

Success factors for e-democracy initiatives

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Organised by: ECAS, Democracy International, CEV, VolontEurope & EESC ECI Ad-hoc-Group

Report

The workshop's objective was to identify the success factors for e-democracy initiatives by zooming in on three of them – the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), the crowdsourcing of citizens' opinions for better policy making and participatory budgeting, while exploring the key role that volunteers play to foster success.

The workshop was opened by Assya Kavrakova, ECAS' Executive Director, who explained the context of the debate and why it is important to take stock of what success means in e-Democracy in the ever-evolving digital world we live in. She moderated the workshop by engaging the audience through more than 15 Slido questions: three concerning each subject of the discussion, the responses to which were commented on by each speaker, and three at the beginning of the session. The question concerning *the three most important factors for e-Democracy initiatives to make them successful - bringing value to our democracies* was repeated at the end of the workshop again to register any divergence of initial opinions.

With regard to the ECI, the Slido poll results underscored the preference for online participation, with an overwhelming 94% opting to sign an ECI online, aligning with the ECI's provision of a Central Online Collection System, which is highly reliable and provides round-the-clock support. Daniela Vancic from Democracy International explained that the ECI's public website and registrar is acclaimed for its accessibility, user-friendliness, and multilingual nature – all crucial factors echoed by respondents in the Slido poll. The ECI website also serves as a comprehensive and detailed public archive of all previous and current ECIs, reflecting the features that Slido respondents said are essential to provide a user-friendly experience (e.g. easy overview, understandability, transparent, helpful). Finally, the ECI Forum, serving as an online support centre, is praised for providing multilingual resources, learning materials, legal, campaigning and fundraising advice —features most valued by Slido participants. Notably, the ECI Forum is one-of-a-kind and sets a benchmark for

comparable initiative or petitioning instruments, offering a model for enhancing citizen engagement and support in democratic processes across Europe.

The success factors of crowdsourcing were presented by ECAS's Programme Director for European Democracy, Elisa Lironi. The participants agreed through the Slido questions that technology nowadays has the potential to make democracy more efficient and widespread, as people can contribute online to decision-making processes wherever they are and whenever they want to. Although the impact of crowdsourced contributions may vary in degree, citizens who participate in crowdsourcing processes will have a better understanding about policy-making in general and how decisions are taken by their representatives. Besides having this civic education element, participants also stated through the Slido that they think crowdsourcing is a way for politicians to increase trust in and legitimacy of their work. Ms Lironi then presented the three main success factors for crowdsourcing: 1. Ensuring the security, functionality user-friendliness and accessibility of a crowdsourcing platform from a technical and inclusive point of view 2. Ensuring the participation of citizens through a solid communications strategy that is flexible enough to adapt to unpredicted external circumstances and 3. The importance of closing the feedback loop together with the commitment of representatives/politicians from the start of the process for real impact.

The success factors of Participatory Budgeting (PB) – presented by Giovanni Allegretti (who coordinated the CEPA Strategy on Participatory Budgeting published by the UN-DESA agency last year) – are mainly linked to its capacity of making visible the outputs and impacts of the process within a short time frame. The participants agreed, through the Slido questions, that the fact the citizens can vote on a list of priorities to be ratified by institutions and then implemented and monitored by participants is a pivotal element that contributes to the success of PB. In fact, it has – at the same time - a practical and a symbolic value: therefore, citizens feel that they are central decision-makers in the discussion of policies and projects. It was emphasised that in the last decade PB has been spreading throughout different institutions and audiences (prisons, schools, professional ranks, NGOs and international umbrella organizations), and was scaled-up at regional and even national levels. Furthermore, at the WUF 2020 in Abu Dhabi a network of cities tried to imagine it as a possible tool to build environmental justice at global level, contributing to structure collaborations among cities of the Global North and the Global South on the topic of climate change. There is a potential for upscaling the PB at the EU level as well, starting with piloting it in combination with other participatory processes.

Gabriella Civico, the Director of CEV and Piotr Sadowski, Secretary General of Volonteurope presented the qualities that are important for good volunteer managers - an ethical approach to volunteering, respecting the core EU values at the heart of all volunteering and solidarity activities and also paying close attention to volunteer well-being. One of the main drivers for maintaining volunteer motivation in ECI campaigns is to take good care of the well-being and mental health of volunteers. Attention should also be paid to supporting the development of the skills and competencies of volunteers and, where possible and requested by the volunteers, validating those skills and competencies. It is important to invest resources into the skills of volunteers in a similar way as for paid staff. The barriers to involving more volunteers being involved in ECI campaigns can

be overcome by making better links between motivation, dedication and appreciation of volunteers, and through this, at the same time encouraging inclusiveness in volunteering.

The EESC representative, Mr. Christophe Lefèvre, summed up the conclusions which led to the elaboration of the three follow-up steps presented at the concluding session of the Civil Society Week by Ms. Assya Kavrakova:

Step 1: To be successful, organisers of e-democracy initiatives need to ensure that the process, including its online dimension/platforms are inclusive, accessible and transparent.

Step 2: Policymakers need to ensure follow up of e-democracy initiatives in terms of impact and feedback to citizens and should acknowledge the work and dedication of volunteers.

Step 3: Policymakers need to embrace innovation and make novelty more visible – include crowdsourcing of citizens' ideas as part of the EU democratic toolbox and pilot participatory budgeting at the EU level.