



Moving democratic innovations from the margins to the mainstream

Policy Synthesis #3

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1 Policy synthesis #3

Moving democratic innovations from the margins to the mainstream

1.1 Context: European democracy's deficits

The rise in populist movements and a general decline in democratic trust have highlighted the urgent need to deepen the role of citizens in governance. Democratic innovations—defined as processes designed with the “overarching goal of improving the quality of democracy by tackling specific contextual deficits”^[1]—have emerged as a powerful response. However, these innovations are not without risks; while they can restore trust, they can also deepen cynicism if perceived as manipulative, rather than genuinely transparent and inclusive.

Despite this risk, initiatives like citizens’ assemblies, participatory budgeting, and policy labs are seen as vital for tackling complex, long-term challenges like the climate crisis. For these innovations to fulfil their promise, they must move beyond their current experimental and often-marginalised status. This policy brief argues that the foundational challenge is the absence of a permanent infrastructure to support and embed them within our democratic systems.

3.1.1. Scope: from ad-hoc events to permanent infrastructure

This policy brief addresses the critical need for structural changes to transition democratic innovations from isolated, ad-hoc events into a coherent, permanent, and impactful part of European governance.

Drawing on research findings —particularly the co-created solutions from its “Democracy Labs” set up in 6 countries—this brief proposes pragmatic, systemic reforms. The overarching objective is to employ a “Trojan horse” strategy: embedding democratic innovations within existing institutions to transform them from the inside.

Figure 2: Procedure overview of the 6 Democracy Labs conducted in the Incite Dem Project

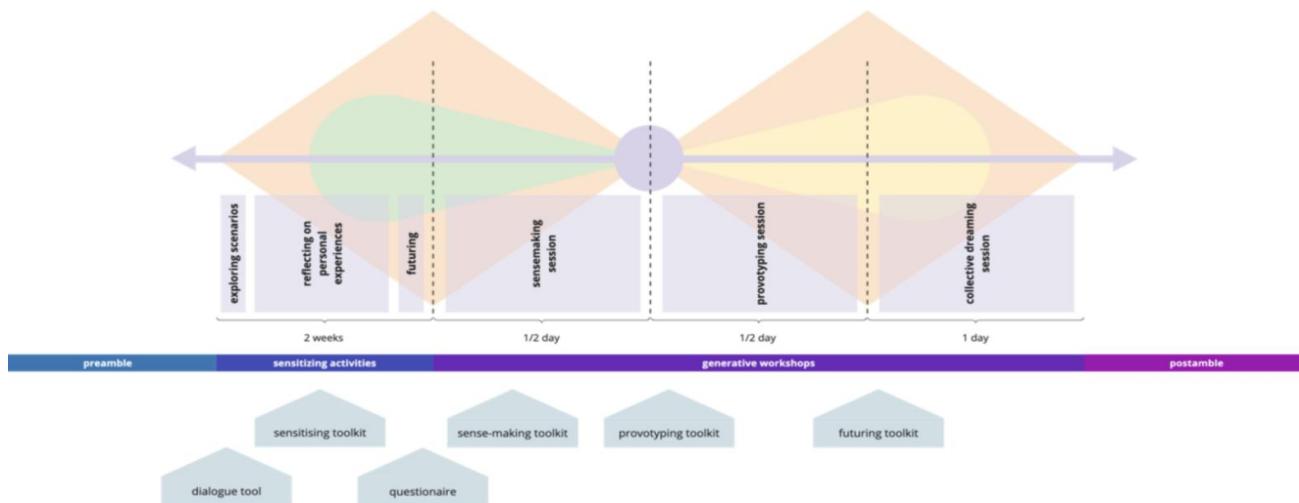


Figure 2: The attached image illustrates the procedure used in the INCITE-DEM project's Democracy Labs. The timeline is divided into a two-week preamble with sensitizing activities, followed by generative workshops that include sessions on sense-making, prototyping, and collective dreaming, and concludes with a postamble. Various toolkits, such as the sensitizing, futuring, and prototyping toolkits, support these stages [2].

The goal is to build a resilient and responsive democratic architecture where citizen deliberation is not merely an accepted exception, but the impactful norm that drives effective and sustainable governance.

1.2 The landscape: a proliferation of democratic experiments

Over the past two decades, Europe has seen a growing trend in the use of democratic innovations. This has reached the highest levels of governance, with the European Union launching exercises like the Conference on the Future of Europe and using citizen assemblies for the preparation of the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

A database of over 1,000 cases compiled by the INCITE-DEM project [3] reveals several key trends:

- **Accelerated Adoption:** Deliberative Mini-Publics are the most widespread format, with their adoption peaking between 2019 and 2021.
- **Local Proliferation:** The overwhelming majority of these innovations (56%) take place within local government, reflecting a strong demand for grassroots engagement.
- **Tackling Complex Problems:** These processes are increasingly used to address systemic challenges like climate change, strategic urban planning, and political reform, with "Planning & Development," "Environment," and "Governance" being the top three policy areas.

While this experimentation is promising, it exists within a fragile ecosystem that often struggles to translate citizen energy into lasting political change.

1.3 The diagnosis: a fragile ecosystem for innovation

Democratic innovations face structural challenges that are amplified by their status as isolated **"experiments."** While this focus allows them to tackle issues like inclusivity or facilitation purposefully, their separation from the broader system of governance makes it difficult to achieve sustainable, integrated change. Research from the INCITE-DEM project reinforces this diagnosis, finding that public authorities consistently struggle to make these initiatives inclusive, engaging, and impactful [4]. This creates a central tension between securing **legitimacy** against elite capture and building the **capacity** to impact policy. This dilemma manifests differently based on an initiative's origins:

- **Institution-led** projects have built-in capacity but must constantly prove their legitimacy to avoid perceptions of "democracy washing."
- **Grassroots movements** have strong legitimacy but often lack the institutional power to translate their demands into policy, risking isolation.

Therefore, while robust safeguards must be in place to protect the integrity of these processes from elite capture, there is a growing urgency to focus on strategies that ensure their results are effectively integrated and have a lasting impact on policy-making.

In **Croatia**, the *We Can! (Možemo!)* political platform grew out of grassroots activism and civil society. While it successfully mobilized voters and won power in Zagreb, it has since struggled with the transition to governance. The initial horizontal, participatory structure became more centralized, and a gap emerged between the grassroots base and the new political leadership, complicating efforts to enact broad systemic change [5].

In **Slovenia**, the *Voice of the People (Glas Ljudstva)* initiative united over 100 NGOs to increase voter turnout and hold politicians accountable. While successful in mobilizing the public and ousting a populist government, the movement has struggled to ensure its demands are met by the new government, highlighting the difficulty of translating electoral influence into sustained policy impact without becoming a formal political party [5].

Further Incite-Dem analysis of 15 European case studies [6] reveals that while opportunities for innovation differ across local, regional, and national levels, the core conditions for success and failure are universal. Across all contexts, public visibility, institutional coordination, and active citizen participation are the essential enablers. Conversely, the most common barriers are stakeholder conflicts, a lack of demonstrable impact, and insufficient citizen involvement.

This recurring pattern of universal challenges reveals five interconnected barriers that define the fragile ecosystem for democratic innovation: a lack of political impact, persistent issues with inclusivity, significant communication challenges, a lack of systemic capacity, and insufficient resources.

The problem of political impact

The most significant failure is the gap between citizen recommendations and the implementation of policy. Because these processes are often consultative rather than binding, political authorities can ignore their outcomes. This lack of guaranteed impact is a primary driver of citizen frustration, turning promising engagement into disillusionment.

Despite producing 49 detailed proposals, the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) faced criticism from participants who felt that politicians were not truly listening and remained uncertain about the political follow-up to their recommendations [5].

The dilemma of inclusivity

Even carefully designed innovations struggle with true inclusivity. While mechanisms like random selection are intended to overcome exclusion, they do not automatically succeed. Research from the INCITE-DEM project [7] indicates that individuals with higher education levels tend to participate more, potentially creating a risk that deliberative processes reinforce the influence of those who are better off, without adequately addressing the needs of more vulnerable groups.

Despite using random selection, some participants in the CoFoE felt that lower socio-economic groups were underrepresented [5].

The "We Can!" (Možemo!) political movement in Croatia, born from grassroots activism, found it difficult to engage blue-collar workers and ethnic minorities [5].

To systematically assess and overcome these challenges, the INCITE-DEM project has developed a detailed set of qualitative criteria and indicators for evaluating the quality of participatory processes, with a focus on inclusivity, empowerment, and fairness. **This framework (see attached document: *D1.3 Criteria and Indicators for Inclusive Participation and Engagement*)** provides a practical tool for designers and evaluators of democratic innovations, and is included as an attachment to this synthesis.

The communication challenge

Participatory processes are inherently demanding from a communication perspective, as they require making complex, often technical, language accessible to a diverse audience. For democratic innovations, this communication challenge is magnified because they must justify their place within the broader institution. Without strategic communication to avoid being seen as an isolated event, their visibility—and thus their integration—is jeopardized. On the other hand, it is crucial to inform participants clearly about the goals, purpose, and limitations of their involvement to avoid creating false expectations and undermining trust [5].

The **Spanish Citizen Climate Assembly** is a primary example of how a lack of strategic communication can render an innovation invisible. A key factor was a **strict confidentiality policy** designed to protect the integrity of the deliberations and make participants feel safe from outside influence. While well-intentioned, this decision created a media blackout during the process, leaving the public and even other experts largely unaware of the initiative. With no dedicated dissemination plan, organizers found it was "too late" to gain media traction after the results were finalized [5]. An expert involved explained the trade-off: *"It was necessary to make people feel safe, but it limited media access to the Assembly process. Almost no one found out about the Assembly"*¹.

Widespread capacity limitation

The success of democratic innovations is constrained by capacity gaps across the entire democratic ecosystem. Beyond organisational inertia and elite scepticism in public institutions [8], many Civil Society Organisations are more accustomed to advocacy than collaborative co-creation. Furthermore, there is a need to cultivate greater civic knowledge, as deep participation requires skills that are not always widespread. Citizens can feel intimidated by complex procedures and may lack foundational knowledge about how their government functions, which makes meaningful engagement a demanding role that requires ongoing learning and support [1].

Insufficient resources

Public administrations and civil society organizations alike lack the dedicated, stable funding and specialized personnel required for meaningful engagement. To be truly inclusive of diverse citizens, it is critical to allocate adequate resources not only to cover participation costs but also to secure professional facilitators and experts who can ensure effective debates and provide necessary knowledge [1]. Without this investment, even acclaimed initiatives remain precarious and subject to shifting political whims. At the same time, the maturation of computational methodologies, such as those used in the INCITE-DEM project for automated transcription, translation, and analysis of large textual datasets, presents a critical opportunity to overcome some of these resource constraints more efficiently.

Even successful, well-funded innovations can prove unsustainable if they are not deeply embedded within permanent institutional structures, leaving them vulnerable to shifting politics or the end of a project cycle.

- In **Lisbon**, the acclaimed **SOMOS programme** for human rights education in schools highlights the risk of political dependency. It was terminated overnight following a change in government because its existence was tied to the will of one administration, not institutionalized as a core public service.[5]

¹ Quote from an interviewee in the INCITE-DEM project's case study on the "Spanish Citizen Climate Assembly".

- The **Municipalities in Transition** project, an ambitious four-year initiative across Europe, faced a different challenge. Despite working closely with local governments, it struggled to create lasting ownership. When its external foundation funding ended, the municipalities did not continue the new collaborative methodology, demonstrating that even long-term projects can fail if they are not fully integrated into the day-to-day operations of public administration.[5]

1.4 Recommendations: building a permanent democratic infrastructure

A systemic, multi-level approach is required to move from ad-hoc experiments to a durable participatory architecture. The following recommendations are designed to be mutually reinforcing, creating an ecosystem that supports meaningful and impactful citizen engagement. However, there are no one-size-fits-all models for democratic innovations, meaning each initiative must be tailored to its unique socio-political context, goals, and challenges. Therefore, the following recommendations and proposals should be viewed as adaptable blueprints and sources of inspiration, rather than rigid prescriptions.

1.4.1 Build a permanent, local democratic infrastructure

The most urgent priority is to move beyond a patchwork of temporary innovations by creating new, permanent, and trusted physical spaces for local citizen engagement. Analysis from Democracy Labs shows a clear preference among citizens for instituting new local spaces where they can gain control over local policy and planning processes [9]. Realizing this vision requires a robust institutional foundation, including implementing the necessary legal and constitutional amendments to formalize these powers. This transition should be scaled up through iterative pilot practices to test and refine the model in real-world settings.

A co-created proposal from the Democracy Labs—**The Permanent Citizen Assembly**²

This model envisions a network of hyper-local, empowered citizen assemblies that are formally integrated into the governance process. Recognizing the structural shifts required, this model relies on a clear legal framework to grant assemblies operating at the village or neighbourhood level, these assemblies would have binding decision-making power on local issues (where legally and institutionally feasible). Public funds would be allocated directly and managed through participatory budgeting. To ensure inclusivity, members are selected by lottery from an “extended registry” that includes non-citizens, reflecting the true diversity of the community. Assemblies are designed to be fully accessible, offering childcare, translation, digital support (e.g., using open-source software like Decidim), and flexible time commitments. Beyond governance, they function as hubs for mutual aid, with shared community resources like kitchens and tool libraries, fostering a culture of solidarity.

² This is a direct policy proposal that emerged from discussions within the INCITE-DEM Democracy Labs (DLabs). It reflects a consensus among participants—citizens, civil society members, and public officials—on a practical, immediate solution needed to strengthen local democratic infrastructure and address barriers to participation.

1.4.2 Guarantee resources and genuine inclusivity for all

Meaningful participation requires time and resources, which are significant barriers for many citizens. To make engagement a right rather than a luxury, states must address structural inequalities by allocating dedicated resources for participation at all levels of governance. This includes funding for meeting spaces, childcare, translation, and stipends or rewards for participation. To ensure genuine inclusivity, specific measures are needed:

- Develop targeted programs for vulnerable communities and women, with built-in incentives and support mechanisms.
- Use AI and digital tools to refine sortition methods and more effectively identify and deliver tailored support to underrepresented citizens, making inclusivity less dependent on heavy resource allocation.

1.4.3 Ensure transparent processes and binding impact

To restore trust, the link between deliberation and decision-making must be transparent, robust, and, where appropriate, binding. This model should be adopted as a new standard for high-impact public policies. Drawing a parallel with Environmental Impact Assessments, major plans should legally trigger a formal citizen consultation process, transforming public input from a political gesture into a non-negotiable stage of governance. The following "Inclusive Citizen Consultation" provides a concrete blueprint for this approach:

A co-created proposal from the Democracy Labs – **The Inclusive Citizen Consultation³**

This model reimagines public consultation as a citizen-initiated, hybrid process. Initiated by a citizen petition, a diverse consultation group—comprising randomly selected citizens, experts, and officials—is formed with real decision-making authority. The shift toward granting such groups formal authority would be preceded by the necessary legal and constitutional amendments to validate citizen-led initiatives within the existing administrative framework. Input from the wider public is gathered through multiple channels, including a dedicated app. Artificial intelligence is used transparently to cluster thousands of citizen opinions into coherent themes, which are then refined into concrete policy models. These models are returned to the public for feedback before a final, binding plan is implemented and monitored through the app, ensuring a fully transparent feedback loop from start to finish.

1.4.4 Build systemic capacity and a culture of co-creation

Embedding democratic innovations necessitates a profound cultural shift, supported by investments in skills and new processes for public administrators, civil society, and citizens alike. A holistic approach is needed to build the capacity of all actors in the democratic ecosystem.

³ This is a direct policy proposal that emerged from discussions within the INCITE-DEM Democracy Labs (DLabs). It reflects a consensus among participants—citizens, civil society members, and public officials—on a practical, immediate solution needed to strengthen local democratic infrastructure and address barriers to participation.

- **Empower public administrations:** Public administrations must build in-house expertise for designing and delivering citizen participation by creating dedicated, cross-departmental units. High-quality facilitation is essential for inclusive and equitable deliberation and should be invested in as a core public service skill.
- **Strengthen civil society as a bridge:** This requires supporting Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to evolve beyond their traditional role as advocacy groups and become key intermediaries within democratic innovations. In this capacity, they act as essential bridges connecting citizens and state institutions. It is crucial to invest in their ability to foster dialogue, mobilize diverse communities, and actively co-create solutions.
- **Invest in citizen education and preparedness:** Meaningful participation requires empowered citizens, but many feel alienated by complex political language. To bridge this gap, it is essential to invest in building civic capacity through permanent, accessible spaces for informal, hands-on learning that complements formal education.
- **Foster a culture of learning and adaptation:** Democratic innovation is an iterative process that thrives on learning. All actors must embrace a culture of continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation. Establishing robust feedback mechanisms enables an honest assessment of what works and what fails, ensuring that future initiatives can be continually improved.

1.4.5 Foster sector-specific democratic experiments for the commons

To address critical sustainability challenges, public authorities should actively promote and fund experimental democratic innovations focused on the stewardship of societal commons. The INCITE-DEM Democracy labs[9] revealed a strong citizen focus on developing collaborative solutions for food, land use, and housing. Supporting such sector-specific experiments can test new models of co-management for shared resources and develop practical, citizen-led solutions to complex problems. Conclusions

Moving democratic innovations from the margins to the mainstream is an essential strategy for strengthening policy effectiveness, enhancing social cohesion, and restoring public trust in a time of democratic fragility. The current landscape of promising but fragmented experiments is not sustainable and risks deepening citizen cynicism. Closing the gap between the promise of participation and its reality requires a fundamental shift: away from one-off initiatives and toward building a permanent, well-resourced, and coherent democratic infrastructure. By implementing the robust, citizen-inspired measures outlined here, the EU and its Member States can transform existing democratic experiments into a resilient, legitimate, and effective architecture for 21st-century governance.

1.5 References

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1.6 Appendix: criteria and indicators for inclusive participation and engagement⁴

1.6.1 Measuring status quo and trends of IncPE: quantitative criteria and indicators concepts

To quantitatively measure criteria and indicators for inclusive participation and engagement (IncPE) in democracy, we first of all distinguish between traditional and innovative forms of democratic participation. Among the former, which we conceptualize as a relatively coherent form of democratic participation, we understand conventional forms of political participation, such as voting, membership in political organizations, or engagement in civil society. Regarding innovative forms of democratic participation, we differentiate between the four types highlighted in the scoping reviews of D1.1 and D1.2, participatory budgeting, deliberative mini publics, collaborative governance, and participatory governance.

Additionally, when considering the measurement of democratic participation in quantitative terms, it is necessary to distinguish between two levels of participation within a given country. First, we are interested in whether a particular form of democratic participation is feasible in a given country – that is, whether citizens are permitted by law or other written rules to engage in the respective form of participation. Second, if so, we are interested in the degree of frequency with which the respective form is actually applied or implemented in the country.

These two differentiations leave us with a 2 x 5 table summarising the available measures of each combination between the form and level of democratic participation. We then used this table to search for existing datasets / indices that provide items to measure these combinations.

Table 1: Overview of indices containing indicators for combinations of forms and levels of democratic participation

	Legally possible	Frequency of implementation
Traditional Forms	V-DEM	V-DEM
Participatory Budgeting	PBAtlas	PBAtlas / Pabulib
Deliberative Mini Publics	--	IMP
Collaborative Governance	V-DEM	V-DEM
Participatory Governance	V-DEM	V-DEM

Legend: V-DEM = Varieties of Democracy (<https://www.v-dem.net/>), PBAtlas = Participatory Budgeting World Atlas (<https://www.pbatlas.net/index.html>), Pabulib = A Participatory Budgeting Library (<http://pabulib.org/format>), IMP = Inventory of Mini Publics (<https://politicize.eu/inventory-dmps/>)

⁴ Authors of the Appendix: Doris Fuchs, Bernd Schlipphak, Oliver Treib, Vanessa Buth, Caner Simsek

What becomes apparent from Table 1 is that there is currently no index or database that comprehensively covers all combinations of forms and levels of democratic participation. In addition, the datasets contained in Table 1 all have additional weaknesses, which we cannot outline in detail here, but which they themselves acknowledge upfront on their respective websites. For example, IMP, as well as PBAtlas, are collecting data based on the voluntary participation of country experts. The latter informs both projects about the existence/implementation of a particular form of deliberative mini-public or participatory budgeting. However, whether the current dataset accurately encompasses all instances of such events or suffers from a systematic bias in data collection remains unknown. In addition, we do not know of a database indicating something about whether a deliberative mini public is (legally) allowed or not in countries across the world.

Furthermore, similar to the insights gained in our project's historical review of democratic innovations (see D1.1), it is challenging to differentiate between collaborative governance and participatory governance. In the V-DEM dataset – the most extensive and probably qualitatively most reliable dataset to date measuring the differences in democracy across countries –, some empirical items/variables can be identified as indicators that may measure both concepts, collaborative governance, and participatory governance, at the same time. For example, indicator 3.6.0.5 of VDEM measures the degree of engaged society by asking: "When important policy changes are being considered, how wide and how independent are public deliberations?" This indicator seems to measure both the degree of collaborative governance (see Ansell & Gash, 2008) and of participatory governance (see Della Porta, 2013).

Finally, combining the measures of each index into a meta-index to measure democratic participation in an encompassing way seems to be an effortful task, to say the least, as the different datasets follow different logics for choosing the unit of analysis. In the IMP and the PBAtlas (as well as in the Pabulib), the unit of analysis is the respective process of a specific mini-public or participatory budgeting initiative. In the V-DEM dataset, the unit of analysis is the country in which a certain number of collaborative governance processes took place or in which a particular share of citizens did (or did not) participate in voting.

Hence, researchers interested in using a comprehensive quantitative measure of the institutionalisation or status quo and the development of participatory governance will in the future need a) to solve remaining issues of overlapping conceptualizations, b) to themselves identify items appropriate for a systematic data set on traditional and innovative forms of participatory democracy, and c) to themselves collect these data at least in parts.

1.6.2 Conceptualising and measuring the quality of IncPE: qualitative criteria and indicators

For the qualitative criteria and indicators, specific events are the unit of analysis. As pointed out above, these indicators focus primarily on the democratic quality of the given participatory process. In addition, criteria can be identified for a normative assessment of the output achieved. Given that our project is interested in inclusive democratic innovations for socio-ecological transformation, the requirements suggested below focus on sustainability. Finally, core influencing factors are named – many more could be identified, but we focus on the most crucial ones here. These factors are not criteria of democratic quality themselves, but are highly likely to exert a strong influence on a given process's potential to achieve a high level of democratic quality. At the same time, they tend to be easier to assess and can thereby help in evaluating the democratic quality of a given process. In what follows, the qualitative criteria are described and are equally illustrated in Figure 3.

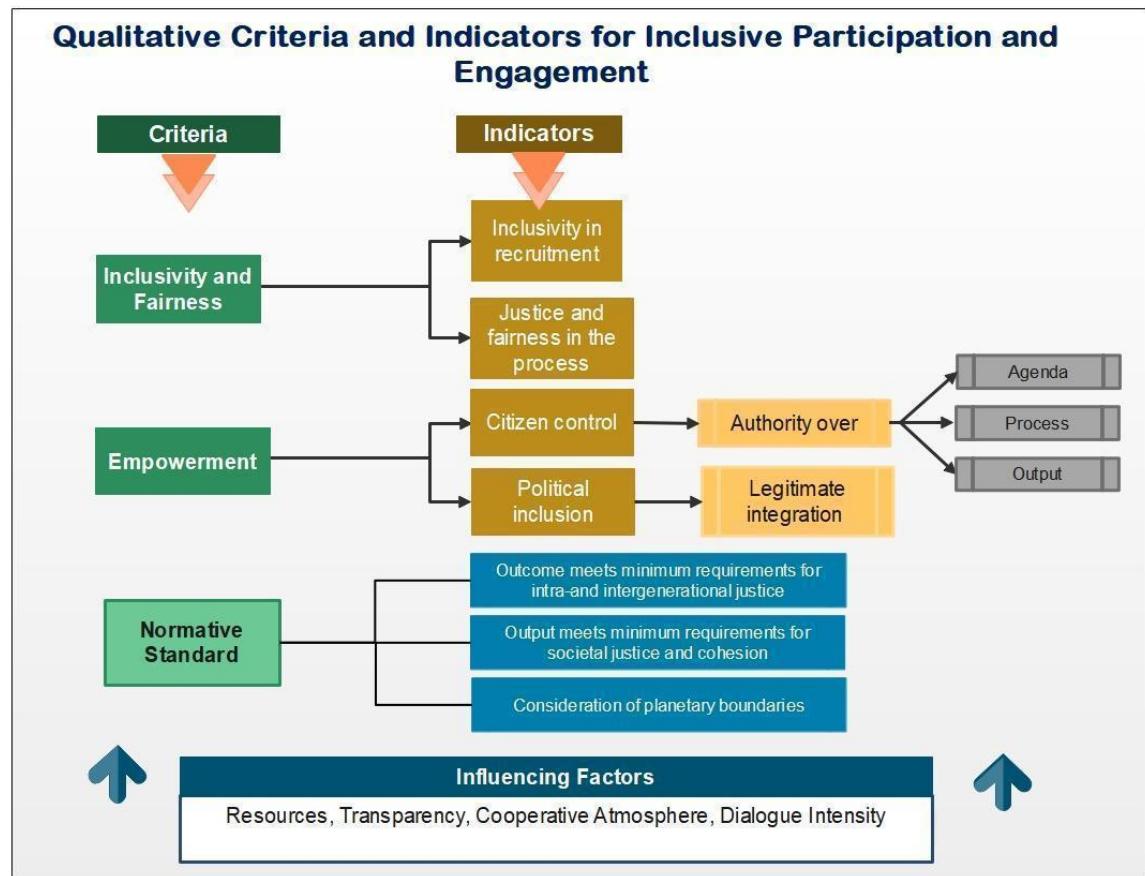


Figure 3 Summary of qualitative criteria and Indicators for Inclusive Participation and Engagement

1.6.2.1 Inclusivity and fairness

- a. Inclusivity in recruitment
 - i. Does the recruitment process consider all relevant target groups and reduce unequal opportunities for access and participation? (Particularly taking into account: unequal opportunities for participation in terms of income, education, gender, age, migration background and equal opportunities for different types of interests, also in terms of degree of organisation and short/long-term nature of interests)
 - ii. Does the final composition of participants broadly mirror the demographic and attitudinal profile of the population at large? (Note however, that recent literature suggests to overrepresent those otherwise underrepresented to ensure justice and fairness in process and output)
- b. Justice and fairness in the process
 - i. Does equal opportunity for all participants to influence the output of the participatory process exist? (e.g., are all perspectives given communicative space and taken seriously? Are asymmetries in communicative or cognitive skills balanced out?)

1.6.2.2 Empowerment

1.6.2.2.1 Citizen control

- a. Citizen authority over agenda
 - i. Do citizens decide the substantive area, issue, and scope of the participatory process?
- b. Citizen authority over process
 - i. Do citizens decide the characteristics of the process (e.g., length, frequency of meetings, processes in and between meetings, etc.)?
- c. Citizen authority over output
 - i. Do citizens have control over the contents and format of the output?
 - ii. Can citizens plan with necessary resources to allow an implementation of the achieved output?
 - iii. Can citizens follow up and assess the rigour and quality of the implementation of the output?

1.6.2.2.2 Political inclusion

- a. Meaningful and legitimate integration of the procedure into political process
 - i. Is a process in place that commits political decision-makers to a meaningful engagement with the output of the participatory process? (e.g., prescribed voting results in terms of a 2/3 majority or such for not implementing the results)
 - ii. Is there a follow-up process for implementation and its evaluation?

1.6.2.3 Normative standard

(No contradictions between the outcome of the dialogue and substantial requirements of social and environmental sustainability.)

- a. Output meets minimum requirements for social justice and societal cohesion
 - i. Does the output adequately consider the rights and needs of other persons and groups of persons within the community/society and align with fundamental justice requirements? (e.g., not impose further harm on the weakest members of society)
- b. Outcome meets minimum requirements for intra- and intergenerational justice
 - i. Does the output adequately consider impacts on people living outside the given community/society?
 - ii. Does the output adequately consider impacts on future generations?
- c. Consideration of planetary boundaries
 - i. Does the outcome reduce or at least not further increase the potential for the overstepping of planetary boundaries by human consumption and production?

1.6.2.4 Crucial influencing factors for the democratic quality of participatory processes

- a. Transparency

- i. Is the process clear and comprehensible to participants in terms of its process characteristics, potential results, and their further handling? Is all relevant information easily accessible?
- b. Dialogue intensity
 - i. Is there an actual exchange between participants rather than an unidirectional communication?
 - ii. Is the process long enough to allow for in-depth deliberations and negotiations?
- c. Cooperative atmosphere
 - i. Do the participants experience the process and its output as relevant and fair? (This, in turn, will tend to depend on effective trust building, skilled and neutral moderation,...)
- d. Resources
 - i. Are sufficient resources (financial, personnel, know-how) provided for an effective process to take place?

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