

# Engaging Policymakers on Democratic Innovations

## The Research

Demos Helsinki spoke to **participatory policymakers** across Europe at local, national and EU levels of government. From Budapest, Camden, Helsinki and Messina to leading participatory policymakers in Scotland, Finland, Ireland and the United Kingdom, as well as across European Union institutions – we wanted to explore their perspectives on how to broaden and deepen citizen engagement.

How can democratic innovations be effectively embedded in both public administrations and broader society? We asked them about existing approaches, persistent challenges, novel practices of interest, lessons learnt and which policy areas needed further exploration. Here is what they told us!



## Embedding democratic innovations within public administration

Participatory policymakers were overwhelmingly committed to the long-term cultural transformation of administration towards broader and deeper citizen engagement. They identified the following **challenges**:

- Organizational inertia within public administrations
- Deep distrust and fear of citizens' capacities and motivations
- Hesitance to pursue democratic innovations in polarised political atmosphere and lack of political buy-in
- Narrow and little robust evidence that democratic innovations are impactful
- High levels of burnout for participatory policymakers
- Insufficient financial and personnel resources for high-cost participatory initiatives
- Siloed and marginal structures for participatory methods and staff
- Lack of specialised and diverse participatory skill-sets, personnel and training



In response, policymakers emphasised **key practices and needs**:

- **Alliances & Networks:** building cross-government, trans-local, and transnational networks of advocates, policymakers, and practitioners
- **Smart Narratives:** tailoring narratives to secure political support and organisational buy-in, emphasising effective policymaking and democratic resilience
- **Reimagining Laws and Codes:** cleverly placed flexible legal frameworks and norms to reshape organisational culture in public administrations
- **Evidence & Evaluations of Impact:** gathering evidence on policy impact, public trust, and the cost-benefit of participatory methods
- **Integrated Participatory Structures:** establishing participation units with diverse expertise across political and administrative departments
- **Capacity Building:** Providing training and capacity-building in democratic innovation



## Creating a *Demos*: embedding into society

Participatory policymakers are aware of the enormity of the task of embedding democratic innovations into society. Their main **concerns** were:

- **Unintended consequences:** problematic assumptions behind models and a lack of contextualised knowledge of local needs.
- **Power struggles:** navigating struggles over representation and shifts in power between societal democratic actors.
- **Equity and scale:** scaling democratic innovations to engage a wide, diverse communities and ensuring equitable and meaningful public involvement.
- **Short-termism:** societal effects and change from innovations can take years.

In response to these challenges, policymakers were inspired by some of the following **emerging practices**:

- **Disconnection from state institutions:** support for democratic innovations run by social movements, civil society and public actors aimed at shaping public discourse and challenging state policies.
- **Key roles for CSOs, unions, community leaders and associations:** in understanding local contexts and setting terms for, creation and implementation of democratic innovations.
- **Trans-local innovations:** connecting hyper-local democratic innovations across borders on related societal issues.
- **Mixing democratic innovations:** combining consultation, participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies to address both equity and scale.



Democratic innovations may be becoming more prominent, but they remain vulnerable and few and far between!

Join the movement to strengthen participatory practices!

**Join the Nets4Dem network here:**



### What is Nets4Dem?

Nets4Dem unites policymakers, practitioners and researchers, to strengthen our joint capacity to implement innovative democracy initiatives at local, national and European levels.

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