

AGENTS OF CO-EXISTENCE

IAP REPORT



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1. Introduction: from network learning to local actions

Integrated Action Plans (IAPs) are a core output of URBACT Action Planning Networks. In the Agents of Co-Existence (AoCE) network, the IAPs were not treated as a final administrative product, but as a practical mechanism to translate shared learning into locally embedded change. While the AoCE Final Network Report captures the network's overarching insights on participation, open government and organizational transformation, the IAPs show how partner cities operationalized these insights in their own governance contexts: with concrete actions, internal commitments and implementation arrangements.

This IAP Report documents that translation process. It is intentionally reflective in nature. Rather than summarizing each city's plan in full, it focuses on what the AoCE partnership learned through the co-production of the IAPs:

- how cities selected a thematic focus within the network's shared framework
- how they shaped integrated approaches that connect citizen participation to organizational routines
- how the action planning process worked at local level
- and which tools at both local and transnational level supported co-production and learning.

In doing so, the report also provides a collective narrative on how participation work evolves, from intentions and isolated initiatives towards more systemic, accountable and sustainable practices.

The AoCE network started from a shared recognition: most partner cities already had participation practices in place, yet many struggled with similar “behind-the-scenes” challenges. These included unclear mandates and roles, difficulties in embedding participation outcomes into everyday administrative work, uneven capacity across departments, limited feedback loops to citizens, and tensions around power and representation. The Baseline Study and IAP Roadmaps helped partners to make these issues explicit and to define their initial pathways for change. Mid-way through the network journey, testing actions enabled cities to experiment with new methods, build momentum and learn what works (and what does not) in their own institutional setting. The final IAPs consolidate this learning into a coherent set of actions, governance arrangements and monitoring intentions, providing each city with a practical route map for the coming years.

A key characteristic of the AoCE IAPs is their balance between a shared thematic backbone and local differentiation. All partner cities worked within the four AoCE themes:

- working with citizens
- innovators coming into government
- civil servants as innovators
- rethinking working methods and rules.

However, cities worked on these topics from different starting points and therefore prioritized different topics. Some, like Genk and Gdansk, focused more on internal capacity-building and cross-departmental collaboration. While the cities of Aarhus and Banská Bystrica refined mature participation ecosystems and feedback mechanisms. And cities earlier in their participation journey invested in foundational structures, legitimacy and readiness, e.g. Quart de Poblet, Kekava and Budaörs. This diversity reflects an integrated approach among partners that takes context seriously and positions participation as a governance practice rather than a single method.

This IAP Report is a standalone deliverable focusing on process, learning and integration; it does not replace the Final Network Report nor the network's final products, but complements them by documenting how shared insights were translated into local action planning. The report is structured around the core elements requested by the URBACT Secretariat for an IAP report. It first maps the thematic focus of the different IAPs and how these reflect integrated approaches. It then looks at specific actions and how participation is designed and embedded. A dedicated section examines ULG experiences and the action planning process, highlighting both quick wins and barriers. The report also assesses the added value of transnational network activities and shared tools, in our case the Participation Assessment Framework. Finally, the report concludes with transferable lessons for other cities and networks.

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2. The thematic focus of the Integrated Action Plans: Reflecting the integrated approach of the AoCE network

2.1 A shared thematic backbone with room for differentiation and different thematic entry points

All partner cities in the Agents of Co-Existence (AoCE) network developed their Integrated Action Plans within a common thematic framework. This framework, co-created during the Activation Phase, consists of four interrelated themes:

- working together with citizens
- innovators coming into government
- civil servants as innovators and
- rethinking working methods and rules.

The purpose of this shared framework was not to prescribe identical priorities or actions, but to create a **common language for participation and governance change**. It allowed cities to recognize shared challenges and learning questions, while retaining the flexibility to respond to their own institutional realities. As a result, the thematic focus of the IAPs varies across the network but remains clearly anchored in the same overarching ambition: **embedding participation more structurally into local governance systems**.

The themes did not function as a checklist. Instead, they provided a shared interpretative framework that allowed cities to prioritize different entry points based on their institutional maturity, political context and organizational capacity. In this sense, thematic diversity across IAPs became an expression of an integrated approach rather than a sign of fragmentation.

The metropolitan context in which Iasi operates added an additional layer: at this scale, thematic focus is shaped not only by participation questions, but also by intermunicipal coordination, governance complexity and the distribution of responsibilities across institutions.

Together, these differentiated thematic choices illustrate how a shared network framework enabled local prioritization without losing strategic coherence.

Iași Metropolitan Area: co-producing an IAP at metropolitan scale

Starting situation

The metropolitan area faced fragmented governance structures and limited experience with participation beyond municipal boundaries.

ULG approach

The ULG functioned as a learning and coordination platform for multiple municipalities.

Why this matters

This highlights how the IAP process can support governance learning at metropolitan level.

2.1.1 Theme 1 – Working together with citizens

Across the AoCE network, cities increasingly recognized that participation is not simply about organizing consultations or collecting opinions. Instead, meaningful participation requires sustained relationships, clarity about influence and visible follow-up.

Many IAPs therefore focus on improving the quality of interaction with citizens, rather than on increasing the quantity of participation activities. This includes investing in facilitation skills, combining online and offline approaches, and explicitly addressing the challenge of mobilising groups that are traditionally underrepresented in participatory processes.

Mini-case – Gdańsk: strengthening feedback loops and trust

Gdańsk has a long-standing tradition of participatory governance, including participatory budgeting and citizen panels. Its IAP explicitly addresses a recurring challenge identified in the AoCE Final Report: the risk that participation loses credibility when citizens do not see how their input is used.

Actions in the IAP therefore focus on strengthening feedback loops, improving transparency around decision-making and clarifying how participatory outcomes are weighed in political processes. By doing so, Gdańsk aims to reinforce trust and legitimacy in an already mature participation ecosystem (Gdańsk IAP).

2.1.2 Theme 2 – Innovators coming into government

The AoCE network consistently highlighted that innovation does not reside exclusively within public administrations. Citizens, civil society organizations and external experts bring knowledge, creativity and lived experience that can enrich policymaking.

At the same time, opening government to external innovation raises questions about roles, responsibility and accountability. The IAPs reflect how cities navigate these tensions in practice.

Mini-case – Aarhus: balancing openness and democratic responsibility

Aarhus' IAP builds on extensive experience with participatory and deliberative formats. The plan focuses on creating space for external ideas and perspectives, while maintaining clarity about political responsibility and decision-making authority.

This approach reflects a key AoCE insight: innovators entering government can strengthen policy quality and democratic legitimacy, provided that roles and expectations are transparent (Aarhus IAP).

2.1.3 Theme 3 – Focus on staff, internal capacities and officials as innovators

Across all IAPs, **internal capacity emerges as a decisive factor for sustainable participation**. Cities recognize that without skilled, confident and reflective officials, participation risks remaining procedural or symbolic.

Many IAPs therefore prioritize training, peer learning and internal reflection. Importantly, these efforts are not limited to participation specialists but increasingly target managers and leadership levels.

Mini-case – Breda and Genk: officials as key agents of change

Both Breda and Genk place strong emphasis on officials as innovators. Their IAPs focus on strengthening skills related to facilitation, communication and working across organizational silos.

Rather than introducing new participation instruments, these cities invest in internal learning processes and reflective routines. This directly reflects the Final Network Report's conclusion that organizational change depends on the attitudes, confidence and capabilities of civil servants themselves (Breda IAP; Genk IAP).

2.1.4 Theme 4 – New working methods and rethinking the rules

Cities increasingly recognize that meaningful participation requires adaptation of internal rules, procedures and working methods. Several IAPs therefore address legal frameworks, internal mandates and cross-departmental coordination.

Rather than proposing radical institutional overhauls, cities focus on incremental changes that gradually reshape how participation is organized and governed.

Mini-case – Budaörs: from ad-hoc engagement to structured practice

Budaörs explicitly recognizes the limitations of fragmented, one-off participation initiatives. Its IAP focuses on systematising engagement practices and embedding them into regular municipal routines.

By doing so, the city aims to increase predictability, clarity and learning across participation processes (Budaörs IAP).

2.2 Integrated thematic focus: beyond single issues

Although cities entered the thematic framework from different angles, the IAPs consistently demonstrate that **participation challenges cannot be addressed in isolation**. Across the network, cities recognized that working with citizens is inseparable from internal capacities, organizational rules and leadership practices.

For example, improving participation with citizens often revealed limitations in internal workflows or decision-making structures. Similarly, investing in staff skills without addressing mandates or political expectations proved insufficient. As a result, many IAPs deliberately combine actions across themes: training and reflection for civil servants are linked to clearer participation guidelines; experimentation with new methods is connected to revisions of internal procedures; and citizen-facing activities are aligned with organizational learning processes.

This interweaving of themes is a key characteristic of the AoCE IAPs. Rather than treating integration as a theoretical principle, cities translated it into **concrete combinations of actions** that reflect how participation functions within local governments.

Genk: connecting citizen participation and organizational routines

Starting situation

Genk has extensive experience with participation and social innovation, supported by a strong civil society network. However, participation outcomes were not always systematically embedded in administrative workflows.

Thematic focus

Genk's IAP connects citizen participation explicitly to internal coordination, follow-up mechanisms and service innovation.

Why this matters

This illustrates how thematic integration helps move participation from dialogue to impact.

An important insight emerging from the IAPs is that integration does not mean “doing everything at once”. On the contrary, many cities explicitly narrowed their thematic focus during the action planning process. Testing actions and ULG discussions helped partners to identify which levers were both urgent and feasible, and where organizational energy could realistically be mobilized.

These strategic choices are visible in the final IAPs. Some cities chose to postpone citizen-facing innovations to first strengthen internal readiness. Others deliberately focused on consolidating existing practices rather than expanding them. In all cases, thematic focus became a way to **align ambition with capacity**, increasing the likelihood that participation efforts would be sustained beyond the lifetime of the network.

The thematic focus of each IAP provides the foundation for the concrete actions described in the plans. It shapes which stakeholders are involved, which tools are prioritized and how progress is monitored. At the same time, the shared AoCE framework ensures that these local choices remain connected to broader questions of open government, democratic quality and organizational transformation.

The following chapters build on this thematic mapping. Chapter 3 explores how cities translated their thematic focus into integrated approaches that connect participation to governance structures and organizational routines. Chapter 4 then looks in detail at how these choices were developed through the local action planning process, including the role of Urban Local Groups and testing actions.

3. The integrated approach in the partners' Integrated Action Plans

3.1 Integration as a governance challenge

Across the AoCE network, integration emerged as a central concern in the development of the Integrated Action Plans. Rather than being understood as a technical requirement or a theoretical ambition, integration was approached as a **practical governance challenge**: how to ensure that participation is meaningfully connected to decision-making, organizational routines and political accountability.

The Baseline Study revealed that many participation initiatives already existed in partner cities but were often organized in parallel to core and often rigid administrative processes. Participation outcomes were not always clearly linked to policy formulation, implementation or evaluation, and responsibilities for follow-up were frequently diffuse. As a result, participation risked remaining symbolic or episodic, despite good intentions.

Budaörs: from ad-hoc participation to structured practice

Starting situation

Participation in Budaörs was mainly organized through isolated initiatives without a shared framework.

Integrated approach

The IAP focuses on systematising participation practices and aligning them with regular municipal procedures.

Why this matters

This shows how integration can be achieved through incremental organizational change rather than radical reform.

The IAPs respond to this challenge by explicitly linking participation to governance structures. Cities addressed questions such as: Who is responsible for participation outcomes? How are citizen inputs weighed in decision-making? How are learning and feedback organized internally? By embedding these questions into their action plans, cities moved participation closer to the core of local governance.

A key dimension of integration in the IAPs concerns **the alignment of participation practices with internal organizational routines**. Many cities recognized that participation places new demands on civil servants: in terms of skills, time, coordination and professional roles. Without addressing these internal dimensions, participation initiatives risk losing credibility.

Several IAPs therefore prioritize actions aimed at strengthening internal capacities. These include training programs, internal reflection sessions, peer learning among departments and clearer guidance on participation roles. Importantly, such actions are not limited to participation specialists. Managers and leadership levels are often explicitly included, reflecting the understanding that organizational change requires support from across the hierarchy.

By integrating participation into everyday work routines—such as project management, policy cycles or service design—cities aim to move beyond dependency on individual champions. The IAPs thus position participation as a shared organizational responsibility rather than a niche activity.

Çekava – Focus on staff training as a foundation for participation

Starting situation

Çekava entered the AoCE network at an early stage of developing a structured approach to citizen participation. While there was political willingness to strengthen engagement with residents, internal capacity within the municipal organization was limited. Civil servants often lacked confidence, shared language and practical experience in working with participatory approaches.

Integrated approach

In its IAP, Çekava chose to focus explicitly on training and capacity-building for municipal staff as a first step. Rather than prioritizing new participation formats, the city invested in strengthening knowledge, skills and internal understanding of participation principles. Training activities were designed to support reflection on roles, expectations and realistic levels of citizen influence, thereby linking participation ambitions to organizational readiness.

Why this matters

Çekava's approach illustrates how investing in staff capacity can function as a strategic entry point for participation. By strengthening internal confidence and shared understanding first, the city increases the likelihood that future participatory initiatives will be credible, consistent and sustainable.

3.2 Integrating short-term actions and long-term change

Another recurring challenge addressed in the IAPs is **the tension between short-term experimentation and long-term transformation**. Participation initiatives often start as pilots or testing actions but struggle to influence structures beyond the project level.

Quart de Poblet: testing actions as a bridge to institutional change

Starting situation

Quart de Poblet has a strong commitment to participation and open government but sought to better align experimentation with long-term governance objectives.

Integrated approach

Testing actions were used to explore how participatory practices could be embedded in management routines.

Why this matters

The city illustrates how experimentation can inform institutionalization.

Within AoCE, testing actions played an important role in bridging this gap. Cities used them to explore new approaches, build confidence and generate concrete learning. However, the IAPs explicitly aim to ensure that such experiments do not remain isolated. Many plans include actions to formalize learning from testing actions, adapt internal procedures or revise guidelines based on experience.

This integration of experimentation and institutionalization reflects a broader insight shared across the network: meaningful participation evolves through iterative cycles of action and reflection. The IAPs provide a framework to sustain this process over time.

Finally, integration in the IAPs also concerns **collaboration across policy domains and actor groups**. Participation issues often cut across departments, sectors and stakeholder groups, challenging siloed ways of working.

Several cities therefore use their IAPs to strengthen cross-departmental coordination, clarify cooperation with civil society organizations and align participation efforts across policy fields. This includes, for example, linking participation to social inclusion, urban development, youth policy or climate action.

By framing participation as a transversal governance issue, the IAPs move beyond sector-specific approaches and contribute to more coherent and inclusive policymaking.

4. Local action planning processes and ULG experiences

4.1 Approaches to IAP production across partner cities

The production of the Integrated Action Plans was itself a key learning process within the AoCE network. While all cities followed the URBACT methodology, they adapted it to their local context, resulting in a variety of approaches to action planning.

Some cities opted for broad Urban Local Groups (ULGs), bringing together civil servants, civil society organizations, community representatives and, in some cases, political actors. These ULGs provided diverse perspectives and enhanced legitimacy but also required careful facilitation to manage expectations and balance voices.

Iași Metropolitan Area: co-producing an IAP at metropolitan scale

Starting situation

The metropolitan area faced fragmented governance structures and limited experience with participation beyond municipal boundaries.

ULG approach

The ULG functioned as a learning and coordination platform for multiple municipalities.

Why this matters

This highlights how the IAP process can support governance learning at metropolitan level.

Other cities worked with more focused ULG configurations, prioritizing continuity and depth over breadth. In these cases, the IAP process functioned as an intensive learning space for a smaller group of actors, often closely linked to internal organizational change processes.

Both approaches proved valuable, depending on context. What mattered most was not the size of the ULG, but the clarity of its role and its connection to decision-making structures.

Across the network, ULGs functioned as more than consultation bodies. They became spaces for **joint sense-making**, where assumptions about participation, power and roles could be discussed openly.

ULG meetings often helped to surface implicit tensions: between ambition and capacity, between openness and control, and between political expectations and administrative realities. By addressing these tensions explicitly, cities were able to refine their IAP priorities and avoid overly abstract or unrealistic plans.

In many cases, ULGs also supported internal learning within administrations. Civil servants reported that participation in ULGs helped them better understand citizen perspectives and reflect on their own professional roles. This learning dimension is a significant, though often underestimated, outcome of the action planning process.

4.2 Quick wins and momentum-building

While the IAP process was primarily future-oriented, cities also identified and pursued quick wins. Testing actions, pilot projects and small organizational adjustments helped to demonstrate the value of participation and maintain engagement among stakeholders.

Aarhus: small experiments to strengthen democratic dialogue

Starting situation

Aarhus has a mature participation ecosystem but sought to address power imbalances and trust.

Quick wins

Testing deliberative formats helped initiate more balanced conversations between citizens and government.

Why this matters

Even in mature systems, small experiments can generate meaningful learning.

Quick wins included experimenting with new facilitation methods, improving communication about participation outcomes, or introducing internal coordination mechanisms. Although modest in scope, these actions often had a symbolic value: they showed that change was possible and helped to build trust within and beyond the administration.

At the same time, cities were careful not to overestimate the impact of quick wins. The IAPs consistently frame them as steps within a longer trajectory, rather than as ends in themselves.

4.3 ULGs as spaces for learning and coproduction

The action planning process also revealed a range of barriers. Time constraints, staff turnover and competing priorities were frequently mentioned challenges. In some contexts, political changes or uncertainty made it difficult to secure long-term commitments.

Another recurring barrier concerned internal alignment. Participation initiatives often rely on collaboration across departments, but existing organizational structures do not always support such collaboration. The IAP process helped to make these structural constraints visible, even if they could not be fully resolved within the project timeframe.

Importantly, cities did not treat these barriers as failures. Instead, they documented them as learning points, informing more realistic and grounded IAPs.

A key outcome of the local action planning processes is the degree of ownership achieved. Where ULGs were closely connected to internal decision-making and where leadership was actively involved, IAPs tended to be more concrete and actionable.

Ownership was further strengthened when cities explicitly linked IAP actions to existing strategies, budgets or organizational processes. In these cases, the IAP became not just a network deliverable, but a reference point for ongoing work.

Taken together, the experiences across the AoCE network underline that the value of the IAP lies not only in the final document, but in the **process of co-production** itself. This process supported reflection, alignment and learning—conditions that are essential for embedding participation as a lasting governance practice.

5. Local and transnational instruments for action planning

5.1 Tools as enablers of co-production

Within the AoCE network, tools were not treated as neutral or purely technical instruments. Instead, they functioned as **enablers of dialogue, reflection and shared ownership**. Both at local and transnational level, tools helped to structure conversations, make assumptions explicit and support learning across organizational and cultural boundaries.

Cities made use of a wide variety of tools, depending on their local context and stage of development. These ranged from participatory workshops and testing actions to internal reflection sessions and training programmes. What these tools had in common was their purpose: not to produce immediate solutions, but to support a process of co-production in which multiple perspectives could be integrated.

Importantly, tools were often adapted or combined rather than applied “by the book”. Cities experimented with formats, adjusted them to their institutional culture and used them iteratively over time. This flexibility proved crucial for maintaining engagement and relevance throughout the action planning process.

At local level, cities deployed a mix of tools aimed at both **external engagement** and **internal learning**. Participatory workshops, focus groups and pilot activities were commonly used to involve citizens and stakeholders in identifying challenges and testing possible approaches. These formats allowed cities to ground abstract discussions about participation in concrete experiences.

Quart de Poblet – Urban Innovation Lab as a local tool for co-production

Starting situation

Quart de Poblet has a strong tradition of participation and open government, supported by dedicated political and administrative structures. At the same time, the city identified a need to create more structured spaces for experimentation, where new ideas could be tested collaboratively without being immediately bound by formal procedures.

Integrated approach

The Urban Innovation Lab was developed as a practical tool to bring together civil servants, citizens, civil society organizations and other local actors. It functions as a protected space for co-creation, testing and learning, allowing the municipality to explore new solutions while maintaining a clear link to organizational processes and policy priorities.

Why this matters

The Urban Innovation Lab demonstrates how local tools can support co-production in a concrete and manageable way. By combining experimentation with organizational anchoring, Quart de Poblet bridges the gap between innovation and institutionalization.

Equally important were tools focused on internal reflection. Several cities organized dedicated sessions for civil servants to reflect on their roles, responsibilities and dilemmas when working with citizens. These sessions created space to discuss questions that are often left implicit: How much influence can citizens realistically have? How do we deal with conflicting inputs? How do participation processes fit within existing procedures?

Testing actions played a bridging role between reflection and practice. By experimenting with small-scale actions, cities were able to explore new ways of working without committing to large-scale change upfront. The learning generated through these tests informed the development of more realistic and context-sensitive IAP actions.

Çekava – Neighborhood meetings as an accessible participation tool

Starting situation

In Çekava, citizen engagement traditionally took place through formal consultation moments, which did not always reach a broad or diverse group of residents. There was a need for more accessible and low-threshold ways to connect with people in their everyday environment.

Integrated approach

Neighborhood meetings were introduced as a local participation tool to create direct dialogue between residents and the municipality. These meetings focus on listening, clarifying local concerns and building mutual understanding. Importantly, they are linked to internal follow-up processes, ensuring that signals from neighborhoods are shared within the administration and inform further action.

Why this matters

Neighborhood meetings show how simple, locally embedded tools can strengthen participation when they are connected to internal organizational routines. They help build trust while also reinforcing learning within the administration.

5.2 Network-level tools: creating a shared learning framework

In addition to local tools, the AoCE network developed and applied several **shared tools** at transnational level. These tools provided a common reference point for learning and supported comparison across diverse contexts.

The collective network result is the Participation Assessment Framework. This framework was developed to support structured reflection on participation design and implementation. It invites users to consider questions related to purpose, inclusiveness, power, transparency, follow-up and learning. Rather than functioning as a checklist, the framework acts as a **conversation starter**, prompting teams to make implicit assumptions explicit.



Several partner cities explicitly integrated the Participation Assessment Framework into their IAP processes. It was used at different moments: to reflect on existing participation practices, to inform the design of testing actions, and to evaluate participation experiences retrospectively.

By applying the framework internally, cities were able to move beyond abstract commitments to participation and engage in more honest discussions about trade-offs and constraints. For example, teams reflected on the level of influence they could realistically offer citizens, or on the organizational implications of more inclusive participation approaches.

At network level, the framework also supported peer learning. By discussing their assessments with other cities, partners gained insight into alternative approaches and governance choices. This exchange reinforced the understanding that there is no single “right” model for participation, but that conscious and transparent choices are essential.

Gdańsk: applying the Participation Assessment Framework

Application

Gdańsk used the framework to reflect on purpose, influence and feedback in existing participation processes.

Learning effect

The framework supported internal dialogue and informed adjustments to participation design.

Why this matters

Reflective tools help avoid tokenistic participation.

Across the AoCE network, the combined use of local and transnational tools contributed to several important outcomes. First, tools helped to **slow down decision-making** in a productive way, **creating space for reflection before action**. This was particularly valuable in contexts where participation is often driven by political or project timelines.

Second, tools supported **shared ownership** of the IAPs. By involving multiple actors in structured reflection and testing, cities reduced reliance on individual champions and strengthened collective commitment to the action plans.

Third, tools facilitated **learning across scales**. Insights generated through local experimentation were connected to network-level reflection, and vice versa. This multi-level learning dynamic is a defining feature of the AoCE approach.

Finally, the emphasis on reflective tools aligns closely with the broader conclusions of the AoCE Final Network Report: **meaningful participation requires not only methods, but also spaces for learning, assessment and organizational development**. The tools used within AoCE helped cities to operationalize this insight in their IAPs.

6. Linking baseline study, testing actions and long-term direction

6.1 Shared starting points across diverse contexts

Although the partner cities in the AoCE network operate in very different institutional, political and cultural contexts, their Baseline Study revealed several shared starting points. Most cities already had participation practices in place, often supported by committed individuals or specific departments. However, these practices were frequently fragmented, unevenly distributed across the organization and not always clearly linked to decision-making or implementation.

Common baseline challenges included limited internal capacity to work with participatory approaches, unclear mandates and responsibilities, weak feedback mechanisms towards citizens and uncertainty about power-sharing. Participation was often framed as an additional activity rather than as an integral part of governance. These shared observations provided a strong foundation for collective learning within the network and informed the initial direction of the IAP Roadmaps.

Building on the Baseline Study, partner cities developed IAP Roadmaps to outline initial pathways for change. These roadmaps helped cities translate analytical insights into provisional priorities, while acknowledging uncertainty and the need for further exploration.

The roadmaps often reflected broad ambitions: strengthening participation, improving trust, enhancing internal capacity or fostering innovation. At this stage, many cities deliberately kept their plans open-ended. Rather than defining detailed actions too early, they used the roadmaps to identify key learning questions, governance dilemmas and potential leverage points.

This intermediate step proved crucial. It created space for reflection and prevented premature closure around solutions. The roadmaps also helped align expectations among local stakeholders and provided a reference point for subsequent testing actions.

6.2 The role of testing actions as a learning bridge

Testing actions played a central role in moving from intention to action. They allowed cities to experiment with new approaches, tools or ways of working on a limited scale and within a manageable timeframe. In doing so, testing actions functioned as a **learning bridge** between the exploratory phase of the roadmaps and the more concrete commitments of the final IAPs.

Iași Metropolitan Area: shared challenges in a multi-level governance context

Starting situation

In the Iași Metropolitan Area, participation challenges were closely linked to fragmented responsibilities across municipalities.

Baseline insight

The Baseline Study revealed that coordination and trust between institutions were prerequisites for meaningful participation.

Why this matters

This case highlights how starting positions shape both ambition and sequencing in Integrated Action Plans.

Across the network, testing actions served different purposes. In some cities, they focused on experimenting with new participation formats or facilitation methods. In others, they targeted internal processes, such as cross-departmental collaboration, role clarification or reflection on participation practices. Regardless of their specific focus, testing actions generated practical insights into what was feasible, where resistance emerged and which organizational conditions mattered most.

Banská Bystrica: building readiness through testing actions

Starting situation

Participation structures were still emerging and internal capacity was limited.

Testing actions

Training and small participation pilots were used to build confidence and organizational readiness.

Why this matters

Testing actions can support foundational learning, not only innovation.

Importantly, cities did not treat testing actions as pilots to be scaled automatically. Instead, they used them as opportunities to reflect critically on assumptions and to refine their ambitions. This learning-oriented approach is clearly visible in the final IAPs.

6.3 Consolidating learning into final IAPs

The final Integrated Action Plans consolidate learning from the entire AoCE journey. Compared to the initial roadmaps, the IAPs are more focused, more realistic and more explicit about responsibilities, timelines and governance arrangements.

Many cities narrowed their scope during the action planning process. Rather than addressing all participation challenges at once, they selected strategic entry points aligned with their capacity and political context. This often meant prioritizing internal capacity-building, organizational alignment or consolidation of existing practices before introducing new participation initiatives.

Ķekava: narrowing focus to ensure feasibility

Starting situation

Ķekava was at an early stage of developing structured participation.

Learning outcome

The final IAP deliberately narrowed its scope to focus on realistic and sustainable actions.

Why this matters

Strategic focus increases the likelihood of long-term impact

The IAPs also show greater attention to sustainability. Actions are increasingly linked to existing strategies, organizational processes or budgetary frameworks. Monitoring and reflection are explicitly addressed, recognising that participation practices will need ongoing adjustment and learning beyond the network's lifetime.

An important insight from the AoCE IAP process is that **progress cannot be understood as a linear movement from baseline to final result**. Instead, cities experienced the journey as iterative and non-linear, characterised by moments of acceleration, hesitation and recalibration.

The value of the IAPs therefore lies not only in the actions they propose, but in the **institutional learning** they represent. Cities are now better equipped to reflect on participation choices, to discuss trade-offs transparently and to adapt their approaches over time.

With their IAPs, the AoCE network demonstrates how action planning can function as a structured learning process. This approach strengthens the credibility and feasibility of the IAPs and provides a solid foundation for their continued work on participatory governance.

7. What the AoCE IAP journey offers to other cities

7.1 Integrated Action Plans as vehicles for organizational learning

The AoCE experience demonstrates that Integrated Action Plans are most valuable when they are understood as **learning instruments**, rather than as fixed implementation documents. Across the network, the IAPs capture a moment in an ongoing transformation process: they formalise insights gained through reflection, testing actions and dialogue, while remaining open to adaptation.

Rather than providing definitive solutions, **the IAPs articulate strategic choices**. Cities made explicit where they want to focus their efforts, what they are ready to commit to, and which challenges require longer-term attention. This clarity increases both the credibility and the feasibility of the plans.

A key conclusion emerging from the IAPs is that meaningful participation cannot be reduced to methods or formats. Across very different contexts, cities identified similar underlying challenges: internal alignment, professional roles, power relations, feedback mechanisms and institutional learning.

The AoCE IAPs respond to these challenges by **positioning participation as a governance practice**. Actions focus on embedding participation into organizational routines, leadership practices and decision-making processes. **This shift is crucial** for moving beyond symbolic participation towards more accountable and sustainable engagement.

The local action planning processes underline the importance of co-production. Urban Local Groups played a central role in shaping realistic and context-sensitive IAPs. Where ULGs functioned as spaces for dialogue and learning the resulting action plans were more grounded and better owned.

At the same time, the AoCE experience shows that co-production requires careful facilitation, clarity of roles and connection to decision-making. ULGs are most effective when their purpose is explicit and when their work is linked to organizational and political processes.

The tools used within AoCE, specifically the Participation Assessment Framework and its web-based visual representation, support structured reflection rather than prescribing solutions. This proved particularly valuable in dealing with sensitive questions around power, influence and inclusion.

By using shared reflective tools, cities were able to compare experiences, learn from each other and articulate their own governance choices more clearly. The added value of these tools lies in their capacity to **support dialogue and learning across contexts**, rather than in standardization.

The IAPs provide partner cities with a concrete basis for continued work beyond the lifetime of the AoCE network. Many plans explicitly link participation actions to existing strategies, organizational reforms or budgetary processes. Others identify participation as a long-term development trajectory that will require further experimentation and capacity-building.

7.2 What the AoCE Network brings to Europe's local governments

For other cities and URBACT networks, **the AoCE experience offers a clear message: strengthening participatory governance is less about copying good practices and more about investing in reflection, integration and learning.** Integrated Action Plans can play a pivotal role in this process, provided they are treated as living documents, embedded in organizational realities.

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 network clearly demonstrates 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.

ANNEX Integrated Action Plans – City Summaries

This annex provides short summaries of the Integrated Action Plans (IAPs) developed by the nine partner cities in the Agents of Co-Existence (AoCE) URBACT network. Each summary outlines the city's starting position, the focus of its testing actions during the network, and the main directions for future development as described in their respective IAPs.

Genk (Belgium), Lead Partner

Starting situation

Genk has extensive experience with citizen participation and social innovation, supported by a strong network of civil society organizations. Despite this, the city recognised that participation outcomes were not always consistently embedded in internal workflows, leading to challenges in follow-up and feedback.

Testing actions and focus

Testing actions in Genk concentrated on improving internal coordination and clarifying responsibilities for participation follow-up. The city explored how different departments could better share knowledge and how participation outcomes could be translated into concrete administrative action.

Way forward

Genk's IAP focuses on embedding participation more firmly into daily work processes and strengthening cross-departmental collaboration. The city sees participation as a driver for public service innovation and aims to improve transparency and trust through clearer internal alignment.

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Breda (Netherlands)

Starting situation

Breda entered the AoCE network with a relatively well-developed participation landscape, characterized by neighborhood councils, advisory bodies, participatory budgeting and strong collaboration with social organizations. At the same time, the city faced growing social inequalities and a clear divide between different parts of the city. Participation was present, but often fragmented, and not always embedded in everyday administrative routines.

Testing actions and focus

During the AoCE process, Breda focused its testing actions on internal reflection and capacity-building. Rather than launching new participation instruments, the city evaluated existing practices and explored how civil servants could be better equipped to work with diverse groups of citizens. Particular attention was given to skills such as facilitation, communication and working across departmental boundaries.

Way forward

Breda's IAP prioritizes strengthening internal practices, leadership and organizational learning. The city aims to embed reflective tools, such as the Participation Assessment Framework, into routine work and to further connect participation to its broader 'Verbeter Breda' program on equal opportunities.

Aarhus (Denmark)

Starting situation

Aarhus entered the network with a mature participation ecosystem, including digital platforms and deliberative practices. The city's challenge lay less in introducing participation and more in addressing issues of power, trust and representation within democratic processes.

Testing actions and focus

Testing actions focused on reflective dialogue around democratic quality and the role of participation in strengthening trust. Aarhus experimented with formats that encourage more balanced conversations between citizens and government.

Way forward

The IAP positions participation as a key element of democratic resilience. Aarhus intends to further develop deliberative approaches and embed reflection on power and inclusion into its participation practices.

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Gdańsk (Poland)

Starting situation

Gdańsk has a long-standing tradition of participatory governance, including participatory budgeting and citizen panels. However, the city identified a need to improve coherence and feedback across participation processes.

Testing actions and focus

Testing actions focused on strengthening feedback mechanisms and clarifying how citizen input is used in decision-making. The city reflected on how to maintain trust in a mature participation system.

Way forward

Gdańsk's IAP emphasizes consolidation rather than expansion. The city aims to strengthen governance arrangements and embed reflective tools to ensure participation remains credible and inclusive.

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Budaörs (Hungary)

Starting situation

Budaörs had experience with citizen engagement, but participation was often organized through isolated initiatives without a coherent framework.

Testing actions and focus

Testing actions explored how participation could be systematized and better aligned with municipal procedures. The city reflected on internal roles and coordination.

Way forward

The IAP focuses on embedding structured participation practices into regular municipal routines and building internal capacity for sustained engagement.

Iași Metropolitan Area (Romania)

Starting situation

The metropolitan area faced challenges related to coordination across municipalities and limited experience with structured participation at metropolitan level.

Testing actions and focus

Testing actions focused on building shared understanding and basic participation structures through the Urban Local Group.

Way forward

The IAP prioritizes capacity-building, coordination and the gradual institutionalization of participation across the metropolitan area.

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Quart de Poblet (Spain)

Starting situation

Quart de Poblet has a strong commitment to participation and open government, supported by a dedicated department and active civil society.

Testing actions and focus

Testing actions focused on improving internal processes and aligning participation with transparency and digital tools.

Way forward

The IAP aims to further embed participation into municipal management and strengthen links between citizen input and administrative decision-making.

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Banská Bystrica (Slovakia)

Starting situation

Banská Bystrica was at an early stage of developing a systematic participation culture, supported by a small dedicated unit.

Testing actions and focus

Testing actions explored training and internal learning for civil servants and initial participation pilots, specifically focusing on polarization.

Way forward

The IAP focuses on building internal capacity, formalizing roles and gradually strengthening participation structures along with establishing a formal Collaboration Board and further exploring training on polarization.

Ķekava (Latvia)

Starting situation

Ķekava was in the early phases of developing structured participation, with limited formal frameworks.

Testing actions and focus

Testing actions focused on awareness-raising through training sessions for staff members and experimenting with participation formats, such as organizing neighborhood meetings.

Way forward

The IAP prioritizes institutional readiness, trust-building and step-by-step development of participation practices.

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