

# How to design green cities with citizens? Insights from BiodiverCities

**Final policy event of the BiodiverCities project**  
Hosted by the European Committee of the Regions  
8 September 2022, 9:00 – 13:15

## A REPORT OF THE DAY

On September 8<sup>th</sup> 2022 in the Committee of the Regions took place the BiodiverCities conference, where the ten cities that have participated in the *BiodiverCities* project shared their experiences and reflections. The conference was divided into three panels, each one with a different main point of debate. The event opening was carried out by Mattia de' Grassi, Member of the Cabinet of Vice-President Šuica, who situated and highlighted the relevancy of *BiodiverCities* in the present time:

*“[Strengthening participatory democracy] is not easy in the current geopolitical context [...] but is more important than ever that we have this project and that we continue experimenting.”*

*Mattia de' Grassi*

Bert Kurby, Head of Unit at the CoR, was the moderator of the first panel, which dealt with the following question: **“POLITICS IS LOCAL. How to engage citizens on key environmental challenges of our times at the local level?”** This discussion is relevant to hold since, *“in this current political mandate, actions at the local and regional level addressing the Green Deal, meeting climate change and environmental challenges are a key priority.”*

The first discussant of the panel was Medea Ferrigno (former Council member for urban planning of the Municipality of Regalbuto). She contended that maintaining quality engagement is arduous since it requires innovation and new skills for different actors, first the public institutions. According to her, such a change necessitates a deliberative investment of economic resources and development of new skills in the public administration, which is a matter of political choices. And this shift cannot be rushed, it takes time, as change will only take place if it is genuine and inclusive.

Samo Peter Medvev, Deputy-Mayor of the City of Maribor, reflected on the uncertainties that a project like *BiodiverCities* has helped to address for a city like Maribor aiming to become more resilient and inclusive for all its citizens. He asserted that firstly, short political cycles, secondly, poor communication as well as lack of awareness and thirdly, lack of resources, made citizen engagement in support of urban biodiversity more challenging but also more necessary to increase trust among citizens and its administrators. Tapping onto informal networks is key in this sense.

Finally, Ashley North, the Alderman for Climate, Mobility and Finance of the Municipality of Leiden, affirmed like the two other discussants, that effective citizen engagement is strenuous, especially when attempting to enhance the presence of the “unusual suspects.” He disputed, similar to Samo Peter Medvev that, in order to build trust, the connection with third parties such as museums or organizations is essential. Mr. North further recommended to be persistent

and to invest time working with “the unusual suspects”, as it is essential to be willing to understand all citizens more closely and to not only be leaders but also **followers**. The last insight he gave was to use smaller and less technical terms that will help citizens connect more.

Johannes Klumpers, senior expert at DG Clima concluded the discussion by summarizing the main takeaways:

- 1- Engaging with organizations and third parties is essential
- 2- Institutional change towards innovation and co-creation will only come if it is genuine, and that is time-consuming.
- 3- Citizen engagement needs to be inclusive, as through fostering a diversity of citizens continuity of action that spans beyond the political cycle will come.

After the panel was finalized, an *intermezzo* was presented by Milo Manica, who represented *BiodiverCities* Varese. He highlighted the importance of preserving biodiversity, especially the conservation of swifts. With no swifts, he contended “*we should use insecticides, which pose health and biodiversity threats to humans.*” In this context, *BiodiverCities* Varese was born, as the number of swifts was observed to be decreasing. The project applied citizen science methods, as citizens were asked to spot swifts and swift colonies to help in collecting and classifying data with the aim of improving scientific knowledge.

The second panel, “*Changing the ways institutions work*”, was moderated by Stefan Appel, Head of Unit, DG Regio. The discussants, José Ferreira, Ieva Misiune, Joan Riera and Franca Marsh reflected upon the following question: **how to mainstream citizen engagement in public institutions?**

José Ferreira, urban planner representing the Municipality of Valongo, contended that in order to mainstream citizen engagement, political will and institutional change are needed to instigate a shift towards an institutional culture that prioritizes participatory democracy. For that, collaborating with proxies is needed, such as universities or other types of organizations. Moreover, promoting synergies between departments is required.

Ieva Misiune, researcher at the University of Vilnius, added that three processes are needed in order to anchor citizen engagement within the institutional context: legitimacy, leadership and coordination activities, a relevant capacities to enhance communication between the stakeholders. In order to accomplish these three requisites, a feedback mechanism that allows citizens to see the relevancy of their contribution should be put in place. Moreover, institutions should work with professionals and facilitators in order to carry out these participatory processes. Finally, the public administration should accept the uncertainty of the process and should be open to experimentation in order to mainstream citizen engagement. In her last remark, Mrs. Misiune also indicated that citizens should also reflect on their performance in order to institutionalize these participatory practices. Citizens ought to be interested in themselves and show a drive for co-creative projects.

On the flip side of the coin, Franca Marsh, a practitioner working in a local NGO, Palmanana, representing Palermo, stated that a reform within the public administration is required to really foster co-creation projects and that carrying out participatory processes of different kinds in vulnerable territories requires greater care. She also pointed out the relevance that legitimacy of these processes in the eyes of citizens as, in her experience, it sparked the interest of citizens to participate. Joan Riera, representing the Municipality of Palma de Mallorca, also

asserted that a change in the public administration is needed since it is excessively bureaucratic and not enough resources are directed to these types of projects. Consequently, this situation leads to a poor culture of public engagement and to challenges in recruiting participants overall. In order to overcome these difficulties and mainstream co-creation, Joan Riera highlighted the importance of collaborating with universities, and the importance of defining quality standards for citizen engagement projects. A more exploratory solution he gave was to establish European standards and academic titles corresponding to different levels of expertise on public participation.

The concluding remarks of the second panel were done by Ann-Karin Holmen, a professor and researcher at the University of Stavanger. She asserted that the *BiodiverCities* project illustrates at its core, the mutual dependence between “champions” and “sponsors” to introduce innovations. The champions are the ones who believe in citizen engagement, and as such, they start and push new innovative ways to engage, and they provide an integrative kind of leadership. However, in order to instigate long-term changes towards mainstreaming co-creation as a way of working, they need cultural and structural support - they need sponsors. These sponsors should not only be citizens, and they should also be within the administrative system, between and across departments.

Finally, the second part of the conference was closed by a second *intermezzo*, where Karine Princé from the National Museum of Natural History of Paris discussed the importance of citizen science in fostering bird watching, and the significance of sustainable land use practices, which can help support richer and more diverse bird communities.

Finally, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and last panel called: ***“Improbable civic spaces: reappropriating public spaces for citizen engagement -a toolkit”***, took place, and was moderated by Suzanna Matvejevic, Senior Advisor for Outreach, European Committee of the Regions. In this panel Ilona Kish, the director of the Public Libraries Network 2030, Danica Lacarac, Project Manager of the National Green Roof Association of Serbia and Pedro Pinho, researcher at the University of Lisbon, discussed the role that public libraries play in citizen engagement. Ilona Kish contended that *“public libraries are a key part of that informational processes [needed for integrative processes such as co-creation] and also are a key bridge between people and institutions.”* The statement was reflected in the accounts on the *BiodiverCities* projects carried out in Lisbon and Novi Sad, as libraries were a key part of their success. In Lisbon, Pedro Pinho affirmed that thanks to the libraries, the project was able to bring on board a big range of citizens with different backgrounds. Moreover, the collaboration with the public library also helped in the refocus of the project, and *BiodiverCities* Lisbon went from a quite academic-narrow project to a more relatable and thus, more inclusive one. Danica Lacarac, representing Novi Sad, added that the inclusion of the library was beneficial for initiating the first contact with the municipal representatives. To conclude, she added that, similar to Palermo, engaging authorities rather than citizens, takes time.

After the third panel was concluded, the third *intermezzo* took place. In this discussion Marialuisa Tamborra (JRC European Commission) and Benjamin Caspar (DG ENV at the European Commission), had their final reflection on the *BiodiverCities*:

***“BiodiverCities showed that having participatory approaches that improve biodiversity is possible.”***

*Marialuisa Tamborra*

*“There are lessons we could learn from this project about how citizen engagement should be done [...] if you have proper citizen engagement, the urban green spaces that you developed are better designed.”*

Benjamin Caspar

The event was closed by Deputy Director-General of the Directorate-General for Environment and Manager of the Mission on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, Patrick Child. He emphasized the need to maintain a strong focus on biodiversity in these extremely challenging times that are accentuated by the energy supply crisis caused by the invasion of Russia in Ukraine. Moreover, BiodiverCities bears importance within the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 EU framework, which is one of the main pillars of the European Green Deal. This framework, not only highlights the importance of citizen engagement but also of new governance modes. *BiodiverCities*, apart from proving to be relevant in today's political climate, has furthermore *“helped to develop and create a valuable form and platform for us to learn lessons and get insights into how different models of citizens engagement can fit into the very different institutional set ups and political contexts in cities around the EU.”*