



Deliberative democracy

Congress of Local and Regional Authorities
of the Council of Europe

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What is deliberative democracy?

Deliberative democracy is a participatory method in which discussion and deliberation among a group of randomly selected persons is a key component of the decision-making process. Deliberation is an advanced practice of citizen participation being used in many communities where local, regional or national authorities want to engage representative groups of citizens. Hence, they can help local leaders take decisions, including on difficult or divisive topics, thereby increasing public trust in democracy.

The main principles of deliberative processes are randomness, inclusiveness, high-quality and well-thought decisions, and openness and transparency. Consequently, these processes can be time-intensive and often prolonged to several days.

Why should participants be selected randomly? Is it compulsory?

Randomness of participants is a core element of deliberative democracy. Since the process is time and resource intensive, it cannot include all citizens and work with smaller groups is advised. This emphasises the importance of group composition, which needs to reflect a number of demographic criteria of the community such as gender, age, etc. so that as such, it represents a microcosm of a city or country. Because they have been designated to represent all residents, participants can be independent in their decision-making, without being distracted by elections, party politics or fundraising campaigns.

What are the main stages of a deliberative process?



Even though the group of citizens that will produce policy recommendations is small (30–70 citizens most often), during each phase, there is a comprehensive participation of different stakeholders, ranging from the general public to interest groups, civil society organisations and local political parties. This leads to a more rounded and informed public opinion and arguably better decisions.

How to choose a topic for deliberation?

The topic for deliberation may be nominated by the authority commissioning the process, but it is also possible to consult citizens and other stakeholders in the process of selection. It is important that the topic is clear, unambiguous, and manageable. A topic that presents a clear trade-off or actual policy dilemma currently faced by the community allows the citizens to give meaningful input to policymakers.

How are deliberative process different from regular public consultation?

The random selection of citizens makes deliberative democracy processes more representative than regular public consultations where often the same type of citizens show up. This also means they are less captured by activists that might not always be representative of the larger population. The meetings begin with a learning phase about the subject and presentations are given by experts and non-governmental organisations. This may take many hours in total. Therefore, a given subject can be considered thoroughly, and qualitative, trustworthy policy-recommendations can be delivered. Deliberative methods make local representative democracy more resilient by enhancing citizens' impact on policymaking.

Examples of good practices

Mostar Citizens' Assembly (Bosnia and Herzegovina)



A “design team” was set up in co-operation with international and local experts in order to prepare the ground for the first Citizens' Assembly in Mostar and in this part of Europe. During a workshop with civil society, six potential topics were selected and then reduced to three after consultation with local political leaders and the city administration. The final topic was selected by the vote of 250 citizens who applied

to participate in the assembly. Final composition of the assembly included 47 citizens.

Deliberations lasted for six days over four consecutive weekends in July 2021. First three workshops were mainly used to introduce citizens with the selected topic -cleanliness and maintenance of public spaces- by working with experts and stakeholders. During this phase, the citizens identified the main priorities with a set of recommendations which were presented to the political parties and civil servants for their feedback and refinement if necessary. At the end of the last day, the citizens voted and proposed 32 recommendations for local authorities.

The recommendations have been considered by the City Council and an action plan for their implementation has been elaborated and unanimously approved. The process to hold a second Citizen's Assembly in Mostar is ongoing. The initiative is implemented with support the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

Deliberative process in Oud-Heverlee (Belgium)



Oud-Heverlee is a rural community of around 11 000 inhabitants with a good proportion of its territory taken up by a large forest. This is a place for tourism and recreation, attracting people beyond the village's borders. The local administration wanted to rethink the whole area, which would have a significant impact on the environmental, economic, and mobility policy of the village. These decisions would also largely

transcend the timeframe of an electoral cycle and last for decades.

In this vein, the Municipal Council decided to use a participation method that could accommodate all these different challenges of a long-term, multi-stakeholder, multi-issue policy problem and involve citizens who were not only members of the stakeholder groups. It therefore opted for a deliberative democratic process with citizens drawn by lot to draft recommendations that would be considered for the development of a urban masterplan of the area. All local stakeholders and political parties were involved in the process.

The municipality chose a group of 50 citizens to form the assembly “Fresh Water Future Forum” named after the natural sources in the forest. The recommendations were divided into five categories and the citizens from the assembly were able to vote anonymously whether they supported each recommendation. The Municipal Council took note of the recommendations and handed them over to the urban planning company that was tasked with drawing up a master plan.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS FOR PUBLIC AUTHORITIES?

The main benefit of organising a deliberative process for a public authority is the possibility to learn what citizens think the best choice for a given subject is, after learning deeply about the issues, hearing different views, and considering possible options. Deliberative processes provide well thought-out recommendations that public authorities can depend on. Because they give voice to everyday citizens, rather than those who are very eager to be involved, it can also reduce polarisation in some policy domains.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In March 2022, during 42nd Session, the Congress adopted the Report [Beyond elections: the use of deliberative methods in European municipalities and regions](#) which offers guidelines for municipalities and regions, illustrated by case studies at the local and regional levels. The Congress calls for the further implementation of deliberative methods at all levels of governance, identifying specific issues where these mechanisms could contribute to the decision-making process. It stresses the need to plan the whole process, to allocate the necessary time for citizen deliberation, and specifically, to define fair criteria for the selection of participants.

Deliberative democracy, as an innovative method of participation is promoted in Ukraine by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe as part of the project “Strengthening multi-level governance, democracy and human rights at local level in Ukraine”. The project is implemented in the framework of the [Council of Europe Action Plan for Ukraine “Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction” for 2023-2026](#). It contributes to building inclusive, sustainable and transparent local authorities.

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The Council of Europe is the continent’s leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is an institution of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 46 member states. Composed of two chambers – the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions – and three committees, it brings together 612 elected officials representing more than 130 000 local and regional authorities.

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