of activities.
- The Bilbao Youth Panel (Bilboko Gazte Panela), launched in 2023, which provides a dedicated space for participation, deliberation, and co-creation, bringing together young people from across the city.

The Panel is composed of 24 young people and representatives from youth groups and associations throughout the city. Members are selected according to a range of criteria to ensure diversity and balanced representation. These include territorial distribution, with three representatives per district; age, from 18 to 30 years old; gender balance, with equal representation of women and men; activity status, including students, workers, entrepreneurs and unemployed young people; cultural background, including both local residents and members of the city's most represented migrant communities; sexual orientation and gender identity; motivation; and other relevant factors.

In each edition, up to 50% of panel members may continue if they wish to do so. The remaining members are selected by the panellists themselves from other young people who registered through a public and open call. Youth associations and groups are invited to take part, with current participants including Global Shapers, Equipo Europa, Fridays for Future

and a local feminist group. The dropout rate is around 20% per edition, mainly due to work, studies or declining interest. When members leave, they are replaced by other candidates from the registration list.

The panel was created as an experimental initiative following a study of different youth participation experiences. Its main objectives are to:

- Strengthen the relationship between young people and the City Council.
- Inform and educate participants about municipal responsibilities, operations and resource management.
- Raise awareness of youth-focused programmes and services under the Local Youth Agenda.
- Encourage dialogue and collaboration between young panel members and municipal departments.
- Create spaces for debate on issues of interest, especially those linked to local action.
- Improve the Local Youth Agenda through co-designed projects: to support this work, panellists form interest-based groups and receive resources, guidance and support to design new municipal programmes and services or improve existing ones.

The Panel operates in a hybrid format, with both in-person and online meetings and activities. Panellists participate in plenary sessions and project teams where they develop proposals. Communication and collaboration between the panellists and the youth department is fluid and based on trust. One of the most valued aspects is the closeness and quality of the relationships built over time. Many panellists have become regular collaborators on municipal issues.

Impact and outcomes

The three editions of the Panel have represented a continuous learning process, as understood by both the young participants and the youth and sports department, acting as the project coordinator. They have jointly clarified expectations and objectives and have adapted operational criteria to the needs of the group. Among the Panel's most relevant contributions:

- 1st edition: programme design for the municipal support service for youth emancipation, creation of the brand and social media strategy for La Perrera, and design of 'Konekta Ideiak', a programme supporting youth initiatives aligned with the goals of the 2030 Agenda.
- 2nd edition: Social theatre program to work on emotions and launch of a participatory process to improve the social and environmental impact of leisure spaces and activities.
- 3rd edition (ongoing): Creation of a youth-managed video podcast to improve communication for La Perrera, design of an annual fair to promote the work of NGOs defending human rights, a program to raise awareness about the dangers of improper mobile phone use among teenagers, and a program to connect people from different generations through various artisanal disciplines.
- The Panel is currently in its third edition, which will conclude in May 2026. Its design and operation are based on agreements among participants and evolve with each edition according to majority-approved proposals.



Transferability tips

General guiding principles

- Political will is key: There must be institutional commitment and explicit political will to ensure the involvement of the entire organization, so that the outcomes of deliberation and co-creation are taken into account. Youth interests are not limited to the competencies of a single department but affect the entire institutional political agenda.
- Avoid any intention to “manipulate the process” or instrumentalization to legitimize decisions already made or to improve the institution’s public “image”.
- Share the responsibility: Both panelists and the institution must assume joint responsibility for the process and its outcomes.
- Transparency and publicity: Information management must meet criteria of sufficiency, accessibility, transparency, and accountability, especially in cases where the institution does not adopt proposals made during the deliberative process (the institution must provide clear and reasonable justification for rejecting proposals).

On planning

- Set up clear objectives to avoid frustration among participants: clearly formulated, relevant, and achievable.
- Avoid excessive bureaucracy. The Bilbao Youth Panel does not operate under a formal regulation; operational rules are adopted by consensus among the participants.
- Aim for the greatest possible diversity among participants, taking into account the city’s sociodemographic characteristics in selection criteria.
- Provide adequate resources for the Panel’s operations:

Economic:

- Financial compensation for panelists: Each panelist receives €50 per in-person session (3 hours). Each project team receives €250 per participant, to be distributed among team members at their discretion.
- Project development budget: Each project team has a fund of €2,000 to design and test their project.

- Human: Technical staff responsible for facilitating sessions, overseeing the process, and ensuring collaboration between municipal departments and the Panel’s work.

Material and technical:

- Efficient communication channels to enable constant interaction between Panel members and the technical team.
- Spaces for meetings and project work, as well as materials and technological equipment for project development.
- Design a detailed plan for the process across its different phases, with continuous evaluation that allows for adjustments, as well as a final evaluation that enables improvements to be implemented in the following edition. Evaluation should take into account the political, social, and operational acceptance of the process.

Operational aspects

- Panelists must understand from the beginning how the Panel works, what is expected of them, the workload involved, and the rewards they will receive.
- Panelists should always feel that the process is effective, aligned with the intended objectives, and that their participation adds value to the process, while also providing a meaningful learning and relational experience.
- The process must be centered on democratic decision-making and allow active participation from all members to ensure a plurality of opinions.
- It is essential to foster an environment of mutual respect and tolerance toward differing opinions.

When working with young people

- Young people want to participate as long as they are truly listened to and their opinions are taken into account. They reject feeling “used” and are critical of processes that only seek “the image.”
- They understand that some of their proposals may not be accepted, as long as there are justified reasons and institutional representatives explain them.
- To participate, they need access to information (municipal competencies, available resources and how they are managed, decision-making processes, result verification, etc.) that is truthful, sufficient, relevant, updated, clear, and accessible to everyone.
- Participatory processes must be clear, with defined objectives, timelines, expected outcomes, and assigned responsibilities and workloads. It’s not about participating “just because,” but participating “for something” and “towards something” that interests them.
- Communication must use the media and language style that young people use.
- Traditional participation formats are no longer valid: they must be updated according to the dynamics young people use and allow for open and diverse participation.
- Participation is a learning process that affects both young people and the municipal organization (technical staff and politicians). It is a process of information, listening, dialogue, deliberation, and co-creation that involves both parties.
- Young people demand their own spaces where they can connect, build collaboration networks, and have direct and accessible contact with institutional representatives.



Ghent's citizens' assemblies:

Safe spaces for deliberation and collective decision-making



Background

Ghent, the capital of East Flanders, is Belgium's third-largest city with about 275,000 residents. A vibrant port and university city, Ghent hosts nearly 70,000 students and thrives on sectors like IT, biotech and creative industries, alongside traditional manufacturing. Its strategic location and North Sea Port make it a key hub for trade and logistics.

The city of Ghent has a long-standing tradition of involving citizens in policymaking, dating back to the 1990s. This commitment was reinforced with the creation of the Policy Participation Unit, which plays a crucial role in integrating lived experiences, needs, and ideas into policy and translating policy back to citizens. Over the years, the Unit has experimented with various tools to engage citizens, including temporary use of vacant buildings, participatory budgeting, crowdfunding platforms, citizen panels, storytelling, and digital participation platforms.

Looking ahead, Ghent will introduce a new tool: the Neighbourhood Barometer. Based on neighbourhood analyses, the city council will visit the neighbourhoods to listen to residents' needs and concerns.

A key strength of Ghent's approach is its network of neighbourhood managers. Each of the city's 25 neighbourhoods has a dedicated manager who connects citizens and policymakers, gathers local insights, and helps



translate them into action. This enables tailored responses to local challenges, often co-created with residents and local partners. Neighbourhood managers support both quick interventions and long-term change. Their on-the-ground presence helps identify what works and what is missing, while fostering experimentation and innovation within the city administration.



Practice in democratic innovation

Between 2020 and 2023, developed deliberative citizens' assemblies with participants drawn by lot. These assemblies represent a participatory governance strategy designed to enhance citizen engagement, foster inclusivity and strengthen trust and direct dialogue between residents and local authorities.

Initially linked to the Wijkbudget (Neighbourhood budget) programme, these assemblies reviewed and selected local projects for funding.

16 panels of 20 residents each were chosen through stratified random sampling to ensure diversity. Selection criteria included gender, age, location, origin and household type to approximate representativity at each neighbourhood level. By doing so, the city captured a broad and diverse spectrum of citizens, beyond the 'usual suspects', while maintaining procedural fairness.

The citizens' assemblies' mandate was clearly defined and time-bound:

- Deliberate with project initiators to ensure informed decision-making.
- Assess proposals against regulatory and qualitative criteria, including feasibility, inclusivity and alignment with community interests.
- Select projects, taking into account the available budgets per neighbourhood.

Impact and outcomes

Citizens' assemblies were organized across 16 neighbourhoods, with 8,000 invitations sent (500 per neighbourhood). A total of 508 residents registered as candidates, representing a 6.35% response rate, which aligns with international benchmarks. Ultimately, 316 citizens were selected as panel participants. The panels convened for 85 plenary sessions over approximately nine months, with each group meeting five to six times.

Evaluations conducted after each round showed growing trust in local governance, strengthened legitimacy, and reduced polarization. Participants felt empowered as active political actors, confirming citizens' assemblies as a valuable complement to representative democracy by providing safe spaces for informed, collective decision-making on issues that matter most to residents.

The outcomes and impacts of the assemblies can be assessed across five dimensions:

Tangible policy outcomes: 107 concrete neighbourhood projects

During the two rounds of **Wijkbudget**, the 16 assemblies deliberated on 535 initial ideas, which were refined into 184 project plans. Following evaluation, 107 neighbourhood projects were approved for €4.24 million in funding. Projects ranged from public space improvements — such as creating community gardens, constructing sports grounds and playgrounds — to social and cultural initiatives, including youth centres, community restaurants, cultural festivals, and handyman services in social housing.

A structured process ensured the effective allocation of resources. Participants prioritized projects serving the collective interest, promoting co-creation, and addressing local challenges. Throughout the plenary sessions, the focus gradually shifted from “What do I personally prefer?” to “What benefits our neighbourhood collectively?” This demonstrates that the assemblies successfully delivered actionable, community-driven solutions within existing budgetary and regulatory frameworks.

Strengthened legitimacy and trust in local governance

By transferring real decision-making power — rather than offering a merely advisory role — to randomly selected residents, the city demonstrated a strong commitment to participatory governance. Participants operated autonomously, supported by the Policy Participation Service and monitored by the independent **Dialoogkamer** to ensure transparency and integrity.

Political authorities respected the panels' decisions without interference. This autonomy, combined with clear mandates and visible outcomes, increased confidence in participatory governance and reduced scepticism toward tokenistic consultation processes. Surveys conducted after the process revealed that participants perceived the assemblies as “real democracy in action,” in contrast to traditional consultation methods often criticized as merely “symbolic.”

Improved representativity through the two-stage sortition method

Although challenges remain — particularly in engaging younger residents and individuals with a migration background — the process achieved notable progress. Participants aged 16–29 represented 23.5% of the assemblies, slightly above the citywide average of 21.5%. In addition, 29.7% of participants had a non-Belgian origin, compared to 40.3% in the general population.

Targeted outreach, personal invitations, and practical support measures — including interpreters, childcare, and transport reimbursement — helped reduce barriers for vulnerable groups and contributed to a more inclusive deliberative process.

Civic learning and social cohesion

The citizens' assemblies fostered civic learning and strengthened social cohesion. Participants reported feeling “honoured” and “empowered” to contribute to their community. For many, it was their first experience engaging in local governance, leading to the creation of new networks and stronger neighbourhood ties.

Deliberative practices — including structured dialogue and exposure to diverse perspectives — improved participants' understanding of complex policy issues and increased their willingness to consider long-term solutions. Ghent's experience confirms OECD findings that deliberative processes can improve governance quality and strengthen resilience against misinformation.

Institutional and cultural change

Finally, the success of the first assemblies within the **Wijkbudget** framework has sparked interest in expanding citizens' assemblies to additional thematic areas such as mobility, housing, and climate policy, signalling a broader cultural shift toward collaborative governance.



Transferability tips

Although there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ framework, the city of Ghent proposes 10 guiding principles:

Define clear objectives and scope

Select a specific policy question that matters locally, focuses on actionable outcomes, and is open to deliberation. Ensure that the assembly’s recommendations have a formal commitment from the city council to influence decision-making.

Use a two-stage sortition to set up assemblies that are inclusive and legitimate, while respecting the voluntary nature of participation

First, use a stratified random selection to reflect your city’s diversity. Gender, age, location and nationality can be drawn from the municipal population register. Second, from those who express interest, ask for additional information, such as household type and origin, to refine representativity. Then, choose 20 panel members per neighbourhood through a second stratified lottery. Maintain a reserve list to address attrition.

Secure political and administrative support

Obtain endorsement from policymakers and administration to guarantee legitimacy. Set up an independent advisory board, such as Ghent’s ‘dialogue rooms’ with academics, civil society and experts, to oversee integrity, fairness and transparency.

Communicate to inspire participants

Send a formal, friendly and personal invitation that explains the expectations and answers all FAQs. Use local media, social platforms and community networks to raise awareness. Share stories of former participants to build trust and inspire future engagement.



- » Zich engageren om zo veel mogelijk aanwezig te zijn
 - Kan je niet aanwezig zijn? Verwittig de wijkregisseur
 - Als je twee keer niet verschijnt, word je vervangen
- » Unanieme beslissingen, stemmen indien nodig
- » Ben je betrokken bij een idee, dan kan je niet deelnemen aan het debat/de stemming over dit idee
 - Je meldt je betrokkenheid op eigen initiatief
- » Opvolging door dienst Beleidsparticipatie en Dialoogkamer

Design an inclusive process

Use targeted outreach to encourage participation: engage civil society partners and key figures, ask them to reach their networks, and follow up (e.g., door-to-door) to understand and address barriers to participation. Ensure neutral, professional facilitation and provide accessible information from diverse perspectives (experts and stakeholders). Support inclusivity with practical measures such as interpretation, transportation, and childcare.

Build trust and transparency

Communicate openly about goals, timeline and follow-up. Publish outcomes online for public scrutiny. Treat all participants' personal data in compliance with GDPR and other international good practices.

Follow-up and implementation

Commit to a formal response from the city council within a set timeframe. Be careful when integrating politicians into a citizens' assembly: they can serve as ambassadors but can also skew the dynamics. Integrate participants' conclusions and recommendations into policy processes or explain why they are not adopted. Consider permanent or recurring assemblies for sustained participation.

Structure the assembly

Spread the meetings over time to allow reflection and consensus-building. Organize the sessions around three phases:

(1) Learning (2) deliberation in small groups, and (3) decision-making.

Budgets and logistics

Adequate resources (time, budget and personnel) are indispensable. Provide compensation for time and expenses to remove participation barriers. Plan for venue, facilitation, participant support and communication.

Conduct an evaluation of process and impact

Gather feedback from participants and stakeholders for improvement.

AGORA:

The first metropolitan committee of immigrants



Background

Grenoble Alpes Métropole is a French intermunicipal authority with a population of approximately 450,000 people. According to official figures, more than 1,000 legal immigrants settle in the metropolitan area each year, including around 300 to 400 beneficiaries of international protection, namely refugees and people granted subsidiary protection.

Women represent around 52% of new arrivals, many of whom migrate through family reunification. In 2025, the principal countries of origin among newcomers were, in descending order: Tunisia, the Republic of Guinea, Morocco, Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Afghanistan.



Practice in democratic innovation

To assess the relevance of its reception policies and better align them with the real needs of newly arrived people, Grenoble Alpes Metropole established AGORA, the first metropolitan committee of immigrants, as part of the UNITES EU-funded project from 2023 to 2025.

AGORA is composed of 16 recently arrived residents, including refugees and asylum seekers, with gender parity among its members: eight women and eight men. The committee brings together volunteers who meet monthly to discuss ways to improve reception services across the metropolitan area and to enhance the experience of refugees and other newcomers upon arrival.

AGORA pursued three main objectives:

- Evaluating metropolitan hospitality policies: drawing on their own experiences as users of public services, AGORA members assessed existing metropolitan reception and integration mechanisms.
- Identifying needs: As members of migrant communities living in the territory, AGORA representatives acted as spokespersons, helping to identify needs and propose ways to adapt hospitality policies accordingly.
- Producing information for newcomers: AGORA members developed tailored resources to improve access to practical information for immigrants arriving in the metropolitan area.

AGORA's creation was supported by the European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund through the UNITES (Urban InTEgration Strategies through co-design) project. Led by Eurocities, the project aimed to strengthen migrant integration at the local level through participatory approaches.

Impact and outcomes

Thanks to strong territorial partnerships, AGORA members were recruited quickly while ensuring diversity, gender parity, and meaningful representation of the target groups.

AGORA also developed effective methods for organising its work and gathering the perspectives of immigrant residents across the metropolitan area. Its members were able to communicate the needs of immigrant communities directly to elected representatives of Grenoble Alpes Metropole, notably during the Conference of Mayors, which brings together the mayors of the 49 municipalities that make up the Metropole. They also shared their experience within national and European networks.

Concrete outcomes include:

- The creation of an interdepartmental coordination mechanism on hospitality within the Metropole, designed to monitor AGORA's proposals and support their implementation.
- The publication of a 'Welcome Guide for Newly Arrived Foreign Residents,' developed collaboratively by newly arrived residents, associations, and metropolitan services to address gaps in access to information. The guide is available in digital and multilingual formats.
- The production of 'The Hospitality Compass', a roadmap for elected officials and municipal services to help strengthen welcoming practices across municipalities.

AGORA concluded its activities in 2025. While permanent participatory forums can be valuable, they may also

be difficult to sustain over time, as participants can experience fatigue or disengagement. The main challenge was ensuring that public actors, including elected officials and metropolitan services, took ownership of AGORA's proposals and translated them into concrete action.

For this reason, it was considered more relevant to focus on implementing the forum's outcomes within public services, while leaving open the possibility of convening a new forum in two or three years to assess progress and impact.

At the same time, AGORA members are in the process of establishing their own non-governmental organisation, led by and for newly arrived foreign residents, with the aim of sharing their experiences and supporting future arrivals.

AGORA also helped strengthen the presence and recognition of Grenoble Alpes Metropole in national and European networks. The originality of the approach has inspired similar initiatives in other local authorities, and the AGORA initiative has been discussed, recognised, and replicated at both national and European levels.





Transferability tips

- Create a caring and friendly environment so everyone feels welcomed.
- Develop a caring and comfortable atmosphere to help maintain people's commitment over time. Pay specific attention to practical details such as mealtimes or linguistic diversity, try to provide childcare for single mothers, and plan recreational activities. This shows respect to people investing their time, especially for groups in precarious situations. The addressed topics are difficult, the realities of life are very challenging, and scheduling "joyful and comfortable" sessions made it possible to bring a little lightness and maintain faith in the work being done. This also fostered a quality of exchange based on listening and trust, which was reflected in the quality of the work produced. The friendly and trusting relationship that developed between public services and AGORA members fostered a genuine spirit of cooperation and a more equal relationship between the institution and participants. Members were no longer perceived merely as "users" or "beneficiaries" but as partners.
- Address individual concerns while also working towards building a collective voice. The power of personal testimony can influence those who are not directly affected.
- Ensure strong political leadership and support that values the voices of affected people and commits the institution to providing meaningful responses.
- Be transparent with participants and partners about the inherent uncertainty of the process and clearly define the available room for manoeuvre.

Montpellier's common food fund: Democratising food access



Background

Montpellier Méditerranée Métropole, in France's Occitanie region, faces a challenging economic and social situation in which a significant share of the population struggles to access quality food. This is driven by poverty, low income, and inequalities in access to healthy products. As a result, food insecurity has emerged as a major challenge.

The democratic challenge addressed by the Metropole, together with local organisations, has two dimensions:

- Ensuring that all residents, regardless of income, can access healthy and sustainable food;
- Enabling residents to become key actors in solidarity-based and collective forms of organisation.
- The core ambition is to build a fair and democratic system of food access that goes beyond one-off aid or traditional food assistance and establishes a dignified right to food for all residents.



Practice in democratic innovation

The Caisse Alimentaire Commune de Montpellier (CACM) (Montpellier's Common Food Fund) is based on a collective budget made up of citizen contributions. Each person contributes according to their means, starting at €1 per month, complemented by public and private funding.

Each member receives a monthly credit of €100 to €220, depending on household size. It is issued in the form of a digital food currency (the MonA) to be spent within a certified distribution network of shops, producers and local retailers that are collectively selected.

The experiment began in late 2022/early 2023 and is going on. It was initially led by Vrac&Cocinas, an organisation working to ensure access to quality food for everyone and the regional federation of CIVAM, an education association supporting collective projects.

Governance is ensured by a Citizen Food Committee, composed of residents of the metropolitan area. The committee is designed to reflect social diversity, with half of its members experiencing situations of precarity themselves.

The Citizen Food Committee defines the scheme's rules, including contribution levels, selection criteria, the choice of certified retailers, and operational arrangements.

Its most innovative feature lies in treating food as a social right, supported by citizen-led governance. The project reframes access to food not as one-off or charitable assistance, but as a structured, collective, and democratic right, inspired by the welfare state and applied to food.

It brings together a wide range of actors, including residents, associations, public authorities, and local producers. In doing so, it combines solidarity, social justice, local democracy, and support for sustainable local agriculture.



Montpellier Méditerranée Métropole and the city of Montpellier are both operational and financial partners. They are responsible for specific actions, including the transformation of food environments, support for investment in production (led by the Montpellier Méditerranée Métropole), and, together with the city, the development of community food hubs.

The total budget over five years is €8 million. The French national government is supporting the project with a €1.4 million grant through 2030 as part of the France 2030 programme.



Impact and outcomes

- Approximately 600 households have already benefited from the experiment. The aim is to reach 1200 households by 2030.
- The 2025 evaluation shows that the proportion of participants declaring themselves in a situation of “quantitative food insecurity” dropped from 11% to 5% over the course of the experiment, demonstrating a significant improvement in food access.
- The system strengthens the purchasing power of low-income households. Some can now buy quality products that were previously inaccessible.
- The initiative has a positive impact on the local organic and/or sustainable economy. Local shops and producers benefit from a stable and solvent customer base, helping consolidate sustainable food supply chains.
- Beyond material access to food, the project generated strong civic engagement. Residents take part in governance and collective decision-making, strengthening social bonds, dignity, and solidarity.
- Finally, the experiment provides a replicable food security model, which is potentially transferable to other territories and able to inspire future broader public policies.



Transferability tips

- Build a representative citizen committee: it should bring together people from diverse backgrounds, ensuring that a significant proportion comes from low-income or precarious groups. This is essential for legitimacy, fairness, and diversity of perspectives.
- Secure mixed funding: a balanced model of citizen contributions, adjusted to income, and public/private funding ensures long-term viability.
- Implement a local or complementary currency or a food credit tool; this is a way to enable controlled budget redistribution while supporting local, organic, and sustainable retailers.
- Select a certified purchasing network of shops, producers, cooperatives and farmers' markets based on criteria that are collectively defined. It is about supporting the local economy while ensuring product quality and sustainability.
- Prioritise transparency and democratic governance: collective decisions, open debates and regular citizen assemblies are key to building trust, engagement and participant motivation.
- Plan for rigorous evaluation, both quantitative and qualitative: monitoring impacts, such as food access, poverty, purchasing power, health and local supply chains, helps to improve the system, document outcomes, and convince funders or policymakers.
- Consider the initiative as a structural lever, not a temporary tool: consider food as a social right, combined with sustainable supply chains, local solidarity, and citizen participation. It is a long-term strategic project.

The Vienna climate team: Workshops and participatory budgeting for a climate-conscious city

Background

Vienna is the capital of Austria and a major cultural and political centre in Central Europe. The city has a population of about 2.04 million people and is consistently ranked among the world's most liveable cities due to its high-quality public services, strong infrastructure, and overall standard of living.

At the same time, climate change presents significant challenges for Vienna. Studies indicate that Vienna is likely to be among the European cities most affected by the climate crisis, with extreme heat emerging as a major concern. While all residents are affected, underrepresented groups, particularly residents without voting rights, are more vulnerable, as they often have fewer resources to adapt and less access to decision-making processes. Around 30% of Vienna's population is excluded from voting, leaving many residents disconnected from existing opportunities for political engagement.

Citizen participation is becoming increasingly important in Vienna. The climate crisis challenges both democratic systems and municipal administrations to develop new processes and structures, including collaborative approaches that are inclusive and promote social justice.

In response, the City of Vienna launched the Vienna Climate Team in 2022. The initiative aims to tackle these challenges while strengthening democracy and social justice and advancing systemic climate protection.





Practice in democratic innovation

The Vienna Climate Team is based on the concept of participatory budgeting and combines it with innovative approaches to citizen engagement and governance. It aims to involve underrepresented groups in shaping a more climate-friendly city.

During a year-long co-creation process, residents submit ideas for climate protection and adaptation projects, develop them in workshops with City of Vienna experts and allocate available funds through a representatively drawn citizens' jury.

Key preparatory measures ensure broad outreach and accessibility:

- Active local facilitators are identified in each district to reach groups typically underrepresented in participation processes.
- A digital and analogue media outreach and information campaign runs across City of Vienna channels, with a multilingual project website providing updates, downloadable information, and detailed explanations of project phases.

- All sessions are designed to be accessible in terms of time and location (weekends, early evenings), with childcare provided during sessions, and compensation for jury members.

The annual project cycle has five phases

Phase 1 – Idea Generation (September/October): Residents attend activities across social spaces, supported by facilitators and the project team. Each district resident has approximately €20 available for climate action projects. Ideas can be submitted individually or by groups via post or online. A 'Climate Team Box' provides facilitators with interactive project information and activation materials in accessible formats. Households also receive ideas by post, ensuring widespread opportunities for participation.

Phase 2 – Idea Assessment (November to February): The initiative creates dialogue between residents, facilitators, experts, political representatives and municipal staff to ensure jointly developed projects are effectively implemented. City experts are briefed to help residents develop initial project drafts, evaluate the feasibility of ideas and support the citizens' jury with technical expertise. In

co-creation workshops, participants jointly prioritise ideas to be pursued further. A public exhibition of submitted ideas ensures transparency.

Phase 3 – Project Development (March/April): In further co-creation workshops, prioritised ideas are transformed into concrete and socially just projects.

Phase 4 – Citizens’ Jury (May): In each district, a representatively drawn citizens’ jury is selected through a two-stage lottery process. Jury members are prepared through a joint session, which includes the ‘Climate Mosaic,’ a participatory learning tool illustrating the connections between climate change impacts and the city’s climate roadmap. Decisions on project funding are then made by consensus.

Phase 5 – Implementation (from June): The projects selected by the jury are implemented by the relevant municipal departments.

The Vienna Climate Team introduces innovations in climate action, community activation, participation and governance.

Innovations in climate action

A participatory budgeting model (€20 per district resident) applied with a specific climate focus.

Fully realised climate action projects jointly developed by residents and city administration.

Cross-departmental collaboration leveraging local expertise to enable creative and innovative solutions.

Innovations in participation

Diverse engagement formats to reach different social groups, from outreach activities to representatively drawn citizens’ juries.

Accessible communication tools to make climate issues understandable and engaging.

Barrier-free session formats with flexible scheduling and compensation.

Governance Innovations

A cross-departmental organisational structure, coordinating around 80 experts from 30 municipal units.

Institutionalised dialogue between politicians, administration, and civil society.

A steering group ensuring quality assurance and advisory support throughout the process.

Piloted in six city districts in 2022-2023, the initiative focused on refining the process design and assessing progress toward its objectives through a strategic evaluation process. The insights informed the further development of the Vienna Climate Team in spring 2024.

Impact and outcomes

The Vienna Climate Team has been established as a permanent initiative since 2024, fully integrated into the City of Vienna’s climate and citizen participation activities.

Over the project’s first three years (2022 - 2024), the Vienna Climate Team generated 75 district-level projects aimed at climate protection and climate adaptation, most of which have been completed or are currently being implemented. The project succeeded in engaging and activating thousands of residents, bringing them on board as active participants.

The data show that the initiative not only reaches the “usual suspects” in participation projects, 40% of participants in the co-creation workshops reported taking part in a participation project for the first time.

The Vienna Climate Team is one of the projects implemented by the Office for Participation and Empowerment, launched in June 2024. This new municipal institution was developed by a team of participation experts, drawing on the experience and lessons learned from the Climate Team.

The Office is dedicated to strengthening democracy and making citizen participation more accessible. It serves as a central contact point for participation initiatives within the city administration, a hub for exchange and networking, and provides guidance to other municipal departments for designing their own participation processes. The office also develops low-threshold initiatives for residents, with a particular focus on reaching those who have traditionally been underrepresented in other participation formats.



Transferability tips

Based on the experiences from the pilot years, Vienna has three key practical recommendations:

- **Equal partnership:** Design the process so all participants are treated as equal partners, and success is shared collectively, without winners or losers.
- **Co-creative focus:** Ensure that a competitive mindset does not overshadow the co-creative problem-solving process.
- **Adequate resources:** Provide sufficient capacity at all levels, both in terms of personnel and material support.

The evaluation of the pilot projects in 2022 and 2023 was published, see the lessons learnt and good practices [here](#).



Warsaw's citizens' council for artists: Democratic deliberation for cultural priorities at Warsaw's Museum of Modern Art



Background

Warsaw, as a dynamic European metropolis, faces a growing need to deepen civic participation and strengthen trust between local authorities, public institutions, and the creative sector. To bridge this gap, the Museum of Modern Art (MSN) in Warsaw, a flagship municipal institution, initiated a pioneering democratic approach. After 20 years of operation, MSN moved into its new, permanent premises on Central Square at the end of 2024. This milestone was treated not just as an architectural opening, but as a socio-political opportunity to redefine the museum's relationship with its community. As part of this reopening process, a significant share of the institution's programme and activities was co-created with the museum's satellite communities: a diverse range of individuals, groups, collectives, social movements, civil society organisations, and other cultural institutions.

Practice in democratic innovation

“Shared museum: A citizens' council of artists” (Muzeum Wspólne) was a key part of the MSN's reopening strategy. This project directly involved representatives from Warsaw's community of contemporary artists in designing the museum's future programme and institutional support system. It was the first deliberative process of its kind in Poland to be carried out within a cultural institution.

The process was fully designed and facilitated by the Stocznia Foundation, an independent NGO specializing in civic participation and professional democratic innovations. MSN partnered with Stocznia Foundation to listen to artists' specialized views, understand their actual needs and expectations, and gather concrete proposals for action.



As a citizens' council – a democratic public consultation process involving selected stakeholders – the initiative consisted of three main stages:

- An educational session aimed at acquiring and/or updating knowledge.
- Deliberative session aimed at in-depth discussion, collective innovation and uncovering solutions to specific challenges.
- Voting aimed at selecting the best solutions.

While these consultations are usually organised for randomly selected residents of a given city, in the case of MSN, the selection process was limited exclusively to contemporary artists. Twenty artists, selected at random from over 200 applicants, took part in the consultation. They were demographically diverse and represented a variety of perspectives on the role of art and artists in society.

During the three-day consultation, the group of artists focused on the question: "How can the MSN support Warsaw's contemporary artists in 2025 (and beyond), taking into account the needs and interests of as many stakeholders as possible?".

Before the consultation, MSN earmarked a budget of 100,000 PLN (€24,000) for the immediate execution of the chosen projects, while declaring open financial flexibility to incorporate broader institutional modifications that extend beyond this initial sum. The process resulted in the adoption of 14 core recommendations, including the following examples:

Lobbying at the legislative level to improve working and living conditions for artists, including at the parliamentary level to secure pensions for artists (the Act on Professional Artists).

Removing age limits and other exclusionary or restrictive criteria in competitions, projects and art exhibitions.

Organising regular networking events, such as speed dating and business breakfasts, to bring artists together with curators and collectors.

Providing an open space conducive to grassroots networking, collaborative problem-solving, mutual support and community-building by artists.

Impact and outcomes

In the weeks following the consultation, MSN publicly confirmed its commitment to implementing the approved recommendations. While the general shape and direction of the recommendations came directly from the citizens' council, their practical implementation is fully driven by the Museum's team. MSN is actively embedding these outputs into its internal workflows, formats, and institutional budgets.

The museum continues to collaborate with consultation participants in the implementation process, alongside other local cultural actors. Beyond the 14 approved recommendations, MSN is actively exploring practical ways to implement other suggestions that received strong support during the citizens' council.





Transferability tips

- Build a representative citizen committee: it should bring together people from diverse backgrounds, ensuring that a significant proportion comes from low-income or precarious groups. This is essential for legitimacy, fairness, and diversity of perspectives.
- Secure mixed funding: a balanced model of citizen contributions, adjusted to income, and public/private funding ensures long-term viability.
- Implement a local or complementary currency or a food credit tool; this is a way to enable controlled budget redistribution while supporting local, organic, and sustainable retailers.
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- Prioritise transparency and democratic governance: collective decisions, open debates and regular citizen assemblies are key to building trust, engagement and participant motivation.
- Plan for rigorous evaluation, both quantitative and qualitative: monitoring impacts, such as food access, poverty, purchasing power, health and local supply chains, helps to improve the system, document outcomes, and convince funders or policymakers.
- Consider the initiative as a structural lever, not a temporary tool: consider food as a social right, combined with sustainable supply chains, local solidarity, and citizen participation. It is a long-term strategic project.

From practice to policy: Fostering democratic innovation in cities

Practical recommendations
for local policy-makers,
based on local trends

The following trends in democratic innovation in cities were identified throughout the duration of the Nets4Dem project. They draw on insights from local practices and experimentation across different urban contexts, and were further informed by the local projects submitted for the Nets4Dem Awards. The Awards highlight a wide range of innovative approaches to civic participation and democratic engagement. They offer a snapshot of how cities and their local partners are rethinking democracy in practice and testing new ways to involve residents in decision-making.

To support their translation into practice, the following section outlines how these trends can be implemented, accompanied by practical recommendations for cities seeking to strengthen participation and democratic innovation.

1. Accessibility and inclusivity: lowering barriers to participation

Trend:

Local participation projects should be designed for those who are least likely to participate, using low-threshold, welcoming formats and practical accessibility measures.

Examples:

- Informal settings, clear guiding questions, and shared codes of conduct help build trust and comfort, especially among marginalized groups.
- Scheduling activities on weekends, allowing caregivers to bring children, and providing food/drinks significantly boost participation among young people and those facing economic precarity.
- Art-based methods (theatre, storytelling, photo-voice) enable people to express lived experiences and policy demands, especially in marginalized or non-traditional settings.

Recommendations:

- Start from lived experiences rather than abstract debates.
- Prioritise accessibility and trust-building; design the initiative as a collaborative ecosystem.

2. Institutional collaboration and accountability: from participation to policy

Trend:

Meaningful participation requires clear pathways to institutional follow-up and accountability, as well as early involvement of public authorities.

Examples:

- Connecting creative deliberation with digital platforms and policy trackers ensures transparency and follow-through.
- Real-time tracking of decisions makes the progress of ideas visible to both participants and institutions.

Recommendations:

- Involve elected representatives from the start to ensure your data has a 'landing strip' in policymaking.
- Invest in follow-up and monitoring mechanisms so participants and institutions can track what happens after recommendations are produced.

3. Long-term engagement

Trend:

Democratic innovation is most effective when seen as a long-term, iterative process, and not a one-off event.

Examples:

- Policy influence grows through sustained dialogue, translation of citizen proposals into administrative language, and ongoing collaboration.
- Structured follow-up pathways (e.g., community-led working groups, micro-initiatives) keep participants engaged beyond initial workshops.
- Longitudinal tracking (e.g., 5-year studies) can provide tangible proof of socialization effects and policy impact.

Recommendations:

- Design for long-term relational processes between communities and public administrations.
- Secure a dedicated budget for longitudinal tracking to measure long-term impact.

4. Local partnerships and trusted actors

Trend:

Collaborating with local, trusted actors (educators, cultural spaces, civil society) is critical for outreach, legitimacy, and shared ownership.

Examples:

- Youth workers and social workers, familiar with the local context, are essential for building trust and reaching target groups.
- Co-designing processes with youth (such as youth and climate assemblies) ensures better representation and energy.

Recommendations:

- Collaborate with trusted local actors for outreach and legitimacy.
- Prioritise voluntary participation for more thoughtful and energetic feedback

5. Format is politics: space, language, and methodology

Trend:

The physical and social design of participatory spaces shapes who participates and how they engage.

Examples:

- Open-air venues and informal settings make participation more welcoming.
- Small groups foster unexpected connections and deeper dialogue.
- Sortition-based selection strengthens legitimacy and diversity compared to open participation.

Recommendations:

- Start with the venue and the food before you think about the agenda.
- Keep groups small. Do not try to represent everyone, but create conditions for unexpected connections.

6. Documentation, visibility and scalability

Trend:

Transparency, documentation and clear communication are not just administrative tasks; they are part of the democratic impact.

Examples:

- Continuous, structured transparency (official documents, policy trackers) counters opacity and builds trust.
- Scalable methodologies (such as phased funding, modular toolkits) allow projects to grow without losing focus.
- Media literacy components can shield democratic innovations from disinformation.

Recommendations:

- Treat documentation and visibility as part of the democratic impact, not just as communication outputs.
- Build the system so it can scale and be reused by other cities.

From cities to the European Union: Recommendations on fostering democratic innovation

Further support democratic innovation, as announced in the new European Democracy Shield.

This requires a commitment to strengthening the structures that support democratic practices, encouraging innovation, and involving citizens more deeply in the political process.

Further highlight practical local responses.

Cities need to learn from each other and they get inspired by each other. Supporting cities to do more together is a crucial yet straightforward way of delivering on the EU's policy objectives.

Support local authorities with capacity-building opportunities on democratic innovation.

Cities need to learn from each other and they get inspired by each other. Supporting cities to do more together is a crucial yet straightforward way of delivering on the EU's policy objectives.

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.

Nets4Dem applies an ecosystems-approach, going beyond silos to create better conditions for systemic change and connecting groups and regions

traditionally underrepresented in the democracy conversation.

Nets4Dem's twelve founding member organisations bring together more than 200 cities, 400 civil society organisations, and over 50 think tanks and universities, covering 75 national governments, and linking to democracy-focused work in 130 countries worldwide.

About Eurocities



Eurocities is the largest network of European cities. With a membership of over 220 large cities, Eurocities represents more than 150 million people across 38 countries, from within and outside the European Union.

Eurocities mission is to build places where people can enjoy a good quality of life in a healthy, green environment. Where low-carbon and smart solutions make for cleaner air and better public services. And

where people can move around sustainably, feel connected to their community and all newcomers are welcomed.

Eurocities is where local governments meet, exchange ideas and work together to bring positive change. Day in, day out, our member cities address global issues at the local level, from climate change to housing to democracy, among many others.

Resources and references

1. <https://nets4dem.eu/knowledge-hub/>
Nets4Dem Knowledge Hub: your portal to online resources, tools, guides and databases made available by Nets4Dem
2. <https://nets4dem.eu/europes-cities-forge-the-future-of-digital-democracy/>
Digital Democracy Lab in Barcelona
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Democratic innovation in cities:

Emerging trends in European local democracy

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