

Crowdsourcing: The Citizens Highway to Policy-making in the EU

Executive Summary

Iceland 
Liechtenstein  Norway 
Norway grants grants

ecas
European Citizen Action Service 



Crowdsourcing: The Citizens Highway to Policy-making in the EU

Executive Summary

ECAS Brussels, September 2023

The policy paper *Crowdsourcing: The Citizens' Highway to Policymaking in the EU* provides a comprehensive understanding of the added value of the method of crowdsourcing of citizens' opinions to the quality of our European democracy and its success factors by linking theory and practice.

Crowdsourcing is a digital democracy method that mobilises the so called 'wisdom of the crowd' on a public policy issues.

It is an e-participation process that has the potential to improve representative democracy by complementing it with more direct citizen engagement in decision-making processes. It can lead to policy perspectives that reflect more accurately citizens' concerns, thus renewing an essential promise of democracy: that citizens are not only heard but, above all, listened to in the development of public policies that affect them. Those have been the conclusions of ECAS's working paper "Towards a Crowdsourcing Pilot at the EU level: Taking Decisions with Citizens and Not for Them"¹, published in 2016 analysing 27 case studies of crowdsourcing from around the globe.

This method, focused on collecting citizens' ideas for policy formulation and online deliberation, was used in the Constitutional reform in Iceland in 2010 and 2011 and in the Off-Road Traffic Law in Finland in 2012. Both the Icelandic and Finnish cases were ambitious and imperfect but have revealed the potential of crowdsourcing in policy-making processes. They brought new perspectives, based on the crowds' experience and expertise-based knowledge, to constitutional and policy discussions, empowered citizens to strengthen the legit-

¹ <https://ecas.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Towards-a-crowdsourcing-pilot-at-the-EU-level-1.pdf>

imacy of the political system, and enhanced the transparency and inclusiveness of decision-making.

In the last eight years, ECAS has been committed to bringing about a Civil Society Partnership for EU Crowdsourcing with the overall aim of ensuring the launch of the first ever pilot crowdsourcing initiative at the EU level. The latter has taken place in 2022 in 10 European cities in Belgium, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Greece, Hungary, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Montenegro, and Portugal on the topic of 'air quality' and the experience has been assessed in 2023 through the application of specifically developed Assessment Framework for E-participation.

Based on the assessment of the pilot, we can confirm that the engagement method of crowdsourcing policy and legislative solutions with citizen has a viable potential to reduce the gap between political elites and citizens through co-decision-making by bringing the citizens' perspectives who are the experts of everyday life and can help align government's resources with citizens' priorities thus increasing both the legitimacy of the decisions taken and their ownership by citizens.

Moreover, the EU should consider adding crowdsourcing to its (e-) participation democratic toolbox, which does not include at present any formal channels for citizens to take part in online decision-making processes on a systematic basis and to co-create policies with their representatives. Crowdsourcing can bring an added value, especially by complementing online EU public consultation processes. While the latter mainly attract technical experts and organised stakeholders, crowdsourcing is designed to tap into citizens' collective in-



telligence, which comprises their experience and knowledge as daily consumers of public policies. This would entail designing a process based on four main elements - the legal basis, the subject matter, the set-up of the online platform, the policy cycle and timeframe. Citizen contributions would feed mainly into the agenda-setting and/or the policy formulation phases of a policy cycle and monitor the subsequent phases.

Based on the lessons learnt from the assessment of the ten crowdsourcing pilots, we have developed the following **Blueprint** of 15 recommendations for a successful citizen-centric transnational crowdsourcing process with a **potential for creating epistemic, democratic and economic value**²: epistemic value because policy-makers are provided with the crowds' experience and expertise-based knowledge, democratic value because it increases inclusiveness, transparency, accountability, deliberation and civic empowerment in policy-making and lastly, economic value because it gives access to

2 Aitamurto T. & Chen K.. (2017) The value of crowdsourcing in public policymaking: epistemic, democratic and economic value, *The Theory and Practice of Legislation* <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/20508840.2017.1282665>

innovative solutions, a more efficient knowledge search and a committed public:

A. Functionality, user-friendliness and accessibility of the crowdsourcing platform

1. The **online crowdsourcing platform** should be **intuitive, visually appealing with a user-friendly design** and offering as much **interaction** as possible.
2. The decision on how strong the **authentication process** of users should be must be based on analysis considering the objectives of the respective phase of the crowdsourcing process as well as the **culture of participation** in each country, as some citizens may be more willing to leave their data while others are afraid to be too exposed, as their political views could be one day held against them in certain situations.
3. The **security** of the online platform and the citizens' **data protection** should be ensured. Citizens must be able to easily read the data protection policy on the platform and the organisers **must fully disclose why the data is being collected and how it will be processed**.
4. **Experts in inclusion** should be consulted when designing the online platform to ensure its accesibility to people from disadvantaged groups.
5. A transnational crowdsourcing needs to ensure multilingualism **through either manual or automated translations or a combination of both**.

B. Participation

6. The **policy topic** of the crowdsourcing needs to appeal to citizens by representing a balance of a subject they can easily relate to and feel confident in having a say on. It is important to **rely on experts on the subject** beyond the organisers to guide citizens' reflections and discussions.
7. **A tailored strategy for accessibility and inclusiveness** of the e-participation process needs to be developed in advance. While crowdsourcing is mainly carried out online, there could be ways to allow for collecting citizens **contributions offline** under certain circumstances in order **to bridge the digital divide**.
8. To maximise outreach to citizens and engagement from across Europe, a **universal communication strategy and guidelines with clear key performance indicators** needs to be developed. However, the implementation of the strategy must be **decentralised** through **country-specific activities** as a 'one size fit all' communication strategy would not work.
9. **Visuals and branding** need to be **coherent and harmonised** across all stages of the crowdsourcing process for citizens to easily recognise and identify it, especially if the timeframe is quite wide.
10. The communications and outreach strategy needs to be **flexible enough to accommodate the challenge of external circumstances or unexpected internal so-**

cio-economic developments in the Member States that could hinder the participation process. It should identify the risks and envisage measures to mitigate these risks.

C. Feedback and impact

11. **Dissemination strategies** should consider **major political events** as this could help maximise the impact of citizen contributions on policymaking.
12. Local authorities and politicians have demonstrated their interest in **better policy-making links between the local and the EU level**. A transnational crowdsourcing process should allow citizens to work together with their local representatives on policy issues and then feed their contributions to the EU level to discuss them with the EU representatives.
13. **Feedback to citizens** is a fundamental step of any participatory democracy activity. Every process should envisage a **clear communication on how citizens can verify the impact of their contributions**.
14. **Human and financial resources** should not be underestimated especially in **the analysis part of the contributions from citizens**. The process should be designed to consider the correct timing to examine results, have multiple stakeholders working on the contributions to ensure all citizens' ideas are respected and not selected out of biases, and have a clear plan from the start on how the proposals will feed into the policy-making process.

15. Every e-participation process needs to be thoroughly evaluated to avoid losing the knowledge accumulated during the experience and to learn how to improve. The application of the universally applicable **Assessment Framework for E-Participation** will allow the ability to further test it on both other crowdsourcing activities and e-participation methods such as participatory budgeting, e-initiatives, e-consultations in Europe and worldwide and to ensure a learning curve.



Iceland
Liechtenstein Norway
Norway grants grants

