



Multiple Scales, Multiple Approaches – Towards Meaningful Engagement In Europe

Public participation and societal engagement are at the heart of creating relevant and effective policies for EU citizens (EU Commission's 2001 White Paper on European Governance and Århus Convention 1998). Inclusiveness and transparency should be fostered at all levels of governance from the EU to national, regional and local levels. Inviting public participation on the transnational level is, however, challenging; people might perceive topics as distant to their everyday lives or too broad to grasp and provide input to.

Nonetheless, environmental issues require the actions and ownership from all of us as they are rarely confined within national or regional borders. Science, policy and society need to work together to create legitimate policies that encourage action from different actors in the European Union. While science has a central role in building the premise for informed decision-making resulting in policies based on the best available knowledge, including local people's perceptions and knowledge can further improve decision making, and increase its legitimacy. Thus, investing time and resources for societal engagement in order to formulate effective policies is worthwhile.

Recommendations

- Societal engagement should always be linked to current and relevant policy issues to foster a meaningful discussion with the potential for influencing or increasing knowledge on emerging policy topics.
- Science, policy and society should work together to ensure the best available knowledge is used at the European level.
- The phase in which engagement with society takes place will differ depending on the desired impacts of engagement.
- The broader the geographical scale of the policy process, the more difficult it becomes to engage diverse audiences. Topics should always be communicated in an appropriate manner at different scales and lower level deliberations should feed into processes at higher level and vice versa.
- Engaging diverse audiences at broader scales (e.g.. the EU level) requires innovative approaches, often combining online techniques, which guarantee an accessible and safe space to share knowledge and opinions.



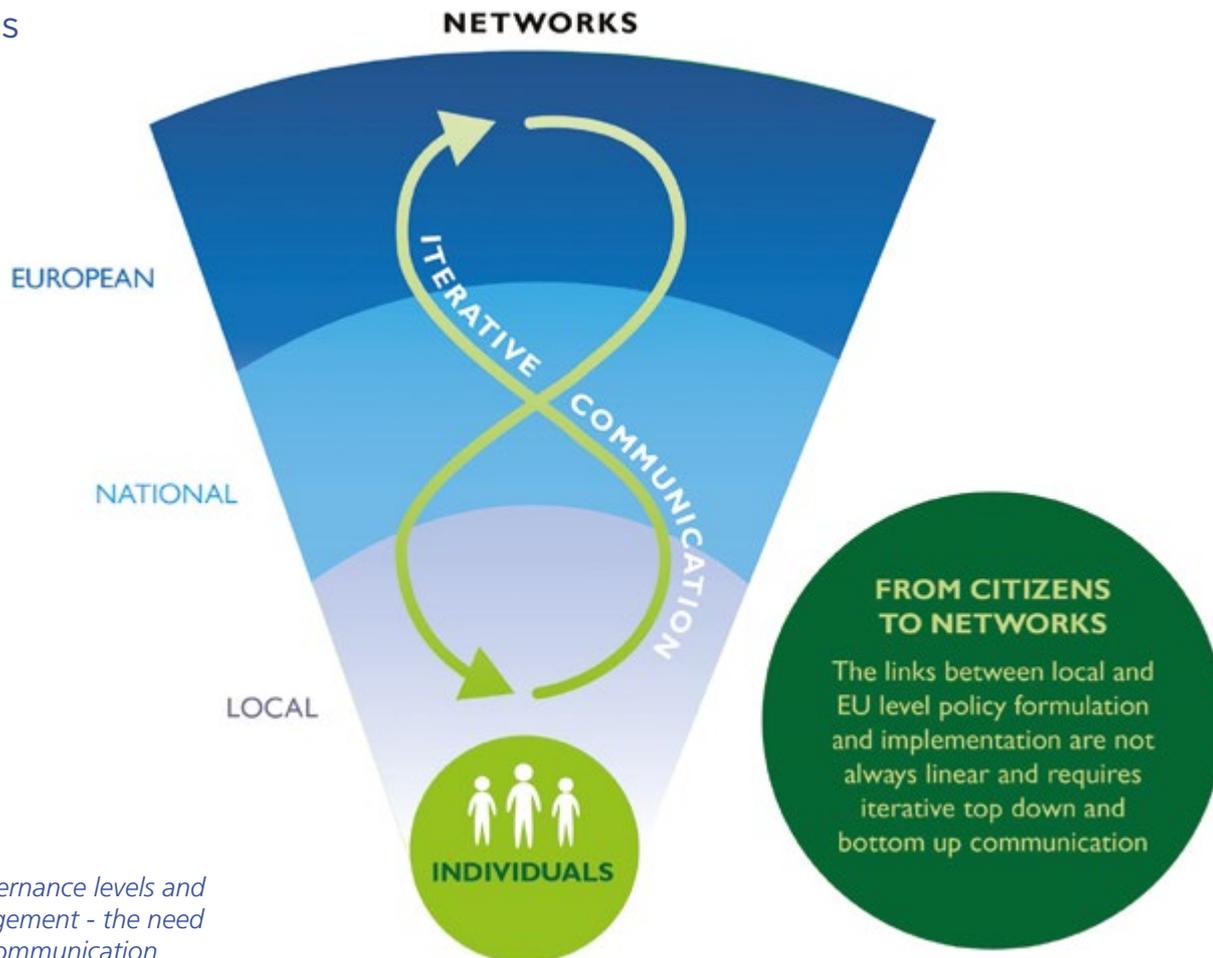


Figure 1: Governance levels and societal engagement - the need for iterative communication

Nature Based Solutions science café

EKLIPSE aims to encourage informed societal debate on environmental policy issues at the EU level using engagement methods such as science cafés. A science café on Nature Based Solutions (NBS) was organized in Helsinki, Finland, linked to an EKLIPSE knowledge synthesis process that developed an evaluation framework to assess NBS in dealing with climate resilience challenges in urban areas.

The NBS evaluation framing was operationalised in the open science café by deliberating how nature based solutions can operate on the ground level and by illustrating why and how citizens can participate in planning for sustainable urban environments. In the NBS science café, policy-makers, citizens, citizen activists and researchers participated in the facilitated dialogue bringing different insights to the science café discussion.

The NBS discussion was happening in Europe on a wider policy level, but the science café illustrated the possible impacts of EU policies on the local scale in

Helsinki. Downscaling the framing brings abstract higher level decision making closer to the public and bridges the gaps between society and policy.

Tying societal engagement to ongoing research topics and policy processes is a significant motivation factor for participants as it enables a timely and relevant discussion and offers the opportunity of increasing ones understanding of a topical issue, expressing novel emerging issues related to it and possibly influencing outcomes of policy formulation.



Why do people engage

People's willingness to get involved in deliberation and discussions is influenced by several factors. Individual traits and interests partly explain it. Learning from public participation and becoming an active and aware citizen can serve as incentives to participate as well as previous experiences of meaningful participation. Furthermore, some regard participation as a democratic duty. Societal engagement can also result from a strong social identity and an altruistic motivation to contribute to common good. Trust in government is important so that political activity leads to collaboration with authorities instead of protests against them. Nevertheless, sometimes a high level of trust can lead to passiveness, and thus encouraging political activeness and fostering political competencies, for example through education, is essential.

The decision to participate is often guided by a personal evaluation of the meaningfulness

of participation. The more influential the consequences of the engagement are and the less personal effort they require, the more likely people will participate. Thus, it is crucial that societal engagement is authentic and participants can genuinely have an impact on the process and its results. Furthermore, people tend to be mainly concerned about local issues they face on a daily basis rather than international policy-making processes. This challenge applies to societal engagement at EU level. For successful international societal engagement, it is important that people feel a sense of belonging to a larger social group. Displaying the links between the diverse scales of decision making may help foster attachment to the EU and promote a collective EU identity that can motivate more people to be active in EU policy-making processes.

More about the topic

BiodivERsA Stakeholder Engagement Handbook

This handbook is designed to help researchers identify and engage stakeholders in research related to biodiversity and ecosystem services topics.

Engage2020 Action catalogue

The Action catalogue is an on-line decision support tool that is intended to enable researchers, policy-makers and others wanting to conduct inclusive research, to find the method best suited for their specific project needs.

Key references

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