



# HECSOs

community engagement

## Policy Recommendation

to promote the active participation of local communities within the decision-making process and advocate for the values of participatory democracy.

Italy, May 31st 2024



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## Partners



## Results from local multi-stakeholder policy workshops that took place in Italy, May 31st 2024.

Within the framework of the HECSOs project, two multi-stakeholder policy workshops were held for each national context in order to solicit public debate and gather suggestions on how to advocate for the active participation of local communities in decision-making processes and to uphold the values of participatory democracy.

The purpose of the local workshops was to gather - through consultation processes, focus-groups and roundtables - recommendations to be submitted to local authorities in each local context and from which to elaborate a policy recommendation paper to be submitted to European institutions.

In Italy the workshops have been organized by the local partner S-Nodi gathering representatives of local authorities, CSOs, associations and professionals based in Savona district (Liguria Region), where a solid network is already working on the challenge of migrant integration and inclusion renovating the services of welcoming and supports of people and families in need.

The workshops were held in Savona on May 31st 2024.

While chapter 1 provides a general overview of the Italian policy framework on the topic of participation in decision-making processes and main related challenges; chapter 2 collects results and evidence based on the workshops discussions.

## Italian policy framework on the active participation of local communities within the decision-making process

In Italy, the political and public debate on the active participation of local communities in decision-making processes is widely discussed and implemented through various participatory democracy tools. In recent decades, numerous participatory processes have been implemented at the regional and municipal levels to involve citizens in public decisions, especially in the preliminary stages, when projects can still be improved. This approach fosters structured dialogue and the presence of experts, avoiding conflicts and promoting shared solutions. Despite significant differences across the country in terms of their diffusion and entrenchment, several tools currently in use and provided by public administrations can be cited:

- **Public Debate:** Introduced in 2018, this tool is mandatory for large-scale public works and includes a consultation phase open to citizens to improve projects and reduce conflicts. However, the recent reform of the Public Contracts Code has raised criticism for limiting participation to only local public entities and stakeholders, excluding individual citizens and local communities.
- **Participatory Budgeting:** This tool allows citizens to decide the allocation of a portion of the municipal budget. Successful examples include Milan, Parma, and Capannori, where citizens can directly influence local policies.
- **E-Democracy Platforms:** The “ParteciPa” platform, for instance, facilitates online consultation on topics of public interest. This tool helps include citizens in decision-making processes by overcoming spatial and temporal barriers.
- **Food Councils:** These discussion forums on food policy involve producers, distributors, consumers, and other actors in the food supply chain. They promote sustainable practices and greater decision-making inclusion.

Furthermore in Italy, the themes of co-design, shared administration, and collaboration pacts are central to fostering active civic participation and improving public spaces through innovative legal frameworks and participatory processes.

■ **Co-design** involves collaborative planning and designing of public projects and services between citizens and public authorities. This approach emphasizes the inclusion of diverse voices in the decision-making process, ensuring that projects meet the actual needs and desires of the community.

■ **Shared administration**, often realized through collaboration pacts (patti di collaborazione), allows citizens and public authorities to work together in a horizontal and participatory manner. This model, pioneered by the Bologna Regulation, focuses on managing urban commons—tangible and intangible assets that contribute to collective well-being—through shared responsibility and mutual commitments. The Bologna Regulation, launched in 2014, provides a framework for these collaborative efforts. It has inspired over 280 local governments in Italy to adopt similar regulations, fostering a culture of active citizenship and sustainable urban management. The regulation outlines clear guidelines for collaboration pacts, detailing the roles, responsibilities, and resources of both parties involved. This approach not only enhances public participation but also strengthens the community's role in urban governance, making it more responsive and tailored to local needs.

■ **Collaboration pacts** are formal agreements between municipalities and citizens or civic groups. These pacts cover various actions such as the care, regeneration, reuse, or management of urban commons. Each pact specifies goals, duration, commitments, and resources, ensuring transparency and accountability. The pacts emerged from a broader initiative to combat citizen disaffection and mistrust in public institutions by promoting active civic engagement and co-responsibility. This model transforms the traditional top-down administration into a collaborative partnership that leverages local knowledge and resources.

Nevertheless, challenges and barriers in relation to those tools are still relevant and full and equal participation of citizens is not yet achieved. Implementing tools such as co-design, shared administration, and collaboration pacts to achieve effective participation of local communities in decision-making processes faces several challenges and barriers:

1. **Complexity and Bureaucracy:** The processes involved in setting up collaboration pacts and participatory budgeting can be complex and require significant administrative support. The bureaucratic nature can discourage citizen participation, as the required procedures can seem overwhelming and inaccessible;
2. **Legal and Regulatory Frameworks:** Establishing and maintaining these participatory processes often requires robust legal frameworks and consistent regulatory oversight, which can be challenging to implement uniformly across different regions.
3. **Funding Constraints:** Adequate funding is essential for the success of participatory initiatives. Limited financial resources can hinder the implementation and sustainability of these programs, making it difficult to scale up successful models.
4. **Human Resources:** Engaging and managing participation initiatives require skilled personnel who can facilitate discussions, manage conflicts, and ensure that the process is inclusive and equitable. The lack of such dedicated staff can impede effective implementation.
5. **Participation Inequality:** Ensuring broad and diverse participation is a significant challenge. Often, those who are more educated or have more resources are more likely to participate, leading to unequal representation of community interests.
6. **Sustained Engagement:** Maintaining long-term engagement can be difficult. Initial enthusiasm can wane over time, and ongoing participation requires continuous motivation and incentives for community members to stay involved.
7. **Building Trust:** Establishing trust between citizens and public authorities is crucial. Historical mistrust or previous negative experiences with public engagement can hinder the willingness of communities to participate.
8. **Collaboration Challenges:** Effective collaboration requires a cultural shift within public authorities to move from a top-down approach to a more collaborative and horizontal model. This can be difficult to achieve in environments resistant to change.

9. **Digital Divide:** While e-democracy platforms can enhance participation, they also risk excluding those without adequate access to digital tools or the necessary digital literacy skills. This can disproportionately affect older adults, low-income communities, and rural areas.
10. **Technological Infrastructure:** Developing and maintaining the technological infrastructure required for effective e-participation can be costly and technically demanding, necessitating ongoing investment and technical support.
11. **Measuring Success:** Evaluating the impact of participatory processes is challenging. Developing metrics and indicators to assess the effectiveness and outcomes of these initiatives requires a thorough understanding of both qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods.
12. **Feedback Mechanisms:** Providing timely and constructive feedback to participants is essential to sustain engagement and show that their input is valued and has an impact. Without effective feedback mechanisms, participants may feel their contributions are ignored, leading to disengagement.

## **Policy recommendations to tackle challenges and barriers for effective and full participation in decision-making processes. Results from local multi-stakeholder policy workshops.**

As a result of the workshop's discussion some specific recommendations to tackle the above-mentioned challenges and barriers to better guarantee effective and full participation of local communities in decision-making processes have been drafted.

### **Enhanced Public Consultation Processes**

#### **Regular Community Meetings:**

Hold regular, well-publicized community meetings where residents can voice their concerns and provide input on local decisions. In order to achieve this objective, strategies should pay attention to:

frequency and scheduling: schedule meetings at various times, including evenings and weekends, to accommodate different work schedules.

facilitation techniques: use professional facilitators to ensure meetings are productive and all voices are heard.

accessible locations: hold meetings in different neighborhoods to make them accessible to all community members.

#### **Participatory Budgeting:**

Implement participatory budgeting processes where community members can directly influence how public funds are allocated. In order to achieve this objective, strategies should pay attention to:

awareness campaign: run campaigns to educate the community about participatory budgeting and its impact.

workshops and training: offer workshops to train residents on how to propose and vote on budget items.

transparency in decision-making: clearly communicate how decisions are made and ensure that the process is transparent.

## Capacity Building and Education

### **Civic Education Programs:**

offer programs to educate residents on how local government works and how they can get involved in decision-making processes. In order to achieve this objective, strategies should pay attention to:

school curriculum: integrate civic education into the school curriculum to foster early awareness.

adult education: provide workshops and seminars for adults on civic participation.

online resources: develop online courses and resources for those who cannot attend in-person sessions.

### **Leadership Training:**

provide leadership training for community members to empower them to take active roles in local governance. In order to achieve this objective, strategies should pay attention to:

mentorship programs: pair community members with experienced leaders for guidance and support.

skills workshops: offer workshops on public speaking, negotiation, and other leadership skills.

recognition programs: create programs to recognize and celebrate local leaders who make a difference.

## Improved Communication Channels:

**Multilingual Information Dissemination:** ensure all information about local governance and decision-making processes is available in multiple languages to cater to diverse communities. In order to achieve this objective strategies should pay attention to:

Translation Services: Provide translation services at public meetings and for key documents.

Community Ambassadors: Recruit community members who can act as ambassadors to disseminate information in their native languages.

Culturally Relevant Communication: Ensure that communication materials are culturally relevant and respectful.

## Digital Platforms

Develop and maintain online platforms where residents can easily access information, provide feedback, and participate in virtual town halls. In order to achieve this objective strategies should pay attention to:

User-Friendly Interfaces: Design user-friendly websites and apps that are easy to navigate.

Social Media Engagement: Utilize social media to reach a broader audience and engage with the community.

Virtual Town Halls: Hold virtual town hall meetings to allow participation from those who cannot attend in person.

## Inclusive Policy Frameworks:

**Diverse Representation:** Ensure diverse representation on decision-making bodies by actively recruiting members from various demographic groups. In order to achieve this objective strategies should pay attention to:

Recruitment Campaigns: Actively recruit diverse candidates for decision-making bodies.

Diversity Training: Provide diversity and inclusion training for all members of decision-making bodies.

Inclusion Policies: Develop and enforce policies that promote inclusivity in all aspects of governance.

**Advisory Councils:** establish advisory councils that include representatives from different community sectors to provide insights and recommendations on local policies. In order to achieve this objective strategies should pay attention to:

**Sector-Specific Councils:** Create advisory councils focused on specific sectors, such as youth, seniors, and immigrants.

**Regular Meetings:** Hold regular meetings for advisory councils to ensure continuous input.

**Actionable Recommendations:** Ensure that recommendations from advisory councils are actionable and followed up on.

## Transparency and Accountability:

**Open Data Initiatives:** Implement open data initiatives where residents can access data on government performance, spending, and decision-making processes.

**Public Dashboards:** Create public dashboards that display key data on government performance and spending.

**Data Literacy Programs:** Offer programs to help community members understand and use open data.

**Feedback Loops:** Establish feedback loops where the community can provide input on open data initiatives.

**Feedback Mechanisms:** Create robust feedback mechanisms where community members can report on the effectiveness of policies and suggest improvements.

**Surveys and Polls:** Regularly conduct surveys and polls to gather community feedback.

**Comment Boxes:** Provide physical and online comment boxes for continuous feedback.

**Response Protocols:** Develop protocols to ensure that feedback is reviewed and addressed in a timely manner.

## Support for Grassroots Organizations:

**Funding and Resources:** Provide funding and resources to grassroots organizations that work to mobilize and represent local communities.

**Grant Programs:** Create grant programs to fund grassroots initiatives

**Resource Centers:** Establish resource centers where organizations can access support and information.

**Capacity Building:** Offer training and capacity-building programs for grassroots organizations.

**Collaborative Partnerships:** Foster partnerships between local government and grassroots organizations to ensure community needs are addressed in policymaking.

**Joint Initiatives:** Develop joint initiatives between local government and grassroots organizations.

**Regular Dialogues:** Hold regular dialogues to ensure ongoing collaboration and understanding.

**Shared Goals:** Identify and work towards shared goals that benefit the community.

## Monitoring and Evaluation:

**Regular Assessments:** Conduct regular assessments of community participation initiatives to identify barriers and improve processes.

**Performance Metrics:** Develop metrics to assess the effectiveness of community participation initiatives.

**Third-Party Evaluation:** Use third-party evaluators to ensure objectivity in assessments.

**Continuous Improvement:** Use assessment results to continuously improve participation strategies.

**Community Feedback:** Continuously seek community feedback on the effectiveness of participation strategies and make necessary adjustments.

Town Hall Meetings: Hold regular town hall meetings to gather direct feedback from the community.

Focus Groups: Conduct focus groups to delve deeper into specific issues and gather detailed feedback.

Feedback Reports: Publish regular reports on the feedback received and how it is being addressed.



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