



World Forum for Democracy

Participatory Democracy Incubator

CONCEPT NOTE

The incubator for participatory democracy is based on an alliance of democracy innovators, brought together by the Council of Europe at the World Forum for Democracy. Its purpose is to connect city governments in Europe and beyond with democracy innovators to replicate and scale up democratic innovations. The incubator supports initiatives - digital and offline - that contribute to the redistribution of political power towards citizens, and that support the broadest possible citizen participation in cities' decision-making procedures. The incubator builds an open infrastructure to boost democracy for inclusive and innovative cities.

BACKGROUND

The Council of Europe's participatory democracy incubator grew out of the World Forum for Democracy, an annual event, organized by the Council of Europe in collaboration with the French government, the Alsace Region and the city of Strasbourg, to debate key challenges for democracy worldwide and to highlight and encourage democratic innovation.

In order to create a sustainable and steady framework for democratic innovations presented at the different Forum editions, the Council of Europe organized a hackathon at the World Forum for Democracy 2015 for the creation of a participatory democracy incubator, assembling experts on democracy innovation and political decision-makers. The hackathon gathered 30 researchers, elected representatives from cities, social and democratic innovators, grassroots activists and civil servants. During the collaborative workshop, participants were invited to think of the best ways to support the development of transparent, participative and collaborative democracy. For a few hours, they were on a mission to build the "best incubator for local participatory democracy they can imagine".

CONCEPT

An incubator is a physical space, linked to a community, where project leaders can have access to support, expertise, resources and services to prototype and grow their idea. The challenge is to adapt this concept to democracy, to find out what kind of ecosystem and support should be built around democratic innovations for a greater impact, while using the immense expertise and knowledge accumulated at the World Forum for Democracy. The incubator will have the overall goal to bring together local decision-makers and democracy innovators to increase citizen participation and impact in cities' democratic decision-making.

Through an open call, interested cities have been invited to apply for the hackathon. The following cities participated in the hackathon: Amsterdam, Netherlands; Arnsberg, Germany; Bolton, United Kingdom; Bonn, Germany; Bucharest, Romania; Falun, Sweden; Ghent, Belgium; Katowice, Poland;

Lisbon, Portugal; Madrid, Spain; Neapoli-Sykies, Greece; Nis, Serbia; Palermo, Italy; Reykjavik, Iceland. These are the founding cities of the incubator for participatory democracy.

OBJECTIVES

The incubator helps civil servants and political decision-makers in cities build an open infrastructure to boost democracy for smart, inclusive and innovative cities. It is strongly goal-oriented and has four main objectives:

1. Creating an active community of democratic innovators in Europe;
2. Building bridges between cities and project leaders of concrete solutions for open democracy; the incubator working as a “democracy dating service”, matching up cities and democracy innovation projects;
3. Bringing support to cities, civic start-ups and non-profit to create, replicate, connect and scale up democratic projects;
4. Creating an open knowledge on the challenges, solutions and key factors for success for open democracy. It should work as a trusted international voice on the benefits of participation, arousing commitment from political leaders and institutions.

SCOPE

The incubator consists of an active, goal-oriented peer community which:

1. Facilitates peer-to-peer exchange about the challenges, needs and solutions for citizen’s participation, open government, collaborative tools, etc.
2. Facilitates connections and cooperation between local governments, entrepreneurs and civil society organisations on open citizen participation
3. Offers professional support and access to inspiration references, expertise and latest development on the “why? how? what” of open democracy, to cities wishing to engage in sustained in meaningful democratic innovation
4. Ensures a minimum level of trust and common objectives between participants, to create a goal-oriented community

MEMBERSHIP

The participatory democracy incubator is open for democracy innovators, social entrepreneurs and city governments from Europe and beyond.

Candidate cities complete the [participatory democracy index](#) and receive an analytical report with examples of good practice from democracy innovators all over the world, as well as from other cities.

Member cities set up a support group and start implementing projects and initiatives to increase citizen participation in the city’s policy-making processes. The cities are encouraged to involve citizens broadly in the strategy development process, in identifying indicators for success, monitoring progress and implementation.

In order to support this process, the Council of Europe provides experts and facilitators. There are no costs associated with the incubator membership for the cities or the democracy innovators.

After having joined the incubator, cities and democracy innovators will engage in the following activities and actions:

a) A peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing network

- Peer-to-Peer exchange via ONLINE meetings between innovators and city representatives (e.g. via Skype, Google Hangouts etc.)
- Peer-to-Peer exchange via OFFLINE meetings between innovators and city representatives (e.g. via expert meetings, city visits etc.)
- Invitations for democracy innovators to speak at city events, facilitated and sponsored by the city in collaboration with the Council of Europe.
- Annual meetings of incubator participants at the World Forum for Democracy to discuss common agendas and shared concerns (active citizenship, inclusiveness, ...)
- Materials on projects (e.g.: map of city projects with contact information, collection of videos and mini-lectures, newsletters, ...)
- Cooperation sessions: Open days for innovators in public authorities, speed-networking events, hackathons for designing solutions to public needs

b) A mentoring programme for cities

- Permanent mentor at the Council of Europe, including e-mail and telephone “hotline”: support and challenge on ambition, tools, techs available, business model, citizens outreach, and help on mapping out the ambition, needs and focus before starting
- Online and offline workshops on common issues (e.g. How to include poor and less educated people in participatory projects? How to set up a randomly selected assembly of ordinary citizens on policy making?)
- Days of support from particular innovators people or experts

c) A label for the community of open democracy innovators

- Benchmark on civic innovation for open cities
- Standardized measures for evaluation and participation principles such as inclusiveness, accessibility, transparency, equality
- City Index on Participatory Democracy

Interested cities and organisations working in the field of open and participatory democracy are invited to contact Rabea Willers, Project Officer at the Council of Europe (rabea.willers@coe.int), for more information.