

CITIZENS FOR CLIMATE

CLIMATE DEMOCRACY, PARTICIPATION OBSTACLES AND LOCAL PRACTICES IN EUROPE

Kick-Off and Spring School Report
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Executive Summary

Across Europe, democracy and climate policy are facing growing pressure. Trust in political institutions is declining, and citizen participation beyond elections remains limited. At the same time, climate change has become one of the most urgent and polarising challenges societies must address. In response, new forms of participation are emerging at the intersection of climate action and democracy, offering fresh ways for citizens to shape decisions that affect their lives.

Citizens for Climate builds on these developments. The project contributes to a more democratic and sustainable Europe by exploring and sharing best practices in inclusive climate democracy—from citizens’ initiatives to climate assemblies—and by supporting their use beyond the participating countries. It focuses on strengthening direct and participatory democratic methods, and on combining them in innovative ways to empower communities and citizens in the green transition.

This report presents the first results of the project, based on the exchanges during the Kick-off and Spring School event in Brussels, Belgium. It brings together insights from seven partner countries: Germany, France, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Belgium and Denmark.

The report focuses on four key questions

1. What participation tools already exist in different national and local contexts?
2. What obstacles prevent citizens from meaningfully influencing climate decisions?
3. What promising practices can be identified on the ground?

By highlighting early findings and shared challenges, the report also provides first lessons for the upcoming national Participation Pop-Up events. These events will bring together citizens, civil society organisations and public actors to explore even closer how citizens' voices can be more directly included in climate policies and decision-making processes.

Citizens for Climate - the Project

Across Europe, democracy and climate policy are under pressure. Trust in political institutions is declining, while participation outside elections often remains limited. At the same time, climate change is one of the most urgent and polarising challenges facing European societies.

Citizens for Climate responds to both challenges. The project contributes to a more democratic and sustainable Europe by learning from democratic innovations in the climate sector. It compares and shares best practices in inclusive climate democracy, ranging from citizens' initiatives and referendums to citizens' assemblies and local participation formats.

The project aims to:

- raise awareness of democratic best practices in climate policymaking;
- connect citizens, marginalised communities, civil society organisations and policymakers across Europe;
- train multipliers so that inclusive participation methods can be used beyond the climate field;
- support civil society organisations in organising Participation Pop-Up events;
- collect and share practical lessons for citizen-led climate governance.

The project activities take place in seven EU Member States: Germany, Denmark, Czech Republic, Hungary, France, Poland and Belgium. The Brussels Kick-off Event and Spring School laid the foundation for the project. The next phase will focus on Participation Pop-Up events, where local communities will explore climate democracy in practice.

Project Consortium

Citizens for Climate is implemented by a consortium of eight experienced partners from across Europe, combining expertise in participatory democracy, climate governance, civic engagement, youth participation, and social innovation.

Democracy International (DI), Germany coordinates the project. As a leading European and global democracy network, DI promotes citizen participation by sharing best practices, strengthening participatory mechanisms, and connecting democracy practitioners.

Gesellschaft für Klima und Demokratie (GfKD), Germany is a leading organisation applying participatory and direct democratic instruments to climate action at the local level. Since its founding in 2008, GfKD has developed extensive expertise in citizens' assemblies, referenda, and participatory governance, including organising Germany's 2021 National Citizens' Assembly on Climate. The organisation regularly convenes regional climate-democracy events with municipalities, civil society organisations, and citizens, and advises public authorities on participatory processes that connect local decision-making with climate objectives.

Ashoka Belgium contributes Europe's largest network of social entrepreneurs and extensive experience in fostering systems change. Operating in 98 countries, Ashoka connects more than 700 Fellows across Europe and promotes collaborative approaches to societal challenges. Through its Participation Hub, Ashoka brings together policymakers and social innovators to co-create participatory policies, while its Bioregional Weaving Lab advances regenerative approaches to land stewardship across Europe. Ashoka contributes expertise in participatory innovation, cross-sector collaboration, and climate-focused social entrepreneurship, drawing on its extensive European network.

Particip-Action (PA), France specialises in large-scale citizen participation on climate, European affairs, and global public goods. Since 2014, it has designed and facilitated numerous deliberative processes, including World Wide Views on Climate and Energy, one of the largest global citizen consultations on climate policy, Democratic Odyssey, and several cross-border consultations. PA also contributed to France's 2020 Citizens' Convention for Climate and multiple local citizens' assemblies. Its expertise in transnational deliberation and cross-cultural facilitation will strengthen the project's methodology and participatory design.

Nyt Europa (NE), Denmark is a civic engagement organisation with a strong focus on youth participation and European citizenship. Building on its experience in projects such as REAL DEAL, chARTer, and Art of Fundamental Rights, NE specialises in engaging young people and previously underrepresented groups through innovative civic education and creative participation methods. Within the consortium, NE leads youth engagement strategies and supports dissemination through its extensive volunteer, school, and European networks.

Mission Possible, Poland is a grassroots coalition promoting a just transition and participatory local democracy in former coal regions. With extensive experience organising local referenda and citizen engagement initiatives, including Poland's first Climate Camp and pioneering conferences on the just transition, the organisation brings valuable expertise in engaging rural communities and communicating climate solutions in post-industrial regions.

Duracfilm (DF), Czechia, home to the Czech Platform for Citizens' Assemblies, specialises in deliberative democracy and institutional innovation across Central and Eastern Europe. Working closely with public authorities, civil society organisations, and international institutions including the Council of Europe, DF provides expertise in embedding deliberative processes into governance and delivering capacity-building for public officials and practitioners.

DemNet, Hungary has more than twenty years of experience promoting democracy, equality, transparency, and active citizenship. As a pioneer of citizens' assemblies and deliberative processes in Hungary, DemNet has organised numerous climate-related assemblies, citizens' juries, and participatory initiatives with municipalities across the country. The organisation contributes valuable expertise in local climate governance, academic cooperation, evidence-based participatory design, and democracy promotion within the challenging policy context of Central and Eastern Europe.

Together, the consortium combines complementary expertise in deliberative democracy, climate participation, civic engagement, youth empowerment, social innovation, and European cooperation.

Key Comparative Findings

Participation tools differ strongly across countries

The partner countries showed a wide variety of participation tools. Some countries have stronger traditions of direct democracy, such as local referendums. Others rely more on deliberative formats, such as climate assemblies or citizens' panels.

A key finding is that no single tool is sufficient on its own. Citizen-led climate governance often becomes stronger when different tools are combined. For example, a citizens' assembly can help produce informed recommendations, while a referendum can give all residents a final decision-making role.

Political follow-up is one of the main challenges

Across countries, participants identified a shared problem: participation processes often produce valuable recommendations, but these recommendations do not always lead to political action.

This creates frustration and can reduce trust. Meaningful participation therefore requires clear follow-up procedures from the beginning. Citizens need to know what will happen with their input, who is responsible for responding, and how decisions will be implemented.

Local level participation is essential for the green transition

Many climate decisions affect people directly in their daily lives. This includes transport, housing, energy, heating, public space and land use. For this reason, the local level is especially important for climate democracy.

Local participation can make climate policy more concrete and understandable. It can also help address conflicts early, especially when climate measures affect costs, mobility, housing or local landscapes.

Marginalised communities need targeted formats

Participants highlighted that standard participation formats often reach people who are already politically active. Marginalised communities may face barriers such as time constraints, language, care responsibilities, lack of trust, financial insecurity, disability, discrimination or limited access to information.

Meaningful inclusion therefore requires targeted outreach, accessible language, safe spaces, compensation where possible, cooperation with trusted local actors, and formats that adapt to people's needs instead of expecting people to adapt to institutional procedures.

Country Insights

Germany – Combining citizens’ assemblies with local referendums

Partner: GfKD

Main approach: “Klima trifft Kommune” (Climate meets Municipality)

The German case presented an innovative model that combines deliberative and direct democracy.

In the proposed approach, randomly selected citizens’ assemblies discuss local climate questions in municipalities. These citizens’ assemblies develop recommendations after learning, discussion and deliberation. Afterwards, all residents are invited to vote on the recommendations in a local referendum.

This model is especially interesting because it connects two democratic strengths. The citizens’ assembly allows a smaller group of residents to study complex climate questions in depth. The referendum then gives the wider population the opportunity to make a direct democratic decision.

The approach can help bridge the gap between informed deliberation and public legitimacy. It can also make climate decisions more visible and binding at municipal level.

However, the German discussion also showed a key obstacle: municipalities must be willing and able to move from recommendations to a formal decision-making process. In the past, political follow-up after citizens’ assemblies has often been difficult. The challenge is therefore not only to organise participation, but also to create accountability for implementation.

First lesson: Climate assemblies become more powerful when they are linked to clear decision-making procedures.

Possible best practice: Combine randomly selected citizens’ assemblies with local referendums to create both informed recommendations and democratic legitimacy.



Credit: Birgit Obmann, Gesellschaft für Klima und Demokratie

France – Climate assemblies and multi-level inclusion

Partner: Particip-Action

Main approach: Climate assemblies and inclusive participation

In France, citizens' assemblies are one of the most visible formats for climate participation. They are used to bring together randomly selected citizens, provide them with information, and allow them to develop recommendations on climate policy.

The French discussion highlighted that inclusion must be considered at several levels. Vulnerable groups are not only relevant at the local level. Their needs must also be considered in national and European climate policy.

One relevant example is the European Citizens' Panel on Energy Efficiency. This process showed how citizens can contribute to EU-level policy discussions and how questions of energy poverty, housing, costs and vulnerability can be included in climate-related deliberation.

The French case also points to the importance of working with cities and local authorities. Local governments are often closest to the people affected by climate policies. They can help make participation practical and connected to everyday realities.

First lesson: Climate democracy must connect local realities with national and European policy processes.

Possible best practice: Use climate assemblies and citizens' panels to include vulnerable groups in discussions on energy efficiency, housing and climate policy.

Poland – Local referendums and participation outside major cities

Partner: Mission Possible

Main approach: Local referendums, smaller communities and youth participation

The Polish contribution focused on local referendums, especially in smaller communities outside major urban areas. This is important because many climate and energy conflicts do not happen only in capitals or large cities. They often affect smaller municipalities, rural communities and regions facing economic transition.

The Polish partner's background is closely connected to local civic mobilisation around environmental and energy issues. Mission Possible represents the civic coalition "Development YES – Open-Pit Mines NO", which emerged in response to plans for new lignite open-pit mines and supports a transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy.

This context makes Poland a strong case for discussing how citizens can influence decisions on energy infrastructure, land use and local development.

Local referendums can give communities a direct voice in decisions that affect their environment and future.

The Polish discussion also opened the possibility of comparing Poland and Germany. Both countries have experience with local democratic tools. Both also face challenges around energy transition, local legitimacy and the role of municipalities.

Youth participation was identified as another important perspective. Young people are strongly affected by the long-term consequences of climate policy, but they often have limited influence in formal decision-making.

First lesson: Climate democracy must reach smaller municipalities and communities outside major cities.

Possible best practice: Use local referendums to strengthen community influence in energy and climate decisions.

Czech Republic – Citizens’ assemblies and public engagement through culture

Partner: DURACFILM

Main approach: Citizens’ assemblies, public engagement and democratic storytelling

The Czech contribution focused on citizens’ assemblies and the wider challenge of making democratic innovation visible and understandable.

DURACFILM works at the intersection of film, advocacy, capacity building and public engagement. Its work shows that climate democracy is not only about procedures. It is also about public imagination, storytelling and trust.

At the same time citizens’ assemblies are still an emerging practice in the Czech context. They offer a way to involve randomly selected citizens in complex policy questions and create space for informed discussion. However, like in other countries, their impact depends on political commitment and public understanding.

Film and cultural work can help make participatory democracy more accessible. It can show what citizens’ assemblies look like, who takes part, and why ordinary people should trust such processes.

First lesson: Democratic innovation needs communication and storytelling, not only technical design.

Possible best practice: Use film, public engagement and accessible communication to build trust in citizens’ assemblies and climate participation.

Hungary – Women’s citizens’ assemblies and safe participation spaces

Partner: DemNet

Main approach: Women’s citizens’ assemblies and inclusive deliberation

The Hungarian case focused on the role of women in citizens’ assemblies and on the need to address participation inequalities through design.

DemNet’s work on women’s citizens’ assemblies in Budapest provides an important example of targeted participation. Women-only citizens’ assemblies create a safer and more focused space for discussing issues that affect women’s everyday lives, including public services, safety and local decision-making.

This approach is relevant for climate democracy because climate policies are not experienced equally by everyone. Women, low-income groups, carers, elderly people, minorities and other marginalised communities can be affected differently by transport, housing, energy and public space decisions.

The Hungarian example shows that inclusion cannot be treated as an add-on. It must shape the design of the process itself. Who is invited, how the space is facilitated, what topics are discussed, and how recommendations are followed up all influence whether participation is meaningful.

First lesson: Inclusive participation requires intentional design.

Possible best practice: Create targeted deliberative formats for groups that are structurally underrepresented in public decision-making.

Belgium – Democratic innovation and participation infrastructure

Partner: Ashoka

Main approach: Participation Hub, democratic innovation and changemaking

The Belgian contribution focused on democratic innovation and the broader ecosystem needed for meaningful participation.

Ashoka’s work in Belgium is connected to social innovation, changemaking and participatory democracy. Its Participation Hub functions as a space for testing new forms of democratic participation and connecting citizens, civil society and institutions.

Belgium is also a relevant context for climate democracy because Brussels has experience with more permanent forms of citizens' participation on climate. This makes the Belgian case useful for discussing how participation can move beyond one-off consultations and become part of regular democratic infrastructure.

The key question is how citizens can be involved not only once, but continuously. Climate policy requires long-term decision-making, monitoring and adaptation. Participation formats should therefore include clear follow-up, feedback loops and opportunities for citizens to see how their input matters.

First lesson: Climate democracy needs lasting participation infrastructure, not only individual events.

Possible best practice: Build hubs, networks and permanent formats that connect citizens, civil society and institutions over time.

Denmark – Who decides in the green transition?

Partner: Nyt Europa

Main approach: Community dialogue through democracy festivals and public events

The Danish case presented an approach that focuses on community dialogue and deliberative engagement through informal public participation.

Rather than relying primarily on formal participation mechanisms, the approach seeks to engage citizens where they already gather. Democracy festivals and other large public events provide accessible spaces for conversations about democracy, climate and local issues, allowing people to participate in a more informal and inclusive way.

This model is particularly interesting because it lowers the barriers to participation. By bringing democratic discussions into public spaces and community events, it reaches citizens who may not normally engage in formal consultation processes.

The approach can strengthen civic engagement by creating opportunities for dialogue in familiar and welcoming environments. It also helps build trust and encourages broader participation by making democratic conversations part of everyday community life.

However, it was highlighted that informal dialogue alone does not automatically lead to policy change. A key challenge is ensuring that the ideas and concerns raised during these events are connected to formal decision-making processes and followed up by public institutions.

First lesson: Informal community dialogue can broaden participation and reach citizens who are often excluded from traditional democratic processes.

Possible best practice: Use democracy festivals and large public events as accessible spaces for deliberative engagement while ensuring that the outcomes are linked to formal policymaking.

Cross-Country Obstacles

Across the seven country discussions, several common obstacles emerged.

Weak political follow-up

Participation processes often produce strong recommendations, but political institutions do not always respond clearly. This can weaken trust.

Unequal access to participation

People with more time, education, money or confidence are more likely to participate. Marginalised communities need targeted outreach and accessible formats.

Complexity of climate policy

Climate policy can be technical and difficult to understand. Participation processes must therefore provide clear information and avoid expert-only language.

Urban-rural divides

Climate policies can be perceived differently in cities and rural areas. Local referendums, assemblies and community dialogues can help address these tensions.

Lack of trust

In some contexts, citizens are sceptical that participation will lead to change. Transparency and follow-up are essential.



Credit: Björn Obmann, Gesellschaft für Klima und Demokratie

Emerging Best Practices in Democratic Participation Tools

The exchanges highlighted several promising democratic tools used across the partner countries. These practices show how different forms of participation can strengthen citizen influence in climate decision-making when they are well designed and connected to political processes.

1. Combine citizens' assemblies with referendums, as presented in Germany, to link informed deliberation with direct democratic decision-making.
2. Use climate assemblies and citizens' panels, as in France, to involve randomly selected citizens in structured discussions on complex climate policies.
3. Apply local referendums, especially in smaller communities as highlighted in Poland, to give residents a direct voice in decisions that affect their local environment and energy future.
4. Develop citizens' assemblies supported by strong communication and public engagement, as seen in the Czech Republic, to increase understanding and trust in participatory processes.
5. Create targeted citizens' assemblies for specific groups, such as women's assemblies in Hungary, to address structural inequalities in participation.
6. Establish participation hubs and long-term democratic innovation spaces, as in Belgium, to move beyond one-off events and build continuous citizen engagement.
7. Organise public panels and debates on decision-making power in the green transition, as proposed in Denmark, to openly discuss fairness, influence and legitimacy in climate policy.

Engagement of Marginalised Communities

Marginalised communities should not only be invited to participate. Participation must be designed around their realities.

Useful practices include:

- early outreach through trusted community organisations;
- accessible venues and times;
- childcare or care-sensitive scheduling;
- reimbursement of travel costs;
- simple language and translation where needed;
- safe and moderated discussion spaces;
- formats that do not require prior political knowledge;
- active follow-up after the event;
- visible explanation of how input will be used.

The Hungarian example of women's citizens' assemblies shows how targeted formats can address structural inequalities. The French and EU-level discussions on vulnerable groups in energy policy show that inclusion is also central to climate justice. The Polish and Danish cases show that marginalisation can also be territorial, for example when smaller communities or rural areas feel excluded from climate decisions.

First Lessons for the Participation Pop-Ups

The Kick-Off and Spring School event highlighted that the national Participation Pop-Ups executed by all partners should focus on concrete local climate issues, clearly connect citizen input to political decision-making, and bring together citizens, civil society and public actors.

They should actively include marginalised communities from the start, collect practical ideas, and document both obstacles and best practices in a comparable way. It is also essential to communicate transparently how participants' input will be used and to ensure that outcomes contribute to the final Climate Participation Booklet.

Conclusion

The exchanges of the Kick-off and Spring School event showed that climate democracy is developing differently across Europe. Some countries focus on citizens' assemblies, others on referendums, local mobilisation, targeted participation or democratic innovation hubs.

Despite these differences, the partner countries identified shared challenges. Citizens need clearer ways to influence climate decisions. Marginalised communities need formats that are designed for them, not merely open to them. Public authorities need to respond more clearly to citizens' recommendations. Climate participation needs trust, accessibility and political follow-up.

The first results of the Citizens for Climate project show that citizen-led climate governance is both necessary and possible. The examples from the seven partner countries provide a strong basis for the national Participation Pop-Up events and for the project's wider goal: strengthening democratic participation in the green transition across Europe. The identified best practices will now be explored in more depth through national Participation Pop-Up events in each partner country, with the knowledge gathered feeding into the development of a Climate Participation Booklet.





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