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

Policy Paper

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

Policy Paper
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 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 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 more accurately reflect 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. These 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”, 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 Constitutional reform in Iceland in 2010 and 2011 and the Off-Road Traffic Law in Finland in 2012. The Icelandic and Finnish cases were both ambitious and imperfect but revealed the potential of crowdsourcing in policy-making processes. They brought new perspectives to constitutional and policy discussions-based on the crowd’s experience and expert-based knowledge; empowered citizens to strengthen the legitimacy of the political system; and enhanced the transparency and inclusiveness of decision-making.

For the past 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. This pilot crowdsourcing initiative took 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’. The experience was assessed in 2023 through application of the specifically developed Assessment Framework for E-participation.

Based on an assessment of the pilot, we can confirm that the engagement method of crowdsourcing policy and legislative solutions with citizens has viable potential to reduce the gap between political elites and citizens through co-decision-making. The method portrays citizens’ perspectives who are experts of everyday life. Thus, their perspectives can help align government resources with citizens’ priorities, thereby 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 currently include any formal channels for citizens to participate in online activities.

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decision-making processes and co-create policies with their representatives on a systematic basis. Crowdsourcing can bring added value, especially by complementing online EU public consultation processes. While the latter mainly attracts technical experts and organised stakeholders, crowdsourcing is designed to tap into citizens’ collective intelligence, which comprises their experience and knowledge as daily consumers of public policies. This would entail designing a process to take place prior to the EU public consultations and specifically tailored for citizens, based on four main elements - legal basis, subject matter, set-up of the online platform, the policy cycle and timeframe. Citizens’ contributions would feed mainly into the agenda-setting and/or the policy formulation phases of a policy cycle and monitor the subsequent phases of the cycle.

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 the potential to create epistemic, democratic and economic value. Epistemic value is generated because policy-makers are provided with the crowd’s experience and expert-based knowledge. Democratic value is engendered because crowdsourcing increases inclusiveness, transparency, accountability, deliberation and civic empowerment in policy-making. Finally, economic value is achieved because crowdsourcing gives access to 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 offer as much interaction as possible.

2. The decision on how strong the authentication process is for users must be analysis-based, considering the objectives of the respective phase of the crowdsourcing process as well as the culture of participation in each country. Some citizens may be more willing to consign their data, while others may be afraid of being too exposed, as their political views could one day be held against them in certain situations.

3. Security of the online platform and citizens’ data protection should be ensured. Citizens must be able to easily read the data protection policy on the platform. The organisers must fully disclose why the data is being collected and how it will be processed.

4. Experts on inclusion should be consulted when designing the online platform to ensure its accessibility to those from disadvantaged groups.

5. Transnational crowdsourcing should ensure multilingualism through either manual or automated translations or a combination of both.

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B. Participation

6. The crowdsourcing **policy topic** should appeal to citizens by representing a subject to which they can easily relate and feel confident having a say on. It is important to **rely on experts in the subject** beyond the organisers to guide citizens’ reflections and discussions.

7. **A tailored strategy for accessibility and inclusiveness** of the e-participation process should be developed in advance. While crowdsourcing is mainly carried out online, under certain circumstances, citizens’ **contributions** could also be collected **offline, 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** should be developed. However, implementation of the strategy must be **decentralised** through **country-specific activities** as a ‘one size fits all’ communication strategy would not work.

9. **Visuals and branding** should be **coherent and harmonised** across all stages of the crowdsourcing process so that citizens can easily recognise and identify the process, especially if the timeframe is quite broad.

10. The communications and outreach strategy should be sufficiently **flexible to accommodate the challenge of external circumstances or unexpected internal socio-economic developments** in the Member States that could hinder the participation process. It should identify the risks and measures to mitigate these.

C. Feedback and impact

11. **Commitment of decision-makers** to the crowdsourcing process and its outcomes is a must. A transnational crowdsourcing process should allow citizens to work together with their local representatives on policy issues and feed their contributions to the EU level to discuss them with EU representatives, thus ensuring **better policy-making links between local and EU levels**.

12. **Dissemination strategies** should consider **major political events** as this could help maximise the impact of citizens’ contributions on policymaking.

13. **Feedback to citizens** is a fundamental step of any participatory democracy activity. Every process should envisage **clear communication on how citizens can verify the impact of their contributions**.

14. **Sufficient human and financial resources** should be allocated for **analysing the contributions from citizens**. The process should be designed to consider allocation of time to examine results; have multiple stakeholders working on the
contributions to ensure all citizens' ideas are respected and not selected out of bias; and have a clear plan from commencement on how the proposals will feed into the policy-making process.

15. Every e-participation process should be thoroughly evaluated to avoid losing the knowledge accumulated during the experience and learn how to improve. Application of the universally applicable Assessment Framework for E-Participation will enable its further improvements through testing on different crowdsourcing and e-participation initiatives in Europe and worldwide and will ensure a learning curve.
2. INTRODUCTION

Crowdsourcing is a digital democracy method that mobilises the so-called ‘wisdom of the crowd’ on 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 were the conclusions of ECAS’s working paper, “Towards a Crowdsourcing Pilot at the EU level: Taking Decisions with Citizens and Not for Them”3, published in 2016, analysing 27 case studies of crowdsourcing from around the globe.

During the past 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 EU level. This took place in 2022, in 10 European cities, on the topic of ‘air quality’. The experience was assessed in 2023.

The objective of the publication, Crowdsourcing: The Citizens’ Highway to Policy-making in the EU is to provide 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.

The first part of the publication defines the concepts of digital democracy and legislative crowdsourcing and discusses their relationship. Subsequently, we discuss key lessons and insights from two cases of legislative crowdsourcing that took place in Iceland and Finland at local and national levels and argue why legislative crowdsourcing is also worth considering at the EU level. We then offer a concept of how crowdsourcing could be performed at the EU level to complement the existing participatory democracy toolbox.

In the second part of this paper, we explain how we designed and implemented the first ever transnational crowdsourcing process in 10 European cities on the topic of ‘air quality’. The assessment undertaken and the conclusions drawn enable robust recommendations based on the success enjoyed and risks encountered.

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3. WHAT IS CROWDSOURCING AND WHY AT THE EU LEVEL?

Digital Democracy is the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to support democratic decision-making to enhance democratic institutions and democratic processes. In this sense, Digital Democracy is not meant to replace traditional forms of representative democracy, but rather to complement them by adding elements of citizen empowerment and more direct participation, especially between elections. It relates to three main concepts: *e-government*, the use of ICT to enhance public administration and services, *e-transparency*, the use of ICT to strengthen openness and transparency in government and political practice, and *e-participation*, the use of ICT to allow stronger citizen participation in decision-making (see details in Lironi 2021). E-participation can include several types of activities and methods that are currently being implemented worldwide, such as participatory budgeting, e-consultations, e-initiatives, e-petitions, e-voting and crowdsourcing.

Figure 1: three aspects of digital democracy (Lironi 2021)

Crowdsourcing can be defined as “an online, distributed, problem-solving and production model that leverages the collective intelligence of online communities to serve specific organisational

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goals⁶. In simple terms, crowdsourcing is a way of connecting and solving problems online with people that you otherwise would not engage with. It allows citizens to reflect upon and collectively discuss the work of a government: to be informed about certain policy issues; shape and share opinions in a constructive way; and, ultimately, have an impact on decision-making processes. Although it aims at channelling public input into the policy process, it is the elected bodies of representative democracies that have the final say on policy.

### 3.1 THE POTENTIAL OF CROWDSOURCING

Several countries have been experimenting with crowdsourcing methods as a means to exploit the democratic potential of digital technology with the aim of reducing the gap between political elites and citizens through co-decision-making.

A well-known example is the crowdsourcing process of Constitutional reform that took place in Iceland in 2010 and 2011. More than ten years ago, Iceland was going through a severe economic recession as a result of the global financial crisis, which challenged the legitimacy of its establishment. The government declared its ambition to produce the world’s first crowdsourced Constitution in an effort to regain the public's trust⁷. The Parliament and the Prime Minister agreed to ask citizens to co-create Iceland’s new Constitution⁸ to reflect their values and beliefs in a better way⁹.

The process had three main phases. It commenced with randomly selected citizens forming National Assemblies to discuss the values they wanted to see in their new Constitution. Twenty-five of these citizens were then elected (from a roster of 522 candidates) to form a special Constitutional Assembly to produce a draft that would be passed in Parliament. It took the Icelanders four months to crowdsource contributions from citizens nationwide to increase the legitimacy of the process and draft the new text. To give further legitimacy to the process, a non-binding referendum took place in October 2012. Although the proposal was approved by two-thirds of the voters, the reform stalled in the Parliament due to internal Icelandic party politics and elections. This led to considerable frustration among citizens and to the subsequent election of non-traditional parties, such as the Pirates, who pledged to enhance direct democracy by enacting the crowdsourced Constitution¹⁰.

Although the new Constitution was not ratified, the crowdsourcing experiment was inspiring and

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groundbreaking. Most importantly, this case established a precedent for other innovative participatory experiences in democratic design and challenged the preconception that creating or amending a Constitution is the exclusive competence of elected decision-makers and legal specialists.\footnote{More on this first phase can be found in Landemore H., “We, All of the People. Five lessons from Iceland’s failed experiment in creating a crowdsourced constitution”, in Slate, July 31, 2014.}

**What did the Icelanders learn?** What is interesting about this case-study is the fact that six years later, in 2016, the Icelandic government decided to reinitiate the effort – by promising to work again on the Constitution with its people and learn from its previous mistakes. Since the former crowdsourced text stalled in the Parliament, the new government coalition **ensured a consensus across political parties from the outset** to continue the constitutional revision process with extensive public participation. This second attempt would also **be fully in compliance with Article 79 of the current Constitution**, which states that amendments to the Constitution must be approved by two consecutive Parliaments with a general election marking the division, so the process would last a total of seven years from 2018 to 2025. Last but not least, the new government also decided to learn from its earlier attempt by **combining more online and offline participatory democracy methodologies** and initiated a more structured process with Opinion Polling, Crowdsourcing, and Deliberative Polling (further details, Lironi 2023\footnote{Lironi E. (2023) “Crowdsourcing a Constitution: The world’s first crowdsourced constitution rises from the ashes in Iceland”, Chapter 8 in Boucher, S., Hallin, C.A., & Paulson, L. (Eds.). The Routledge Handbook of Collective Intelligence for Democracy and Governance (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003215929}).

A further example of a crowdsourcing case took place in Finland in 2013, when the Finnish Ministry of Environment decided to use crowdsourcing to develop a new off-road traffic law. Citizens were called upon to submit their ideas on how to redesign the Off-Road Traffic Act, the purpose of which was to regulate traffic beyond established roads. The online deliberation took place on a platform where citizens could decide on several different issues related to off-road traffic, including whether decisions were to be made on a county, municipal or local level, etc. The platform used gamification as a method to incentivise engagement with a point reward system. Citizens could comment on broad topics related to off-road traffic identified by the government or even submit a new topic to add to those proposed. This e-participation method was combined with e-transparency, as contributions were publicly displayed, and a second website was developed as an information hub to support citizens in making informed discussions\footnote{Lironi E.; Crowdsourcing EU Legislation: Harnessing the Power of Digital Democracy,(pg 73-92) in Citizen Participation in Democratic Europe - What next for the EU? Edited by Alberto Alemanno and James Organ, ECPR Press, 2021, London; New York}.

The Finnish crowdsourcing experiment took place in four phases, each taking approximately 4 or 5 months to complete:

1. **Problem Mapping:** Citizens were asked to share their problems or concerns regarding off-road traffic. Their input was examined and served as the basis for the second phase.
2. Problem Solving: Citizens were invited to devise solutions to the problems identified during the first phase. Experts acting as moderators were available to support participants in their reflections and provide answers from the Ministry.

3. Evaluation: The ideas from the second phase were evaluated online by citizens through rating and comparison. Experts evaluated the same ideas, providing the reasoning behind their analysis.

4. Law-Writing: All the contributions were compiled in a report for the Ministry of Environment to achieve the final step of law reform. However, the law reform process was never completed due to a lack of political will to proceed to the final step.

What did the Finns learn? As in the Icelandic case, the lack of a formal institutionalised process from the outset determining what would follow the consultative phase led to an arbitrary final result. To avoid citizens’ frustration in a crowdsourcing process, it is important to guarantee that their opinions are going to be taken into consideration in the final step by introducing a binding process or obligation to incorporate citizens’ proposals in the law/constitutional change.

Other challenges that emerged were more technical in nature. For example, the risk of misrepresentation because citizens could create multiple profiles on the platform – a problem that could have been solved by introducing an authentication process. The process could also be considered effort-intensive as the platform required expert moderation to increase participants’ active and informed contributions and, of course, citizens who did not have access to the Internet or technological means were excluded from the process.

Nonetheless, the Finnish example is generally regarded as a success. Aitamurto, Landemore, Lee and Goel\(^{14}\) listed the benefits of using crowdsourcing as a method that allows citizens to participate in a structured virtual space for discussion and to contribute to a problem-solving process. Furthermore:

- When citizens are given the opportunity to do so, they will engage in a civil and constructive way in democratic discussions.
- The crowd was realistic about the potential impact on the law and fully understood that the result would be a compromise of many opinions.
- Crowdsourcing can contribute to civic education, as citizens learned more about policy-making and legislative procedures in general.
- “The crowd is wise” according to Stanford University’s crowd evaluation tool. The participants in the Finnish case focused mainly on reasoned ideas based on common-sense.
- Minority voices were not lost, as they were aligned with the minority demographics of the population.

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3.2 WHY AND HOW SHOULD CROWDSOURCING BE IMPLEMENTED AT THE EU LEVEL

The objective of crowdsourcing is both to collect relevant knowledge for improving policies and to allow citizens to actively participate in policy-making. It shows that citizens can engage directly with decision-makers, without intermediaries, to solve complex issues while making government more open and effective. According to Aitamurto (2012), when policy-making processes are open, information flows out to citizens who obtain unprecedented opportunities to participate in governance. At the same time, through crowdsourcing, policy-makers can receive ideas, perspectives and insights and readily inform themselves about citizens' values and attitudes. Although crowdsourcing is often considered to be the opposite of expert consultation – as the general public is considered to consist mainly of lay people rather than experts – it can also be argued that citizens are actually experts in daily life and citizenship issues and can contribute to bringing innovative solutions in policy-making processes. Furthermore, crowdsourcing is different from traditional public consultation as it requires more interaction between governments and citizens that can take place in different stages of policy-making and through multiple channels, harnessing the potential of digital tools. Its ultimate goal is to empower citizens to co-create policies with decision-makers. At the EU level, participation policies were progressively introduced in the EU’s legislative framework in the 1990s in the context of discussion about the potential of the Internet to promote values such as openness, transparency and good governance. Since then, the Commission has developed several participation instruments for citizen empowerment, which require certain online tools and features. However, research has shown that current formal participation tools are not completely effective for a number of reasons.

- **Online EU public consultations**, defined as a “formal processes by which the Commission collects input and views from stakeholders about its policies”, are systematically launched to allow the general public to have a say in the EU’s law-making process. However, online EU public consultations are highly technical and mainly used by organised interests. They are not very accessible and there is a general lack of awareness among individual citizens that this tool exists as a form of e-participation. In order to improve online EU public consultations,
the European Commission would have to overcome three main weaknesses: accessibility, representativeness and feedback/impact\textsuperscript{20}.

- **Petitions to the European Parliament**, which are used by citizens to express, through a web portal, their concerns or individual demands about already existing EU policies. These petitions are more of an *ad hoc* ‘problem-solving’ tool, whereby citizens can address concerns only on existing European policies which affect them directly. This means that it is not possible for citizens to petition on a policy they would like the EU to implement.

- **European Citizens’ Initiative** (ECI), which is the first supranational instrument of participatory democracy (with a strong online component) giving citizens the opportunity to invite the European Commission to legislate on a specific policy issue if they gather one million signatures from at least seven Member States. The ECI is, to date, the only existing Regulation based on Article 11 TEU. Despite improvements made through the new Regulation implemented in 2019, the ECI is not cost-effective. It requires significant resources to activate and has limited impact on EU policy. Moreover, the system interface for the ECI is not always user-friendly for the general public\textsuperscript{21}. Although the rules, mainly simplifying the tool, have been improved through the new Regulation, it remains an open question whether the long-term attractiveness of the instrument and participation for citizens can be increased\textsuperscript{22}.

- **The Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference for the Future of Europe**, a website available in the 24 official EU languages, allowed citizens to submit ideas on any of the nine topics discussed within the Conference, as well as any other topic. While it was one of the innovations of the Conference, the Platform’s lack of focus and structure, paired with the lack of guidance for CoFoE participants, was problematic and discouraged the submission of contributions. Moreover, it resulted in a somewhat chaotic submission of ideas of very different ranks — some ideas were very specific, and others very general. It was not clear how the ideas were weighted and classified almost until the end of the CoFoE. Civil society organisations did not have their own space on the Digital Platform; they, therefore, had to follow the citizens’ path to submit contributions. There were also accessibility problems for persons with disabilities. A technical assessment ordered by the European Disability Forum described the issues and provided recommendations to resolve the problems of accessibility\textsuperscript{23}.

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\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{23} Civil Society Europe publication “Civil Dialogue in the EU – What’s next? Lessons Learnt from the Conference on the Future of Europe and Suggestions to Strengthen Future Civil Dialogue”
A number of other non-formal e-participation tools have been introduced on an *ad hoc* basis by EU Institutions or individual policy-makers. For example, the European Commission has co-funded e-participation projects and some Directorates-General (DGs) have worked on their own platforms (e.g. Futurium) while some Members of the European Parliament experimented with digital tools to reach out more directly to their constituents and crowdsource ideas for their work and reports.\(^{24}\) Although these experiments are welcome, they lack harmonisation, formal structures, institutional support across the EU and sustainability in the long term.

The EU-level (e-)participation tools are limited in the extent to which citizens can influence policy-making. The ECI allows citizens only to place an issue on the EU's agenda; petitions are designed to receive inputs only on *existing* legislation; and public consultations are usually limited to specific issues chosen by the Commission and are designed to receive feedback on policy issues mainly from stakeholders and experts. The current EU participatory toolbox does not include formal channels for citizens to participate in online decision-making processes on a systematic basis and co-create policies with their representatives\(^{25}\).

There is a strong argument, therefore, that the EU should consider adding crowdsourcing to its (e-)participation toolbox. The case studies from Iceland and Finland have established that crowdsourcing can bring multiple benefits to our democracy. Unlike public consultations, which mainly attract technical experts and organised stakeholders, crowdsourcing is designed to tap into citizens’ collective intelligence, which comprises their experience and knowledge as daily consumers of public policies. Citizens are experts in everyday life, and their insights can help align government resources with citizens’ priorities.

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According to the chapter ‘Crowdsourcing EU Legislation: Harnessing the Power of Digital Democracy’ (Lironi 2021), the design of EU-specific crowdsourcing processes must take into consideration four main elements: legal basis, subject matter, establishment of the online platform and the policy cycle and timeframe.26

Legal basis: The existing policy and legislative framework in the EU provides a possible basis for the use of crowdsourcing in EU decision-making. While the European Union is founded on the principle of representative democracy (Art. 10(1) TEU), Art. 11(1), TEU also provides a legislative framework for citizens’ involvement in decision-making. Every citizen has the right to participate in the democratic life of the EU and decisions should be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen.

Subject matter: Different policies require different policy processes at the EU level depending on the competences of the Commission to legislate upon certain issues. Since local and national crowdsourcing experiences have highlighted the importance of citizens’ specific impact on policy-making, an EU crowdsourcing mechanism should be designed for policies under the exclusive or shared competence of the EU rather than for regulatory legislation or international treaty frameworks.

Choice of online platform There are several ways in which the crowdsourcing mechanism at the EU level could take place. For example, it could take place through one common EU-wide platform accessible in all official EU languages and created by the EU institutions, which citizens from all Member States would use. Alternatively, it could be introduced through national platforms in countries'/citizens’ respective languages, implemented by the governments in Member States, which would select and filter the crowdsourced ideas before they reached EU level. Analysis would be necessary to assess the optimum solutions to enable citizens’ participation and ensure transparency and openness of the process in the different stages.

Policy cycle and timeframe The development of crowdsourcing in the EU will necessarily involve a detailed assessment of potential ‘points of entry’ in the existing decision-making process. A policy cycle usually includes five main stages:27 Agenda Setting (issue/problem identification); Policy Formulation (development of solutions); Decision-Making; Implementation; and Policy Evaluation. In the chapter ‘Crowdsourcing EU Legislation: Harnessing the Power of Digital Democracy’ (Lironi 2021), we argue that crowdsourcing of citizens’ input is best suited to the stages of Agenda Setting and Policy Formulation as these could reinforce the EU’s legitimacy through participation (input legitimacy), performance (output legitimacy) and process (throughput legitimacy). By harnessing the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ in the Agenda Setting and Policy Formulation stages, citizens can identify the issues

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that need to be addressed through legislation and propose solutions. In addition, citizens' impact on the legislative process will be clearer if their input can shape legislation from the outset.

In the EU's ordinary decision-making process, we should explore opportunities for crowdsourcing citizens' opinions prior to the EU public consultation procedure. First, the crowdsourcing pre-public consultation would aim to gather ideas from citizens, thus using participatory democracy to strengthen the input legitimacy of the decision-making process. Second, the selection of leading ideas would be carried out by an intermediary, such as Commission officials or MEPs. Third, the launch of a public consultation would allow the discussion and validation of leading ideas by experts, thus strengthening the output legitimacy of the decision-making process. Combined, the three steps would not only enhance the transparency and openness of the EU (throughput legitimacy28), but also increase ownership and support for the policy proposals among the most important actors in the decision-making process: the general public, EU institutions and key stakeholders.

Figure 2: proposed EU-level crowdsourcing process (LIRONI 202129)

The **Decision-Making and Implementation** stages depend heavily on the political will of the representatives: the “crowd” participates in the early stages of the policy process, but it is always up to the decision-makers to have the final say on how the legislation will be formulated and implemented. However, policy-makers should ensure citizens’ contributions are taken into consideration by keeping them involved in the Decision-making and Implementation phases and informing them of the outcomes. Citizens should also be allowed to give feedback on the entire process through the **Evaluation phase**.

In addition to implementing crowdsourcing of citizens’ opinions prior to the EU’s online public consultations to allow citizens to have a say in the EU’s policy-making processes from the outset, crowdsourcing could also serve as a complementary channel to other mechanisms, such as EU citizens’ panels, implemented by the Commission in 2022 and 2023 within the framework of the CoFE.
4. EUROPE-WIDE CROWDSOURCING THROUGH CODE EUROPE AND DIGIDEM

Based on the lessons learnt from local and national crowdsourcing experiences (e.g. the above-mentioned Icelandic constitutional reform and Finland’s Off-Road Traffic law), ECAS designed the first ever transnational project pilot on the collaborative method of crowdsourcing legislation in several European countries simultaneously and on the same topic to explore and document its potential to allow EU decision-makers to go beyond consultations and structured dialogues with the usual stakeholders, thus enhancing civic participation and contributing to strengthening democratic culture and civic awareness.

In a consortium of 15 partners (European NGOs, civic tech organisations, think-tanks and a university) and implemented within the framework of two specific projects, ‘CODE Europe’ funded under the EEA grants, and ‘DigiDEM’, funded by the European Commission under the Europe for Citizens programme, the crowdsourcing was held during 2022 in 10 European cities on the topic of ‘air quality’.

4.1 DESIGNING THE PROCESS

Following the conceptual framework described above (pg. 11) and based on in-depth research and assessment of e-participation methods, 27 cases of crowdsourcing and the outcomes of the EU-CROWD project, ECAS developed a comprehensive methodology for the crowdsourcing process. This methodology involved the following elements: the crowdsourcing implementing partnership, the subject matter, the entry points at the EU level, the timeframe, the technical platform, the communications strategy, the monitoring and evaluation of the process and the impact.

30 Hungarian Academy of Science – Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary; European Environmental Bureau (EEB), Belgium; Citizens Foundation, Iceland; Scify, Greece; DAEM, Municipality of Athens, Greece; OneSource, Portugal; ManaBalss.lv, Latvia; ProInfo, Bulgaria; E-Governance Academy, Estonia; InePA, Slovenia; Centre for Public Policy Providus, Latvia; Stichting Netwerk Democratie, Netherlands; Democracy International, Germany; E-Riigi Akadeemia Sihtasutus, Estonia; Gradjanska alijans, Montenegro.
31 https://ecas.org/projects/code-europe/
32 https://ecas.org/projects/digidem/
33 Funded by the Commission’s Europe For Citizens programme, the EUCROWD project studied what citizens would want to crowdsourc on at the EU level and ultimately designed the first ever transnational crowdsourcing pilot in Europe.
THE CROWDSOURCING CONSORTIUM

ECAS formed a consortium to administer the crowdsourcing, which included an international and multi-stakeholder partnership, as the aim was to create a community of policy makers, academics, businesses, NGOs and citizens who would advocate for a stronger democratic culture and civic awareness, especially through ICT. The partners complemented each other in terms of skills and expertise – a mix of academics and researchers, civic tech experts with extensive knowledge of online tools and experienced organisations with a proven track record in e-participation. In addition, the consortium comprised of three expert partners who are internationally recognised leaders in their fields of expertise: ECAS in digital democracy, citizen rights and engagement; the European Environmental Bureau on environmental issues; and Citizens Foundation as the pioneer of crowdsourcing. Since this was a bottom-up pilot project, the transnational crowdsourcing did not have policy-makers and political representatives involved from the outset. The partners reached out to them only when the project funding was secured and brought them on board while the activities were already being implemented.

DECIDING ON THE SUBJECT MATTER AND THE ENTRY POINTS

A key starting point in developing the pilot crowdsourcing initiative was to identify an appropriate area of EU competence and a policy topic on which European citizens would like to have a say. The outcomes of the EUCROWD project, implemented by ECAS and seven partners in 2017, through a series of events in the Member States involving citizens, demonstrated that there are three predominant policy areas in which citizens would like to have more impact at the EU level - education, health and environment. ECAS concluded that ‘air quality’, a topic combining both health and environmental issues, could spark citizens’ interest in crowdsourcing solutions on how to tackle pollution in the places in which they live.

Since the goal of the crowdsourcing on ‘air quality’ was not only to gather citizens’ proposals but also to maximise their impact on policy-making, ECAS, with the support of the expert partner, the European Environmental Bureau, identified the relevant EU entry points for the collected citizens’ input on ‘air quality’:

- In 2021, the European Commission was due to publish its EU Action Plan: “Towards a Zero Pollution for Air, Water and Soil” in which prospective new legislative initiatives for the coming year(s) were announced.
- The process for revision of the Ambient Air Quality Directives was imminent. The European Commission also intended to organise a public consultation to gather input from the public.
The WHO was due to publish its updated guidelines on air quality in June/July 2021.

The Clean Air Forum was due to be organised by the European Commission in Madrid.

Therefore, the subject was chosen not only due to its transnational nature and the important global challenges associated with it (air pollution has been estimated to be responsible for more than 400,000 premature deaths each year) but also because of its importance at EU level and the European Commission’s commitment to revise the EU Ambient Air Quality Directives in 2023-2024, which created a ‘window of opportunity’ to feed citizens’ input into this process.

**SET UP OF THE CONTENT, PLATFORM AND CAMPAIGN STRATEGY**

Preparation of the crowdsourcing took approximately a year. This time was spent mainly in setting up the content, the platform and preparing the communications strategy for outreach to citizens.

Inspired by the Finnish Off-Road Traffic case study, ECAS designed the crowdsourcing process in **four separate phases:**

1. **Problem Mapping:** Citizens identify problems related to ‘air quality’ that they encounter in their daily life.

2. **Problem Solving:** Citizens propose solutions to the ‘air quality’ problems they have mapped in Phase 1.

3. **Ideas Selection:** Citizens evaluate the solutions proposed in Phase 2 to highlight the most popular ideas and priorities for European policy-makers.

4. **Policy Formulation:** Based on the previous phases, citizens formulate and co-create policy proposals on ‘air quality’ with experts in the field and guided by the European Environmental Bureau.

Each phase lasted approximately three months so that the entire process was implemented within a year during 2022.

Citizens were not expected to participate in all four phases of the crowdsourcing, but were free to choose when to join the process. The crowdsourcing was intended to be as inclusive as possible by allowing flexible participation, depending on availability and willingness to join. For example, the first phase was intended to be the most straightforward, where the questions were simple and did not require expertise. By contrast, the final phase required citizens to expend more effort when formulating policies. The expectation was that the first phase would undoubtedly appeal to the ‘crowd’ while the final phase might comprise a small number of citizens who felt deeply committed to the initiative and/or comfortable to work with experts on the issue.
The technological platforms were designed to follow the four phases. Four expert civic tech partners each agreed to develop one of the phases for the crowdsourcing on ‘air quality’. These civic tech partners were chosen because of their years of experience in running e-participation platforms across Europe with their diverse knowledge and experience in citizen engagement. Phase 1 was developed by the Greek SciPy; Phase 2 was developed by the Icelandic Citizens Foundation; Phase 3 by the Portuguese OneSource; and Phase 4 by the Latvian ManaBalss.lv.

The design of the crowdsourcing attempted to anticipate necessary elements to ensure delivery of a successful process. However, several challenges remained (more details under Chapter 4) which required the partners’ attention while building the tech platforms for the specific phases:

- The authentication process for each of phases – a combination of weak authentication for Phases 1 and 2 and stronger authentication for Phases 3 and 4;
- Visuals and branding throughout the phases – retaining, where possible, the same visual identity during all Phases and preserving any material produced for the crowdsourcing so citizens could clearly recognise the process from commencement until completion;
- Diversity of languages – a combination of manual translations from partners and automated translations;
- Data Protection and Storage – appointment of a Data Protection Officer for the entire crowdsourcing process and ensuring that platforms were secure;
- Accessibility and inclusiveness – ensuring maximum accessibility of the crowdsourcing across diverse platforms, browsers, etc. although this did not resolve the digital divide unless the online process was complemented with the possibility of offline consultations.

On the communications side, the development of a solid, coordinated and targeted strategy was considered to be of fundamental importance to success of the crowdsourcing. Any expert on participatory democracy will highlight the challenges of outreaching to citizens in an inclusive manner and stimulating engagement and discussions particularly on policies which can be seen to be technical or controversial. ‘Marketing’, as some civic tech experts like to refer to it, is key to the success of e-participation mechanisms and cannot be underestimated when launching a crowdsourcing activity.

A comprehensive communications strategy was developed to address specific target groups and predict the communication channels and tools to best fit the relevant audiences. The strategy included both internal communication among the organisers and their workflow and communication to the external actors. This was designed to raise awareness about the crowdsourcing through correct messaging and channels; to engage citizens with targeted campaigns and the support of multipliers; and to engage policy makers at local and EU level. Furthermore, the strategy described
how the results of the implementation would be measured and included an annual workplan for implementation. This was open to revision as necessary, depending on circumstances that could affect the crowdsourcing process (e.g. citizens were less preoccupied with environmental concerns after the invasion of Ukraine which meant that it was more challenging to engage them in the crowdsourcing).

4.2 IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACTIVITIES AND THE RESULTS

The crowdsourcing commenced on 1 January 2022 and ran until 31 December 2022 across Europe to gather citizens’ concerns and solutions to air pollution. It took place online in four phases:

1. The first phase took place from January to April 2022. Citizens in 10 cities - Lisbon, Tallinn, Riga, Burgas, Athens, Budapest, Brussels, Podgorica, Amsterdam and Berlin - were asked to identify specific problems related to air quality that they encountered in their daily lives.

The platform developed by SciFY had a brief questionnaire, developed with the support of the EEB, to test citizens’ awareness of the sources of air pollution in their cities; to select the negative impacts of air pollution they were experiencing; and to ask them to identify in an open answer the problems they experienced in relation to air pollution. The platform allowed citizens to either create an account to answer or to respond anonymously. It also included some gamification aspects, such as rewarding people with badges if they shared the platform with other citizens through social media. The various languages were manually translated by the partners and the visual identity was slightly modified to reflect the 10 cities. 45 888 European citizens from 10 cities visited the designated platform during the phase, making 2 385 specific comments about air quality.

2. The second phase took place from April to July 2022 and focused on proposing solutions to the air quality problems highlighted during the first phase. The partners analysed the results from their cities and ECAS, together with the EEB, developed 10 categories of ‘problems identified’ to which citizens would need to find solutions in Phase 2. The platform was developed by Citizens Foundation and had a combination of manual and automated translations. The page allowed for interaction among users: each problem was in a specific box with a description of the main issue; the possibility for participants to propose solutions to support a solution with a ‘like’ button; and to comment on each other’s proposals. Users could again participate with an account or decide to contribute anonymously. 44 719 European citizens from 10 cities visited the designated Phase 2 platform and 625 suggestions were made on how to improve air quality in their cities.
3. The third phase, from August to October 2022, involved citizens voting for the optimum policy solutions to improve air quality at local, national and EU level. ECAS and EEB once again analysed the results from the 10 cities in the previous phase to determine the main policy solutions proposed by citizens to solve pollution. It was important to have an expert on environmental issues involved in this process as the EEB could guide citizens in correctly formulating solutions to their problems. The platform was developed by OneSource and allowed citizens to choose their top five priority solutions from approximately 30 solutions proposed during the second phase. Since it was important during this phase to respect the “one person, one vote” principle and avoid a citizen voting multiple times and distorting the results, users were required to create an account with a strong authentication process and anonymous participation was not allowed. 6,487 European citizens from the 10 cities visited the Phase 3 designated platform and citizens across Europe cast a total of 867 votes in favour of the solutions they most supported.

4. Finally, the fourth phase from November 2022 to January 2023, involved citizens, with experts, drafting policy proposals to the EU decision-makers on how to improve air quality based on the votes in Phase 3, (please see ANNEX 1). The platform was developed by ManaBalss.lv and citizens were required to register and digitally identify themselves to participate in this phase. The starting draft text on the platform was proposed by EEB after working on the combined leading ten solutions that had emerged from Phase 3 in the 10 cities. During Phase 4, citizens were asked to work on the text by making suggestions about what should be improved, eliminated or edited. Alternatively, they could simply approve parts of the text with a ‘like’ button to show their consent to bringing it forward to decision-makers. During this phase, the platform was no longer divided into cities, since the goal was EU level. However, the text was provided in different languages to allow citizens to use the language in which they felt most comfortable. 1,130 European citizens visited the online platform during Phase 4, generating 169 comments on the policy document and 413 votes of support for various parts of the text.

In total, the crowdsourcing received more than 4,100 material contributions and reached out to approximately 98,224 participants throughout Europe on its digital platforms throughout its 4 Phases.
While ECAS’s research on digital democracy practices and crowdsourcing case-studies was insightful into the potential of crowdsourcing legislation to reduce the gap between decision-makers and citizens, several analyses of case studies have demonstrated that there is not enough evidence to prove the success of e-participation in meeting these objectives, mainly because of the lack of data, feedback mechanisms during and beyond projects and comparisons of e-participation experiences over time. Although there have been many case-studies of individual e-participation practices by project consultants, NGOs and academic researchers, consistent evidence supporting the role e-participation plays to foster democracy is scarce, as there has been limited quality comparative analysis of e-participation projects.

For this reason, ECAS envisaged in the CODE Europe and DigiDEM projects, the development of a universally applicable assessment framework for e-participation projects, based on a clear set of assessment criteria and allowing objective comparison of the role and impact of e-participation projects across time and space.

The Assessment Framework for E-Participation was developed in 2021 in close collaboration with several research partners, e.g. the e-Governance Academy in Estonia and outlined the key objectives to be achieved by a successful e-participation project (input and activities) and success criteria (output, outcome and impact) by which to measure the extent to which those objectives were achieved. This Framework allows a comparison across time (for instance, the comparison of e-participation projects in a particular country at different points in time) and space (the comparison of e-participation projects in different countries). It also includes guidelines on how to organise a process that would ultimately lead to enhancing the quality of our democracy through citizen online engagement.

Once the Assessment Framework for E-Participation was developed in line with the conceptual and methodological state-of-the-art, it was used to assess the ten crowdsourcing pilots in Europe. Each partner had to analyse their crowdsourcing with citizens using the Framework. One partner (Center for Public Policy PROVIDUS, Latvia) compiled a final report with a comparative analysis of all the cases and recommendations for further improvement of both the transnational crowdsourcing and the Assessment Framework itself, specifically when implemented on crowdsourcing processes.

34 The are multiple benefits that these processes can lead to, for example: enhancing participation by involving citizens beyond the typical stakeholders, ensuring a learning process for both citizens and decision-makers through a real-time exchange of views, encouraging innovative ideas for shaping policies based on the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ and even increasing the legitimacy of policy-making (“Towards a Crowdsourcing Pilot at the EU level: Taking Decisions with Citizens and Not for Them”, 2016).

35 See more: https://codecidingeurope.eu/e-participation-assessment-framework/
When designing the transnational crowdsourcing, the importance of providing feedback and ensuring impact were taken into consideration and it was agreed unanimously by the partners that these would be key factors to the success of the entire e-participation pilot.

In this respect, the partnership needed to cope with the following three challenges:

First, the process was bottom-up and not initiated by decision-makers, which meant that the organisers were required to ensure the commitment of policy-makers during the process. Some cities managed to involve local policy makers in the process. ECAS, for example, which was administering the crowdsourcing in Belgium, managed to ensure the commitment of Alain Maron, Minister of the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region, responsible for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Participatory Democracy, to take into consideration the citizens’ recommendations in his environmental policy work for Brussels. While other partners managed to engage similarly with their local authorities, this was not the case for all 10 cities.

Second, the authentication process throughout the various phases was not the same. During the first two phases, it was possible for citizens to answer anonymously as the intention was to lower barriers to participation as much as possible and increase willingness for people to engage on the platform without necessarily sharing their data. However, this meant that the partners could not reach out to these citizens to explain to them the next steps in the process and what happened to their contributions.
Third, due to timing, a discernible impact at the EU level is still to be determined, as the Institutions continue to work on and approve the new Air Quality Directive in 2024. However, in early 2023, the organisers released the final report with the top ten crowdsourced recommendations on air quality to the European Parliament’s ENVI committee and its MEPS and will continue its advocacy work during the coming months.
5. SUCCESS FACTORS AND RISKS IN CROWDSOURCING

According to Aitamurto & Chen\(^{36}\), when crowdsourcing is used as a participatory democracy method in policy-making, there is a **potential for creating epistemic, democratic and economic value**. Epistemic value is created because policy-makers are provided with the crowd’s experience and expert-based knowledge. Democratic value is generated because crowdsourcing increases inclusiveness, transparency, accountability, deliberation and civic empowerment in policy-making. Finally, economic value ensues because crowdsourcing gives access to innovative solutions, a more efficient knowledge search and a committed public. However, to have access to these values, especially when implementing crowdsourcing transnationally, a set of criteria must be met, including a large group of participants; diversity in participation to include a variety of opinions; and systemic and automated analysis methods to ensure citizens’ inputs are processed.

The Finnish and Icelandic cases provided three clear practical recommendations to take into account in the design of any crowdsourcing mechanism at any level:

1. **Functionality and accessibility**;
2. **Participation**; and
3. **Feedback and impact**.

In the following sections, we analyse each of these elements based on how the CODE Europe and DigiDEM crowdsourcing pilots were designed and implemented in the 10 cities on ‘air quality’. Ultimately, recommendations for a EU level crowdsourcing process are elaborated based on what we learned during this pilot transnational participatory process.

### 5.1 Functionality and Accessibility

Any crowdsourcing platform should be **user-friendly, technically secure and appealing to citizens** of different ages and from different parts of society.

Data privacy should be ensured and an authentication system in place to allow users to confirm their status as valid stakeholders.

Both the crowdsourcing platform and the overall process at the EU level should ensure multilingualism and respect for different cultures of participation and reflect the complexity of the EU policy-process.

5.1.1. Lessons learnt through the pilot

The authentication process for each of the phases was one of the challenges to be addressed by the partnership. On the one hand, it is important to strive towards a process that is considered legitimate where, for example, citizens cannot create multiple accounts to repeatedly reply to a questionnaire and we can limit spam and trolls. On the other hand, the higher the barriers for participation, the less likely the crowdsourcing will appeal to citizens and the number of respondents may be low. Since the crowdsourcing envisaged four separate phases for a single process, partners proposed the possibility to have an authentication that would allow citizens to register only once and create an account that would allow them to access any phase. However, this was technically too complicated to implement across four separate tech platforms.

Since the four phases had different purposes, the partners proposed a more feasible solution: the possibility of having a weak authentication process during the first two phases—Problem Mapping and Problem Solving, and a strong authentication for the final two phases—Ideas Selection and Policy Formulation. The first two phases should aim to have the lowest barriers to participation (e.g. possibility to answer anonymously or even through social media), as the goal was to collect as many contributions as possible to understand how citizens perceived the problems of air pollution and how to solve them. The third phase would ask citizens to vote or rate the solutions. Here it was important to have stronger authentication (e.g. requesting a mobile phone number to send a personal code) to ensure users cast their vote only once on the platform (the ‘one person, one vote’ principle). The fourth phase was the policy formulation phase with experts. Strong authentication was also put in place to ensure accountability of the final policy proposals.

The combination of weak and strong authentication processes led to mixed results. On the one hand, we managed to lower the barriers to participation during the first and second phases and avoided manipulation of the outcomes during the third and fourth phases. On the other hand, during the first and second phases, we could not reach out to all participants to communicate how their inputs were taken into consideration (lack of feedback process) and the third and fourth phases saw a significant decrease in citizen participation in some cities, as people did not feel comfortable in consigning personal data, such as their mobile phone number to register and access the platform.
**Data Protection and Storage:** The principal challenge was the transfer of certain data from one phase to another during the process. Since each phase of the process was considered to be independent, the partners agreed that each would take responsibility for protecting the data on the platform they created and during the phase for which they had responsibility. Each tech partner assigned a Data Protection Officer (DPO) who worked under the guidance of a lead DPO. A tailored Data and Privacy Policy was developed and published on all the platforms for citizens to consult and appreciate how their data was processed.

Gathering data is important for two reasons: to communicate the results of the process by providing citizens with feedback on the impact their contributions might have on policy-making and for evaluation purposes, as every e-participation activity should end with a thorough analysis of what could have been improved. In the CODE Europe and DigiDEM project, no security breaches were reported, and the partners made it clear to citizens that the main purpose of the collection of data was to provide them with feedback and analyse the pilots through the Assessment Framework for E-Participation and advance recommendations and guidelines for the future.

**Accessibility and inclusiveness** are significant challenges for every e-participation process due to the so-called digital divide. Usually, the best way to address this is to combine the online process with offline means of engaging citizens. However, the CODE Europe and DigiDEM projects focused on the implementation of crowdsourcing that took place solely online, excluding some citizens. Partners proposed ways to be more inclusive: making the platform sufficiently user-friendly for seniors; mobile friendly for those who wished to access the platforms through their phones; and ensuring readability of the platforms on specific tools used by people with disabilities. However, some features required substantial financial resources and specific expertise on how to ensure that an online platform is fully accessible for groups with diverse needs.

**Diversity of languages:** The ambition was to create the first ever transnational crowdsourcing experience in ten different European cities/countries in the languages of the citizens who would participate in the process. Translation required time, effort and resources. Specific terms that are not well-understood, such as ‘crowdsourcing’, can be a linguistic challenge. The partners therefore decided that it would be possible to have all phases in all relevant languages with the support of both manual and automated translations. The transnational crowdsourcing phases were available in 10 languages: Greek, Latvian, Estonian, Portuguese, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Dutch, French, German and Montenegrin.
5.1.2. Recommendations

- There should be **one online platform** developed to accommodate all phases of the crowdsourcing process which should be **intuitive, visually appealing with a user-friendly design and as interactive as possible.**

- A tailor-made **analysis on whether a strong or weak authentication process is necessary** should be carried out for each crowdsourcing process, depending on the objectives. This should consider **the culture of participation** in each country, as some citizens may be more willing to consign their data while others may fear doing so, as their political views could be held against them in certain situations.

- The online platform should withstand security breaches and Data Protection Officers should monitor the entire process. Citizens should be able to easily read the data protection policy on the online platform and the organisers should **always fully disclose why the data is being collected** and **how it will serve the process.**

- When designing the platform, it is **important to collaborate with experts in accessibility rights** to ensure inclusiveness of the online platform to people from vulnerable groups.

- A transnational crowdsourcing should ensure multilingualism **through either manual or automated translations or a combination of both.** The choice of solution will depend on the human and financial resources available to the organisers.

5.2 Participation

Unlike other participatory democracy methods that use random representative samples, such as deliberative polling or citizen assemblies, **crowdsourcing is based on self-selection**\(^{37}\). While a group decision normally requires statistical representativeness of a population, the goal of crowdsourcing is simply to source good ideas from citizens to inform policy and contributions are analysed without concern for the frequency or popularity of the expressed ideas\(^{38}\). However, the process should ideally be as inclusive as possible to maximise the efficiency of the knowledge search\(^{39}\). For example, the platform should be easy-to-use or linked to social media platforms, or off-line contributions should be provided for to bridge the digital divide.

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38 **Ibid.**
In order to carry out the crowdsourcing process in an accessible and understandable format for citizens, it is fundamental to choose suitable policy areas for a crowdsourcing pilot. For example, highly technical legislation such as regulatory frameworks would not be suitable for engagement with the general public.

In order to mobilise citizens, civil society organisations should offer support infrastructure at national and local level, particularly for the dissemination of information and awareness-raising.

Crowdsourcing usually requires significant financial and human resources to streamline the input process and sort citizens’ contributions and comments so that the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ is useful to decision-makers.

5.2.1. Lessons learnt through/from the pilot

The policy topic of ‘air quality’ was chosen in accordance with the preference of citizens who participated in the EUCROWD project events to deliberate on health and environmental issues at the EU level. The idea was for them to identify challenges they experienced caused by air pollution in their cities and to put forward proposals for solutions to policy-makers at local, national and EU levels. The partners realised from the outset that, to simplify the process, it was not necessary to ask citizens to distinguish between levels of government when contributing as it was too complex for them to identify competences at local, national and EU levels. This role was left to expert organisations, mainly ECAS and the European Environmental Bureau, who were responsible for processing the contributions from citizens after each phase and analysing where these could have most impact.

Maximising outreach to citizens from different European countries was a major implementation challenge to a European-wide transnational crowdsourcing due to the significant country, media, cultural and language specifics and differences between the places where the process was carried out. Under the CODE Europe and DigiDEM projects, these differences included varied sizes of the cities where outreach to citizens was to take place (e.g., Athens has a population of in excess of 3 100 000 inhabitants while Burgas in Bulgaria has approximately 210 000). In addition, there were significant variations in the specific media markets and media players; the number of e-participation and environmental activists and NGOs that could serve as multipliers to support the process; the administrative capacity and budgets of the public authorities; media consumption patterns; cultural specifics regarding citizen participation; and language specifics. These specifics meant that a ‘one size fits all’ communication strategy would not work. The project required a country-specific approach. Therefore, our transnational crowdsourcing partnership developed a universal communication strategy and guidelines, but decentralised its implementation to country-specific

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activities, providing implementers with operational freedom to adjust channel selection, approach, message formulation (language use) etc. to best fit the national/local context.

Visuals and branding throughout the process were a challenge since the crowdsourcing phases were implemented through different tech platforms. Consequently, the visuals and branding of all four phases had to be harmonised and coherent. The simplest solution was to use the visuals created for the project website in all communications activities in the crowdsourcing on 'air quality'.

Participation hindered by external circumstances: while environmental issues have become increasingly important during the past decade and are at the heart of people's concerns for the future, in recent years, coinciding with commencement of the implementation of transnational crowdsourcing, citizens' preoccupations have focused on other imminent issues such as the Covid pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the onset of another economic recession. This represented a challenge in engaging citizens, especially in countries such as Estonia and Latvia during 2022. Citizens were more concerned about a possible war on their doorstep rather than the quality of the air they were breathing in their cities.

Nonetheless, it was interesting to observe that other European cities also had external circumstances hindering participation in our crowdsourcing. For example, in Germany, campaigning for better air quality and healthier living conditions was very important and relevant to decision-makers. However, the crowdsourcing was subject to significant competition from other more formal participatory democracy initiatives by local governments on the same topic. In Berlin, the city initiated an official citizens' assembly on climate in 2022 to develop a climate protection plan. Simultaneously, civil society commenced a citizens initiative, forcing the city to be more progressive by becoming CO2 neutral by 2030.

As a consequence of all these factors, the partnership was required to revisit its communications strategy to tackle these risks to participation in different ways. On the one hand, it was necessary to convince citizens of the importance of ‘air quality' especially because of the direct impact it has on their daily lives. On the other hand, the partner in Germany attempted to find ways to collaborate more closely with the city of Berlin and strive for synergies between the crowdsourcing and their own participatory democracy activities.

Analysing citizens' contributions to make them suitable for the policy-making processes proved to be especially complex when crowdsourcing is composed of different phases. It is important to ensure correct timing; adequate human resources, including experts on both the process and the topic; ensure citizens’ ideas are considered equitably, etc. In our case, ECAS and the EEB were responsible for analysing the contributions from one phase and moulding them to commence the next phase process. This took more time than initially envisaged and resulted in delays because some modifications were required as the questions we were asking citizens were too complex (e.g., should this solution be for local, national or EU level?). It was also a challenge to bring forward some controversial or factually incorrect citizens’ ideas. In those cases, we attempted to respect citizens'
proposals and be fully transparent as to why some contributions moved forward while others did not.

5.2.2. Recommendations

- The policy topic of the crowdsourcing should appeal to citizens by being a subject they can easily relate to and feel confident in having a say on. It is important to **rely on experts beyond the organisers to guide citizens’ reflections and discussions.** As mentioned previously, the crowdsourcing method is mainly suitable for the agenda-setting phase of a policy cycle, although citizens’ contributions could also benefit the policy formulation phase if they work together with stakeholders, experts and institutional actors.

- Accessibility and inclusiveness of an e-participation process should be considered from the outset. While crowdsourcing is mainly carried out online, there could allowances for collecting citizens' contributions offline in certain circumstances.

- To maximise outreach to citizens from across Europe, a **universal communication strategy and guidelines with clear key performance indicators** should be developed. However, implementation of the strategy must be **decentralised** through **country-specific activities** as a 'one size fits all' communication strategy would not work.

- **Visuals and branding** should be **coherent and harmonised** across all stages for citizens to easily recognise and identify the crowdsourcing process, especially if the timeframe is quite broad.

- The communications and outreach strategy should be sufficiently **flexible to take into consideration the challenge of external circumstances or unexpected internal socio-economic developments** that could hinder the participation process. It should identify risks and measures to mitigate these.

5.3 Feedback and Impact

Crowdsourcing should be practised as part of open EU decision-making. Therefore, **securing the prior commitment of EU decision-makers is of key importance.** To build an efficient and valuable crowdsourcing process, policy-makers, especially Commission officials and MEPs, should commit by becoming champions together with citizens for co-legislation. The policy-makers should also ensure **full transparency by providing feedback to citizens** about the impact of their contributions on the policy process. It is important to conclude the entire process with an **evaluation.** A clear set of
criteria should be developed in advance to assess the experience and enable lessons to be learnt.41

5.3.1. Lessons learnt through the pilot

Timing the optimal moment for impact is a challenge because of the respective political calendars of the EU and the countries involved in the crowdsourcing, e.g. national and local elections; discussions of policy initiatives related to e-participation and protection of the environment; and other relevant initiatives. To address these challenges, the project partners identified the optimum time to hold dissemination activities and events and the opportunities or ‘entry points’ where policy recommendations made under the crowdsourcing pilots would best feed into the political process. Crowdsourcing partners managed local levels while ECAS and the EEB managed EU level.

Decision-makers on board from the start: since the CODE Europe and DigiDEM projects were initiated by NGOs, academics and think tanks rather than local authorities or EU institutional actors, the partnership needed to ensure the political commitment of decision-makers to citizens’ contributions in their work on improving air quality. Some partners managed to do this for cities such as Brussels and Burgas.

ECAS, for example, reached out to Alain Maron, Minister of the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region, responsible for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Participatory Democracy, before the crowdsourcing commenced in January 2022 to explain the process and obtain his support and commitment. Mr Maron was keen to participate in the initiative not only because he valued what his citizens had to say on environmental issues, but also because he looked forward to working with other mayors or local authorities on a European scale. Local authorities seem to attribute importance to contributing more actively at EU level. According to Mr. Maron, the transnational crowdsourcing was a good opportunity to connect the two levels in policy-making processes. The Minister was featured in a video to call upon citizens to join the crowdsourcing. He promoted the initiative on his social media channels and joined the final event where the Brussels citizens’ recommendations were presented to him. He delivered a speech explaining how he would take up these proposals in his work on air quality in the upcoming year. In terms of impact at local level, the Brussels case was exemplary.

Feedback to citizens throughout the phases was only possible to those who willingly consigned their personal data on the platform and created a user account. To reach out to anonymous users, the only way to communicate our results was to promote the next steps through our social media channels, partners’ general newsletters on the project websites and through with local/national events.

As for the ten recommendations that resulted from the final phase of the crowdsourcing process and were submitted to the European Parliament, including the ENVI committee, the process is ongoing at the EU level at the time of writing this paper. ECAS and the EEB will continue to advocate during the coming months, reaching out to the other Institutions. Feedback will be given to citizens once it is clear how their recommendations have impacted EU level and which decision-makers have taken them into consideration.

**Evaluation** was a major ambition of the CODE Europe and DigiDEM projects, within the framework of which the universal **Assessment Framework for E-Participation** was created to help respond to the question: *How can we define the success of an e-participation project?* The Assessment Framework is based on the Theory of Change and elaborates success factors and criteria, providing for comparative analyses of e-participation initiatives, including design and monitoring. It can also serve as a tool for knowledge sharing and capacity-building to enhance the effectiveness and impact of e-participation mechanisms.

The framework was tested on the 10 pilots, identifying the elements of success and risks in the crowdsourcing shared in this publication. ECAS’s follow-up objective is to refine the Assessment Framework for E-Participation to be more tailored to specifically analyse crowdsourcing processes.

### 5.3.2. Recommendations

- **Strategies should be planned to coincide with major political events** as this could help maximise the impact of citizens’ contributions on policy-making.

- Local authorities and politicians have demonstrated their interest in **better policy-making links between local and EU level**. Transnational crowdsourcing should avoid being merely a top-down mechanism implemented solely by EU institutions. Instead, it should constitute a process where citizens work on policy issues with their local representatives, who, together with EU representatives, would then feed these contributions to EU level.

- Providing feedback back to citizens is a fundamental step of any participatory democracy activity, but it can sometimes only be possible if citizens consign their data and are willing to be contacted. Every process should commence with a **clear communication on how citizens can verify what happened to their contributions and the impact they have**.

- **Human and financial resources** should not be underestimated particularly during **analysis of the contributions from citizens**. The process should be designed to ensure appropriate timing to examine results; have multiple stakeholders working on
the contributions to ensure all citizens' ideas are respected and not selected out of bias; and clarify at the outset how the proposals will feed into the policy-making process.

- Every e-participation process needs to be thoroughly evaluated to avoid losing the knowledge accumulated during the experience and learn how to improve. Our suggestion is to use the Assessment Framework for E-Participation for further testing both in other crowdsourcing activities in Europe and worldwide and other e-participation mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, e-initiatives and e-consultations.
6. CONCLUSION

The world is changing due to rapid digitalisation and so is our democracy. People are increasingly using new technologies to reach out directly to friends, sales and customer care representatives and even politicians, requesting rapid solutions to their problems. Technology has created new opportunities in the form of methods for social engagement, online activism and movement building by changing the way people access information; provide individual input that forms public opinion; and reach out to one another and to decision makers. Our current representative democracy, based mainly on elections occurring every 4-5 years, presents as slow, sluggish and rigid to citizens who not only expect agile and rapid responses, but also want to be heard and instill change between elections.

E-participation - the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to foster democratic processes by allowing citizens to access and engage with information on specific policy issues and contribute to decision-making processes - is increasingly being implemented at local, regional and national level in Europe. In the context of perceived dissatisfaction with traditional forms of political engagement, e-participation mechanisms can increase the legitimacy of law-making processes and complement our representative democracy by adding elements of citizen empowerment between elections.

Crowdsourcing has revealed how new technologies can be exploited to revitalise democracy by developing more responsive, informative, transparent and participatory decision-making processes. However, while many countries have commenced exploring ICT with this aim, further evidence is required to prove the success of e-participation in meeting these objectives. Formal channels for e-participation are currently limited and are often short-term experiments, which explains the important lack of data, dearth of lessons learned during and beyond projects and shortage of longitudinal comparisons of e-participation case studies in time series.

There is a clear need for further experimentation with e-participation and attentive analysis of these processes so that we will be able to assess whether and how new digital platforms can truly contribute to increasing the quality of policy-making and reshaping European democracy.

In order to address this need, ECAS designed and implemented, together with 14 partners across Europe, the CODE Europe and DigiDEM project that held the first ever transnational crowdsourcing pilot in 10 European cities on the subject of ‘air quality’ and developed an Assessment Framework for E-Participation to prepare and evaluate the process within a strictly defined methodology.

Based on assessment of the pilot, we can confirm that the method of crowdsourcing policy and legislative solutions with citizens has viable potential to reduce the gap between decision-makers and citizens. Crowdsourcing can bring new perspectives, based on the crowd’s experiences and ex-
pert-based knowledge, empowering citizens to strengthen the legitimacy of the political system and enhance transparency and inclusiveness of decision-making.

The lessons learnt have contributed to the development of the following Blueprint for a successful transnational crowdsourcing process:

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

- There should be one online platform developed to accommodate all phases of the crowdsourcing process which should be **intuitive, visually appealing with a user-friendly design and as interactive** as possible.

- A tailor-made **analysis on whether strong or weak authentication is necessary** should be carried out for each individual crowdsourcing process, depending on the objectives. It should consider **the culture of participation** in each country, as some citizens may be more willing to consign their data while others are afraid of being exposed, as their political views could one day be held against them in certain situations.

- The online platform should withstand security breaches. Data Protection Officers should monitor the process from commencement to completion. Citizens should be able to easily read the data protection policy on the online platform and the organiser should **disclose why the data is being collected** and **how it will serve the process**.

- When designing the platform, it is **important to collaborate with experts on accessibility rights** to ensure inclusiveness of the online platform to those from disadvantaged groups.

- A transnational crowdsourcing should ensure multilinguism **through manual or automated translations or a combination of both**. The choice of solution will depend on the human and financial resources available to the organisers and advances in technology.

E. **Participation**

- The crowdsourcing policy topic should appeal to citizens by representing a subject to which they can easily relate and feel confident in having a say on. It is important to **rely on experts beyond the organisers to guide citizens’ reflections and discussions**. As mentioned previously, the crowdsourcing method is mainly suitable for the agenda-setting phase of a policy cycle, although citizens’ contributions could also benefit the policy formulation phase if they work together with stakeholders, experts and institutional actors.

- Accessibility and inclusiveness of an e-participation process should be considered from the outset. While crowdsourcing is mainly carried out online, allowances could be made to allow collection of citizens’ **contributions offline** under certain circumstances **to bridge the digital divide**.
To maximise outreach to citizens from across Europe, a **universal communication strategy and guidelines with clear key performance indicators** should be developed. However, implementation of the strategy must be **decentralised** through **country-specific activities** as a ‘one size fits all’ communication strategy would not work.

**Visuals and branding** should be **coherent and harmonised** across all stages for citizens to easily recognise and identify the crowdsourcing process, especially if the timeframe is quite broad.

The communications and outreach strategy should be sufficiently **flexible to take into consideration the challenge of external circumstances** that could hinder the participation process. It should identify risks and measures to mitigate these.

**F. Feedback and impact**

- **Communication and dissemination strategies** should be planned to coincide with **major political events** as this could help maximise the impact of citizens’ contributions on policy-making.

- **Commitment of decision-makers** needs to be in place from the outset. Local authorities and politicians have demonstrated their interest in **better policy-making links between local and EU levels**. Transnational crowdsourcing should avoid being merely a top-down mechanism implemented solely by EU institutions. Instead, it should constitute a process where citizens would work together on policy issues with their local representatives, who, with EU representatives, would then feed these contributions to the EU level.

- Providing feedback back to citizens is a fundamental step of any participatory democracy activity, but it can sometimes only be possible if citizens consign their data and are willing to be contacted. Every process should start with a **clear communication on how citizens can verify what happen to their contributions and what impact they had.**

- **Human and financial resources** should not be underestimated particularly during **analysis of the contributions from citizens**. The process should be designed to ensure appropriate time to examine results; have multiple stakeholders working on contributions to ensure all citizens’ ideas are respected and not selected out of bias; and clarify from the outset how the proposals will feed into the policy-making process.

- Every e-participation process should be thoroughly evaluated to avoid losing the knowledge accumulated during the experience and learn how to improve. Our suggestion is to further test **the Assessment Framework for E-Participation** both on other crowdsourcing activities in Europe and worldwide and on other e-participation mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, e-initiatives and e-consultations.
7. REFERENCES


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8. ANNEXES

CITIZENS RECOMMENDATIONS ON AIR QUALITY FROM THE CODE EUROPE AND DIGIDEM PROJECTS

01
MORE GREEN SPACE IN CITIES

Urban planning is a city competence. While calling on local authorities to re-think the way in which urban space is used, finding ways to bring back nature in urban areas and leaving cars out (car-free cities), citizens are also calling on the European Institutions to launch a dedicated initiative to raise awareness about the benefits that green space has on citizens’ health and biodiversity. The European Institutions are required to earmark funding for the development and maintenance of green spaces within cities. The demand for more green space in cities goes hand in hand with the demand to reduce the space that cars, and road traffic in general, have in urban settings. The development of green spaces (including subsidies for green roofs and local gardens) and the protection of existing ones are two key priorities. The WHO suggested that citizens should have at least 0.5ha of green space within 300m (5-minute walk) from home.

The EU institutions should therefore agree on a revised Ambient Air Quality Directive which is able to trigger such shift by: setting ambitious air quality standards and including effective enforcement and sanction regimes. An adoption of effective measures to reduce air pollution will be a priority.

02
INCREASED CYCLING AND WALKING INFRASTRUCTURES AND THEIR QUALITY

The European Environment Agency estimates that in the European Union, in 2020, 96% of the urban population was exposed to levels of fine particulate matter above the latest WHO Air Quality Guidelines; and that 89% was exposed to excess levels of nitrogen dioxide.

To reduce the percentages above, it is fundamental to promote and facilitate active mobility in urban areas: namely cycling and walking. To do so, the related infrastructure needs to be in place: if it is true that urban planning is a city’s competence, important steps should be taken at the EU level to facilitate access to funding (in particular through the European Structural and Investment funds) for cities aiming at improving their existing cycling and walking infrastructures or to build new ones. Priority should be given to projects aiming to modernise and develop safe and permanent solutions that encourage citizens’ choice to opt for active mobility. Recently, some steps in the right direction have been taken by the European Commission, which has developed a Guidance for Cycling Projects
in the EU and has also announced the release of an EU Cycling Declaration, aiming at further supporting the uptake of cycling in the EU.

In February 2023 the European Parliament also agreed on a Resolution calling for the European Commission to develop a European cycling strategy with the aim of doubling the number of kilometres cycled in Europe by 2030.

Despite cities in the past being designed to accommodate road traffic, it is time for EU and local decision-makers to re-think how to best use urban space, giving it back to people and nature.

03

TAX BIG POLLUTERS (COMPANIES)

While it is key to prevent pollution, it is also important to guarantee the full implementation of the so-called polluter-pays principle, enshrined in EU law (Art. 191 TFEU, Directive 2008/50/EC, Directive 2002/49/EC), once air pollution has already been generated. The polluters should pay, through fines and penalties, for breaching air pollution-related legislation, while support is only given to activities that are coherent with the ‘do no significant harm’ approach. Money gathered through fines and penalties should be re-invested in air pollution prevention, air pollution reduction monitoring, enforcement promotion and potential remedies. Companies should be requested to publish an annual report on how much pollution they have generated in the previous calendar year and illustrate which remedial actions have been put in place since. Large companies should actively engage with relevant stakeholders (including youth representatives) to identify pollution-prevention techniques to be implemented and the related remedies.

EU decision-makers must agree on legislation which keep polluters accountable (e.g. developing economic instruments to incentivise air pollution reduction measures and penalise air pollution generation; requiring 0.1% levy on profits made by any polluting industrial sector - including chemicals, industrial farming, internal combustion engines automotive sector, fossil fuels energy production); and ensure that pollution monitoring and remediation costs are paid by polluters. The general public should not bear additional costs because of air pollution.

EU institutions must have a zero-tolerance attitude towards polluting economic actors and work for the full internalisation of pollution costs in any policy and finance framework. The full implementation of the polluter-pays principle constitutes an essential way to define a (economically) sustainable path towards zero-pollution, including air-pollution.

04

SUPPORT RENEWABLE ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURES
(E.G. SOLAR PANELS)
Clean renewable energy is the future, a no-regret choice for achieving clean air and climate objectives. Through the European Commission’s proposed REPowerEU plan, the EU and national governments have the once-in-a-generation opportunity to expand their capacity to produce and use clean renewable energy (solar and wind), and to quickly achieve a fossil-free EU.

From making rooftop solar installations mandatory on new buildings (for all public and commercial buildings by 2027 and for new residential buildings by 2029) to proposing higher energy-saving targets, the European Commission’s plan involves several positive initiatives to transform Europe’s energy landscape in the right direction. Buildings, if equipped with photovoltaic panels (PV) will generate 25% of the EU’s electricity consumption, according to the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission. Citizens call on the European Parliament and national governments to support the uptake of solar power and complementary energy storage assets.

To further promote the installation of renewable energy infrastructure, EU and national decision-makers must support the establishment and facilitate the uptake of Renewable Energy Communities (RECs).

Citizens’ involvement and buy-in during the development and implementation of renewable energy projects is essential: this approach will enhance cooperation between citizens and public authorities, reduce the risk of energy poverty and help balance social and economic divides. Energy produced by community-owned projects can lower the bills for everyone; in addition, RECs help raise awareness about energy consumption, thus leading to stronger energy efficiency and energy savings – which are fundamental to reduce air pollution.

Ownership models that promote justice and community control are also crucial to successfully support the uptake of clean renewable energy, as citizens have great benefits from being co-owners and co-producers, e.g. through revenues being re-invested in social and local services or the creation of local green jobs. In other words, renewable energy communities constitute a stimulus for better empowerment and democracy while tackling multiple crises, including the air pollution one.

05

STRENGTHEN PUBLIC TRANSPORT NETWORK IN NON-URBAN AREAS

Citizens are highlighting the need for public transport infrastructure and further services in non-urban areas. The need for timely, efficient, affordable and regular connections between rural and urban areas should be considered a priority to both reduce air pollution and also to help ensure that citizens wanting to live in rural areas get access to fundamental public services such as public transport in order to commute to work or to school. More data sources, data collection methods and tools are needed to evaluate further the needs of citizens in different areas and tailor specific measures accordingly.

The EU institutions should provide financial support and dedicated expertise for the development
of projects and infrastructures aiming at shortening the time spent to commute to work or to school from a non-urban area - therefore making the use of public transport an attractive option compared to cars. In parallel with public transport, also intermodal transport (car sharing, bike sharing) should be promoted.

Moreover, accessibility could be improved through, for instance, single public transport card/account. The network and quality of the service could also be ameliorated by implementing specific measures such as the creation of bus and cycling lanes and more frequent services. If more people can reach their urban destinations using public transport and not their car, there will be several resultant benefits: less cars in city streets, less congestion, reduced air and noise pollution, more space for nature and more space for people. All citizens – including those with mobility difficulties and low-income – will make the most of all these benefits.

06

ESTABLISH RULES TO GET ZERO-EMISSION INDUSTRIES

With the ongoing revision of the Industrial Emissions Directive, the European Parliament and Member States have a once-in-a-generation chance to establish strict rules to achieve the zero-pollution ambition that the European Commission has committed to within the European Green Deal. Zero-emission industries will not only benefit air quality, but also help Europe to achieve its climate neutrality objective.

Stricter technical measures to reduce air pollution from all industrial processes must be made mandatory. Pollution prevention measures must be prioritised ahead of end-of-pipe solutions, and the scope of the new Industrial Emissions Directive should be expanded, for example, by expanding the Best Available Techniques (BAT) to additional industrial sectors, such as industrial-scale farms (intensive rearing of cattle).

All industrial sectors must be included in the scope of the new Industrial Emissions Directive, including intensive agriculture plants.

07

BUILDING INSULATIONS

Domestic heating is the biggest source of particulate matter pollution in the EU: the burning of lignite, coal, biomass and other materials is contributing to more than 40% of total particulate matter emissions.

While it is fundamental to support the uptake of heat pumps as a cleaner option for generating heat in our homes, counting also on auto-produced solar energy, reducing air pollution from domestic heating starts with better insulating buildings. Energy savings always reduce air pollution.
Citizens are calling on EU decision-makers (including Member States sitting in the Council) to simplify and to privilege access to funding for renovating-building projects aiming at saving energy - which would reduce air pollution and benefit the climate. In addition, they call for taxes on renovation projects to be reduced, especially for low-income households. Attention should also be drawn to the importance of promoting building insulation through legislative instruments and policies which are not necessarily linked to the topic of energy consumption.

ELECTRIFYING BUS FLEETS

The electrification of public transport, in particular of bus fleets, must be seen as one of the important steps to be taken at city level to reduce air and noise pollution. While reducing the number of cars, to ensure car-free cities, coherent action must also be taken to secure zero-emission public transport. There is a highly effective way to clean up urban buses, by renewing existing fleets with zero-emission buses, which use battery electric or hydrogen technology (obtained from clean renewable sources).

Around 20 major European cities including Barcelona, Berlin, Madrid, Rome and Warsaw have already pledged to buy only zero-emission buses from 2025. These cities will join a similar number of cities that only procure zero-emission buses - a group that includes all Dutch cities, Denmark’s six largest municipalities, Hamburg and London, among others.

As a result, zero-emission bus sales are growing. However, without action at EU level, demand for zero-emission urban buses will not be matched by supply. Constrained by a lack of availability, or prices that are too high due to an insufficient supply, cities will be forced to keep buying combustion engine buses. Financial support should be foreseen to help cities transition towards emission free buses. Therefore, citizens are calling on European decision-makers to cut air pollution, noise pollution and climate impacts by including a target for all new urban buses sales to be zero-emission from 2027 in the new Regulation on CO2 standards for new heavy-duty vehicles.

ESTABLISH A SPEED LIMIT OF 30 KM/H IN CITIES

Urban planning, including the definition of speed limits and proper road design, is a national/local competence. Despite this, while heading towards car-free cities, the European Union can support the uptake of a 30 km/h speed limit in cities. This effectively reduces air pollution as the intensity and frequency of accelerating and breaking are reduced, with both being important sources of particulate matter pollution and indirect source of nitrogen dioxide emissions. As a result, both biking
and walking become safer.

The European institutions could provide technical assistance in the elaboration of such planning activities, as it is potentially the first step to take to transition to car-free cities. This represents an excellent example where measures deriving from citizen involvement would help to choose the best solutions to be implemented, for instance thanks to information and best practices collected by citizens from other countries.

10

WORKSHOPS AND SCHOOL PROGRAMS TO INCREASE AWARENESS ABOUT AIR POLLUTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

In line with the Council of the European Union’s Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development, adopted on 16 June 2022, it is important to acknowledge that education plays a fundamental role in promoting awareness and understanding about air pollution impacts on health and the environment. Moreover, education can support the learning actions that citizens can take to prevent and reduce air pollution. Civic education plays an integral role in environmental protection as well (so-called Environmental Citizenship).

Citizens have identified the need for EU decision-makers, including national governments represented by the Council, to develop dedicated educational trainings on the topic. Next to promoting the inclusion of air quality and environmental protection in schools’ programmes, the need for specific workshops targeting adults has also emerged.

Citizens call on the European Commission and Members of the European Parliament to co-organise, with national government representatives, national workshops dedicated to air quality (along the Clean Air Dialogues). In addition, citizens call for decision-makers to elaborate a workshop format for disseminating key information: to be used by schoolteachers and professors willing to contribute to their students’ awareness; and by local decision-makers and NGOs to raise awareness among adults and to build knowledge of media actors. Decision-makers should also properly enable and support citizens’ participation in relevant processes, as already demanded by law.

Access to funding (e.g. LIFE Programme) should be prioritised when the main objective of the project seeking financial support is to raise awareness and inform the public about air pollution issues.