

Strengthening Europe Through Meaningful Participation

A Contribution to the Debate on the Conference on the Future of Europe.



Success Factors
Based on 25 Years'
Experience in Citizen
Participation



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IFOK strongly endorses the plan to set up an inclusive, transparent and accessible Conference on the Future of Europe, featuring broad and diverse citizen participation, as envisaged in the recent communications of the European Commission and the European Parliament. The Conference offers a unique opportunity to counter alienation in the European project and to address growing societal frictions. As such, citizens from all backgrounds, walks of life and regions should be consulted on solutions to the EU's most pressing institutional, environmental, social and economic challenges. The success of well-conducted citizen participation derives from qualitative results acceptable to the majority of the European people, giving rise to political and societal consensus on the future of Europe.

However, if not conducted thoroughly, the Conference on the Future of Europe and its citizen participation can create high political risks for the European Union. The Conference needs to give room for citizens' concerns, opinions and recommendations and involve them in the decision-making process. If citizens' involvement is merely seen as a necessary communicative tool, but not as a source of substantive input for the Conference, it will most likely achieve exactly the opposite of the Conference's aims. This threatens the Conference's legitimacy and risks stoking populist sentiment. The future of Europe is deeply intertwined with the future of politics. Both are ripe for a shift in mindset, which entails pivoting towards citizens' needs and enabling meaningful participation.

With our 25 years of experience in conceptualising, designing, steering and implementing participatory and co-creative processes for government agencies at local, regional, national and European levels, we want to share critical success factors for this process. Creating an atmosphere of open dialogue and constructive deliberation, and making sure that tangible results are fed into the relevant administrative and legislative processes is the key to meaningful citizen participation. The following insights should therefore be taken into account when finalising the design and organising the Conference and citizen participation.



Climbing Up the Ladder of Participation: The Optimal Linkage Between Citizens and Conference

- ➔ Inviting MPs from both the EU and national levels, as well as representatives from all EU institutions, social partners and civil society organisations to the Conference, will increase the body's legitimacy and the acceptance of its decisions across borders and party lines. Furthermore, this creates the opportunity to turn the Conference into a European Convention in case treaty changes should become a possibility. However, as the designated members of the Conference are mainly the same people who already discuss and influence European politics on a professional and daily basis, the accompanying participation of citizens needs to be strong. We could, for example, imagine a Conference setting in which randomly selected citizens from all Member States are constant members of the Conference. If citizens will get the chance to being part of the Conference, they should make up at least one third of its members in order to have a meaningful say within the Conference. Having learned from the very positive experiences of citizens' assemblies in Ireland, France and Germany, **making their participation a key part of the Conference would send a strong signal to the people of Europe: your voices are heard!**
- ➔ There might be reasons why the direct participation of citizens in the Conference may not be possible. Still, the **main success factor for meaningful citizen participation lies in linking both, citizens participation and the Conference** – no matter through which actual format the citizens of Europe will be involved. There are several options to ensure that citizen participation will be optimally linked with the Conference on the Future of Europe. If the Citizens' Agoras will be realized as currently envisaged by the European Parliament, some of the randomly selected citizens should be **sent to the Conference as representatives and reciprocal feedback loops should be installed**. By doing so, a profound cooperation between them is possible instead of merely informing the Conference on citizens' opinions. Additionally, joint working groups between the Conference and the Agoras on the different Agoras' topics should be an option. Another way to enable meaningful citizen participation would be to **establish a Citizens' Conference as supplement of the Conference on the Future of Europe**. It could meet at identical time slots and discuss the same topics; this regular exchange would lead to a strong cooperation between the two formats. The participants of the Citizens' Conference could be assembled by citizens from the Agoras or by other randomly selected citizens from all Member States.
- ➔ The **random selection of citizens ensures the participation of people from all backgrounds, walks of life and regions**, representing the diverse demography of Europe, whether in a Citizens' Conference on the Future of Europe, Citizens' and Youth Agoras or other participatory formats, including those at the national level. Random selection necessitates an inclusive and accessible procedure for all actions within the Conference and its accompanying processes to ensure that everyone will generally be able to take part and follow the proceedings.
- ➔ The **discussions and working procedures of the citizens' formats should be inclusive and accessible to ensure meaningful participation**. Working in small groups, using different methods, establishing rules to ensure everybody's involvement, easily comprehensible information and a strong, citizen-friendly facilitation will make the citizens' involvement a success for all participants.
- ➔ A Conference on the Future of Europe which enables meaningful participation of citizens, fosters new ways of political decision-making at the European level. To ensure that citizen participation does not remain a one-off event, the **involvement of citizens in future European decision-making processes should be a main topic of the Conference** when discussing institutional questions, as was the case throughout the German "Bürgerrat Demokratie" in 2019.





Open Dialogue and Constructive Deliberation: A Synced Mix of Online and Offline Participation Formats

- ➔ **Citizen participation needs a clear structure** in order to make sure that citizens know about their mandate and that expectations from all sides, namely the EU's institutions, Member States, involved stakeholders and citizens themselves, are met. Thus, the different formats of the Conference on the Future of Europe and its accompanying **events should all feed into one well-structured participatory process**. Each event must be **clearly mandated and implemented within the overall objectives of the Conference**, ensuring that many different citizens' dialogues and deliberative events do not lead to a collection of unstructured results.
- ➔ In addition to the participation of a few thousand randomly selected citizens, the involvement of the broader public should be an integral part of the Conference. A **versatile, multilingual and accessible platform for online participation** can bring the thoughts and opinions of many European citizens into the discussion. With a clear scope and mandate, it can complement the work of the Conference in several ways, e.g. for setting the agenda, voting and commenting on recommendations from the Conference. A broad **communication campaign** informing the public of the chance to join the discussion online would generate EU-wide awareness of the Conference.
- ➔ A **variety of participatory methods and events** organised by the Commission, the EP, their liaison offices and national and local governments and parliaments include hackathons, citizens' workshops, co-creative methods, user-centred ways of working and deliberation in small groups. A flexible combination of these formats can promote the broad visibility of the Conference and ensures that the involved citizens, stakeholders and representatives work efficiently towards the much-needed results. It is important that each event and action accompanying the Conference is transparent about its own **scope and mandate beforehand**. Discussions and the collection of ideas at festivals and other public events, as envisioned by the European Commission, should be used to gather input for the overall agenda or comments on results from the Conference.

Non-Partisan and Efficient Steering Setting Up a Process Advisory Board and a Coordination Office

- ➔ It is essential that all dialogue formats share the same standards, proceedings and quality. Therefore, we recommend **that an efficient coordination office links the major EU institutions, the member states, stakeholders and local / regional organisers and establishes ways to deal with conflicts**. Furthermore, the collection of results needs to follow a standardised format and work process in order to be transparently and efficiently reintegrated into the official decision-making processes. Moreover, a **process advisory board consisting of external experts on process design and citizen participation** should serve as a sounding board of 'process guardians'.
- ➔ Since a truly inclusive process entails various formats of participation and numerous dialogues across Europe, overall steering requires actors with **significant expertise in the coordination of large-scale multi-stakeholder processes, together with sufficient resources to handle the corresponding tasks**.

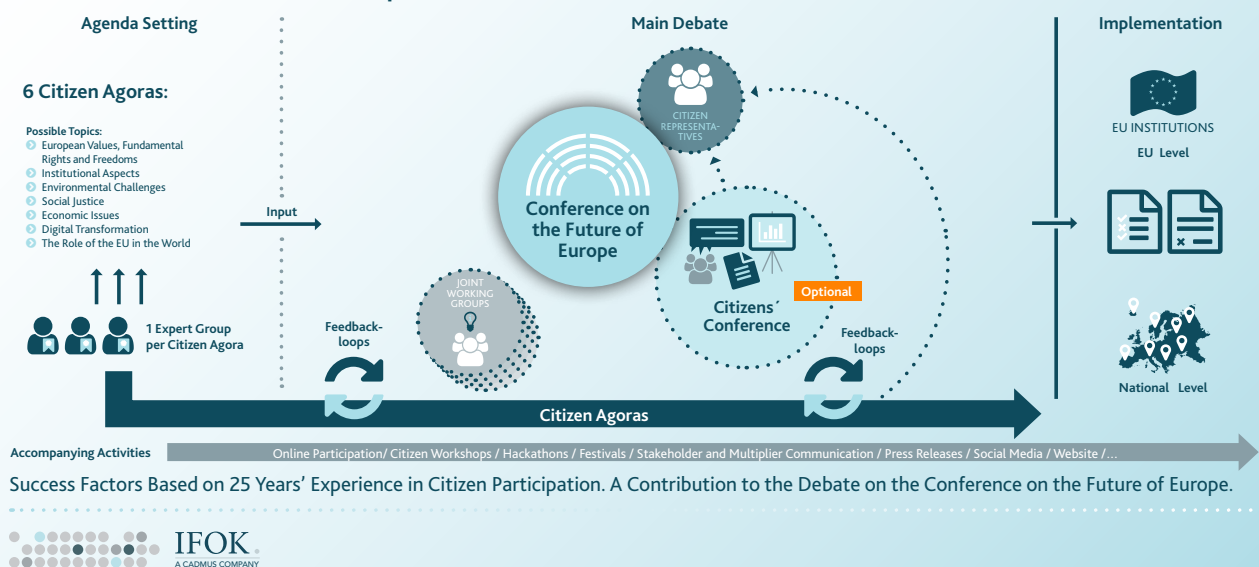




Turning Output into Outcome: Clear and Transparent Feedback Mechanisms

- ➔ The Conference on the Future of Europe and its surrounding activities must be results-driven and **lead to clear and tangible output** throughout the entire two-year process. This requires a **focused methodology** and **straightforward facilitation**, giving room for thoughts, ideas and new topics and at the same time fostering results which lead to political action.
- ➔ Before starting the Conference, **its scope, the mandates of the different strands of participation and how the results will be handled must all be communicated clearly**. Not all results have to lead to political action, but the **follow-up on the results must be transparent and traceable**, thus **giving detailed feedback to involved citizens, stakeholders and the general public**. The type of political changes that can be expected from the Conference on the Future of Europe must be stated explicitly beforehand.
- ➔ The EU's institutions need to learn how to work with citizen participation and its results. The bodies need to **rethink their procedures and operations** in order to **create room for** direct input from the public, not only in the phase of decision-making or legislative procedures, but also at the initial stages of working on specific topics and issues. The **growing need for openness, transparency and flexibility in political institutions** is an important consideration for the future functioning and evolution of the EU's institutions.

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This paper is published by IFOK and co-signed by the following institutions and persons, all of which share profound experience in civic participation. Among others, this strong network of partners has proven its expertise in the conduction of the European Citizen Consultation process of 2009. After that, many more institutions all over Europe were added to the network.

Berenschot



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