



POSITION PAPER

Democratic Tools for Active Citizenship at All Levels

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Democratic Tools for Active Citizenship at All Levels

Multilevel democracy – from local to global- cannot be considered a utopia anymore, but the only reasonable endeavor to ensure well-being and lasting peace in the era of interdependence and interconnectedness. The Supranational Democracy Dialogue (SDD), hosted by Università del Salento, since its [first edition](#), became a place where like-minded scholars, activists, and international professionals exchange ideas and freely discuss proposals and possible solutions. After the adoption of a [Manifesto on Supranational Democracy](#), in the first edition, in 2018, and a [Declaration on Deliberative Democracy](#), published on May 9, 2023, the contributors to the V Edition “Focus on tools” (May 18-19) shared their thoughts about several democratic instruments for collaboration across national borders which are collected together in a [toolkit](#). The toolkit may evolve over time just like the SDD network is growing, one edition after the other. This position paper summarizes and reflects on the outcome of the fifth SDD edition.

1. Preconditions

The first precondition for real, genuine active citizenship at all levels is the existence of a political space beyond borders, where ideas may be exchanged, and political positions built.

Unfortunately, even if social media are global, TV channels and news programs are focused on the national dimension. This is where most of the political discourse is carried out and confined, notwithstanding the fact that almost all issues are nowadays global, at least the important ones, like the mass violation of fundamental rights of migrants or the disastrous effects of climate change.

Even if the European Union is a legal order and a space where European citizens’ rights find their protection, we are still far from a real European public sphere where civic and political rights are expressed. Not to mention how far this goal appears at the global level.

The first chapter of our toolkit for active citizenship at all levels is all about that: the building of a political sphere, and how much it relates to reliable, effective communication. This is the cornerstone of any democratic society encompassing the right to free speech as well as the right to information. To achieve that, it is important to make sure that the messages conveyed are clear, accurate, and inclusive.

Visual communication is becoming increasingly important as it is more immediate and effective than ever before. Images and videos can convey messages in ways that words cannot possibly match. However, it is important to balance the use of visual communication – or any communication - with ethos, logos, and pathos. The three ingredients are all necessary: ethos refers to the credibility of the speaker, logos refers to the logic and reasoning used to support an argument, and pathos refers to an emotional appeal made in the argument. By balancing these elements, we can ensure that the messages we convey are convincing and coherent.

Another important aspect of communication is accuracy. In today's world, there is an increasing amount of misinformation and disinformation being spread – even more thanks to Artificial Intelligence (AI) which allows realistic images to be shared with fake news, to manipulate public

opinion. To remedy this, it is important to share sources and data so that people can check the facts for themselves as well as develop education in fact-checking. This is required to promote trust and transparency in the democratic process.

However, achieving inclusiveness in communication is easier said than done. There are obstacles to overcome, such as the digital divide and the scarce attention given to non-national issues by mainstream media. To overcome these obstacles, we need to develop *ad hoc* communication strategies that are accessible to everyone. This will help to ensure that the voices of all citizens are heard, and that democracy remains truly participatory and representative.

The building of a public sphere beyond borders also requires movements, parties, and associations that interact transnationally. Europe would set an example if only European elections were to become truly European, with European transnational parties, European electoral law, and TV shows offering a stage for a truly European political debate.

Still, such progress at the European level (as well as the most needed and lacking ones at the global level) even if encouraged by the appropriate reforms, cannot just be top-down. There is a need to complement them bottom-up through civic engagement.

Even then, another precondition is required and that is education: education to appreciate and navigate the challenges of a multicultural society, education to democracy, i.e to critical thinking and to speak one's mind, education to read and evaluate information that could be fake or manipulative, and education to citizenship itself, which means knowing the legal tools for participation and be willing to use them. Actually, the Union has many online tools and platforms to encourage citizens' participation but they are underused and often totally unknown.

The SDD conference was an occasion to consider how much the Erasmus program had achieved, even involving just a little percentage of University students, and how it could set a model, or at least a good practice for further a European and global education. Exchange programs and cross-border collaboration programs could in fact be extended to most of the societal areas.

Interesting reflections arise also on the topic of cross-border communication and interactions as borders are not just the perimeter of national politics, but often also a deterrent for useful interactions in cross-border communities, those sharing cultural heritage, a language, and other commonalities. As much as allowing us to enlarge our perspective, the permeability of borders would enhance, in such cases, true enjoyment of cultural rights. Local authorities may be actors in this dialogue just like civil society at large.

Once such preconditions are met – a public sphere over and cross border, education centered on the role of the individual at all levels as an actor and not just a passive consumer of political advertising – or while we work for these preconditions to be met, it may be useful to remember that there already are many ways for being an active citizen at all levels.

2. Civic Participation

There are many ways to participate in public conversation in a public space, from demonstrating to signing petitions, from blogging and interacting through public platforms to joining transnational movements and parties.

Litigation, claiming mechanisms, spreading information and countering fake news and hate speech, and unmasking manipulation are all ways to participate, individually and in the aggregations of civil society. There are many online platforms in Europe to ease the way and spreading knowledge about them is another of our citizens' duty. They include: [Citizens initiative](#); [Together.eu](#); [Fit For Future](#); [Have your Say](#); [Conference on the Future of Europe](#).

The last one, the Conference on the Future of Europe, has been a stunning example of citizens' involvement. It goes without saying that technology plays a fundamental role both in allowing a multilingual conversation, thanks to the automatic translation, and in organizing and making sense of the amount of data and contributions collected, through digital tools for data mining and mapping of ideas.

Europe is showing a way that could be easily followed by other areas of regional integration as well as by global organizations as these tools work, are easily created and there are no significant barriers to access them (once the access to internet is guaranteed, which is another precondition we should add to the list above).

Yet, the most important tool to be acknowledged is the citizen assembly – or the citizens' panel in EU jargon – the deliberative democracy tool *par excellence*.

The new springtime of deliberative democracy, based on the lot, dates back to the last two decades. The studies conducted within the [OECD](#) were particularly significant in this regard, which actually follow some important experiments conducted at a national level on issues of primary importance, and precede others. In Europe, after the financial crisis of 2008, both Ireland and Iceland have experimented with ways of constitutional revision with this formula. However, this is a global trend (see the activity of NewDemocracy in Australia).

Making the instrument permanent (as the Belgian G1000 Citizens' Summit or the Assemblée Citoyenne in Paris) has an additional value: it serves to communicate to citizens the message implicit in the rotation: knowing that the composition is renewed periodically by drawing lots communicates the message that sooner or later it can happen to anyone to be on board, increasing the attention and interest of citizens in public affairs. The goal is to make everyone a potential actor. Numerous civil society movements support these experiments and offer effective collaboration (for instance, Democracy Next).

The democratic nature of the process, however, is not only in the drawing of lots, which translates into practice an idea of equal opportunities but even more so in the deliberative moment: in the exercise of comparison that leads to the formulation of choices. The majority doctrine proves inclined to combine this type of assembly with representative democracy: the outcome of the city assembly, therefore, does preparatory work with respect to the parliamentary debate. In some experiences, however, deliberative democracy is combined with direct democracy, if there is a subsequent ratification by referendum.

The tool, is, by definition, scalable: applicable from the local to the global, see for instance the experimental [Global Assembly](#), and it seems the new Columbus's egg to bridge the gap between citizens and politicians, especially in the time laps between an election and the next one

The four panels established as part of the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021-2011) were enough successful to be considered a test for several future legislative procedures in the Union in the transition from the Commission's proposal to the Council and Parliament's approval. We hope this procedure will be established as an essential ingredient also in revising the EU treaties once the limiting rule of unanimity will be finally overcome.

3. Litigation

Courts may be precious in supporting individuals ready to take a stance for the collective, as Emilio De Capitani did in defense of transparency in the European legislative process – as the case law [De Capitani I](#) and [De Capitani II](#) testify.

[Climate litigation](#) is another clear evidence of what courts and civil society may achieve together. Taking a stance for collective rights, exposing governance flaws, claiming old and new rights, and addressing the lack of implementation of existing rights (see – as a tool – the referring for preliminary ruling to ECJ in EU case law), all require adequate laws to allow actions and class actions, but also protecting whistleblowers (in need of effective guarantees about their own fundamental and labor rights) and journalists exposing corrupt politicians and powerful manipulators. There is a need for laws effectively stopping the strategic lawsuits against public participation (so-called SLAPP), intended to silence, intimidate or impoverish those who have courage enough to expose powerful enemies of the public interest through abuse of legal instruments (see e.g. see the [EU Directive](#))

4. Digital Tools

Technology is an essential ingredient in this picture as the building of a public online sphere, the creation and management of online platforms, data protection, cyber security, and the countering of the risks of manipulation, all underlie the arguments already expressed.

Artificial intelligence is a precious tool to use with caution to make sense, for instance, of the large number of inputs collected through participatory and deliberative democracy channels – see [crowdlaw](#) -as well as to check facts. An example may be provided by [iVerify](#), the UNDP's automated fact-checking tool that can be used to identify false information and prevent and mitigate its spread. It is supported through the UNDP Chief Digital Office and the UNDP Brussels-based Task Force on Electoral Assistance. Yet, a force for good may be misused as a force for evil, and like many tools, it is neutral in essentials.

Balancing ethics and technological advancement is widely understood as one of the current challenges, a topic we can only briefly touch upon here. Another need, not less important, is the improvement of internet governance to guarantee access rights as well as fair conditions to all.

5. Balancing conflicting interests

Democracy is a multifaceted system that involves managing complexity across various aspects of governance. It encompasses designing policies, adopting legislation, interpreting legislation, choosing the most effective enforcement tools, and managing conflicts. This discourse will delve into how these processes can be facilitated using different tools and approaches.

One key aspect of democracy is mapping needs, which involves understanding the diverse requirements and priorities of the people. By adopting a needs-based approach, policymakers can better identify the issues that require attention and formulate policies accordingly. Furthermore, digitalizing governmental processes can enhance efficiency and accessibility, ensuring that decision-making is transparent and inclusive.

Another crucial element is prioritization, where democratic systems must weigh different concerns and allocate resources accordingly. For example, environmental protection can be prioritized to address pressing ecological challenges. To accomplish this, building partnerships is essential. Initiatives like the [UN Partner Portal](#) facilitate collaboration between governments, international organizations, and civil society, fostering coordinated efforts to tackle global issues effectively.

In the democratic context, building synergies is crucial for sustainable development. Balancing environmental policy, economic growth, and human development is a complex task, but it is necessary to ensure comprehensive and well-rounded progress. By identifying common goals and aligning strategies, policymakers can work towards mutually beneficial outcomes.

Building structured dialogues among stakeholders is an important element in this strategy, and it is vital in a democratic framework. This can be achieved through various means, an example is provided in the EU by the [AI Alliance](#).

Also, a culture of collaboration may be developed in the political arena learning from the corporate experience, where team building, role-playing, and other exercises for personal and collective growth are the rule of the day to facilitate interactions foster understanding, strengthen effective approaches to collaboration, and facilitate decision-making. By engaging stakeholders from different sectors and backgrounds – and learning how to better interact with them - policymakers can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of their policies.

However, democracy also entails trade-offs. It is impossible to please everyone, and conflicting interests and opinions are inevitable. Therefore, it becomes crucial to manage these trade-offs effectively using all the aforementioned tools and approaches. By engaging in open and transparent dialogue, weighing the pros and cons, and considering the long-term consequences, policymakers can navigate trade-offs and make informed decisions that may serve the greater good with the support of citizens, also helping them to accept unpopular decisions when beneficial in the long run.

In summary, democracy entails managing complexity across different stages of governance. Through needs mapping, digitalization, prioritization, partnerships, synergies, structured dialogue, and managing trade-offs, democratic systems can address societal challenges and ensure inclusive and effective decision-making.

6. The evolution of multilateralism

All the tools already mentioned rely on a collaborative approach, among states and other international actors as well as among individuals. Not by chance, the UN Sustainable Development Goals are considered all to be interconnected and the last one (no.17) is "Partnership for the Goals".

After the era of competition, we all hope to see the dawn of the era of collaboration as a result of the increased interdependence inside the world we live in: multinational, multicultural, multidisciplinary multistakeholder, multilayer, just "multi."

More than before we see platforms of international actors acting together – as the project "[Initiate2](#)" in the area of humanitarian response. Key players from different backgrounds may come together for a result that is more a multiplication than an addition of capacities, expertise, and strength.

The new models are well beyond the dichotomy national/international or even international/supranational, as they involve horizontal, grid collaboration at the transnational level among local authorities or even involving business actors inside multistakeholder partnerships.

7. Promoting a new economic model intended for the well-being of people and the planet.

Promoting a new economic model that prioritizes the well-being of people and the planet is a crucial endeavor in our contemporary world. To achieve this, several key strategies can be implemented to counter short-termism (what we could call "casino capitalism"), reduce the dominance of finance over actual GDP, foster responsible business practices, protect social and environmental rights, and encourage long-term investments.

One fundamental aspect of promoting a new economic model is countering short-termism. A suggested step towards achieving this is abolishing quarterly reports of companies, which often prioritize short-term financial gains over long-term sustainability. By shifting the focus to longer-term perspectives, businesses can better consider the social and environmental impacts of their actions, leading to more responsible and sustainable practices.

Additionally, reducing the impressive volume of finance compared to actual GDP is vital for a more balanced and equitable economic system. This can be achieved through the implementation of adequate laws and regulations. By enacting measures that address excessive financialization and promote stability, governments can create an environment that aligns financial activities with real economic growth, reducing the risks of speculative bubbles and market instability.

Fostering codes of conduct and human rights instruments for businesses is another essential element. The [EU Action Plan on Democracy and Human Rights](#) serves as a valuable example in this regard. By establishing clear guidelines and expectations for corporate behavior, businesses can be encouraged to operate in a socially and ethically responsible manner, ensuring that human rights are respected throughout their operations.

Furthermore, trade agreements can be instrumental in shaping a new economic model that benefits individuals and protects social and environmental rights. Agreements such as the [EU-Canada Trade](#)

[Agreement \(CETA\)](#) demonstrate the potential for incorporating provisions that safeguard social and environmental standards, as well as consumers' rights. By making trade agreements more comprehensive and inclusive, the negative impacts of globalization can be mitigated, ensuring that economic activities contribute to sustainable development.

Spreading knowledge about rights, tools, and enforcement mechanisms to the public at large is crucial for empowering individuals and communities. By enhancing public awareness of their rights, consumers can make informed choices and hold businesses accountable for their actions. Governments and organizations can play a vital role in providing accessible information, educational campaigns, and platforms for public engagement, enabling citizens to actively participate in shaping the economic model that serves their well-being.

Taking care of global public goods at the global level, like the EU's commitment at the regional/continental level, is essential. Embracing multilateralism and international cooperation allows for the protection of common resources, such as the environment, public health, and peace. By engaging in global initiatives and partnerships, countries can collectively address global challenges and promote sustainable development on a planetary scale.

Encouraging long-term investments is a crucial element of the new economic model. Another interesting proposal that surfaced at the conference is about the use of Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) through multilateral development banks for investments. Governments and international financial organizations may facilitate long-term financing for sustainable projects. This approach supports the transition to a more environmentally friendly and socially inclusive economy, promoting innovation and addressing long-term societal needs.

In conclusion, promoting a new economic model that prioritizes the well-being of people and the planet requires a multi-faceted approach. By countering short-termism, reducing the dominance of finance, fostering responsible business practices, protecting social and environmental rights, spreading knowledge to the public, prioritizing global public goods, and encouraging long-term investments, we can create a more sustainable, equitable, and prosperous future. These strategies, combined with multilevel governance, active citizens' participation at all levels, and international cooperation, can shape an economic model that serves the interests of both present and future generations.

8. Final Remarks

The Supranational Democracy Dialogue is not just an event series, it is a network, growing year after year as an epistemic community, and it is a lab in itself for multidisciplinary, multistakeholder, intergenerational conversation as well as a place for reflection out of the box, challenging the current narrative about global governance and democracy.

It may appear that such a topic is just too broad for a single conference or even a series, yet, in the long term it is more than that: it is a constant conversation among concerned individuals bringing to the table their own expertise and experience and accepting the challenge to learn new, different perspectives in order to reach a better understanding of current times, to focus and fine-tune their own contribution and to combine it with that provided by other like-minded experts and activists.