

Report



- Date and time: 8 December 2020, 10:45 - 12:15
- Title of the session: **How Regions and Cities Mobilise**
- Format: Ideas Lab
- Facilitators: **Richárd Barabás** (Deputy Mayor, municipality of Újbuda /District XI/, Budapest), **Laure Van Hauwaert** (Managing Director, EU Institutions WPP /moderator/), **Emmanuel Rivière** (French representative, World Association for Public Opinion Research)

Main topics discussed

Richárd Barabás, Deputy Mayor, municipality of Újbuda (District XI), Budapest, gave some concrete examples from the EU-funded initiative there. The aim of the project was to combat digital isolation through creativity and culture. *"Even though we are communicating more than ever, the social ties in our communities are fraying."* People were encouraged to take part in cultural activities, with participants/organisers rewarded with "points" to access more cultural events. There was also a focus on stimulating creativity, bringing art and technology into citizens' lives, with the creation of an app as well as an Art&Tech centre.

Emmanuel Rivière, French representative of the World Association for Public Opinion Research, suggested that participatory democracy was a way to build trust between citizens and decision-makers. People must be confident that being involved in these processes has an impact, and the participation itself must be enjoyable. *"It is a matter of combining participatory democracy with representative democracy."* Participatory budgets were one example of a successful initiative.

"We really need to involve people if we want to tackle the challenges of the future together."

Solutions proposed

How to engage young people in the consultation process

Some participants noted the difficulty in engaging young people in particular in the consultation process. Learning from unsuccessful attempts in Greece, it was proposed that rather than a top-down approach, care should be taken to include young people from the beginning in planning and developing consultation. There had been some success in Salzburg, Austria, where young people were given specific topics related to their everyday lives to debate, discuss and then report on.

What is the role of technology in participatory democracy?

There was also the question of engaging older people, who might not be as digitally literate as the young. **Emmanuel Rivière** noted that this group was among the most likely to take part in face-to-face consultation events, which were no longer possible due to COVID-19. Print, e.g. local newsletters/newspapers/leaflets, was still a very effective way to reach out to this generation. In future, participatory democracy projects should combine both online and offline elements.

Richárd Barabás suggested that door-to-door canvassing was a tried-and-tested method for finding out local people's opinions. However, it was impossible to imagine a campaign or movement that did not use digital

technology in any way. One participant in a consultation experiment in Brussels indicated that many volunteers (~50%) became demotivated and dropped out when the process went virtual due to the pandemic.

How to reconcile a citizen-led initiative with the administrative/bureaucratic needs of participatory democracy?

Having citizens and experts in the same room could be extremely fruitful and mutually enriching. Although projects should have a clearly defined long-term goal, with specific takeaways for policy-makers, identifying quick wins and implementing them was identified as a way to sustain momentum in a long process that could lose its early dynamism and vision.

Civil servants/people with institutional know-how should be involved in matters of budget/institutional co-operation, etc.

Questions from the audience

What can regional/local authorities do to encourage citizens to take part in the conference on the future of Europe?

Mobilising groups of citizens around topics that are important to them was proposed as one way to do this. Rather than encouraging individual engagement in a very broad and macro-level project, the focus should be on mobilising groups of citizens with an interest in a particular topic, such as sustainability, mental health, or equality. Regions/cities should find a way to show how the voices of local citizens have been listened to at European level.

It was suggested that the EU could produce communication packages allowing representatives to share videos and simple explanations in the local language, giving citizens a better understanding of the project.

Take-away messages

Citizens should be mobilised on topics that are relevant to them. It should be made clear how their contribution would be followed up. Multilateralism, engaging citizens and stakeholders at every step of the process, was key.