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Triggering citizen involvement

SUSTAINABILITY

📅 12.10.2020 💬 0



This article gathers tips on how authorities and communities can attract and trigger dialogue with citizens for better environmental and social impacts. It bases itself on community building tools as well as ethical standards to answer the citizen trust crisis. Concrete examples from Finland and Belgium help illustrate how local authorities can apply those principles.

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The European Green Deal issued by the EU Commission on December 2019 is a set of policy initiatives. The aim is to help Europe to become climate neutral in 2050 by the efficient use of resources and moving to a clean and circular economy. (European Commission 2020a.) The important role of citizens in this transition process has been recognized and is embedded in the Green Deal (European Commission 2020b).

Interreg Europe funded project CECI – Citizen Involvement in Circular Economy Implementation helps developing regional policies through promoting citizen involvement in circular economy (Interreg Europe 2020). LAB University of Applied Sciences is the lead partner of the CECI project.

How to create attractive citizen communities

Communities are formed by groups of people unified by joint vision or circumstances taking collective actions for a common goal. They go beyond ordinary networks and connections in order to reach collective aims and impacts.

Four pillars on how to create an attractive community can be identified:

1. Strong identity

- Making people willing to be part of the club: the branding is important and must convey the mission, atmosphere and values through appropriate name, visuals, and keywords.
- Referring to local specificities, endemic species, people, or monument, people may identify with. At the same time, one needs to consider the risk of nationalism or localism in some forms, that might not develop open communities but rather exclusive religious or ethnic groups.
- There are articles (De Beauchesne 2019) and guides (makesense 2020) to help building the community vision and selecting a catchy community name by using collective intelligence.

2. Learning activities

- People often join communities with perspectives of learning hard and soft skills applicable also in their personal and professional life. Therefore, it's important to have a clear vision of the different roles, trainings and opportunities a community can offer.

3. Connections

- There must be a benevolent and respectful frame that will resonate with everybody. That will help to channel divergent opinions and protect the group from being hijacked by someone.
- People have a strong sense of belonging. Communities enable connecting different stakeholders at different situations, which can share, at least temporarily, similar goals.

4. Rewarding

- Members build their reputation through their contributions.
- Communities grow thanks to the role models and ambassadors, which embody and dynamize the values and processes, and attract other people in following.
- Communities should allow a satisfying personal balance between what people bring and get from the community, depending on their skills, time and monetary resources, thus creating together collective community wealth.



Image 1. Long term relationships and welcoming atmosphere are necessary for citizen participation (makesense 2019)

How to reach diverse citizens eager to participate in local actions for circular economy
 At times, the trust crisis between citizens and public authorities may be identified. The following practices (Table 1) could help to better connect with citizens that are rarely heard, to better understand what they have to say, and how to settle a convenient atmosphere to discuss local issues.

1. Mapping citizens for better representativity	
	Rely on local actors e.g. community centres, that already have the trust of people.
	Include the people affected by the decisions. Controversial activities that generate much inconvenience are often located in areas, where the population have a little mobilization and bargaining power. (Erickson 2016.)
2. Make your intention and message clear	

	Be transparent about the real potential outcomes.
	Apply the Aarhus Convention principles that enforce the rights to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • receive environmental information by public authorities • participate in environmental decision-making • review procedures to challenge public decisions made without respecting the two earlier mentioned rights or environmental law in general (European Commission 2020c; UNECE 1998).
3. Create a welcoming atmosphere for all	
	Offer refreshments, introduce the meeting with an icebreaker, so participants can relax. Practice what you preach – Make it zero waste.
	Facilitate and enable greater accessibility in participation, e.g. SITRA (2020) (Finnish Innovation Fund) has published guidelines to find appropriate methodologies.
	Avoid online only. Go to places where people are.
	Offer different options and services for people in different circumstances (working on shift, parents with children, physically disabled, lacking transportation or computers, or language barriers).
	Acknowledge achievements, no matter how small they are.

Table 1. Good practices that could enable better connection with citizens (UNECE 1998; Erickson 2016, European Commission 2020c; SITRA 2020)

Concrete examples of citizen involvement in circular economy

The below-mentioned examples have been collected from the CECI project partner regions.

Rural Lahti – Urban-Rural Migrants 2030 (Maallemuuttajat 2030)

In Päijät-Häme, Finland, the Urban-Rural Migrants 2030 – project aims to increase expertise and experience-based knowledge about sharing economy & service economy possibilities in rural regions. The objective is to find solutions to such local issues like disappearing local services, rural exodus, and high unemployment, and to create positive ecological and social impacts at the same time. To make sure the future solutions will match the needs of local residents, the LAB University of Applied Sciences has asked the residents of Hollola and

Asikkala (two municipalities participating in the project) for ideas on how to share or rent goods, premises, and know-how instead of owning them. (LAB 2020.)

Together with the project, the municipalities of Asikkala and Hollola have started trials of sharing economy services to evaluate their business potential, environmental, and social welfare impacts. Opportunities for rural sharing and service economies include i.a co-farming, shared tools and equipment, vehicle rentals, repair services and service activities provided by farms, such as yard maintenance. (LAB 2020.)

Image 2. Sharing Economy – Tool and Game Library established by Maallemuuttajat 2030 project. (Image: Kaisa Tuominen)

Stroom

The city of Mechelen, Belgium, started an urban living lab for circular economy acceleration through citizen involvement. One specific neighbourhood was chosen, because it houses people from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and includes a social housing district. The aim was to make the project results representative for the diverse population of the city, and to actively engage everyday men and women whose primary concern is not sustainable consumption. The city mapped people's wishes and concerns about different livelihood needs: energy and water consumption, food, housing, mobility, relaxation, material consumption and waste management. They connected to people through key figures and neighbourhood workers, street committees, the school committee, and the youth organizations within the neighbourhood. Together with social organizations, citizen initiatives and entrepreneurs, they organized a circular market, mapped the circular consumption initiatives in the city on a physical and online map for citizens and tourists,

and explored ways in which they could mainstream the use of their circular products or services. (Mechelen 2020.)

Conclusions

Citizen involvement is important to get circular economy projects to evolve. At the same time, it has proven to be a challenging task as many factors influence the success of citizen engagement. Luckily, there are several tools and methods available. Furthermore, there are existing successful examples that can be replicated and transferred to different regions and different situations. We need to develop the skills that are essential for an active citizen dialogue to harness the know-how for regional development to its full potential.

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Illustration: <https://pxhere.com/fi/photo/1444151> (CC0)

Published 12.10.2020

Reference to this article

Miller, L., Delaunay-Belleville, A., Villanen, M. & Medkova, K. 2020. Triggering citizen involvement. LAB Pro. [Cited and date of citation]. Available at:

<https://www.labopen.fi/en/lab-pro/triggering-citizen-involvement/>

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CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT



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