

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY DAY 2021

Crowdsourcing Citizens' Proposals on Air Quality

ECAS Brussels, November 2021



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1. INTRODUCTION

On 23 November 2021, civil society representatives and policy makers convened to discuss how participatory democracy can help to improve the environment. This event also introduced the DigiDEM project and the crowdsourcing platform that will enable the collection of citizens' proposals on air quality in January 2022.

Hendrik Nahr, European Democracy Outreach Coordinator, ECAS, moderated and opened the event. Mr. Nahr highlighted that climate change and environmental policy have become increasingly important to citizens and governments as is evident with the European Commission Green Deal and COP26. Many citizens are engaging on the topic of climate change and in particular air quality through protest movements. This triggers the following questions: *How can we actually get citizens on board and participate in environmental policies? How can democracy ultimately improve the environment?* Throughout this event, the panelists tackled this question.



Hendrik Nahr
European Democracy
Outreach Coordinator, ECAS

2. PANEL

The opening of the event was followed by panelists' introductory interventions and their answers to the question: Do you think democracy can improve the environment?

The first panelist was **Lucas Demuelenaere**, Counsellor to Alain Maron Ministre du Gouvernement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, chargé de la Transition climatique, de l'Environnement, de l'Energie et de la Démocratie participative. Mr. Demuelenaere emphasised that citizen action is important to keep governments accountable in creating ambitious policies that tackle the issues that concern citizens. This is evident with the current government elected in 2018 in Brussels. Just before the elections, citizens conducted protest movements directly asking for the government to take action on air quality in Belgium. These protest movements led to the election of arguably the greenest government in Brussels. Mr. Demuelenaere highlighted that in order to create ambitious policies in air quality, it is necessary to include the citizens in the decision making process. He gave the example of enlisting citizens to install air quality monitoring devices to assist in measuring the air quality in Brussels. This involvement supports that cause since it raises



Lucas Demuelenaere
Counsellor to Alain Maron
Ministre du Gouvernement
de la Région de Bruxelles-
Capitale

awareness to the issues and it holds governments accountable to the citizens mandates. Mr Demuelenaere concludes that in order for democracy to improve the environment, there must be significant efforts made to communicate with the public and directly engage with citizens in the decision making process.

The second panelist was **Ellen Vandebroucke**, Sustainability Expert for the Educational Department Leuven and Coordinator of School 2030. Ms. Vandebroucke is currently working with 65 schools in Leuven to help them implement systemic plans in regard to the environment and climate change. Ms. Vandebroucke highlights that collaboration is key to achieving the 2030 climate neutral goal and successfully implementing systemic plans on climate change in the 65 participating schools. It is important to work together to find solutions as it will ultimately have a greater impact. Ms. Vandebroucke also emphasised the importance of digital democracy. She stated that digital democracy can assist in action towards climate change, however the process towards digital democracy needs to speed up and more cooperation is needed. It is essential to exchange with the public on the issues of climate change and inform citizens of possible solutions. Ms. Vandebroucke concluded that collaboration, speed and open source are key to creating change in the environment.

The third panelist was **Dimitri Lemaire**, Director, Inventio Group. Mr. Lemaire emphasised the importance of deliberative democracy. It is essential to engage with citizens and to create spaces for citizens to debate with each other, experts and policy makers with the goal of creating policy recommendations for policy makers to adopt. Mr. Lemaire also highlighted the importance of inclusiveness: getting minorities and citizens with different socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in these deliberations is key. They are often the ones that are disproportionately affected by climate change and poor air quality. Mr. Lemaire concluded that collaboration, cooperation, inclusiveness and deliberation are key to initiating change and involving citizens in the decision making process.



Dimitri Lemaire
Director, Inventio Group

The fourth panelist was **Michiel Nuytemans**, Owner, Tree Company. Mr. Nuytemans' company specialises in online democratic innovation and finding ways to inform and involve citizens in the decision making process through online methods and tools. Mr. Nuytemans highlighted that the pandemic has changed the way citizens view and use online tools. The pandemic has sped up the digital democracy process and has made citizens more inclined to using online tools to engage and participate in decision-making processes. However, Mr. Nuytemans emphasised that we must continue to use in-person tools as well as online tools to ensure inclusiveness. Mr. Nuytemans concluded that the

future of participatory democracy is a combination of both in-person and online tools and methods.

3. THE DIGIDEM PLATFORM

Elisa Lironi, Senior Manager of European Democracy, ECAS presented the project DigiDem and the crowdsourcing platform on air quality. She outlined the four phases of the project and the e-participation assessment framework: January 2022 will mark the launch of the transnational crowdsourcing platform on air quality in 10 different cities in Europe: Brussels, Amsterdam, Berlin, Podgorica, Lisbon, Tallinn, Riga, Athens, Burgas, Budapest. The crowdsourcing exercise is split into four phases, each of the phases are developed by 4 different tech companies:

1. Problem mapping: citizens will identify problems related to 'air quality' that they encounter in their daily life (SciFY, Greece)
2. Problem solving: citizens will propose solutions to the 'air quality' problems they have mapped in phase 1 (Citizens Foundation, Iceland)
3. Idea selection: citizens will evaluate the solutions proposed in phase 2 in order to rank the most popular ideas and priorities for European policy-makers (OneSource, Portugal)
4. Policy Formulation: based on previous phases, citizens will formulate policy proposal on 'air quality' with experts in the field and guided by the European Environmental Bureau (ManaBalss.lv, Latvia)

The proposals received by this crowdsourcing activity aim to impact the following EU legislation: Revision of the Ambient Air Quality Directives, The Industrial Emissions Directive, Zero Pollution Action Plan, National Emission Ceilings Directive that will be revised in 2025. The research component of this project is the creation and implementation of a universal assessment framework for e-participation. The framework will be tested on the crowdsourcing pilots on air quality and help assess the success of e-participation tools in the future.

Click on this [link](#) to learn more about the crowdsourcing platform.

4. Q&A

The presentation was followed by a round of questions to the panelists moderated by Hendrik Nahr.



Elisa Lironi

Senior Manager European
Democracy, ECAS

Question to **Dimitri Lemaire**, Director, Inventio Group: *What do you think the project managers of this crowdsourcing activity should be mindful about when it comes to this crowdsourcing exercise? What are the factors to take into consideration and the elements that must be implemented to make this a success?*

According to Mr. Lemaire, it is important to ensure inclusiveness and reach out to minority groups, people with disabilities and those who do not have access to digital tools. He also emphasised that the project managers should keep the crowdsourcing platform simple and user-friendly, possibly make the platform mobile friendly to ensure greater accessibility. Furthermore, it is essential to create a platform or newsletter where citizens can be informed about the results and impact of the crowdsourcing platform.

Question to **Ellen Vandenbroucke**, Sustainability Expert for the Educational Department Leuven and Coordinator of School 2030: *What is your view on the role of education in this project and how do you view this project from this perspective?*

Ms. Vandenbroucke suggested collaborating with different schools, especially with their headmasters, to integrate the crowdsourcing platform into the curriculum. She also emphasised the importance of collaboration between the participating cities and exchanging best practices amongst each other on how to tackle air quality issues.

Question to **Lucas Demuelenaere**, Counsellor to Alain Maron Ministre du Gouvernement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, chargé de la Transition climatique, de l'Environnement, de l'Energie et de la Démocratie participative : *How could the results of this crowdsourcing support the work of the Minister regarding policies on air pollution in Brussels? How would you see the outcomes of this exercise feeding into your work?*

Mr. Demuelenaere explained that the effect of the results from the crowdsourcing platform will be dependent on the political will of governments. He suggested that the results of the crowdsourcing platform should be published ahead of important political landmark moments, such as elections, to reinforce the impact of the project. Mr. Demuelenaere also agreed with the other panelists that inclusiveness is key and it is important to reach out to citizens who may not be aware that air pollution is an issue. Furthermore, these types of projects are a great way for citizens to indirectly learn and understand policymaking and the role they play in political processes.

Question to **Michiel Nuytemans**, Owner, Tree Company: *From your point of view and from your experiences, what are the lessons learned that could help this initiative to develop the technical side to be as efficient and sophisticated as possible?*

Mr. Nuytemans suggested keeping each phase fresh and new to keep the



Ellen Vandenbroucke

Sustainability Expert for the
Educational Department
Leuven and Coordinator of
School 2030



Michiel Nuytemans

Owner, Tree Company

participants engaged. Established methods of crowdsourcing such as surveys and questionnaires can be combined with new methods, i.e. a game to learn about air pollution. Mr. Nuytemans also emphasised the importance of making this platform multilingual and implementing some type of feedback survey to understand how to make this platform better for future projects.

5. CONCLUSIONS

After the round of questions, the panellists also discussed implementing a type of glossary that explains the topic, air quality, as well as the different terms and vocabulary used on the crowdsourcing platform. Finally, Mr. Nahr thanked the speakers for attending the event and for their insightful discussions.

To learn more about the crowdsourcing platform and DigiDEM project, please follow us on social media [twitter](#) & [Facebook](#) and check out our website [link](#).

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