Speak Up | Interreg North Sea | Co-funded by the European Union

Lessons Learned in Public Participation

Mid-Project Report

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International Youth Think Tank, Gothenburg

Skive Kommune

VIA University College, Aarhus

Malmö

Municipality of Groningen, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

Stadt Oldenburg

Province Drenthe

Stad Roeselare

Stad Mechelen, Hannah Arendt Institute

Bellidée, Saint-Martin-Boulogne

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INTRODUCTION

This mid-project report compiles insights from the twelve partner organisations involved in the Interreg North Sea Region Speak Up project. It brings together collective learning to date and provides a clear overview of the challenges faced when engaging in public participation for the green transition, as well as the practical approaches being developed to address them.

The findings are derived from semi-structured interviews with all project partners which include municipalities, universities, and NGOs. These cover 6 countries from the North Sea Region: the Netherlands (Municipality of Groningen, University of Groningen, Province of Drenthe), Belgium (City of Mechelen, City of Roeselare, Hannah Arendt Institute), France (Bellidée), Denmark (VIA University College, Skive Municipality), Sweden (International Youth Think Tank, City of Malmö), and Germany (City of Oldenburg). Each partner contributes distinct experiences across various modes of participatory governance, from neighbourhood engagement and citizen assemblies to youth-led initiatives and participatory budgeting.

Several recurring challenges surfaced across the interviews: difficulties in recruiting diverse participants, ensuring that all voices are heard once people are in the room, managing conflicts and polarization, securing meaningful follow-up processes, clarifying the role of municipalities, building trust in institutions, engaging young people, and making effective use of digital participation tools. Partners also described ways they are addressing these challenges while continuing to learn what works in practice.

The sections that follow present this collective knowledge: articulating the shared challenges while highlighting the practical solutions emerging within the partnership. This synthesis is designed not only to document current practice, but also to inform and support ongoing efforts in participatory democracy for the green transition.

MAIN CHALLENGES & INSIGHTS

01   Diversity & Inclusion: Recruitment

This first challenge is one of the most recurrent within organisations working in public participation. Whether this involves neighbourhood participation activities or citizen assemblies, small or large groups of citizens, municipalities or non-profits, many report difficulties in reaching diverse participants. Specifically, people from more vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds and neighbourhoods tend to participate less, leading to their underrepresentation and thus samples that do not truly reflect the population of interest. In order for these panels and assemblies to come up with solutions, advice, and activities that truly reflect the needs of citizens, this barrier must be addressed.

> "**The main challenge that we face every time is that it is more or less the same group of inhabitants that is really involved and engaged in the project, in meetings, and everything regarding the project. It's more difficult to reach other people, vulnerable people that could have an interest in participating, but who for some reason do not come.**"
> — Serena Rivaroli, Bellidée

Who tends to participate more/less?

Oftentimes, organisations report that a large proportion of their participants are older adults, who may have more time and experience to contribute. However, participation can vary depending on the activity or topic: for example, climate change initiatives often attract younger generations, while social issues tend to engage a higher proportion of women. At the same time, people with disabilities or those facing time and resource constraints encounter greater difficulties in participating. Participation also depends on regional demographics, so organisations need to have a clear understanding of their community and its specific circumstances.

How have organisations attempted to address this?

- Diversify outreach methods — invitations are sent to all areas of interest in large numbers, using various methods, to increase the likelihood of reaching diverse audiences. This can be done through posted mail, e-mails, city billboards, public transport advertisements, newspapers, leaflets placed in strategic areas, etc.
- Go where people are — in-person outreach in targeted areas can help in recruiting people who are not reached through conventional channels.
- Personal contact — direct interaction with individuals, such as home visits or face-to-face meetings, creates informal opportunities for conversation. These interactions allow important information to be shared and can encourage participation in the organization's activities.
- Increase outreach where needed — more invitations can be sent to areas where participation tends to be low. This can also be increased through in-person visits (e.g., going to markets) in areas where voting is generally low.
- Remove barriers — citizens do not all have the time and the means to allocate to such projects. It is important to attempt to remove as many practical barriers as possible. For example, scheduling the meetings outside of working hours, reducing their length, offering transport and childcare, etc.
- Participation fee — if possible, providing participants with some compensation can remove financial barriers.

> 66 **"Successful participation starts where people actually are, not where we would like them to be. And this means that we need to know and understand the target groups well in order to address them effectively. Many people today tend to adopt a consumerist attitude; they expect information and opportunities for participation to reach them directly —only a few actively seek them out. As an administration, we need to address this reality by actively shaping participation rather than just inviting it. "**
> — Daniela Janssen, Stadt Oldenburg 99

- Adapt messaging to the target group — different groups have different priorities and needs. Using a targeted approach, such as framing communication methods to fit the different populations of interest, can be helpful to reach more diverse engagement. For example, a high-income area might have messaging focused on climate-smart living, while lower-income areas' messages will focus on perceptions of what a "good life" is.
- Attractive messaging — creating attractive and inclusive messaging has been efficient in attracting a large number of applicants. Making the invitation feel like a "golden ticket" for example, was a creative way that made the receivers feel special and invested.
- Hospitality — making sure that people feel wanted, valued, and welcome at the event. This could be done by reaching out directly (e.g., by phone) and asking about their needs and barriers to participation (transportation, time, etc.)
- Collaborate with local organisations — consider partnering with organisations or networks that already have connections with underrepresented or less-engaged populations (e.g., local housing companies, youth initiatives).
- Ambassadors — having contact with an ambassador from within a community can be helpful to engage those who are particularly hard to reach.
- Increase trust — citizens have to feel like they are an active agent in society, a part of the community, and able to create change in order to be willing to participate (see Theme 6).

- Statistics-based randomization — applying local quotas to applications (e.g., by gender, age, education, district, or other socioeconomic factors) can produce a sample that is randomized yet representative.
- Hybrid format — offering both in-person and online participation can be a solution to allow people who still cannot attend in person to take part (see Theme 8).

02   Diversity & Inclusion: Feeling Heard

When it comes to diversity and inclusion, the challenge does not stop at recruitment. Once participants have been recruited and efforts have been put into gathering a diverse group, there remains the difficulty of ensuring all voices have equal chances of being heard. Some people can have the tendency to take on leadership roles, while others could be less comfortable speaking up. Again, this can result in the under-representation or misrepresentation of certain ideas and their amount of support. It is thus important to ensure that all participants are made to feel comfortable and given the opportunity to speak up.

Who tends to speak more/less?

Organisations have reported that seniors tend to be more engaged. However, having generally greater experiences in engaging in such events, they also tend to be rather open to conversations and different points of view. Also, specifically for recurring meetings and panels, inhabitants who have more knowledge and skills in the topics covered might tend to take charge, and others will subsequently rely on them as well. However, all voices should still be equally valued, no matter their background or experiences—again, for the sake of representation.

How have organisations attempted to address this?

- Education — giving sufficient attention to education is important so that everyone starts the event on equal footing. That is, ensuring all participants understand the main goals of the citizen assembly, what's at stake, the insight from experts, etc.
- Presence of a representative — depending on the context, having an employee present to guide (but not lead) meetings can allow the organisation to observe dynamics. They can then ask specific questions, opening the dialogue to others and ensuring that there is space for everyone to express their ideas. Their role is to be a neutral mediator.

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> **"But I would say the facilitator is very valuable. You should not underestimate that. That's a competence that you need, people that are actually used to both handle difficult people but also be the equalizing force to get everybody heard."**
> — Monika Månsson, City of Malmo
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- Trained facilitators — having trained facilitators to guide discussions has been reported as being highly valuable, especially in the case of citizen assemblies. If possible, there should be a facilitator per talking table, where they can ensure no one is monopolizing speech time.
- Polls — giving voting opportunities is a way to ensure that the ideas expressed during meetings truly represent the majority of the group. It also provides further opportunities for people who are less comfortable orally to have a say and be heard.

- Small deliberation tables — as is often the case in citizen assemblies, larger groups should be divided into smaller talking tables for deliberations. This can ensure that more people, especially those who are more likely to be and feel marginalized, are comfortable to speak up.

- Small notes — letting people write down their ideas (e.g., on post-it notes) can provide further opportunities for those less likely to speak up to have their proposals shared and considered.
- Feedback sessions — for recurrent panels, organizing meetings with the coordination groups to discuss these issues and be transparent about the consequences and stakes of representation can be helpful.

03   Conflicts & Polarization

Public participation initiatives can be a space for conflict to arise. These events often gather diverse people from drastically different backgrounds and life experiences. Since these groups often lack opportunities to interact, bringing them together can be both a significant benefit and a potential drawback in a polarized society. Conflits are not systematic but should be kept in mind, especially as they are prone to happen when engaging in more controversial topics.

How have organisations attempted to address this?

- Strict policies and warnings — for recurring meetings, a method used by some organisations is to set strict ground rules from the start. This involves ensuring that people are aware of behaviours that are not allowed, and that their repetition can lead to expulsion for the benefit of the group.
- Citizen-made voting process — a tested and efficient method is to let citizens create their own voting process. For example, agreeing that a proposal will pass with ⅔ of the votes in favour. This helped participants accept the outcome of the votes.
- Focus on community — recentering the dialogue on what participants have in common, on their goals (e.g., sustainability and collective wellbeing), and on their community engagement can help push the discussion away from conflicts and towards problem-solving.
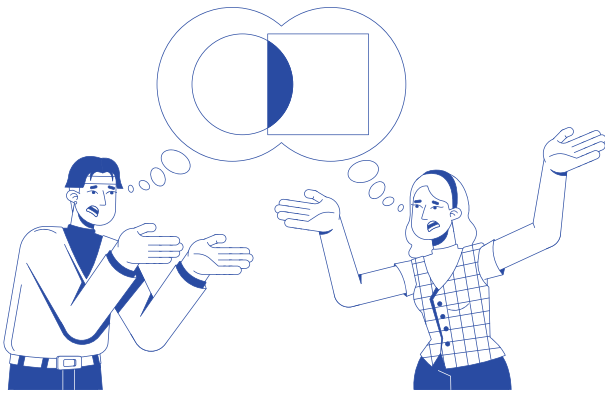
- **Presence of a representative** — again, it can be good to have a neutral mediator present. Their simple attendance can act as an inhibitor, dissuading participants from engaging in conflicts. They may also steer the conversation a certain way by asking the right questions, without providing any answers.
- **Facilitation workshops/trainings** — people hosting public participation events and leading discussions are not always prepared to handle conflicts. Ensuring they receive proper training beforehand can help them be able to step in when necessary.
- **Trained facilitators** — similarly to the section above, facilitators were mentioned as being valuable to handling conflicts. Often included when hiring a third-party organiser, they might be good to consider in other contexts as well, when the budget allows.
- **Building dialogue** — the participation process has to be built on open dialogue, where both sides of an argument can discuss their viewpoints respectfully, even when disagreeing.

> **"I heard in later interviews where people said Okay, you have that opinion, I have this opinion, we're not agreeing on it, but we talk about it, and it's okay, we have respect for each other's opinions, although we don't agree. I thought, well, that was some sort of a lesson they learned also from the dialogues in the citizen assembly."**
> — Christiaan Teule, Province of Drenthe

04   Follow-up Processes

A prevalent concern for both citizens and organizing bodies is that of the follow-up process. What will happen with citizens' recommendations? Changes require time, and the multiple steps to realizing these changes are often unknown to citizens. For example, it takes a while for policies to be drafted, accepted, and implemented. In addition, certain citizen proposals are not within the reach of the organization/department in charge and thus cannot be materialized, or must be sent to different departments. Finally, some advice might simply not be realizable due to technical or legal constraints that citizens are not aware of. All of these issues can lead to frustrations, reduced trust, and the perception that the time and effort accorded to the project were futile.

> **"I think that was another problem in the end, we're trying to see who is aware of the citizen assembly and its impact, but we realised that most people were not aware, like they hadn't heard about it. And more than 80% were not even aware of the outcomes. "**
> — Dr. Anne Eichholtzer, University of Groningen

How have organisations attempted to address this?

- Managing expectations — explaining clearly before and throughout the process what the timeframe of the project is, and delineating the possibilities and limitations around it (e.g., technical, budgetary, legal). Working within the political systems in place, being transparent about the processes and feasibility.
- Explaining the system — explaining how the city is run and the steps that have to be followed after receiving the citizen's advice can help participants understand and accept the long time-frame for receiving feedback.
- Redefining success — something that is important to keep in mind is that large ambitious projects (e.g., energy communities) are often seen as successful, but due to their difficulty levels, also tend to engage fewer people. On the other hand, smaller-scale "easy" projects (e.g., community gardening) are more successful in involving diverse inhabitants. Projects must thus keep in mind this balance between ambition and engagement—potentially starting small and growing from there.
- Specific target or theme — one issue, especially for citizen assemblies, might also be that it is too broad. Having a more confined theme or target group might help sharpen and streamline the advice.
- Selection % — having too many proposals accepted by participants might make it harder for them to be later implemented. Consider having a selection criterion well above 50% in order to only have a few widely accepted proposals pass the vote.
- Communication with citizens — keeping them informed about the steps being taken and how their projects and recommendations are being reviewed is important. This might be through emails or social media posts, for example.

- Digestible communication — use varied and targeted methods to share the outcomes of an initiative. For example, Instagram may be more digestible and thus efficient to inform young people (v.s. a newsletter).
- Engaging storytelling — for example, mentioning personal stories of the direct positive impact a policy change has had on people. This can be more memorable and impactful than sharing dry policy reports.

> **" "So in fact, I guess our citizen assembly really received the idea that their work was relevant. And I've noticed that since then, a lot of people from the citizen assembly came to meetings from the city, and they did participate in public debates, in meetings with politicians, and in new policy planning of different departments. "**
> — Mark Van der Veken, Stad Mechelen

- Holding feedback meetings — this can be in multiple sessions: midway through the initiative, after a panel or assembly's recommendations are sent to be reviewed, and after the advice has been implemented. It enables citizens to ask questions directly to social servants, politicians, and/or experts. They can then get detailed answers and further understand what will happen with their proposals, increasing the transparency of the process. It is also beneficial for them to hear directly from experts the limits of certain proposals, to lessen frustration if some can't be implemented. Although not all three sessions are necessary, a midway session can be beneficial for citizens to get feedback and adjust their advice before it is too late, a session after the final advice is sent can prepare them for the outcome while they wait for this long process, and the final session importantly informs them of the specific outcomes of their work.
- Pre-post surveys — these can help to understand what participants' motivations and expectations are before entering the process, in order to better understand their later reactions. What do they want out of this initiative? Do they expect to influence policy? Or to experiment with different modes of democracy?
- Communication with stakeholders — that is, keeping them in the loop throughout the process for them to be prepared and not taken aback by the proposals in the end.
- Involving other departments — this may simply be by communicating what is being done throughout the process, or having other social servants directly involved in the initiative. This may increase the potential for proposals that do not fall under your own branch to be seriously considered in another.

> **" "This means that we couldn't really say yes or no to a lot; we could just say we're going to send it to our colleagues in other departments. I think they were a little bit, I wouldn't say worried or concerned, but other departments weren't part of the whole process, so they didn't know what to expect."**
> — Monika Månsson, City of Malmö

05 Role of Municipalities

A difficulty faced specifically by municipalities and governmental institutions when working with neighborhood participation is that of figuring out their role and the extent of their engagement. How much should you let citizens take charge? When should you take over and how much? There is a balance between giving agency to the inhabitants whilst still managing the process that is difficult to find. These choices also come with consequences. For example, the decision to give full agency to citizens might be accompanied by unexpected outcomes. In this case, should you accept this as part of the process or intervene?

How have organisations attempted to address this issue?

- Be a facilitator — to tackle global issues like climate change through public participation, a new wave of research suggests moving away from top-down approaches. This method holds that municipalities should shift from being actors of change towards being a support for citizens to organize this change themselves, collectively (see "The Collective Impact Model").

The Collective Impact Model

This model, born in northern America, posits that municipalities should act as a "backbone support" to citizen activities. It outlines five building stones to help guide them towards achieving this goal.

To read more about this model, head over to our website:
⊕ *The Collective Impact Model: H...*
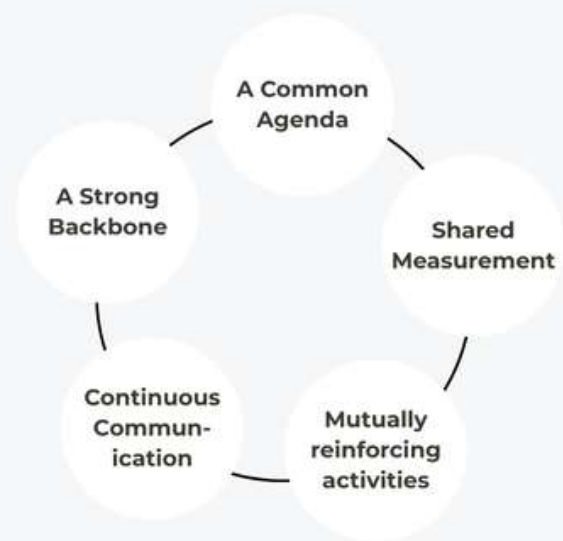
- Consider the phases — the municipality's role will change depending on the phase of involvement. In the beginning, in order to set things in motion, the municipality will have higher engagement. Moving into the middle stages, there should be a switch over of responsibility to citizens. It is ultimately up to citizens to reach decisions concerning initiatives, but professionals can help push citizens into the action phase.
- Formalized Framework — following a framework for meetings between professionals and citizens in steering groups can be helpful to support high levels of mutual information.
- Shared understanding — creating a shared understanding between professionals and citizens about what engagement and mobilization mean. What are the success criteria? When is the ambition met?

- Consider human dynamics — this isn't just about project management, it is important to be able to consider human dynamics, such as who might be left behind, can anyone get hurt, and how can you build trust between the people and towards the process. Indeed, an important precondition to collective action is to build trust (see Theme 6).

- Set up a support structure — in order for citizens to take action and succeed, a structure needs to exist. This will be achieved by creating a network of local actors (NGOs, universities, citizens, social servants, etc.) with common goals, providing a platform and tools for action.
- Change mentality — this is a big challenge, and especially true for politicians, who need to be ready to hand over the reins, transferring their mandate to collective action.

> **"That's not actually a policy of governance. It's just a mentality from the people in power, saying, Here are the keys. And I give the keys. I put it on the table, and I'm part of it. And where you need me, I will be there. Where you need support, I will make it possible for support to come."**
> — Landry Mawungu, Hannah Arendt Institute

06   Trust in Institutions

Both research and municipalities themselves report global trends of declining trust in governing bodies. This can create added barriers to participation, as citizens often perceive their involvement as performative tokenism. In addition, people tend to hold a priori beliefs and biases towards public servants (e.g., working slowly), which can further impact their willingness to participate.

How have organisations attempted to address this issue?

- Working with the people — although this demands a certain level of involvement and time, getting to know citizens more closely—and vice versa, citizens getting to know the public servants—has proved efficient. This can help create equal grounds between both parties, turning them into partners within the projects. Having a close connection with the citizens throughout the whole process can thus be helpful, from planning to activities to feedback.

- **Building bridges** — non-profit organisations can act as bridges between citizens and municipalities/governments. These organisations have reported that although citizens had low levels of trust towards governmental institutions, their trust in the association remained high. The citizens can thus go to them for demands, and the non-profits then relate this information to municipalities to co-organize solutions.
- **Follow-up** — making sure that citizens know what is being done with their recommendations after an assembly or panel meeting is important, whether that is the implementation process or the reasons why a specific project cannot be realized (see Theme 4).

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> **"As administration, we have generally noticed what is a decline in trust in politics and the city administration. We have found that personal contact, cooperation with trusted local players, and the follow-up of results are crucial for building trust."**
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> — Daniela Janssen, Stadt Oldenburg
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- **Connect action to needs** — going to the citizens to ask about their concerns and connecting your actions (e.g., in preparing a citizen assembly) directly to their needs can build feelings of connectedness and trust.
- **Transparency** — being as transparent as possible throughout the whole process is important to gain trust both from citizens and politicians. Communication efforts can help in this regard.
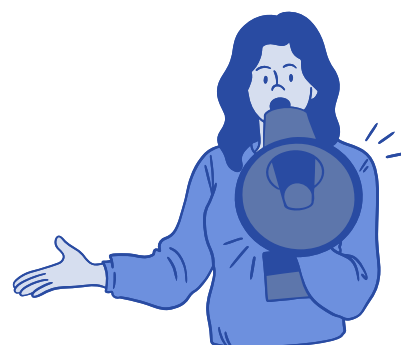
07   Working with Youth

Engaging youth can involve different methods than when working with other demographics. Not every project or topic will interest everyone, and there is a specific challenge in engaging youth with their specific issues and interests in mind. With the right engagement, young people can be extremely passionate and invested. However, this may come with more conflicts and outbursts.

How have organisations attempted to address this issue?

- **Training & supervision** — young people may need more training and supervision at first, having had fewer opportunities in democratic initiatives, but it is also important

to trust that they are capable of similar successes and results if given the chance. However, they need to be provided with sufficient tools and the right support.

- Youth speaking to youth — having youth facilitators or co-facilitators can help in engaging other young people, as they will be able to understand their needs, interests, dynamics, and challenges on a deeper level.

- Creative topic or activity — creating fun and engaging initiatives that are specifically targeted to their interests can help in getting more young people involved in neighbourhood participation. Some successful initiatives that have been led by our partners are, for example, letting them create a rap album about their lived experiences and struggles, and starting a design contest with a prize to restore a riverbank.

- Channel their passion for engagement — young people can be very outspoken and passionate about certain topics. Although this can create conflicts, when channeled properly, it can also lead to great engagement. Having young people engage with other generations can thus lead to fruitful discussions and movement.

> **"I think that is the beauty of working with youth because they are more loose, and they are more capable of using their own strength, their full energy, by being very engaged."**
> — Urban Strandberg, International Youth Think Tank

08 Digital Participation

Digital participation can take different forms and, although it brings many benefits, also comes with its own share of challenges. It might be daunting to know where to start. What kind of tools exist and should be used for your specific purpose? Who do you want to target with this, and who will realistically be reached? To what extent will people want to get involved and feel heard this way?

> **"A lot of citizens wrote in our questionnaires that they didn't know how to participate, that they want to be involved in the plans of the province, but they don't know how, and they don't know when, and they don't know on what. That's why we had this idea of having a multi-channel approach."**
> — Anne de Zeeuw, Province of Drenthe

How have organisations attempted to address this issue?

- Combined use — this is reported by all organizers, who use their digital participation tools in combination with in-person participation. While digital participation may not be fully representative, often not reaching older adults or people who do not have access to these tools, they can help gather a larger amount of feedback with a lower level of investment. Information gained from digital participation tools can also be used to guide and inform in-person initiatives (e.g., citizen assemblies).
- Creative targeted methods — different types of digital tools can be used to reach different target groups (e.g., voting tablet boards placed around the city, social media platforms, creatively placed QR codes).
- Various options — these tools can offer different participative options, catering to citizens' different goals and time constraints. This could be voting opportunities, message boards, surveys, etc. It could also be used to provide follow-up information after participation events (e.g., 3D visualisations of building plans), creating a well-rounded platform, useful throughout the whole process.

- Communication — a lot of digital tools go unnoticed by citizens. There should be enough communication efforts in order to make everyone aware of this tool, how to use it, and why/what it is for.
- Recognizable and easy to use — digital platforms can simplify the process of communicating and connecting with governing bodies. By making it a well-known and easy-to-use tool, it can then become a go-to place for people to participate.

> **"We do find that the hybrid format is also a great way to connect the population with the local government. There's an increase in feeling heard and feeling of influence, and the effect of the citizen assembly is also stronger for people who have been consulted online."**
> — Dr. Anne Eichholtzer, University of Groningen

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

This section combines the advice provided by the Speak Up project's 12 partners for anyone looking to start a public participation project. These reflections are based on practical experiences and the lessons that were learned from leading diverse real-world projects, with their various pitfalls and successes in mind.

What should you keep in mind when creating a public participation initiative?

1 Preparing for Failures

Trial and error is sometimes needed to figure out what works and what doesn't. Something might not have worked because it was the wrong context, time, or target group. Accept the failures, learn from them, and adapt!

2 Preparation is Key

Before jumping into a project, allow yourselves enough time to focus on the preparation process, thoroughly thinking about what you want to achieve. What is the goal? What is your role? Who is the target? What will you do with the output?

3 What type of engagement?

Similarly, you should think beforehand about what kind of citizen engagement you are looking for. What is the democratic goal? Is there participatory democracy in the decision-making process or the implementation process? How do you relate municipal ambitions and co-production strategies?

4 Keep it simple

It is better to have a few activities that really make a difference than to have too high ambitions where nothing can actually come out of it. Often, smaller activities are where the learning opportunities for citizens are the greatest.

> "One advice would be, of course, keep it simple. It's better to have a few activities that really do make a difference than to have high ambitions and nothing really comes out of it. It's better to have small activities where there can be a lot of learning potential for the citizens. Also, because there will be different success parameters and they will have the feeling it's important with our local community building."
> — Dr. Holger Meyer Højlund, VIA University College

5 Make time for it

It will always take longer than you expect, so be prepared for the amount of time that you will have to allocate to this project.

6 Focus on education

No matter the type of public participation, having educational sessions for participants can help in many ways. It might be to ensure everyone starts the process with a baseline knowledge of the topic, but also to provide them with some strategic organisational skills in co-production.

7 Flexibility & co-facilitation

Having employees and citizens co-facilitate activities increases learning opportunities. Consider the level of flexibility in the organisation, to leave room for citizens' active learning and development of democratic competences.

8 Involve everyone

It is important to have all stakeholders in mind (e.g., politicians, colleagues, citizens) throughout the process, keeping them informed and engaged.

9   **Give politicians a role**

Specifically, politicians should be given a role so that they feel like you are in this together, and so that they do not interfere with the process from fear of it becoming a hazard.

> **"I think what's most important is to always take everyone with you in their story, like politicians, colleagues, citizens — everyone should be informed and should be engaged and feel motivated to do this."**
> — Jasmien Wellens, Stad Roeselare

10   **Broaden your vision**

See public participation as part of the change you want to create, rather than a means to an end. A citizen assembly is just one dot in a bigger picture of change, and should be coupled with other local action (e.g., neighbourhood committees, stakeholder meetings) to create real movement.

11   **Evaluate Participation**

It is useful to ask participants mid-term and after a participation event how they experienced it. There is a lot to learn from practical experiences.

12   **Role of communication**

Do not let communication become an afterthought. Having someone dedicated to this task could help ensure there is sufficient capacity allocated to this crucial element.

> **"Participation and communication are closely linked. As a municipality, we believe it is important that we communicate clearly during the participation process. From beginning to end. "**
> — Fred Stol, Municipality of Groningen

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Curious to know more about our partner's goals and methods within public participation? In this section, we provide a short overview of the organizations' work and present their ongoing projects.

More information & interviews can be found on the Speak Up website.

Gemeente Groningen

Groningen is a province and city located in the north of the Netherlands. The municipality (or Gemeente in Dutch) has two main forms of participation: resident participation and government participation. They are the two "approach routes" by which participation begins. In resident participation, the resident takes the initiative, and the government joins in. With government participation, the government is the starting point, asking the residents to participate. The purpose of civil servants is to provide strategic advice on democratic renewal and participation. They advise management and political administration on how municipalities can increase and improve cooperation with the inhabitants, as well as how residents can cooperate among themselves and with the municipality.

These public participation projects range from citizen assemblies to participatory budgeting. For example, they have recently concluded a Citizen Assembly on waste, the advice from which is currently under review. They also developed a pilot project in Hoogkerk, a city within the province, where citizens get to vote on what their allocated budget can be spent on based on local needs.

University of Groningen

The University of Groningen (or Rijskuniversiteit) is one of Speak Up's knowledge partners, located in the Netherlands. They have two main research objectives. The first is to evaluate the impact of citizen assemblies. For example, looking at how it changes relationships between citizens and local governments, for both participants and non-participants. The second objective is to understand how we can create meaningful dialogue during group discussions. How can we ensure that all voices are equally heard? How can we reduce polarization? How can we truly get the full potential of a citizen assembly?

In order to achieve their research goals, they have partnered with Speak Up partner municipalities such as the Gemeente Groningen, Provincie Drenthe, and Skive Kommune.

Province Drenthe

Drenthe is a province situated in the north of the Netherlands. Both civil servants working for the parliament and the executive branch of the province are involved in public participation projects. They collaborate with inhabitants, civil society organisations, and local partner governments for citizen engagement and policy development projects. One of their main focus is thus to strengthen the connected governance position of the Parliament.

One of their main methods is their hybrid format. They have developed a digital participation tool, with an online questionnaire, as well as a citizen assembly. The online participation tool has helped to guide the creation of the in-person assembly, as well as gather a wider array of responses. These approaches are complementary and must work in tandem.

Stad Mechelen

Mechelen is a province and city in northern Belgium. Their strong focus on being an inclusive city has led them to create many public participation opportunities. Within Speak Up, they have focused on two main projects and roles. Their first goal has been to try to streamline the process and methodologies used to create participation tracks (e.g., using common language, sharing expertise, and having advisory boards). Their second goal has been working on a specific participation project, which aims to positively transform the river running across the city. Through co-creation, they aim to enhance local biodiversity, bring back a full and vibrant ecosystem, whilst making this a pleasant public space for all. Thanks to this project, they have created many different participation activities, such as boat tours and citizen assemblies, where nature is given a voice.

Stad Roeselare

Roeselare is a municipality and city located in northwest Belgium. Their strategic unit coordinates the various projects funded by the Speak Up project with other branches and the policy experts, one of whom specializes in public participation. For the past few years, they have been working on various citizen engagement projects, including neighbourhood and digital participation. For these initiatives, they have employed a dialogue-maker who physically goes to the various neighbourhoods to engage citizens in conversation, as well as an online voting and open-discussion social media platform.

They are currently developing a citizen assembly on the topic of sustainable mobility. The participants have been randomly selected based on specific quotas, and the assembly will be launched in October this year! They are planning to hold 5 to 6 sessions before sending the participants' advice to be reviewed.

Hannah Arendt Institute

The Hannah Arendt Institute is one of the knowledge partners of the Speak Up project, located in Mechelen, Belgium. Their focus within the project is to evaluate and research governance methods, as well as the role of municipalities within public participation

projects—and more broadly as decision-makers. Their main research interest is the Collective Impact Model, which posits that municipalities should act as guides and support citizens' action, rather than leaders.

They have been collaborating with various Speak Up project partners to evaluate their pilot projects in relation to the Collective Impact Model, such as Skive, Malmö, and Mechelen.

Bellidée

Bellidée is an association located in the north of France, which manages three community centers and two nurseries in its territory. These centers are open to everyone and support resident-led initiatives, focused mainly on social development. Bellidée is guided by the values of solidarity, dignity, and democracy. They try to transmit these values to their inhabitants by promoting collective action and community involvement.

Bellidée is managed by a board of local volunteer residents. Thus, Bellidée works for the residents in a very concrete way, and public participation is at the heart of their work. Community centers in France, such as Bellidée, have the obligation in their contract to create activities, actions, and projects for the inhabitants and with the inhabitants. This means that each director has a written section in their contract describing their obligation to follow the wishes and the needs of the inhabitants. Working for the citizens is thus more than just an ethos; it is part of the formal system there.

VIA University College

VIA University College is one of Speak Up's knowledge partners, located in Aarhus, Denmark. For their research on public participation, they aim to have a double view. First, they are interested in understanding the municipality's governance roles and co-production abilities. How do they engage in co-production with citizens? What are the employees' competencies? Are the different managerial layers prepared for this? Second, they also look at how citizens organize climate action. How do they organise their participation? How do they unite? How does civil society, organised in different ways, join municipal projects?

In order to achieve these research goals, VIA has partnered with Skive Kommune and has been evaluating their pilot projects.

Skive Kommune

Skive is a municipality and town located in northwest Denmark. Skive's project and development unit aims to create solutions with its citizens for the green transition. They also try to develop methods to engage and involve citizens in public participation initiatives.

Their current pilot project is their two climate villages, which use the "Future Shop" method. This is a vision-based method where citizens write out their dreams for the area that they live in. The goal is to provide an opportunity for the inhabitants to engage with the municipality, to get an idea of what people want from the city, as well as to give a voice to those who might not usually feel comfortable speaking up.

International Youth Think Tank

The IYTT is an international non-political youth organisation, which aims to provide public participation opportunities for the youth and by the youth, called Youth Fellows. Through various methods, these youth are creating more citizen engagement opportunities for all demographics, all the while learning about democratic processes. Their activities span across Europe, Africa, North America, Asia, and Latin America.

They have been collaborating with various Speak Up partners by sending their Youth Fellows to their cities and leading democracy summer camps with local youth. These consist of three important steps, on three consecutive days. On the first day, the youth go out into the city streets to ask passersby questions about democratic agency (called Open Chair Democracy Talks). On the second day, they gather to discuss their findings and brainstorm policy proposals based on what the locals have shared. On the third day, they present their proposals to the local city leaders.

Malmö

Malmö is a city located in southern Sweden. Malmö's environmental department works specifically towards a climate transition, and recognizes that this transition cannot be engaged in alone. They are thus trying to find ways to engage citizens and to give them a voice. They try to give people information and explanations about why this transition is needed and how to engage in it, hoping to make them want to join the movement.

They recently held a local citizen assembly for the inhabitants of the city. The goal of this pilot assembly was to try a more manageable, budget-friendly method, which could be easily replicated by other cities. They had a recruitment process, four educational meetings, and a final deliberation assembly. The first meeting was held in person in order for everyone to meet, and the following three were online. They developed suggestions, which were then sent to the city for review. A feedback session was then organised to update citizens on what was done with their advice.

Stadt Oldenburg

Oldenburg is a city in the north of Germany. They see it as their responsibility to make participation processes open, transparent, and as low-threshold as possible. Their participation coordination office acts as an interface between the urban society and the city administration, bringing citizens' knowledge and ideas in. They have an integrated city development project, which focuses on having a hybrid form of participation. This entails both street conversations and workshops, as well as online participation tools. They hold a monthly "project workshop" to hear directly from inhabitants about what they would like to see and change in the city. Another recent creative project is the Oldenburg beermats, sprinkled across the city's bars, which have a question on them as well as a QR code leading to a short survey, in order to spark democratic dialogue.