

Conference on the Future of Europe: “The future of democracy - from local to European”

Local citizens’ dialogues and panels on the future of Europe
to be facilitated by the European Committee of the Regions and the Bertelsmann Foundation

Context and objective

The Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future makes the case for local citizens’ panels, which could provide input into debates and recommendations of European and national citizens’ panels and the final report of the Conference expected for spring 2022. This note proposes to hold a limited number of local citizens’ dialogues or panels, including through the combined effort of regions and cities grouping together in European partnerships, in order to discuss topics of their concern. The ultimate objective would be to use the Conference on the Future of Europe for showcasing and promoting tools, which facilitate citizens’ interaction with politics and politicians across all levels of government.

As the assembly of locally elected politicians, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) will – with the help of external expertise through the Bertelsmann Foundation – support such events and facilitate their deliberations and input into the works of the Conference. The key message deriving from the process will be that European democracy matters to Europe’s regions and cities and vice versa and that new models of dialogue and deliberation with citizens can strengthen democracies.

The proposed project aims at bringing two elements into the debate to open up a space of policy choices and recommendations, which can be linked to the reality of citizens and places: These elements are "the future of Europe" and "the citizen", and they will be developed by way of deliberations and through methods, which have already or will be tested in participating regions and cities.

The opening of such “European public spaces” can lead to increased policy choices ("thinking the unthinkable") as well as to novel methods of increased citizen participation. By way of cross-referencing experiences from different places in Europe, policy recommendations on the future of Europe might become more informed by citizens’ needs and expectations.

The project would be implemented according to the following lines:

- local citizens’ dialogues and panels would be held between September 2021 and December 2022 at (a) local or regional level, or (b) by European partnerships composed by ad-hoc cross-border, inter-regional and city-to-city consortia representing the diversity of places in Europe;
- local, regional level partners as well as European partnerships shall refer to parliaments, councils and assemblies together with regional and local administrations, who are ideally already engaged in participatory citizen deliberation, consultation, panels or similar models¹ - or are committed to test them;
- the dialogues/panels shall be designed to provide input into the Conference on the Future of Europe – meaning that they have to respect the “Conference Charter”² for organisers of events related to it - including the broadest possible representation of citizens involved;

¹ For an overview of existing models see: [OECD \(2020\): Innovative citizen participation and new democratic institutions. Catching the deliberative wave. Paris](#); [European Committee of the Regions \(2019\): From local to European: putting citizens at the centre of the EU agenda. Brussels](#).

² See the “Charter” on the digital platform of the Conference [here](#)

- the organisation of related events shall provide conclusions and recommendations on both, the Conference on the Future of Europe and the feasibility and effectiveness of such initiatives for improving democratic processes at local, regional and European level.

What the CoR can offer

Following the selection process and announcement of the partnerships, the CoR can offer the following:

- together with the [Bertelsmann Foundation](#), the CoR will provide guidance, training and, if necessary, facilitators, for the local event partners during the preparation and follow-up of the events;
- advice, if needed, for the technical part of the citizens' dialogues/panels, including support to interpretation costs on a case by case basis
- advice for and provision of media relations;
- hosting of online events
- moderator's and guest speakers' costs
- provision of CoR information materials
- dissemination of the event results
- delivering the results of the reporting to the 9th European Summit of Regions and Cities

Profile of local/regional partners and European partnerships

Partners at local, regional and European level would be selected by approaching CoR members and candidate regions and cities directly at administrative level and call for the expression of interest. Partners will be confirmed and invited to subsequent meetings.

Selected partners shall

- represent the diversity of the EU territory and the democratic fabric in different places of Europe;
- be free to select one or several topics to deliberate;
- agree to the good practice principles for citizens' dialogues and be ready to use random selection and to invite "citizens from all walks of life" - as it will be done for European and national citizens' panels (see further details in Annex);
- agree to the methods and conditions and the timeframe of the Conference on the Future of Europe;
- be ready to engage in the process and make available the resources it requires to prepare and carry out the project in their region or city.

Reporting

Each partner will be requested to report back in a common format on the process including recommendations on the future of Europe on which the citizens of their constituencies have voted upon. They would also report back on the feasibility and effectiveness of such initiatives for improving democratic processes at local, regional and European level. The democratic institutions as well as the public authorities involved in the project will keep the right of reserve as well as the possibility to express their respective views on the works and topics of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The CoR would produce - together with the Bertelsmann Foundation – a final report in March 2022, which will be submitted to the bodies of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Indicative timetable

2021

12 May: Kick-off event, public announcement and media outreach;

28 May: Webinar to provide more details on the methodology

May - June: applications, evaluation, selection

June - July: partners' meetings, planning, guidance and practical preparations;

September-December: local citizens' dialogues/panels held by partners; informing the platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe;

2022

end of January: drafting conclusions from all dialogues/panels;

February: drafting the final report;

March: outreach and input into the final report to be sent to the bodies of the Conference on the Future of Europe; input to CoR report on the feasibility and effectiveness of citizens' dialogues/panels for improving democratic processes at local, regional and European level.

Bertelsmann Foundation's experience in strengthening the voice of citizens in Europe with inclusive, deliberative and effective citizens' dialogues and panels

The Bertelsmann Foundation's experience in recent years with a large number of local, regional and transnational citizen dialogues shows: Citizens' dialogues strengthen democracy. They increase citizens' trust in politics and they offer policymakers valuable additional perspectives. Experience also shows: The quality of local citizens' dialogues and their results can be significantly increased if diverse groups of citizens participate and if the dialogues are structured and conducted according to good practice principles. Citizens' concerns and views on specific topics are incorporated more strongly and directly into political decisions.

Innovative citizens' dialogues: inclusive, deliberative and effective

The citizens' dialogues/citizens' panels are organised under a set of good practice principles that ensure making the dialogues a success.

A key principle is **inclusion and diversity, achieved through random selection**. The random selection method ensures that citizens participate who represent the diversity of society. These are young and old, women and men, people with different educational and socio-economic backgrounds. They allow for a plurality of opinions and perspectives and ensure an inclusive and balanced participation of citizens. Discussion results represent society in all its richness. Innovative ideas and proposals emerge that are valuable for politicians towards finding better solutions.

The second good practice principle is **structure and deliberation**: The discussions between citizens as well as between citizens and policymakers are clearly structured. The citizens exchange different experiences and views. Supported by moderators, they work together in mixed small groups and develop collective ideas and proposals. Fact-based information and experts help them to weigh up arguments. Simultaneous translation allows the participants to speak in their mother tongue and to communicate easily and without language barriers.

The third principle is **commitment of policymakers**: The dialogue with citizens' panel is embedded in a political process. Policymakers discuss with the citizens about their ideas and proposals. They give feedback, clarify on how to deal with the results and outline a follow-up process. The citizens' proposals are documented and published.

Support by the Bertelsmann Stiftung

A **manual for (digital) dialogues with citizens' panels** (local, cross-border, inter-regional and city-to-city dialogues): The manual describes the random selection method, the dialogue method, the good practice principles, the technology and the process. Practical tips and materials such as templates help to get started and successfully implement the dialogues. The manual is designed for digital and analogue dialogues. It can be used in all European cities and regions, for local dialogues and for multilingual citizen dialogues, e.g. in border regions and in town twinning.

Guidance and trainings for local teams, for the initiators who are responsible, for the politicians and local administrators involved in the preparation of the citizens' panels and in the recruitment of the citizens' through random selection. The trainings contribute to the competence and skills of the actors on site and ensure that the citizen dialogues are implemented successfully.

Identification and training of dialogue moderators and process facilitators, we are part of a Europe-wide network of professional moderators and facilitators of citizen participation processes. Support in finding suitable people who can assist local teams in the preparation

and implementation of the Citizens' Dialogues. Support and training of these process facilitators and moderators.

Example of the process of a citizens' panel: Three and a half hours cross-border digital Citizens' Dialogue with citizens from France, Germany and Switzerland

Corona and community life in the trinational border region of Basel Developing proposals - Process in six steps 210 minutes, including 2x10min breaks	
Phase	Programm
1 Plenary	Introduction and explanation of working methods
2 Plenary	Digital surveys and topical inputs from politicians and experts: The role of citizen dialogues, advantages and disadvantages of cross-border cooperation, specific challenges in the Corona period
3 Work in small groups	Get to know each other and exchange experiences in seven table groups: How did you experience living together in the trinational Basel region during the Corona period?
4 Work in small groups	Collecting ideas and developing proposals in seven table groups: Learning from the Corona Pandemic: How can the region become crisis resilient? What ideas do you have?
5 Plenary	Reports from the table groups, discussion, feedback politicians, further handling of results, follow-up
6 Closure	Evaluation of the dialogue and end of the event

How random selection works

Random selection can be implemented by two methods: a) by professional service provider (e.g. market research institute) and b) with the help of a resident register, which exists in most European countries at the municipal level.

The organising institution (e.g. the municipality) decides on the method. It determines the number of participants and the criteria according to which the group of citizens should be composed by e.g., age, gender, education, place of living etc. It prepares invitation letters (e.g. from the mayor) and additional information needed for participant recruitment. Recruitment then starts according to the selected method.

Method a): The service company uses telephone databases and calls people drawn at random. If there is interest, those interested receive the invitation. The service provider receives the sign-ups, matches them with the desired number in each "category," and recruits until the target numbers are reached. Often, 10 or 20 percent are over-recruited to compensate for

shortfalls on the day of the dialogue. The cost of the service varies by the number of participants, recruiting area, and amount of allowances for participants.

Method b): the organizer determines the number for sampling. Experience shows that about 2 - 5 % of the invited persons show interest. That is, if 100 citizens are to participate, a sample of at least 2 000 citizens should be drawn. The invitation is sent to these persons. The registrations are then matched with the desired number in the categories. It may be necessary for a second sample to be drawn in order to reach the target numbers.

Method a) requires financial resources, which can be considerable depending on the number of participants, search area and duration of the dialogue. On the other hand, it reduces the personnel costs for the organizing institution.

Method b) is not very expensive. You only need material costs for sending the invitation letters. However, you need access to the population register or a similar personal database and the human resources to organize the invitation and participant management.

Why random selection is key

Random selection is being used more and more in citizens' participation around the world. The Bertelsmann Foundation's experience shows that with this method you are guaranteed to involve citizens who have never participated in participation formats before. This gives you the security of getting a very mixed group that represents society in all its diversity. Practice also shows that other forms of participant recruitment for a diverse group are even more time-consuming. Evaluations of these dialogues show that citizens find the exchange among themselves highly interesting and exciting. The results of the joint work are of high quality and often very balanced. This makes the participants proud and positively surprises the initiators and politicians.

What a cross-border citizens' dialogue can cost

For the organisation of cross-border citizens' dialogues, costs are incurred for random selection (e.g. EUR 10 000 – 15 000 for a service provider depending on the number of citizens, search area and duration of the dialogue or e.g. EUR 2 500 or postage costs for the invitations to citizens drawn from the resident register, for simultaneous interpretation for small groups and plenary sessions, for technology and locations, for process facilitation with professionals and dialogue moderators.

More about Bertelsmann Foundation – Program “Future of democracy”

In recent years, the Bertelsmann Foundation has conducted a series of citizens' dialogues and panels with the European Commission, municipalities and other government institutions. We gathered expertise and practical experiences with innovative participation formats, for example on citizens' dialogues at EU, national and local level, transnational dialogues as well as cross-border dialogues both, physically and digitally. More information about the project can be found [here](#).