

Report on Citizen Engagement and Participation and Local Governance in Europe

Citizen Foresight Europe project

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1. Review and collection state of the art and EU needs

1.1 Introduction: Local Democracy, Local Governance and Citizen Engagement

Local democracy represents the level of governance closest to citizens, where public policies directly shape everyday life: from housing and mobility to education, safety and social inclusion. The European Commission highlights that effective local governance and meaningful citizen engagement are essential to ensuring that democratic systems remain

responsive, inclusive and trusted (European Commission, CORDIS, *Revitalising Citizen Engagement in Local Democracy*).

When citizens and local institutions work together, public decisions become more transparent, accountable and better rooted in real needs. According to EU-funded research, strengthening participation at the local level contributes to social cohesion, improves the quality of public services and reinforces the legitimacy of democratic institutions (European Commission, CORDIS).

Civil society organisations play a key role in this ecosystem by facilitating dialogue, representing vulnerable groups and supporting inclusive decision-making. Empowering civil society strengthens governance outcomes and enhances citizens' trust and sense of ownership in democratic institutions (*Springer Studies on Local Governance*, 2024).

1.2. Growing Democratic Challenges in Europe

Across Europe, democratic systems are facing increasing pressure due to declining trust in institutions, political polarisation and widening social and economic inequalities. EU research notes that “in Europe, there is growing disaffection and a lack of trust in democratic processes, driven by widening inequalities and anxieties concerning social, economic and cultural change” (European Commission, CORDIS, *Revitalising Citizen Engagement in Local Democracy*).

This perception is further explained by James Scott, Professor at the University of Eastern Finland, who observes that “many citizens have the perception that ‘the system’ does not work for them, and that it is too distant to be influenced.” As a result, “populist and illiberal alternatives to democratic participation have gained in popularity,” often at the expense of trust in democratic norms and institutions (Scott, quoted in European Commission, CORDIS).

The OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (2024) provides additional evidence of these dynamics. The survey highlights how a series of major shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation and war with major geopolitical consequences, have shaped citizens' priorities and trust levels (OECD, 2024). On average, 59% of respondents across OECD countries identify inflation as one of the most important issues facing their country, followed by poverty and social inequality (33%) and unemployment (22%). At the personal level, 71% of respondents report being concerned about their household's financial situation over the next one to two years (OECD, 2024).

The OECD also notes that political polarisation, partly fuelled by mis- and disinformation, has visibly increased, exacerbating social tensions and political disengagement and making it more difficult for governments to build consensus on reforms (OECD, 2024).

According to International IDEA (2024), the crisis of representative democracy takes different forms across countries. At the local level, dissatisfaction often appears as political apathy, low knowledge and interest in politics, or as political cynicism, marked by awareness but disillusionment with decision-making processes (Kersting & Cronqvist, 2005, p. 28). These dynamics lead to lower voter turnout, declining party membership, and occasionally, a rise in protest movements.

Recent evidence shows that local trust dynamics are geographically uneven. The Joint Research Centre (2025) notes that rural residents tend to maintain higher trust in local authorities than in national or European institutions. This highlights the importance of having place-based policies and fostering interaction between local decision makers and citizens. In this way, trust in the EU in rural areas could be improved and territorial cohesion could be strengthened.

1.3. Citizen Engagement as a Key Response

In this context, citizen engagement and participation are increasingly recognised as key responses to democratic erosion. The OECD stresses that building trust in public institutions requires a holistic approach that takes into account not only governance performance but also citizens' socio-economic backgrounds and their perceptions of political agency (OECD, 2024).

A major challenge for representative democracies is governing pluralistic societies characterised by diverse needs, interests and political attitudes. Vulnerable and marginalised groups are often less engaged in democratic processes, indicating a persistent gap in inclusiveness that weakens democratic legitimacy (OECD, 2024). Strengthening participation mechanisms at the local level can help address these challenges by fostering dialogue, co-creation and shared responsibility between citizens and institutions.

EU-funded research further emphasises that “strategies that encourage and strengthen democratic participation at the local level could help to reinvigorate citizen trust in democracy and overcome apathy and illiberalism” (European Commission, CORDIS).

Citizen participation would strengthen inclusiveness by making people feel more involved in their political community and, as a result, more personally responsible for public decisions. It would increase the legitimacy of both the decision-making process and its outcomes and, at the same time, improve the effectiveness of government decisions, since more legitimate decisions tend to face less resistance. Finally, participatory processes can also enhance the quality of decisions, as they allow authorities to base their choices on the wide range of interests expressed by citizens (Springer Studies on Local Governance, 2024).

1.4. EU Policy Framework and Strategic Priorities

The importance of citizen engagement, civil society and local governance is clearly reflected in the political priorities of the European Union. The second mandate of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is structured around six priorities, two of which are particularly relevant in the current democratic context: “**Supporting people, strengthening our societies and our social model**” and “**Protecting our democracy, upholding our values**” (European Parliament Research Service, 2025).

These priorities directly respond to the challenges of democratic disaffection, polarisation and declining trust, highlighting the need for stronger social cohesion, inclusive governance and democratic resilience.

Supporting People, Strengthening Our Societies and Our Social Model

This priority seeks to improve living standards by promoting fairness, regional cohesion and equal opportunities. (European Parliament Research Service, 2025). The **European Pillar of Social Rights**, adopted in 2017 and operationalised through a 2021 action plan, remains the main framework guiding EU action in this area.

The Commission has also committed to tackling poverty, strengthening the European Child Guarantee, addressing the housing crisis through a European Affordable Housing Plan and reducing regional disparities.

Many of these initiatives are implemented at local and regional level, making effective local governance and citizen engagement essential to their success.

Protecting Our Democracy, Upholding Our Values

To reinforce democratic resilience, the EU has introduced the **European Democracy Shield**, which aims to protect the core pillars of democratic systems, including free and fair elections, independent media, resilient institutions and a vibrant civil society (European Commission, *European Democracy Shield*, 2025).

As stated by President von der Leyen, “democracy is the foundation of our freedom, prosperity, and security,” and the Democracy Shield seeks to strengthen citizens’ ability to live democratic values every day through free speech, independent media and strong civic participation (European Commission, 2025).

The initiative is structured around three pillars: safeguarding the integrity of the information space, strengthening democratic institutions and elections, and boosting societal resilience and citizens’ engagement through a whole-of-society approach.

The EU Strategy for Civil Society

Complementing the European Democracy Shield, the **EU Strategy for Civil Society** recognises civil society organisations as essential actors in policymaking, service delivery and representation of vulnerable groups (European Commission, *EU Strategy for Civil Society*, 2025).

The strategy focuses on three objectives: fostering engagement through structured dialogue platforms, supporting and protecting civil society through knowledge-sharing and emergency measures, and ensuring sustainable and transparent funding. In this context, the Commission has proposed a significant increase in financial support for civil society organisations, including €9 billion under the proposed AgoraEU programme (European Commission, 2025).

By strengthening civil society capacity, the strategy directly contributes to more inclusive local governance and enhanced citizen participation.

1.5. ALDA Perspective: Local Democracy as the Foundation of Democratic Renewal

Recent reflections by the European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA, 2024) advance a compelling hypothesis: “local democracy will save democracy.” This perspective rests on the idea that, at the local scale, the *democracy of decisions* (deliberative democracy) and the *democracy of cooperation* (contributive democracy) complement the *democracy of the vote* (representative democracy). Together, these three dimensions reorient democratic practice toward participation, shared responsibility and tangible community outcomes (*Local Democracy Will Save Democracy*, p. 2).

Today cities face growing contradictions. They are increasingly “smart” yet socially segmented, producing isolated living patterns and health-related stress. In response, new forms of *sharing*, such as digital cooperation, shared mobility, and co-produced knowledge platforms, illustrate how citizens can rediscover collective action. Although sometimes criticised as rhetorical (Mela, 2013), initiatives inspired by the *sharing city* can acquire genuine civic meaning when paired with social commitment and concrete local experimentation.

Emerging beneath these practices is what Nakano (2000) called a *caring society*, where community members collectively address needs often relegated to the private sphere: care for children, migrants, older adults, and the ill. Social innovation increasingly takes hybrid forms, blurring the boundaries between public welfare and civic initiative (Ciaffi, 2020). Examples abound: schools doubling as community centres after hours, neighbourhood gardens, and shared cultural-health facilities (Labsus, 2023). In parallel, local circular economies arise, as in London’s Brixton Pound, illustrating how communities link sustainability and solidarity within market systems still ruled by conventional economics.

These experiments demonstrate the transition *from ideas to actions*, where community-driven initiatives align with local authorities to co-create the public good. Bologna’s 2014 *Regulation for the Shared Administration of the Commons* is emblematic. Based on Article 118 of the Italian Constitution, it institutionalises horizontal subsidiarity, enabling collaboration agreements between citizens and public institutions for activities of general interest. Over 7 000 such agreements have already been implemented nationwide (Labsus, 2022), marking a shift toward *contributory democracy* (Barbot et al., 2016), in which traditionally marginalised groups, such as undocumented migrants, children or informal communities, become integral to local governance.

This growing community activism demonstrates how “spread politics” (Marcon, 2005) and third-sector initiatives increasingly shape local policy innovation, filling gaps left by declining partisan structures (Gallent & Ciaffi, 2014). Within this framework, the question of who defines the general interest becomes central. The European Union defines services of general interest, such as transport, postal services or healthcare as essential services that may be delivered by public or private bodies and classified as economic, non-economic or social (European Commission). In particular, *social services of general interest* respond to the needs of vulnerable citizens and reflect the principles of solidarity and equal access.

However, defining the general interest is no longer an exclusive prerogative of political decision-makers. Rather, new practices of *contributory democracy* challenge the traditional “bipolar” model of government, dividing those who govern from those who are governed. This paradigm is progressively replaced by a model of *shared administrative responsibility*, in which citizens and institutions collaborate on an equal footing to define and implement the public interest (Arena, 2020).

The local level thus emerges as a democratic ecosystem where social, economic and environmental inequalities are confronted in everyday experience. Urban realities marked by exclusion, under-service, and spatial injustice vividly remind policymakers that democracy’s renewal must begin *from below*. In this sense, *local democracy will save democracy* is not a rhetorical statement but empirical: it points to tangible pathways through which cooperative governance, citizen participation and shared responsibility can collectively restore trust in democratic institutions.

1.6. Key Concepts and Principles of Participatory Democracy

Participatory democracy provides space for citizens to contribute to decision-making and initiate change. According to ALDA (2024), it rests on eight key principles: mutual respect among actors; respect for NGO independence; recognition of public authorities’ accountability; transparency; responsiveness; inclusiveness and non-discrimination; gender equality; and accessibility, both offline and online.

The actors involved include local authorities (both elected officials and civil servants), individual citizens and civil society organisations. Each plays a complementary role: public authorities ensure legitimacy and accountability, while citizens and associations contribute expertise, lived experience, and social representation (ALDA, *Participatory Plan for Local Communities*, 2024).

1.7. Levels and Tools of Participation

Participation unfolds across four levels: information, consultation, dialogue, and partnership:

- Information ensures transparent communication but is largely one-way. Effective strategies include accessible language, diverse media channels and proactive outreach to digitally excluded groups.
- Consultation allows authorities to collect citizen views on policies through public meetings, surveys or consultative committees, ensuring feedback to maintain trust.
- Dialogue establishes two-way communication through sustained collaboration in policy design, using methods such as *World Café* sessions or *Open Space Technology*, which foster collective intelligence and problem-solving.
- Partnership represents the highest level of engagement, where civil society and authorities co-produce solutions or co-decide on public policy, while maintaining the independence of civil actors (ALDA, 2024).

1.8. Conclusion

Local democracy and citizen engagement are central to addressing the current crisis of trust in democratic institutions. Evidence from EU research and OECD analysis shows that social and economic shocks, inequality and polarisation have weakened citizens’ confidence in

democratic systems. Strengthening participatory governance at the local level offers a concrete and effective response to these challenges, building inclusion, transparency, and legitimacy from the ground up.

EU priorities and policy frameworks increasingly recognise the strategic role of local governance, civil society and citizen participation in reinforcing democratic resilience. By empowering citizens and fostering inclusive local democracies, the European Union can strengthen trust, social cohesion and democratic legitimacy across its Member States.

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2. ALDA's contribution: from methodology to action

Within the project, ALDA is the lead partner for Work Package 8, and has been working throughout a structured process: first, based on ALDA network and expertise, together with

project partners support, specific needs and challenges related to citizen engagement, participation, and local governance in Europe have been collected, in order to identify the key areas where Local Authorities require support, strategies, and solutions to enhance their governance practices. Secondly, ALDA was responsible for the creation of a Community of Interest (CoI) related to citizen engagement and local governance. Lastly, ALDA was responsible for the preparation and implementation of Open Space Scenario Event.

2.1. Methodology

The creation of the CoI has been supported by a mapping exercise which led to identification of stakeholders and practitioners of foresight and citizens engagement across Europe. This database also served to shape a meaningful and impactful Open Space Technology (OST) Event, including Local Authorities, CSOs, and citizens, to engage in open discussions and collaborative brainstorming on local governance challenges to co-create scenarios for the future of citizen engagement and local governance. Before the in-person OST event, an online webinar was organised to engage new stakeholders, raise awareness on foresight, and promote the OST event and the CoI.

The preparation and implementation of Open Space Scenario Event has been the core of ALDA's WP8 work. The Open Space methodology enabled an open, self-organised exchange among diverse stakeholders (local authorities, CSOs, youth organisations, researchers, and citizens in general). Participants collectively explored challenges, envisioned desirable futures, and co-created scenarios around local governance and civic engagement.

Through this structured approach, ALDA and the project seek to bridge the gap between authorities and citizens, promoting more inclusive, effective, and innovative governance that benefits all. By fostering collaboration, transparency, and collective problem-solving, this work package lays the groundwork for more participatory and responsive local governance systems.

2.2. Communication strategy

In order to identify participants interested in joining the CoI and taking part in the in-person event, ALDA carried out a mapping of stakeholders potentially interested in the topic of foresight. The following criteria were taken into consideration: geographical location, previous collaboration, level of potential interest in participating, type of organisation represented, and level of influence. Based on this mapping, personalised emails were sent to maximise engagement.

A [brochure](#) and a [template email](#) were provided to project partners to help us with dissemination within their network.

Communication materials were created to support the visibility of the projects on social media, on ALDA accounts on LinkedIn and Facebook, and on ALDA's website:

Post to promote the webinar:

https://www.linkedin.com/posts/aldaprojects_how-can-citizens-and-local-authorities-co-creat-e-activity-7389317982939844609-snnX?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAF1JyusBqv5Z4-ovjtj9u0sQFROVaq3Wgvo

Posts to promote the in-person event:

https://www.linkedin.com/posts/association-of-the-local-democracy-agencies_democracy-participatory-opportunity-activity-7392236147214602241-KOUj?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAF1JyusBqv5Z4-ovjtj9u0sQFROVaq3Wgvo

https://www.linkedin.com/posts/association-of-the-local-democracy-agencies_how-can-citizens-and-local-authorities-co-create-activity-7396849730430951425-dcre?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAF1JyusBqv5Z4-ovjtj9u0sQFROVaq3Wgvo

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https://www.linkedin.com/posts/empowering-citizens-to-shape-tomorrows-policies-share-7406277280819412992-q5DR/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAEdpeWwBOeFCE3otnsqUKJWA07LHIX9ZkZM

Article for the launch the launch of the Community of Interest on ALDA's website:

<https://www.alda-europe.eu/community-of-interest-launch/>

2.3. The Community of Interest (CoI)

The Citizens Foresight Europe Community of Interest (CoI) brings together local leaders, municipalities, NGOs, and experts to address future governance challenges through collaborative problem-solving. By joining, participants can access resources, network internationally, influence policy, gain visibility, and contribute to co-creation processes. The project uses foresight and co-creation to enhance citizen engagement and promote inclusive, forward-thinking governance practices across Europe. It's an opportunity for stakeholders to shape the future of local governance and ensure democratic processes are effective and responsive to emerging challenges.

2.3.1. Citizen Foresight CoI: structure and key phases

The Citizens Foresight Europe Community of Interest (CoI) is built from the Citizen Foresight Europe project, funded by the European Union's CERV programme, and is part of a broader effort to enhance citizen engagement and participation in democratic processes. It emphasizes collaboration across sectors, including local authorities, civil society, and research, to address common challenges and opportunities. The CoI will facilitate the exchange of practices, methodologies, and experiences to promote best practices in local governance and foresight.

The CoI brings together local leaders, municipalities, policy-makers, civil society organizations, NGOs, research centers, experts, and youth associations from several European countries. The CoI aims to create a shared space for stakeholders to exchange experiences, collaborate, and propose solutions to build more effective and future-oriented local governance. Key benefits include:

- Access to cost-free informative material, such as tools, methodologies, and policy updates.
- Networking opportunities with local and international administrations, research institutes, NGOs, and other stakeholders.
- Participation in co-creation processes and policy recommendations.
- Increased visibility for participating organizations.
- Exchanging practices and learning from diverse stakeholders and project partners.

The CoI aims to connect stakeholders and organisations interested in and working on the project's topics, while also fostering the exchange of knowledge and practices among them.

The project uses foresight research, workshops, and co-creation labs to engage citizens in envisioning the future of Europe, promoting their active participation in democratic processes and ensuring their preferences are represented in decision-making. The expected outcomes include increased citizen engagement, awareness, and the development of innovative future search methods, leading to a platform for cross-disciplinary dialogue and knowledge exchange.

The project's core focus is on collaborative and inclusive problem-solving, with a particular emphasis on the importance of foresight in addressing challenges facing local governance and ensuring that all stakeholders contribute to shaping a more effective and forward-thinking local and European democracy.

Key takeaways for potential participants:

- Be part of a diverse network addressing local governance challenges with a forward-looking approach.
- Access to resources: Gain access to tools, methodologies, and policy insights, especially related to foresight and participation and engagement innovation.
- Policy impact: Participate in shaping policy recommendations and have a voice in the future of local governance.
- Connect with a broad range of stakeholders across Europe and gain visibility.
- Contribute to and learn from co-creation processes and workshops focused on future-oriented solutions.

2.3.2. Functioning and sustainability

This Community of Interest (CoI) served as a hub for knowledge exchange and fed into the online platform created by CRN, which brings together organisations across Europe interested in foresight and participatory policymaking. The CoI ensures the dissemination of the project's results and the sustainability of its impact beyond the completion of the project by keeping participants informed and engaged through ALDA's initiatives and updates on foresight.

2.4. Online webinar

On November 4, 2025, ALDA organised an online event on Zoom 1 month before the OST event to strengthen the engagement for the Community of Interest and promote the upcoming event.

The online webinar gathered 25 participants from a diverse range of stakeholders: CSOs, Networks of no-profit organisations, City Council representative, think tanks. The [agenda](#) for the webinar included the presentation of the project, the announcement of the OST event and the promotion of the Col. The core part of the event was project partners' presentations of the results of their work to date. Comparative Research Network, the project leader, gave an overview on the foresight methodologies they use. Fondazione LINKS – Leading Innovation & Knowledge for Society presented the local workshop carried out over the previous months, as well as the initial findings that will inform their policy recommendations. Fédération Internationale des Journalistes (FIJ) discussed how women in politics are portrayed in the news, while the Bureau for Integration of Social Innovations (Sdruzhenie Byuro Za Integratsiai Sotsialni Inovatsii) presented their event on co-creating inclusive spaces for civic engagement and equitable societal transformations and the resulting policy recommendations. Finally, Matteo Nicolosi, from Inspiring Futures Europe (IF), gave a speech on foresight and IF work in the EU.

2.5. Open Space Technology event

Foresight is ultimately a multidisciplinary process that helps us prepare for the future, while also shaping the future we want. Many foresight tools begin by identifying change, understanding it, and then working to influence it. By considering a range of plausible futures, foresight allows us to identify potential challenges and opportunities, as well as test policy assumptions. Through participatory foresight, the collective intelligence of stakeholders is harnessed, ensuring that decisions are made inclusively and with a broad perspective. Foresight, as a tool, empowers citizens to explore, evaluate, and ultimately shape forward-looking policymaking. By focusing on emerging challenges and opportunities, foresight helps institutions make better decisions in the face of uncertainty, ensuring fairer and more inclusive outcomes.

The foresight process typically involves four key steps. First, it's crucial to detect early changes before they become major trends. Next, understanding and assessing uncertainties comes into play, this includes framing relevant questions and identifying what truly matters, always keeping in mind that these factors may evolve. Once uncertainties are clarified, it's important to sketch "what-if" scenarios to explore different possible futures, considering how various choices perform under diverse assumptions. Finally, the process involves comparing alternatives through targeted questioning to evaluate their potential impact.

During the workshop then delved into the Open Space Technology methodology, everyone was invited to reflect on the core theme of the workshop: building the cities of the future, grounded in strong local democracy and active citizen engagement. From this topic, participants created discussion groups around key sub-topics of shared interest. These sub-topics included sustainable sufficiency and inclusion, intergenerational dialogue and social loneliness, the housing and renting crisis, and emerging technologies for local democracy.

Each group worked collaboratively to identify current challenges and needs related to their topic, envisioning ideal future scenarios and co-developing policy recommendations to guide the desired outcomes. These policy recommendations will be published on the project partners' websites in the coming months, contributing to the broader *Citizen Foresight*

Europe project, which supports evidence-based, participatory, and forward-looking local governance across Europe.

The participants were divided into four groups, each tasked with discussing a specific theme: sustainable sufficiency and inclusion; intergenerational dialogue and social isolation; emerging technologies for local democracy; and the housing and rental crisis. In line with the methodology, one group was unable to complete the full activity, and its members subsequently joined the other groups to contribute to their discussions.

The group focusing on **sustainable sufficiency and inclusion** discussed how, particularly in urban contexts, the prevailing economic system often runs counter to the Sustainable Development Goals related to sufficiency and responsible consumption. There are limited economic incentives to encourage a shift towards more sustainable practices. Consequently, the discussion concentrated on several key challenges, namely access and infrastructure, culture, knowledge and awareness, the economic framework, and governance and decision-making.

Regarding access and infrastructure, the group highlighted a lack of green spaces, or limited access to them, in many cities. In addition, access to sustainable modes of transport is often insufficient, and mobility can remain exclusive in certain contexts. At the same time, citizens are not always encouraged or motivated to respect, use, and enjoy green and shared public spaces.

These observations led the discussion towards cultural aspects, as well as knowledge and awareness. The group noted a lack of collective responsibility, as consumerist values and aspirations tend to be highly individualistic, resulting in a diminished emphasis on the common good. Moreover, there is often limited awareness of the impacts of climate change, as well as insufficient understanding of how individual behaviours and consumption patterns contribute to it. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that significant cultural and socio-economic differences exist across regions, cities, and communities. The considerations outlined above are highly context-specific: in some settings, particularly where people struggle to meet basic needs, climate change may be perceived as a less immediate priority. In contrast, in other contexts the impacts of climate change may be more directly experienced, and sustainable practices are often already embedded in everyday life as part of long-standing traditions.

The discussion on capitalism prompted the group to critically reflect on the dominant economic paradigm, which is largely growth- and profit-oriented and therefore structurally misaligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. This model tends to prioritise economic expansion over social and environmental considerations, contributing to the polarisation of wealth and reinforcing many of the systemic challenges discussed above, particularly those related to sufficiency, responsible consumption, and social inclusion.

Furthermore, the group identified structural gaps within current educational frameworks. Formal curricula often provide limited civic education and insufficient coverage of climate change and sustainability-related issues. Where such topics are addressed, they are frequently presented in a generic manner, lacking contextualisation and practical orientation. As a result, education systems may fall short in equipping learners with the knowledge,

skills, and agency required to effectively contribute to sustainable and context-sensitive transitions at the societal level.

The group discussing **intergenerational dialogue and social loneliness** identified a complex set of interrelated challenges, highlighting both structural and societal dimensions. One of the primary concerns is the political and cultural divide between younger and older generations, with many participants reporting feelings of misunderstanding and limited mutual recognition. These divides are often exacerbated by broader societal factors, including the polarisation of media and the dominance of digital algorithms, social media platforms, and other technology-driven channels that reinforce information silos. The coexistence of local and broader media “bubbles” further complicates dialogue and hinders constructive interaction.

Digitalisation also plays a critical role in shaping intergenerational gaps. Access to information, public services, and administrative tools remains uneven, often leaving older adults and digitally marginalised groups at a disadvantage. Beyond age, cultural differences, particularly affecting queer communities, minorities, and other marginalised groups, introduce additional layers of social fragmentation, making dialogue more challenging. The group emphasised that social segregation, both within neighbourhoods and across urban and rural areas, negatively impacts mental health, reduces inclusiveness, and diminishes the sense of belonging within communities.

Several questions were raised regarding how to foster meaningful intergenerational engagement. These include: how to encourage youth volunteerism; how to facilitate welcoming environments for newcomers; how to ensure equitable access to information and assistance; and whether intergenerational interactions need to be mutually beneficial to be sustainable. Budgetary constraints were also noted, particularly in relation to inclusion-focused facilities and community centres, some of which are closing due to funding pressures.

Additional structural challenges include the need to address generational divides in a constantly evolving society, where demographic shifts, such as declining birth rates and aging populations, affect community composition. Factors such as gentrification, ageism, and geographic disparities between urban and rural settings further complicate efforts to engage citizens. The group highlighted the importance of transferring intangible cultural heritage, skills, and local knowledge across generations, while recognising the difficulty of doing so in a dynamic context with diverse and changing target groups.

Overall, the discussion underscored the urgency of creating safe, inclusive, and context-sensitive spaces for dialogue that bridge both generational and cultural gaps. Addressing these challenges requires integrated policy approaches that combine digital inclusion, community-based interventions, education, and targeted funding mechanisms to strengthen social cohesion and reduce loneliness across all age groups.

The group focusing on **Emerging Technologies for Local Democracy** identified several challenges related to Artificial Intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and Data Commons, emerging technologies that could offer significant potential to enhance citizen participation and public service delivery, but whose effectiveness is currently limited by several obstacles.

Trust between citizens and local authorities remains low due to limited communication covering only parts of the policy cycle, weak accountability, and ad hoc forms of engagement, whereas participation would need to be multi-directional, legally supported, and continuous throughout policy-making to strengthen trust and influence.

At the same time, high-quality local data and sharing infrastructures are often lacking, which prevents evidence-based decision-making, and public authorities frequently have limited technical capacity to implement AI or IoT solutions, constraining the transformative potential of technology.

Participatory processes also face design and process-related challenges, as they require structured frameworks, clear legal grounding, and sufficient time and space for citizen input, while inclusive, bottom-up engagement and diverse participation methods are essential to prevent dominance by a few actors and to foster representation and trust.

Regulation and public perception further complicate the picture: over-regulation can stifle local digital innovation, yet robust rules are needed to ensure accountability and trust, and public perception of AI is often negative due to concerns over misinformation and “black-box” decision-making, which makes it necessary for regulation to address technology, users, and producers in order to balance innovation with ethical and legal standards.

In the current state of innovation, AI and digital tools are applied in fragmented ways across countries and municipalities, mainly for data collection, analysis, and sharing, and their broader impact depends on addressing gaps in trust, technology, process design, and regulation.

3. Policy recommendations

During the Open Space Technology event, participants reflected on the core theme of building the cities of the future, grounded in strong local democracy and active citizen engagement. This process led to the identification of key sub-topics, which informed the drafting of the policy recommendations. These sub-topics were: sustainable sufficiency and inclusion; intergenerational dialogue and social loneliness; and emerging technologies for local democracy.

3.1. Sufficiency and inclusion group

The group discussing sustainable **sufficiency and inclusion** came up with the following recommendations in order to think of inclusion and mobility through the lens of foresight and citizens participation.

- *Enhance Educational Systems for Inclusion and Sustainable Mobility*

Who should act: Local authorities, in collaboration with schools, universities, and CSOs

What should be done:

- Introduce mandatory elements on climate change, sustainability, sufficiency, inclusion, and mobility in school curricula starting from elementary education.
- Deliver informal educational programs for adults tailored to local contexts, including experience-based learning, community gatherings, workshops, and workplace training on the same topics (climate change, sustainability, sufficiency, inclusion, and mobility).

Expected impact: Promotion of lifelong learning through informal adult education, increased citizen awareness, empowerment, and engagement in sustainable and inclusive mobility, and stronger social cohesion.

Time horizon: Medium-term

Links with EU priorities: Democratic participation, equality, digital and green transition.

- *Develop Local/Community-Owned Governance Frameworks*

Who should act: Local authorities, supported by national governments and CSOs

What should be done:

- National Citizens Assembly on Sustainable & Inclusive Mobility: One representative from each local authority participates to inform national agenda-setting and access to funding.
- Local Committee on Sustainable & Inclusive Mobility: Hybrid committee including experts, local authority officers, and citizens selected randomly, ensuring co-production and co-decision-making at the neighborhood or city level.

Expected impact: Greater citizen participation in decision-making, more responsive and inclusive governance, and alignment of local and national priorities.

Time horizon: Medium-term

Links with EU priorities: Democratic participation, equality, digital transition, sustainable mobility (Green Deal).

- *Secure Funding for Local Governance and Mobility Transformation*

Who should act: EU institutions, member states, local authorities

What should be done:

- Establish EU-directed national funds supporting local governance structures for mobility transformation.
- Implement redistributive measures such as wealth taxation or reallocation of funding from unsustainable transport modes to sustainable alternatives.
- Support community-based alternative currencies and service-sharing schemes to facilitate access to mobility services (e.g., car-sharing, bike-sharing).

Expected impact: Enhanced financial support for sustainable mobility projects, increased accessibility to public services, and promotion of local community engagement.

Time horizon: Medium to long-term

Links with EU priorities: Green Deal, social inclusion, democratic participation, sustainable urban mobility.

3.2. Intergenerational dialogue and social loneliness group

The group that discussed **intergenerational dialogue and social loneliness** identified four main areas of in which improvement was needed and the following are the policy recommendations:

- *Facilitate Digital Inclusion for Older Adults*

Who should act: Local authorities, national digitalization agencies, CSOs

What should be done:

- Create contact points and support centers where volunteers (especially young people) assist older adults in accessing digital services and “internet spaces.”
- Offer free, government-funded digital literacy training programs targeted at the elderly and other vulnerable groups.

Expected impact: Promotion of lifelong learning and digital skills among older adults, reduced social isolation, increased participation in community life.

Time horizon: Short to medium-term

Links with EU priorities: Digital transition, social inclusion, lifelong learning, equality.

- *Develop Structured Intergenerational Volunteering Programs*

Who should act: Local authorities, CSOs, educational institutions

What should be done:

- Create targeted volunteering schemes where young people engage with older adults in activities such as helping with daily tasks, teaching skills, or running workshops.
- Integrate intergenerational teaching in programs like the “University of the Third Age,” with younger instructors offering classes on various topics to older participants.

Expected impact: Strengthened intergenerational dialogue, mutual learning, reduction of social loneliness, and improved social cohesion.

Time horizon: Medium-term

Links with EU priorities: Democratic participation, lifelong learning, social inclusion, equality.

- *Expand Community and Social Spaces for Active Aging*

Who should act: Local authorities, national agencies, CSOs

What should be done:

- Establish and fund active aging centers, intergenerational living spaces, and community hubs (e.g., art, photography, social media sessions) to encourage interaction among generations.
- Adapt the “Endroits de lien” model from Brussels for local contexts, ensuring government support to maintain long-term sustainability.

Expected impact: Reduced social isolation among older adults, enhanced social integration of new residents, and promotion of community cohesion.

Time horizon: Medium to long-term

Links with EU priorities: Social inclusion, equality, democratic participation, Green Deal (through sustainable community planning).

- *Encourage Evidence-Based Policy and Capacity Building*

Who should act: National and local authorities, professional training institutions

What should be done:

- Integrate intergenerational fairness assessments in all policy areas (similar to youth checks).
- Provide training for professionals to design and implement policies addressing social loneliness and intergenerational dialogue.

- Collect and analyze data to monitor impacts and guide decision-making.

Expected impact: Policies better tailored to the needs of different generations, increased accountability, and enhanced effectiveness of interventions.

Time horizon: Medium-term

Links with EU priorities: Democratic participation, social inclusion, lifelong learning, equality, evidence-based governance.

3.3. Emerging technologies for local democracy group

The group that chose to discuss the topic of **Emerging technologies for local democracy** identified five policy recommendations.

- *Implement an Umbrella Approach for Small and Medium Municipalities*

Who should act: Local authorities, supported by national governments and EU institutions

What should be done:

- Adopt a coordinated umbrella framework to ensure scalability, interoperability, and uniformity of all digital solutions at the municipal level.
- Encourage co-creation of solutions and frameworks with citizens, civil servants, and experts to avoid fragmented or scattered implementations.

Expected impact: Efficient, standardized, and interoperable digital solutions across municipalities; reduced duplication of efforts and increased public trust.

Time horizon: Medium-term

Links with EU priorities: Digital transition, democratic participation, efficiency in public administration.

- *Strengthen Digital Literacy Across Society*

Who should act: Local authorities, schools, universities, and professional training institutions

What should be done:

- Integrate digital and media literacy into all educational curricula, linked to civic education and critical thinking.
- Provide compulsory digital literacy programs for civil servants and decision-makers, in partnership with universities and think tanks, including continuous professional development.

Expected impact: Increased awareness and competence in digital tools for citizens and decision-makers; enhanced informed participation and ethical use of technology.

Time horizon: Medium-term

Links with EU priorities: Digital transition, democratic participation, lifelong learning, equality.

- *Develop Transparent and Trustworthy AI Tools*

Who should act: Local authorities, national governments, and research institutions

What should be done:

- Deploy AI assistants for decision-makers to enable informed, data-driven policy-making.
- Implement AI tools to provide citizens with accessible, transparent, and reliable public information.
- Ensure AI use in participatory processes is conscious, balanced, and trustworthy.

Expected impact: Improved quality of local governance, increased trust in AI, and more effective citizen engagement in decision-making.

Time horizon: Medium-term

Links with EU priorities: Digital transition, democratic participation, ethical AI, transparency.

- *Establish Public Data Commons and IoT Infrastructure*

Who should act: Local authorities, national governments, EU institutions

What should be done:

- Create a public data lake to store IoT and citizen-generated data, promoting data altruism and evidence-based decision-making.
- Ensure interoperability and accessibility of these datasets across municipalities.

Expected impact: Improved data-driven policy-making, enhanced transparency, and stronger evidence-based governance.

Time horizon: Medium-term

Links with EU priorities: Digital transition, democratic participation, innovation, evidence-based governance.

- *Promote Enabling Digital Tools for Participation*

Who should act: EU institutions, local authorities

What should be done:

- Introduce the European Digital Wallet and local-level digital voting solutions as pilots to enhance citizen participation.
- Ensure these tools are secure, accessible, and integrated into local governance frameworks.

Expected impact: Increased citizen engagement, streamlined access to public services, and strengthened local democracy.

Time horizon: Medium to long-term

Links with EU priorities: Digital transition, democratic participation, social inclusion, trust in public institutions.

3.4. Conclusion

The co-created policy recommendations address citizen engagement and local governance challenges by drawing on insights from stakeholder engagement within the Community of Interest and the outcomes of the Open Space Scenario Event. These recommendations are the result of inclusive and diverse participation from a wide range of stakeholders, ensuring they are both relevant and comprehensive. They reflect the collective wisdom and needs of the community and aim to offer practical guidance for enhancing citizen participation and governance at the local level. The final recommendations serve as a resource for improving governance practices and citizen engagement sustainably. By involving diverse voices, they provide actionable advice for fostering more effective and inclusive local governance.