PHOENIX

From Voices to Action: Empowering Participatory Governance

Third

POLICY

brief

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[1]
PU = Public
PP = Restricted to other programme participants (including the Commission services)
RE = Restricted to a group specified by the consortium (including the Commission Services)
CO = Confidential, only members of the consortium (including the Commission Services)

Executive summary

"From Voices to Action: Empowering Participatory Governance" is the third Policy Brief from the H2020 project PHOENIX—The Rise of Citizen Voices for a Greener Europe. This Policy Brief is informed by the work developed under Task 5.2, "Participatory Testing, Localisation, and Optimisation of the Evaluation Plan" (WP5). It aims to provide an evaluation of the co-design processes conducted within the Territorial Commissions for Co-Design (TCCDs).

At the heart of this document is the recognition that participatory governance plays a pivotal role in addressing complex socio-ecological challenges, particularly within the framework of the European Green Deal (EGD). The TCCDs have demonstrated how inclusive methodologies and diverse stakeholder engagement can foster stronger civic participation, enhance trust, and drive meaningful policy innovations. However, challenges such as representation gaps, participant fatigue, and limited integration of outputs into policy frameworks persist, requiring strategic responses.

The document outlines specific recommendations for overcoming these challenges, co-created with the TCCD representatives that participated in the cross-TCCD session held in Tartu, Estonia, 17th April, 2024. These include fostering hybrid participation models, improving communication strategies, incentivizing engagement, and ensuring sustained institutional support.

By addressing these aspects, the findings emphasize the potential of participatory governance to bridge gaps between citizens and decision-makers, ultimately contributing to a just and equitable ecological transition.

In addition to presenting recommendations, this document briefly reflects on the participatory evaluation process that underpinned the findings. This evaluation focused on assessing the transparency of co-design methodologies, the diversity of participants, and the alignment of expectations with outcomes.

The insights gained provide a roadmap for refining participatory frameworks and ensuring they are adaptable to diverse contexts and needs.

The brief focuses on assessing participants' experiences in these initiatives, particularly regarding the transparency of the employed methodologies, the diversity of actors involved, and the alignment of participants' expectations and motivations. It identifies key challenges, such as representation gaps and participant fatigue, and proposes actionable recommendations to enhance participatory governance frameworks.

Key insights from this evaluation demonstrate the potential of participatory governance to influence policy outcomes and foster inclusive and effective decision-making. The lessons learned highlight the need for adaptable, transparent, and inclusive methodologies to advance ecological and social transitions within the framework of the European Green Deal.

In the following pages, the policy brief to be made public in PHOENIX communications channels.

KEY RESULTS

1. **Representation gaps** remain a critical challenge, particularly for younger participants, rural communities, and marginalised groups.
2. **Clear methodologies and real-time feedback** are highly value, which increase **trust and satisfaction**.
3. Integrating co-design outputs into broader policy frameworks requires **stronger institutional support**.
4. **Co-design** process fosters **civic engagement** and enhances **participants' understanding of policy mechanisms**.
5. **Combining online and offline engagement, hybrid participation** models address the digital divide and foster inclusivity.

The power of participatory governance

Participatory governance refers to a system where citizens, civil society organizations, and local authorities actively engage in decision-making processes that affect their communities and societies. Rather than decisions being made solely by elected officials or experts, participatory governance promotes inclusivity and transparency by giving a platform to a diverse range of voices.

This approach encourages collaboration between stakeholders, fostering shared responsibility for policy development and implementation.

Co-design is a key element within participatory governance. It involves a collaborative process where all relevant stakeholders—whether citizens, experts, policymakers, or community groups—work together to design policies, solutions, or projects. In the context of the European Green Deal (EGD), co-design ensures that the voices of diverse groups are integrated into the development of environmental policies and initiatives, making them more reflective of local needs, values, and experiences.

Co-design

Co-design is a collaborative and inclusive process in which diverse stakeholders—such as citizens, policymakers, experts, and community organizations—actively participate in the design, development, and implementation of policies, services, or solutions.

Rather than being a top-down approach where decisions are made by a select group, co-design ensures that those affected by a decision have a meaningful role in shaping it.

Co-design is grounded in six principles of inclusivity, shared ownership, and iterative learning, fostering more effective, equitable, and context-sensitive outcomes.

By integrating different perspectives, lived experiences, and expertise, co-design enhances legitimacy, strengthens public trust, and increases the likelihood of sustainable implementation.

In the context of governance and policymaking, co-design serves as a key mechanism for participatory democracy, ensuring that public policies and initiatives are not only technically sound but also socially responsive and just.

INCLUSIVITY

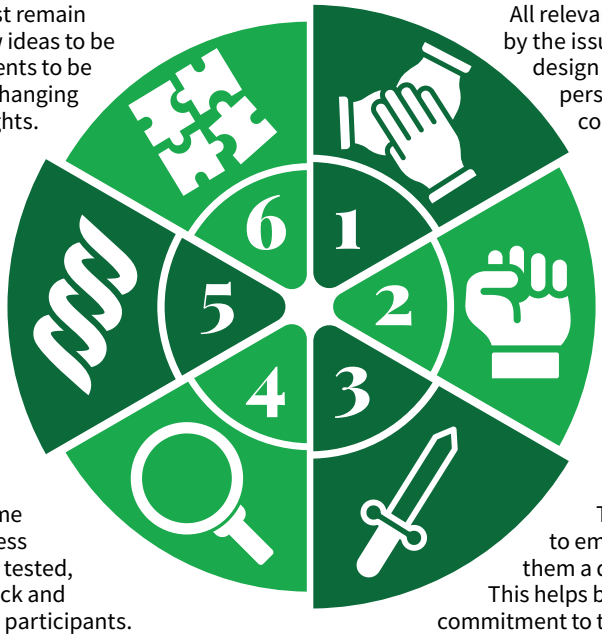
Co-design processes must remain adaptable, allowing for new ideas to be integrated and for adjustments to be made based on feedback, changing circumstances, or new insights.

FLEXIBILITY

Open communication about the design process, objectives, and constraints helps build trust and ensures that all stakeholders are informed and have equal opportunities to contribute.

TRANSPARENCY

Co-design is not a one-time event. It is an iterative process where ideas are developed, tested, and refined through feedback and continual engagement with participants.



COLLABORATION

All relevant stakeholders, especially those affected by the issue at hand, should be involved in the design process. This ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, leading to more comprehensive and equitable solutions.

EMPOWERMENT

Co-design is inherently a collaborative process. Stakeholders work together, share knowledge, and engage in dialogue, ensuring that each participant contributes their expertise and insights.

ITERATION

The co-design process aims to empower participants by giving them a direct role in shaping outcomes. This helps build trust, ownership, and commitment to the final solutions.

Co-Design Strengths

- Diverse Perspectives, ideas, participants and Collaboration;
- Constructive Communication and Exchanges;
- Effective Information Sharing and Collaboration;
- Equal Treatment and Unity;
- Non-hierarchical structure;
- Honesty and trust;
- Transparency process;
- Facilitating Compromise and Debate Culture;
- Dynamic and Understandable Discussions;
- Motivation;
- International networking;
- Learning from the experiences of the others.

Co-Design Weaknesses

- Difficulty in communication – messages are unfocused, unclear objectives;
- Engagement Challenges - Keep the people in the process;
- Limited Participation;
- Time Constraints and Duration of Program (too long);
- Lack of Representation and Difficulty in Achieving Representativeness;
- Resistance to participation in both sides (political/authorities, citizens).

CO-DESIGN

A collaborative approach to decision-making and problem-solving where stakeholders, including citizens, policymakers, and experts, work together to develop policies and solutions. It emphasizes shared ownership, inclusivity, and iterative refinement to ensure that diverse perspectives shape the final outcomes.

PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE

A decision-making approach that actively involves citizens, civil society, and stakeholders in shaping policies and solutions, ensuring that diverse perspectives contribute to more democratic and effective governance.

Co-Design Opportunities

- Opportunities for Participation and Co-Creation – opportunities for joint roadmaps to build the co-creation process;
- Optimization and Efficiency;
- Stakeholder Engagement and Collaboration – developing the network;
- Increase the values around public participation; Add social inclusion to these values, as a central aspect;
- Elaboration and Problem-Solving;
- Community Empowerment and Social Growth;
- Digital Engagement and Technology;
- Convergence of circumstances/interests;
- The same needs at different scales/levels;
- Test participation methodologies to use in another process;
- Possibility to overrule the national legislation by different examples in other countries.

Co-Design Threats

- Process Management and Lack of Focus;
- Time Constraints and Management;
- Communication and Trust;
- Participation and Engagement;
- Power Dynamics and Influence;
- Social inclusion as a process is problematic to achieve;
- Lack of respecting the time;
- Participation is a right which only some people have the privilege to exercise;
- Lack of incentives;
- Politicization of the process;
- Political cycle –interrupts the process;
- Bureaucracy in both sides (political/authorities, citizens).

! RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the co-design and participatory governance process for the Ecological Transition, Local Implementers should consider the following recommendations, ensuring active citizen involvement in decision-making through inclusive, participatory, and deliberative practices .

1 Incentivising Participation:

Participants should be compensated for their time and contributions to address engagement fatigue, including providing financial compensation, childcare, and transportation support.

2 Improving Communication Strategies

Develop clear and accessible communication frameworks that use plain language and multiple formats to ensure inclusivity. Digital platforms should be complemented with in-person facilitation where necessary.

3 Broadening Sociocultural Representation:

Tailored outreach programs should be designed to engage underrepresented groups, especially youth, rural communities, and marginalised populations. Specific efforts should ensure diverse participation from the onset.

4 Strengthening Policy Integration

Co-design processes should engage policymakers and key stakeholders early to ensure that the outcomes are reflected in public policy decisions. This will foster a more vital link between civic input and tangible policy impacts.

5 Promote Hybrid Participation Models

To address the digital divide, a hybrid model of digital and in-person participation should be adopted to ensure that all stakeholders, regardless of digital literacy, can engage meaningfully.

6 Continuous Feedback and Transparency:

Regular updates and feedback loops are essential for informing participants of the project's progress and how their input influences decisions. Transparency in decision-making will maintain trust and motivation. Self-assessment and feedback should be implemented regularly.

7 Development of Platforms to Communicate:

Provide multiple channels for communication, such as email updates, social media platforms, and dedicated project websites; Foster open and constructive communication channels where participants feel comfortable sharing their ideas, concerns, and feedback.

BEWARE OF PARTICIPANT FATIGUE

Participatory processes often face challenges such as participant fatigue, which can undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of engagement. In co-design activities, it is essential to be aware of the demands placed on participants to ensure that their involvement remains manageable and productive. An approach that recognizes and addresses fatigue not only improves the quality of participation but also fosters more inclusive and sustainable decision-making, leading to better long-term outcomes.

For a democratic and participatory green transition

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