

JRC CONFERENCE AND WORKSHOP REPORT

How to design green cities with citizens: insights from BiodiverCities

*Notes from the final policy
event, 8 September 2022,
European Committee of
Regions, Brussels*

Junyer Puig, H.

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Contact information

Name: Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy

Email: EU-CITIZEN-ENGAGEMENT@ec.europa.eu

EU Science Hub

<https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu>

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Abstract

Since 2020, ten cities across Europe have been engaging citizens in support of urban biodiversity. Within the BiodiverCities project, local inhabitants have co-created a variety of activities such as urban gardens, jointly re-imagined empty green lawns and unused spaces, co-designed strategic plans and new visions for their cities and neighbourhoods. Overall, more than a thousand citizens were engaged. Local institutions have also been involved, leading to actual institutional innovation and greater policy impact.

On September 8th 2022, the BiodiverCities final event took place at the European Committee of the Regions in Brussels, Belgium. The aim of the event was to reflect upon their local efforts *ex-post* in order to collect lessons learnt and address the challenges of co-creation as a way of working with citizens and within public institutions. The topics discussed in the conference set good grounds on how to proceed with the institutionalization of co-creative projects in the future, at different levels of governance.

Acknowledgements

The Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy would like to thank the European Committee of the Regions for supporting the organization and hosting the event.

Warm thanks to all participants.

1 Introduction of the event and setting of the scene

On September 8th 2022, the BiodiverCities final policy event took place in Brussels, kindly hosted by the European Committee of the Regions.

The final policy event of the BiodiverCities project, one of the key projects of the European Commission's **Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy**¹, aimed to present highlights, lessons learnt and the local impact achieved throughout citizen engagement processes run in ten cities across Europe in 2021 and 2022. It was an opportunity to discuss policy needs and other enabling conditions to ensure that citizens are engaged in the co-creation of urban green infrastructure and by extension to other fields of land use planning.

The meeting brought together practitioners and city officials involved in BiodiverCities in dialogue with policymakers of EU institutions and Member States.

Box 1. What is BiodiverCities?

BiodiverCities is a project developed by the EU at the request of the European Parliament, run by the Joint Research Centre in collaboration with Directorate-General for Environment. It is part of the Commission's **Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy**'s portfolio of projects. Ten European cities were involved (Palermo, Regalbuto, Varese in Italy, Lisbon and Valongo in Portugal, Palma in Spain, Leiden in the Netherlands, Maribor in Slovenia, Novi Sad in Serbia and Vilnius in Lithuania), running participatory processes in support of urban biodiversity and green infrastructure in 2021 and 2022, aiming to improve and increase civil society participation in decision-making. The project also contributed to the mapping of urban biodiversity and ecosystem services at European scale.

Across the 10 cities, over 1,000 citizens have been engaged, through different methods and tools. At times, citizens have been invited to contribute to key policy and planning documents such as a Masterplan (Valongo, Portugal) or a Strategic Development Plan (Regalbuto, Italy), at others, they took part of hands-on activities such as gardening or walking tours to actively re-make and re-imagine their city and neighbourhood. Citizens were recruited through opportunistic or purposive sampling (e.g., inhabitants of a neighbourhood).

BiodiverCities sits within the context of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. Results from the project are of relevance to EU Missions for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, Adaptation to Climate Change and Soil, as well as, among others, for the implementation of the Nature Restoration Law Proposal.

The main public output of the project consists of an Atlas (forthcoming), collecting case-studies and highlighting challenges, including institutional, and lessons learnt of the local engagement processes. All projects, carried out in the ten cities involved, are already available on [the Competence Centre's Community of Practice website](https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/participatory-democracy_en).

The conference was organized into three panels moderated by EU policy officers, each one concluded with an "intermezzo", and each panel with a different main point of debate.

The event opening was carried out by **Mattia de' Grassi, a Member of Cabinet of Vice-President of the European Commission, Mrs. Dubravka Šuica**, who situated and highlighted the relevance of BiodiverCities in the present time. He asserted the following:

"[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"

¹ https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/participatory-democracy_en and <https://cop-demos.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

Figure 1. BiodiverCities event at the European Committee of the Regions



Mr. de' Grassi argued that as the European Commission is dedicated to nourish participatory projects, while also showing commitment to counter climate change in urban areas. Since cities are "at the forefront of innovation", BiodiverCities has proven to be fit-for-purpose. Furthermore, BiodiverCities has been reflecting and reinforcing one of the main conclusions derived from the Conference on the Future of Europe (COFE), the pan-European participatory process carried out from April 2021 to April 2022: deliberative democratic practices are one of the possible ways for public institutions to meaningfully engage citizens in the decision-making processes. Following Mattia de Grassi's opening words, the first panel took place, where discussants debated **how to engage citizens on key environmental challenges at the local level**.

2 First panel. Politics is local: how to engage citizens on key environmental challenges of our times at the local level?

Bert Kuby, Head of Unit at the European Committee of the Regions, was the moderator of the first panel, which dealt with this following question: **Politics is local. How to engage citizens on key environmental challenges of our times at the local level?** This discussion proved to be relevant to hold since, as Mr. Kuby affirmed, *"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, Italy. She contended that maintaining quality engagement is arduous, since it requires innovation and new skills for different actors, firstly the public institutions. According to her account, 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. This shift cannot be rushed: it takes time, as change will only take place if it is genuine and inclusive.

"Engagement must mean empowerment for all the citizens" (Medea Ferrigno)

Dr. Samo Peter Medvev, Deputy-Mayor of the City of Maribor, Slovenia 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. Based on Maribor's experience, tapping onto informal networks to reach out to citizens has proven to be key in this sense.

"Engaging citizens is critical for the transformation of the city" (Samo Peter Medvev)

Finally, Ashley North, the Alderman for Climate, Mobility and Finance of the Municipality of Leiden, Netherlands affirmed, similarly to the two other discussants, that effective citizen engagement is strenuous, especially when attempting to enhance the presence of the "unusual suspects." He disputed, as Dr. Samo Peter Medev, that, in

order to build trust, the connection with third parties such as museums or other organizations, and research institutions 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 as well as to not only be leaders but also **followers**. The last insight Mr North shared, was to use smaller and less technical terms that will allow citizens to relate more to the process.

“There are many people in your city who do know solutions and you should be open-minded to that” (Ashley North)

Johannes Klumpers, Senior Expert at Directorate-General for Climate Action, European Commission and acting as discussant to this first panel concluded the discussion by summarizing the main takeaways:

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

2.1 First intermezzo

After the panel was finalized, an “intermezzo” was presented by Milo Manica, who discussed the BiodiverCities project in Varese, Italy. By reproducing in the conference room, the sounds of swifts, Mr. Manica highlighted the importance of preserving biodiversity, especially the conservation of swifts. Without swifts, he contended “*we should use more insecticides, which pose a biodiversity and human health threats.*” The project made use of citizen science, as citizens were asked to identify swifts and swift colonies in their towns and territories to help in collecting and classifying data with the aim of improving scientific knowledge.

3 Second panel. Changing the ways institutions work.

The second panel focusing on “**Changing the ways institutions work**”, was moderated by Stefan Appel, Head of Unit at Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission. The speakers - José Ferreira, Ieva Misiune, Joan Riera and Franca Marsh, reflected upon the following question: **how to mainstream citizen engagement in public institutions?**

Figure 2. Discussants of the second panel



José Ferreira, urban planner representing the Municipality of Valongo, Portugal, 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.**

“Promoting the financial and technical means that together, with a new organizational culture, will allow the effectiveness of the process in a sustainable and continuous way” (José Ferreira)

To achieve that, working through “proxies” is needed, such as collaborating with universities or other types of local organizations. Moreover, promoting synergies between departments is a necessity.

Ieva Misiune, researcher at the University of Vilnius, Lithuania added that three elements are needed in order to anchor citizen engagement within the institutional context: a) legitimacy, b) leadership and c) coordination skills i.e., a relevant capacity to enhance communication between the stakeholders involved, and to set clear goals and expectations. In order to accomplish these three conditions, a feedback mechanism should be put in place, allowing citizens to see the relevancy of their contribution.

“The process should never be left for voluntary unpaid work” (Ieva Misiune)

Moreover, agreeing with José Ferreira, she contended that 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 learn to trust citizens by being open to experimentation in order to mainstream citizen engagement.

On the other side of the coin, Franca Marsh, a practitioner working in an NGO based in Palermo, Italy, called *Palma Nana*, stated that a comprehensive 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 contended that such a change did not take place in Palermo yet, but that BiodiverCities has enabled to progress towards attending to citizens’ demands.

“BiodiverCities has been a great experience in terms of having the possibility of scaling up the voice [of the citizens], which is already an achievement” (Franca Marsh)

Joan Riera, representing the Municipality of Palma, Spain 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 engagement and to challenges in recruiting participants, overall. In order to overcome these difficulties and mainstream co-creation, Joan Riera highlighted the following aspects: 1) the importance of using and shaping the existing facilities into **arenas** and platforms that allow to share knowledge and best practices (BiodiverCities is an example, in this sense); 2) the significance of partnering with universities, and 3) the importance of professional expertise in achieving participatory efficiency and meeting quality standards of participatory processes.

“The network that has been created in the BiodiverCities project can be used and further expanded as a European platform for citizen participation and good practices” (Joan Riera)

The concluding remarks of the second panel were done by Ann-Karin Holmen, Associate Professor in Political Science at the University of Stavanger, Norway. She argued that the BiodiverCities project illustrates, at its core, the mutual dependence between the “champions” and the “sponsors”, figures that are necessary to introduce innovations in the public sector and beyond. 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 introduce long-term changes towards mainstreaming co-creation as a way of working, “champions” need cultural and structural support, i.e., they need “sponsors”. These sponsors should not only be citizens. They can also be found within the public institutions, at different levels of governance.

3.1 Second intermezzo

The second part of the conference was closed by a second “intermezzo”, where Karine Princé from the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, discussed the importance of citizen science in research, with particular reference to bird watching. Karine Princé also stressed the significance of sustainable land use practices, which can help support richer and more diverse bird communities as they have the potential to reduce biotic homogenization.

Figure 3. Slides of the second “intermezzo” (monitoring common birds in the French countryside) presented by Karine Princé



4 Third panel. Public spaces for citizen engagement.

The 3rd and last panel called **“Improbable civic spaces: reappropriating public spaces for citizen engagement –a toolkit”**, took place, and was moderated by Suzanna Matvejevic, Senior Expert for local outreach at the European Committee of Regions. In this panel, the role that public libraries play in citizen engagement was discussed by 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.

Ilona Kish contended that libraries hold a long history of being spaces where the local community gathers, where knowledge is exchanged, and where participation can take place. Hence, libraries are trusted spaces. Ms. Kish affirmed that public libraries can be, in fact, *“a key bridge between people and institutions.”* This statement was reflected in the accounts of BiodiverCities projects carried out in Lisbon and Novi Sad, as libraries were a key part of their ability to engage local inhabitants.²

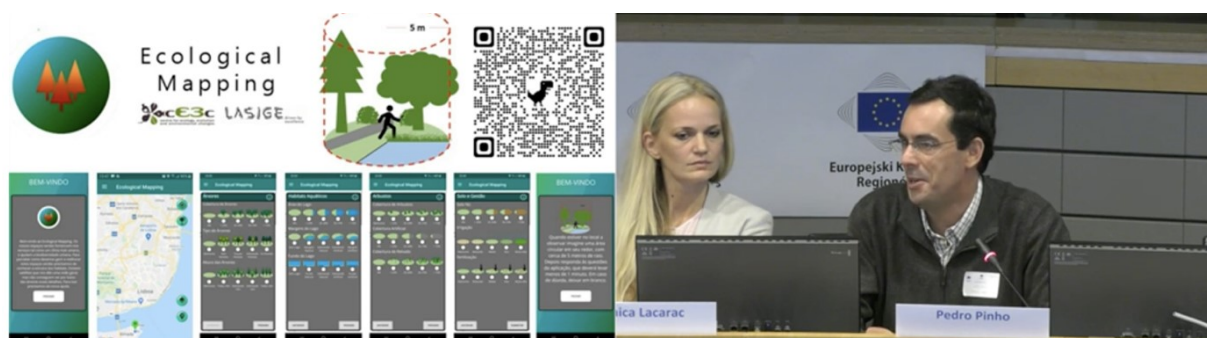
In Lisbon, Pedro Pinho affirmed that, thanks to the libraries, the project could bring on board a diversity of citizens and therefore, of perspectives. Moreover, the collaboration with the public library also helped to refocus of the project, and BiodiverCities Lisbon moved from being a quite academic-narrow project to a more relatable and thus, more inclusive one.

“With Lisbon library network, we could bring on board citizens with different social and economic backgrounds”
(Pedro Pinho)

Danica Lacarac, representing Novi Sad, added that the inclusion of the library was beneficial in initiating the first contact with the municipal representatives. To conclude, she added, similarly to the experience shared by Franca Marsh, from the city of Palermo, that:

“Engaging authorities rather than citizens, takes time.” (Danica Lacarac)

Figure 4. Slides of Pedro Pinho's presentation



4.1 Third intermezzo

After the third panel was concluded, the third “intermezzo” took place. In this discussion, Marialuisa Tamborra, Project leader at the Joint Research Centre and Benjamin Caspar, Policy Officer working at Directorate-General for Environment of the European Commission, had their final reflection on the outcomes of BiodiverCities:

² The collaboration between the Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy and Public Library Network 2030 (PL2030) will lead to the publication of the “Rough guide to citizen engagement in public libraries” (forthcoming). The toolkit, drafted by PL2030 and the Lisbon Library Network, will display how different libraries played a greater role in local policymaking processes. Building on this work, a follow up research project on “Public spaces as spaces of citizen engagement. Building partnerships to democratize science and policy”, will critically focus on other kind of civic spaces such as, for example, museums, theaters or parks and their contribution to invited forms of public participation and democratic life at large. This project is going to kick-off by December 2022.

“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)

5 Conclusion of the event

The event was closed by **Patrick Child, Deputy Director-General (DDG) of the Directorate-General for Environment and Manager of the EU Mission on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities**. He emphasized the need to maintain a strong focus on biodiversity in these extremely challenging times that are aggravated by the current energy supply crisis.

Moreover, BiodiverCities bears importance within the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, which is one of the main pillars of the European Green Deal. The strategy stresses the importance of citizen engagement, introducing the need for a new governance framework. It also recognises the importance of addressing the quality of urban ecosystems for reaching its objectives. Among others, the DDG also referred to the Commission proposal for a Nature Restoration Law as well as to the forthcoming guidance on urban greening plans, the recommendations from the Conference on the Future of Europe and the EU Mission on Climate Neutral and Smart-Cities, by highlighting **how these pivotal policy initiatives put at their heart citizens and their engagement**.

BiodiverCities, according to Mr. Child, apart from proving to be relevant in today’s political climate, it 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.” (Patrick Child)

Figure 5. BiodiverCities partners



The recording of the event is available at the following link:

<https://frontend.cor.smv.cloud/en/sessions/reference/biodivercities-conference>

5.1 Follow up

Learnings from the BiodiverCities, including those emergent from the policy event, as well as the case studies of the ten cities involved, will feature as part of the main public output of the project, namely an **Atlas**.

BiodiverCities has indeed presented relevant lessons for the future of citizen engagement in policymaking and research for the Commission and beyond e.g.:

- Citizen engagement needs to be inclusive and to be inclusive, different formats and recruitment strategies are to be used;
- Trust and time are imperative for co-creative projects to take place and be meaningful;
- Citizen engagement should be understood as a mean not a goal, in order to be mainstreamed. Moreover, its mainstreaming will only take place when institutional changes come about, and these changes will only be realized if they are accompanied by a structural support from sponsors i.e. public institutions.
- Spaces where participatory activities are developed can also have a big influence on the success of the projects.

The Atlas will showcase the ten case-studies highlighting challenges, including institutional, and lessons learnt of the local engagement processes. The Atlas will be published in Spring 2023. All projects, carried out in the ten cities involved, are currently available on the Competence Centre's Community of Practice website.³

The BiodiverCities project also led to a research spin-off solely focused on the institutional challenges to co-creation as a way of working with citizens and within institutions carried out by Ann-Karin Holmen and Helena Junyer Puig. The aim of these researches is better understanding the conditions for institutional innovation and learning, with regard to mainstreaming citizen engagement in public institutions (forthcoming in early 2023).

³ https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/projects-activities/biodivercities-project_en

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Annexes

Annex 1. Agenda of the policy event



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 – 13:00
rue Belliard/Belliardstraat 101, room JDE53

The final policy event of the [BiodiverCities](#) project aims to present highlights, lessons learnt and the local impact achieved throughout **citizen engagement processes run in ten cities across Europe in 2021-2022**. It is an opportunity to discuss policy needs and other enabling conditions to ensure that citizens are engaged in the co-creation of urban green infrastructure and by extension to other fields of land use planning. The meeting will bring together practitioners and city officials involved in BiodiverCities in dialogue with policymakers of EU institutions and Member States.

BiodiverCities is a pilot project funded by the EU at the request of the European Parliament, run by the Joint Research Centre in collaboration with Directorate-General for Environment of the European Commission. It is part of the portfolio of projects of the Commission's [Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy](#).

The project sits within the political context of the [EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030](#) and the latest [COM \(2022\) 404 final CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE Putting Vision into Concrete Action](#). BiodiverCities can also provide knowledge and know-how of direct interest to EU Missions for [Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities](#), [Adaptation to Climate Change](#) and [Soil](#).

Programme

08:15-8:45 **Arrival** **at** **the** **European** **Committee** **of** **the** **Regions**
Grab a coffee/tea!

9:00-9:10 **Welcome and Introduction to the BiodiverCities project.**

Ângela Guimarães Pereira and Anna Paola Quaglia, Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy

9:10-9:25 Setting the scene: The broader EU wide citizen engagement vision – putting BiodiverCities in context

Mattia de' Grassi, Member of Cabinet of Vice-President of the European Commission Dubravka Šuica

9:25-10:25 Conversation n°1 “Politics is local!” How to engage citizens on key environmental challenges of our times at the local level?

Moderator

Bert Kuby, Head of Unit, European Committee of the Regions

Panellists

Medea Ferrigno, Presidio partecipativo del Patto di Fiume Simeto [Regalbuto, Italy]

Samo Peter Medved, Deputy Mayor, Municipality of Maribor [Slovenia]

Ashley North, Alderman for Climate, Mobility and Finance, Municipality of Leiden [Netherlands]

Discussant

Johannes Klumpers, Senior Advisor, Horizon Europe Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change

*Intermezzo: story telling with **Milo Manica**, Gruppo Insubrico di Ornitologia e LIPU Varese [Italy]*

10:35-10:55 Coffee break

10:55-11:55 Conversation n°2 Changing the ways institutions work. How to mainstream citizen engagement in public institutions?

Moderator

Stefan Appel, Head of Unit, DG Regio, European Commission

Panellists

José Ferreira, Municipality of Valongo [Portugal]

Ieva Misiūnė, University of Vilnius [Lithuania]

Joan Riera Jaume, Municipality of Palma de Mallorca [Spain]

Franca Marsh, Palma Nana [Palermo, Italy]

Discussant

Ann-Karin Holmen, Associate professor, University of Stavanger [Norway]

*Intermezzo: story telling with **Karine Princé**, Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris [France]*

12:05-12:40 Improbable civic spaces: reappropriating public spaces for citizen engagement – a toolkit

Moderator

Suzanna Matvejevic, Senior Advisor for Outreach, European Committee of the Regions

Told by

Ilona Kish, Public Libraries Network 2030, **Pedro Pinho**, University of Lisbon [Portugal] and **Danica Lacarac**, National Green Roof Association of Serbia [Novi Sad, Serbia]

Intermezzo: *What have you been enjoying most?* with **Marialuisa Tamborra** (JRC, European Commission) and **Benjamin Caspar** (DG ENV, European Commission)

12:45-13:00 Closing remarks by **Patrick Child**, Deputy Director-General of the Directorate-General for Environment, Manager of the Mission on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, European Commission

13:00 Onwards – Reception in Atrium 5

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