



DOCUMENTATION

DINNER DIALOGUE

Conference on the Future of Europe – How to get citizen participation right

February 4, 2020

Bertelsmann Stiftung in cooperation with
King Baudouin Foundation and Open Society Foundations

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On 4 February 2020, the Bertelsmann Stiftung, together with the King Baudouin Foundation and the Open Society Foundations, organised a DINNER DIALOGUE in Brussels.

The topic that evening was the Conference on the Future of Europe and how to meaningfully involve citizens. The three foundations have been active in strengthening and expanding citizen participation for many years. Now is the right moment to give democracy and innovative citizen participation a new push within the EU.

The DINNER DIALOGUE brought together around fifty EU officials, think tankers, experts on Democracy and European Affairs, participation practitioners and journalists. Since citizen participation is crucial for the perception and success of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the discussions that evening focused on the quality criteria for good citizen participation and their implementation in the context of the Conference. Exciting and inspiring discussions were held during a combination of input lectures about the quality criteria of citizen participation and plenary and table discussions on how to shape citizen participation in the context of the Conference.

The Chatham House Rule was applied at this event. Therefore, the documentation only provides an overview of discussions made and gives no references to specific speakers.

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Input

Quality of citizen participation: Five principles for getting it right

Dominik Hierlemann and Anna Renkamp

For more than a decade, the Bertelsmann Stiftung has been studying and conducting citizen participation. Here, five ideas for meaningful and high-quality citizen participation are outlined.

1. Participation with Impact

Participation with impact means clear objectives, a real scope for action, and measurable impact. The initiators of any process need to define the roles of citizens: communication, consultation, or decision-making. A real scope for action implies there is no predefined outcome, so that the citizens feel their contribution is valuable. Measurable impact means that the results must be accessible and taken seriously by decision-makers. Citizens do not necessarily expect their proposals to be implemented; however, citizens *do* expect their proposals to be considered by policymakers. They want to know what happens with the results.

What does this mean for the Conference on the Future of Europe? It's all about embedding citizen participation into the Conference. This includes interaction between citizens, politicians and all the institutions involved, especially during the decision-making phase. The process has to be designed in a manner that ensures these interactions. A follow-up to manage the responses and feedback from political decision makers to the citizens about their proposals is equally important.

2. Relevant topics – for citizens and politics

Which topics can be discussed in citizen participation formats? How concrete do the questions have to be? Who selects the questions? Are the topics determined top down or is bottom up participation possible?

We would say: A lot is possible. But not everything makes sense. Generally, citizen participation can tackle the hot topics that politicians do not want to burn their fingers on. Like the question of immigration. Citizen participation formats can also deal with cold topics that are important for the future but a bit less controversial, such as demographic change. One thing is clear: the more concrete the question, the better it is. If a concrete political problem is to be solved, then it's better to specify the topic top down. If there is more room to manoeuvre, think bottom up, i.e., the citizens themselves decide on the issue.

What does this mean for the Conference? The big topics, such as climate change and digitalization issues are exciting for citizens. However, the questions must be clear and concrete. Institutional issues? For example, the election of the Commission President? Perhaps it is not the first thing people have in mind. However, it is very concrete. And it is a very elementary democratic question. The bottom line: The choice of topics is important. However, how they become workable issues in an effective and meaningful citizen participation process might prove to be more important.



3. Diversity

Citizen participation can take many formats. It is increasingly popular not only to focus on civil society organisations and stakeholders, but on ordinary citizens. The random selection of citizens is being used more frequently in many countries. Why? Because it is a good way to ensure diversity and involve everyone, not just lawyers, but nurses. Not just politically supportive individuals, but citizens who are critical of politics, as well. We understand random selection as the process of compiling a sample of citizens that represents society's diversity. The sample is categorized in terms of age, gender, educational level, and socio-economic background. Why use random selection? Participants are a "microcosm of the general public". They give us a broad range of experiences, thoughts and perspectives. This diversity sparks conversations among people who might never have met outside of the citizen participation format. Research shows that the public accepts the results of randomly selected citizens.

What does this mean for the Conference on the Future of Europe? The EU lives more from institutional innovations than nation states. Randomly selected citizens could meet in transnational groups. In a true European spirit. With the help of randomly selected citizens, the EU could be in a position to spearhead the development of innovative democracy. The new Commission wants to "give a new push for democracy". Why not for new forms of democracy too?

4. Good Deliberation

No one will say anything against good deliberation. But the devil is in the details. That is, in the process and in the understanding of the word. Because good deliberation is more than just communication. It is more than dialogue. It is the cooperative development of ideas and solutions.

It needs to create opportunities for reflection, for getting to know the opinions of others in depth and for thinking about one's own positions. Let's take a Citizens Assembly as an example. Good deliberation takes time. Time for preparation, time for execution. A one-day Citizens Assembly will hardly produce substantial results. Citizens need to be able to listen to different experts and ask them questions.

Good deliberation at the European level means that citizens don't simply discuss topics among their peers, within their national borders. Transnational and multilingual dialogues are necessary. Last year, together with the Commission, we conducted a transnational dialogue with 120 randomly selected citizens from five countries. The participants spoke to each other at 10 tables in their four different mother tongues. This is also possible with more languages. What we need is not an accumulation of national public spheres, but a European public sphere. Good deliberation is at the heart of it all. It shows that people with very different backgrounds and opinions can work together and find solutions together. Isn't this the European Way of Life?

5. Public acceptance

In order for the public to accept citizen participation, the process must be visible, transparent and credible. Visibility presumes that citizens are aware of what is going on and know that citizen participation is taking place. Therefore, all communication channels and multipliers should be activated. Reporting in the media helps to create a broad public debate. The participation process, materials and results must be transparent, understandable and easily accessible to everyone. Then, citizens are informed and can participate. This leads to credibility.

What does this mean for the Conference on the Future of Europe? In addition to the groups of randomly selected citizens, all European citizens should have the opportunity to participate. We already know that a website, or better yet, an online platform, will be established. We believe it should not only serve communicative purposes, but also make participation easier. It is interesting for all citizens to make suggestions and to discuss ideas. European information centres, civil society organisations, national, regional and local actors should be involved as multipliers. The Conference is not about excluding anyone, but about including everyone – citizens and civil society organisations alike.



Plenary discussion

State of play: The Conference on the Future of Europe and how European citizens should be involved

Stefan Schäfers, Director for European Affairs at the King Baudouin Foundation, together with Dominik Hierlemann, Senior Expert in the Future of Democracy Program of the Bertelsmann Stiftung and moderator of the event, welcomed the evening's speakers and guests. They emphasized the good timing of the second DINNER DIALOGUE. Although the concept for the Conference on the Future of Europe has not been finalized, and how European citizens will be involved has not been clarified, planning is in full swing. The European Parliament, the Commission and some of the EU Member States have already put forward their proposals (the Council's official position is still being finalized).

The plenary discussion was opened with introductory remarks from high-level representatives from the three main EU institutions that are involved in designing and organising the Conference: Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography, Mairead McGuinness, Vice-President of the European Parliament and responsible for relationships with national parliaments, and Michael Roth, Minister of State for Europe from German Federal Foreign Office, co-responsible for developing the Council's position on the Conference in that capacity.

The discussion covered many different aspects of the design and organisation of the Conference, especially the citizen participation dimension.

Ensuring meaningful participation for citizens

The central topic of discussion was how citizen participation in the Conference can be made meaningful: how can we make sure that it has a clear and visible impact on the Conference outcomes and recommendations, and ultimately on the future position and course of the European Union?

A first point, made repeatedly, is the need for clear **objectives**. This concerns the overall Conference objectives, as well as the aspects of the Conference specifically related to citizen participation. The citizens' expectations of the Conference can only be managed if such objectives are

agreed upon and communicated from the outset, and ultimately met. A number of participants expressed concerns about the **different levels of ambition** that they observed in the positions of the three EU institutions: the European Parliament is believed to be most ambitious, inspired by successful participatory processes such as the Irish Citizens' Assemblies. However, some participants suspected that a significant group of Member States may want to block any such grand participatory ambitions, especially if they lead citizens to believe that treaty change is a likely result.

Another point that was brought up during the evening was **to not pre-empt the Conference discussions**. Citizens will only participate if they are confident that politicians are open to their input, as opposed to being driven by a preconception of the necessary outcome of the discussions. For some of the actors involved, this also means that the **Conference agenda** should provide structure to the discussions **without being exclusionary**: if citizens want to address certain topics that are not directly related to the overall Conference themes, there should be space for that. One concern that was raised in response, though, is that citizens' participation needs to be guided by **concrete questions** in order to deliver **concrete recommendations** that can be followed up on by policymakers.

Lastly, the earlier discussion about the need for clear objectives, and for a relatively open yet focused agenda, was connected to the discussion on how to follow-up on the Conference output: participants called for a **clear feedback and follow-up mechanism**. Unlike the European Citizens' Consultations and Citizens' Dialogues, citizen input must have a clear and visible impact on EU politics and policy. While treaty change is one possible option, it was argued, it is not a necessary outcome.

A Conference that allows everyone to participate

Another issue that returned frequently during the evening was the question of inclusiveness: who should participate in the Conference on the Future of Europe, and how should participation be organised?



When it comes to citizen participation in the Conference, **sortition** was mentioned as a possibly useful recruitment technique: it would allow the diversity of the European population to be echoed in the Conference discussions, instead of only hearing from the ‘usual suspects’. The participation of randomly selected EU citizens could be organised by means of transnational deliberative formats, including discussions in mixed, multilingual groups. At the same time, Conference-related events should happen all across Europe, especially **outside the capitals**, in order to make sure that every citizen in the Europe has a chance to participate. Furthermore, the question of **online participation** was brought up as an important complement to these face-to-face events. Lastly, a suggestion was made for the Conference to connect with and promote pre-existing instruments of citizen participation, such as the European Citizens’ Initiative.

In addition to the participation of individual citizens, it was argued that **civil society** organisations should be represented in the Conference, alongside representatives from the European Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee and the social partners. Also, the involvement of **national parliaments** was discussed: in order to ensure that the ownership of the Conference is shared by the EU and its Member States, it was argued that national parliaments must have strong representation in the Conference, including in its Steering Committee. The planned **interinstitutional agreement** between the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council was also mentioned as an important prerequisite for developing this shared ownership. In order to balance the need for flexibility for Member States and other actors involved in organising Conference-related events and the

need for a clearly defined common framework and identity, reference has been made to a set of **Conference guidelines** to be developed and published after the interinstitutional agreement is completed.

A Conference that focuses on topics that matter to citizens

One last issue that participants debated is the type of topics that would need to be dealt with during the Conference. The Conference should deal with topics that matter to both citizens and EU institutions, and in particular the ‘**hot topics**’, for which Europe-wide debate is urgently needed. The question remains, of course, which topics are hot and which are not, and how this is determined. One participant argued that institutional issues like *Spitzenkandidaten* and **transnational lists** may be seen as relevant for citizens if these discussions are framed in the right way – that is, as basic questions related to the way we organise EU democracy and how we select our political leaders. Following a similar line of reasoning, the idea that rule of law violations in the EU should be addressed during the Conference was argued as well.

In the final round of remarks and takeaways, the EU institutions were called upon to tap into the rich experiences with citizen participation at various political levels. Additionally, someone argued that it would be better for the EU to be modest in its ambitions so that they can be met, instead of creating high expectations that will never be realized. Lastly, a note of caution was put forward: if citizen participation in the Conference is mismanaged or insufficiently thought through from start to finish, this may undermine rather than strengthen citizens’ trust and confidence in the EU, and its future.

Table discussions

Giving citizens' a real say: Participatory challenges for the Conference on the Future of Europe

Table 1 Topics:

*Top down or bottom up –
what are the right topics and
who decides on them?*

Selecting issues

Several speakers mentioned that the Conference on the Future of Europe should deal with the priorities defined by the von der Leyen Commission. Other participants extolled the virtues of demonstrating the EU Strategic Agenda 2019–2024 laid out by the European Council in June 2019. There was a rather broad agreement that the issues should not be predetermined – citizens should be free to decide what they want to debate. In this context, it was discussed whether the EU should readjust its priorities/agenda if citizens want the EU to concentrate on topics other than those prioritised by EU institutions. Another suggestion during the debate was to limit the list of issues to be discussed to the key strategic priorities from the European Citizens' Consultations in 2018, the priorities of the von der Leyen Commission and the European Council in 2019. The following issues were mentioned as relevant for citizens and for the EU institutions: Green Deal, Digital Transformation, Global EU, Democracy and Governance.

Specifying the issues

There was a rather broad agreement that there will have to be a trade-off between the need to be general in terms of issues to be discussed while at the same time identifying the more specific questions that should guide the debate. The idea of citizens being asked for input about possible concrete questions at the Conference on the Future of Europe was discussed. One suggestion was to convene 'Transnational Citizens Panels' comprised of randomly

selected citizens from all EU member states. These citizens could draft thematic questionnaires about the main challenges, issues and questions. Another argument was that the identification of specific questions to be addressed in the Conference on the Future of Europe could raise expectations that the EU might not be able to fulfil.

Including institutional questions

There was general agreement that the Conference on the Future of Europe should deal with institutional and governance matters. However, the questions and issues addressed should not be too concrete and technical, citizens might not be interested or knowledgeable enough to discuss and consider the details of EU governance and decision-making. Questions and issues subject to deliberation should be formulated in a more general manner and address how the EU could become more democratic in the future. This may be something EU citizens have an interest in.

Mandate to decide on topics

Similar to experiences at national level, where some central authority usually identifies the issues and questions to be addressed, the three main EU institutions should agree on which topics should be dealt with in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe. The issues should be identified early in the process.



Table 2 Diversity:*How to ensure inclusive and broad participation?***Best practice for random selection of citizens**

There was agreement that a good random selection must be made over two phases. The first phase is a random sampling during which letters are sent to a certain number of citizens. In the second phase a stratified sampling of people who are interested is drawn according to certain criteria such as age, gender, education and location. The random selection can be carried out with the help of polling agencies that buy their data from national registries.

Including populists and anti-EU forces

Diversity also means the inclusion of populist and anti-EU forces. To do this, focus groups should be conducted and caution should be exercised when moderating and training participants. Eurosceptic opinion often softens by involving those voices in the discussion.

Communication and awareness

The Conference on the Future of Europe should not only be known inside the Brussels bubble, citizens should also be made aware of it. Communication should be different from the European Citizens' Conference and the Commission's online survey, in which only 85,000 people took part. Obviously, people did not know about the survey. Lessons should be learned from these examples and support from governments, parties and the media at national levels should be leveraged.

Civil society representation

It is crucial to involve non-governmental organizations and their interests in addition to ordinary citizens for the Conference on the Future of Europe. They are in daily contact with the constituencies and exert influence through trust and not through authority.

Table 3 Transnational Processes:

How to ensure good transnational and multi-lingual deliberation?



Time for institutional participation of citizens at the EU level

Several speakers mentioned that the debate on the future of Europe should not lead to another nice “one shot event” with no concrete outcome using inconsistent methods. Most participants agreed that a permanent commission for citizen participation at the EU level should be introduced and that citizen participation should be institutionalized within the EU decision-making process.

Not just one method of involving citizens in the Future Conference

Keeping the different levels of the European Union (local, regional, national, European) in mind, it is important that many different methods are chosen to involve citizens in the Conference. For example, the random sampling of citizens from all European Union countries, intended to gather a diversity of opinions on one topic, could be complemented by other online or offline methods to include the voices of the citizens who are willing to get involved.

Role of organized groups

Citizens consultation should also include members of active organizations (civil society, trade unions, local entities, interest groups, parliament). The question is, how are good synergies created? For example, members of such organizations could be involved in citizens deliberations as experts to help inform citizens and to presenting the arguments in favour or against. They could also intervene to help organizing these citizens deliberations.

Transnational versus decentralized citizen consultations, or both?

A large part of the debate concerned how to organize a citizen consultation at the EU level. The argument was made that it is possible to use interpreters to organize transnational consultation (this was done by the Bertelsmann Stiftung). Citizens who participated generally expressed great satisfaction and a sense of empathy with fellow participants from other countries (this is positive for the construction of an EU public sphere). Also, the high-quality solutions proposed by the transnational groups were made in a true European spirit.

While most participants recognized that such transnational events are valuable experiences, they agreed that it should be a complementary event of decentralized consultations (consultations taking place on a same topic in different countries, regions, municipalities). If not, this kind of procedure would not help reconnect citizens with the EU, it may be perceived as just another elitist experience in the EU bubble. It has also been pointed out that transnational forms of consultation are expensive.

Table 4 Visibility:

How to communicate the Conference and use digital tools?

Communication and awareness

Communication is not just done by getting attention from media outlets, but by embedding consultations in wider social networks.

Communication and expectations

There is a need to communicate a reasonable level of expectations early on so the stakeholders are not disappointed later. Communication should not focus solely on the process of deliberation but also on follow-up and impact – how the results find their way into political decisions. One idea was to build participation into the communication strategies themselves, so that participants have some say over how their results are presented.

Taking into account the different levels of the European Union

There is a need to use the wealth of existing experiences in how to develop messaging that appeals to local audiences – especially experiences about how to prevent outside reporting from distorting the internal deliberations of the agoras.

Anticipating and countering the barriers to dialogue

One idea developed in this context was to base messaging on a positive case for democracy, as opposed to negative messaging about saving the EU from populists, or the awkward institutional debates that are likely to dominate much of the Conference.



Table 5 Results:

Follow-up – how to deal with the results?

In general: Participants in this table discussion see the Conference on the Future of Europe as a chance to combat populism. However, in order to avoid frustration among those who participate in it, the Conference needs to lead to concrete, tangible results.

Linking different arenas

It is important that the agora part of the Conference and the discussions on the political level do not run separately, they need to be intertwined. Not just by papers, but also by physical, real life meetings between politicians and participants from the general public.

Developing feedback-loops

The group discussed how to manage the feedback to the participants: How should the European Parliament communicate the outcome to the agoras? Use a matter of fact report – or should agora be asked to confirm the outcome in any way (Is this what you wanted? What happens when the agoras don't agree?)? One idea was to not only include citizens in the agora, but also in the Steering Committee for the whole Conference.

How to measure the impact of the Conference?

Some space was devoted to the discussion on how to measure the impact of the Conference on the Future of Europe. One participant proposed a fixed quota, as in “at least 25 % of what was agreed in the Conference should be adopted by EU institutions”. But how do you measure 25 %? If this is the goal – how do you explain the other 75 % to the citizens? Several members of this table pointed out that the Conference on the Future of Europe should not take over parliament's role as the institution that stands for representative democracy in the legislative process.

To avoid frustration afterwards, this process should already be agreed on in its entirety as part of the joint statements between the institutions.





Agenda

17:15	Registration and informal reception
18:00	Welcome Quality of citizen participation: Five principles for getting it right Dominik Hierlemann , Senior Expert, Bertelsmann Stiftung Anna Renkamp , Senior Project Manager, Bertelsmann Stiftung
18:15	State of play: The Conference on the Future of Europe and how European citizens should be involved In conversation with: <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, European Commission■ Mairead McGuinness, Vice-President, European Parliament■ Michael Roth, Minister of State for Europe, German Federal Foreign Office
19:15	Giving citizens a real say: Participatory challenges for the Conference on the Future of Europe Thematic discussions at five tables Table 1 Topics: Top down or bottom up – what are the right topics and who decides on them? Table 2 Diversity: How to ensure inclusive and broad participation? Table 3 Transnational Processes: How to ensure good transnational and multi-lingual deliberation? Table 4 Visibility: How to communicate the Conference and use digital tools? Table 5 Results: Follow-up – how to deal with the results?
19:45	What next? The road for meaningful citizen participation at the Conference on the Future of Europe Presentation of table discussions and findings
20:30	End of Dinner and farewell

List of participants

Iris Abraham	Communication Adviser, Cabinet Vice President Dubravka Šuica, European Commission, Belgium
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Thomas Bondiguel	Counsellor, Permanent Representation of France to the EU, Belgium
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Karl-Heinz Lambertz	President, European Committee of the Regions / President, Parliament of the German-speaking community, Belgium
Olivier le Bussy	Journalist, La Libre, Belgium
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Marilyn Neven	Programme Manager, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Belgium
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Further information can be found on

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/democracy-and-participation-in-europe/

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