



CITIES AS ARENAS OF POLITICAL INNOVATION IN THE STRENGTHENING OF DELIBERATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

EUARENAS POLICY BRIEF

June 2024



SUMMARY

This EUARENAS deliverable focuses on scenarios of local deliberative and participatory democracy based on foresight methods and the actual experiences of collaborative governance. This discussion focuses on the “EUARENAS Future City” and the “collaborative city” of Reggio Emilia as examples that offer a number of policy insights.

THE FUTURE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

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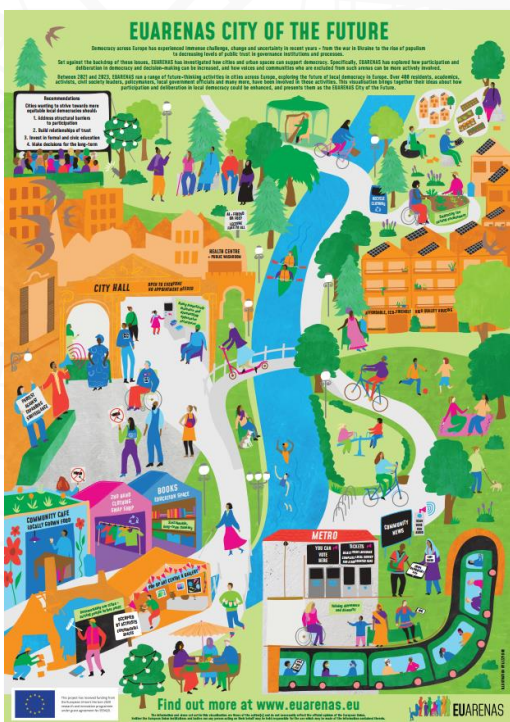
EUARENAS & FORESIGHT

EUARENAS responds to a major European challenge - the need to strengthen legitimacy, identification and engagement within the democratic public sphere. The project investigates the ways that social movements, coupled with local reform initiatives that manifest themselves in local-level experiments, create momentum for political change that include more inclusive forms and participatory forms of governance. It nurtures active citizenship, social agendas and political life through citizen participation and democratic innovations in European cities through a range of traditional, applied, and mixed methodology research approaches.

Foresight and future-thinking approaches are one of the research strands present in EUARENAS. As a tool, foresight is both a tool for understanding democratic innovations as they emerge and for engaging citizens and other actors in such innovations within the participatory and deliberative realms. EUARENAS uses mixed method approaches to foresight to investigate and hypothesize over future trends and scenarios in participatory democracies. Its core objectives are to:

1. Use a hybrid methodological approach to foresight research in order to investigate and hypothesise over future trends in democratic processes.
2. Develop practical methodological guides on approaches to conducting foresight research in order to create future social scenarios.
3. Create both a conceptual synthesis of the learnings from the foresight research and visions of future equitable and inclusive democratic scenarios to inform wider project findings.

CITY OF THE FUTURE: RECOMMENDATIONS



The foresight and future-thinking research activities have culminated in a Future Scenarios Report, which can be read [on the EUARENAS website](#), and a visualisation of the EUARENAS City of the Future, which can also [be viewed online](#). Both outputs make the recommendation that cities wanting to strive towards more equitable local democracies should:

1. Address structural barriers to participation
2. Build relationships of trust
3. Invest in formal and civic education
4. Make decisions for the long-term

This policy briefing transforms these key learnings into actionable policy recommendations that can be implemented at city level.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

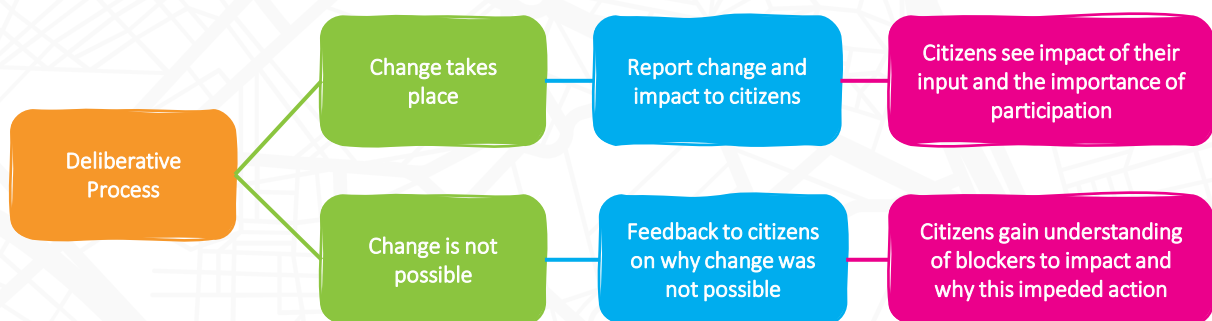
1. REMOVE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Barriers to participation should be removed so that people are not only encouraged to engage in democracy, but also have the means to do so. The removal of barriers should be enacted in policy to ensure inclusion is embedded at every level. Policies may include, but are not limited to:

- The introduction of universal welfare/income
- Participation incentives
- Diverse language translations as default on all local government documents
- Diverse visual representation of race, gender, sexuality, age, etc. in all media
- Age-appropriate education on democracy and participation at all school levels

2. CLEAR FEEDBACK LOOPS

There should be a clearly defined process of consultation and change implemented throughout the city, with feedback loops for deliberative processes to either demonstrate the impact of a consultation or to explain why change wasn't possible in an instance. This would help to prevent disillusion and disenfranchisement among citizens who take part in deliberative processes but then fail to see related change. It will demonstrate to citizens the areas in which they have the most power, while also increasing transparency on areas where change is difficult.



3. TEST AND LEARN

A culture of testing and learning should be cultivated, using the outputs from Recommendation 2 in order to learn what works and what doesn't. Ideas and actions resulting from these learnings should then be made mainstream at city level with the view to embedding tools and processes as a result of each deliberative process, rather than confining learnings to one-off projects. Again, this will aim to prevent the creation of disenfranchised citizens, as well as creating a culture in local authorities of continuous learning and implementation, and collaboration across projects and work streams.

INSIGHTS FROM REGGIO EMILIA. CO-PROGRAMMING AND CO-DESIGNING THROUGH COLLABORATIVE DEMOCRACY

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REGGIO EMILIA – TOWARDS THE COLLABORATIVE CITY

Collaborative democracy represents an innovative approach to urban governance that integrates the public's insight and active participation throughout the decision-making process and the whole policy cycle.

The collaborative city, as interpreted in Reggio Emilia, has been developed as a comprehensive new urban eco-system, where inclusive governance is based on the interaction, collaboration, and sharing of ideas -but also responsibilities - with citizens and the different actors that animate the community. Following Ostrom's thought on commons, the environmental, cultural, infrastructural, and digital resources vital for the community are 'common goods' that shall be co-owned, co-designed, co-planned, and co-managed by and within the community as much as possible.

Starting in 2015, the city of Reggio Emilia embarked on the transition to a collaborative city (Co-City) with the project "Neighborhood as a Common Good" (Quartiere bene Comune, QBC project). This initiative marked the beginning of a collaborative venture between the Municipality, citizens, associations, private enterprises, and universities. Notable projects during this phase included the community Wi-Fi network in Coviolo, the restoration and public opening of Villa Levi, and the regeneration and collaborative management of the Mauriziano Museum. After the pandemic, between 2022 and 2024, the city and the stakeholders involved felt the necessity to re-adapt and innovate the strategy. The objective was to create a structured framework where public involvement directly influences policy creation and urban planning. Reggio Emilia reviewed its collaborative city strategy, emphasizing the local government's role as a State innovator (Mazzucato), aligning it with ambitious EU goals focusing on climate and technological justice.

The updated approach was formalized in the 2022 Regulation on Democracy and Urban and Climate Justice, introducing a two-phase strategy: co-planning by Area Councils (Consulte) and co-governance through Urban Sustainable Development and Innovation Partnerships (USDIPs). The 2024 Title V Regulation amendment introduced new co-design tools to address climate and technological justice. The new provisions introduced in the Regulation feature an innovative form of multi-actor partnership called Urban Sustainable Development and Innovation Partnerships (USDIPs). The objectives of USDIPs are co-designed to achieve specific impacts, and the results of every action taken under a USDIP are evaluated through Community Budgeting. This budgeting process considers 9 impact dimensions and a combination of qualitative and quantitative indicators, linking the outcomes to both public and private investment returns. Another significant innovation in the new Title is the institutionalization of the City Science Office. This office serves as a research tool and hub for the municipality, supporting the public administration in designing innovative public policies and functioning as an ESG Hub to facilitate high-impact strategies.

KEY MILESTONES

1. Quartiere Bene Comune (QBC): An initiative where collaborative democracy was applied by structuring a participatory deliberative tool for engaging citizens, neighborhood architects, and stakeholders in complex projects such as the Coviolo community wi-fi, the regeneration of the Mauriziano Museum and Villa Levi, and the Renewable energy communities.
2. Regulatory Framework: Introducing new regulative provisions (2022) in Reggio Emilia that support co-programming through Area Councils and co-designing through initiatives like the Integrated System for Social Planning (PSSI).

3. City Science Office (CSO): An institutional broker designed to facilitate the exchange between city planning needs and academic research, ensuring that urban innovations align with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) goals.

PROJECTS IN REGGIO – SOME EXAMPLES

Neighborhood Car-sharing: A focused project on sustainable mobility within selected neighborhoods, demonstrating community-based solution design.

Renewable Energy Communities (RECs): Establishment of RECs that emphasize strong environmental, social, and economic impacts.

Rodano Park Development: Enhancement of local natural resources through community-involved planning and execution, fostering ecological connectivity and cultural heritage preservation

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO FACILITATE THE INTRODUCTION OF CO-PROGRAMMING AND CO-DESIGN PROCEDURES, FOR INNOVATIVE CO-GOVERNANCE



EXPAND MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS: Encourage the creation of more Urban Sustainable Development and Innovation Partnerships, to tackle diverse urban challenges.



INCREASE THE ADAPTABILITY OF RESOURCE ALLOCATION: Support these initiatives through targeted funding and resource allocation, evaluating their outcomes through Community Budgeting to ensure their sustainability and impact at multiple levels, that encompass also the social and environmental dimensions of the different projects.



ENHANCE REGULATORY SUPPORT: Develop regulations that facilitate collaborative interactions between the city, its residents, and other stakeholders to ensure ongoing engagement and effective implementation.



MONITOR AND EVALUATE: Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of these projects and refine strategies accordingly.



EXPERIMENT WITH NEW ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES: An innovative governance requires an adaptative bureaucratic administration, engage it and provide it with pioneering instruments to face modern challenges like a City Science Office.



CONCLUSION

The implementation of co-programming and co-designing within the context of collaborative democracy has shown significant potential in the EUARENAS pilot city of Reggio Emilia. By adopting similar strategies, other municipalities can enhance participatory democracy, improve urban innovation, and meet their sustainability goals. This innovative approach can support the achievement of multiple goals such as implementing co-governance through elaborated tools, extend the municipality's capacity of developing new inclusive projects, enlarge the public administration's skills in different fields.

ABOUT THE DOCUMENT

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EUARENAS investigates the ways in which social movements coupled with local government reform initiatives, manifesting themselves in local-level experiments, create momentum for political change that include more inclusive and participatory forms of governance.



For more information:

euarenas.eu



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