

AGENTS OF CO-EXISTENCE

Final Network Report



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across Europe, local governments are under increasing pressure to engage citizens more openly, inclusively and meaningfully, while operating in contexts of growing complexity, polarization and institutional constraint. Although participation has become a widely accepted democratic ambition, many municipalities struggle to translate this ambition into consistent and credible practice.

The URBACT Agents of Co-Existence (AoCE) Network was established to explore this challenge from a different angle. Rather than focusing on new participation tools or methods, the network brought together nine European cities to examine what happens inside local governments that enables or obstructs meaningful participation. The central question guiding the network was:

How can local governments organize themselves to work more effectively, creatively and responsibly with their citizens?

Over a period of two and a half years, the AoCE network explored this question through four interconnected themes: working with citizens, innovators coming into government, civil servants as innovators, and rethinking rules and working methods. While each theme addressed a distinct entry point into participation, the network consistently found that participation challenges rarely belong to one domain alone.

Across all partner cities, a shared insight emerged: participation does not primarily fail due to a lack of citizen interest or insufficient engagement techniques, but because organizations are not always ready to open up participation in a clear, aligned and responsible way.

This systemic insight led the network to reframe participation as an organizational capability rather than a standalone activity. Improving participation, the network concluded, is not about applying a blueprint or climbing higher on participation ladders, but about making conscious and continuous choices about when, why and how participation is appropriate in a given context.

The main collective outcome of this learning journey is the **Participation Assessment Framework**. Developed initially by the City of Genk and refined collaboratively across the network, the framework provides a reflective decision-support tool that helps civil servants assess their organization's readiness for participation.

Beyond individual tools or practices, the AoCE network contributes to a broader understanding of open government and democratic resilience. It demonstrates how honest participation choices, grounded in organizational readiness and learning capacity, can strengthen trust between citizens and institutions, even in contested and polarized contexts.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Purpose of the URBACT Agents of Co-Existence Network

Across Europe, cities are searching for new ways to strengthen the relationship between public institutions and the citizens they serve. Local governments face growing expectations for transparency, inclusion, and responsiveness, while at the same time dealing with complex societal challenges, increasing polarization, and rapidly changing technologies. Many traditional approaches to citizen participation no longer meet the needs of contemporary urban societies.

The **Agents of Co-Existence (AoCE)** Network was created in response to this changing democratic landscape. Supported by the **URBACT IV** program, the network brought together nine partner cities from across Europe to explore one central question:

How can local governments organize themselves to work more effectively, creatively, and meaningfully with their citizens?

Inclusive citizen participation in public policies is obviously not a new concept. Many countries have wide-ranging initiatives that promote citizen involvement in governance and decision-making processes. According to literature, (e.g. International Social Survey Program, Economist Intelligence Unit's measure) citizens are more active when democratic governance is at its best, thus quality of governance correlates to high levels of participation.

The different levels of citizen participation are well-defined in Arnstein's ladder of participation, first published back in 1969. In the URBACT Active Citizens Baseline Study¹ an adapted version of this model was presented which describes the many forms of citizen participation clearly.

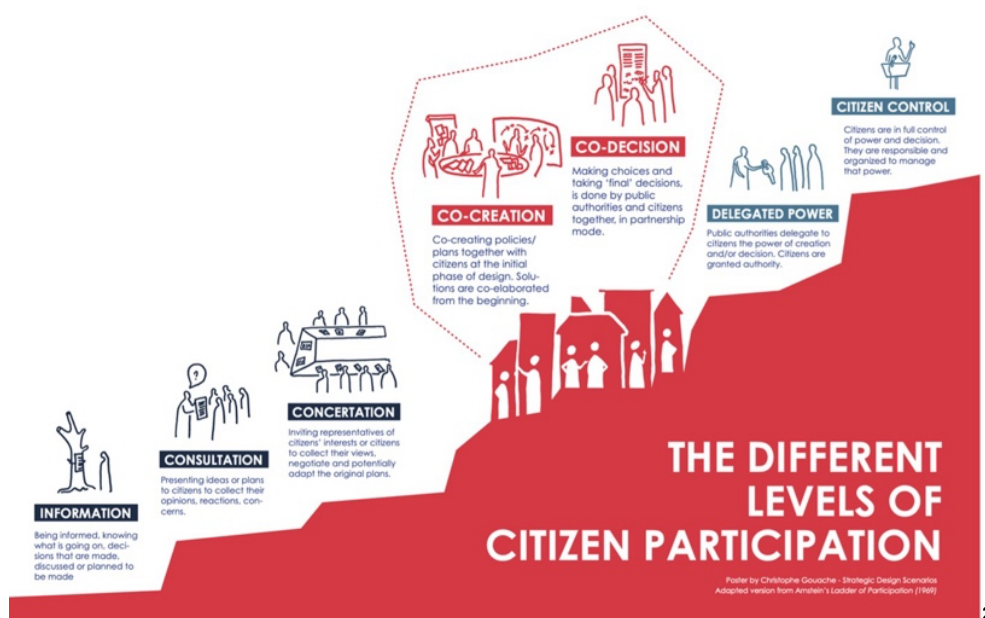


Figure 1. the Different levels of citizen participation

¹ <https://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/2022-10/ActiveCitizens%20APN%20Baseline%20study.pdf>

Rather than focusing on (new) tools or techniques, the AoCE-network aimed to understand what happens **inside public institutions** (in their internal culture, roles, rules, and work routines) that enables or obstructs high-quality participation.

The network introduced the concept of **“Agents of Co-Existence”** as a foundation for democratic collaboration, emphasizing the ability of citizens, civil servants, political leaders, community actors, and others to live, work, and decide together in constructive ways.

Their main goal was described as **“to foster innovative approaches to societal challenges and strive for inclusive local policies with active community involvement”**. Or describing it in simpler words: All 9 cities working together in the Agents of Co-Existence network aimed to improve citizen participation. Not so much by looking at different ways and methods to include citizens in decision-making processes, but rather by taking a good look at their own organization, the city administration and the people working for it. All cities want their civil servants to become true Agents of Co-existence.

The overall purpose of the network was to:

- strengthen open government practices,
- improve internal capacities for participation,
- identify organizational barriers,
- test new ways of working,
- and co-create practical tools that support democratic collaboration.

The most important shared outcome of this URBACT journey is the **Participation Assessment Framework**, described later in this report: a reflective decision-support method that helps civil servants determine when, why, and how to organize participation processes. In our view the Participation Assessment Framework forms a very useful help to work with and it helps to deepen the level of participation as described in Arnstein’s ladder of participation.

Over the past 2,5 years the network was led by **the City of Genk (Belgium)**, known for its long-standing tradition of community-based governance and its relational approach to urban development. Genk’s leadership, particularly its focus on internal reflection, learning culture, and inclusive policymaking, provided a solid foundation for the network approach. Together with Lead Partner, the City of Genk, the AoCE partnership included nine municipalities representing a wide range of European contexts:

Aarhus (Denmark)
Banská Bystrica (Slovakia)
Ķekava (Latvia)
Quart de Poblet (Spain)

Gdańsk (Poland)
Budaörs (Hungary)
Iași Metropolitan Area (Romania)
Breda (Netherlands)



Figure 2. Map of the participating cities in URBACT AoCE-network

Together, the partners represent diverse political cultures, administrative traditions, and democratic landscapes. Their differences proved to be a strength, highlighting shared challenges and enabling cross-context learning.

Over the course of the 2,5 years working together, partners regularly met for transnational learning, reflection and peer reviews on their Integrated Action Plans and Testing Actions as well as to be inspired through many site visits to participation projects in the cities visited.

Each partner city also worked with its own **URBACT Local Group (ULG)**, a multi-stakeholder group composed of civil servants, community representatives, activists, experts, and local organizations. These ULGs helped shape local priorities and also contributed to a shared European learning process.

1.2 Why Participation Needs a New Approach

Early discussions within the AoCE-network revealed that many cities face the same core issues:

- Participation is often started too late in a decision-making process.
- Staff feel insecure about facilitation, communication, or managing conflict.
- Internal procedures create delays or confusion.
- Political expectations are not always explicit.
- "Participation" can mean very different things across departments.
- Civil servants often carry the emotional load of public engagement.
- Outreach to diverse groups remains difficult.
- Innovation is often siloed, fragile, or dependent on "champions."
- Citizens are sometimes invited into processes where nothing is truly negotiable.

These challenges are not caused by a lack of motivation or interest, neither among citizens nor among municipal staff. They result from **institutional conditions**. The network therefore decided that attention needed to go to the *internal* foundations of participation: the organizational culture, mandates given and rules that are applied. But also, capacities building, cross-department collaboration and political alignment. In our Baseline Study we described a skills model for innovation in public policy. We established that further development of these skills is essential for civil servants working for public administrations that wish to work in an open government, open for citizens to actively participate in decision making processes. This internal focus is what makes the AoCE-approach different from many other participation initiatives.

1.3 The Four Themes of the AoCE-network

To structure the learning journey, the network defined **four themes** that capture the key dimensions of democratic collaboration inside municipalities:

Theme 1 – Working Together with Citizens. This theme focuses outward on the quality of collaboration with citizens and communities. For this part, the network focused on answering questions such as: How do municipalities create meaningful, accessible, and trust-building participation processes? How do they engage diverse groups? What methods work in different contexts?

Theme 2 – Innovators Coming into Government looks at the boundaries of institutions – how new actors and innovators enter government work. How can governments open their doors to new actors – NGOs, youth groups, neighborhood initiatives, social innovators – and integrate their contributions into public decision-making?

Theme 3 – Civil Servants as Innovators. This theme looks inward, to the skills, attitudes, and capacities of civil servants. For this theme, important questions are how can staff be supported, trained, empowered, and encouraged to take on new roles as facilitators, connectors, and co-creators of democratic processes?

Theme 4 – New Working Methods & Rethinking the Rules addresses the system, the rules, procedures, and structures that make participation possible. How can these be adapted to support participation rather than hinder it?

In the next chapters we will describe our insights associated with each of the themes and our key learnings. We will not avoid the downside of our discoveries and, also share the challenges, risks or difficulties we see. The AoCE-network is convinced that learning through mistakes is essential for those working in and with citizen participation. Therefore, we do not look away from things that proved difficult and/or at times even impossible. For it is from our mistakes that we learn the most! Also, being allowed to make mistakes is essential for an organization with a culture in which participation and an open relationship with citizens is important. It is exactly the reason why we introduced the OOPS-award: an award for the biggest mistake made by one of the partners in our Network.

The OOPS-award was won by the city of Gdansk during the first Core Network Meeting. Their mistake was to simply copy-paste an earlier approach for a participation trajectory for another process. This failed completely. And it learned them that each participation process requires attention and must have its own process. A key learning recognized by all other partners.



Photo 4. Michal Zorna of Gdansk receiving the OOPS award

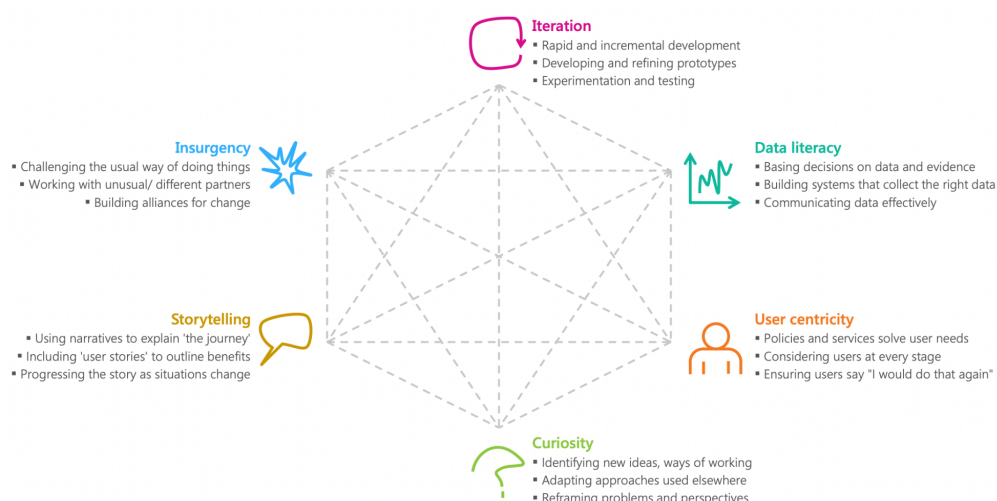
In the field of open governance and public sector efficiency enhancement OECD's Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI¹) is one of the most important policy suppliers. Their primary mission is to identify, analyse, and showcase cutting-edge practices, tools, and methodologies that drive public sector innovation. (See examples from the OPSI case study library: Agent of Open Government and Future Mentor programme)

The *Core Skills for Public Sector Innovation* report is probably the most relevant to the topic to be mentioned here. The OECD's innovation framework emphasizes putting people first in innovative organizations: how effective the public sector is at being innovative will likely depend on the abilities and skills of individual civil servants, how they are organized in teams, and how the public administration is structured.

The developed model for public sector innovation is based on **six "core" skill categories**. Not all public employees will be required to utilise or apply these skills daily. However, in a modern 21st-century public service they should at least be somewhat familiar with these six areas:

- **Iteration:** developing policies, products and services incrementally and experimentally;
- **Data literacy:** ensure that decisions are data-driven;
- **User-centricity:** public services should focus on addressing citizens' needs;
- **Curiosity:** seeking and trying new ideas or ways of working;
- **Storytelling:** explaining the change in a way that creates engaging narratives;
- **Insurgency:** challenging the status quo and working with unusual partners.

FIGURE 3. CORE SKILL CATEGORIES



For each of the 6 core skills to innovate in the public sector, the model provides a matrix that decomposes each skill area into four practical elements at the three levels of capacities - basic awareness, emerging capability, and regular practitioner. It is possible to use the matrix for creating profiles of innovators, depending on their set of functions and responsibilities.

Although the themes are presented as separate chapters in this report, they constantly intersect in practice. In many cases, challenges in one theme could be traced back to weaknesses in another:

- Poor outreach to citizens (Theme 1) often stemmed from unclear political mandates (Theme 4).
- Staff hesitation to run participatory processes (Theme 3) was linked to lack of clarity about decision-making power (Theme 4).
- Innovators wanting to work with government (Theme 2) faced outdated rules or siloed departments (Theme 4).
- Citizens losing trust (Theme 1) was sometimes due to internal miscommunication among departments (Theme 3)

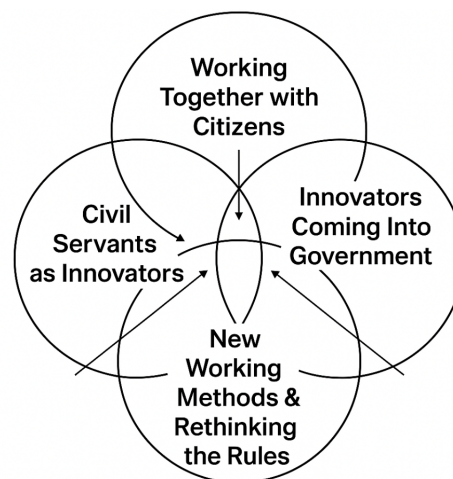


Figure 5. All four themes intersect

Partners repeatedly emphasized that strong participation only emerges when **all four dimensions align**. This **holistic understanding** helped cities make better decisions and develop more mature participation strategies in their integrated action plans. Across the AoCE-network, six insights consistently surfaced as relevant across all four themes:

1. **Participation requires clarity above all else.** Citizens want to understand the purpose of a process, what elements are open for discussion, how their input will be used, and what happens after the process ends. Cities found that when expectations are unclear, frustration grows quickly.
2. **Internal coordination matters just as much as external communication.** Municipalities emphasized that before inviting citizens into a process, internal alignment is crucial – including clear responsibilities, realistic timelines, and political backing – to avoid confusion and broken promises.
3. **Participation is emotional work.** Civil servants regularly navigate conflict, public pressure, and unrealistic expectations while carrying the emotional load of facilitating dialogue. This makes structured support and capacity-building essential for sustainable participation work.
4. **Innovation thrives in “soft spaces.”** Effective participation rarely begins in formal council meetings or rigid procedures. Instead, it flourishes in more flexible environments such as workshops, neighbourhood dialogues, co-creation labs, informal breakfast meetings, and peer-learning settings, where experimentation feels safer.
5. **Trust is the currency of participation.** Cities observed that even small participation processes that strengthen trust can have a lasting positive impact on democratic culture, making trust-building a core outcome rather than a side effect. On the other hand, distrust often is the

steppingstone for polarization. Quite a few of our partners had to deal with polarized issues and have worked on an approach to move away from this polarization.

6. **Digital tools are powerful—but only when combined with face-to-face engagement.** Their successful use also requires civil servants to develop specific digital skills and to introduce new working methods and rules. Since all partners planned actions in their IAPs that introduce new digital participatory tools and solutions, this topic received increased attention across all themes, supported by good practices from both the partners and beyond the partnership.

In the AoCE-network we have worked on ideas and methods to create solutions that help create this holistic approach towards participation in decision making. We have found that the Participation Assessment Framework will be an important method for this approach and will help create this holistic view to build a culture of meaningful participation: one that engages citizens, empowers innovators, supports civil servants, and adapts institutional rules to match contemporary democratic needs.

1.4 The Development of the Participation Assessment Framework

One of the most significant results of the AoCE-network is the **Participation Assessment Framework**, developed by Genk and refined through joint discussion with all partner cities.

The framework responds to a recurring challenge observed early in the network: **Participation often fails not because citizens are unwilling, but because the internal system is/the civil servants are not ready.**

The framework provides a reflective set of questions to help civil servants determine whether participation is appropriate for a given topic and what level of participation is realistic. But it is also helpful to define which stakeholders are (to be) involved, what political mandate exists, and whether the conditions for success are present, both internally and externally

The theoretical basis for the Participation Assessment Framework is found in **Engeström's Activity Theory**. In chapter 6 this theory will be further explained, together with the use of the Participation Assessment Framework. Together with the enormous progress all partner cities made with their (testing) actions and work on their Integrated Action Plans the Framework is an important result of 2,5 years of working together under the URBACT-umbrella. The AoCE-network is convinced the Framework will be helpful in many organizations to improve their approach to participation processes for decision-making.



Figure 6. Participation Assessment Framework

The chapters that follow explore this insight through four interconnected themes. Each theme highlights a different entry point into participation, but none can be understood in isolation. Together, they show how challenges in citizen engagement, innovation, civil service capacity and institutional rules are deeply interrelated. By examining these themes side by side, the report builds towards a shared understanding of participation not as a set of methods, but as an organizational capability that requires continuous reflection and alignment.

CHAPTER 2 – THEME 1: WORKING TOGETHER WITH CITIZENS

2.1 Why working with citizens matters more than ever

As said in the introduction: cities are searching for new ways to strengthen the relationship between public institutions and the citizens they serve. Local governments face growing expectations for transparency, inclusion, and responsiveness, while at the same time dealing with complex societal challenges, increasing polarization, and rapidly changing technologies. Many traditional approaches to citizen participation no longer meet the needs of contemporary urban societies.

While working together in the AoCE-network, across all AoCE partner cities, one insight emerged with striking consistency:

**Participation only works when citizens feel seen, respected,
and genuinely invited into the decision-making process.**

This seems simple, but in practice, cities found that working together with citizens requires deliberate choices, clear communication, and a supportive internal organization. Without these conditions, even well-intended engagement efforts risk disappointing citizens or overburdening staff.

Theme 1 focused on the fundamentals of participation:

- How do you invite citizens in?
- How do you reach groups that are not already involved?
- How do you frame a project, so people understand what is at stake?
- How do you ensure that citizen input actually influences public decisions?

Within the AoCE-network, municipalities established that meaningful participation is fundamentally **relational work, not a purely technical or procedural task**. It is built on human interactions: on listening, responding, and engaging in ways that make people feel their presence matters. Effective participation requires curiosity about citizens' perspectives, clarity about what the process can influence, and an openness to adapting plans based on what emerges. Above all, it demands a sustained investment in trust-building, because without trust, even the most sophisticated participation tools fail to create genuine dialogue or impact.

2.2 What we learned

During our transnational meetings, the local ULG meetings, and through their testing actions, cities shared several insights and have thought about what can be learned from these insights:

Insight 1 - Good participation starts long before the first public meeting

Cities noted that the biggest risks arise when a participation process is launched too late. When political decisions have already been made, or when internal alignment is missing, citizens inevitably feel misled, which then leads to distrust. This is why e.g. the City of Banská Bystrica put a lot of effort in training staff on preventing polarization, since this was definitely an important issue within their city.

***"If we are not clear internally, we cannot be honest externally."*³**

³ This quote was literally said by participants during one of the AoCE Core Network Meetings

Thus, internal preparation became a core focus for the AoCE-network, and it explains why Theme 4 later discusses the institutional conditions for participation.

Insight 2 - Trust is built through small acts, not big events

Many cities found that citizens respond strongly to small, human gestures. A personal invitation can signal that their presence genuinely matters. A brief conversation in the street can build trust in ways that formal meetings often cannot. A phone call after a meeting shows respect and continuity, reinforcing that their contributions are valued. And when staff members demonstrate that they are genuinely listening, it also creates an atmosphere of sincerity that encourages people to stay engaged and participate more actively. Formal consultation evenings were often *less* effective than informal dialogues or site visits.

"In participation, people respond to people – not to institutions."⁴

Insight 3 - Diversity does not happen by accident

Reaching underrepresented groups requires a more intentional and thoughtful approach. Tailored communication ensures that messages are accessible, culturally appropriate, and delivered through channels people use. Going into neighbourhoods allows the city to meet citizens in their own environments, where they feel most comfortable. Offering different forms of participation helps accommodate varying schedules, preferences, and levels of confidence. Working with trusted intermediaries—such as NGOs, community leaders, or youth workers—builds bridges to groups who may not trust or regularly interact with public institutions.

Łekava's experience with neighbourhood dialogues clearly illustrated this: the key was not the format but the personal relationships⁵.

Insight 4 - Participation must be honest about constraints

Cities learned that credibility depends on being clear and transparent with citizens from the very beginning. People need to understand what is already decided so they do not waste time discussing issues that are no longer open. They also need to know what remains undecided, as this is where their input can make a genuine difference. Being explicit about what citizen contributions can influence helps manage expectations and motivates meaningful participation. Equally important is explaining what cannot change, so the process does not create false hopes or later disappointment.

Gdańsk showed this with its Civic & Green Budget⁶: transparent rules made the process predictable and widely trusted. This was a valuable lesson they have learned through earlier participatory processes which were less successful.

Insight 5 - Process and transparency matter as much as content

In several cases, cities observed that citizens valued the quality of the process even more than the specific outcome of a decision. For instance: clear timelines help people understand how long the process will take and when they can expect to hear back. Open reporting builds trust by showing that all contributions are acknowledged and treated fairly. Documented follow-up demonstrates accountability and reassures participants that their input has not been forgotten. Visible next steps give citizens confidence that the process is moving forward, which often matters more to them than whether their preferred option was selected. This means that even "small" improvements in communication and follow-up can significantly improve trust.

⁴ Quote by an Aarhus representative during one of our Core Network Meetings

⁵ Described as good practice in par. 2.5.3 of this report

⁶ Described as good practice in par. 2.5.1 of this report

2.3 Challenges related to “working with citizens”

Since the network also specifically looked at “what doesn’t work” for each theme described in this report, the partners identified important challenges related to the specific theme. There are quite a few issues that complicate meaningful collaboration with citizens. These challenges are rarely the result of bad intentions. Rather, they tend to emerge from unclear decision-making, organizational fragility, or communication that unintentionally excludes people.

A first challenge arises when **participation is launched without a clear political mandate**. When citizens are invited to engage without knowing what is actually open for discussion, expectations quickly diverge from reality. People may invest significant time and energy in developing ideas that later turn out to be non-negotiable. Even when this happens unintentionally, it generates disappointment and distrust. Over time, such experiences undermine the credibility of participation processes and make it harder to convince citizens that their voices genuinely matter.

Closely related is **the tendency to frame consultation as co-creation**. If key decisions have already been made, calling a process “co-creation” creates false expectations and leaves participants feeling that their contributions were symbolic rather than substantive. Partners observed that honest and precise labelling of participatory processes is not a technical detail, but a condition for trust. When people clearly understand the level of influence they have, engagement becomes more constructive and less frustrating.

Another recurring challenge concerns **organizational dependence on individual champions**. In many cities, participation processes thrive because of one highly committed staff member who builds relationships and holds the process together. While this dedication is invaluable, it also creates vulnerability. When such individuals change roles or leave the organization, participation efforts often stall or collapse because knowledge, responsibility and trust were never embedded institutionally. Partners emphasized that sustainable participation must be carried by the organization, supported by shared procedures, clear roles and institutional memory.

Communication itself also poses a significant challenge. Text-heavy invitations, bureaucratic language or abstract topics can make participation feel inaccessible or irrelevant. Citizens may struggle to grasp what a process is about or how it connects to their everyday lives. When communication feels formal or distant, people often assume that participation is “not for them.” Clear, simple and inviting communication is therefore essential—not only to increase turnout, but to signal openness and inclusivity from the outset.

Finally, cities stressed the importance of **closing the loop**. When citizens share ideas or concerns but never hear back about what was done with their input, their willingness to participate quickly diminishes. Lack of feedback creates the impression that contributions disappear into a void, regardless of their quality. Cities found that timely and transparent follow-up—showing which suggestions were taken on board and explaining why others were not—strengthens the legitimacy of participation and encourages people to stay involved over time.

2.4 Key learnings related to “working with citizens”

Together, the partners in the Agents of Co-Existence network formulated a shared set of recommendations that capture **what governments need to work credibly and inclusively with citizens**. These recommendations did not emerge as abstract principles, but as practical insights distilled from experimentation across cities. Together with the lessons from the other thematic chapters, these

recommendations shaped the Participation Assessment Framework, which supports cities in reflecting on how, why and with whom they engage.

Since nowadays it is almost unthinkable to not make use of digital solutions for citizen participation, in the key learnings the AoCE network also shares some of their learnings and good examples related to the use of digital tools for each theme. Even though participation is inherently rooted in face-to-face relationships, partners recognized that **digital tools can open new opportunities** to reach a broader and more diverse segment of the population. Almost all partners therefore decided to integrate digital solutions into their participatory processes. A key insight, however, is that digital methods also **carry the risk of excluding residents who lack digital skills, confidence, or access to devices**.

For this reason, partners underlined that the **aim should never be to replace traditional in-person tools**—such as workshops, public forums, neighbourhood walks, or information boards—**but to complement them**. When used in this blended way, digital tools **do not undermine inclusion but actively enhance** it by:

Reaching more residents in a shorter amount of time. Digital platforms enable wide outreach with minimal logistical constraints, making it possible to involve people who cannot attend physical meetings due to work, mobility, or caregiving responsibilities. They also allow participation at any time, increasing flexibility for residents.

Gather large volumes of quantifiable and comparable data. Online tools make it easier to collect structured input, visualize trends, and quickly analyse data. This supports evidence-based decision-making and helps municipalities understand participation patterns over time.

Share information more broadly and transparently with citizens. Digital channels allow updates, documents, and decisions to be published instantly and accessed by anyone. This improves trust, reduces misunderstandings, and supports open dialogue.

Become more cost-effective over the long term. After initial setup, online tools can reduce the need for repeated physical events, travel, and venue costs. They also help staff use their time more efficiently by automating parts of the engagement process.

Overall, this blended approach ensures broader participation and makes engagement more accessible, efficient, and sustainable for both residents and municipalities.

The most commonly used or planned digital tool among the AoCE partners is a **digital participation platform (a centralized website)**. Partners concluded that having all participatory processes accessible in one place significantly increases both online and offline engagement. When citizens know that every ongoing initiative—consultations, surveys, co-creation activities, or budgeting processes—is available on a single, reliable site, they are less likely to miss important opportunities to influence local decisions. Therefore, a key recommendation for cities is to **establish a unified digital participation platform where all participatory processes are clearly organized and easily accessible**.

Several partners—such as Banská Bystrica, Gdańsk, and Genk—have already chosen to adopt the DECIDIM platform. **DECIDIM** is a free and open-source, web-based participation platform originally developed by the City of Barcelona in 2016. More than just a digital tool, it is a full FLOSS project⁷, meaning anyone can copy, modify, and share its source code. Its active international user community continuously improves and expands the platform through updates, plugins, and new functionalities.

⁷ FLOSS = Free/Libre and Open Source Software

Today, DECIDIM is used by more than **390 municipalities across 30 countries**, including cities such as Tampere, Helsinki, Zurich, New York City, and **Banská Bystrica**, which runs its participatory process “Let’s create Banská Bystrica together” on the platform.



Figure 7. Banská Bystrica’s DECIDIM website

The main application areas of DECIDIM are strategic planning, participatory processes, organizing citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting. Its key features:

- **Participatory budgeting** component is specifically designed for the authorization, submission, internal review, public voting and evaluation, and presentation of submitted projects;
- **Questionnaires/surveys** this feature offers a full range of question formats and an evaluation mechanism;
- **Participatory texts** creates a space for participatory creation and commenting on documents by predefined groups of users;
- **Participatory events** creates a space for the management of all participatory events of the city in an intuitive and customizable online environment (online/personal workshops, seminars, conferences);
- **User authorization** offers several ways to authorize users (email, sms gateway, qr code by mail)

Other partners such as Breda, Budaörs and Quart de Poblet are taking a different approach by **developing their own digital participation platforms from scratch**. Budaörs, for example, initially created a platform for a pilot participatory budgeting campaign. After this platform proved successful for that specific process, the city decided to expand its use, enabling it to support additional participatory initiatives, such as discussions on their City Plan 2040, which are already underway on the platform.

Apart from these notions on the use of digital platforms, cities consistently emphasized that meaningful participation starts long before the first meeting with citizens takes place. **Investing time in preparation is essential**. Internal alignment helps ensure that participation processes are coherent rather than contradictory. Clarifying what is genuinely open for discussion allows civil servants and politicians to speak with one voice, while clear political ownership signals that citizen input will be taken seriously. Equally important is cross-departmental collaboration, as many participation processes cut across policy silos. These preparatory questions are reflected in the framework’s emphasis on mandate, scope and organizational readiness.

Rather than aiming for large, high-profile participation processes from the outset, cities found value in **starting small**. Prototyping methods through limited-scale experiments gave staff the opportunity to learn by doing, without the pressure of reputational risk or unrealistic expectations. These pilot experiences fed directly into the framework by highlighting the importance of adaptability, learning cycles and proportionality in participation design.

Another recurring insight was **the importance of diversity in participation methods**. Relying on a single format often leads to the same voices being heard repeatedly. By combining online tools with face-to-face engagement, cities were able to reach people with different preferences, schedules and capabilities. Neighbourhood walks connected conversations to lived places, creative workshops lowered thresholds for participation, and youth-oriented formats brought in perspectives rarely present in traditional meetings. This reinforced the framework's focus on inclusivity, accessibility and contextual sensitivity.

Further, **clarity about the level of participation emerged as a decisive factor for trust**. Cities learned that explicitly distinguishing between information, consultation, dialogue, co-creation and decision-making helps citizens understand the purpose of a process and the influence they can expect. Clear labelling allows people to make informed choices about their involvement and prevents disappointment rooted in mismatched expectations. These distinctions now form a central element of the Participation Assessment Framework, supporting transparent and honest engagement.

Finally, the network underlined that **participation is fundamentally relational**. Trust and sustained engagement cannot be built through procedures alone. Cities acknowledged that they rarely reach all groups on their own and that partnerships are indispensable. Collaborating with schools, NGOs, neighbourhood initiatives and community hosts made participation more accessible, particularly for residents who might feel distant from public institutions. This relational dimension is explicitly embedded in the framework, which encourages cities to reflect on partnerships, intermediaries and long-term relationship-building as integral parts of participation.

2.5 Good practices in Theme 1 “Working with citizens”

The following pages present five good practices selected by the AoCE-network as exemplary illustrations of Theme 1. Each practice highlights different dimensions of working effectively with citizens: scale, inclusion, innovation, and trust-building.

1. **Gdańsk(Poland): Civic& Green Budgets**
2. **Budaörs(Hungary): IntroducingParticipatorybudgeting**
3. **Ķekava (Latvia): Neighbourhood Dialogues & NGO Council**
4. **Aarhus (Denmark): Democracy hosts (incl. Neighbourhood mothers)**
5. **Iași (Romania): “DecideWisely! –Civic Participation Framework Lab”**

2.5.1 Gdańsk (Poland): Civic & Green Budgets

Gdańsk's Civic and Green Budgets respond to residents' evolving needs, supporting ecological projects and local initiatives across the city.

The Civic Budget introduced in Gdańsk in 2013 responded to residents' growing demand for greater involvement in shaping their local environment and influencing municipal priorities. Continuous evaluations over the years revealed a clear shift in citizens' expectations: more and more proposals focused on expanding green spaces, planting trees, improving air quality and protecting the natural

environment. This trend reflected rising ecological awareness and highlighted the need for a financial mechanism that would prioritise environmental projects and ensure fair access to funding for green initiatives.

Although the Civic Budget was inclusive, it was not fully equipped to address the increasing number and specificity of environmentally focused proposals. As these projects multiplied, it became evident that a dedicated, thematic tool could better support the city's strategic goals in climate adaptation, biodiversity and sustainable urban development. This led to the creation of the Green Civic Budget in 2020, introduced as a separate, exclusive fund for environmental and nature-based initiatives.

The practice now integrates two complementary participatory instruments: the Civic Budget and the Green Civic Budget. Both operate annually through a transparent cycle that includes proposal submission, verification, public voting and implementation of the winning projects. While the Civic Budget supports all types of community-driven improvements, the Green Civic Budget focuses solely on environmental initiatives such as tree planting, pocket parks, pollinator-friendly meadows, rain gardens, biodiversity corridors and climate-resilient public spaces. By allocating a separate funding stream, ecological priorities are safeguarded and not overshadowed by more traditional infrastructure or social projects.

To meet its objectives, the practice relies on clear annual rules, user-friendly guidance for residents, environmental verification procedures, citywide communication campaigns and full transparency in publishing results. This adaptive approach ensures that both budget mechanisms remain relevant and aligned with Gdańsk's long-term sustainability goals.

Key stakeholders include residents who submit and vote on projects, district councils that mobilise local communities, municipal departments responsible for green areas and public spaces, environmental NGOs providing expert input, and informal neighbourhood groups co-developing ideas. Beneficiaries include residents enjoying greener and more attractive public spaces, the natural environment benefiting from biodiversity and climate-resilient interventions, and the city administration, which strengthens participatory governance and gains deeper insight into community priorities.

Together, the Civic Budget and Green Civic Budget⁸ empower citizens, encourage informed decision-making and support long-term environmental stewardship in Gdańsk.



Figure 8. Civic Budget website of Gdansk

Resources needed

In the 2025 edition, the combined implementation of the Civic Budget and the Green Civic Budget in Gdańsk was financed with a total of 21,526,022 PLN. This included 4,137,851 PLN for citywide projects and 17,388,171 PLN for district-level initiatives. Within these amounts, dedicated funding was

⁸ Further information can be found on the following webpages: <https://www.gdansk.pl/budzet-obywatelski> and <https://euarenas-toolbox.eu/the-tool/gdansk-participatory-budgeting/>

allocated to environmental projects: 1,304,922 PLN for citywide Green Civic Budget initiatives and 3,718,649 PLN for district-level green projects. In the 2026 edition, the overall participatory budget increased to nearly 25 million PLN.

The human resources required to operate the practice involve staff from several key municipal units, including the Social Development Department, the Department for Cooperation with District Councils and Citizens, the Green Areas Authority and district councils. These teams coordinate the annual cycle, support project submissions, verify proposals, manage the voting process and oversee the implementation of selected projects.

Evidence of success (results achieved)

Since 2013, Gdańsk's Civic Budget has become one of the city's most stable and effective participation tools, implemented annually and steadily expanded. Its financial scale shows strong institutional commitment: from 9 million PLN in the first edition to over 20 million PLN in recent years, including 21,526,022 PLN in 2025 and nearly 25 million PLN planned for 2026. The system generates consistently high engagement. In 2025, residents submitted 612 projects, 394 of which passed verification and entered the final vote, demonstrating widespread public awareness and active use of the mechanism.

The model has evolved significantly, most notably through the creation of the Green Civic Budget, a dedicated environmental funding stream available both citywide and at district level. Across twelve editions, residents have selected more than a thousand projects worth nearly 200 million PLN, resulting in tangible improvements such as upgraded public spaces, mobility solutions, recreational areas and enhanced green infrastructure.

Challenges encountered

During the implementation of the Civic Budget practice, several challenges and lessons learned have become evident. One recurring issue concerns representativeness. Studies show that participants in participatory budgeting processes often do not fully reflect the demographic structure of the city, which may lead to outcomes that overlook the needs of underrepresented groups. Another challenge relates to the verification of submitted projects. The process can be technically demanding and time-consuming, especially when the number of proposals is high, and the assessment is carried out mainly by municipal staff without broader dialogue with residents. This may limit the sense of true co-decision making.

Operational challenges have also been observed. In Gdańsk, a technical error during the 2017 voting process resulted in missing votes, demonstrating the importance of transparent and reliable digital systems for maintaining public trust. Furthermore, participatory budgets often focus on individual project ideas rather than broader strategic urban needs, which may restrict their long-term impact.

Another lesson concerns scale. Although the annual budget dedicated to the Civic Budget in Gdańsk has grown significantly, it still represents a small share of the city's overall financial framework, limiting its ability to influence systemic policy areas. For this reason, a closer alignment between participatory budgeting and strategic urban planning is considered essential.

Overall, the key lessons highlight the need to strengthen representativeness, ensure transparent and robust operational processes, integrate deliberation into project evaluation, and embed the Civic Budget more strongly within long-term city strategies.

Potential for learning or transfer

Gdańsk's Civic Budget is potentially interesting for other regions because it demonstrates how a large city can embed participatory budgeting into long-term governance in a stable, recurring and evolving form. One of the key success factors is its institutionalisation: the process has been carried out annually since 2013, supported by a clear legal framework, dedicated municipal teams and a transparent allocation formula that distributes funds at both citywide and district levels. The introduction of the Green Civic Budget, an environmental stream fully integrated into the main programme, also shows how thematic priorities can be incorporated without creating parallel systems. Many cities seek ways to link climate action with citizen participation, and Gdańsk's model provides a practical example of such integration.

Another transferable element is the scale and design of engagement. With more than 600 project proposals submitted in recent editions and steadily increasing financial allocations, Gdańsk demonstrates how participatory budgeting can achieve high visibility, political support and citizen ownership when consistently prioritised and adequately resourced. At the same time, the city's experience highlights factors that may hamper transfer if not addressed, including the need for reliable digital voting tools, transparent verification procedures and efforts to ensure representativeness among participants.

A concrete example of the practice's visibility beyond Poland is its inclusion in the EUARENAS Participatory Toolbox, where Gdańsk's Civic Budget is presented as a replicable participatory and deliberative method that other cities can adopt or adapt. This recognition shows that the model is not only functional locally but also considered relevant in European democratic innovation contexts. As such, it offers practical inspiration for regions seeking to strengthen participation, integrate environmental priorities and build long-term, community-driven decision-making mechanisms.

2.5.2 Budaörs (Hungary): Introducing Participatory budgeting

Budaörs launched its first participatory budgeting (PB) process in early 2025 as a testing action within the AoCE project, marking a significant step towards strengthening local democracy and citizen involvement.⁹ The introduction of PB responded to a long-standing challenge: municipal budget decisions often feel distant to residents, who have limited opportunities to influence how public resources are allocated. The municipality recognised that sustainable and legitimate urban development requires direct citizen participation, especially in a rapidly growing city where local needs are diverse and evolving. This context triggered the decision to introduce a structured, transparent and genuinely inclusive participatory budgeting model, allowing residents to directly decide on the allocation of 100 million HUF.

The practice of participatory budgeting in Budaörs aims to bring decision-making closer to citizens, enhance transparency and build trust between the municipality and the community. It provides a clear and accessible process through which residents can express their priorities, propose solutions and influence tangible outcomes. The PB cycle consists of four main stages. First, residents are invited to submit ideas addressing various development priorities such as greening, mobility, accessibility, community spaces or social inclusion. This open submission phase enables citizens to articulate needs that are often visible only at the neighbourhood level. In the second stage, municipal experts conduct a professional evaluation to ensure the feasibility, legality and relevance of the submitted proposals. This verification process guarantees that only implementable ideas move forward, while maintaining openness and clarity about the criteria applied.

The third stage is public voting, during which residents of Budaörs choose the ideas they consider most important for their city. This step ensures that the final outcome reflects shared community priorities rather than individual interests. The winning proposals are then integrated into the municipal budget and implemented by the municipality, which closes the loop between citizen input and concrete action. Through this annual cycle, the practice effectively meets its objectives by increasing transparency, strengthening public trust and directly integrating community needs into urban development.

The PB model involves a wide range of stakeholders. The municipality provides the framework, coordinates the process and ensures implementation of the winning ideas. Residents play a central role by submitting proposals, voting and engaging in community discussions. Civil organizations, neighbourhood groups and public institutions may also propose ideas or contribute to implementation, helping broaden outreach and deepen local ownership. The main beneficiaries of the practice are the people of Budaörs themselves, who gain improved public spaces, greener neighbourhoods and solutions tailored to their daily needs.

The level of engagement in the first edition demonstrates the strong commitment of local residents. A total of 83 ideas were submitted, providing valuable insight into the topics most important to the community. When compared proportionally to the population, Budaörs received nearly six times more submissions than Budapest's citywide participatory budgeting process, which has been running since 2020. This remarkable level of participation shows that the people of Budaörs are eager to shape their city's future and that the PB model successfully mobilised the community from its very first year. Through this practice, Budaörs has taken an important step toward more inclusive, transparent and citizen-driven urban governance.

⁹ Further information can be found on the following webpages: <https://resztveszek.budaors.hu/> and www.budaors.hu

Resources needed

The Municipality of Budaörs allocated 100 million HUF for the 2025 participatory budgeting. An additional 6 million HUF was provided by the municipality to cover necessary IT tasks as well as communication and marketing. During the design and implementation of the participatory budgeting, it became clear that there is a need to establish an internal position—a dedicated person responsible for participation processes, coordinating and implementing them. If such a position cannot be ensured, then long-term external contracts must be used to secure the necessary capacity. Without this, neither next year's participatory budgeting nor other complex participatory processes can be successfully implemented.

It is recommended that this participation officer cooperates with the Budaörs Community coordinator, potentially implementing initiatives jointly. A possible future step could be the establishment of a participation office with a 2–3 persons team. With such capacity, larger-scale and more diverse processes could be carried out.



Figure 9. Impressions of Budaörs Website for participatory budget

Evidence of success (results achieved)

This year, for the first time, a total of 83 ideas were submitted, which also serve as feedback on the topics and issues that most concern the residents. According to the data published by the Budapest Municipality on participatory budgeting, Budaörs can be very proud of this level of activity, as proportionally to its population—nearly six times as many ideas were submitted in Budaörs compared to the capital's participatory budgeting process this year, a program first launched in 2020. At the beginning of the year, the submitted ideas went through a multi-stage evaluation process, resulting in 20 proposals being placed on the ballot in two categories:

- Small project category: This includes ideas that can be implemented with a budget of at least 500,000 HUF but no more than 5 million HUF.
- Large project category: This group contains proposals that can be implemented with a budget above 5 million HUF but not exceeding 30 million HUF.

The voting closed on September 30. The final results of the vote were also confirmed by the Municipal Council. As a result, a total of 13 projects were supported. 3 large projects and 10 small projects.

Challenges encountered

The relevant decision-maker cannot be convinced about the added-value of a PB and do not provide sufficient human capacity and fund for its second implementation. We try to demonstrate the benefit of PB through the testing action this way ensuring additional edition of the participatory budget in Budaörs.

Part of the pre-screening and selection process took place during the summer period, which made the implementation of the processes more difficult. This should be taken into account in the future. It will also be a serious challenge for the municipality that next year the participatory budget will restart with new idea submissions, while at the same time the implementation of the winning projects from previous years will also be ongoing.

Even after the public vote, due attention must be paid to the transparent, annual closing of the process, making internal decisions, announcing the results, and then contacting the winners. This didn't go smoothly the first time.

Potential for learning or transfer

The example of Budaörs highlights that participatory budgeting is not merely a financial decision, but also a way of building relationships between city leadership and residents. The process of idea submission and voting provides direct feedback on local needs.

The online platform and public voting supported transparency. This is instructive for other municipalities: the process works well when residents can see how an idea progresses to implementation.

We have applied Maptionnaire, a map-based survey making tool for collecting project ideas in the participatory budget Budaörs 2025. Maptionnaire proved to be an extremely user-friendly platform for creating the idea collection questionnaire and gathering submissions. Due to the tight timeframe, it was especially useful that the questionnaire could be created quickly without requiring IT development work. The drawback was that it functions separately from the participatory budget (PB) website, meaning the data had to be downloaded from the Maptionnaire interface and re-uploaded to the website's admin panel so that evaluators could access it. Maptionnaire's unique mapping features can also be integrated into the resztveszek.budaors.hu website.

Budaörs also launched a prize game on Instagram to present the steps of participatory budgeting in a playful way. This shows that participation can be encouraged not only with information, but also with engaging experiences.

2.5.3 Ķekava (Latvia): Neighbourhood Dialogues and Collaborative Events in Neighbourhoods

Neighbourhood-based collaborative events to boost participation and foster closer cooperation between municipal staff and local communities through informal, engaging interaction.

Within the framework of the URBACT network “Agents of Co-existence,” three collaborative events were organized across different neighbourhoods of Ķekava Municipality to foster informal interactions and strengthen dialogue between the municipality and local communities¹⁰. The goal was to motivate residents and spark in them the willingness and initiative to engage as active – rather than passive – participants in the life of their neighbourhoods; to promote cooperation; to deepen understanding of the values, needs and challenges faced by residents in different neighbourhoods; to encourage collaboration between neighbourhood associations and reinforce a shared municipal identity.

The first event, **Pop-up Exhibition “100 Years of Daugmale”**, was organized by the neighbourhood association *Darām Daugmalei* in collaboration with the Daugmale Primary School Museum. Municipality representatives were invited to participate in the creation of the exhibition, providing a unique opportunity to engage with the neighbourhood, help uncover and preserve its rich history, and present it during “Daugmalei 100” festival. The exhibition was one of the central events during centenary celebrations (total number of visitors – ca 2000, organizers – over 70 local volunteers and municipality staff). The exhibition combined historical research, community storytelling, and creative participation, highlighting the important role residents play in documenting and celebrating their own local heritage.

The second event, **Community Event “Meeting of Three Villages”**, was planned and implemented by residents of Katlakalns, Valdlauči, and Rāmava (ca 10 local volunteers) in cooperation with the Katlakalns Culture Center and the municipality. The event for the first time brought together local entrepreneurs and community members living and working in these areas to foster mutual understanding, strengthen social connections and encourage future cooperation. The event included variety of activities: workshops for children and adults, entertainment for children, orienteering and a quiz, market of local entrepreneurs, opportunity to voice the needs of local citizens etc. It brought together approximately 500 participants of all ages.



Photo 10. Impression of Neighbourhood meetings in Ķekava

¹⁰ The events took place as testing actions in August – September 2025

The third event, **“People and Natural Resources of Baldone – A Resource for Community Well-being”**, combined an educational excursion with a nature hike in Baldone. The event was planned and implemented by active members of Baldone community themselves (Seniors’ Association Sābri, Baldone Art association, local guides) in cooperation with the municipality, it brought together more than 50 residents from various neighbourhoods of Ķekava Municipality (the interest was higher but the registration for the event had to be closed due to capacity limits). Baldone was previously an independent municipality and was merged with Ķekava only in 2021, meaning that a unified identity still requires active development. Participants explored the historical heritage of Baldone as a spa town, discovered its natural resources, and engaged in discussions about current challenges and future development prospects.

A key factor contributing to the success of all three events was the active involvement of local residents at every stage – planning, organizing, and implementation. By engaging community members directly, these initiatives created a sense of ownership, encouraged participation, and strengthened the connection between the municipality council members and administration staff and neighbourhood communities. Through informal and innovative formats, the events not only enhanced mutual understanding but also promoted a culture of collaboration, inclusivity, and shared responsibility.

Overall, these collaborative events demonstrated the potential of community-led approaches in building stronger, more resilient neighbourhoods. They provided municipal staff with valuable insights into local needs, enabled residents to actively shape their communities and fostered lasting networks within and among neighbourhood associations, reinforcing a unified municipal identity and contributing to the long-term goal of co-existence and cooperation.¹¹

Resources needed

- Financial resources: amount depends on the scope of the event, ranges between 2000-8000 EUR (municipality’s own funds, URBACT funds, local entrepreneurs)
- Human resources: The events were planned and organized by local volunteers and municipality staff

Evidence of success (results achieved)

The collaborative events clearly strengthened civic engagement among local residents and encouraged active participation in joint initiatives. The initiative also played an important role in fostering a shared municipal identity and promoting interaction and cooperation among the municipality’s various neighbourhoods.

As one of the organizers of the Daugmale event emphasized, the celebration succeeded because the residents genuinely wanted it - they actively engaged in organizing it and, most importantly, were given the opportunity to bring their ideas and dreams to life. The planning and execution of the event reflected authentic collective participation: no single vision of what the celebration should be was imposed. If someone proposed an idea or suggestion, they also took part in making it happen. There

¹¹ Further information on the neighbourhood events can be found here:

<https://kekava.lv/pasakumi/nosvineti-svetki-daugmalei-100/>

<https://kekava.lv/?galerija=daugmalei-100>

<https://kekava.lv/aktuali/aizvadita-pirma-tris-ciemu-satiksanas-ramavas-depkina-muiza/>

<https://kekava.lv/?galerija=aizvadita-pirma-tris-ciemu-satiksanas-ramavas-depkina-muiza>

https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=24381719451457284&id=100001377049277&rdid=c8tbbghhCzGbHiLU#

<https://kekava.lv/novads/baldones-cilveku-un-dabas-resursi-sabiedribas-labbutibai/>

https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=24381719451457284&id=100001377049277&rdid=c8tbbghhCzGbHiLU#

was no attempt to dominate or persuade others to follow a single opinion; all decisions were made democratically, reflecting a true spirit of collaboration.

Potential for learning or transfer

An important learning for Kekava (and therefor for other cities as well) is that events require timely planning to be ready for challenges. But these neighbourhood events also show that the core principle of **equal and active participation of all partners to build a shared understanding and vision** is applicable to municipalities of any size, provided there is genuine willingness to engage from all participants and the necessary financial resources for implementing the activities have been secured.

A successful neighbourhood dialogue requires a diverse range of formats, including informal methods of engagement conducted directly within the community.

2.5.4 Aarhus (Denmark): Democracy hosts

A practice where both residents and civil servants are trained in local democracy and facilitation whereafter they host different meetings on political topics with residents and politicians.

Aarhus is working to strengthen local democracy by creating new ways for citizens, politicians, and civil servants to meet and learn from each other. Two important tools in this work are our **democratic hosts** and the **inverse voter meetings**. Both help build **democratic trust** and **democratic self-confidence** in the city.

Democratic hosts are not only citizens – they also include civil servants who take part in the training. Together, they learn skills such as dialogue facilitation, active listening, and creating open and safe meeting spaces. When civil servants join the training, they gain a better understanding of how to support balanced and respectful conversations with residents. This helps break down barriers and shows that the municipality is willing to meet citizens on equal terms. For citizens, learning alongside civil servants increases **self-confidence**, because they experience that their knowledge and perspective are valued. For the municipality, it builds **trust**, because civil servants become more capable of engaging in open and transparent dialogue.

The **inverse voter meetings** also reflect this shared approach. These meetings turn the traditional format upside down: **citizens set the agenda**, choose the topics, and guide the discussion. Politicians and civil servants participate as equals and listen first. Democratic hosts—both citizens and trained civil servants—work together to facilitate the meetings and ensure that everyone feels safe to speak. This joint hosting strengthens the feeling of shared responsibility and reduces the distance between the public sector and residents. Citizens gain **self-confidence** as they see their ideas taken seriously, and politicians and civil servants gain **trust** in the value of citizen knowledge.

Together, democratic hosts and inverse voter meetings support a more open, equal, and trusting democratic culture in Aarhus. They help citizens feel confident in participating, help civil servants and politicians connect more genuinely with local communities, and create lasting structures that make democracy more inclusive for everyone.

Resources needed

The initiative is low-cost. It requires one coordinator for three months (about 5 hours/week), three experts for training modules (around 2 sessions of 5 hours each), and approximately €750 for food pr. inverse voter meetings. If staff is going through the training someone needs to pay their salary 2x5 hours pr. Staff member. Otherwise, the cost is mostly time for citizens and politicians. Unless the events are driven by civil servants.

Evidence of success (results achieved)

Aarhus conducted two training courses, educating 40 hosts—30 citizens and 10 civil servants. Working in host pairs, they have organized 10 events, each attended by around 25 citizens and 4 politicians.¹²

Experience has shown that citizens appreciated the opportunity to speak directly with politicians and felt understood and heard. Politicians reported that they valued the less competitive setting, which allowed for more nuance and deeper discussions.).

The initiative also reached groups that do not normally participate in political meetings, who then went on to organize events for their own communities. Among the 40 trained hosts, 15 had an ethnic minority background (mostly women) and 10 were young people. Many participants reported that it was their first time attending a political meeting, while others mentioned that it was the first time they

¹² The democratic hosts project was carried out as a testing action between March and November 2025

had spoken with politicians with whom they strongly disagreed. This highlights the practice's potential to engage underrepresented groups and foster dialogue across different perspectives.

Challenges encountered

It has been challenging to engage politicians, who also experienced high drop-out rates, and recruiting participants has also been difficult. Initially, citizens themselves were expected to contact politicians based on diversity criteria, but later we took over this process, which made it easier.

For recruiting participants, face-to-face outreach from citizen to citizen proved most effective, especially when the meetings focused on very concrete and locally relevant issues for the target group. We also observed that the closer the events were to elections, the more politicians attended.

Potential for learning or transfer

This practice is interesting for other regions because it shows how citizens can take the lead in facilitating dialogue with politicians, supported by civil servants. Citizens are trained as hosts and organize events that focus on concrete, locally relevant issues. Participants report feeling heard and understood, while politicians appreciate the space for nuanced, in-depth discussions.

Challenges include engaging politicians and recruiting participants. Direct outreach by citizens proved most effective, and participation increased when events were timed closer to elections. The initiative is low-cost, simple to scale, and sustainable, as citizen hosts can continue organizing events with minimal support.

The approach is highly transferable. Other regions can adapt the model by training citizen hosts, providing guidance from civil servants, and tailoring events to local priorities. The citizen-driven nature fosters democratic trust, self-confidence, and meaningful engagement between citizens and politicians, making it a strong example of participatory democracy.

2.5.5 Iași (Romania): “Decide Wisely! –Civic Participation Framework Lab”

An interactive civic education lab where high-school students learn how to evaluate and improve their participation using the Civic Participation Framework.

The “Decide Wisely! – Civic Participation Framework Lab”¹³ was developed in Iași to address the persistent gap between young citizens and local decision-making processes. Although the Iași Metropolitan Area benefits from an active civic ecosystem, many young people remain only partially engaged, often due to limited information, lack of confidence or insufficient opportunities to understand how public participation works in practice. Consultations with the ULG and observations from AoCE meetings indicated that most students associate participation with occasional consultation rather than genuine involvement or collaboration.

¹³ The lab was delivered on 26 September 2025, following preparatory work conducted at the beginning of the month. The event lasted six hours (09:30–16:00), followed by a week of documentation and analysis. Although piloted as a single session, it was designed as a replicable model for future use across the metropolitan area. Further information can be found on the webpage www.zmi.ro

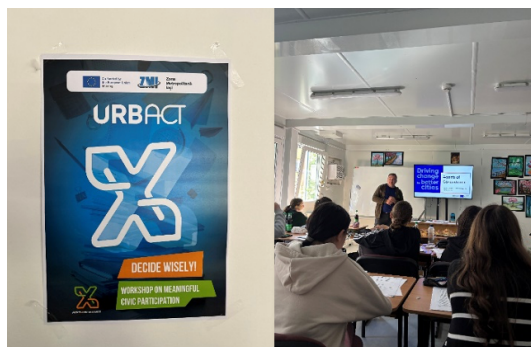


Photo 11. The Lab @ work

The lab adapts the URBACT Civic Participation Framework to a youth-friendly setting. Students become familiar with the four levels of participation—Information, Consultation, Involvement and Collaboration—and reflect on their own experiences within this spectrum. Through a structured agenda combining short presentations, individual exercises and group work, participants gain insight into how local decisions are made, how civic input is collected and how collective action can influence community outcomes.

The methodology is based on “learning by doing”. Students map their civic experiences, identify barriers and propose improvements for participation in their school or community. The practical component helps demystify participatory governance and shows that civic responsibility can be exercised through simple, accessible actions.

Implementation involved several sequential steps: coordination with schools, adaptation of the Framework to a youth context, facilitation of the self-assessment exercise, team-based analysis of civic issues, prioritisation of proposals and collective presentation of results. The process was supported by worksheets, visual materials and structured facilitation.

Stakeholders included IMAA as coordinating institution, teachers from Colegiul Național Pedagogic “Vasile Lupu”, facilitators from the AoCE team and ULG members with experience in civic engagement. Beneficiaries were high-school students aged 16–18, alongside teachers who were exposed to new methods of civic education. The practice provides a model that can be replicated in other schools and integrated into the Iași Integrated Action Plan.

Resources needed

The practice was financed through the AoCE Small Scale Action mechanism, with a budget of EUR 2,500 covering event organization, materials, facilitation and documentation. Costs included venue preparation, two coffee breaks, printing of worksheets, technical support and photography services.

Human resources included:

- one facilitator from the ADI ZMI AoCE team (methodology design and facilitation)
- one logistic coordinator for communication, registration and on-site organization
- one external provider (Gaman Show & Events) for logistics, equipment and catering
- two teachers supporting participant selection and pedagogical continuity
- one photographer for visual documentation

The school hosted the activity and provided the necessary infrastructure. The practice is cost-efficient and easy to replicate with minimal resources.

Evidence of success (results achieved)

The “Decide Wisely! – Civic Participation Framework Lab” proved highly successful in demonstrating how participatory civic education can be effectively introduced to young people. The practice generated clear, measurable results and provided strong qualitative evidence of its impact.

A total of **30 students** participated actively throughout the six-hour lab, engaging in self-assessment, team exercises, debates and civic proposal development. Using the Civic Participation Framework, participants were able to identify their current level of engagement—most locating themselves at the **Consultation** level—and understand pathways toward more meaningful involvement such as **Involvement** and **Collaboration**. This self-reflection component offered valuable insights into youth perceptions of participation, confirming the Framework’s relevance and usability in educational contexts.

The practice enabled the creation of over 10 civic proposals, covering topics such as environmental protection, transparency, student–teacher communication, participatory budgeting in schools, and community solidarity. Two proposals—“School Participatory Budgeting” and “Civic Ambassadors of Iași”—were prioritised by participants and will be explored further within the ULG network as potential follow-up actions.

Feedback collected at the end of the session demonstrates strong satisfaction and learning outcomes:

- **97%** of students rated the lab as “useful” or “very useful”;
- **93%** declared they better understand what civic participation means;
- **90%** expressed interest in repeating similar activities;
- **85%** felt “heard and valued” during the workshop.

Participants’ comments highlight increased civic awareness and motivation, with statements such as “It was the first time I felt my voice matters” and “Now I understand that participation is something I can actually do.”

Teachers and facilitators observed notable improvements in students’ confidence, critical thinking and collaborative skills. The successful testing of the Framework confirms its potential for replication in other schools across the Iași Metropolitan Area.

Challenges encountered

Implementing the “Decide Wisely! – Civic Participation Framework Lab” brought valuable learning opportunities but also several challenges typical for civic participation activities involving young people. One of the main difficulties concerned the **limited prior exposure of students to structured civic participation**. Many participants were unfamiliar with concepts such as consultation, involvement or co-decision, which required additional time for explanation and adaptation of the Framework into youth-friendly language. Facilitators addressed this by simplifying terminology, using real-life examples and incorporating role-based exercises to translate abstract concepts into relatable situations.

A second challenge was the **initial perception among students that participation does not lead to concrete change**. This attitude—rooted in previous experiences of not being listened to—could have limited engagement. The implementation team mitigated this by emphasising examples of successful civic initiatives from Iași and other AoCE partner cities, and by ensuring that student proposals were taken seriously, discussed collectively and documented for follow-up through the ULG.

Logistical limitations also posed constraints. Delivering the workshop within a single school day required careful time management, especially for group work and presentations. Some exercises needed to be shortened or adapted on the spot to maintain the planned rhythm and allow all teams to present their ideas. Additionally, the availability of teachers during school hours influenced coordination, requiring flexible communication and strong collaboration with the host school.

Another challenge stemmed from the **variation in students' confidence levels**. While some participants were comfortable debating and presenting ideas, others were more hesitant. Facilitators used small-group formats, peer support techniques and guided prompts to ensure that every student could contribute in a safe and encouraging environment.

Finally, applying a Framework designed for municipal administrations to a school context required adjustments. The practice highlighted the need for youth-specific civic tools that reflect their environment, decision-making structures and opportunities for involvement. This insight will inform future iterations of the methodology and its replication across the metropolitan area.

Despite these challenges, the lab successfully demonstrated that meaningful youth engagement is possible when methods are adapted, facilitation is supportive and follow-up actions are clearly defined.

Potential for learning or transfer

The lab shows how a complex governance tool such as the Civic Participation Framework can be transformed into an accessible learning method for young people. It relies on modest resources, a clear structure and adaptable materials, making it suitable for replication in schools, youth centres or community organizations across regions.

Key transferable aspects include:

- the youth-friendly adaptation of a municipal governance tool;
- the combination of reflection, practical exercises and teamwork;
- the connection between schools, local administration and civil society.

Successful transfer requires trained facilitators and institutional support from schools. Potential obstacles include limited time, unfamiliarity with civic participation methods and low student motivation, but these can be mitigated through flexible scheduling and teacher involvement.

Interest from other schools in the metropolitan area already suggests potential for wider replication in 2026.

CHAPTER 3 – THEME 2: INNOVATORS COMING INTO GOVERNMENT

3.1 Why innovators matter in local democracy

Throughout Europe, we can see citizens becoming increasingly active in shaping public life. In the AoCE-network we experienced youth groups building new civic initiatives that bring fresh energy and perspectives to local challenges. In cities like Gdansk, Banská Bystrica and Aarhus, local NGOs create social innovations that address gaps in services and support vulnerable groups in ways municipalities often cannot. Neighbourhood associations are stepping in to address community needs, strengthening social ties and fostering local problem-solving. Informal networks are organizing themselves around issues such as climate, housing, mobility, and culture. Despite what is sometimes thought and said, citizens are willing to mobilize when they see pressing challenges and opportunities. These actors bring **energy, creativity, and new perspectives** that public institutions cannot always generate internally.

“Innovation in democracy rarely starts inside government – it often enters from the outside”

Moreover, in certain situations citizens are faster in mobilizing themselves and stepping up to create solutions on pressing matters. This was demonstrated after “DANA”, the floodings in the area around Valencia in the fall of 2024. While governments were busy arguing “who was to blame”, the citizens in the area quickly organized themselves and were able to give aid and setting up shelters etc. Even after a few weeks, the citizen initiatives were considered more reliable and functional than government aid, who by then tried to take over the initiatives. An important question therefor arises whether it is always necessary for government to take over citizen initiatives that are successful, or if they are better off by themselves. On the other hand, when the initiatives are not integrated into formal governance structures the result is that innovations remain “external experiments” instead of becoming drivers for systemic change.

While working on theme 2, the AoCE-network explored how governments can open themselves to new partners, new ideas, new forms of knowledge, and new ways of making decisions. This shift requires first and foremost **a willingness to look beyond traditional expert-driven processes** and to recognize the value that communities, civil society, and everyday citizens can bring. It involves creating spaces where diverse actors can contribute their insights, co-create solutions, and influence outcomes. Ultimately, this is not simply about participation – it is about co-governance, where responsibility and decision-making are shared, and public institutions work alongside society rather than above it. It is therefore also a step up on Arnstein’s ladder of participation.

3.2 What we learned

When the AoCE-network held their core network meeting in the City of Gdansk (June 2024), the host city presented their way of working in citizen participation through a strong cooperation with NGO’s and (neighbourhood) associations. They presented the idea of « the city as a broker »¹⁴. The colleagues working for the department on citizen participation see themselves as the linking pin, to make sure there are good connections between the “outside forces” and the internal organization. They help organizations find the right contacts, and on the other hand help their colleagues to get in touch with the NGO’s and associations outside the organization when there are questions or

¹⁴ For more background on the Gdansk way of working, listen to the [3rd episode](#) of the AoCE-podcast “Talks with change agents”.

information on certain topics is needed. This way of working perfectly fits in with the insights the AoCE-network learned regarding this specific theme:

Insight 1 – Institutions need “permeable boundaries”

Innovation does not require a full reorganization of government structures. Rather, it requires a *shift in mindset*: local government should not function as a closed container, but as a partner within a broader ecosystem. This means acknowledging that valuable ideas, energy, and expertise often come from outside municipal walls. It includes recognizing that NGOs and innovators possess specialized knowledge that municipalities may lack, and that their involvement can strengthen public solutions. It also means allowing external actors to shape agendas, not merely respond to them once decisions are already framed. Above all, it requires treating civic energy as an asset rather than a challenge – something to be supported, connected, and amplified rather than controlled.

Insight 2 – Innovation flourishes in collaborative spaces

The most successful examples came from cities that intentionally created “soft spaces” for collaboration – flexible, relational environments where people can meet, exchange ideas, and experiment together:

- Breda’s Value Networks bring together diverse stakeholders to explore shared challenges and generate cross-sector solutions.
- Banská Bystrica’s Collaboratory Board provides a platform for citizens, experts, and municipal staff to jointly shape priorities and test new approaches.
- Quart de Poblet’s Urban Innovation Lab serves as an open arena for co-design, where community members and professionals work side by side on urban challenges.
- Iași’s Civic Media Literacy initiatives empower citizens with the skills to critically engage with information and participate constructively in public debate.

These are all not bureaucratic structures. Instead, they are relational arenas where creativity, trust, and new ideas can emerge.

Insight 3 – Innovators need clarity, not control

Cities often fear losing control when working with external actors, worrying that collaboration might dilute authority or lead to unpredictable outcomes. It was therefore really enlightening to meet with these external actors during the AoCE-network meetings (both the transnational meetings and the ULG meetings).



Photo 12. Meeting AoCE-network with NGO in Gdansk

In these meetings, innovators repeatedly emphasized that **what they need most is not freedom from oversight, but clarity and structure**. They value clearly defined roles so everyone knows their responsibilities and boundaries. Also, transparency in processes ensures that decisions are fair, understandable, and trustworthy. When all parties are clear about their expectations, goals can be aligned and misunderstandings prevented. Furthermore, they need predictable support (whether in resources, guidance, or institutional backing) to allow them to act confidently. In short, *control is not the issue; ambiguity is*. When municipalities reduce uncertainty, collaboration becomes far more productive and mutually beneficial.

Insight 4 – Successful collaboration requires internal champions

Innovators can enter the system and have real impact only when civil servants take an active role in bridging gaps between formal institutions and external actors. They do this by opening doors, connecting innovators with the right people and resources, and brokering relationships across departments, sectors, and community groups. They also act as translators, helping different stakeholders understand each other's perspectives, language, and priorities. In every good practice of Theme 2, these “boundary-crossing civil servants” emerged as key actors, demonstrating that innovation often depends as much on the people within the system as on the ideas themselves.

3.3 Challenges related to « innovators coming into government »

Like in all other themes, together with listing the most important insights or lessons, the AoCE-network also sees several challenges related to theme 2, innovators coming into government. These challenges usually emerge from “the system”. Local government is designed as a system: to ensure stability, accountability and legitimacy. But these securities in the system often unintentionally make innovation difficult.

A first recurring challenge is **administrative rigidity**. Rules and procedures that safeguard transparency and fairness may also limit the ability to work with small, experimental or unconventional partners. Procurement regulations often favour established organizations over emerging initiatives, while formal consultation procedures can slow down decision-making and reduce room for improvisation. In many cities, a risk-averse culture discourages civil servants from exploring unfamiliar approaches or supporting bold ideas. This rigidity is further reinforced by siloed budgets, which prevent resources from being shared across departments and make cross-sector collaboration difficult. Together, these dynamics show how administrative systems designed for stability can severely inhibit experimentation and creativity.

A second challenge concerns **mismatched timeframes**. Innovators typically operate at speed: testing ideas, adapting on the go, and responding to immediate needs or opportunities. Municipal administrations, by contrast, work within annual or multi-year planning cycles, formal budget rounds and predefined reporting rhythms. These different “timeframes” often collide. Fast-moving initiatives can become stuck waiting for approvals, funding decisions or procedural milestones, while administrative timelines may feel disconnected from the urgency that innovators experience on the ground. Without deliberate efforts to bridge these rhythms, collaboration risks losing momentum, impact or relevance, which in return often leads to distrust and/or loss of commitment.

Another persistent “obstacle” for innovators in government are **unequal power relations**. Quite often, NGOs and citizen associations feel they are positioned as “junior partners” rather than as equals in a process. This happens when they are invited late in processes or involved only in consultative or symbolic roles. In some cases, they were asked to comment on decisions that had already been taken, or to participate in public events without real influence over outcomes. This undermines trust and can create frustration, particularly when organizations bring deep local knowledge and practical expertise. Among others the Breda Value Networks have shown that collaboration becomes far more effective

when innovators are engaged early, contribute to agenda-setting, and participate in decision-making on an equal footing with municipal staff.

Another structural challenge to be pointed out is a **lack of continuity**. Partnerships that depend on individual leadership (either outside or within the government) or short-term political priorities are vulnerable to disruption when leadership changes or strategic priorities shift. Without institutionalization through formal agreements, clear procedures or embedded organizational structures valuable collaborations may quickly unravel. Cities that managed to sustain cooperation over time did so by anchoring collaboration within the organization itself, rather than relying on personal commitment alone. Here again we see the Breda Value Networks as a very good example.

All together, these challenges illustrate that working effectively with innovators requires more than goodwill or ad hoc solutions. It calls for conscious efforts to adapt administrative systems, align rhythms, rebalance power relations and embed collaboration structurally. The good practices that follow show how the AoCE-partners have begun to address these challenges and create more resilient frameworks for long-term cooperation with diverse actors.

3.4 Key learnings on innovators coming into government

The lessons identified across the network become particularly tangible when viewed alongside the good practices developed in the AoCE-network during the URBACT journey.

For instance, the importance of **creating structured spaces for collaboration** is clearly reflected in Breda's Value Networks. By organizing cooperation around thematic coalitions of public, private and civic actors, the city created recognizable spaces where partners meet regularly, align ambitions and develop joint initiatives. These networks are not ad hoc gatherings, but deliberately designed structures with shared agendas and coordination mechanisms. Similarly, the Collaboratory Board on Open Government in Banská Bystrica provides an institutionalized platform where municipal representatives and external innovators engage in ongoing dialogue, supporting consistent collaboration beyond individual projects or political cycles.

The lesson of **starting with shared purpose rather than projects** is also evident in Iași's Civic Media Literacy Lab. Rather than beginning with predefined activities, the Lab was built around a shared concern: strengthening media literacy and critical digital skills among citizens. This common purpose brought together educators, civic organizations, media professionals and municipal actors, allowing projects and activities to evolve organically from a clearly articulated societal challenge. The focus on purpose helped align expectations and created a sense of collective ownership among diverse partners.

The need to **make the rules visible** also emerges across these practices. In Banská Bystrica, the Collaboratory Board clarifies roles, mandates and decision-making procedures, helping external actors understand what influence they have and within which boundaries. This transparency reduces uncertainty and enables innovators to engage more effectively. Breda's Value Networks likewise benefit from explicit agreements about responsibilities, resources and governance, creating clarity that supports trust-based collaboration.

Providing logistical and emotional support is a less visible but equally important dimension of these practices. In Iași, the municipality's support for the Civic Media Literacy Lab goes beyond funding. The city provides legitimacy, visibility and a stable institutional home, helping participants navigate administrative systems and gain recognition for their work. In Breda, civil servants play an enabling role within the Value Networks by connecting actors, facilitating meetings and sustaining momentum over time, ensuring that initiatives do not rely solely on volunteer energy.

Engaging urban innovators through digital tools can also be highly effective. Among the AoCE partners, Aarhus and Genk have included actions in this regard in their IAPs. Their approaches could serve as recommended practices for guiding the digital transition in citizen engagement.

Genk plans to set up and operate a **hybrid citizen panel**. This hybrid model combines a digital panel with opportunities for in-person gatherings. Over a period of three years, this digital panel will actively engage citizens 3-5 times per year on topics they have expressed interest in, while also giving them the option to participate in physical meetings. This hybrid approach allows for a more in-depth dialogue and richer insights through smaller, representative in-person groups, and also ensures that additional insights can be gathered from groups that are underrepresented in the online panel.

Similarly to Genk, Aarhus also plans to **establish a citizen panel**. However, theirs will be **fully digital** and composed of a representative group of citizens who can be regularly invited to provide input and share their opinions on a range of topics.

Such a panel would make it easier and faster for the municipality to collect high-quality feedback. To be effective, the panel should be sufficiently large, demographically representative, and diverse in perspectives.

It could also serve as a channel to expose existing citizen proposals to a broader audience, increasing visibility, engagement, and the overall quality of public input.

Also worth mentioning in this respect is the work Quart de Poblet has done to achieve a transparency portal for citizens that not only complies with legal requirements but also boosts citizens' trust in the municipal institution. The initiative is described in paragraph 3.5.3 of this chapter.

Finally, all these practices underline **the importance of celebrating and sharing successes**. Breda actively communicates the achievements of its Value Networks, showcasing collaboration as a core element of its governance approach. In Iași, the Lab's outcomes are shared with wider audiences to demonstrate the public value of civic innovation. In Banská Bystrica, the Collaboratory Board functions not only as a working platform but also as a visible symbol of the city's commitment to open government. Through communication and recognition, these cities reinforce trust, encourage participation and normalize collaboration as part of everyday municipal practice.

Together, these good practices demonstrate how the key lessons of this theme can be operationalized in different local contexts. While their institutional forms vary, they share **a common emphasis on purpose-driven collaboration, transparency, support and visibility** – illustrating how cities can create enabling environments in which innovators and governments work together more effectively.

3.5 Good Practices in Theme 2

The following pages highlight four good practices illustrating how cities successfully opened their institutions to new actors and ideas:

1. **Breda (Netherlands): Value Networks**
2. **Iași (Romania): Fake vs. Fact – Civic Media Literacy Lab**
3. **Quart de Poblet (Spain): Transparency Portal & Digital Open Government**

Each case illustrates a different pathway toward institutional openness.

3.5.1 Breda (Netherlands): Value Networks

The city of Breda has developed an innovative collaboration model in which social organizations work together within six "**value networks**" to create targeted implementation plans. These networks¹⁵ focus on key themes: "togetherness and self-reliance," "existence security," "a safe home," "coming home to Breda," "a healthy and active life," and "a promising youth." Each network collectively defines the unique value it aims to bring to the community, establishes specific objectives, and devises strategies to meet these goals collectively.



Photo 13. Value Networks meeting Breda's City Council

By developing one cohesive plan within each network, the organizations avoid duplication, address service gaps, and ensure the full use of collective expertise and knowledge.

Through the focused efforts of the value networks (particularly those centered on "existence security" and "a safe home") Breda expects to achieve greater participation among marginalized groups, youth, and women.

The policy framework 'Breda Samen Doen' has changed on a few key points. For example, there is now a clear division of roles between partners and the government. The government determines 'what'

¹⁵ Further information on the value networks can be found on: [Waardenetwerken | Gemeente Breda](#)

(what we fund) and the partners determine 'how' (how we implement it best). It is also now stated that partners prepare a grant application together and learn from each other. If this remains below the grant ceiling, the subsidy can be awarded with minimal review. If this is not the case, the municipality assesses the application. A tender procedure has been developed for this purpose. The results achieved with the implementation plans are evaluated every year. This takes place in the 'State of the Tables', organized by the city council.

In this URBACT project, Breda started a new value network: **diversity, equality, and inclusion**. The reason for this is the new policy framework "Inclusive Living Together"¹⁶: equal, connected and accessible. The DGI community has been closely involved in the development of this policy framework.

With the Inclusive Living policy framework and the new network, we want to realise three ambitions:

- Ambition 1: An equal society
- Ambition 2: a connected society
- Ambition 3: An accessible society

Best practices

In developing the policy framework for diversity, equality, and inclusion, Breda got its inspiration from best practices and insights from other municipalities and organizations such as Movisie. Close collaboration with external partners, such as social organizations and experts, is essential for creating a policy framework that is widely supported and has a real impact. Moreover, they adopted a learning approach during the policy-making process. This means they not only gathered input but also actively reflected and adjusted their approach based on the feedback received. By integrating this approach, they were able not only to develop a strong and relevant policy framework in Breda but also to initiate a process that allows them to continuously learn and improve. As a result, the policy framework is not only based on current needs but also flexible enough to remain effective in the future.

Participation Process with external partners

The goal of the Breda participation process was to gather widely supported insights and ideas regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). By actively listening to the different perspectives within the community, Breda collected valuable input that enabled them to develop a policy framework that truly meets the needs and expectations of residents and stakeholders. This process also taught them how important it is to remain open to new insights and to incorporate them into our decision-making.

In the context of the municipal initiative, Breda set up an external network with DGI partners. They have worked closely with the organizations RADAR, Breda for Everyone, Breda Equal, BO Diversity, COC, Public Health Service (GGD), Buddy to Buddy, and Hello Breda. These partners have shared their expertise and experience, which was crucial for shaping a widely supported policy framework. Breda also held discussions with religious institutions, the Commemoration of the Abolition of Slavery Foundation in Breda, and Stars of Tomorrow. And, they have also spoken with the Chassé Theater and Nieuwe Veste, who inspired with the wonderful activities they organize. Additionally, they involved the youth ambassadors by utilizing the Echo network.

The DGI policy framework includes three implementation plans. Two of them, Accessibility and Street Harassment, have been approved by the Executive Board. Work is underway on the Anti-Discrimination Plan, expected early next year. Advocacy groups and people with lived experience are involved. The network is now discussing priorities and how to work together going forward. The budget needed for

¹⁶ The policy is valid for 2025-2028, while the initial value networks started in 2023

the value network is appr. 70.000 euro. Further, the involvement of 2 process managers and a subject matter expert is required.



Figure 14. DGI ambitions overview

Evidence of success (results achieved)

Success mainly depends on how we work together: making clear agreements on **how to interact and deciding which topics to focus on for the future (with a clear goal in mind)**. It also helps that partners have received multi-year funding. In networks where this is in place, we see progress in real collaboration and clear development paths.

The process follows a method that helps partners get to know each other and work together based on shared values. In the Breda assessment framework, we measure hard indicators like reach and satisfaction, and soft indicators like self-reliance, craftsmanship, and synergy through stories. The goal is to encourage professionals to act with quality rather than quantity.

When creating implementation plans, we discuss with partners and researchers which data and tools can support good monitoring. Talking about cases with experts by experience is useful, as are conversations in the neighbourhood to understand the current situation.

A unique aspect of the **DGI network** is working with partners from very different target groups—such as people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ communities, and partners with a migration background. This leads to new insights and collaborations that did not exist before. Work is now underway on an implementation plan, and partners are discussing which topics are most relevant to address together.

Challenges encountered

Limited budgets can cause tension, so partners need to make clear choices to stay within funding limits. Experts play an important role in helping everyone agree on the plan.

Potential for learning or transfer

Value networks are a way of working where partners collaborate based on shared values, get to know each other, and find connections. Because the municipality is an equal partner, there is room to agree on key points: who we work for, how we avoid overlap, and how we complement each other to reach common goals. This happens through joint action plans and identifying focus areas for cooperation. In the DGI network, we now see partners with different target groups working together more, showing understanding, and seeing each other as partners instead of competitors. Last year was about getting to know the network; next year will focus on alignment and creating a joint action plan.

For every city, it is important to reflect on the role of the municipality and how it can collaborate most effectively with social partners, with the central question being how participation and cooperation can be improved. Developing a joint implementation plan is the key change compared to granting individual subsidies to partners and leads to a more optimized and efficient collaboration.

3.5.2 Iași (Romania): Fake vs. Fact – Civic Media Literacy Lab

An interactive media literacy lab that helps young people identify misinformation, analyse digital content and develop critical, responsible civic behaviour in the online environment.

The “Fake vs. Fact – Civic Media Literacy Lab” was created in Iași as a response to the increasing exposure of young people to misinformation, digital manipulation and online content that can distort their understanding of reality. Teachers, ULG members and local stakeholders observed that many students consume digital media without applying verification strategies and are often unaware of how algorithms influence what they see online.

These concerns became more evident during AoCE consultations, where young participants expressed uncertainty about distinguishing credible information from misleading or false content. The lab was therefore designed to strengthen critical thinking, media literacy and responsible information use – all essential elements for meaningful civic participation in the digital age.

The workshop¹⁷ follows a progressive, highly interactive learning approach. Students begin with a short icebreaker (“Truth or Fake?”), then analyse manipulated articles, images and social media posts. They explore how algorithms create personalised information bubbles and take part in a structured fact-checking exercise that introduces a verification checklist focusing on source credibility, author intent, publication date and content coherence. The final stage involves co-creating civic posters that promote responsible digital behaviour.

The methodology relies on non-formal education techniques and encourages active participation, discussion and teamwork. Students work in small groups, challenge assumptions, compare evidence

¹⁷ Carried out as testing action on 29 September 2025

and present their conclusions. The facilitator balances theory with practice, while teachers provide context and link the activities to the broader civic curriculum. Using examples drawn from local news and platforms familiar to students significantly increases engagement and relevance.

Implementation was carried out through a coordinated partnership between ADI ZMI (responsible for overall coordination and alignment with the IAP), the hosting school (Colegiul Național Pedagogic “Vasile Lupu”) and an external provider specialised in facilitation and educational formats (Gaman Show & Events). The ULG offered methodological input on civic education and helped refine the learning tools.

Main stakeholders included:

- **ADI ZMI**, coordination and methodological adaptation;
- **Teachers and school leadership**, ensuring educational relevance and student engagement;
- **External facilitator**, responsible for guiding activities and maintaining the interactive rhythm;
- **ULG members**, providing expertise in civic participation and media literacy;
- **Students**, the primary beneficiaries, who developed essential skills for critical digital citizenship.

The practice illustrates how local administrations, schools and civic actors can collaborate effectively to strengthen youth resilience to misinformation and support democratic culture in a rapidly changing digital environment.

Resources needed

The practice was funded through the AoCE Small Scale Action mechanism with a budget of EUR 2,500, covering event organization, facilitation, materials, catering, technical equipment and documentation. This ensured an efficient and well-structured six-hour educational workshop.

Human resources included:

- one lead facilitator from the external provider (Gaman Show & Events);
- one IMAA representative responsible for coordination and feedback collection;
- two teachers ensuring pedagogical support;
- one photographer for documentation.

Material and logistical resources included:

- a classroom arranged for group work, provided by the school;
- fact-checking worksheets, algorithm simulation materials, quiz sheets and creative tools;
- printed materials, participant kits, URBACT-branded visuals;
- projector, flipchart, audio-visual equipment;
- two coffee breaks and technical support.

Evidence of success (results achieved)

The pilot workshop generated encouraging results, both quantitative and qualitative, showing improved media literacy and critical thinking among participants.

A total of **32 participants** took part (26 high-school students, 4 teachers, 2 members of ADI ZMI).

According to the **32 anonymous feedback forms**, participants reported:

- **97%** – the topic was “very interesting and relevant”;

- **91%** – better understanding of misinformation and fake news;
- **93%** – improved ability to verify the credibility of online information;
- **88%** – increased awareness of manipulated content;
- **100%** – positive evaluation of the interactive methodology;
- **94%** – appreciated the open, motivating atmosphere;
- **90%** – considered the duration appropriate.

These results indicate that the combination of relatable examples, structured exercises and teamwork is effective in strengthening digital critical thinking.

Students' worksheets show clearer identification of manipulation techniques, improved source-checking and a better understanding of algorithmic influence. Teachers observed that students became more attentive to online risks and more confident in discussing digital content. Facilitators noted high engagement and consistent participation throughout the workshop.

The lab contributes directly to the civic education goals of the Iași Integrated Action Plan and lays the foundation for broader replication in 2026.

Challenges encountered

Several challenges emerged during implementation, offering useful lessons for future replication:

- **Different levels of digital literacy:** Some students were less familiar with verification techniques, requiring the facilitator to adapt explanations and provide step-by-step guidance.
- **Time constraints:** Keeping a balance between theory, debate and practical exercises within a single school day demanded careful pacing, with some activities adjusted to ensure sufficient time for group presentations.
- **Variation in confidence levels:** Not all students felt equally comfortable speaking in public. Small-group discussions and guided prompts ensured inclusive participation.
- **Complexity of misinformation examples:** Certain cases required simplification to ensure accessibility for all participants.
- **Coordination with school schedules:** Delivering the workshop during regular school hours required close collaboration with teachers and flexible planning.

Despite these challenges, the pilot demonstrated that young people can engage deeply with topics such as misinformation and digital responsibility when methods are adapted to their needs and interests.

Potential for learning or transfer

The “Fake vs. Fact – Civic Media Literacy Lab” offers strong transfer potential to other regions facing similar challenges related to misinformation and digital vulnerability among youth. Its strengths include:

- a **clear, low-cost methodology** that is easy to adopt
- a **progressive learning structure** combining awareness, analysis and co-creation
- the use of **locally relevant examples**, which can be tailored to different cultural and digital contexts
- a **collaborative model** between administration, schools and civic actors.

Regions wishing to replicate the practice should consider:

- preparing a facilitator familiar with media literacy concepts
- adapting examples and worksheets to local digital habits
- ensuring access to basic equipment (projector, worksheets, internet)
- engaging teachers to provide continuity in classroom discussions.

Potential challenges include differences in school timetables and varying levels of digital competence, but modular formats and teacher training sessions can mitigate these aspects.

Interest from other metropolitan schools in Iași suggests that the model is scalable and well suited for further dissemination across the region and within the AoCE network.

3.5.3 Quart de Poblet (Spain): Transparency Portal & Digital Open Government

Quart de Poblet wishes to achieve a transparency portal¹⁸ that not only complies with legal requirements but also boosts citizens' trust in the municipal institution. The practice addresses a serious crisis of public confidence in institutions, stemming from the 2008 financial crisis and decades of corruption scandals. Although new laws have been created to ensure transparency, local administrations such as Quart de Poblet find it difficult to implement them effectively due to a lack of resources and entrenched inertia in the work of civil servants. The specific problem is a transparency portal that did not comply with legal standards, as it did not collect all the data required by law and was also difficult for citizens to consult, rendering it ineffective in restoring trust among the municipality's residents.

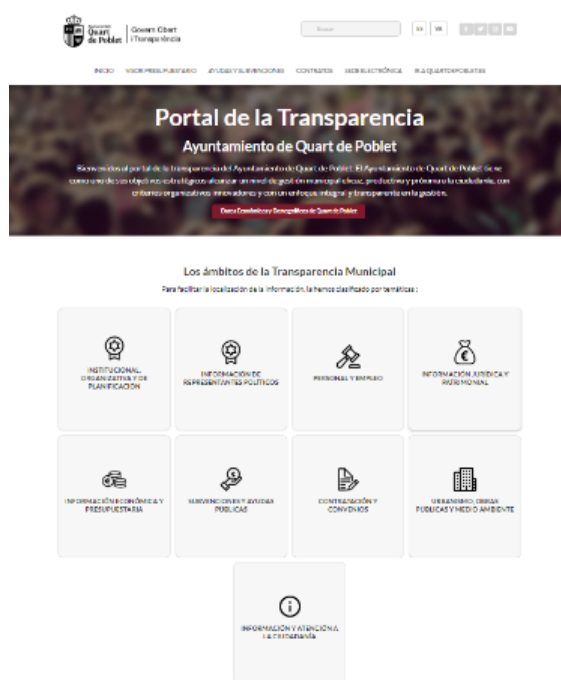


Figure 15. Impression of the Portal de la Transparencia

The practice achieves its objectives through a three-phase methodology.

The first step would be an in-depth and rigorous assessment of the situation. This involves a comprehensive analysis of the current transparency portal, carried out by an external audit, which highlights current shortcomings and problems, using the MESTA system (methodology for evaluating

¹⁸ This good practice testing action began in May 2024 but has no end date, because the action will continue as long as the Transparency Portal exists.

and monitoring transparency in administration), adapted to Valencian legislation, which is more restrictive than national legislation.

The next step, once the results of the audit have been analysed, would be to create an internal structure to collect the necessary data to ensure that information obligations to citizens are met.

Finally, it automates the storage and dissemination of information to ensure that the portal is kept up to date without increasing the workload of staff.

The key to its success is to unify information sources and ensure accessibility in both official languages, which promotes social integration.

The ultimate goal of increasing trust is achieved by exceeding the legal minimum requirements and aspiring to obtain a prestigious external quality seal (INFOPARTICIPA).

The main stakeholders leading implementation are the ULG members: Jesús Martí (Open Government Technician), who provides technical execution, and Lluïsmi Campos (Open Government Councillor), who provides political leadership.

The primary beneficiaries are the citizens of Quart de Poblet, who gain reliable, accessible information to monitor the council. A secondary beneficiary is the council's civil servants, who benefit from streamlined workflows and increased public recognition of their work due to restored trust.

Resources needed

For the practice, financial resources have been allocated to cover the external audit, which amounted to €8,566.80. No additional financial resources were required for the other necessary steps.

In terms of human resources, the Open Government Department technician has acted as the driving force behind the practice, together with the Mayor's Office, to involve other civil servants.

Evidence of success (results achieved)

There are two clear indicators that measure the success of the Transparency Portal:

As a web portal, we can measure the volume of traffic it has generated. Given that we are starting from a baseline of 0 (since the portal did not exist previously), it will be in the 2026 fiscal year when we can measure whether the portal maintains the traffic generated, remains stable, or decreases. So far, since its launch in June 2025, it has had 1,228 visits, an average of just over 200 visits per month, although it should be noted that last month alone it had 286 visits, demonstrating an upward trend that we hope will continue.

For the content part, the evaluation of the content we make available to citizens in relation to current legislation, we have a tool created by the Autonomous University of Barcelona, which evaluates the communication and transparency of public administrations, INFOPARTICIPA (infoparticipa.info/maps). According to this website, we started at 26.92% in 2023 (where 50% is exactly what the law requires and 100% would mean absolute transparency) and in 2024 we moved to 51.92%. Our goal is to reach close to 80% by 2025 (at the end of this year) and to achieve recognition of this tool in the near future through the 'Infoparticipa Seal'.

Challenges encountered

The main challenge we faced when implementing the action was the lack of a culture of transparency, both at the political level and among civil servants, with reluctance to grant the necessary permissions to access data, provide CVs and other personal documentation related to public office. Similarly, there is little culture of participation among the general public.

The leadership of the Mayor's Office in creating a comprehensive Transparency Portal has been decisive in mitigating internal challenges. Furthermore, the search for an accessible and clear interface for the portal, as well as its dissemination on different networks encouraging its consultation, has served to connect citizens and break down reluctance to participate.

Obsolete methods within internal dynamics have been another key challenge that has been mitigated by facilitating the automation of content, using the latest sources of information so that processes are not repeated and the workload is not increased.

Potential for learning or transfer

This practice is a valuable model for other regions due to its realistic and efficient approach to restoring public confidence in municipal action.

The methodology is clear, offering a structured three-phase plan (external audit, internal restructuring and automation) that can be adapted to different legal and administrative contexts.

It is a moderate investment and, with internal leadership, significant improvements can be achieved.

The automation of information flows prevents the portal from becoming obsolete and does not overload staff, solving a common problem in this type of project. In addition, it facilitates the scalability of information, allowing it to be adapted to specific situations (in our case with DANA Assistance).

It is a practice that combines legal compliance with the strategic objective of increasing trust, going beyond minimum requirements and can be validated by seeking external quality seals.

The case of Quart de Poblet shows that effective transparency requires, in addition to technology, a strategic approach, organizational changes and a clear vision that turns legal obligation into an opportunity to rebuild trust.¹⁹

¹⁹ Further information can be found on: <https://transparencia.quartdepoblet.es/>

CHAPTER 4 – THEME 3: Civil Servants as Innovators

4.1 Why civil servants matter for democratic innovation

One of the strongest conclusions from the AoCE-network was that no participation method, no co-creation tool, and no new governance model can succeed if **public organizations are not ready internally**.

Municipalities often direct their attention toward **external processes**, such as consultation rounds, public hearings, or co-creation workshops. Or they focus solely on **digital platforms**, designed to gather ideas or feedback from residents or other **citizen engagement techniques**, ranging from participatory budgeting to neighborhood forums. And off course, these tools matter, and they can certainly strengthen democratic participation, but as cities across Europe have repeatedly discovered through practice: **Participation does not start with citizens, participation begins inside government**.

The ability to work with participation emerges when civil servants are empowered, motivated, and equipped to rethink how they work. It can grow when internal routines, organizational silos, and outdated assumptions are challenged. It takes shape when municipal teams develop new skills, experiment with new methods, and adopt a mindset that welcomes change and openness rather than fears it.

Only when this internal foundation is strong can external engagement truly flourish. Communities feel the difference when public officials collaborate openly, respond quickly, and show curiosity instead of defensiveness. In other words, the most successful citizen-driven innovations often reflect an earlier—and quieter—transformation within the institutions themselves.

If civil servants fear making mistakes or work in rigid departmental silos, lack the time, mandate, or support to innovate, or must navigate contradictory political expectations, then even the most carefully designed participation processes will fall short. This is why in **Theme 3** the AoCE-network focused on the **internal innovation capacity of municipalities**. Focusing on the conditions that allow civil servants to become *drivers* of democratic renewal rather than passive implementers of instructions. To become true “change-agents”, as we called them in our Podcast-series “Talks with change-agents”.²⁰



Figure 16. Podcast logo

²⁰ The Podcast “Talks with Change Agents” can be found on Spotify. It is a series of 6 interviews with different partners within the AoCE-network

During the transnational meetings, partner cities openly acknowledged that participation efforts often break down not because citizens are unmotivated or disengaged, but because **institutional systems are not prepared to respond, adapt, or collaborate effectively** and how this frustrated them. They saw within their own organizations when internal structures are fragmented, staff feel disempowered, or when innovation is treated as an added burden rather than a core task, participation processes become symbolic rather than transformative.

Strengthening internal capacities, varying from organizational culture and leadership to cross-department cooperation and innovation skills, is therefore essential. Only when public administrations themselves are ready to embrace change can participation become meaningful, impactful, and sustainable.

4.2 What we learned

Like in the chapters on themes 1 and 2, the AoCE-network decided to share the four most important insights related to the role of **civil servants as innovators**.

Insight 1 - Innovation requires psychological safety inside the organization

For innovation to take root, civil servants must work in an environment where they feel safe to think differently, take risks, and question established routines. This means providing a.o. the freedom to experiment, without fearing consequences if an idea does not immediately succeed. But also the ability to say “I don’t know”, acknowledging uncertainty as a natural part of the innovation process rather than a weakness. It asks for room to test, iterate, and adjust, recognising that new approaches rarely work perfectly on the first attempt. And with this also space to reflect, individually and collectively, on what is working, what is not, and what can be learned from each attempt.

In several cities, staff openly admitted that **fear of failure remains one of the most persistent barriers to innovation**. When mistakes are punished, or when the organizational culture values certainty over curiosity, innovation becomes impossible. The other way around: when teams feel psychologically safe, even small experiments can spark broader institutional change.

Insight 2 - Facilitation and relationship skills are essential

Innovation in participation is not primarily technical, it rather is relational. While digital tools, methods, and platforms matter, they cannot replace the human element at the heart of participatory processes.

Across the network, partners observed that the most impactful innovations emerged not from new technologies but from the way civil servants interacted with people.

Increasingly, public officials are expected to act as:

- **facilitators**, guiding conversations and ensuring that every voice is heard;
- **moderators**, helping groups navigate complexity, disagreement, or competing interests;
- **bridge-builders**, connecting departments, stakeholders, and community groups that rarely interact;
- **translators**, making internal procedures understandable to the public – and bringing citizens’ perspectives back inside the organization in a meaningful way.

In the Textbox in the introducing chapter, we already highlighted the six core skills civil servants need to possess/learn in order to be competent in working with citizens. When these skills are improved working with citizens becomes much easier. However, these competencies rarely appear in traditional public administration curricula, which tend to focus on regulation, planning, and procedural knowledge. Yet throughout the network, it became clear that **relational skills were just as important as technical**

expertise. Where civil servants could build trust, manage dialogue, and foster collaboration, participation efforts thrived. Which is something we could clearly see during our Core Network Meeting in Aarhus.

The approach of the Aarhus' Citizen Service Innovation & Democracy Department focuses on aiding their colleagues within the administration to work from trust, with an open mind and to foster collaboration with the Aarhus Compass:



Figure 17. The Aarhus Compass

This insight highlights a broader shift: modern public administration increasingly depends on interpersonal capacities that enable connection, empathy, and dialogue – the essential ingredients of democratic innovation.

Insight 3 – Digital skills need to be developed

Also, introducing a new digital tool for participatory purposes (whether a website, a map-based survey, a digital twin platform, or an AI/AR solution) requires investing in the skills and confidence of the civil servants who will use it. Even the most innovative tool cannot deliver meaningful participation if staff are unsure how to operate it, how to interpret the data it produces, or how to integrate it into their daily work. **Well-designed trainings help civil servants understand not only the technical functions but also the participatory purpose behind the tool:** how it supports inclusion, how it improves decision-making, and how it strengthens dialogue with residents. Trainings also reduce resistance to change, build internal ownership, and ensure consistent and responsible use across departments.

Ultimately, equipping staff with the **right knowledge and practical skills is essential to turning digital tools into effective instruments of citizen engagement.**

Insight 4 - Cross-department collaboration strengthens innovation

Silos (whether organizational, thematic, or hierarchical) consistently emerged as barriers to meaningful participation. When departments work in isolation, information is fragmented, creativity shrinks, and participatory processes become narrowly framed or disconnected from broader municipal strategies.

Across the network, partners mentioned that:

- **Co-creation works best when departments collaborate**, bringing together perspectives from planning, social services, environment, culture, finance, and beyond. The diversity of viewpoints helps identify better solutions and reduces the risk that participation becomes a mere checkbox exercise.
- **Learning becomes richer across disciplines**, as staff members gain insights into each other's priorities, challenges, and methods. This multidisciplinary exchange helps civil servants see problems systemically rather than through the narrow lens of a single unit.
- **Organizational energy grows when hierarchies soften**, allowing staff at different levels to contribute ideas, challenge assumptions, and share responsibilities. Innovation tends to flourish in organizations where knowledge flows horizontally rather than only vertically.

Several partners demonstrated strong practices in this area. **Genk's inclusive HR policy** has created a workplace culture where staff feel empowered to collaborate and contribute beyond their formal roles. Meanwhile, **Ľekava's investment in staff training** has equipped teams with shared tools and mindsets, making cross-department cooperation more natural and more productive. But also **Banská Bystrica's breakfast meetings** create an environment where civil servant can meet and learn from each other in a non-hierarchical setting.

Together, these examples show that dismantling silos is not so much about organizational restructuring. It is much more about cultivating a culture that values openness, shared ownership, and collective intelligence.

Insight 5 - Innovation within public administrations does not happen in isolation.

Even the most motivated and skilled civil servants are limited in what they can achieve if the political and administrative leadership does not create the conditions for experimentation. Across the network, partners repeatedly emphasized that **supportive leadership is a decisive factor** in whether participatory innovation succeeds or fails.

Civil servants cannot innovate if **leadership expects zero risk**, demanding certainty in contexts where innovation inherently involves trial and error; when **mistakes are punished**, discouraging teams from proposing new ideas or testing unfamiliar methods or if **participation is treated as symbolic**, used for optics rather than genuinely influencing policy or practice.

In contrast, cities where political and administrative leaders encouraged experimentation saw a very different dynamic. When leaders openly communicated that small failures are acceptable – even valuable – civil servants felt empowered to test new approaches. When leaders backed participatory outcomes, rather than overriding them for political convenience, trust grew both inside the administration and with citizens. And when leaders modelled transparency, curiosity, and openness, these attitudes spread through the organization.²¹

The lesson was clear: **innovation flourishes where leadership legitimises experimentation, protects learning, and values authentic participation**. Without this top-level support, even strong internal capacities remain underused; with it, municipalities can transform not only how they work but how they relate to their communities.

²¹ Listen to [episode 1 of "Talks with Change Agents"](#) where this topic is discussed with. Mr. Wim Dries, mayor of the city of Genk

4.3 Challenges linked to “Civil servants as innovators”

Regarding the barriers partners shared during our AoCE journey, all partners mentioned the aspect of time. **Participation requires significant time** for planning, facilitation, coordination, and follow-up, yet many teams are already stretched thin. Civil servants repeatedly expressed that they believe in participation but cannot fit it into their schedules. When participation becomes an “extra task,” it competes with urgent daily responsibilities. This leads to rushed processes or abandoned initiatives, despite good intentions. **Without adequate staffing and time allocation, participation cannot become a sustainable practice.**

In addition to this, **civil servants often lack clarity about whether they are truly empowered to innovate.** Questions such as “Are we allowed to do this?” or “Do we have political backing?” create hesitation and confusion. When mandates are vague, they fear overstepping boundaries or triggering political pushback. As a result, promising ideas remain untested or are implemented cautiously and inconsistently. Innovation becomes fragile when authority and responsibility are not clearly aligned.

An important third challenge is the **hesitation to engage with conflict.** Participation inevitably brings different perspectives to the surface, including disagreement or tension. Many civil servants reported feeling unprepared to navigate these moments constructively. Without conflict-handling skills, staff may avoid deeper engagement processes altogether. This limits the potential for honest dialogue and shared problem-solving. Ultimately, avoiding conflict weakens both the quality and credibility of participation. This is why Banská Bystrica decided to put a lot of effort into learning to work in a polarized environment by creating workshops for politicians, civil servants and citizens.

Innovative or **participatory work is often invisible within traditional performance systems.** Civil servants who take initiative may receive little recognition or formal support. Without rewards, staff may prioritize tasks that are more visible or measurable. This discourages long-term engagement with participatory methods, even among motivated employees. Over time, the lack of incentives erodes innovation culture. Last, but not least, public administrations rely on established procedures that can be slow to change. Even when individual staff members are motivated, rigid routines and approval chains can limit their room to act. Innovation often requires crossing boundaries, but institutional norms tend to reinforce silos and caution. This creates friction between new ideas and old systems. As a result, progress is gradual, and momentum is easily lost.

4.4 Key learnings: How to strengthen internal innovation capacity

Based on our discussions and shared experiences, and taking into consideration the insights and challenges described in this chapter, partners found the following practices proved effective:

First of all, it is important to **provide training in facilitation, co-creation, and conflict navigation.** These are not optional add-ons but **core competencies for modern democratic governance.** Civil servants increasingly face situations where they must guide dialogue, balance perspectives, and hold space for disagreement. Without these skills, even well-designed participation processes can break down. Training builds confidence. It also reduces fear of conflict and fosters a shared methodology across departments. Over time, these competencies strengthen the overall culture of collaboration and trust. It is the exact reason why the city of Genk decided to make training on participation an essential part of the introductory programme for civil servants. And why Banská Bystrica invested in training on how to work with citizens in a polarized environment.

It is also helpful to **create internal communities of practice.** They give staff a safe space to exchange experiences and learn from one another and help transform individual learning into collective

institutional knowledge. Regular meetings encourage reflection on successes, challenges, and unexpected outcomes. This shared learning builds stronger internal networks and reduces isolation between departments. Ultimately, it cultivates an organizational habit of continuous improvement. A more voluntary approach for this are the breakfast meetings organized for civil servants in Banská Bystrica. The city of Kekava developed a training programme for staff and civil servants to help create this community of practice.

Bringing together different professional backgrounds expands the creativity and relevance of participatory work. When planners collaborate with social workers, or communication staff work with youth workers, insights deepen and blind spots shrink. **Cross-functional teamwork** allows problems to be approached from multiple perspectives simultaneously. It also breaks down rigid departmental silos that limit innovation. Over time, these collaborative practices improve both internal alignment and service quality. The Urban Innovation Laboratory set up in Quart de Poblet was set up to achieve exactly this purpose.

Public endorsement from political and administrative leaders legitimises experimentation. **When leadership communicates openly that risk-taking is acceptable, staff feel safer to test new approaches.** This support also protects innovators from criticism if experiments do not immediately succeed. Visibility matters: when leaders celebrate learning, it signals a shift in organizational culture. Such backing empowers civil servants to implement bolder and more meaningful participatory initiatives. This is why initiatives such as the joint training of staff and civil servants in Kekava is so important. It creates an environment where experimentation can be discussed and learning can take place. And that learning is facilitated further by embedding short reflection moments into routine tasks. This helps to **normalise learning**. Asking “What did we learn?” after workshops, meetings, or pilots encourages continual improvement. These small loops prevent mistakes from being repeated and successes from being forgotten. They also help teams adapt quickly to new challenges or feedback. Over time, regular reflection strengthens organizational resilience and agility.

4.5 Good Practices from partner cities in Theme 3

This chapter highlights five examples demonstrating how municipalities strengthened civil servants’ innovation capacities:

1. **Aarhus (Denmark): Citizen Service Innovation & Democracy Department**
2. **Genk (Belgium): The Genk Social Model as inspiration for Inclusive HR Policy**
3. **Banská Bystrica (Slovakia): Cooperation Trajectory on Polarisation**
4. **Quart de Poblet (Spain): Urban Innovation Laboratory**

4.5.1 Aarhus (Denmark): Citizen Service Innovation & Democracy Department

Staff-driven innovation in the municipality, combining autonomy, trust and citizen engagement with political support and funding. It demands a culture of taking risk, focus on human value and available resources to test new ideas.

The practice addresses the challenge of fostering innovation within municipal services while maintaining high-quality citizen service, political alignment, and employee well-being. Innovation and Democracy empowers civil servants to act as innovators, enabling them to develop and pilot initiatives that create tangible value for citizens.

Key elements include trust in employees, high autonomy, and a culture where experimentation and learning from mistakes are encouraged. Civil servants pursue projects aligned with their interests while balancing core operations in citizen services and navigating political frameworks. Staff are supported in project development, stakeholder engagement, and securing political backing and funding, ensuring initiatives are sustainable and scalable.

Civil servants co-create projects with citizens and stakeholders, focusing on initiatives that improve local services, foster participation, and strengthen democratic trust. The department facilitates innovation while ensuring alignment with municipal priorities and strategic objectives.

Main stakeholders are civil servants, citizens, political representatives, and external partners such as EU project consortia. Beneficiaries include citizens, who gain improved services and participation opportunities, and employees, who experience high motivation, professional growth, and well-being.

Resources needed

The practice leverages internal resources, including employee time for project development and coordination, guidance from the department, and modest budgets for pilot activities. Additional funding is often obtained through successful EU project applications.

Evidence of success (results achieved)

The practice²² has produced numerous successful projects, including citizen engagement initiatives, participatory service designs, and multiple funded EU projects. Civil servants in the department reports high autonomy, high well-being, and motivation compared to rest of municipality, while delivering measurable value to citizens. Political support ensures legitimacy and access to funding, enabling initiatives to be scaled and sustained. The culture of experimentation allows staff to test ideas safely, strengthening municipal innovation capacity.

Challenges encountered

Challenges include balancing innovation work with operational responsibilities and political frameworks. Staff need guidance to align projects with municipal priorities while maintaining autonomy. Establishing a culture that tolerates mistakes and encourages learning requires trust from leadership and ongoing mentoring. Managing resources, securing political support, and integrating initiatives into day-to-day operations are key lessons for replication.

Potential for learning or transfer

This practice is highly transferable to other municipalities seeking to foster innovation and participatory practices. Key factors for transfer include creating a culture of trust, autonomy, and high employee well-being; supporting staff in project development and citizen engagement; ensuring political backing and access to funding; and balancing innovation with operational duties. Other regions can adopt similar approaches to empower civil servants as change agents, create meaningful value for citizens, and build sustainable, innovative municipal practices.

4.5.2 Genk (Belgium): The Genk Social Model as inspiration for Inclusive HR Policy

A citizens' panel developed a model for living together in a superdiverse city. Two tracks were initiated for implementation: internal and external. For the internal rollout, measures within HR policy were developed to foster an inclusive and connecting mindset among civil servants.

Problem addressed and context

Genk is one of Belgium's most superdiverse cities, with 59% of its residents having a migration background. This diversity is a strength, but it also brings challenges related to social cohesion, mutual understanding, and trust in public institutions. The city observed rising polarisation, increased feelings of loneliness among certain groups, and difficulties in creating shared spaces of dialogue between residents with very different life-worlds. Additionally, frontline civil servants often faced

²² Started in 2005 and still going strong

complex social interactions requiring intercultural sensitivity, openness, and resilience. These societal dynamics created an urgent need for a shared narrative that could bring citizens and the local government closer together, while also providing practical guidance for everyday interactions in a multicultural environment.

How the practice reaches its objectives and how it is implemented

To address these challenges, Genk launched a citizens' participation trajectory between January 2024 and February 2026 with a representative panel of 22 residents ("the 22"). Their task was to formulate the ingredients for "living well together in our city." The deliberate choice for demographic diversity—across age, gender, origin, education level and employment status—ensured a broad legitimacy. Despite differences in perspectives, the panel succeeded in identifying common ground, resulting in four "Genk Habits"²³, summarised in the community model that emphasizes openness, respectful coexistence, genuine conversation, and emotional acknowledgement in a rapidly changing society.

After launching the Genk Habits in December 2022, the city shifted towards internal anchoring. Inspiration sessions were organized for municipal teams and civil society actors, helping them explore how the habits could be translated into their daily work. A parallel collaboration with the Inclusive HR Policy project group investigated how the habits could reinforce an inclusive and connecting organizational culture.

In 2024–2025, this work led to concrete structural measures. A new core competence, "Genk," was added to the city's competency framework across three levels. This competence incorporates an inclusive, open, and approachable attitude, encouraging civil servants to foster dialogue, remain resilient, and support citizens in an empowering, non-patronising way.

Another tool is the "Genk bath," an onboarding requirement through which new employees engage with civil society organizations during their first year of employment. The purpose is to experience different perspectives in the city, strengthen empathy, and build bridges between administration and citizens. Participation is supported by a structural allocation of work hours and will gradually become mandatory for functions linked to the highest competence levels.

In February 2025, Genk initiated a new trajectory: the "Rollout of the social narrative." This collaboration with the communication department and a behavioural change agency aims to strengthen community building, stimulate ownership of the Genk Habits, and encourage positive social behaviours. Internally, it will introduce cultural nudges and rituals to embed the habits in the organizational culture. Externally, it seeks to activate citizens through accessible storytelling and recognisable communication, with large-scale rollout planned for 2026 and beyond.

Stakeholders and beneficiaries

Key stakeholders include:

- The citizens' panel ("the 22"), whose deliberations form the foundation of the model.
- City of Genk employees, who apply the habits in their daily work and shape interactions with residents.
- Civil society organizations, which play a crucial role in the Genk bath and in strengthening bridges between communities.
- Communication and HR departments, steering the internal integration and behavioural aspects.

²³ Further information on: <https://www.genk.be/genkse-gewoontes>

- The wider population of Genk, who benefit from improved social cohesion, more empathetic public services, and a strengthening of trust in local government.

Ultimately, the practice aims to create a shared narrative that supports living well together in a superdiverse city—and to do so through a participatory, culturally sensitive, and structurally embedded approach that other regions can learn from.

Resources needed

The estimated financial impact is approximately 30,000 EUR for the rollout of the social narrative. The project requires an additional 0.5 FTE in staffing to support implementation. These resources will ensure proper coordination and effective execution of the initiative.

Evidence of success (results achieved)

This practice is considered good because it is built on a solid participatory foundation: a representative citizens' panel of 22 residents co-created the community model, ensuring that the resulting "Genk habits" genuinely reflect the city's superdiverse population. The approach strengthens legitimacy, ownership, and alignment between community values and municipal policy. Internally, the framework has already influenced organizational culture by influencing the city's rebranding, shaping a new core competence embedded in the city's competency framework and by introducing the "Genk bath," which promotes dialogue-based learning and exposure to diverse life-worlds among staff.

As the initiative is still in the rollout phase, measurable impact is limited, but early monitoring structures are in place. To date, around 5% of new employees have participated in the Genk bath since its launch in September 2025, and participation rates are being tracked to guide further implementation. The impact of the new social narrative trajectory will be assessed primarily through qualitative indicators, such as citizens' storytelling experiences and perceptions of connection. These evaluation mechanisms ensure that the practice remains evidence-informed and adaptable as it evolves.

Challenges encountered

Several challenges emerged during the implementation of this practice. First, translating an abstract community model ("the Genk habits") into concrete actions across a large municipal organization proved demanding. While the habits were well-received conceptually, embedding them into daily work processes required time, repeated communication, and targeted support for teams. This led to the development of inspiration sessions and collaboration with the Inclusive HR Policy project group, which became essential to strengthen internal ownership.

A second challenge involves the uptake of the "Genk bath." A compartmentalized organization makes it difficult to achieve horizontal support for HR measures. Similarly, internal support for a social theme like living together is challenging. How do we move from communication about a community model to encouraging desired behavior, contributing to citizenship, and defining the role of civil servants in this? We believe this issue can serve as a lever for organization-wide work: different departments are already working on behavioral change, and we want to share lessons learned from this trajectory and translate them to other policy domains. Participation has been lower than expected in the early phase (currently around 5% of new employees). Practical barriers such as scheduling, workload, and the need for clear guidelines from supervisors have slowed implementation. This highlighted the lesson that structural change requires not only a compelling narrative, but also operational alignment and managerial reinforcement.

Finally, the launch of the social narrative trajectory showed that linking communication, behavioural change, and community building is complex. Ensuring coherence across internal and external messaging requires intensive coordination between departments. A key lesson learned is that behavioural nudges and narrative strategies must be co-created with both staff and residents to be

effective, and that impact measurement needs to prioritize qualitative insights alongside quantitative indicators.

Potential for learning or transfer

This practice is potentially valuable for other regions because it demonstrates how a superdiverse city can translate broad societal challenges into a shared, citizen-owned narrative that becomes embedded in organizational culture and daily public service delivery. One key strength is the co-creation process with a representative citizens' panel, ensuring that the resulting framework resonates with a wide range of life experiences. Many regions face similar questions on how to foster social cohesion in increasingly diverse contexts; Genk's method shows that investing in structured citizen deliberation can produce a narrative that is both unifying and actionable.

Another transferable element is the systematic anchoring of the community model inside the municipal organization. By integrating the "Genk habits" into the competency framework and linking them to HR processes—such as the introduction of the "Genk bath"—the city created mechanisms that move beyond symbolic communication. Other regions could adopt this approach by connecting values-based frameworks to HR, onboarding, leadership development, or performance systems, ensuring long-term behavioural reinforcement.

A further lesson lies in strengthening the relationship between citizens and local government. Local authorities are closest to residents, and by deepening that connection, they are uniquely positioned to address local challenges while also generating supra-local impact. The actions implemented in Genk aim to foster a recognisable, human-centred culture within the administration, which in the long term contributes to building trust in government—an ambition relevant for many regions struggling with declining institutional confidence.

The practice also highlights the importance of internal–external coherence. The social narrative trajectory, combining communication, behavioural insights and community-building strategies, offers a model for regions seeking to connect organizational culture with citizen engagement. The emphasis on storytelling, dialogue and behavioural nudges may inspire other areas looking for soft-power tools to strengthen trust and cohesion.

However, transferring this practice requires sustained political commitment, cross-departmental coordination, and adequate resources. While the methodology is highly transferable, the narrative must always be locally co-created. Although no formal transfers have taken place, several Belgian municipalities have shown interest, indicating its potential relevance across diverse regional contexts.

4.5.3 Banská Bystrica (Slovakia): Cooperation Trajectory on Polarisation

The practice builds capacity of municipal staff and civil society to address polarization via workshops, tailored strategies, and 'Platform of Leaders of the Middle'.

Polarization is rising across society, affecting nearly every sphere of public life, including cities and local governments. What once were manageable differences of opinion have increasingly transformed into entrenched divisions. The local context does not exist in isolation: intensifying geopolitical polarization is influencing public attitudes, political behavior, and institutional dynamics at the municipal level. As global tensions deepen, their echoes become visible in local conflicts, community relations, and civic engagement.

At the same time, dialogue—one of the fundamental tools for navigating differences—is weakening. Opportunities for constructive exchange are becoming fewer, and many actors lack effective methods for addressing polarization in their daily work. Strategies and communication styles that heighten tension often become more visible and influential than those that seek to bridge divides. As a result, an environment marked by mistrust, suspicion, and an increasingly dominant “us versus them” mindset takes root.

The spread of “us vs. them” thinking creates a sense of helplessness, fear, and resignation among both citizens and public officials. People retreat into groups they perceive as safe, reinforcing echo chambers and limiting the possibility of cooperation across differences. This dynamic narrows the vital middle ground—the space where negotiation, compromise, and joint problem-solving can occur. As this middle ground shrinks, the functioning of participatory governance becomes increasingly difficult, because participation relies on trust, openness, and a willingness to engage with diverse perspectives.

In this context, the development of participatory governance at the city level is directly affected. Cities seeking to create inclusive, collaborative decision-making processes must confront the reality that polarization undermines the very relationships and attitudes that such processes depend on. Strengthening social cohesion therefore becomes not only a social objective but also a prerequisite for effective participatory governance. Our aim is to build the capacities and skills required to strategically work with polarization, reduce its negative impacts, and cultivate the conditions for cooperation.

To achieve this, our practice focuses on systematically developing the capacities of municipal staff and civil society actors to address polarization in a thoughtful, strategic manner. This work includes a series of capacity-building workshops on strategic approaches to polarization, where participants learn to understand its mechanisms, recognize its early signs, and apply methods that help reduce tensions rather than amplify them. Participants also develop tailored depolarization strategies that respond to the specific needs, challenges, and dynamics of their local context.²⁴

A crucial component of this practice is also the opportunity to join a community of practice which is currently known as the Platform of the Leaders of the Middle, the platform we are now building. This platform serves as a safe space for discussion, reflection, and the sharing of practical experience. It provides an environment in which leaders can openly explore the challenges of polarization, learn from each other, and test approaches that help strengthen dialogue and cooperation in their communities.

Resources needed

The financial and human resources required to set up and run the practice depend on the scope of implementation, the number of participating municipalities or civil society actors, and the level of ongoing support provided.

A key requirement is that workshops are delivered by trained and certified trainers. These trainers must hold accreditation from the Dutch organization Inside Polarisation, ensuring professional and evidence-based delivery. The financial costs for engaging certified trainers vary by region, travel needs, and workshop depth. In general, fees start at **approximately €3,000 per workshop**, with higher costs for multi-day formats or workshops delivered in remote locations.

Following the workshop, participants are equipped to create their own depolarization strategies tailored to their local context. This phase does not require additional financial resources; it relies mainly on participants’ motivation, time, and internal capacity. With the knowledge gained, strategy

²⁴ First workshops were organized between May 2024 and September 2025. More information can be found here, although the further information will be added on an ongoing basis: [Dialogue Centre](#) and [Platforma lídrov stredu I Banská Bystrica](#)

development can continue independently, supported by internal reflection, peer exchange, and commitment to applying the methods learned.

Additional human and financial resources may be required when establishing the **Platform of the Leaders of the Middle**. Depending on ambition and scale, this may involve part-time coordination (e.g., 0.2–0.5 FTE), expert facilitation for specific sessions, and basic operational costs such as online tools for communication, moderation of meetings, or occasional in-person gatherings. These investments help sustain the platform as a community of practice and ensure consistent support for participating leaders.

However, the platform can also begin with minimal resources by using existing municipal capacities, voluntary participation, and predominantly online meetings. As it grows, additional funding can strengthen coordination, broaden activities, and connect more actors working on depolarization.

Overall, the practice requires modest initial investment for certified workshop delivery, minimal direct costs for local strategy development, and flexible, scalable resources for maintaining the Platform of the Leaders of the Middle.

Evidence of success (results achieved)

This practice is considered effective because it addresses polarization in a structured, strategic, and sustainable way. Municipal staff and civil society actors often face rising tensions in their communities but lack the methods or confidence to respond constructively. By strengthening their skills, the practice directly enhances the capacity of local institutions to maintain dialogue, social cohesion, and participatory governance.

Workshops delivered by certified trainers ensure high professional quality and evidence-based methods. Participants consistently report increased understanding of polarization dynamics, improved ability to identify early signs of escalating conflict, and greater confidence in using depolarizing communication techniques. In several participating municipalities, staff teams developed concrete depolarization strategies that were later integrated into community engagement processes, demonstrating practical application beyond the workshops.

Evidence of effectiveness also comes from the functioning of the **Platform of the Leaders of the Middle**. Members describe the platform as a rare safe space to reflect, test ideas, and learn from peers facing similar challenges. Regular meetings are leading to new partnerships between municipalities and civil society organizations, joint community events focused on dialogue, and coordinated responses to local polarization situations.

Although long-term societal change requires sustained effort, early outcomes show reduced tension in several local disputes, improved communication between community groups. The combination of professional training, tailored strategies, and an ongoing community of practice ensures that the impact is not limited to a single event but continues to grow through continuous learning and collaboration.

Overall, the practice is considered effective because it builds durable local capacity, strengthens social cohesion, and equips actors with practical tools to address polarization in ways that lead to measurable, real-world improvements.

Challenges encountered

The effectiveness of such interventions depends heavily on continued engagement, follow-up, and whether participants translate learning into concrete action. Research cautions that single, isolated interventions may have only limited effects, and long-term success requires sustained effort and structural support.

Potential for learning or transfer

This practice is highly relevant for other regions because the challenges it addresses—polarization, weakening dialogue, mistrust, and shrinking spaces for cooperation—are becoming widespread across Europe and beyond. The approach offers a structured, transferable methodology that can strengthen local resilience in diverse political, social, and cultural contexts.

A key strength is that the practice works at the **meso level**: municipal staff, civil society actors, and community leaders. This makes it adaptable, because most regions rely on this same group of actors when addressing local tensions. The combination of certified workshops, tailored depolarization strategies, and a community of practice creates a model that can be replicated with relatively modest resources.

Success factors for transfer

- Using certified trainers (e.g., from Inside Polarisation) to ensure methodological quality.
- Building local ownership by allowing each municipality to create its own depolarization strategy.
- Maintaining an ongoing learning structure (such as the Platform of the Leaders of the Middle) rather than relying solely on one-off workshops.
- Ensuring support from leadership within municipalities or civil society organizations to embed practices in daily work.

Potential obstacles to transfer include:

- Lack of political or institutional will to acknowledge polarization as a problem.
- Limited availability of certified trainers in some regions.
- High staff turnover, which can disrupt continuity.
- Insufficient time allocated by participants to implement depolarization strategies after the workshops.

Despite these challenges, the practice remains highly transferable because it focuses on universal competencies: dialogue, conflict sensitivity, strategic communication, and building social cohesion. Regions facing rising tensions, mistrust, or declining participation can particularly benefit from adopting this approach, adapting it to their local needs while retaining its proven structure and methodology.

4.5.4 Quart de Poblet (Spain): Urban Innovation Laboratory

Achieve a transparency portal that not only complies with legal requirements, but also boosts citizens' trust in the municipal institution.

The practice seeks to reverse the inability of current municipal tools and structures to manage complex urban challenges (e.g., digitalisation, climate resilience, or intercultural coexistence) and to foster genuine citizen participation.

Given the municipality's strong population growth, the existing system was insufficient to meet the needs of the population, creating a gap between the council and its citizens. The context is the need for a profound cultural change within the council's administrative structure, moving from a closed, procedural model to a form of open, collaborative and experimental governance in order to rebuild public trust and improve public services.

The practice reaches its objectives through the establishment of an "Urban Innovation Laboratory"²⁵, implemented using the "Hexagonal" method. This method operationalizes its goals through six vectors:

- OPEN: Open local government to new voices, knowledge and demands.
- TRANS: Mixing disciplines, perspectives and diverse actors to enrich solutions.
- AGIL: Streamlining decision-making processes and institutional response.
- CO: Collaboration between citizens, technicians, politicians, associations and the economic sector.
- PROTO: Prototyping solutions before scaling them up, testing policies on a small scale.
- TECH: Digitising tools, data and services, ensuring their inclusive use.

Implementation is a phased process, starting with a "Phase 0" of diagnosis and ecosystem activation. This involves three structured workshops focused on internal organizational analysis, external ecosystem mapping, and future roadmap co-creation, ensuring the laboratory is built on evidence and broad stakeholder input.

The main stakeholders are Quart de Poblet Town Council (politicians and technical staff), which manages and participates in the laboratory, and Hexagonal's external experts, who provide the methodology. Citizens, local associations and the economic sector are also key stakeholders as active participants. The main beneficiaries are the citizens of Quart de Poblet, who will receive more responsive and effective public services. A crucial beneficiary is the municipal administration itself, which will develop new internal capacities, a more agile culture and an improved dynamic for serving the public.



Photo 18. Impressions of the workshops

Resources needed

The personalised external advice provided by the Hexagonal group is the only service that has required financial resources, in this specific case amounting to €9,000. In terms of the human resources required, the Open Government technician acts as the driving force behind the initiative, the Mayor's Office is responsible for organizing the workshops, and technicians from key areas of the council participate in the workshops, as do political leaders from the municipal government team.

²⁵ Find out more about the hexagonal method used in the urban innovation laboratory on its website:
<https://hexagonalinnova.net/nosotros/>

Evidence of success (results achieved)

The result we achieved in this phase of the urban innovation laboratory, which were organized between September 2025 and December 2025, are the documents that reflect the current state of the corporation. We would therefore have a diagnostic document for the entity, analysing the strengths and weaknesses detected during the first workshop, both at the level of the council's technical staff and the different departments, including the synergies between them, identifying internal capacities, frictions and levers for change. Thanks to the second workshop, we would have a map of actors and relationships in the local ecosystem, as well as a catalogue of the key urban challenges detected in the municipality, with a systemic analysis of their causes and possible strategies to address them. Finally, as a result of the workshops, we would have a document setting out the methodological and cultural foundations for continuing the innovation laboratory during 2026 and a shared roadmap at the institutional level to address the challenges outlined above.

There is also an intangible result, which is the encouragement of the will to change. The workshops that form part of the laboratory serve to trigger the necessary 'click' in the civil servant's willingness to change, which activates dynamism, gives them new enthusiasm when they see themselves represented and participating in changes in the work structure, and creates a general state of mind that is absolutely necessary for a new, disruptive way of working.

Challenges encountered

The lack of confidence in the workshop itself on the part of civil servants, and especially politicians, has been mitigated by the initiative of the Mayor's Office, which, as the highest authority at the municipal level, has served to promote the workshop. There is also a general lack of training culture among civil servants, not in terms of knowledge, where they can be trained on an ongoing basis, but in terms of work dynamics, where the maxim 'if it works, why change it' is used, creating tremendous resistance to change

However, once underway, the dynamics of the workshop encourage civil servants to participate actively, which activates a participatory and transformative spirit.

The main challenge is that planning is not a priority in the face of day-to-day problems. This problem is mitigated by the roadmap provided by the workshop, which also has the added value of unifying the plans of the departments into a single general line.

Potential for learning or transfer

The entire process followed during the urban innovation laboratory can be replicated in any type of organization. The search for improvements in internal organization, internal analysis of strengths and weaknesses, and detailing relationships with the entity's external agents are common aspects whose knowledge helps to improve, distribute work and resources more efficiently and, in general, improve internal dynamics.

Creating a space for reflection, in which everyone participates and feels like an active part of a group, and which also studies the challenges identified and creates a roadmap shared by the entire organization, is undoubtedly a value that can be transferred to any organization.

CHAPTER 5 – THEME 4: NEW WORKING METHODS & RETHINKING THE RULES

5.1 Why rethinking the rules matters

Across Europe, municipalities are under increasing pressure to be more transparent and involve citizens earlier in decision-making. To respond respectfully to complex societal changes and include diverse communities. Traditional administrative rules and procedures, often rooted in compliance, hierarchy, and risk avoidance, are not designed for these new realities. As a result, civil servants frequently encounter internal barriers such as rigid timelines/insufficient flexibility, legally driven process design or unclear mandates for participation and silo-based responsibilities.

The AoCE-network established that **true democratic innovation goes beyond new tools or engagement formats**. It requires rethinking how local governments function from the inside out. Many partners realised that meaningful participation cannot thrive within outdated administrative structures or rigid procedures. Instead, innovation demands **new working methods**, new internal routines, and in some cases even the **rewriting of long-standing rules** that no longer fit contemporary governance needs.

For this reason, our 4th theme focused on **system innovation**, the organizational foundations that determine how municipalities work, learn, and collaborate. Rather than focusing only on individual initiatives, the AoCE-network looked at the deeper conditions that allow civil servants to act as innovators and enable participatory practices to become sustainable. Together they pointed to several enabling factors:

- **simplified rules**, so staff can act with clarity and flexibility rather than fight bureaucracy;
- **accessible internal guidance**, giving civil servants practical instructions and shared language for participation;
- **supportive leadership**, which legitimises experimentation and protects learning;
- **cross-department facilitation**, to bridge silos and bring multiple disciplines into co-creation processes;
- **learning loops**, where teams regularly reflect on what works and what needs adjustment;
- **dedicated structures for collaboration**, such as participation units, innovation labs, or cross-functional working groups.

Together, these elements form the backbone of system innovation — **the shift from participation as an isolated project to participation as an organizational capability**.

5.2 What we learned

Throughout the 2.5-year collaboration, the Network learned that **participation cannot thrive in rigid systems**. Governments often ask communities for creativity, collaboration, and co-ownership, but at the same internally they still operate under restrictive conditions. Staff face strict procedural steps that leave little room for adaptation, opaque decision-making processes that make outcomes unpredictable, fixed consultation templates that limit dialogue to predetermined formats, or minimal flexibility that discourages responsiveness. This internal rigidity creates a mismatch between the collaborative approach expected from citizens and the actual organizational reality. As a result, participation can feel symbolic or performative, eroding trust and reducing citizens' willingness to engage.

Through experience and implementation of their testing actions, the partners have learned that to achieve genuine democratic participation, internal rules, routines, and decision-making structures must align with participatory intentions, enabling civil servants to act with flexibility, transparency, and responsiveness.

Secondly, tools such as participation frameworks, checklists, conversation guides, decision-making flowcharts, and public consultation toolkits serve a purpose beyond structuring processes. They actively influence how civil servants approach collaboration, encouraging a mindset that values dialogue, iteration, and responsiveness. **Clear methods provide guidance** in uncertain situations, reducing fear, hesitation, and confusion, which are common barriers to experimentation. By making participatory practices tangible and repeatable, these tools give staff the confidence to innovate and adapt approaches to local contexts. Over time, consistent use of well-designed methods **cultivates an organizational culture where collaboration is expected, manageable, and seen as integral to problem-solving**, rather than as an optional or risky extra. It is among others for this reason that the AoCE-network decided to adopt and adapt Genk's Participation Assessment Framework as an important tool that can be used by cities working on improving their work with citizen participation.

In the third place, **participation succeeds only when multiple departments collaborate**, including planning, communication, social services, legal, youth, and organizational development. Each team brings essential perspectives, ensuring processes are practical and meaningful. New working methods cannot function in isolation, as they span several areas of municipal work. Cross-department coordination improves outcomes and reduces silos. It also fosters a culture where innovation is a shared responsibility. And yet, supportive rules and cross-departmental collaboration alone are not enough to foster lasting innovation; they must be paired with **dedicated learning spaces** where staff can reflect, share experiences, and improve practices. Cities across the network have experimented with a variety of approaches to embed learning into daily work. **Banská Bystrica** organizes informal breakfast meetings that encourage open discussion and knowledge exchange. **Genk** uses internal learning cycles to review pilots and gather lessons systematically. **Aarhus and Ķekava** have established municipal academies to train staff in participatory methods and democratic innovation, while several partners have created **thematic communities of practice** to share expertise across departments and projects. By providing structured opportunities to reflect, experiment, and learn collectively, these initiatives make innovation **sustainable rather than sporadic**, gradually embedding new approaches into the organizational culture.

5.3 Challenges related to “rethinking the rules and new working methods”

Despite progress, partners also mention several recurring obstacles. An important first being that **responsibility for participation is often unclear** within municipal structures. For example, the communication team may assume that planning is leading, while planners expect social policy departments to take charge. Legal teams frequently intervene late, imposing constraints that complicate ongoing initiatives. This lack of clarity creates delays, inefficiencies, and frustration among staff. Ultimately, it weakens outcomes and makes participatory processes less credible to citizens. Organizations where a dedicated participation officer is assigned also suffer from this, with colleagues expecting this person to “take care of participation”.

Many municipal rules were created for stable, predictable environments and assume linear workflows. They often limit stakeholder engagement and leave little room for adaptation. Today's social challenges, however, are dynamic and unpredictable, requiring flexibility and iterative problem-solving. **Rigid rules can therefore hinder experimentation** and slow down innovation. Partners realised that updating internal procedures is essential to match the complexity of modern participation, although this is certainly one of the toughest issues to face. Just as the third challenge, **risk aversion**. Civil

servants frequently expressed fear of public criticism, legal mistakes, or political pushback. This risk aversion can prevent teams from testing new methods or engaging communities in meaningful ways. Rigid legal interpretations often block initiatives that might otherwise improve services or participation. Even small experiments may be avoided due to the potential for blame or reputational damage. Overcoming this culture of caution is key to enabling innovation in municipal governance.

Without **shared methods, guidance, or frameworks, participation processes become fragmented and vary depending on the team or individual**. They may be personality-driven, relying heavily on the enthusiasm of particular staff members (e.g. the participation officer) rather than structured organizational routines. This inconsistency can confuse both citizens and other municipal teams. Formalising methods and embedding them into institutional practices is essential. Institutionalisation ensures reliability, fairness, and sustainability across projects and departments. Several partners have taken serious steps in this direction, a.o. the city of Gdansk with the introduction of their public consultation toolkit and the city of Genk with the Participation Assessment Framework, which was also adopted and adapted by the AoCE-network.

5.4 Key learnings on “rethinking the rules and introducing new working methods”

For participation to move beyond good intentions, municipal organizations must ensure that **their internal rules and structures actively support participatory ambitions**. Participation struggles to take root when procedures are rigid, fragmented, or contradictory. Clear alignment between internal regulations, templates, and decision-making processes creates the organizational space civil servants need to respond meaningfully to citizen input. This alignment signals that participation is not symbolic but taken seriously. A telling example is found in **Breda**, where the implementation of the Participation Strengthening Act was approached not as a one-off compliance exercise, but as a living organizational process. By gradually embedding participatory obligations into daily routines and internal agreements, Breda demonstrates how rules can enable rather than constrain collaboration with citizens.

Supportive structures, however, are only effective when civil servants are equipped with **practical methods that build confidence and a collaborative mindset**. Frameworks, guides, and toolkits do more than organize participation processes. They shape how staff think about engagement. Well-designed tools reduce uncertainty, encourage experimentation, and make participation tangible and repeatable across departments. In **Genk**, the Participation Assessment Framework illustrates this clearly. By offering a structured yet flexible method to reflect on key questions, such as purpose, roles, inclusion, and decision-making, the framework helps teams design participation processes more consciously and transparently. Over time, consistent use of such tools normalizes collaboration as a standard way of working rather than an optional addition.

Effective participation also depends on **interdisciplinary teamwork and shared responsibility**. Complex societal challenges rarely fit within the remit of a single department. Involving colleagues from urban planning, communication, social services, legal affairs, youth policy, and organizational development ensures that participatory approaches are inclusive, feasible, and coherent. Cross-department collaboration helps dismantle silos and reduces dependence on individual champions, making innovation more resilient. Practical learning-oriented collaboration can take simple but powerful forms, as demonstrated in **Banská Bystrica**. Their informal breakfast meetings provide a low-threshold learning infrastructure where staff from different disciplines exchange experiences, reflect on ongoing projects, and jointly explore new approaches. Such formats foster trust, collective ownership, and continuity across participation initiatives.

When working on rethinking the rules and introducing new working methods, the concept of open data and open government also has to be considered. While most cities aim to be open governments the question arises what this means from a digital perspective. We established that in the long term, most cities aspire to move toward this openness, recognizing their potential to improve transparency, participation, and trust.

The concept of **open data – open government** revolves around making public sector information freely available, accessible, and reusable by citizens, businesses, and other stakeholders. Open data refers to structured, machine-readable datasets—covering areas like transport, environment, demographics, budgets, or public services—that are published online in a transparent and timely manner. Open government builds on this principle by promoting transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in decision-making, ensuring that governance is not only visible but also responsive to the needs and insights of the community.

Implementing this concept requires **new working methods and rules within city administrations**. Traditional hierarchical workflows often limit information sharing, slow decision-making, and hinder collaborative engagement. To foster openness, municipalities must adopt practices such as:

- **Data governance and standards** – establishing protocols for collecting, verifying, updating, and publishing datasets consistently.
- **Interdepartmental collaboration** – breaking silos between departments to enable integrated datasets that reflect the city's multiple dimensions.
- **Citizen engagement integration** – designing processes where open data is used not only for reporting

Among the AoCE partners, **Budaörs** has planned an IAP action to lay the foundations for a more open government by **updating and improving its GIS system**, with the long-term goal of making it more accessible to citizens through the city's digital platform. **Quart de Poblet** has proposed an equally ambitious initiative with the development of a transparency portal (see the full good practice under theme 2) which also established to create a **digital open government**.²⁶

Finally, **municipalities strengthen innovation when supportive rules are paired with structured learning spaces**. Participation evolves through practice, reflection, and adjustment – not through fixed templates alone. Learning structures such as retrospectives, internal academies, or communities of practice allow teams to test methods, share lessons learned, and refine their approaches. In **Gdańsk**, the Public Consultation Toolkit plays a dual role: it offers methodological guidance while also serving as a shared reference point for learning and quality improvement across the organization. By combining clear guidance with spaces for reflection and exchange, municipalities create learning loops that transform experimentation into institutionalized practice.

Together, these experiences show that durable participatory innovation emerges when internal rules, methods, teamwork, and learning reinforce one another. When organizational structures enable flexibility, tools shape collaborative mindsets, departments share responsibility, and learning is continuous, participation becomes an embedded part of how municipalities work – not an exception, but the norm.

²⁶ This is explained as Good Practice under paragraph 3.5.3

5.5 Good practices from partner cities

This theme explores two complementary practices from partner cities, with each case offering a different lens for rethinking the rules and introducing new working methods.

- 1. Breda (NL): Participation Strengthening Act Implementation:** A living approach to integrating participation obligations into municipal organization.
- 2. Gdańsk (PL): Public Consultation Toolkit:** A comprehensive resource to improve consistency and quality in public consultations.

In chapter 6 the **Participation Assessment Framework for Participation** that was first developed by the Lead Partner, the City of Genk, will be discussed. This good practice was adopted by the AoCE partners as their collective network product. It offers a practical method for designing participation systematically and transparently.

5.5.1 Breda (NL): Participation Strengthening Act Implementation

Create a participation guide for the social domain. This guide will make participation easier, more inclusive, and accessible to all residents. Its purpose is to ensure that everyone—especially people who are vulnerable or hard to reach—can take part, express their views, and influence decisions.

Breda already has strong networks and an ambition to be inclusive, yet many marginalized groups remain underrepresented in existing participation processes. Improving participation is therefore essential to give everyone a voice, strengthen trust between residents and the municipality, and make better use of people's ideas, experiences and strengths. Achieving this requires clear plans, good coordination, and practical tools that lower barriers to participation.

The city of Breda is strengthening its approach to citizen participation in response to the new Participation Enhancement Act. From 2025 onward, this law gives residents more influence over policies and services, including the “right to challenge.” However, traditional participation structures—such as neighbourhood councils and public consultations—often fail to reach many vulnerable groups. As a result, participation is not always fair or representative, and trust in local government can suffer.

To address these issues, Breda is developing more accessible and diverse participation pathways. New approaches include client councils in social care, youth initiatives enabling young people to help shape the city's future, and the use of digital tools to broaden access. Partnerships with local NGOs and the URBACT Local Group help engage communities that are usually left out, while training for municipal staff strengthens their skills in participatory methods. At the same time, the municipality is working on a unified framework to guide participation across all departments.

Key stakeholders include the municipality, civil servants, local organizations, and client councils. The primary beneficiaries are all residents—particularly young people and marginalized groups—who gain more influence over the policies and services that affect their daily lives.

Resources needed

We don't know all the details yet, but at least one full-time participation officer will be needed. The goal is to create a clear guide and make practical agreements on how to manage participation in the organization.

Evidence of success (results achieved)

This practice is promising because it addresses a core challenge: many marginalized groups and young people are still not sufficiently involved in policy making. Research by our intern, Mustafa Sezen, confirms that hard-to-reach residents often remain excluded. His findings show that participation is most effective when municipal staff reflect the diversity of the community. Diverse teams better understand residents' needs, which leads to fairer policies and increased trust.

Recent initiatives—such as client councils and youth platforms—already give residents more direct influence. The use of “boosters” also helps connect the municipality with local communities, although these intermediaries need additional support to work effectively. The city is now developing a clear participation framework and practical agreements to ensure that participation becomes more consistent, inclusive, and embedded across departments.

Partnerships with local organizations and the use of digital tools are making participation more accessible for a wider group of residents. Early signs indicate broader engagement and stronger cooperation between communities and municipal staff. Over time, success will be measured through structural improvements and concrete outcomes, such as increased diversity among participants, more inclusive decision-making, and higher levels of citizen trust and satisfaction.

Challenges encountered

The City of Breda faces several challenges in making citizen participation truly inclusive and structurally embedded. Current initiatives, such as neighbourhood councils and client councils, do not consistently reach marginalized or hard-to-reach groups, limiting equal representation. There is no shared vision or uniform participation framework, which leads to fragmented approaches across departments. Limited resources and capacity make it difficult to scale outreach and support for initiatives like “boosters.” At the same time, successful participation requires a cultural shift within the organization—from isolated tools to an integrated approach where staff actively work with residents. Another challenge is ensuring that municipal staff reflect the diversity of the community, so policies and communication better match citizens' needs. Finally, clear agreements and measurable indicators are missing to assess the impact of participation. These challenges call for structural embedding, sufficient resources, and an inclusive, organization-wide approach.

Potential for learning or transfer

A key lesson is that participation is not just about tools; it needs a cultural change inside the organization. Having a diverse municipal staff also builds trust and makes policies fit better with the community.

5.5.2 Gdańsk (PL): Public Consultation Toolkit

Public Consultations Toolkit helps Gdańsk standardise, improve and document all participatory processes by offering clear methods, tools and shared guidelines for civil servants.

The Public Consultations Toolkit was developed to address several persistent challenges within Gdańsk's participatory system. Despite long experience with public engagement, municipal units carried out consultations inconsistently, using different methods and documentation standards. Civil servants often struggled to choose appropriate participation tools, ensure clear communication with residents, and integrate consultation results into everyday policy work. The lack of shared guidelines and fragmented institutional knowledge made it difficult to guarantee coherence and transparency across the administration.

The Toolkit responds to these issues by providing a practical, easy to use manual containing methods, templates and operational guidance for planning, conducting and evaluating public consultations. It sets out clear steps for designing a process, selecting suitable engagement tools, communicating

with residents and preparing final reports. Its aim is to introduce coherent standards across the administration and improve the quality of participatory activities. The Toolkit is being developed in parallel with the update of the public consultations resolution and the creation of the new citywide participatory platform, ensuring that all three components form a unified and integrated system.

The development process is collaborative and based on real needs. It begins with identifying the needs of civil servants, followed by an analysis of similar toolkits produced in European projects. A draft structure and initial content are prepared and consulted with municipal staff and other relevant stakeholders. The content is then refined, designed and internally tested, with feedback used to make further adjustments. To ensure continuity, a designated “toolbox owner” is appointed to maintain and promote the Toolkit and update it as needed.

The main stakeholders involved are municipal civil servants, non governmental organizations and external experts. Civil servants contribute to the creation of the content and will be the primary users of the Toolkit. Coordination is led by the Social Development Department and the Department for Cooperation with District Councils and Citizens, ensuring alignment with broader city initiatives.

The beneficiaries of the practice are both the administration and residents. Civil servants gain clear, shared standards and a tool that improves the quality and consistency of consultation processes. Residents benefit from better designed, more transparent and understandable participatory processes, supported by clearer rules and stronger administrative capacity.

Resources needed

Approximately 19 000 PLN was allocated for expert support, including facilitation and the preparation of materials and documents. The practice also relies on existing internal municipal resources, with staff contributing to coordination and content development. The city is additionally seeking external funding to further develop and scale the tool. In the future a dedicated action owner, either a newly hired staff member or someone already employed in the municipality, will be responsible for maintaining and updating the Toolkit. Work on the practice has been ongoing since 2024. We expect full and stable functioning in 2026, with the understanding that the Toolkit will continue to evolve as dissemination activities generate new feedback and improvement needs.

Evidence of success (results achieved)

The practice is considered good because it directly responds to clearly identified gaps in Gdańsk’s participatory system and demonstrates measurable progress in standardising and improving consultation processes. Evidence gathered during the project shows that municipal units previously used fragmented methods, inconsistent documentation and varied approaches to resident engagement. The development of the Toolkit has already generated concrete outputs, including a needs diagnosis among civil servants, a structured mock-up and content proposal, internal consultations across departments, and ongoing refinement aligned with the new consultation resolution and the participatory platform. These steps mark the first time Gdańsk has created a unified operational standard for participation.

The practice also shows success in capacity building. In 2024 the city delivered a full cycle of training sessions for civil servants, resulting in documented attendance lists, workshop materials, photo documentation and an evaluation report. This learning process directly informed the content of the Toolkit, demonstrating a clear link between user needs and the design of the final product. The evaluation confirmed improved awareness of participatory standards and revealed a strong demand for practical tools, validating the relevance of the practice.

Additionally, the structured, multi-stage implementation process itself is considered a success. It has introduced cross-department cooperation, systematic feedback mechanisms and a sustained

workflow that continues into 2025 and 2026. The creation of a designated future action owner further strengthens long-term sustainability.

While the full results will materialise once the Toolkit is fully operational, early outputs – including training completion, internal testing, documented consultations, improved coordination and the alignment of three major system components (Toolkit, updated resolution, participatory platform) – already demonstrate that the practice effectively addresses institutional challenges and lays the groundwork for measurable improvements in the quality, transparency and consistency of public consultations in Gdańsk.

Challenges encountered

Several challenges emerged during the development of the practice, reflecting both organizational and contextual factors. One key difficulty was maintaining steady engagement from civil servants throughout the process. Participation fluctuated during longer breaks or periods of high workload, which showed that continuity and a predictable rhythm of work are essential for keeping contributors involved. Another challenge concerned balancing diverse expectations and needs among municipal units. While many departments recognised the value of common standards, their day- to- day operational differences required careful negotiation to ensure the Toolkit remained practical and adaptable rather than overly rigid.

Internal coordination also proved demanding. Aligning the Toolkit with the revised public consultations resolution and the new participatory platform required multiple rounds of adjustments and close cross-department collaboration. This highlighted the importance of clear responsibilities, iterative decision making and a designated owner who will safeguard the final implementation.

A significant lesson learned is that the official introduction of the Toolkit will be decisive for its long-term success. Early reception by staff, clarity of instructions and the way the tool is communicated will all influence how quickly it becomes part of everyday practice. The choice of timing is equally important. Political context, organizational stability and the availability of supportive leadership can either accelerate or delay adoption. The document notes that overly public or premature presentation of related reforms, such as the new consultation resolution, can risk politicisation and reduce willingness to engage.

Finally, the process demonstrated that tools of this scale must evolve over time. Feedback gathered during internal testing showed that flexibility, periodic updates and continued dissemination are necessary to keep the Toolkit relevant. This reinforced the importance of long-term stewardship, regular review cycles and ongoing dialogue with the users who will rely on the Toolkit in their daily work.

Potential for learning or transfer

This practice is potentially valuable for other regions because it shows how a municipality can move from fragmented consultation practices to a coherent and standardised system. Many cities face similar challenges: inconsistent methods across departments, limited institutional memory, difficulties in communicating consultation outcomes and a lack of clear operational guidance for civil servants. The Gdańsk experience demonstrates that these gaps can be addressed through a structured, step by step process that links legal, organizational and digital reforms.

A key success factor that can be transferred is the parallel development of three complementary elements: a unified operational Toolkit, an updated legal framework and a digital platform. Their coordinated design ensures that standards are not only defined but also supported by procedures and tools that make them usable in practice. Another transferable aspect is the emphasis on internal

capacity building. The practice shows that consultations improve significantly when staff receive practical training and actively contribute to designing the tools they will later use.

Regions considering similar work should note that timing, political support and internal communication are crucial. Introducing new standards too quickly or without sufficient ownership among staff can slow down adoption. Conversely, early involvement of different departments and clear leadership help maintain momentum.

Although the full rollout is still underway, the approach already offers a clear model for systematising participation processes. Other regions can adapt the methodology regardless of size or administrative structure, especially those seeking to strengthen transparency, consistency and user-friendly public engagement.

CHAPTER 6 –THE PARTICIPATION ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

6.1 Lessons learned combined to one collective lesson

During their URBACT-journey, the Agents of Co-Existence network has explored participation from multiple angles: working with citizens, opening government to innovators, strengthening civil servants as change-makers, and aligning internal rules and working methods. As was described in the chapters before each theme highlighted different entry points into participation. Yet as cities reflected on their experiences during the transnational meetings and with their ULGs at home, a more complex picture emerged: The challenges they encountered did not belong to one theme alone, nor could they be solved within a single domain. None of the four themes can be addressed in isolation.

Partners established that participation rarely breaks down or fails for one clear reason. Rather, difficulties accumulated gradually, often becoming visible only when trust was already under pressure. Civil servants described situations in which they sincerely wanted to engage citizens but lacked clarity about political mandates or decision-making space. Citizens, in turn, were invited into processes that appeared open, but in the end offered little meaningful influence once institutional boundaries became apparent. Innovators brought energy and new ideas, only to encounter uncertainty about roles, procedures, and responsibilities inside the organization. These issues surfaced across all four themes, indicating that the core challenge lies not in how participation is organized, but in how local governments organize themselves for participation. In the introduction of this report this intersection between the four themes was already described.

As we have seen in the chapters before, across the network similar challenges surfaced repeatedly. Participation was initiated too late to shape core decisions, or too early to be supported by clear direction. Civil servants were encouraged to experiment, while internal rules continued to reward predictability and control. Openness towards society was proclaimed, but internal conversations about risk, authority, and responsibility remained unresolved. These were not isolated incidents; they were symptoms of deeper organizational dynamics at play.

What became increasingly clear was that no single intervention derived from the learnings as described in the themes (more engagement tools, better communication strategies, or higher ambitions on participation ladders) could resolve these challenges on its own. Cities learned that participation cannot be ‘fixed’ by choosing the right method or by aiming for a higher level of citizen influence. Instead, meaningful participation depends on continuous choices about scope, timing, roles, and power, made across different parts of the organization and often under conditions of uncertainty.

And to add to this, these choices are rarely neutral. They involve negotiations between political leadership and administration, between internal departments, and between government and society. Civil servants found themselves navigating these challenges without a shared language or reflective space to assess whether their organization was actually ready to open up participation in a credible way. As a result, participation sometimes became symbolic, inconsistent, or vulnerable to disappointment – not because the ambition was wrong, but because the organizational conditions were insufficiently examined.

The network’s collective lesson, therefore, was not that participation should be less ambitious, but that it should be more consciously assessed. Improving participation is not about applying a blueprint, but about understanding one’s own organizational position within a complex system of expectations, constraints, and possibilities. Participation rarely fits neatly into predefined project cycles, organizational charts, or linear decision-making models; it inevitably raises questions of timing, responsibility, influence, and power.

6.2 From a collective lesson to a coherent answer

The four themes explored by the AoCE-network highlight different dimensions of the same systemic question. When cities struggled to work meaningfully with citizens (Theme 1), the root cause was often not a lack of outreach or motivation, but unclear internal decisions about scope, timing, or influence. Similarly, efforts to collaborate with external innovators (Theme 2) frequently stalled when internal roles, responsibilities, or expectations were not clearly defined. Even highly capable and innovative civil servants (Theme 3) found themselves constrained by organizational uncertainty or by rules that did not support experimentation (Theme 4).

Seen from this perspective, the lessons emerging from the network did not point towards a new participation model, a toolkit, training for civil servants, or a more refined engagement technique. Instead, they converged around a more fundamental insight: cities did not primarily lack ideas or commitment, but a shared and structured way to assess their own readiness for participation. What was missing was not ambition, but alignment. It shows that meaningful participation depends largely on the internal coherence of the organization.

We have seen in the AoCE-network that civil servants encountered participation dilemmas long before formal participatory moments began. Questions surfaced about political ownership, organizational mandate, internal capacity, legal constraints, and the actual space for citizen influence. Quite often, these questions were addressed implicitly, individually, or too late in the process. As a result, participation trajectories frequently started from assumptions rather than deliberate choices, leaving civil servants and citizens alike navigating unclear expectations.

This recurring pattern led the AoCE-network to shift its focus. Rather than asking **how** participation should be organized, cities increasingly asked **whether** their organization was prepared to engage, and under what conditions participation could be meaningful and credible. This reframing marked an important turning point in the collective learning journey: To look at participation not as a standalone or isolated activity, but as an organizational capability that requires continuous reflection and internal coherence.

The Participation Assessment Framework was developed precisely to respond to this systemic challenge. Rather than offering another participation method or toolkit, it provides **a structured way of thinking before acting**. It supports civil servants in asking the right questions at the right time – not only about citizens, but also about their own organization, mandates, capacities, and readiness.

6.3. A collective network product

Although the first version of the Participation Assessment Framework originated in the City of Genk, its current form is the result of collective learning across the entire AoCE- network. Through testing actions, peer reflections, and transnational exchanges, partners refined the framework to ensure it resonates with the daily realities of municipal work across different European contexts. It encapsulates shared learning about what it takes to navigate participation responsibly within complex governmental systems.

By shifting attention from methods to assessment, the Participation Assessment Framework offers local governments and most of all their civil servants a way to engage with participation more honestly and sustainably. It acknowledges that there is no single, universally correct way to improve participation. Instead, it invites cities to continuously examine their own position within a web of political, organizational, and societal relations—and to make participation choices that are both ambitious and realistic. The Participation Assessment Framework therefore represents more than an analytical instrument or a tool. It is a shared product of the network, a tangible outcome of two and a half years of working together. Importantly, it is designed not as an expert-only model, but as a usable

tool that enables conversations within local governments and between civil servants. By doing so, it directly contributes to strengthening internal capacities for participation.

Approached from a holistic perspective, the Participation Assessment Framework must be understood as the logical culmination of the network's learning journey. As was explained in previous chapters, throughout the AoCE process, partners repeatedly encountered the limits of partial solutions: A clear participation vision or strategy proved insufficient when internal roles and mandates were unclear. A rich toolbox lost its value when organizational capacity or political commitment was lacking. Even highly motivated civil servants struggled when internal rules, timelines, or accountability structures worked against participatory ambitions. What these experiences made visible was that participation cannot be strengthened by addressing one theme or topic.

By connecting insights across themes, the network came to see participation as a systemic practice rather than a standalone activity or assignment. It is shaped simultaneously by political intent, organizational culture, institutional rules, professional practices, and relationships with citizens and external actors. Improving participation therefore requires more than normative aspirations or methodological sophistication; it demands a continuous and conscious assessment of how these different aspects interact in specific situations.

This insight also reshaped how the network related to established participation frameworks, such as Arnstein's ladder or the adapted version of this ladder as defined in the URBACT Active Citizens Baseline Study²⁷. While the ladder remains essential for articulating levels of citizen influence, the AoCE-network experiences showed us that aiming for higher levels of participation without assessing organizational readiness can be counterproductive. As said before, the question was no longer only *how much* influence citizens should have, but *whether local governments were genuinely able* to offer that influence in a responsible and credible manner. Without this assessment, participation risks becoming performative rather than transformative.

It was precisely this gap that led to the development of the Participation Assessment Framework as a collective network product. The framework was initially designed by the City of Genk. But it was further developed through shared reflection, experimentation, and discussion among all partner cities. This enabled the network to strengthen its relevance as a transnational learning outcome rather than a locally specific tool. The PAF in fact embodies the network's shared understanding that **participation capacity must be assessed rather than assumed**.

To be clear: The Participation Assessment Framework does not replace Arnstein's ladder; it deepens it. Where the ladder clarifies how much influence citizens have, the PAF addresses whether the organization is ready to offer that influence in a credible way. This protects both citizens and civil servants from frustration and loss of trust.

6.4 Engeström's Activity Theory as intellectual backbone

Engeström's Activity Theory provided the conceptual grounding needed to translate this holistic understanding into a practical framework. At its core, this theory views human action as embedded within systems composed of actors, tools, rules, divisions of labour, communities, and shared objectives. It shows participation not as an isolated event or method, but as a **complex system** in which tools, rules, roles, community, goals, and organizational structures constantly interact. This holistic perspective is essential because it mirrors the lived reality of civil servants: participation is never just about designing a workshop or choosing a method – it is about balancing political expectations, organizational routines, citizen relationships, legal constraints, and available capacity.

²⁷ See p. 1 of the Introduction for a figure of that model.

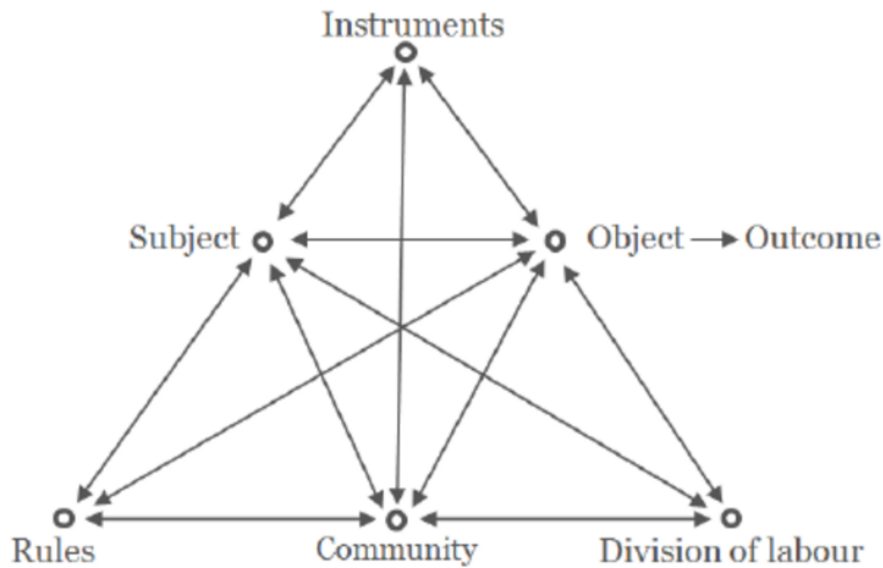


Figure 19. Engeström's Activity Theory

The genius of anchoring the Participation Assessment Framework in Engeström's Activity Theory is that the eight components of the Framework together **force teams to look at a participation process as a whole system**. Each component reflects one part of the activity system (purpose, community, rules, tools, division of labour, outcomes, tensions). And only by considering all eight components of the Framework can a participation process become both internally aligned, externally transparent, and socially credible.

In practice, this means that civil servants using the Participation Assessment Framework are automatically pushed into a holistic mindset: they must look simultaneously at the purpose, the community, the political frame, the internal organization, the risks, the roles, the communication, the feasibility. Everything that actually determines whether participation will work.

By doing so, the Participation Assessment Framework helps municipalities address **the four key thematic challenges** identified by the AoCE-network:

Theme 1 (Working with Citizens): through clear purpose, transparent influence, inclusive stakeholder mapping, and honest communication.

Theme 2 (Innovators Coming Into Government): through clarity about rules, roles, collaboration structures, and political space.

Theme 3 (Civil Servants as Innovators): by developing internal reflection skills, risk awareness, facilitation capacity, and cross-department collaboration.

Theme 4 (New Working Methods & Rethinking the Rules): by identifying contradictions, testing new formats, adjusting organizational routines, and strengthening internal alignment.

In short: Engeström's Activity Theory gives the **holistic backbone**, and the Participation Assessment Framework turns that holistic view into **eight concrete elements** that help civil servants act with clarity, alignment, and system-awareness. By drawing on the Activity Theory, the Framework does not simplify complexity but makes it workable. It invites civil servants to surface contradictions early on, to reflect on the interplay between ambition and constraint, and to consciously weigh the conditions under which participation can contribute to democratic legitimacy and public value. In this sense, the framework mirrors the holistic nature of the question it addresses.

Seen this way, the Participation Assessment Framework is not a toolkit, nor a checklist, nor a prescriptive model. It is an invitation to think systemically about participation before acting. As such, it captures the central conclusion of the AoCE journey: **meaningful participation is not the result of better techniques alone, but of organizations willing to assess themselves as part of the participatory system they seek to shape.**

6.5 How to use the Participation Assessment Framework

The Participation Assessment Framework is designed to be used as a reflective instrument before and throughout participatory processes, rather than as a checklist applied at a single moment in time. Its purpose is not to determine whether participation should happen, but to support civil servants and organizations in assessing under what conditions participation can be meaningful, credible, and responsible in each context. By doing so, it operationalizes the holistic understanding developed throughout the AoCE journey.



Figure 20. Visual of the Participation Assessment Framework

At the heart of the Framework lie eight interconnected elements: who, purpose, process, internal process, clear roles, time, communication, and evaluation. These elements do not represent sequential steps, nor can they be meaningfully considered in isolation. Together, they surface the systemic conditions that shape participation in practice. Experience across the network, described in earlier chapters, showed that when one or more of these dimensions remains implicit or underexplored, tensions tend to emerge later in the process, often at the expense of trust, learning, or democratic legitimacy.

The Framework first helps to position participation in its broader context. Clarifying **who** is affected, **why** participation is initiated, and what the intended **purpose** of engagement is. This prevents participation from becoming symbolic or misleading. Cities learned that vague ambitions such as 'involving citizens' easily mask unresolved questions about influence, representation, and decision-making authority. Making these considerations explicit creates a shared starting point for both internal actors and participants from outside the organization.

Secondly, the Participation Assessment Framework foregrounds participation as an ongoing process rather than a single event. Reflecting on the **process**, the required **time**, and the necessary **internal processes** within the organization highlights the fact that participation unfolds across policy phases and organizational boundaries. Several cities experienced that participatory ambitions faltered not because of external resistance, but because internal alignment, coordination across departments, or realistic timelines were missing. The Framework therefore encourages early reflection on whether the organization is structurally prepared to support participation over time.

Finally, the Framework draws attention to the (often-underestimated) conditions of **clear roles**, **communication**, and **evaluation**. Defining responsibilities, both internally and externally, helps civil servants navigate their own position between political leadership, organizational constraints, and societal expectations. Thoughtful communication, aimed at managing expectations and ensuring equal access to information, supports transparency throughout the process. Explicit consideration of evaluation shifts participation from a one-off exercise to a learning opportunity, allowing organizations to reflect on outcomes, tensions, and unintended effects.

The visual (see above) translates these reflections into a concrete conversation tool. Used in team meetings, for project kick-offs, or moments of reflection, it enables civil servants, managers, and policymakers to jointly assess participatory ambitions and organizational readiness. In this sense, the card is most certainly not a directive instrument, but rather an aid for shared language, fostering dialogue across roles and departments.

Used consistently, the Participation Assessment Framework supports a more honest and resilient approach to participation. It neither promises simple solutions nor prescribes fixed outcomes. Instead, it acknowledges that participation requires continuous judgement in complex environments, while still offering structure, clarity, and collective reflection as a basis for action.

CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: ANSWERING THE AOCE QUESTION

7.1 What the AoCE Network Learned Together

In this report is assembled what was learned in the URBACT-journey of the AoCE-network. Over a period of two and a half years, the Agents of Co-Existence (AoCE) network brought together nine European cities with a shared ambition: to strengthen democratic participation by improving how municipalities work with citizens, with societal actors, and within their own organizations. While each city operated in a different political, administrative, and cultural context, the joint learning journey revealed strikingly similar challenges and insights.

From the beginning, the network deliberately focused on what happens inside local governments: organizational culture, internal rules, professional practices, political-administrative relations, and learning capacity. This internal orientation proved essential. Across all themes, testing actions and shared reflections, one overarching insight emerged: meaningful participation depends less on ambition alone and more on organizational readiness.

Participation surfaced consistently as a relational, contextual, and systemic practice. Partners shared their experience that even well-designed participatory processes can fail when internal clarity is missing, mandates are ambiguous, or expectations remain unmanaged. Conversely, when internal alignment, honesty, and learning are present, participation becomes more credible, more meaningful, and more capable of strengthening trust between citizens and government.

Through our cooperation, core network meetings with peer reviews and insightful online academies, the AoCE network established that often failing participation processes are not because of lack of interest among citizens but are much more to blame on internal misalignment. Efforts to collaborate with innovators stalled when roles, responsibilities, or rules were unclear. Motivated civil servants struggled to innovate when organizational structures or leadership expectations did not support experimentation. Participation rarely failed for one single reason; difficulties accumulated when organizational conditions were insufficiently examined.

This led partners to ask themselves under what conditions participation could be meaningful, credible, and responsible. Participation was no longer approached as a method to be selected, but as a continuous organizational choice involving clarity about purpose, influence, roles, timing, communication, and learning.

Honesty about influence emerged as a foundation for trust. Cities learned that clearly communicating what is open for participation—and what is not—does not weaken engagement but strengthens it. Managing expectations early proved just as important as inclusive outreach or creative formats.

At the same time, the network recognized that innovation in participation requires learning structures and safety. Civil servants need space to reflect, experiment, and learn from setbacks without fear of blame. Where this learning capacity was present, innovation became less dependent on individual persons and more embedded in organizational routines. Many partners turned their attention to innovations offered by digital tools—such as map-based questionnaires, digital platforms, and digital or hybrid citizen panels. They invested not only in setting up these tools but also in training civil servants to ensure their effective and long-term use, hoping to increase citizen participation in their cities.

Participation was also increasingly understood as relational work. Lasting democratic impact was often linked not to one-off participation moments, but to the quality of relationships built over time—between citizens and government, across departments, and with societal partners.

The Participation Assessment Framework crystallizes this collective learning. Developed initially in Genk and refined collaboratively across the network, the framework responds to a shared challenge observed early on: participation frequently fails not because citizens are unwilling, but because organizations are not sufficiently prepared.

Rather than offering a new model or checklist, the framework provides a structured way for local governments to assess themselves as part of the participatory system. It supports reflection on key conditions such as purpose, stakeholders, internal coordination, roles, time, communication, and evaluation. In doing so, it encourages more conscious, realistic, and transparent participation choices.

The framework does not replace established participation concepts such as participation ladders; it deepens them. While ladders describe levels of citizen influence, the Participation Assessment Framework helps determine whether an organization is capable of offering that influence responsibly.

7.2 What the AoCE Network Brings to Europe's Local Governments

Looking ahead, the Agents of Co-Existence network offers European local governments a contribution that goes beyond individual practices or project results. Its relevance lies in how it strengthens open government and democratic resilience in a time of growing societal complexity, declining trust, polarisation, and institutional pressure.

First, AoCE provides a practical interpretation of open government as an organizational practice. Rather than framing openness solely in terms of transparency or access to information, the network positions open government as the capacity of institutions to engage society honestly, coherently, and responsibly. By focusing on internal readiness, political-administrative alignment, and clear communication about influence, AoCE translates open government principles into everyday municipal practice.

Second, the AoCE approach contributes directly to democratic resilience. In a context where public institutions are increasingly confronted with contestation, misinformation, and distrust, the ability to assess participation choices becomes critical. The Participation Assessment Framework helps local governments avoid symbolic or overpromising participation, reducing the risk of further erosion of trust. By supporting realistic, transparent, and well-aligned participation processes, it strengthens the legitimacy of democratic decision-making under pressure.

Third, AoCE strengthens the institutional resilience of local governments. By embedding reflection, learning loops, and shared responsibility into participation practices, municipalities become less dependent on individual champions, short political cycles, or isolated experiments. This increases continuity and robustness, especially during times of organizational change or political turnover—conditions that typically challenge participatory governance.

Finally, AoCE demonstrates the value of a European learning community for democratic renewal. The network shows that cities across Europe face comparable dilemmas in implementing open and participatory governance, and that collective reflection is more effective than isolated solutions. AoCE thus contributes to a shared European capacity to adapt democratic practices to contemporary challenges, reinforcing both openness and resilience over time.

At the start of the Agents of Co-Existence network, cities shared a simple but at the same time far-reaching question: *how can local governments organize themselves to work more effectively, creatively, and meaningfully with their citizens?* Two and a half years later, the answer is neither simple nor prescriptive. But the AoCE network believes they have shown that democratic innovation grows when local governments develop the capacity to reflect on themselves—their intentions, constraints, and readiness to share influence responsibly. Meaningful participation is not achieved through perfect designs, but through alignment, honesty, and continuous learning.

The AoCE URBACT clearly demonstrated that meaningful participation cannot be reduced to better methods, stronger visions, or more engaged professionals alone. Instead, it requires local governments to continuously examine how political intent, organizational structures, professional practices, and societal expectations interact in specific situations. Effectiveness, creativity, and meaning emerge not from simplification, but from the ability to navigate these interactions consciously and responsibly.

The Participation Assessment Framework captures this insight as the central outcome of the network's collective learning. It does not offer a blueprint for participation, nor does it promise certainty in complex contexts. What it provides instead is something more fundamental: **a structured way for local governments to assess themselves as part of the participatory process.** By encouraging reflection on purpose, roles, capacity, timing, communication, and learning, the framework supports organizations in making participation choices that are both ambitious and credible.

The network did not seek to deliver final solutions. Instead, it strengthened the foundations that allow cities to keep learning, adapting, and collaborating with citizens in complex and changing contexts.

For all partners in the network co-existence or participation is not an end point. It is an ongoing commitment to working together: thoughtfully, transparently, and every day.

AUTHOR'S REFLECTION

Coordinating the Agents of Co-Existence network has been a privilege and a great learning experience. Over the past two and a half years, I have been able to work with highly engaged civil servants, policymakers and community actors from the nine partner cities in our Network. From the very start, every one of them was willing to open up their practice, share doubts as well as successes, and learn together across institutional and national boundaries.

What made the AoCE Network special to me was not only the quality of the ideas or the practices developed, but just as important: the level of trust that gradually grew between us. Partners were willing to speak honestly about what did not work, to question their own assumptions, and to acknowledge the organizational tensions that often remain hidden behind participation rhetoric.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all partner cities, and especially all those wonderful people who traveled to all our Core Network Meetings, for their commitment, curiosity and courage throughout this journey. I am grateful for the trust placed in me to guide this process as their Lead Expert. A special word of thanks to our Lead Partner's coordinators is appropriate. We started of with Natasja Meysman, who was an excellent coordinator, but unfortunately had to leave the project halfway through. She was then replaced by Katrien Dreessen and Yasemin Yilmaz. Working with them was a great pleasure for me.

The AoCE journey reaffirmed my belief that democratic innovation does not start with new tools or bold statements, but with organizations willing to look at themselves, to learn collectively, and to engage society with honesty and care.

This report marks the end of the formal AoCE network, but not the end of our collective learning. I hope the insights and the Participation Assessment Framework will continue to support local governments across Europe in strengthening open, resilient and meaningful democratic practices.

Anja van Hout
Lead expert
Agents of Co-Existence Network
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