

CHAPTER 2

Democracy and values; bottom-up approach, citizens' ownership; partnership and participation; multilevel governance

The best motivation for European citizens is to see the effects of their engagement in local participation (for example when politicians discuss their decisions with citizens and invite them to local council meetings), and to see how their opinions have been taken into account, influencing the decisions. "For that reason, it is of utmost importance that such discussions are immediately related to the daily lives of people at the local level," notes a Hannes, from an Austrian NGO.

Involving and informing citizens is something that most civil society organisations find essential. As Éva from Hungary writes: "We need to provide detailed information on what the EU actually does for us, what specific projects it has financed, what specific opportunities it offers, what kind of tenders are available."

Integrating civil society in the development and implementation of macro-regional strategies is an absolute priority. Darja from Slovenia distinguishes two major tasks: "First of all, citizens should be aware of the existence of macro-regions and regional policies. Secondly, it is important to show existing cooperation, integration and exchange among countries of a macro-region, and potentials that could be developed in the future. This way, citizens would see their interest in an active participation."

Anders from Sweden is a bit more sceptical and thinks that in the short run, "it is not realistic to reach a level of general awareness among our citizens of the existence and importance of macro-regional strategies".

When asked about what factors impede organised civil society participation in macro-regional decision-making processes, a Latvian NGO answers: "Capacity and knowledge. If organisations are fighting for their day-to-day living, they do not have enough time to invest in their expertise, and to participate in the decision-making process."

Other problems might also hinder active involvement. As Meelis from Estonia writes, "since the processes are normally kept closed, when opened for consultation, the timeframe is short and would require quite a bit of focusing, therefore the participation remains limited".

Civil society organisations often bring together professional research and project management teams with a good knowledge and clear understanding of particular issues in their macro-regions. Igor from Ukraine has found that "a bureaucratic approach on the European Commission's and the national level is the key obstacle".

What could be done? Aneta from a Slovak NGO suggests that the idea of the Conference on the Future of Europe should be promoted on a macro-regional level, using the various events / programmes. The Conference should not be only a talking shop, but a convincing reference point in disseminating a strong European message among the citizens of macro-regions.

As a Polish civil society organisation adds, "macro-regional policies can focus on promoting macro-regional identities like Central European, Carpathian, Alpine, and other. They constitute parts of a bigger European commonwealth."

Ideally, there should be a greater understanding of the importance of the bottom-up approach and the involvement of the third sector, civil society, and citizens. Erasmo from an Italian NGO says that "it is essential to establish bottom-up cooperation, involving the social partners, socio-economic agents and civil society organisations, broadening dialogue and cooperation on

several levels". Stefan from Germany underlines that "organised civil society participation is based on creating a structural dialogue in a bottom-up process, and finally displaying different opinions and competence". This should lead to a situation where the role of citizens and their organisations are not confined to attentive implementation, but they are an integral part of the policy-making processes. This definitely increases their ownership feeling.

Magda from Poland adds: "Promote more Annual Fora; local NGOs can organise mini public events (deliberative forms of democracy) where the idea of macro-regionalism can be presented to citizens and best practices shared. All these should happen on the VERY local level

Regional and macro-regional policies can influence the promotion of pro-European attitudes by encouraging citizens to think pro-European in every way, by promoting a better standard of living, investment, and more generally improving the quality of life. Pejo, a youth representative from Croatia gives an example: "One of the regional policies is sustainable development, a main goal of Europe for the future, because it is planned in advance to ensure a quality environment for the people who will live after us, our children and grandchildren."

To make all these happen support from the European Parliament e.g. by the resolution on Citizens' dialogues and Citizens' participation in the EU decision-making (7 July 2021) or the proposal on a statute for European cross-border associations (17 February 2022) could greatly enhance the creation of a favourable political climate.

Specific suggestions

- Integrating civil society organisations more as partners into the process of elaboration of regional strategic documents, development programmes, EU programmes, including their representatives into decision-making bodies. (NN, Poland)
- NGOs need to develop consultation and learning tools for more effective participation and influencing policy decision-making. (Stanka, Serbia)
- The new "Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values" programme should be used to promote civil dialogue on macro-regional level as well. (Miklos, Hungary)
- Early education is important to make citizens understand that their involvement is important, they need to be aware from school / college. (Iuliana, Romania)
- Regularly organised events of the European Commission, e.g. the European Week of Regions and Cities and the EU Macro-regional Strategies Week are important policy playing fields for CSOs; they should proactively contribute to and benefit from these events. (Martha, Poland)

Additional quotes

"I think democracy in the EU is already functioning quite well. We could improve it by telling more about how the EU works." (NN, Lithuania)

"The way for citizens to get ownership is to involve them. To invite them to participate in activities in the different topics of the strategy. It means real action, not meeting talking heads from governments and universities." (Kurt, Denmark)

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