

# CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT IN COMPLEX POLICYMAKING:

## Case Study- Recommendations on Democratising Economic Governance in Europe



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief identifies prospects and recommendations for enhancing the involvement of citizens and civil society in complex policy issues and processes such as the European Semester process and the benefits thereof. The insights presented in this brief stem from test cases and related activities conducted in Denmark and Italy within the scope of the REAL DEAL project. The aim of the test cases was to explore avenues for democratising European economic governance through the use and incorporation of innovative deliberation methods within the framework of the European Semester. The learnings from the case study underpin the usefulness of deliberative formats and methods in economic governance, while pointing to the need for further explorations and establishment of a process structure that would optimise their potential.

## INTRODUCTION

### BACKGROUND

The incoming of Von der Leyen's Commission in 2019 brought the introduction of new, transformative policies that guided the political agenda for the timeframe of the 2019-2024 mandate, with an overarching aim to essentially green the EU's economy in a socially just and inclusive manner and to take action and tackle the dangerous impacts of climate change. Within this, achieving stronger economic and social coordination is a vital process, mainly encompassed in the European Semester framework. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Semester has moreover become an instrument for the Recovery and Resilience Facility in order to "implement ambitious reforms and investments" aimed at making EU member states' "economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and prepared for the green sustainability for green transformations". Cognizant of the effects of this on local communities and the everyday lives of European citizens, enabling their involvement in these complex policy-making processes was recognized as an important step for ensuring their commitment to the transition and thus, achieving it. The presented case study is nested within this context, and in the framing of the REAL DEAL project, which focuses on the centrality of citizen participation in processes like the European Semester for achieving successful implementation of the European green transition agenda, as operationalized through the European Green Deal (EGD).

### RELEVANCE

In the current context of global geopolitical and economic turbulence and the aftermath of the 2024 European Parliament (EP) election results, strengthening the economy and global competitiveness of the European Union (EU) is put forward as one of the main strategic focuses for this new 2024-2029 mandate. The long-term mission for prosperity and stability of Europe, ensuring the well-being of its citizens, should however inherently entail that social and environmental sustainability objectives remain focal to

this economic transformation. The urgency to act on climate change is ever more visible, and so is the need for the EU to progress towards reaching its climate neutrality goals and upholding its global climate leadership position. As announcements that the Clean Industrial Deal (CID) will replace the European Green Deal are being made, it is a decisive moment to highlight the need for policy design that will serve both the strengthening and transformation of the EU's economy while building on existing efforts towards a green and just transition. Meanwhile, it's worth noting that in the mission letters to all the new Commissioners, President von der Leyen underlines that "success of this new Commission will be measured against our ability to meet the targets and objectives we set, notably as part of the European Green Deal". This means that the EGD is still in the EU political mainstream

A lesson that can be taken forward from the last few years is that in a polycrisis context, (fuelled also by misinformation and disinformation) public support and opinion related to complex policies can easily be polarising, thus rendering their efficient implementation more difficult. Enhancing the possibilities for citizens to effectively and meaningfully engage can arguably benefit the policy development process by enabling policy makers to get a fuller understanding of issues at play, increasing the transparency and ownership of the process as well as the legitimacy and implementability of adopted policies. In issues of such importance and impact as economic and climate governance, citizens can sometimes feel constrained and without autonomy over key decisions that concern them directly. Therefore, there is a need to incorporate their involvement and representation in complex policy processes, as also suggested in the European Commission (EC) Recommendation on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes (2023) and, most recently, in the 2024 EC Mission Letters. However, there is not yet a blueprint developed for how citizen and civil society voices can be heard in the complex political processes such as the European Semester process. The insights from the case studies presented in this brief provide a guiding point.

## OVERVIEW OF THE CASE STUDY

The case study and related activities were built upon the policy cycle and outcomes of the European Semester, as the key policy framework on European economic governance. Three test cases were conducted, namely in Denmark, Italy and a joint test case for both countries in order to collect insights on how citizens and national civil society organisations can be involved in a complex EU and national policy process. While the individual test cases in Denmark and Italy were developed in the context of national realities and opportunities, the joint test case provided both comparative overview as well as a mixed, international setting of the study. The design and execution of the test cases consisted of:

**A) an initial phase**, aiming to identify effective entry points within the European Semester yearly process cycle, as well as to establish connections and networks with stakeholders already involved in the European Semester process in both countries (e.g. national EC offices).

**B) a preparatory phase**, including format and topic framing based on good practice and adapted to national relevance, as well as the selection of outreach practices cognizant of the intricacy of the subject matter, opting out of random selection as less feasible. To set the scene and enhance possibilities for meaningful engagement and dialogue among participants, knowledge upgrade sessions and courses were conducted to reduce abstraction and provide common understanding of the complex issues at hand. A train-the-trainer program and refinement of the deliberative elements in the test cases was also done by experts and in order to increase facilitation and moderation capacity and optimise the deliberation process.

**C) an implementation phase**, undertaking the deliberations in the respective different formats of the test cases (in-person policy lab in Denmark, online deliberative assembly in Italy and an in-person interactive and deliberative event for the joint test case) to develop a shared vision and actionable policy recommendations relating to the nexus of economic thematics to citizen well-being, environmental protection and social and climate justice. While not being able to engage with political recipients within the test cases, which could have further increased the impact of the outcomes, the generated policy outputs were integrated in subsequent advocacy activities.

**D) a reflective phase**, evaluating learnings from the previous phases to provide a tangible account of challenges and opportunities for civil society's participation in policy processes like the European Semester. The test case highlighted the importance of involving civil society in EU-processes that affect the everyday lives of all EU-citizens. Including civil society in policy development is not only making the transformation of the European economy more just. It has the potential to add value and provide support for policy outcomes. However, it also made visible some challenges and remaining barriers. To start with, there are inadequate resources (funds, time and expertise) to facilitate and participate in deliberation which impedes fruitful engagement. Inexperience and unacquaintance with inherent processes and methods deliberation methodology may curb confidence in deliberative policy development. Further, the lack of established processes and clear points of entry limited civil society's ability to more meaningfully influence policy through deliberation and is an aspect that needs to be further developed.

# CONCLUSION

The case study demonstrated that the democratisation of complex policy processes, like the European Semester, is possible and that the incorporation of deliberative formats and methods is useful to increase the involvement of citizens and civil society organisations, enhance the knowledge basis in such policy-making processes and provide for more robust and representative policy outcomes. More specifically, the case study revealed:

## A STRONG POTENTIAL:

There is significant potential for bringing in citizens and civil society to involve effectively in complex policy-making and implementation processes, thus enriching discussion and broadening policy recommendations. The table below provides an illustration of concrete policy outcomes deliberated upon and reached by citizens within the case study and in relation to the European Semester.

POLICY AREA	VISION	RECOMMENDATION
<b>Citizen Involvement for Better Health and Well-being</b>	A society with active citizen involvement for community cohesion and well-being.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rethink the Primary School Framework: Promote inclusion, collaboration, project-based learning.</li> <li>2. Establish Local Civic Bodies: Create assemblies, compensate participation.</li> <li>3. Grant Basic Rights to Nature.</li> <li>4. Rethink the Labor Market: Focus on workplace well-being.</li> </ol>
<b>Climate and Biodiversity</b>	EU is a leader in sustainable agriculture and biodiversity conservation.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. New Agricultural Support: Redirect support to sustainable farming.</li> <li>6. Structural Change in Agriculture: Promote diverse, local food systems.</li> <li>7. Greenhouse Gas Tax for Agriculture.</li> <li>8. Benchmark for Climate Footprint.</li> </ol>
<b>Value and Consumption</b>	A regenerative society prioritizing quality of life over economic growth.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Establish Quality of Life Research Unit.</li> <li>10. Focus on Equality: Create flexible labor markets.</li> <li>11. Sustainable Business Models.</li> <li>12. Encourage Interdisciplinary Approaches.</li> </ol>
<b>EU's Global Role and Responsibility</b>	An inclusive, democratic EU acting responsibly on a global scale.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13. Global Citizen Involvement: Create a global forum for dialogue.</li> <li>14. Fair Distribution of Resources.</li> <li>15. Reduce Global Land Use: Implement sustainable practices.</li> <li>16. Compliance with International Agreements.</li> </ol>

### **A LACK OF ESTABLISHED PROCESSES:**

There is a need for established processes and institutions to guide deliberation and policy development. Incorporating spaces for citizen involvement in already complex processes is not a simple task and requires a tailored approach, the exploration of entry points and the development and establishment of mechanisms to integrate the policy outputs from the deliberations.

### **A NEED FOR INVESTMENTS AND FURTHER EXPLORATIONS:**

More investments are needed to support the optimal enrolment of these processes. Through the case study we have sketched how a European Semester cycle could be designed with citizen and civil society involvement. Further investment and exploration is needed by testing deliberative principles in other contexts and in different policy processes by deploying similar frameworks. More data and experience are required for the continuous development and design of enhanced citizen and civil society engagement methods in a manner that also takes into account the nature of the deliberation process and the time investment it requires.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS ON ENHANCING CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT IN COMPLEX POLICY-PROCESSES**

- National governments and the European Commission to acknowledge the need and benefit of citizen involvement in economic governance and to invest in a coherent and committed manner in the design and incorporation of deliberative methods in complex policy processes, like the European Semester process.
- National governments and the European Commission to provide further support and cooperate with civil society organisations, in joint endeavours and experimentations leading to evidence-based solutions to enhance and optimise the citizen involvement and input in policy-making processes, resulting in stronger support for such policies and their implementation.
- National governments and the European Commission to commit to and incorporate mechanisms for follow-up and integration of the deliberative policy outcomes into the adoption of related policy measures.

# CONCRETE

## NEXT STEPS

- 1** Widen the spectrum of involved actors in the consultative mechanism of the European Semester from social partners to a broad variety of civil society organisations. This should be extended to direct citizen involvement with specific formats.
- 2** Take efforts to bring more actors to the table to contribute with different types of knowledge and experience, including reflections on the economic system, and to support the implementation of corporate social responsibility.
- 3** Widen the classic consultative approaches with hearings to include deliberative processes and practices and establish quality criteria for these processes and their facilitators.
- 4** For the topic of economics there is a special need to lower the entry barriers for engagement. Therefore, capacity must be built by organising knowledge upgrades and providing accessible material.
- 5** Establish multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) for economics and sustainability in the member states, modelled after the EU level MSP on the SDGs, for developing joint policy input for economic policymaking at all levels, including for the European Semester.
- 6** Include existing bodies like advisory councils and national economic and social committees in the MSP, which should also organise direct citizen deliberations in support of its work.



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