

Report



- Date and time: 8 December 2020, 9:00 - 10:30
- Title of the session: **For a truly inclusive debate**
- Format: Workshop
- Moderator: **Wolfgang Petzold** (Deputy Director for Communication, European Committee of the Regions) / Speakers: **Assya Kavrakova** (Executive Director, European Citizen Action Service /ECAS/), **Brikena Xhomaqi** (Director, Lifelong Learning Platform), **Ieva Cesnulaityte** (Policy analyst, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development /OECD/)

Main topics discussed

The workshop focused on the topic of inclusiveness, showcasing existing methods and best practices from various organisations and exploring the possible challenges to and risks of the Conference on the Future of Europe by drawing on past experience of using inclusive and deliberative methods. It concluded by putting forward practical suggestions that should be taken on board by the EU institutions when defining the scope and aim of the process. The discussion, involving the speakers and the audience, revolved around the scope of the two-year initiative, its risks from a citizens' engagement point of view as well as the existing and urgent need for citizens to know more and be involved in defining the future of Europe.

Speakers presented innovative ideas that could support democratic engagement in the EU, for example the "crowdsourcing method" to involve a larger number of citizens in policy-making. The role of civil society was mentioned as a catalyst for citizen engagement, a space where people are used to democratic deliberations. Different criteria for ensuring that an initiative is inclusive and participatory were listed, such as ensuring representativeness, enhancing deliberations and making sure the results of the deliberative process have an impact.

A deliberative process is not a communication exercise, but communication is key to ensuring the success of the process. Smooth communication of the organisation, results and impact can facilitate the opportunities for learning and debate, encourage greater participation and increase awareness of the process.

Key messages from each speaker

Assya Kavrakova (executive director, European Citizen Action Service (ECAS))

The full commitment of all three EU institutions and all Member States to the process is absolutely essential. Citizens' assemblies should be organised at a centralised, national level with elected spokespersons at European level. Without this, national features and the authenticity of the process would be lost.

The European Union should clearly explain what can be done by the EU and what cannot (based on the EU Treaties). If the Member States do not take up this process, inclusiveness and a bottom-up approach can be an issue.

Brikena Xhomaqi (director, Lifelong Learning Platform)

Inclusiveness goes with ambition. Unless the debates of the Conference on the Future of Europe are based on the most local level possible, the process cannot be successful. However, opinions expressed at local level then need to be compared with each other in a more coherent and organised way at European level. This way, inclusive debates will have a real impact in defining the future of Europe.

As regards drawing up the agenda, it is important to not give the wrong message to people about the role of Brussels Eurocrats in deciding on the topics of the debate.

Ieva Cesnulaityte (policy analyst, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD))

Citizen participation is one of the key elements of establishing greater inclusiveness. For this reason, in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, different participatory methods should be used. However, we need to make sure that they are all linked up, from grass-root initiatives to the European level, in a comprehensive way.

Questions from the audience

Questions from the audience challenged how representative and participatory democracy could complement or support each other in inclusive debates. Speakers agreed that citizens' assemblies are not intended to be a replacement for representative democracy. Their mandates and how their recommendations are dealt with on a political level need to be clearly communicated well in advance to the society at large in order to manage people's expectations.

As a reflection on the question of what inclusiveness means in Europe, the speakers agreed that as long as we are all building our future together in Europe, it should not matter if someone is an EU citizen or not, which is an important decision to be made by the three EU institutions.

Take-away messages

The three speakers presented diverse and colourful aspects and methods of building inclusive debates at local, regional, national and European level. The speakers concluded that it is really important to start these debates by improving on existing methods, including know-how, the multiplier effect and the infrastructure of civil society or grass-root initiatives. Citizens do not only need to be heard, they need to be listened to.