Agents of Co-Existence

Aarhus, Denmark
375.000 inhabitants

Challenge

Low trust in politicians and low democratic self-esteem, especially among low-participation citizens. Low trust means doubting politicians' ability or willingness to act for the common good; low self-esteem means feeling unqualified to understand or contribute.

Local heroes

Aarhus Volume (a youth cultural community) and the Neighborhood Moms were trained as democracy hosts and helped run reverse voter meetings. Through their trusted community presence and strong local networks, they engaged many young people and citizens from ethnic minority backgrounds. Their involvement broadened participation, supported respectful dialogue, and strengthened the event's reach in communities that are often underrepresented.

Lessons learnt

With modest funding for catering, a sense of community, and some training, many citizens were eager to invest real energy in discussing everyday politics. Politicians were equally motivated to engage and learn. Several participants reported a more positive view of politicians—and even of people they strongly disagreed with politically.

Solution

Reverse voter meetings

We tested "reverse voter meetings," where citizens set the agenda and politicians primarily listen and respond to lived experiences and local needs. In parallel, we trained democracy hosts to create safe, respectful dialogue, support participation, and ensure more voices are heard. The pilot strengthened citizens' feeling of being taken seriously and improved the quality of conversations across different viewpoints. It also helped engage residents who usually stay on the sidelines and created stronger, more direct connections between citizens and decision-makers.



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Agents of Co-Existence

Budaörs, Hungary
30 000 inhabitants

Challenge

In Budaörs, not the full range of stakeholders were engaged in identifying local priorities and potential solutions. It was especially challenging to reach young people. In addition, the municipality lacked a unified digital participation platform, which limited opportunities for wider and easier engagement.

Local heroes

The main local heroes are primarily those directly involved in the evaluation process – such as municipal staff and community evaluators. However, in reality, everyone is a local hero who participated: by submitting an idea, evaluating, or voting. Without their participation, genuine participation would not have been possible.

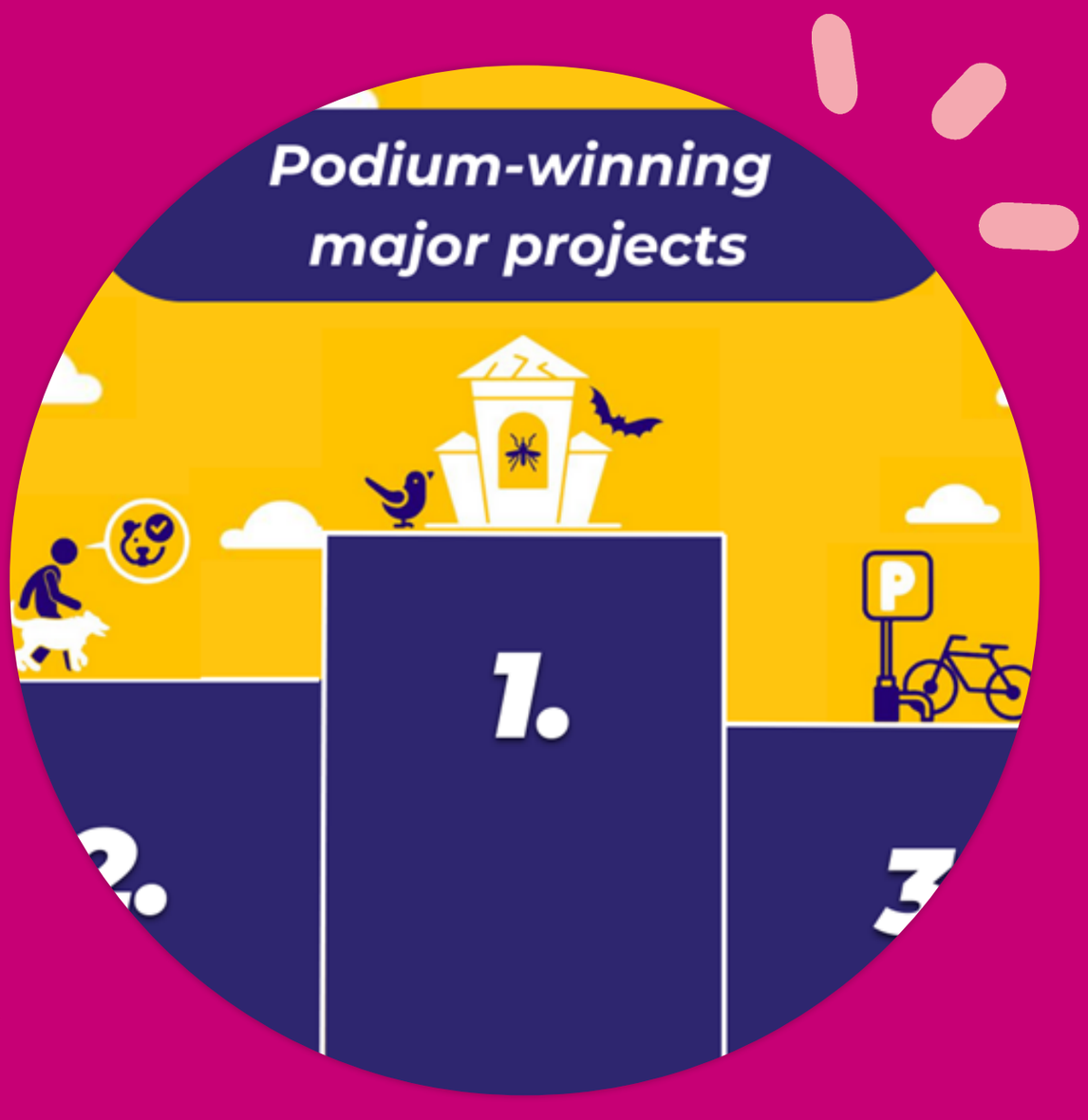
Lessons learnt

One of the most important lessons is the long-term value of having a participation officer responsible for coordinating all participatory processes. A strong digital participation platform also proved essential: it helped to reach more citizens, improved the quality of collected information and partly replaced the expensive and time-consuming in-person participatory actions.

Solution

Participatory budgeting is a democratic process where citizens decide how to allocate a part of the public budget. At the beginning of 2025, Budaörs has launched its first participatory budget as a testing action in AoCE project. The result were highly encouraging:

- 83 ideas were submitted
- 13 projects were supported, 3 large projects and 10 small projects
- Participation rate was six times higher per capita than in Budapest
- Strong public demand for an annual PB cycle
- Growing culture of openness and transparency



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BUDAÖRS

Agents of Co-Existence

Gdansk, Poland
489 160 inhabitants

Challenge

Growing citizen expectations demanded clearer, more transparent decision-making and stronger internal capacity to plan, coordinate, and communicate large-scale participation, ensuring consistent standards, faster feedback loops, and meaningful involvement across diverse communities and city services.

Local heroes

Residents, district councils, municipal departments, and local NGOs are the core local heroes of this work. Residents bring ideas, lived experience, and energy. District councils amplify neighbourhood needs and help mobilise participation. Municipal teams turn proposals into feasible, well-delivered projects. NGOs contribute outreach, facilitation, and inclusion methods, ensuring diverse voices are heard.

Lessons learnt

Insights on clarity, mandate, and internal coordination shaped Gdańsk's approach to participation. We learned that transparent rules and verification criteria reduce frustration and build trust. A clear internal mandate and early cross department alignment prevent bottlenecks, ensure consistent communication, and make large scale processes easier to manage, deliver, and evaluate.

Solution

Civic & Green budgets

Annual Civic and Green Budgets, two complementary participatory budgeting tools, empower residents to propose and select projects that improve neighbourhood life and urban sustainability. In parallel, a systematic training and peer exchange programme strengthens municipal staff capacity to design, facilitate, and communicate participatory processes. Together, these actions increase transparency and trust, improve the quality and consistency of engagement across departments, and help the city manage large-scale participation more effectively. The result is stronger collaboration with communities, more inclusive decision making, and a pipeline of citizen led projects with visible local impact.



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GDAŃSK

Agents of Co-Existence

Genk, Belgium
68.198 inhabitants

Challenge

Genk faces increasing polarization, declining trust in democratic institutions, and fragmented participation practices. The city seeks ways to structurally embed participation and strengthen connections between its diverse population groups.

Local heroes

Engaged residents, staff members, and partners who embody the Genk Habits—the building blocks of Genk's coexistence model—act as bridge-builders between communities. They actively participate in dialogue processes, learn from each other, and stimulate new forms of living together. Their commitment demonstrates how local change emerges through collaboration and shared ownership.

Solution

The city is building an organization-wide participation culture by training staff, strengthening knowledge-sharing, and creating a horizontal participation framework. Concretely, an internal knowledge platform, a participation assessment framework, digital and physical dialogue formats, and a citizens' panel are being developed. These actions enhance transparency, improve decision-making, and stimulate collaboration between the city administration and residents. Establishing an inclusive organizational culture and mindset among staff reinforces the connection between the city and its citizens. Genk introduced several inclusive HR measures, such as a core Genk competency for all employees and an onboarding trajectory reflecting Genk's coexistence model.



Lessons learnt

Sustainable participation starts within the organization: staff need skills, support, and space to genuinely integrate participation into their work. Combining formal and informal learning, interdepartmental collaboration, and clear frameworks lowers thresholds. Hybrid participation methods and transparent communication further strengthen residents' trust in the city and its decision-making processes.

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GENK

Agents of Co-Existence

Ķekava Municipality, Latvia
32 300 inhabitants

Challenge

The challenge was to foster community ownership, move mindsets beyond mere legal compliance with mandatory participation requirements, encourage active citizenship and strengthen both cooperation and a shared sense of identity across neighbourhoods.

Solution

Neighbourhood dialogues

We focused on small-scale engagement formats that encouraged residents to actively participate in joint initiatives by inviting them to take the lead in organizing activities within their neighbourhoods. In 2025, it resulted in three collaborative events, all planned and implemented by local residents in cooperation with municipality: a pop-up exhibition "100 Years of Daugmale" held during the Daugmale-100 festival and attracting around 2000 participants; a community event "Meeting of Three Villages", attended by about 500 people of all ages and a resident-led nature hike in Baldone, bringing together over 50 participants and highlighting local values through community perspectives.

Local heroes

This would not have been possible without the active involvement of citizens, neighbourhood associations and non-governmental organizations, as well as the dedication of municipal staff and the engagement of the municipality council members.

Lessons learnt

- Listen – people's ideas are the spark for change,
- Empower – trust residents, give them responsibility and support,
- Participate – don't just watch, roll up your sleeves,
- Commit – civic engagement thrives on dedication and passion.

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KEKAVAS NOVADS

Agents of Co-Existence

Quart de Poblet, Spain
25 000 inhabitants

Challenge

Strengthen links between associations and increase their membership base, revitalising them

Local heroes

Local heroes include the leaders and active members of Quart de Poblet's associations, who voluntarily dedicate their time to community life. Through their collaboration in initiatives such as the Associations Fair and the Sopar Associatiu, they strengthen social ties, foster inclusion, and inspire citizen participation across generations.

Lessons learnt

Municipalities can strengthen participation by acting as enablers, creating spaces for collaboration while recognising the leadership of local associations. Well-designed collective events build trust, reinforce autonomous networks and encourage knowledge exchange. This balanced approach supports resilient civic ecosystems and offers a transferable model for other cities.

Solution

Associat Quart

Associat Quart seeks to strengthen the associative fabric of Quart and has created events with a multiplier effect at the local level, such as the "Sopar Associatiu (Associative Evening)" and the "Associations Fair". Both events, which were well attended and highly rated by participants, have served to attract new members and, in turn, have forged links between the different associations to increase their diversity and representativeness and generate an exchange of knowledge that improves their responsiveness and makes them more independent from the administration.



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Ajuntament de Quart de Poblet
Un poble d'associacions

Agents of Co-Existence

Banská Bystrica City, Slovakia, 73 500 citizens

Challenge

Rising polarization is eroding the middle ground for dialogue and compromise in public life. In cities and local governance, growing "us versus them" dynamics undermine trust and make inclusive, participatory governance and participatory decision-making increasingly difficult.

Local heroes

- A team of municipal professionals working on participatory processes who have the courage to address polarization in a strongly divided city, often becoming scapegoats for protecting the middle ground where dialogue remains possible
- Local MPs who resist polarizing rhetoric despite political pressure
- Embassy staff who actively promote and support depolarization practices through based on their engagement in our workshops

Lessons learnt

A key lesson is that working with polarization requires time and sustained commitment. Building capacities, testing tools in practice, and reflecting on their application must be systematic and continuous. Progress depends on creating safe learning spaces and supporting actors who remain in the middle ground—people willing to address polarization constructively and not yet fully pulled into opposing camps. Strengthening their skills and confidence is essential for maintaining dialogue and preventing further societal fragmentation.

Solution

Fighting polarisation and strengthening social cohesion becomes not only a social objective but also a prerequisite for effective participatory governance. Therefore the aim of our local action is to systematically build the capacities and skills of municipal staff and civil society actors required to strategically work with polarization, reduce its negative impacts, and cultivate the conditions for cooperation. 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 polarised context within the city.



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MESTO BANSKÁ BYSTRICA

Agents of Co-Existence

Breda, Netherlands
188.078 inhabitants

Challenge

Local participation efforts were fragmented, and innovative civic actors struggled to find pathways into municipal decision-making

Local heroes

Social innovators, municipal departments, community groups, civil society actors. Special thanks to our partners from the DG&I network and the women we spoke to for democratic values.

Lessons learnt

Clearer pathways for community innovators to collaborate with the municipality
Stronger and more diverse participation ecosystems
Better internal understanding of how to balance flexibility with consistent procedures
Transferable approach recognised by AoCE partners

Solution

Implementation of Value Networks and including new methods for engaging citizens and social innovators. For our policy diversity, equality and inclusion we formed an value netwerk. With this network we made policy together with partners from the city in order to arrive at a supported implementation agenda.
We have conducted a study on how we can better reach groups of residents who are currently often not involved in shaping policy developments. We will secure this output of this research in future policy in relation to the participation framework.
Also we approached a group of female integration participants with the question, how can we better safeguard democratic values for the female integration participant?



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GEMEENTE BREDA

Agents of Co-Existence

Intercommunity Development Iasi Metropolitan Area Association – Romania, 613,000 inhabitants

Challenge

Strengthening citizen participation and trust in public decision-making across a metropolitan territory, while improving civil servants' facilitation and communication skills and creating practical mechanisms to translate citizens' input into clear, transparent follow-up.

Local heroes

Local change was driven by committed students, engaged teachers and civil society leaders who stepped beyond formal roles. By testing new forms of dialogue and collaboration, they demonstrated that participation is not an abstract concept but a shared responsibility between institutions and citizens across the metropolitan area.

Lessons learnt

Participation becomes credible when citizens see clear feedback loops: what was heard, what was done, and why. Small-scale pilots are powerful proof of concept and build trust faster than long documents. A diverse ULG needs facilitation, not only meetings. In metropolitan settings, coordination across communes is essential to scale impact.

Solution

IDIMAA implemented four Small Scale Actions to test participatory governance in real settings. Two civic labs engaged over 60 students in structured dialogue, problem-solving and co-design of local proposals using an adapted Civic Participation Framework. Additional actions strengthened cooperation between public institutions and civil society, including support initiatives for vulnerable groups. The impact goes beyond individual workshops: tested tools, concrete civic proposals and a stronger multi-stakeholder network now enable the metropolitan administration to facilitate structured dialogue and scale participatory practices across the territory.



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ZMI Zona Metropolitană Iași