



“Engaging Citizens for Good Governance in Cohesion Policy”:

Narrative of the high-level conference

Cohesion Policy is the main investment policy of the Union. It supports job creation, competitiveness, economic growth, improved quality of life, social inclusion and sustainable development.

- These investments generate tangible outcomes for citizens on the ground in all territories. 40 % of European citizens are aware of a project co-financed by EU funds: this is not enough.
- Evidence and experience show that projects are of higher quality when citizens are engaged in selection and delivery. In addition, this kind of engagement generates “ownership”. Yet such engagement varies across programmes.

Against this background, the European Commission will organise a conference on 6 February 2020 to examine what initiatives under Cohesion Policy have worked to strengthen citizen engagement and to get inspiration for Cohesion Policy from examples of citizen participation in other contexts. On top of direct engagement, civil society organisations (CSOs) are means amongst many to engage with citizens. An open and transparent debate with all involved parties will allow us take a users’ perspective on how to bring Cohesion Policy closer to citizens. The conference will take place under the political leadership and with the participation of Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, Elisa Ferreira. The key objectives are to:

1. Facilitate a discussion on the role of citizens and civil society in Cohesion Policy.
2. Identify interesting practices and innovative ways of cooperation between citizens and authorities that can inspire Cohesion Policy actors.
3. Develop political momentum for action to enhance cooperation between citizens and authorities in the future Cohesion Policy and programmes in Member States.

This document provides the background and larger policy context of the conference organised on 6 February 2020, and a brief overview of the state of play of citizen and civil society engagement in Cohesion Policy.

The bigger picture

The principle of involving citizens in policy development and implementation is well established across EU policies. In Cohesion Policy, the partnership principle is part of its DNA but there is a growing consensus on the need to “do more”. The recent Eurobarometer from April 2019



suggests that 77 % of respondents consider that social accountability¹ in their country can be improved. There is increasing evidence that the quality of institutions and administrative capacity affect economic growth. Citizen engagement is an important tool to improve institutional quality, trust and ownership.

The importance of more citizen engagement was already recognised and strengthened in the Lisbon Treaty with the European citizens’ initiative. On 30 April 2019, the Commission laid down its vision for a “new strategic agenda for the EU 2019-2024” highlighting the need for strengthened citizen engagement². In her political guidelines for the 2019-2024 Commission, President Ursula von der Leyen expressed her will for European citizens to play a leading and active part in building the future of our Union. Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, has been mandated to organise a Conference on the Future of Europe, to start in autumn 2020 to ensure Europeans “have their say on how their Union is run and what it delivers on”. During her confirmation hearing before the European Parliament, Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms Elisa Ferreira said that “all citizens, wherever they are, can feel that they are part of this project” and committed to “visit the regions to understand local concerns—and local aspirations” with the aim “(t)o encourage faster and better implementation of projects, and to let communities know they are not left behind.”

Good governance

Cohesion Policy represents almost a third of the total EU budget. It brings EU policy priorities closer to regions and territories, translating wide policy objectives into specific territorial investment priorities. Member States are primarily in charge of the daily implementation of this budget. The 7th Cohesion Report underlined the importance of quality of governance and institutions in Member States and regions for economic development and effectiveness of public investment, including that co-financed by Cohesion Policy³. Closer cooperation with citizens and civil society is one of the fundamental elements of good governance of Cohesion Policy through EU structural funds.

In fact, there is large consensus among academics, public authorities and civil society organisations that engaging with citizens is part of good public governance practice⁴. Looking in particular at Cohesion Policy, the engagement of citizens brings added value to public authorities on several fronts:

¹ "Social accountability" refers to actions initiated by citizen groups to hold public officials, politicians, and service providers to account for their conduct and performance in terms of delivering services, improving people's welfare and protecting people's rights.

² See European Commission Communication of 30 April: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/files/europe-may-2019-preparing-more-united-stronger-and-more-democratic-union-increasingly-uncertain-world_en

³ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/cohesion-report/

⁴ OECD, “Draft Policy Framework on Sound Public Governance”, <https://www.oecd.org/gov/draft-policy-framework-on-sound-public-governance.pdf>

UN, “People Matter: civic engagement in public governance”, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan028608.pdf>



- ✓ it ensures that expertise and technical know-how is considered during decision-making processes, enabling better thematic balance and focus;
- ✓ it strengthens commitment and ownership of policy decisions at local level and thus facilitate implementation; and
- ✓ it deepens complementarities with other policies, strategies and funding sources⁵.

Citizens and Cohesion Policy

After 30 years of Cohesion Policy, we have seen good examples of active participation of citizens, local communities and civil society. On local matters, locally led development strategies (CLLD), integrated territorial investments in cities, Urban Innovative Actions and Interreg cross-border cooperation provide many project examples across the EU. Macro-regional strategies and partnerships under the Urban Agenda for the EU move in the direction of participatory governance. The ESIF Open Data Platform⁶ is an intuitive, user centric web-interface for sharing information on European Structural and Investment Funds' implementation in Member States. Integrity pacts⁷ are pilot examples of civil society monitoring of public procurements, through which most of these funds are spent. The importance of transparency and citizen engagement as part of good governance in public spending was also among the conclusions of the conference on Good Governance for Cohesion Policy in May 2018⁸. For the coming programming period, 2021-2027, Cohesion Policy wants to achieve a competitive, fair and sustainable Europe. This requires cooperation of all governance levels including citizens. It is therefore logical that one of the five proposed policy objectives of Cohesion Policy is "A Europe closer to citizens", which is supporting local initiatives. The start of a new programming period in 2021 is an opportunity to consider how to enhance citizen engagement across the EU and policy areas under Cohesion Policy.

Existing civil society involvement in implementation of Cohesion Policy

The Commission organises a Structured Dialogue with stakeholders, i.e. umbrella organisations representing the partners at Union level in order to bring EU funds and Cohesion Policy closer to civil society, to assist the Commission in the development of the policy in different areas of expertise and to discuss the implementation of EU funds. Environmental partners, non-governmental organisations, and bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion, gender equality and non-discrimination represent civil society in this dialogue.

National and regional governments decide on the involvement of stakeholders relevant for programming and management of EU funds in their territory for the period 2014-2020. The "European Code of Conduct on Partnership" supports Member States to organise such

⁵ "Implementation of the partnership principle and multi-level governance in 2014-2020 ESI Funds" (final report, July 2016)

⁶ <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/>

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/how/improving-investment/integrity-pacts/

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/conferences/good_governance



cooperation, as partners should be involved throughout the whole programme cycle, from planning of investments to evaluation of results in monitoring committees. Relevant civil society organisations contribute with valuable thematic knowledge and experience, e.g. on the application of horizontal principles, like equality, non-discrimination and sustainable development. Civil society can also help authorities to consider the effect of implementation of EU funds on vulnerable groups, like those at risk of discrimination and social exclusion.

Involvement of civil society is not always easy. Influencing factors are for instance the capacity and resources in civil society organisations, representation of civil society throughout the programme life cycle, involvement of the right people, management of consultation by public authorities and/or organisation of the constructive dialogue (e.g. availability feed-back and follow-up mechanisms, timing of consultations).

Against this background, public authorities can strengthen their participatory practices and build capacity of civil society partners for effective administration and use of the Funds in the next programming period, on the basis of existing rules on partnership.

The conference

The agenda of the conference is organised around four main angles:

1. **“the What”**: to provoke thinking and debate and set the scene for the day. This session will provide context and visions by looking at the situation today and trends and developments in citizens’ and CSO engagement for public policies.
2. **“the Why”**: to explain why partnerships with citizens or their representatives benefit authorities, politicians and administrations.
3. **“the Experiences”**: to present practical examples in dynamic breakout sessions, and go more into details on specific issues: 1) Open data/ tech to engage citizens, 2) Co-creation, ownership and meaningful participation, 3) Monitoring, transparency and accountability – building trust through cooperation and 4) Capacity building for authorities and CSOs.
4. **“the How”**: a political debate to explore how citizens and civil society could and should be involved in EU Cohesion Policy for the future.

At the end of the day, participants can bring home the discussion on the role of citizens and civil society in Cohesion Policy, inspired by examples and experience from other participants. Exchanges of ideas can develop into innovative ways of cooperation between citizens and authorities.

Citizen’s engagement is a priority for Cohesion Policy 2021-2027 that goes beyond this conference. The conference is a visible start of an important theme for the 2021-2027 period.