



## European Local Democracy Week

# THEMATIC IDEAS – WHAT KIND OF EVENTS TO EMPOWER CITIZENS?

## 1. CONSULTATION AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

When preparing their own Democracy Week, municipalities may start from an in-depth assessment of the situation as regards democratic participation in their community. This includes establishing appropriate benchmarks and introducing a monitoring system. A self-assessment can be performed using the C.L.E.A.R. tool (available on the reference text section of the European Local Democracy Week website).

Mechanisms to facilitate and evaluate different ways of citizen participation at local and regional level could be established. Surveys could be used to evaluate:

- if/how citizens feel involved in the elaboration of local policies;
- efficiency of the information process;
- citizens' acquaintance with the participatory tools;
- fields/decision areas the citizens would like to be more involved in;
- efficiency of different communication tools and of the means put in place to engage citizens in the decision-making process (meetings, web-pages, public consultations, etc.);
- level of trust in elected representatives;
- impact of decisions taken at different administration levels.

Surveys can be repeated regularly, so as to test the effectiveness of the initiatives put in place to enhance citizen engagement. In addition, results should be made public and discussed with inhabitants, in order to ensure transparency and the consideration of useful suggestions.

Focus groups can provide opinions and suggestions towards policies to be adopted and can help to assess the impact, so as to collect feedback on policies adopted.

Local and regional referendums can be organised to consult citizens on major issues affecting their future.

Initiatives of participatory budgeting can increase transparency and confidence in the democratic process and strengthen social

The type of participation offered should be clearly stated, so as not to create false expectations in citizens, which may lead to frustration and disappointment. The purpose of an initiative can be to inform, consult, dialogue, co-operate or co-decide. The following practical tool to define the level of participation offered and match it with output has been developed by the 12-Star City of Huddinge, Sweden.

Forms of participation	Characteristics	You get to	Examples of methods
Information	One way communication	Know	Newspapers Webb General meetings
Consultation	Gathering opinions	Express opinions	Survey Focus groups Citizen panel
Dialogue	Exchanging ideas	Discuss	Open Space
Cooperation	Planning and doing	Do things	Work group Future workshop
Co-decision making	Deciding together	Decide	Participatory budgeting

cohesion in local communities.

**I**n order to increase confidence and trust in the democratic process, codes of conduct could be developed to encourage local elected representatives and local authorities to behave in a manner consistent with the highest ethical standards and ensure compliance with these standards.

In France, Youth or Children Councils exist in as many as 400 cities. Since 1999 they have been united in an association (Anacej), which aims to promote participation of young people and children in public decision-making, improving co-operation with elected representatives at local level and assisting local communities in the implementation of participatory initiatives for young people.

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The 12-Star City of Stockton on Tees (UK) promotes local democracy in schools through supporting the election of school councils. This activity is part of a long term strategy to encourage young people to be seen and heard as active citizens in their school community and the community where they live. It involves delivering a specially developed fun assembly to promote and explain the importance of having a school council and the voting process. A character called "Count de Voters" who wears a bright period costume helps to deliver the assembly in the Primary Schools using various props and polling equipment. As part of our ELDW 2012 Stockton on Tees supported five school council elections involving over 1000 students aged 6-11 years old.

Through the school council elections, the children learn: why their voice matters; how their vote is their voice in elections; how to choose the best candidate for the job; the role of a school councillor; and how to vote in a polling station.

## 2. DEVELOPING A PARTICIPATORY CULTURE AMONG YOUTH

**T**he mayor and other elected representatives or officials responsible for specific fields could be made available for a "question time" in the schools and universities. Young people could also be taken to the mayor's office and the town hall to show them where and how local administration functions.

**M**ock elections in schools are an excellent tool to help children and students to practice democracy. Teachers can accompany this process with an overview of the history that made it possible for every citizen to have the right and responsibility to practice voting. It is important that students study and learn about the candidates and their debated issues before casting their votes.

Public service divisions, such as the firehouse, police station and the city-planning office, could provide the opportunity to students on a voluntary basis to spend a day with the officials at work, eventually accompany them on the field, in order to motivate the young generation to take part in the public life of the community. Mayors could offer to chosen students to become co-mayors for a short period or participate directly in the actual governance to observe the local decision-making process in practice.

**C**ivic education manuals or guidebooks can be developed for schools. These manuals should give specific examples on how to get involved in local affairs together with the participatory tools provided, and should propose a list of concrete activities and initiatives for young people to engage in at the local level.

**S**chools could organise competitions for essays, articles, paintings and art exhibitions on the theme of rights and responsibilities of citizens, as well as ways of democratic participation – what it means to be an active citizen, and how each of us can contribute to the life of the community. The mayor or other official representatives may be invited to the award ceremony.

**U**niversities and cultural bodies may organise lectures, debates and events on citizens' rights and responsibilities, examining the educational, legal and historical dimensions, and on new tools of participatory democracy, also with regard to

current challenges and the evolution of the concept. They can also organise events and debates on citizen participation involving European organisations, expert speakers, European historians, international bodies, NGOs, human rights organisations. Representatives of the Congress can also be invited as guest speakers.

**S**tudents and young people can be invited for an interview with the mayor, and for an open dialogue or round table discussion with local representatives. These interviews could appear in the local press, the municipal newsletter, and/or the municipality website.

**E**LDW could be the occasion for the creation and launch of children and youth councils: these initiatives will allow young people and children to be more engaged in community decision-making. They will make them acquainted with the principles of democracy, provide a voice to young people and allow them to take an active role in public life.

**S**chools, youth associations and youth councils can help to bring together young people from different social and ethnic backgrounds to take part in joint activities. These may include sport, music, artistic and cultural events. Such initiatives will encourage interaction, combat segregation and cultural isolation, thus creating an environment more favourable to social participation.

**D**irect consultations could be organised with groups of representatives. Ideally, young people themselves should decide who would represent them for a specific consultation. These groups of representatives are established for the purpose of consultation only.

**C**ities or schools could allocate a small budget to a contest on projects relevant to participatory democracy tools and active citizenship. Projects can be assessed by a student panel on the basis of set criteria. Another methodology which could be used to have projects evaluated by a larger audience is the "balloon debate" in which a number of speakers attempt to defend their project and win the approval of the audience. The audience is invited to imagine that the speakers are flying in a hot-air balloon which is sinking and that someone must be thrown out if everyone is not to die. Projects are eliminated one at a time. The last one remaining in the balloon is the

winner and gets to be supported and financed. Each speaker must to explain the reasons why they should not be thrown out of the balloon and save the remainder.

**Y**outh panels could be put in place on the occasion of the ELDW to discuss views and ideas about specific issues affecting the lives of young people in the community. The panel should be broadly representative of a specific community. It is possible then regularly to discuss issues of

The city of Tampere, Finland, organises immigrant family evenings to promote a local working group and to encourage young immigrant mothers to take part in local life and in the municipal elections.

interest to young people.

**C**ities could start producing local magazines or newsletters, in paper or electronic format, specifically targeted to youth and possibly also written by them. The content should cover matters of interest for them: information about sport, art and music events, school issues, give examples of young people who are involved in community projects, as well as offer opportunities to join initiatives and get involved at local level.

**T**hematic lessons could be organised in schools to explain ways and opportunities of democratic participation, including the rights and responsibilities of citizens in this context. For example taxes could be discussed with an explanation of why local, state and national governments need income for hospitals, police, firemen, schools, roads, etc. and how the decisions on their redistribution will be taken.

**S**tudents could be encouraged to devote some of their time for academic mentoring, in order to assist other students who encounter learning difficulties and do voluntary work for civil organisations in their area.

### **3. PARTICIPATION OF DISADVANTAGED GROUPS IN PUBLIC LIFE**

In order to involve more closely the civil society in the organisation of the European Local Democracy Week, the 12-Star City of Strasbourg, France, launched a call for proposals to financially support associative initiatives on the leading theme of ELDW 2012 “*Human rights make for more inclusive communities*”. Five projects were selected to receive funding by the community: they focused on priority areas such as children and young people experiencing social difficulties and disabilities and marginalised people.

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The municipality of the 12-Star City of Festos (Greece) in 2012 organised a number of initiatives aimed at increasing awareness about volunteering among young people. To this end, a meeting was organised with young people living in the area of Festos to discuss volunteering and develop a joint action plan for future activities in the municipality. The organisation of this meeting required the voluntary participation of trainers who have implemented Lifelong Learning programmes in the municipality of Festos.

**F**oreign language websites or leaflets containing information on locally available services can be made available to immigrant communities. These may contain information on where to find the nearest citizens’ advice bureau, language course or intercultural mediator and provide practical information about healthcare, schooling, working permits, etc. One section could present associations and suggest how to get involved in community projects as a mean of better integration.

**C**itizens in multicultural neighbourhoods could organise events to showcase traditional craft products, dishes, costumes or folk songs from their native region, thus promoting social cohesion and understanding.

**L**ocal Councils for Foreigners could be created to discuss issues relating to their integration into

the community life and to be consulted whenever appropriate; it is generally an excellent way to foster dialogue and integration between different cultures. Its functions are normally specified by ad hoc municipal regulations.

A Women’s Council could be established and organised regularly, in order to engage women in local politics and encourage them to actively participate in public debates and local initiatives.

**D**isabled people should also be educated about their rights and opportunities to participate in democratic processes and possibilities to connect with their peers through the internet.

**O**pen days, forums and information centres are good tools to provide detailed information about civic rights and duties.

**I**n the framework of the ELDW, local authorities may choose to develop activities, trainings and workshops, stimulate debates and involve elderly citizens, as well as other disadvantaged groups in social and public activities.

#### **4. INFORMATION SHARING AND E-DEMOCRACY**

**P**ublic and private sector platforms provide an avenue to citizen engagement while offering access to transparent and reliable information. Citizens should have easy and open access to relevant documents and information about decisions that need to be taken at local level. Municipal websites should give comprehensive information about public consultation processes and public events.

**G**eneral assemblies can be organised to give information and collect feedback on recently planned local initiatives and projects. Mayors and councillors may invite citizens to attend debates, meetings and question and answer sessions to discuss relevant issues at local level.

**L**ocal authorities may dedicate a section of their official website to the participation of their municipality in ELDW. The section may be identified by the ELDW’s logo and slogan with a link to the reference texts which are available on the ELDW website. NGOs and associations could be invited to publish their own events and initiatives related to the Week.

**I**n the previous years, many partner cities have taken ELDW as a good opportunity for “open days” and guided tours in town halls and other city administration buildings. Citizens may meet local officials and visit their town hall. This can be especially beneficial for certain target groups that are generally far from the activities going on inside institutions.

**M**unicipalities can organise a wide range of informal activities aimed at helping citizens to better understand how the decision-making process works at local and regional level and at increasing trust between elected representatives and the members of the community they administer.

**P**ublic lessons on electronic tools of participatory democracy can be organised, where young people coach the elderly on how to use the internet, and access information more easily and possibly, in order to be informed about and engaged in community issues. The modern technology allows elderly citizens to keep up to date with the latest events and to remain involved in social, cultural and leisure activities.

**A**wareness campaigns on ways of democratic participation and active citizenship may be launched in the community. Leaflets and other printed materials could be distributed in schools and public places. Posters and banners bearing the logo of the ELDW could be placed around the city to communicate short slogans emphasising the principles of commonly shared values and principles of a democratic society.

**L**ocal radio and TV channels could host the mayor or other officials for a question time with a panel of citizens and advertise the events organised in the occasion of ELDW.

*To get inspired by concrete projects on participatory democracy implemented in municipalities around the world, visit the website of the World Forum for Democracy and consult the discussion Labs:*

[www.world-forum-democracy.org](http://www.world-forum-democracy.org)

## 5. COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

**V**olunteering and solidarity fairs are good opportunities to have citizens meet all or most of

The 12-Star City Province of Reggio Calabria, Italy produced a short film (“Hakuna Matata”) shot in the prison of Reggio Calabria. The film presents the terrible life experience of two wives of prisoners and of their children going through the undignifying experience of the weekly visit to their husbands.

The 12-Star Cities of Büyükçekmece and Lüleburgaz (Turkey) developed a wide promotional and information campaign which included leaflets, banners, posters, gadgets and cockades by using the logos and slogans of the ELDW (downloadable on the ELDW website). These were distributed to the public during all the activities organised in the framework of ELDW. A specific ELDW page was added to their institutional web-page, facebook and twitter accounts. News about the programme of activities was published on local newspapers. NGOs and associations were also involved. After the closure of the ELDW, reports about the events, including photos and clippings, were made available on the dedicated webpages.



the volunteer organisations active in the area. A “volunteer opportunities” booklet could also be produced to present possibilities of getting engaged in various fields.

**C**ity administration could encourage the creation of an online volunteer time bank where citizens, who would like to contribute some of their time

and skills to their community, can register and find information about a range of possible activities. This could be the creation of a sort of day care centre operated by students in the summer to help working families, to teach foreign languages, to help out in elderly homes or just to read tales for hospitalised children. This web-platform could be made available to associations, ONGs and groups involved in community projects to disseminate information about their activities. Time banking helps to build support networks in communities by increasing connections through the sharing of time, care, skills and knowledge.

**S**tudents should be motivated to experience community activism beyond the school. Different volunteer organisations, NGOs and companies could go into schools to talk to students about their activities.

**S**chools and play centres may organise regular meetings or homework support sessions between children and elderly citizens. This will strengthen relationships between generations.

**T**he community should find ways of keeping the elderly active and involved in the life of the community. Their skills and knowledge in fields such as business, administration, teaching, production processes, culture, and in many other fields should become a resource for disadvantaged groups, youth, NGOs, etc. Local authorities may organise training sessions taught by retired people from different backgrounds and targeted to the unemployed, immigrants, young people, etc.

*If you have any proposals on thematic ideas (e.g. type or topic of activities) please share them with us, by writing to [demoweek@coe.int](mailto:demoweek@coe.int)!*