DEMETRA

Democratic Governance, Environmental and Climate Challenges, and Societal Transformation: Deliberation, Inclusiveness, and Citizen Empowerment for Sustainable Food Systems

Citizens as Partners in Food System Transformation: Scaling Deliberative Democracy for Sustainable Food Systems

Policy Brief No. 1

Getting citizens involved in food policy decisions can help build public support for change, but only if it includes people who are usually left out, gives them real power, and actually influences government decisions. This brief sets out six key actions to make this work, from explaining food issues clearly to ordinary people, to setting up permanent citizen councils that shape policy.

For policymakers, government staff, and people working on food and sustainability issues.

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The challenge

The pressure on policymakers. Governments must deliver ambitious sustainability transformations in response to the climate crisis, while keeping them fair, democratic, and broadly supported. Food systems are at the heart of this: they drive greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, and health inequalities, while recent crises, from COVID-19 to geopolitical shocks, have exposed deep vulnerabilities.

What DEMETRA does. We study how citizens contribute to these transformations through deliberative participatory processes (DPPs), small-scale democratic experiments that bring diverse ordinary citizens together to address key societal transitions. DEMETRA works across seven European cities in seven countries, each with different food systems, political traditions, and levels of DPP experience. The seven project cities are Brighton (UK), Cologne (Germany), Bologna (Italy), Lille (France), Geneva (Switzerland), Uppsala (Sweden), and Tartu (Estonia).

Three questions we address

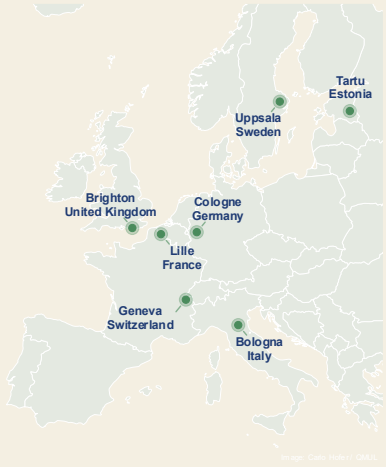
1. Inclusive voices. How can citizens' voices (especially those from marginalised or under-represented communities) be effectively included?

2. Genuine participation. How can processes be designed for real decision-making, not just symbolic involvement?

3. Lasting policy impact. How can DPPs be built into regular policymaking and scaled for lasting impact on local and regional food systems?

Policy brief aimed at policymakers, their administration, and practitioners.

Seven cities · seven countries · seven food systems



Six recommendations at a glance

Drawing on our findings, we set out six priority actions for embedding deliberative participatory processes in food and sustainability policy. Each is explained in full on the next page.

REACH PEOPLE

1 Integrate deliberation into policymaking

Embed deliberative approaches and communicate them through accessible language.

2 Protect small producers and marginalised groups

Connect DPPs to measures that share the costs and benefits of transition fairly.

GIVE IT TEETH

3 Connect DPPs to real political decisions

Clarify in advance how DPP recommendations will be processed.

4 Establish lasting deliberative structures

Set up permanent infrastructure that integrates community-based initiatives.

MAKE IT STICK

5 Support local food initiatives long-term

Provide stable, multi-year institutional and financial backing for community food organisations.

6 Invest in the evidence base

Integrate harmonised indicators on citizen participation in sustainability decision-making into national monitoring systems.

Numbering matches the detailed recommendations on the following page.

The recommendations in detail

1. Integrate deliberation into public programmes and policymaking. Embed deliberative approaches within existing public programmes and communicate them through accessible language and familiar channels to broaden public understanding and participation.

2. Protect small producers and marginalised groups. Connect DPPs to measures that share the costs and benefits of transition fairly: targeted support for small producers, affordability mechanisms, and social protection.

3. Connect DPPs to real political decisions. Clarify in advance how DPP recommendations will be received, considered, and responded to by local government, and communicate these links transparently to participants and the public.

4. Establish lasting deliberative structures. Set up or strengthen food policy councils, citizen panels, and local food strategies; permanent democratic infrastructure that integrates community-based initiatives.

5. Support local food initiatives for the long term. Move beyond pilot-based support. Provide stable, multi-year institutional and financial backing for community food organisations, recognising them as governance partners.

6. Invest in the evidence base. Integrate harmonised indicators on citizen participation in sustainability decision-making into Eurobarometer, the European Social Survey and relevant national monitoring systems, while ensuring adequate coverage of under-represented groups.

Together, these actions would help make DPPs a durable part of European food-system governance, strengthening legitimacy, addressing inequalities, and helping ensure the green transition is both effective and democratic.

The underlying evidence

These recommendations draw on DEMETRA's first three strands of research (conceptual, empirical, and organisational).

Legitimacy comes from inclusion. Sustainability transformations need legitimacy, which DPPs deliver by bringing citizens directly into policy design, provided they reflect the people they speak for.

Process quality is decisive. Well-facilitated dialogue builds trust and better decisions. Authorities should invest in training, tools, and clear guidelines, and link outputs to real follow-up.

Close the data gaps. Few surveys track citizen participation in sustainability decisions, and evidence on marginalised groups is especially thin. Standardised indicators and targeted research are needed.

Context shapes what works. Governance structures, institutional trust, and organisational capacity all determine whether a DPP takes root; models cannot be transplanted wholesale. Community actors tend to lead, whereas commercial actors often prefer expert-led models.

Promising local models exist. Community-supported agriculture, cooperative food networks, and food-sharing platforms can scale democratic food governance, given long-term policy and institutional backing.

Watch the equity risks. Without supportive frameworks, the costs of change fall on small producers and low-income communities. In a crisis, DPPs also guard against top-down measures that undermine democratic norms.

EMPIRICAL STRAND

189
existing surveys reviewed

1,476
question items on sustainability topics

ORGANISATIONAL STRAND

100+
interviews, 15 per city

850+
Institutional survey responses

Image: Valentin Rottensteiner / UWH

About this brief

This brief is a public output of Work Package 9 of the DEMETRA project and draws on research from Work Packages 1, 2 and 3.

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LICENCE

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