DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

CITIZEN PARTICI-PATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Insights from local practices in European cities

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The outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic is the perfect storm that corroborates the magnitude of upcoming challenges for the future of democracy, cities, and citizen participation

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The impacts of the covid-19 pandemic in cities, where more than half of the world population lives, offer a unique cross section to understand whether and to what extent participatory practices have been pushed forward

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Evidence from European cities shows emerging trends of short-term local participatory practices focussed on the provision of practical support in different policy domains through online and on-the-field channels

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Contents

1 MAIN CHALLENGES

The outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic is the perfect storm that corroborates the magnitude of upcoming challenges for democracy, cities, and citizen participation. The first challenge is related to the ways in which democratic regimes demonstrate their capacity to handle the current crisis. The second challenge builds on the concentration of more than half of the world population in cities and tells about the ways in which urban policies and initiatives tackle the impacts on vulnerable groups of the current covid-19 pandemic. The third and last challenge is about the ways in which forms of citizen participation arise in the time of crisis. Evidence from local participatory practices in European cities allows systematising knowledge on emerging trends.

1.1 DEMOCRACY

In the last few decades, the decrease of citizenry trust towards democratic representatives and institutions has built on the raise of what, according to the Freedom House, can be defined as the global retreat of democracy[1]. In the time of the current covid-19 pandemic, the spread of exceptional and extra-legal measures can aggravate degrees of citizen mistrust, and increase risks to roll back citizen participation at all levels of decision-making through the expansion of emergency powers, as pointed out by the international organisation Open Government Partnership (OGP)[2]. However, while the state still plays a major role in the crisis management, the independent global platform OpenDemocracy highlights emerging differences between governance models adopted by authoritarian (e.g. China) and democratic states. In the latter, the emergence of different state and social responsibilities, and the combination of diverse forms of expertise in order to ensure a wide array of responses has given rise to multiple models of »corona governance«[3]. As the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) points out, these models are more evident on subnational scales, where governments are at the frontline of the crisis management and recovery, as well as confronted by covid-19's asymmetric impacts over society[4]. An overview on emerging evidence allows contending, thus, the need to prepare local governments, organisations and civil societies to effectively face ongoing and upcoming global risks and extreme events.

1.2 CITY

Cities concentrate more than half of the world population and, therefore, great socio-economic inequalities. The unequal distribution of wealth is evident in the spread of informal settlements and overcrowded areas, which are often compounded by poorly maintained public transport systems

and housing[5]. While contagion can spread more quickly in large urban areas, the combination of density, poverty, poor housing conditions and limited access to health care can aggravate health conditions of vulnerable groups. Moreover, the World Economic Forum (WEF) argues that the use of transportation corridors by these groups at the outskirts of cities intensifies the spread and transmission of infectious diseases into the downtown core[6]. In addition to that, main sources of contagion in urban and metropolitan contexts are the several local and global supply chains, and their international travel networks. Despite these downsides and the ongoing loss of urban jobs, however, cities still ensure two thirds of global Gross Domestic Product, which represents a great potential to tackle the current crisis. According to WEF, those cities that are better resourced, with transparent, collaborative, and inclusive governance show higher capacity to prevent, detect, respond and care for patients in the current covid-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, WEF advocates the need to prepare cities to manage global risks by creating a dashboard tracking capacities, identifying gaps, and minimising future threats[7]. In addition, as argued by OpenDemocracy, the preparation of cities should build on the exceptional policy opportunities opened by the current crisis, which can trigger collective experiments with institutional and non-state organisations[8].

European cities confirm global trends, as 75% of the population lives in cities and urban areas, which equally hold challenges of social inclusion and opportunities to experiment new policies in the current crisis. However, as subnational governments expect negative impacts on their finances, with rising expenditure and falling revenues in the days ahead[9], the European network Eurocities issued a statement advocating the need for the recovery to be powered by cities. To this end, a new pact between city and leaders on resilience, sustainability and inclusion should fulfil the gap of long-standing underinvestment at the local level and trigger multilevel governance. According to this statement, cohesion policies should safeguard 10% earmarking for sustainable urban development, and European funding should boost the green

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1 More information at: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/democracy-retreat

2 More information at: https://www.opengovpartnership.org/collecting-open-government-approaches-to-covid-19/

3 More information at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openmovements/democratic-horizons-times-corona-governance/

4 More information at: http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/the-territorial-impact-of-covid-19-managing-the-crisis-across-levels-of-government-d3e314e1/

5 According to the global platform Right to The City, vulnerable groups are the homeless, slum dwellers, people threatened by evictions, displacements and collapses of their homes due to natural or everyday occurrences, informal workers and impoverished people, particularly women, older people and dissidents of all ages who suffer multiple forms of violence: https://www.right2city.org/the-right-to-the-city-facing-covid-19/

6 More information at: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/how-should-cities-prepare-for-coronavirus-pandemics/

7 This argument is advanced in light of the call to »promote information sharing and communication measures in and between cities to prevent and reduce the international spread of infectious diseases« made by the Global Parliament of Mayors in November 2019: https://globalparliamentofmayors.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/GPM-Durban-Declaration-11-November-2019.pdf

8 As stressed by OpenDemocracy, proposals for the universal income at the national levels, the reinforcement of mutual aid and the adoption of free public transport at the local level are good examples of these opportunities: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openmovements/democratic-horizons-times-corona-governance/

9 More information from a recent survey conducted by the OECD and the European Committee of the Regions: https://cor.europa.eu/en/news/Pages/ECON-cor-oecd-survey-covid-19.aspx

and digital transformational power of cities to meet the climate neutrality goal for 2050. Greater flexibility in the Pact of Stability and Growth should facilitate long-term investments for small and medium enterprises, employment, quality social services as well as strong active inclusion measures for the most vulnerable people[10].

1.3 CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

As the impacts of the current crisis build on global trends of democratic retreat and socioeconomic inequalities, both especially visible in cities, participatory practices have also been affected by the restrictions imposed under the covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) advocates that citizen participation is a key tool to fight loneliness, lack in cultural, educational, sports and social activities, and enhance the protection of the most vulnerable people in the time of the current pandemic. In particular, the IOPD highlights the need for grassroots initiatives to be developed in tandem with local governments and other organisations. Yet, several challenges are on the rise, being the transformation of public meetings and face-to-face deliberation into virtual online settings a major one. According to the Council of Europe, the shift towards digital participation should convince promoters to effectively map stakeholders and engage with the key affected parties through adequate methodologies[11].

The IOPD is one of the many organisations that have collected evidence on the development of participatory practices worldwide[12]. The global crowdsourcing platform Participedia seemingly shows examples of dialogue and deliberation processes for engaging citizens on covid-19 issues through the ›Citizens Voices & Values on Covid-19‹ initiative[13], and the OGP offers examples covering citizen participation, transparency and accountability in response to the covid-19 pandemic[14]. In a similar vein, UN-Habitat and UCLG promoted a virtual community for mutual learning and the sharing of local experiences, which is expected to facilitate the access to online resources and provide guidelines and briefings to improve the capacity of response in cities. Knowledge sharing has been coupled by active learning and collaboration between urban health experts, government agencies at all levels, sanitation experts, social scientists, innovators and urban planners, giving raise to the platform ›Cities for Global Health‹[15].

2 PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES IN EUROPE

In the last three decades, methods of citizen participation have been triggered by international, national and local institutions in Europe[16]. Participatory practices are deemed to strengthen democracy, community trust and confidence, effectiveness of solutions, deal-making among competitive interests, efficiency of expenditures, and public accountability. Worldwide, the inclusion of citizen voices in what concerns debates and decisions over public matters has been unfolded through a wide array of participatory methods, aimed at engaging multiple publics, and addressing different issues. Accordingly, various forms of citizen participation have been promoted by public authorities, organisations, and grassroots groups of citizens aiming to influence and/or shape, from different stances and holding different degrees of power, public decisions[17].

The section below builds on the need to understand whether and to what extent participatory practices have been promoted in the time of the covid-19 pandemic. Several online sources showcasing examples of participatory practices were consulted to provide a grounded understanding of citizen participation in this exceptional time. In October and November 2020, the search was based on data available at the OGP, OECD, IOPD, and Participedia websites and platforms, which covered a wide range of participatory practices, such as the promotion of deliberative initiatives on specific issues concerning the covid-19 pandemic, the development of solidarity-based initiatives aimed at providing mutual aid and support, as well as the creation of local networks for the sharing of knowledge, expertise and help. In some cases, citizen participation was understood as the provision of information and/or the launch of public campaigns on the constraints brought about by the covid-19 pandemic. Overall, the search allowed to examine in-depth several examples of citizen participation, with local practices clearly outnumbering international, national and regional practices.

2.1 OVERVIEW OF THE INTERNATIONAL, NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES

At the international level, findings show the creation of several media platforms aimed at sharing knowledge about participatory practices and solutions (e.g. »Cities for Global Health«), along with some few other examples spread from countries.

- The Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS) launched a Special Edition of NALAS Digest: Local Response to COVID-19.
- The Spanish »Stop the Curve« platform created through a geolocation system that organises citizen initiatives and offers help among neighbours has spread internationally in Europe (France, Portugal, etc.) and Latin America.

10 More information at: https://covidnews.eurocities.eu/

11 Council of Europe: Civil society: newsroom: COVID-19: Recommendations for Maintaining and Improving Citizens' Engagement during Covid-19 Restrictions: https://www.coe.int/en/web/civil-society/-/covid-19-recommendations-for-maintaining-and-improving-citizens-engagement-during-covid-19-restrictions

12 More information at: https://oidp.net/en/covid19/page.php?id=46

13 More information at: https://sites.google.com/participedia.net/citizensvoicescovid

14 More information at: https://www.opengovpartnership.org/stories/open-government-approaches-to-tackling-covid-19/

15 The platform is co-led by UN-Habitat, UCLG, Metropolis and the Euro-Latin-American Alliance of Cooperation among Cities, and compiles 657 initiatives from 34 countries, and 105 cities. More information at: https://www.citiesforglobalhealth.org/

16 Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)4 made by the Council of Europe

17 For an overview, see for example: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.2040-0209.2010.00347_2.x

At the national level, findings show a variety of both government and citizen-led practices, in tandem with growing experimentation of public consultations with randomly selected citizens.

- In France, the Parliament hosted a virtual public forum with around 15,000 citizens to collect recommendations on post-covid-19 policy priorities. The country also pivoted climate change assemblies online with 150 representative citizens participating in seven weekend sessions. The network #PourEux emerged as a citizen solidarity movement that serves and delivers meals to the homeless. Likewise, the platform cagette.net for delivery of local fresh products offers urgency kit for those producers who are unable to sell at present.
- In United Kingdom, assemblies about net-zero greenhouse gas emissions target and the pandemic's impact were organised with 110 randomly selected participants. Four organisations (Traverse, Ada Lovelace Institute, Involve, and Bang the Table) have provided input on the use of technology in response to the COVID-19 crisis with 28 randomly selected participants who took part in a three-week deliberative process. In parallel, the website of the Local Governments Association collects information for local entities, while NGOs organised the national campaign »to raise awareness on the most vulnerable.
- In Finland, the Dialogue Academy and Timeout Foundation organised the series »Lockdown Dialogues«.
- In Norway, the National Institute of Public Health collaborated with The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities to generalise the use of a mobile phone application that permits offline data capture, making it possible to generate analyses from data on health in real time.
- In Italy, the website Covid19italia.help lists offers for help or tips.

At the regional level, along with the provision of public information and the organisation of public consultations with randomly selected citizens, some citizen-led practices have aimed to provide practical support on this scale.

- In Scotland, the government held an online consultation on covid-19 responses, and launched a digital platform seeking public input on decisions.
- In the West Midlands (United Kingdom), the organisations BritainThinks and Engage Britain set up a Citizens' Panel with 36 randomly selected panellists to provide recommendations.
- In France, the department of Haute-Garonne launched the consultation process »Société d'après Haute-Garonne« for its citizens to decide how they want the post-covid-19 society to look like.
- In the German state of Thuringia, solidarity initiatives between neighbours emerged with the aim to buy and collect medicines for the elderly and risk groups, cargo bikes for the youngster, as well as babysitters.

2.2 SYSTEMATISATION OF LOCAL PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES

At the local level, the identified participatory practices developed in 58 European cities have been systematised according to the following criteria, which were defined in light of collected evidence (see table 1, p. 5):

- Timeframe: short, medium, and long term;
- Sponsor: public authorities, organisations, grassroots groups;
- Scope: information, knowledge sharing, support provision, public campaign, recommendations;
- Theme: solidarity, health/care, environment, food, culture/sport, youth/education, mobility, tourism;
- Channels: on-the-field, online.

2.3 INSIGHTS

The magnitude of the current situation makes it difficult to draw an exact picture of what can be defined as citizen participation. Moreover, it is unlikely that findings represent the total number of ongoing practices in Europe. Given the sample of consulted sources, information about several practices may be circulating in media platforms that were not taken into account in this search, whereas other practices may be developed without being disseminated internationally. In conjunction to that, this search relied on sources providing data in English language only, which further limits a more comprehensive understanding of collected evidence. Nevertheless, this systematisation is, as far as the author was able to establish, the first comprehensive contribution of its kind on citizen participation in Europe during the exceptional time of the covid-19 pandemic.

Timeframe. All local participatory practices adopt a short-term timeframe (=58), which corroborates OPG's findings about trends for immediate responses aimed at curbing contagion, scaling medical treatments and care, and providing safety nets to the most vulnerable. In parallel, some few practices also promote a medium (=8) and/or long-term (=2) timeframe, which correspond to OPG's definition of recovery – i.e. advancing economic stimuluses, strengthening the health systems, enhancing transparency and accountability of aid flows – and reform – i.e. planning new goals for institutions, re-empowering citizens, and restoring civic freedoms. Accordingly, OPG argues that only few cases compound planning and policies, as well as decisions on budget/expenditures[18]. At the present, however, it is difficult to argue whether short-term responses to the current pandemic will be developed through longer-term strategies in the future.

For example, Warsaw (Poland) is experimenting citizen participation by using the Living Lab concept to co-create solutions for the gastronomy sector, which has been hardly hit by the crisis. In contrast, the city council of Madrid (Spain) is enabling citizens to submit their ideas, connect with businesses in their neighbourhood, and ask

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[18] More information at: https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/a-guide-to-open-government-and-the-coronavirus/

Table 1
SYSTEMATISATION OF LOCAL PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES

COUNTRIES	CITIES	TIMEFRAME			SPONSOR			SCOPE					THEME								CHANNEL	
		Short	Medium	Long term	Public authorities	organisations	grassroots groups	information	knowledge sharing	support provision	public campaign	recommendations	solidarity	health/care	environment	food	culture/sport	youth/education	mobility	tourism	on-the-field	online
Albania	Tirana	x			x						x		x									x
Austria	Vienna	x	x	x	x			x		x			x	x				x				x
Bulgaria	Sofia	x			x		x			x				x		x					x	
Belgium	Brussels	x			x							x							x		x	x
	Antwerp	x			x					x				x					x		x	
	Ghent	x	x		x					x										x	x	
Estonia	Järva Wald	x			x			x						x								x
Finland	Helsinki	x			x						x		x									x
France	Paris	x			x	x			x	x			x									x
	Bordeaux	x			x					x	x					x						x
	Nice	x			x			x	x	x	x			x	x			x			x	x
	Grenoble	x			x		x			x			x									x
	Nantes	x	x		x					x					x	x					x	x
	Nîmes	x					x			x			x				x				x	
	Angers	x			x					x			x									x
	Lille	x			x					x	x				x				x	x	x	
	Brest	x			x						x		x								x	
Germany	Berlin	x			x			x	x	x				x					x		x	x
	Frankfurt	x			x						x		x			x				x	x	
	Bamberg	x			x					x							x	x			x	
	Chemnitz	x			x			x	x			x	x									x
	Mannheim	x			x					x				x							x	
	Düsseldorf	x			x				x					x				x			x	
Greece	Athens	x			x			x								x						x
Italy	Rome	x				x				x			x								x	
	Milan	x			x			x		x			x	x							x	x
	Naples	x			x					x			x								x	
	Bologna	x			x					x							x				x	
	Florence	x			x					x							x	x	x		x	
	Vicenza	x			x				x	x			x									x
	Busto Garolfo	x			x					x						x	x				x	
Lithuania	Vilnius	x			x					x							x			x	x	
Netherlands	Rotterdam	x			x					x							x	x			x	
Poland	Warsaw	x			x					x						x					x	
	Lublin	x			x				x				x									x
	Gdańsk	x			x					x			x			x					x	
	Gdynia	x			x					x			x			x						x
	Sopot	x			x					x			x			x						x
Portugal	Lisbon	x			x					x			x								x	x
	Guimarães	x			x						x					x					x	
Romania	Cluj-Napoca	x			x			x					x									x

COUNTRIES	CITIES	TIMEFRAME			SPONSOR			SCOPE					THEME								CHANNEL	
		Short	Medium	Long term	Public authorities	organisations	grassroots groups	information	knowledge sharing	support provision	public campaign	recommendations	solidarity	health/care	environment	food	culture/sport	youth/education	mobility	tourism	on-the-field	online
Slovakia	Bratislava	X			X			X									X					X
Spain	Madrid	X	X	X	X	X			X				X					X	X	X	X	X
	Barcelona	X			X			X	X				X				X					X
	Granollers	X			X				X	X												X
	Terrassa	X			X				X					X								X
	Alcobendas	X			X					X			X	X								X
	Zaragoza	X			X				X	X												X
	Aragon	X			X					X			X	X								X
	Seville	X			X					X				X							X	
Sweden	Kungsbacka	X			X			X					X				X					X
	Malmo	X			X						X		X									X
United Kingdom	London	X	X		X			X	X				X	X			X		X			
	Cardiff	X	X		X			X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
	Bristol	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X			X	X
	Leicester	X	X		X					X					X				X		X	
	Birmingham	X			X	X				X			X				X				X	
	Glasgow	X			X	X			X					X	X		X				X	
Total		**58**	**8**	**2**	**56**	**6**	**3**	**13**	**18**	**37**	**11**	**2**	**30**	**18**	**6**	**13**	**12**	**8**	**11**	**6**	**33**	**33**

Source: Author's own work

municipal experts questions through the local platform »Decide Madrid«, an existing tool of participation, which is likely to provide a stable support for longer term results.

Sponsor. The majority of local participatory practices are either promoted or directly led by public authorities (=56) and only few reported practices are (co-)organised by organisations (=6) and civil society (=3), which proves the main role of the state in providing financial, human, and technical resources under the current crisis. Yet, this finding should be understood in light of, at least, three factors. First, international media platforms often receive information from governmental agencies, which may not have access to information regarding all ongoing participatory practices in their cities. Second, and connected to the previous point, organisations and groups of citizens may not have knowledge, skills or resources to access and provide international media platforms with information about their practices. Third, some of the identified practices actually aggregate initiatives implemented on the field by a wider range of agents, including local organisations and associations, neighbourhood groups, and informal groups of citizens.

For example, the city council of Grenoble (France) created the platform »Voisins Voisines«, which promotes neighbourhood networks to improve the daily life of residents, reduce loneliness associated with containment measures and strengthen ties of solidarity with the most vulnerable. Likewise, neighbourhood help in Berlin (Germany) includes also those without internet connection. In case one needs help with their groceries, medicines or pets, one only needs to call the number and enter their post code and type of request which are automatically published on a web page. In Sofia (Bulgaria), it is the city council that receives offers of help from citizens, who volunteer to aid the elderly to get food and medication around the city.

Scope. Most of the local participatory practices regard the provision of practical support from public authorities in favour of specific social groups (e.g. most vulnerable people, such as older people, children, women, etc.) and economic sectors (=37). The provision of public information on the measures in place against the covid-19 contagion is also understood as citizen participation, and mostly relies upon local institutions' websites and social medias (=18). OGP adds that general guidance to health and safety often includes local epidemiological data and hotlines for citizens to reach out for additional assistance. A third form of citizen participation

is the sharing of knowledge, which is frequently developed through ad-hoc media platforms combining tools that enable people to offer and/or receive practical support, mainly at the neighbourhood level (=13). In some cases, citizen participation is approached through launching public campaigns that aim to sensitise local population about specific measures (e.g. wearing masks and practicing social distancing) and opportunities (e.g. cultural activities) (=11). Only in two of the identified examples citizens have been consulted to formulate specific recommendations to local authorities, which contrasts with evidence collected from upper scales, where deliberative initiatives with randomly selected citizens are more frequent.

For example, Birmingham city council (United Kingdom) created the ad-hoc ›Emergency Community Response Hub‹ to provide food aid to the most vulnerable citizens with new communication channels alongside charities and volunteers. Chemnitz (Germany) invested on online mechanisms of engagement by addressing all its inhabitants in a live stream assembly with the mayor, deputy mayors, and high representatives from the health sector where people could ask questions that were collected, answered and published on the city's website. Another example is given by Nice (France), which ran a communication campaign to warn people of the ecological impact of throwing away masks.

Theme. Most of the local participatory practices promote solidarity actions addressing the most vulnerable social groups (=30), followed by practices concerning the promotion of health and care solutions in the face of the covid-19 pandemic (=18). Cities often focus on food provision in line with local sustainable strategies (=13). Culture and sport also emerge as privileged fields of action both in place (e.g. by opening public spaces especially during the summer) and online (e.g. offering online cultural events) (=12). Urban mobility is also tackled as a significant issue through temporary and longer-term interventions aimed to ensure the safety of public transportation and promote sustainable mobility (e.g. through biking) (=11). Last, only six practices focus on the development and/or maintenance of the tourism sector.

For example, in Kungsbacka (Sweden), people aged 70 years or older and others who belong to a risk group and have difficulties using online tools can book a ›digital doer‹ to assist them at home on how to make a video call, download an e-book or enjoy a live streamed concert or digital museum tour. In a slightly different vein, Cardiff (United Kingdom) live streamed the annual Tafwyl festival celebrating Welsh language and culture along with reinforced public investment to improve walking and cycling infrastructure to restart public life in the city safely.

Channel. Evidence shows the equal distribution of both on-the-field (either public or crowdsourced provision of goods and services, neighbourhood volunteering, etc.) and online tools in the development of local participatory practices (e.g. digital platforms, apps, hotlines, etc.) (=33). This data suggests the need to enable participation and reach the most

vulnerable groups in place, while keeping citizens informed and offering open data through a wide range of digital tools. OPG adds that in some cases, cities show growing interest in enhancing transparency over forecasting models, protecting data rights and privacy, and tackling misinformation and disinformation online[19]. About this issue, the European Commission has published a guidance on the development of new mobile applications that support the fight against the covid-19 pandemic to ensure that European citizens can fully trust digital solutions[20].

For example, Busto Garolfo city council (Italy) manages a free-delivery service on the field for food, medicines and other basic necessities, in collaboration with the municipal social services. In contrast, Alcobendas city council (Spain) created a platform to share knowledge on neighbourhood, association and institutional initiatives, such as the Infanta Sofía Hospital's one, which encouraged citizens to write e-mails to those admitted, to be handed by nursing staff.

3 CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Evidence collected from the selected sources suggests that citizen participation in the time of the covid-19 often takes place through short-term practices in European cities. Practices are mainly led by public authorities to provide support to citizens, often with the help of volunteers and organisations. In conjunction to this, city councils also tend to provide public information, and create media platforms to share knowledge on ongoing initiatives developed by the public and private organisations, and local groups of citizens. Public campaigns are also understood as practices of citizen participation, whereas, so far, little investment has been done to steer online public consultations. Such variety of scope is confirmed by the multiplicity of themes addressed by the identified participatory practices, being the promotion of solidarity the most frequent, followed by health and care solutions. Other themes cover culture and sport, urban mobility and, to a lesser extent, tourism. Last, this broad set of participatory practices equally rely on both on-the-field and online tools, which is expected to ensure and hopefully increase their public reach.

These insights suggest that while citizen participation can play a considerable role for more inclusive responses to the current crisis, the covid-19 pandemic brought a transformative potential in this field that needs to be seriously addressed in the days ahead by policymakers, practitioners, and scholars. Accordingly, the following policy recommendations aim to contribute to advance the future debate on citizen participation.

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19 More information at: https://www.opengovpartnership.org/
collecting-open-government-approaches-to-covid-19/

20 More information at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/
detail/en/ip_20_669

1. Exceptional times should not give raise to extra-legal decisions and discretional power in decision-making. In contrast, compliance to legal requirements should be ensured with improved transparency and stronger citizen participation in policymaking.

2. Local authorities, organisations, and civil society promoting participatory practices should be clear about the ways in which key stakeholders and affected parties are identified and engaged.

3. Government-led participatory practices and other participatory initiatives promoted by organisations and civil society should complement each other and find, according to their scope, the most adequate balance between autonomy and institutional embeddedness.

4. Local authorities promoting participatory practices should be aware of the strong territorial dimension of the covid-19 impact. The mechanisms put in place should, therefore, aim to reduce risks of current contagion and prepare to anticipate upcoming risks and extreme events.

5. Participatory practices promoted by organisations and groups of citizens should be more strongly disseminated through international media platforms and find financial support to sustain their networks and outcomes.

6. Participatory practices should be equipped with solid digital platforms to share local information, open the access to governmental data and trigger public oversight of political decisions.

7. The proliferation of media platforms and websites that aim to promote the sharing of knowledge and know-how among cities should be clear about the extent to which citizen participation is pursued by showcased practices.

8. International media platforms should make greater efforts to promote cross-border collaboration among governments, organisations, and citizens at multiple levels, and provide practical information on how to design and implement both online and on-the-field practices.

9. Current circumstances require systemic efforts to ensure that the participation of citizens and the collaboration between public authorities and organisations starts from the identification of problems, develops through the collective formulation of solutions, translates into the provision of services and goods, and ends with the evaluation of the practices.

10. Citizens should be involved in online public deliberations to comment and/or provide recommendations on covid-19 responses through the constitution of multi-stakeholder advisory councils mandated to review and monitor decision-making at all levels.

11. Since the covid-19 pandemic will have short, medium, and long-term effects, participatory practices should break the ceiling of short-term timeframes, often focussed on the efficiency of experimental initiatives, to include medium/long-term planning strategies focussed on the effectiveness of regular and durable citizen participation in decision-making.

12. Last, the covid-19 pandemic confirms the necessity to put health as a high priority in public policies and expenditure, and to prepare cities to upcoming risks and extreme events. The transformation and advancement of participatory practices can help make more consensual decisions for our future on this planet.

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CITIZEN PARTICIPATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Insights from local practices in European cities

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This policy report provides a systematisation of evidence-based knowledge about local practices of citizen participation in Europe in the time of the covid-19 pandemic. The report was built upon the consultation of online sources about public propositions, policy guidelines, and databases collecting information on participatory practices in Europe. The search took place in October and November 2020 and privileged sources in English language, with a focus on Europe. The structure of the report follows the main issues identified through this search, which covered main interlocked challenges associated to the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic for democracy, cities, and citizen participation. Firstly, democracy is challenged in its capacity to handle the current crisis, which emerges in variable forms of governance. Secondly, cities are challenged as they represent a problem and a resource at once. On the one hand, high concentration of population and the presence of greater socioeconomic inequalities may imply greater risks of contagion. On the other, some cities hold great political and economic resources that can provide concrete opportunities to effectively tackle the current crisis. Last, citizen participation is challenged in multiple dimensions that are more pointedly captured in the second section of the report, which zooms in onto European participatory practices. An overview on the international, national, and regional scales is followed by the systematisation of local participatory practices according to five grounded criteria: timeframe (short, medium, and long term); sponsor (public authorities, organisations, grassroots groups); scope (information, knowledge sharing, support provision, public campaign, recommendations); theme (solidarity, health/care, environment, food, culture/sport, youth/education, mobility, tourism); channels (on-the-field, online). Main insights are discussed for each one of the five categories to cast light on main emerging trends in Europe. The report concludes with twelve policy recommendations that aim to contribute to the advancement of the international debate on the future of citizen participation by unfolding its transformative potential.

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