Humanities and Social Sciences Communications

Article in Press

https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-06384-5

Sustainable futures: citizens' imaginaries for democratic participation practices

Received: 30 April 2025

Accepted: 28 November 2025

Cite this article as: Campos, I., Limão, J., Repo, P. *et al.* Sustainable futures: citizens' imaginaries for democratic participation practices. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* (2025). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-06384-5

Inês Campos, João Limão, Petteri Repo, Doris Fuchs, Vanessa Buth, David Lamas & Daniel Peniche

Sustainable futures: citizens' imaginaries for democratic participation practices

Abstract

To address global sustainability challenges, novel ways to engage citizens in governance are sought. However, citizens' perspectives and expectations regarding their participation in shaping sustainability transformation are often neglected in research and practice. This article aims to address this knowledge gap by exploring how citizens envision democratic participation in the pursuit of a sustainable future. The approach draws on findings from visioning exercises conducted with over 100 citizens across five European countries. These citizens were part of mini-publics that participated in Democracy Labs held in five cities. They were selected based on socio-demographic criteria such as gender, age, employment status, and education, with attention to including underrepresented groups. The analysed imaginaries reveal that citizens favour democratic practices integrated into daily life rather than occurring in distant, designated venues. An idealised concept of embedded participatory governance emerges from citizens' visions, which depict multiple decision-making nodes influencing regional, national, and even international resolutions. Citizens expect traceability and transparency of decision-making at the local, national, regional, and transnational levels. Addressing these expectations, this article provides insights for policymakers and sustainability scholars on citizens' perceptions of a functional democracy, highlighting the requirements for new spaces for citizenship and for legitimate, impactful processes of collective participation in sustainability governance.

Keywords: imaginaries, democracy perspectives, participation spaces, idealised experiences

1. Introduction

The complexity of today's sustainability challenges, such as climate change, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and societal inequalities, requires a transformative change in society (Gillard et al., 2016; Lipper & Cavatassi, 2024; M.-L. Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Pastukhova & Westphal, 2020). Numerous

policy interests compete for pathways to a transition to sustainable futures (Pickering, Coolsaet, et al., 2022; Pickering, Hickmann, et al., 2022), yet finding suitable forms for their governance is far from easy (Repo & Matschoss, 2018). Addressing such complexity and uncertainty requires novel, legitimate practices of democratic decision-making that enable inclusive participation by citizens and communities in transformative change (Asenbaum, 2022; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016).

Transitions represent profound, long-term sociotechnical changes driven by interconnected policy and decision-making processes involving diverse social actors and institutional frameworks (Markard et al., 2012). Sociotechnical research has argued that a sustainability transition entails a transformative change due to the large-scale and multilevel dynamics across techno-economic, sociopolitical, socioeconomic, cultural and justice dimensions (Hölscher et al., 2018; Pastukhova & Westphal, 2020). It remains unclear how citizens, especially from vulnerable groups, can participate in this transformation, which necessitates new models for democratic participation (Pickering, Hickmann, et al., 2022) and requires an inclusive and novel governance approach (Korhonen-Kurki et al., 2025). Research into democratic participation and active citizenship increasingly recognises the value of novel democratic practices for advancing transformative governance (Felicetti, 2021; Pickering, Hickmann, et al., 2022). However, the role of citizens' agency in fostering new political imaginations for democratic practices and specifically their participation in the shaping of the future, is still not thoroughly examined (Agger, 2021; Reinikainen, 2024; Smith, 2019).

Citizens' wishes and expectations regarding novel participatory practices are all the more critical in an era of rising polarisation in discourse, (Kleiner, 2018; Li & Jager, 2023), growing cleavages (Lockwood, 2018), and a decrease in dialogue, all characterising democratic backsliding (Kaftan & Gessler, 2024; Matsusaka, 2025; Mechkova et al., 2017). In this context, research into participatory and deliberative democracy highlights "democratic innovations" as complementary practices and mechanisms, such as citizen assemblies or participatory budgeting, through which citizens can collectively participate in decisions (Asenbaum, 2022; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016). Democratic innovations, thus, represent new forms of

citizen participation in democratic life. For instance, referring to the Conference on the Future of Europe, organised to create a connection between citizens and the key institutions of Europe, Alemanno considered that it reflected a growing realisation that citizens should be Europe's "ultimate source of authority and legitimacy"(Alemanno, 2020) (p.1). Local-level processes, such as participatory budgeting, have likewise been successful in integrating citizens in managing resources (Coleman & Cardoso Sampaio, 2017).

Research into the impacts of democratic innovations (e.g. citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting, e-participation) has yielded ambivalent results. While these practices can empower citizens and lead to novel policies (Alemanno, 2020), empirical research has documented how final recommendations from, for instance, citizen assemblies can be watered down or neglected in subsequent political processes (Elstub et al., 2021; Galván Labrador & Zografos, 2024). This can have significant consequences for citizens' interest in future engagement, contributing to their increasing alienation from political participation (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016). More fundamentally, such democratic innovations have been mostly implemented from the top as a one-time governmental initiative, which may not meet citizens' expectations of participation (Alemanno, 2020).

A critical opportunity for advancing citizens' participation is not only to seek to engage citizens in a politically legitimate way, but also to understand citizens' expectations regarding their participation in transformative sustainability policymaking. Thus, this article addresses the question of how citizens imagine their participation in new processes for democratic participation. By examining citizens' imaginaries, this study seeks to contribute to new research pathways at the interface of inclusive democratic innovations and sustainability governance.

In pursuit of this question, the analysis draws on empirical data gathered via a visioning experiment based on an open-ended questionnaire with 128 responses. Written responses recorded by most of the participants in a booklet with prompting assignments are also used (n=113). The booklet and questionnaire aimed to encourage participants to reflect on their past democratic engagement activities, their understandings of

democracy, and their ideals for future democratic practices to address complex sustainability challenges. Respondents were recruited in five European cities to participate in a novel co-creation approach developed by the authors – i.e. Democracy Labs (Campos et al., 2024). Data used for this analysis were collected during the initial stage (i.e., the sensitising stage of these labs, in which participants work individually).

In what follows, the article continues with a background account in Section 2, where key concepts and theories about imaginaries and their relevance for transformative governance are outlined, followed by Section 3, which describes the methods and materials. The analysis and results are presented in Section 4 and discussed in Section 5. The conclusion, Section 6, highlights the applicability of key findings to future research and practice.

2. How imaginaries contribute to change

The study of perceptions of the future for describing social outcomes has been a growing field in sociology (Beckert & Suckert, 2021). In this field, imaginaries and expectations for the future are considered factors for social change, and perceptions about the future are analysed as social facts (Beck et al., 1994; Beckert & Suckert, 2021). The understanding of social action as future-oriented has roots in diverse sociological scholarship (Luhmann, 1976), including pragmatist traditions, in which the future is viewed as constantly informing present action (Tavory, 2018). Studies on the sociology of time – i.e., focusing on social relations as intrinsically framed and governed by time – are equally concerned with temporality as a social construction, with the future gaining as much importance as the past and present in explaining social change (Flaherty & Fine, 2001; Sorokin & Merton, 1937). While studies of how the future is imagined by individuals are increasing, the question of how these imaginaries can offer guidance for transformative governance towards sustainability is still open (M.-L. Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Reinikainen, 2024; Riedy & Waddock, 2022). One reason for this gap may relate to methodological challenges in gaining direct insights from citizens on abstract topics such as their 'imaginaries', which require open questions, supported by visioning and participatory exercises that truly engage participants in thinking about the future.

Nevertheless, it is increasingly recognised that the capacity of individuals to imagine possible futures, whether desirable or alarming, can impact societal change and is fundamental to motivating a collective sense of direction in the face of complex sociotechnical challenges (Milkoreit, 2017; Sheppard et al., 2011). However, addressing global sustainability problems poses challenges for imaginations of futures that are detached from imaginaries of the past. For instance, citizens' imaginations can fail to envision what the reality of severe climate change would be like due to a lack of past reference for an equivalent development (Milkoreit, 2017). Imaginations are informed by past experiences framing hypothetical futures, but also by openness concerning the possibilities for the future. Here, new forms of democratic participation enabling an inclusive engagement of citizens can help co-construct sustainable futures driven by novel shared imaginaries (Machin, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). Imaginaries can also be disruptive; they are influenced by personal and collective experiences and express possible futures, offering alternative, positive or negative, radical visions (Asara, 2025; Brewer, 2007). Imaginaries have, thus, been defined by Bazzani as "wishful or frightening futures that combine elements of the present with some normative value orientations" (Bazzani, 2023. p.387). Individual imaginaries may concern personal goals or relate to collective outcomes for society, for instance, a carbon-neutral society that is more equal and just (Milkoreit, 2017).

Imagination can be fuelled by a willingness to change the future for the better. These imagined experiences allow people to abstract themselves from the routinised experiences of the present by imagining alternative and disruptive futures (Bazzani, 2023). Thus, utopian and idealised views of the future are common in imaginaries, enabling individuals to depart from the present. This utopian dimension may also be driven by retrospective interpretations of the past and a desire to return to (an experienced or imagined) distant past. For instance, imaginaries for sustainable futures can entail a return to an idyllic past in which nature was more abundantly present in everyday life (Buell, 1995). Such nostalgia can exert a significant influence in fostering proactive action towards the future (Wilson, 2020).

Places are important in imagination (Feola et al., 2023). For instance, smart cities' imaginaries are framed by technology, digitalisation, and smart devices, providing the physical infrastructure on which broader

visions for environmental and social sustainability are anchored (Miller, 2020). The physical and material dimensions of imaginaries are thus fundamental. Whether individually or collectively, those tasked with envisioning future democratic practices will leverage their present places of reference, such as urban public spaces, libraries, public buildings and parks, and other spaces where people typically meet. These spaces frame idealised physical or virtual spaces in which imaginary future processes are anchored.

Imaginaries can also help people cope with uncertainty, especially when varying pathways towards the future can have contrasting outcomes (Bazzani, 2023). For instance, the impact of climate change on future societies depends on the measures taken to reduce global emissions. However, there is not only uncertainty regarding the extent to which global changes can tackle these challenges, but also on the effectiveness of different pathways to decarbonization (Möller et al., 2024; O'Neill et al., 2017). In a world with increasing political cleavages and divides, global leaders' commitment to addressing these challenges is equally shrouded in uncertainty (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Xiang, 2024). Imaginaries, thus, offer a way to cope with uncertainty, helping to assess alternative pathways and incentivising action. Bazzani (2023) highlights how imaginaries can encourage agency by supporting a transition from expectations about the future, linking past experiences to expectations about what is conceivable to happen. These assessments may be positive, or they may seek to avoid frightening futures – e.g. a future where critical sustainability boundaries are overlooked with dramatic consequences for life on Earth and democracies being replaced by autocracies.

This study covers these tensions when it examines individuals' imaginaries for democratic innovations to address complex sustainability problems. Its starting assumption is that citizens' imaginaries reflect a perception that current experiences with democratic practices are not enabling inclusive and effective participation in sustainability governance, which is supported by relevant empirical studies (Alemanno, 2020; Felicetti, 2021). Therefore, the study explores how citizens envision improved democratic innovations, combining visioning prompts with assigned experimental activities, thus incentivising a reflection on the concept and characteristics of democracy. A key characteristic of the approach has been to

ensure participants understand the task of imagining their democratic participation beyond traditional voting. The approach provides an opportunity to gain insight into citizens' visions of democracy, allowing researchers to understand how their personal wishes and expectations align or differ from key proposals for democratic innovations outlined in academic literature.

3. Materials and Methods

The study is based on a qualitative and visioning method, taking stock of materials collected in Democracy Labs, which is a co-creation approach detailed in Campos et al. (2024) at the intersection of speculative design, critical design, and participatory futures (Sanders & Stappers, 2012). Data were gathered from citizens participating in the Democracy Labs. This selected group is akin to a mini-public, such as citizen assemblies, with a particular focus on addressing specific inclusion gaps, a strategy highlighted by recent critical evaluations of mini-publics' representation (Spada & Peixoto, 2025). Given the limited number of participants, as well as the recruitment focus on inclusion and specific geographic locations, the data cannot claim representativeness for the European population. Yet, they allow the study with its experimental and qualitative nature to open new opportunities in engaging citizens in co-creating and envisioning democratic innovations.

Data collection was conducted between May and November 2024 in the context of five Democracy Labs implemented in five European cities – i.e., Barcelona, Lisbon, Ljubljana, Potsdam and Rome. Democracy Labs involve citizens in co-creating innovations for democratic participation over a four-stage process – i.e. (i) individual sensitising, (ii) collective critical reflection, (iii) ideation, and (iv) evaluation. The focus of this study is on the activities of the sensitising stage, grounded in phenomenological and constructivist theories, emphasising the importance of participants' lived experiences, emotions, and personal meanings as a foundation for deeper engagement and co-creation in the design process (Krüger et al., 2017; Sanders & Stappers, 2012). The focus on the sensitising stage allows an analysis of citizens' individual imaginaries

before they engaged with and potentially were influenced by other citizens and the researchers in the subsequent workshops (i.e., taking place during the latter stages).

3.1 Sensitising Stage

The sensitising activities, which take place at the initial stage of the Democracy Labs, were crafted to engage citizens in thinking about their past democratic experiences and ideas for the future. The sensitising elements foster individual immersion into the topic and prepare participants for collective discussions (Osborne et al., 2022).

Participants were guided individually into implementing a set of tasks over two weeks. The tasks included (i) completing an online self-administered questionnaire in which the focus was on their imaginaries for future democratic innovations for sustainability, and (ii) filling in a printed booklet about their experiences and ideas about democracy. The questionnaire and booklets were distributed in the local language, and the responses were translated into English for analysis. Communication arrangements were set up to connect with participants to clarify possible questions about the tasks.

Invitations to fill out the online questionnaires were sent by email, and paper questionnaires were provided for those who wished to respond offline. The visioning exercise, implemented through the questionnaire, used a sequence of seven open-ended questions, following an initial prompt (i.e., “embark on a journey through a time capsule and find yourself in 2050”). It also included three multiple-choice questions to identify the level of governance of the imaginary democratic practice, preferences for the technologies and materials used, and preferences for existing processes for participation. Additionally, four questions collected information on participants’ gender, age, educational background and employment status. The questionnaire form is available in ZENODO (Campos et al., 2025). The questionnaire was self-administered using the Lime Survey platform and first trialled with 10 test respondents from each of the participating countries. Their feedback led to minor changes to improve clarity. The questionnaire was open from the

moment the sensitising stage booklets were delivered in all countries until the first day of the Democracy Lab workshops.

The booklet (available at Lamas et al., 2025) includes diverse questions, suggestions and ideas for activities (e.g., drawings, photoshoots), to instigate a self-reflection on the topic of democratic participation. Participants were encouraged to ponder their roles in past decision-making processes, consider their ideas about democracy, and reflect on the most important values and principles for them. Each booklet page had a challenge or prompt to assist participants' reflections. This analysis examines only the ideas about democracy that participants reported in the last two pages of their booklets. Booklets were handed personally to participants (in Barcelona, Lisbon, Ljubljana, and Potsdam) or sent by postal mail (Rome) and included the link to the open-question questionnaire.

After working individually during the sensitising period, participants engaged in subsequent sense-making and ideation stages. However, the outcomes of the sense-making and ideation stages result from the collective discussions participants had and, therefore, are not included in this analysis, which focuses on the individual imaginaries of participants, based on their lived experiences, before engaging in group discussions with others. These imaginaries represent understandings of political and social action, and explore what is considered feasible, desirable and thinkable (Machin, 2022a).

3.2 Recruitment and Research Participants

At the recruitment stage, participants were briefed in detail on the objectives of the research and provided informed consent. They were told that the research aimed to gain insights into their ideas, imaginaries and attitudes about democracy, considering how they would prefer to be engaged in democratic participation.

Recruitment approaches included announcements in social media, local media outlets, newsletters, and displaying flyers in local libraries and civic centres with an outreach of between 2000-4000 citizens (i.e., Barcelona, Rome, and Ljubljana), through a stratified selection using the services of a local recruitment company (Lisbon), or, also through a stratified selection, by sending invitations to over 2000 contacts provided by the city's public register (Potsdam).

The criteria for selecting research participants for the Democracy Labs sought diversity, rather than representativeness and aimed to prevent the dominance of majority views (Spada & Peixoto, 2025). They included age, gender, educational background, and employment status. Political inclination was not included as a criterion. Nevertheless, the pre-selection stage included some questions posed to participants, such as whether they were interested in sustainability and participatory processes, whether they were members of any club, party or association or had participated in other forms of democratic engagement aside from voting. The final selection also considered answers to these questions, seeking diversity in the participants based on their experiences. However, as indicated by previous research, people on the left, and left-wing parties, as well as individuals less inclined to engage in traditional politics, tend to show greater interest in alternative democratic practices (Núñez et al., 2016; Neblo et al., 2010). Therefore, some bias may be present if participants were more inclined towards the left.

To ensure that the voices of more vulnerable and marginalised citizens were included in shaping alternative democratic practices, recruitment aimed to involve a minimum of participants from more vulnerable groups, such as unemployed people, ethnic minorities, migrants, sexual minorities or individuals from less advantaged neighbourhoods. Citizens were likewise recruited from different districts at the city level. The five cities represented are from three European regions (i.e., Southern, Central and Eastern), in countries with varying socioeconomic contexts (i.e., Germany, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain), and with a focus on large urban areas, either capital cities (Rome, Lisbon and Ljubljana) or large cities (Barcelona, Potsdam). The urban focus has been due to cities being highly exposed to sustainability challenges, such as climate

change, pollution, and environmental degradation, but equally crucial for addressing these challenges (Hölscher & Frantzeskaki, 2021).

Not all participants recruited for the Democracy Labs filled in the booklet or the survey, as these activities were proposed during the sensitising stage, to support their engagement. Furthermore, participants could choose to hand them back to the facilitators at the end of this period or to keep them for themselves. The primary purpose of these materials was to empower participants through sensitisation for their participation in the following stages of the Labs. Therefore, in a total of 143 recruited participants for the Democracy Labs, 128 responses to the questionnaire and 113 anonymous booklets with citizens' responses were collected (see the number per city in Table 1).

Table 1 Number of respondents per city

Medium	Barcelona	Lisbon	Potsdam	Ljubljana	Rome	Total
Questionnaire	30	30	27	24	17	128
Booklets	26	18	31	23	15	113

The sample of questionnaire respondents follows a symmetrical distribution in age, with a minimum age of 16 (one person), a maximum of 75 (only one person), and a mean and median value of 42. The educational levels of the participants are diverse, and most respondents were employed full-time. However, there was a slight overrepresentation of people with tertiary education, which is a typical characteristic of such engagement forms. According to Eurostat data (*Educational Attainment Statistics*, 2024), individuals with tertiary education in Europe account for a minimum of 36% in Portugal to 46.8% in Slovenia. A large proportion of the participants hold higher degrees, which is consistent with countries that have high rates of tertiary education (see Table 2). Yet, there was an overrepresentation of participants with a Master's degree in the Barcelona and Rome Labs, which may be due to the recruitment method (e.g., public calls posted in libraries), indicating a challenge in preventing over-recruiting in this group. Regarding gender, there is an imbalance in the sample, with 64% of respondents being women and 33% men, with one person identifying as "other" and one as "diverse". This difference reflects an overall trend across the five cities,

with more women accepting the invitation to participate than men. The difference was more striking in the Barcelona Lab, where 25 respondents identified as women, four as men, and one responded "other". Nevertheless, there is some evidence indicating that women in Barcelona tend to participate more than men in public workshops and participatory activities. According to a study of the Barcelona Municipality from 2022 ('Dades de Gènere i Cultura', 2022), women accounted for 82% of enrolments in workshops organised by civic centres and for 57% of library cardholders. This may explain the gender discrepancy in Barcelona, as the recruitment strategy adopted in this city was based on social media posts on websites, printed ads in public libraries and civic centres and newsletters from the Barcelona City Network Council and other organisations. This imbalance in group formation can also be an opportunity to hear women's perspectives, as women tend to be underrepresented and speak out considerably less, for instance, in parliaments (Bäck & Debus, 2019).

Table 2 Educational level and employment status of questionnaire respondents

Variable	**Total Frequency**	**Barcelona**	**Lisbon**	**Potsdam**	**Ljubljana**	**Rome**
Educational Level						
Master's degree	35%	53%	27%	26%	21%	53%
Post-graduate degree	6%	3%	0	3%	17%	12%
Bachelor's degree	35%	27%	27%	30%	25%	18%
Secondary high school	25%	10%	43%	26%	25%	18%
Basic high school	0.7%	0%	0%	0%	4%	0%
Other	7%	7%	3%	14%	8%	0
Employment Status						
Full-time employed	48%	43%	67%	37%	58%	35%
Part-time employed	11%	10%	13%	18%	4%	18%
Student	11%	20%	7%	11%	12%	18%
Retired	6%	3%	7%	18%	0%	6%
Unemployed	5%	13%	3%	4%	4%	0%
Householder/caretaker	0.7%	3%	0%	0%	4%	0%
Other	15%	7%	3%	11%	17%	23%

3.3 Data analysis

3.3.1 Questionnaires

The questionnaire and booklets' responses were analysed separately and findings later compared. The data analysis of the questionnaire results followed three steps. First, data processing was conducted in Python, using NumPy and Pandas libraries, as well as Matplotlib for data visualisations. The replies to the diverse questions concerning past experiences with democracy (e.g., Q1: "*Think of a memorable activity (good or bad!) when you participated in a democratic process other than voting. Please describe that memorable activity in your own words*.") were thus compiled into a 'past' column, while all the questions related to the future journey (i.e. Q4: *"Imagine you embark on a journey through a time capsule and find yourself in 2050. You discover that in this not-so-distant future people have learned new ways to plan their future together")* were compiled into a 'future' column.

Second, after cleaning (e.g., removing errors with translations and abbreviations), the file was coded using NVivo software. The text was thematically analysed, with the review of all text extracts seeking commonalities in ideas, concepts and perspectives, as well as repeated concepts that were grouped into specific codes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method applied to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns or themes within textual data to understand underlying meanings, perspectives, and trends in written or spoken communication (Braun & Clarke, 2023). When working in NVivo, the text was deconstructed into small units (or quasi-sentences), and observed sections were assigned specific codes (i.e., keywords, labels) based on their content.

Thirdly, to ensure inter-coder reliability, the two main coders discussed the codes qualitatively and used a percent agreement (which calculates agreement based on the number of agreements divided by the number of coders) (Mao, 2017). The process was repeated until agreement yielded a reliability of 90%. The codes were then grouped into broader themes, which reflected significant patterns in the data. For instance, the questionnaire asked respondents to describe "an ideal setting where people come together to decide on important issues". Some responses detailed a specific space (e.g., keywords used included "relaxed", "green", close to "communities", "virtual") while others described processes (e.g., "multilevel"; supported by "facilitators" or "experts", "sharing information") hence, two themes emerged (i.e., "New Spaces" and

"Processes"). Additionally, while describing their imaginaries, respondents referred to their concepts of democracy, their perceptions of the quality of democracy, and the aspects they most valued about democracy, leading to additional themes. For instance, "electoral responsibility" and "inclusion" are examples of codes integrated into the broader "Democracy Values" theme. Thus, the final themes of the thematic analysis of the questionnaires' data reflect key commonalities and differences. These themes, presented in Table 3, covered a total of 939 coded text extracts and were distilled from 101 codes.

Table 3 Key Themes resulting from the analysis of the self-administered questionnaires

Key Themes	% Total
Processes	44%
New Spaces (Physical and Virtual)	16%
Quality of Democracy	15%
Democracy Values	9%
Reflections on Past Engagement/Participation	9%
Future Society	5%
Democracy (concept of)	2%

3.3.2 Booklets

The data analysis of the booklets was centred on the responses citizens noted down regarding two key activities, namely: "*My thoughts about: what is democracy for you?"* and "*My thoughts about: from your point of view, what are the necessary principles for democracy*?". Coding of the principles was done bottom-up, with coders identifying principles (e.g., "freedom", "equality") mentioned in the answers. This led to a list of 25 referred principles, and a basis for further analysis of understandings of these principles.

A final comparison of the findings of the booklets and the questionnaires' data shows that the booklets' data were related to the "Democracy (concept of)" theme first identified in the responses to the questionnaire. Additionally, the reference to democratic principles relates to the 'Democracy Values" theme. The booklets, thus, provide important contextual information on the overall ideas and concepts of democracy, serving to validate and expand the results of the thematic analysis of the questionnaire responses. The booklets' data provide a very useful way to gain qualitative insights into citizens' perceptions about each observed theme

The data is qualitatively rich, as it captures the complexity of human experiences and perceptions as expressed by a diverse set of respondents, but there are also limitations to consider. One such limitation concerns the geographical scope since the participants were all from European countries and from urban areas. Likely, citizens from rural regions would have different experiences to build upon and alternative visions for the future, anchored by rural cultures and experiences (Feola et al., 2023; LeVasseur et al., 2022). Another limitation refers to the nature of the booklets, which were anonymous and, therefore, did not provide information on the respondents (e.g. gender, age, education), although they match a sub-sample of the survey respondents. Nevertheless, sociodemographic criteria are not used as an explanatory variable in the analysis.

4. Results

In what follows, findings from the analysis of the questionnaire and booklets are presented, highlighting areas of commonality and difference across the main themes.

Reflections on Past Engagement and Participation

Respondents recounted diverse past experiences of engagement. Common experiences include being engaged by their local parish or municipality as residents, members of a condominium, or members of a local community, called to be involved in urban planning processes or invited to participate in local council meetings. Individual experiences also included participation in citizen council meetings and neighbourhood association meetings; citizen dialogues with policymakers in special sessions; student council assemblies; community meetings of informal collectives; and participation in demonstrations.

Most descriptions were balanced accounts covering positive and negative aspects. Out of the 85 descriptions of past engagement and participation experiences, only 10 were decidedly negative. In the other examples, respondents referred to both positive and negative aspects. Common negative aspects included polarised and unflexible opinions, especially on sensitive topics (e.g., migration), lack of effectiveness in either influencing decisions or in implementing the results of participation, complexity of legal language and

information, lack of accurate information, and stakeholders' prioritisation of personal gain, rather than collective wellbeing. Conversely, common positive aspects included a sense of working for the good of the community, new interpersonal bonds, the feeling of being part of a collective with similar ideas, and the ability to directly influence important decisions.

Democracy – concept, quality, values and principles

Citizens described what democracy means to them, the key challenges it faces today and the values attributed to democratic practices. Both in the questionnaire and booklet responses, democracy is broadly conceptualised as a form of collective participation, although how this is perceived varies widely. Eleven questionnaire and booklet responses emphasised rules, laws, representation, and the effective integration of deliberative processes (i.e., citizens are asked for feedback on policy but are not expected to directly influence the outcome). Many questionnaire respondents (116) described democracy as a process that ideally goes beyond traditional voting, through which citizens either participate directly in decisions or are called to deliberate through debate and consensus-building. In this context, most respondents supported the idea that everyone (not just a selected few) should be offered the possibility to express their opinions and directly influence final decisions. Likewise, most booklet respondents shared a view of democracy as inclusive, diverse and respectful participation, supported by shared information and knowledge, anchored in the assurance of individual rights and responsibilities.

Additionally, 59 questionnaire respondents perceive democracy today as being flawed (examples of its problems are offered in Table 4), with decision-making and power concentrated in a small group of actors (companies, but also international organisations and institutions), who favour a specific political agenda and neglect citizens' perspectives. Some refer to the problem of disengagement, growing alienation from traditional democratic processes and a lack of civic participation. Disinformation and lack of transparency were also pointed out. One respondent highlights the disconnection between civil society and governments. One person went so far as to declare that most decisions are made without or even against the will of the people. Another characterised the current society as 'apolitical' and lacking a sense of community.

Additionally, five booklet respondents expressed highly negative views of democracy as a system that fails to ensure social justice. Other booklet respondents referred to both positive (e.g. "Political system, the only one that makes sense to me.") and negative aspects (e.g. "(…) often the majority is not the 'right' choice.") of democracies as they conceptualised them.

Conversely, at least three questionnaire respondents did not criticise the balance of influence in the current system, and one claimed it was important that companies are involved in political debates. Three respondents argued that experts should lead key decisions to ensure their economic and technical feasibility, as citizens are not qualified. Although another four also spoke out in favour of the presence of experts and provision of information by them as a support for citizens' deliberations.

Fifteen questionnaire respondents criticised a lack of attention to the most pressing societal problems, including local issues such as housing, mobility, migration, and living standards, as well as global challenges such as wars, climate change and environmental degradation, with three referring to the need to protect the "Earth". Although a minority, two questionnaire respondents extended democratic participation to caring for the interests of nature and non-humans.

Table 4 Examples of quotes relating to the perceived flaws of democracy today from responses to the Questionnaire (Q) and Booklet (B)

Key challenge	Example quotes
Bureaucracy	*"The decision-making processes are too complex and too bureaucratic and take too long" (Potsdam,* Q73).
Decision-making power in a few hands	*"Decisions are now made by a smaller group in a less transparent way; those who make decisions do not have to bear the long-term consequences themselves"* (Potsdam, Q63).
Disbelief in democracy	*"Currently, people have stopped believing in politics and democratic processes… there is little political literacy and people do not participate"* (Lisbon, Q20).
Lack of transparency and information	*"A highly flawed governance structure. (…) it requires free information and expertise, but in practice neither the first nor the second condition are met"* (Rome, B7).

Beyond the general statements on the concept and quality of the democratic system, respondents highlighted democratic values that should guide participation, engagement and deliberation practices. These are

summarised in Table 5, and are mainly provided in the questionnaires (in response to the question about what could have improved past experiences of democratic engagement and participation) but are reinforced by statements collected in the booklets, in which citizens refer to aspects that they value (but perceive as not yet fully present) in healthy democracies.

Table 5 Suggested democratic values expressed by respondents

Democratic Values	Description	Example Quotes
Accessibility and inclusivity	Using clear language, offering accessible structures for participation, and engaging all affected communities, including marginalised groups.	*"Ensuring that everyone is genuinely included in the decision-making process requires adopting democratic processes that use plain, inclusive, and accessible language"* (Barcelona, Q84).
Education for democracy	Teaching citizens from an early age about democratic processes and participation and incentivising the participation of children.	*"I think it's more important to educate citizens that society's issues concern everyone"* (Lisbon, Q18).
Respect for nature	Recognising that all entities – including nature – should have representation. Democracy is referred to as critical to addressing environmental problems.	*"There will always be an empty chair for the earth, the water, and for those we have not yet thought of"* (Potsdam, Q57). "*(…) climate change and the destruction and depletion of nature, wars and famines and political upheavals with the spread of hatred, racism and fascism are a bad journey that we are leaving to our children*."(Ljubljana, Q127)
Inclusivity, respectful dialogue and active listening	Ensuring everyone has a voice in decision-making.	*"Being an active participant and listening to everyone's voice, even those who speak 'very softly'."* (Barcelona, B8) *"The presence of many realities in the area and the active listening when people take the floor." (Rome, Q38)*

The principles for democracy were outlined in the booklet responses, which specifically asked participants about the required principles for democracy. The most valued principles were equality (36.2%),

participation (27.4%), and freedom (26.5%), including freedom of speech, of association, of the press, and personal rights. These principles are summarised in Figure 1.

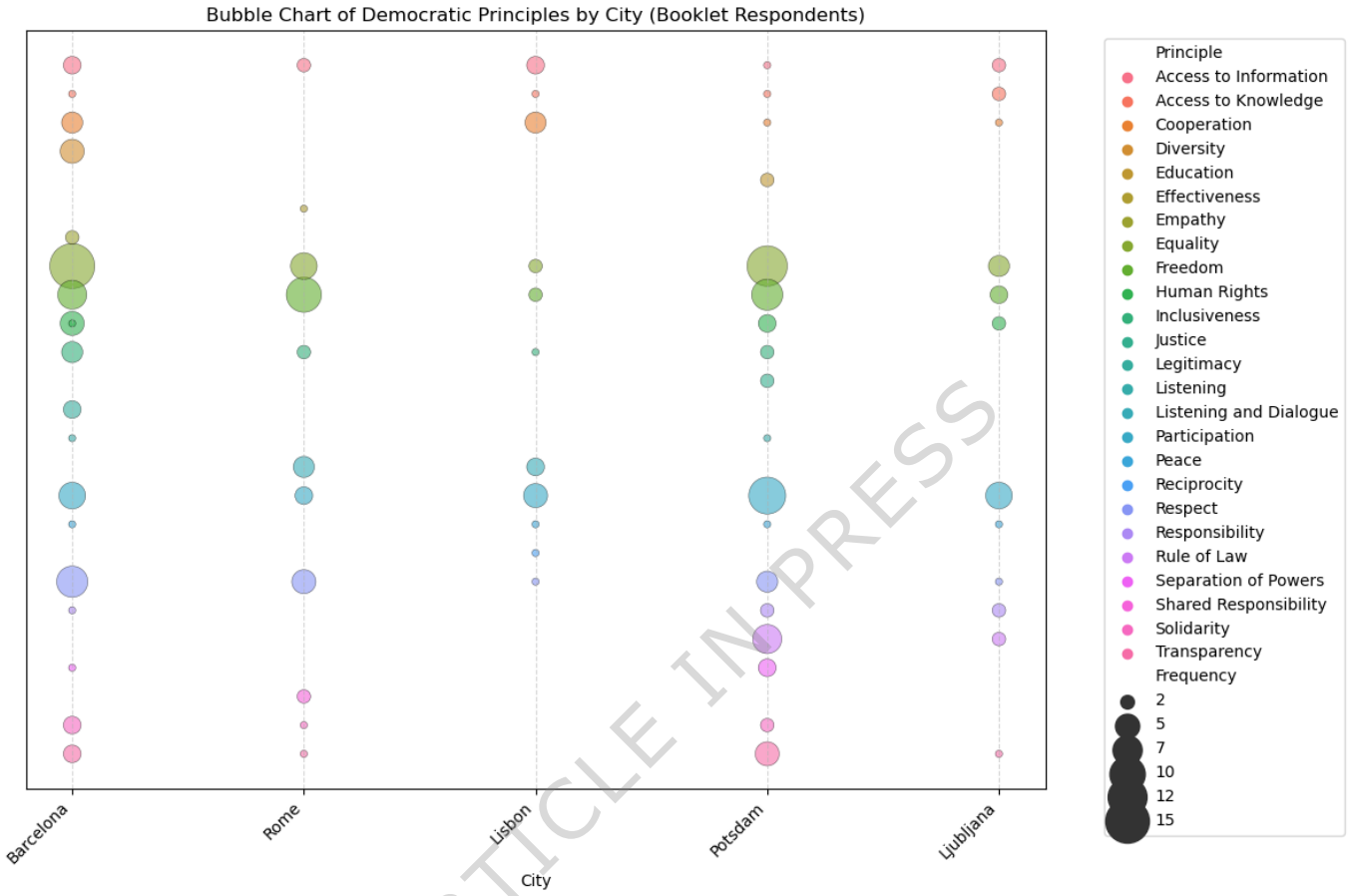

Figure 1 Summary of democratic principles based on the analysis of the booklets filled in by participants in six cities

Imaginaries: future society, processes, new spaces

The visioning exercise is provided by the questionnaire only. 128 respondents responded to questions asking them to reflect and imagine future democratic participation practices in 2050. Their responses merge in three interrelated themes: "Future Society," " Processes", and "New Spaces (Physical/Virtual)."

Future Society

Forty-three participants (33%) considered broad societal changes when reflecting on the democratic practices of the future. Although there were diverse ideas, two were common in the responses from all cities. First, there is a focus on more sustainable urban structures. New cities are imagined with new transport systems, new green spaces, and models of civic cooperation, including new services for children and the elderly. Second, based on values such as empathy, shared responsibility and inclusivity, respondents refer to the need for a radical transformation of society that starts at the individual level, with a focus on the common good. Examples of quotes expressing these ideas are provided in Table 6.

Table 6 Examples of quotes from respondents on their ideas for a future society

Future Society (codes)	**Example Quotes**
Common good	*"It is difficult to imagine processes different from those currently in use without also thinking of a radical change in people and their way of experiencing the 'common thing' and feeling part of a whole"* (Rome, R45*). "The society of the future presupposes an enlightened and empathetic individual who connects with his equals to decide together on common issues"*(Ljubljana, Q127).
Sustainable urban structures	*"A city where no strong power imposes its model of a city, where people only get around by public transport and where common spaces are cared for and shared"* (Rome, Q48).

Processes

New processes for democratic participation in the envisioned futures are varied, with several common elements, but also differences. According to the responses, decision-making processes should occur at multiple levels of governance, involving relevant actors at each stage, through designated means and procedures, including various feedback mechanisms between citizens, stakeholders, and policymakers. Sixteen respondents explicitly referred to such multilevel governance and envisioned a future where local authorities, supported by policymakers at multiple levels of governance, adopt new responsibilities, engaging citizens early in decision-making. This includes sharing challenges, organising local meetings, and facilitating consultations.

Two respondents (from Barcelona and Potsdam) highlighted the need for a universal basic income to reduce working hours and allow greater community participation. Additionally, two others (from Potsdam)

suggested introducing a 'Democracy Day,' a designated day off from work to engage in democratic processes. Their ideals emphasised the importance of having time for participation.

New democratic processes should also contribute to shifting power dynamics, according to the respondents. Six of them suggested the State should protect democratic decision-making at the local level, acting as a guarantor that decisions made by citizen bodies are implemented. Twenty-one respondents suggested that elected officials act as policy monitors rather than decision-makers. They considered that political parties would lose influence as citizens take a central role in a participatory democracy. Five explicitly called for a power shift away from interest groups. In support of such power shifts, respondents suggested that voting processes could be made more accessible, with online voting supported by 13 respondents from five cities.

Seven respondents from Lisbon emphasised the need for anti-corruption measures such as frequent independent audits. Six respondents (from Ljubljana, Barcelona, and Rome) supported a delegate-based representation system, where community representatives are selected based on expertise and regularly rotated.

Other responses highlight how new participatory structures, such as citizen councils and assemblies, would ensure that diverse social groups, including children and the elderly, are represented. Preparing and educating young people for active civic engagement is emphasised by at least eight, with participation occurring regularly (e.g., monthly or weekly). Eleven respondents stressed the need for effective communication systems, ensuring policy information is clear and accessible. The role of facilitators in meetings was also highlighted as key to inclusive decision-making.

In line with these ideals, respondents acknowledged potential exclusions. Sixty-one explicitly addressed who might be left out. Some believed exclusion would occur due to a lack of interest in participation, while others pointed to structural barriers, such as age (children, the elderly), homelessness, and cognitive disabilities. This was also particularly mentioned with respect to a reliance on digital participatory processes. Conversely, some also suggested excluding individuals with conflicts of interest tied to significant capital holdings. Finally, ten respondents explicitly expressed a European identity, emphasising

the need for a united continent. Some examples of codes and text extracts under this theme are provided in Table 7.

Table 7. Examples of codes and quotes for the theme Ideal Experience

New Processes (codes)	**Examples**
Decision-making	*"(...) there is a space in which issues are resolved by consensus in an attentive, respectful, understanding and genuinely equal manner"* (Potsdam, Q62)
Decision-making	*"The way I imagine decision-making in the future differs from current experiences in several key aspects that address the limitations of time, the dedication of specialists, integration with daily life, and the strengthening of civic education."* (Barcelona, Q99)
Facilitators	*"A key part of this environment is very strong and capable facilitators who would ensure that the debate is constructive and directed towards the highest good of all. (...)"* (Ljubljana, R121).
Multi-level governance	*"I imagine multi-level, less centralised decision-making processes, where smaller communities can make decisions about immediate needs that arise according to the best possible outcome for all parties involved"* (Rome, R43).
Policymakers	*"Elected candidates actually receive a mandate to govern, not arbitrary decision-making that has nothing to do with the needs and actual desires of residents"* (Ljubljana, R124).

Importantly, local governance plays a crucial role in respondents' views on democratic processes. Regarding the governance scale of their imaginaries, respondents selected from a menu of multiple options, checking all that applied. Despite considering diverse levels of participation (i.e., village, city, region, country, Europe and Global) the options which included the village scale (i.e., village) had the highest frequency (52.3%), followed by options starting from the city scale (15.6%), from the national scale (10.9 %) and the regional scale (7.0%). Options including all scales accounted for 14.8%, followed by a focus on the global scale only (10.1%). Four respondents considered all options to be relevant, except global (3.1%), and two thought the governance level would depend on the issue being addressed.

Additionally, participants were also asked to name the different technologies and media they found that should be used. Transparent and secure voting systems, followed by new meeting spaces, virtual platforms and video conferencing, were the preferred media and technologies for supporting democratic practices in the future. Virtual platforms were perceived to be critical for bringing citizens from distant places closer,

but not a substitute for local, physical meetings in which people participate directly in deciding about problems close to them. Indeed, 78 respondents (60.9%) thought that new meeting spaces with physical infrastructures, that also integrate virtual elements, should be used. Artificial intelligence (AI) was believed to play a central role in interconnecting all technologies by 23 respondents (however, new imagined processes of more than 70% of responses did not include the use of AI). Respondents perceived AI to carry the promise of higher transparency, traceability, and information sharing, but also raised concerns for inclusivity and digital divides, as well as personal freedom.

New Spaces (Physical and Virtual)

Participants also developed a range of ideas for relevant spaces for democratic participation (see Figure 2). A commonality between the envisioned new spaces is that they should be accessible and designed to cater to the needs of different people. Most respondents (89) mentioned the need for new physical spaces. These could integrate physical and virtual configurations, enabling remote attendance and meeting the preferences of different participants, while also being conceived as neutral (non-partisan) spaces. Some respondents mentioned relaxed environments, with comfortable seating, food and drinks available, creating a friendly and non-formal atmosphere and fostering well-being. When mentioned, these relaxed environments were thought to be more conducive to respectful dialogue. Local assemblies and forums were specifically mentioned by eight respondents. Others emphasised the need for avoiding distractions (two suggested not allowing mobile phones).

Of the twenty-four respondents who described physical spaces only, nine imagined spaces with some natural elements, referring to plants, plenty of daylight, and the possibility for outdoor meetings. The configuration of a circle or an amphitheatre shape was suggested as ideal for bringing people together by 12 respondents. Spaces should be primarily close to people's problems and needs, involving communities directly. For instance, local public spaces, such as libraries or pavilions, were suggested to be used. Conversely, fifteen participants preferred strictly virtual spaces (platforms specifically designed for online deliberation and secure voting).

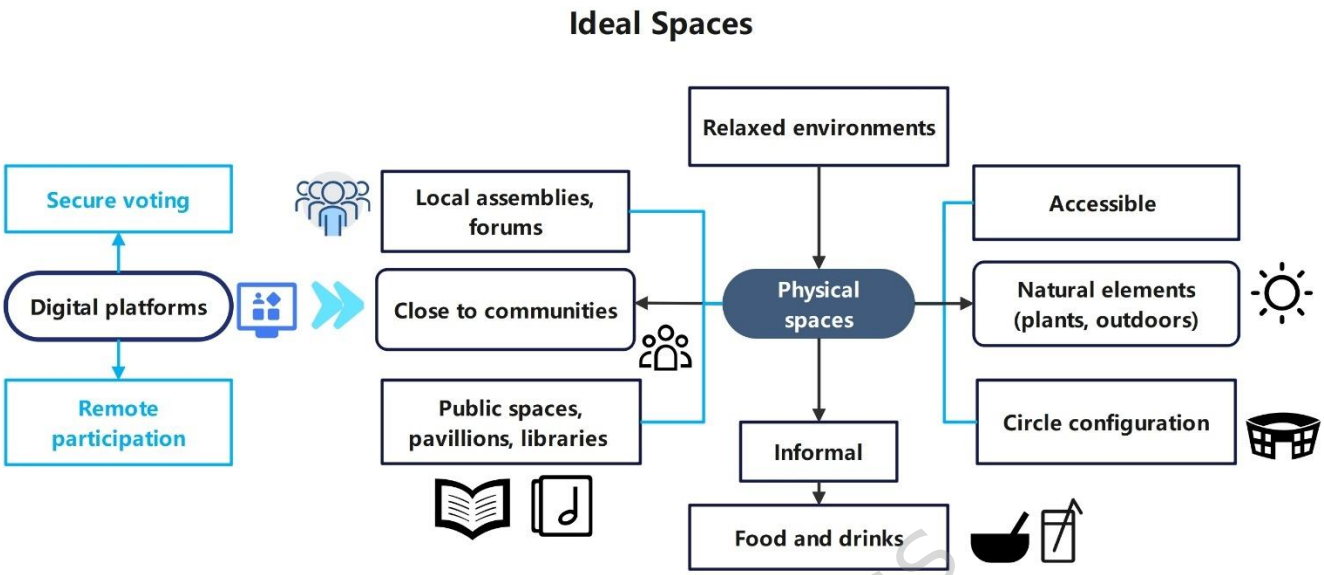

Figure 2 Respondents' imagined ideal spaces for democratic participation

5. Discussion

This study provided new insights into citizens' expectations and wishes for democracy, its overarching principles, challenges and solutions, outlined through experiences and visions. These imaginaries speak to criticisms of prevailing democratic practices that have been noted in democratic innovations research, including the prevalence of top-down designs, which are not always inclusive, with little attention to follow-up and impact (Bussu et al., 2022, 2025), for instance, in the case of climate policy (Smith, 2024).

Imaginaries also refer to principles, values, processes and spaces that citizens consider crucial and desirable for democracy and are framed by past engagement experiences, as well as sociopolitical and socioeconomic prospects for future societies. Thereby, they can foster the development of novel transformative governance practices (Woiwode et al., 2021).

A preference for participatory and deliberative rather than representative democracy was a key feature of citizens' imaginaries. This corresponds to policy and academic proposals that have called for institutionalising deliberative practices within parliaments (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022), or coupling

citizen bodies with legislative committees (Hendriks, 2016). To date, however, the challenge remains that many citizen assemblies and similar participatory formats are mainly deliberative, with citizens providing feedback and recommendations, while not enabling actual policy change (Galván Labrador & Zografos, 2024).

Importantly, imaginaries emphasised the relevance of direct participation (i.e. with citizens directly influencing decisions), echoing some scholarly proposals for "embedding", rather than institutionalising, participatory governance (Bussu et al., 2022, p.134). The relevance of embedding responds to critiques of democratic innovations failing to connect with political institutions and thus to convert the results of participation into new policy measures (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016; Smith, 2024). Embedding participatory governance has been conceptually defined by Bussu and colleagues (2022) across temporal, spatial and practice dimensions, which effectively relate to this study's empirical findings, as citizens' imaginaries comprise new processes, new spaces and new interrelated practices. Embedding would create a new culture of participation, through which citizens would effectively influence and co-create new policy. Here, the expectation is that participation practices are repeated regularly over time as well as integrated into decision-making spaces and across different governance levels, benefiting from a thriving relationship with existing institutions, communities, and broader civil society (Bussu et al., 2022).

Building on the idea of embedding, proposals for an "assemblage perspective" (Bussu et al., 2025, p.3) understand democratic innovations as emerging through configurations built on the interconnectivity between human (e.g., government, institutions, citizens) and non-human elements (e.g., technology, new spaces, rule of law), as well as relational and non-linear processes (Bussu et al., 2025). Citizens' imaginaries reflect these conceptual proposals for an assemblage perspective in democratic participation. Imaginaries depict new relationships between governments (e.g. state actors act as 'guarantors') and diverse social groups, anchored in new physical and virtual spaces and novel legal frameworks to support them, aiming for more inclusive and impactful participatory practices.

Citizens are also aware of the resources needed for inclusive democratic participation, as argued in previous research (Escobar, 2019; Mouter et al., 2021). These include monetary resources, but also the support of experts and facilitators (Moore, 2012) and time availability (Holand & Ellingsen, 2024). Questionnaire respondents highlighted the need for time for deliberation and decision-making, which literature has also identified as pertinent (Curato et al., 2017). Some citizens identified a possible strategy for 'freezing' time through a 'democracy day', very similar to the proposal for a 'deliberation day' (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2002), which would consist of a specific date for deliberative exercises, without other occupations and concerns. Such a proposal also aligns with an assemblage perspective, as democratic practices would become embedded in everyday life (Bussu et al., 2025).

Additionally, citizens imagined relaxed and green spaces as ideal contexts for positive democratic debates. In a similar vein, a recent report by Democracy Next proposes eight spatial qualities for deliberative assemblies, emphasising the need to explore the role of physical spaces in democratic practices (*Spaces for Deliberation*, 2025). The key qualities identified in their report (based on expert interviews) include accessibility, proximity, and a relaxed atmosphere, matching some of the characteristics idealised by this study's respondents. The results highlighted that citizens value face-to-face democratic situations where individuals meet to listen to and debate arguments and make collective decisions. Similarly, the relevance of introducing new local mechanisms for participation that interrelate to regional and national-level decision-making processes has been increasingly reasoned for in research (Buzogány & Spöri, 2024). Furthermore, there is evidence of links between polarisation, democratic backsliding and a lack of effective strategies to engage diverse citizen groups at the neighbourhood level (Koch et al., 2021).

Although inclusivity and equality were fundamental principles informing citizens' imaginaries, citizens also recognised that imagined processes are seldom completely neutral and may inadvertently lead to silencing some participants. There were concerns with establishing conditions for inclusive participation, catering to groups such as the elderly, digitally disconnected citizens, and youth. These are aspects that provide an empirical backing to existing academic debates (Lupia & Norton, 2017).

Citizens' imaginaries also combine the principles they most value. For instance, they link the centrality of transparency and traceability to the use of digital platforms to support multilevel and multiscale processes. At the same time, they acknowledge mixed feelings about AI in the future, indicating enthusiasm, as well as a lack of trust concerning the prospects for AI use in the context of democratic governance (Jungherr, 2023).

Overall, citizens' imaginaries of democratic participation support the notions that transformative governance and realising citizens' potential for democratic participation in tackling complex sustainability problems (Huttunen et al., 2022) require attention to the embedding processes, their spatial dimensions (Hirschl, 2022) and the need for new interconnected and relational democratic participation mechanisms. To produce real impact, these should rely on localised and scalable models for participation, and ensure citizens' capacity to influence decisions and the political legitimacy of processes (King & Wilson, 2023; Pickering, Hickmann, et al., 2022). For instance, to effectively contribute to climate change policy, citizen assemblies, which are becoming popular in Europe, can serve as a means for advancing such transformative governance (Smith, 2024).

Lastly, the imaginaries contrast with research into "stealth democracy" as an alternative to representative and direct democracy (Medvic, 2019). Stealth democracy refers to citizens who acknowledge the relevance of democratic processes but do not wish to participate regularly and prefer to delegate decisions to responsible experts. Research suggests these citizens are more likely to be on the right-wing spectrum, as supported by case studies from Finland (Ruostetsaari, 2017) and Spain (Lavezzolo & Ramiro, 2018). Nevertheless, evidence of stealth preferences was minimal across the imaginaries (although not absent), indicating citizens with such preferences are also likely not interested in participating in a Democracy Lab.

6. Conclusion

This analysis set out to explore citizens' imaginaries regarding their role in the participatory shaping of sustainability governance. In pursuit of this objective, it assessed inputs from citizens in terms of their experiences, expectations and wishes for democratic participation practices collected in the context of (the

sensitising stage of) Democracy Labs in five European cities. Results show that citizens' imaginaries are influenced by a perception that current experiences with democratic practices are not enabling inclusive participation in sustainability governance. A predisposition towards new processes, new spaces and practices that are empowering for local communities is noticeable, thus supporting the embeddedness and assemblage of democratic participation in social life. Citizens also valued a vertical integration of policymaking processes from local to regional, national and even transnational levels, together with a quest for transparency and traceability (supported by digitalisation), indicating an understanding that co-constructing the future together requires a multi-level and multi-scale governance approach with a strong localised footing.

These findings are particularly relevant for sustainability-oriented transformations, highlighting various opportunities for reimagining democratic participation (i.e., new processes, spaces and practices) that can effectively address the complex environmental and social sustainability challenges we face, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, and their associated inequalities and justice issues. They show that citizens consider it essential to establish a democratic and participatory foundation that includes the representation of diverse social groups, particularly those who are most affected by, exposed to, and vulnerable to these challenges, in pursuit of transformative change.

Likewise, this study's findings provide valuable insights for further research and practice. Overall, research and policy need to examine the conditions that facilitate local deliberations in both urban and rural regions and affect inclusive civic engagement and participation in sustainability policy and governance. It is also crucial, however, to improve our understanding of how citizens' wishes and expectations regarding participation can be considered and pursued in diverse contexts. Moreover, future research into the assemblage of participatory governance across diverse communities and territories is crucial for tackling intersectional inequalities in representation and better understanding diverse expectations and aspirations, including those of citizens who, as in the case of stealth democracy, prefer not to get engaged in participatory democratic innovations and rely on representative democracy instead.

References

Ackerman, B., & Fishkin, J. S. (2002). Deliberation Day. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *10*(2), 129–152. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9760.00146

Agger, A. (2021). Democratic innovations in municipal planning: Potentials and challenges of place-based platforms for deliberation between politicians and citizens. *Cities*, *117*, 103317. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2021.103317

Alemanno, A. (2020). Unboxing the Conference on the Future of Europe and its democratic raison d'être. *European Law Journal*, *26*(5–6), 484–508. https://doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12413

Asara, V. (2025). Untangling the radical imaginaries of the Indignados' movement: Commons, autonomy and ecologism. *Environmental Politics*, *34*(1), 141–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2020.1773176

Asenbaum, H. (2022). Rethinking Democratic Innovations: A Look through the Kaleidoscope of Democratic Theory. *Political Studies Review*, *20*(4), 680–690. https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299211052890

Bäck, H., & Debus, M. (2019). When Do Women Speak? A Comparative Analysis of the Role of Gender in Legislative Debates. *Political Studies*, *67*(3), 576–596. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321718789358

Bazzani, G. (2023). Futures in Action: Expectations, Imaginaries and Narratives of the Future. *Sociology*, *57*(2), 382–397. https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221138010

Beck, U., Giddens, A., & Lash, S. (1994). *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*. Stanford University Press.

Beckert, J., & Suckert, L. (2021). The future as a social fact. The analysis of perceptions of the future in sociology. *Poetics*, *84*, 101499. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101499

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2023). Thematic Analysis. In F. Maggino (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (pp. 7187–7193). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17299-1_3470

Brewer, G. D. (2007). Inventing the future: Scenarios, imagination, mastery and control. *Sustainability Science*, *2*(2), 159–177. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-007-0028-7

Buell, L. (1995). *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard University Press.

Bussu, S., Bua, A., Dean, R., & Smith, G. (2022). Introduction: Embedding participatory governance. *Critical Policy Studies*, *16*(2), 133–145. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2022.2053179

Bussu, S., Wojciechowska, M., Forde, C., & Santos Dias, T. dos. (2025). Participation as assemblage: Looking at developments in democratic innovations through an assemblage perspective. *Politics*, 02633957251329608. https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957251329608

Buzogány, A., & and Spöri, T. (n.d.). Cities against democratic backsliding: Democratic resilience through urban resistance in the Visegrád 4 capitals. *Contemporary Politics*, *0*(0), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2024.2394345

Caluwaerts, D., & Reuchamps, M. (2016). Generating Democratic Legitimacy through Deliberative Innovations: The Role of Embeddedness and Disruptiveness. *Representation*, *52*(1), 13–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2016.1244111

Campos, I., Fuchs, D., Repo, P., Jager, W., Klöckner, C., Wang, S., Lamas, D., Cots, F., Barchiesi, E., Löfström, E., Peniche, D., Sion, Y., Buth, V., Limão, J., Oliveira, S., Diaz, C. R., & Živčič, L. (2024). What roles can democracy labs play in co-creating democratic innovations for sustainability? *Socio-Ecological Practice Research*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42532-024-00197-7

Campos, I., Limão, J., & Repo, P. (2025). *Questionnaire form: Your ideas on democratic innovations for sustainability*. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15091193

Coleman, S., & Cardoso Sampaio, R. (2017). Sustaining a democratic innovation: A study of three e-participatory budgets in Belo Horizonte. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(5), 754–769. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1203971

Curato, N., Dryzek, J. S., Ercan, S. A., Hendriks, C. M., & Niemeyer, S. (2017). Twelve Key Findings in Deliberative Democracy Research. *Daedalus*, *146*(3), 28–38. https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00444

Dades de gènere i cultura. (2023). *Observatori de Dades Culturals de Barcelona*. Retrieved 10 March 2025, from https://barcelonadadescultura.bcn.cat/dades-de-genere-i-cultura/

Educational attainment statistics. (2024). Retrieved 31 July 2025, from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Educational_attainment_statistics

Elstub, S., Carrick, J., Farrell, D. M., & Mockler, P. (2021). The Scope of Climate Assemblies: Lessons from the Climate Assembly UK. *Sustainability*, *13*(20), Article 20. https://doi.org/10.3390/su132011272

Escobar, O. (2019). *Chapter 12: Facilitators: the micropolitics of public participation and deliberation*. https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/edcoll/9781786433855/9781786433855.00022.xml

Felicetti, A. (2021). Learning from Democratic Practices: New Perspectives in Institutional Design. *The Journal of Politics*, *83*(4), 1589–1601. https://doi.org/10.1086/711623

Feola, G., Goodman, M. K., Suzunaga, J., & Soler, J. (2023). Collective memories, place-framing and the politics of imaginary futures in sustainability transitions and transformation. *Geoforum*, *138*, 103668. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2022.103668

Flaherty, M. G., & Fine, G. A. (2001). Present, Past, and Future. *Time & Society*, *10*(2–3), 147–161. https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X01010002001

Galván Labrador, A., & Zografos, C. (2024). Empowerment and disempowerment in climate assemblies: The French citizens' convention on climate. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, *34*(4), 414–426. https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.2093

Gillard, R., Gouldson, A., Paavola, J., & Van Alstine, J. (2016). Transformational responses to climate change: Beyond a systems perspective of social change in mitigation and adaptation: Transformational responses to climate change. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, *7*(2), 251–265. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.384

Haggard, S., & Kaufman, R. (2021). The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, *32*(4), 27–41.

Hendriks, C. M. (2016). Coupling citizens and elites in deliberative systems: The role of institutional design. *European Journal of Political Research*, *55*(1), 43–60. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12123

Hirschl, R. (2022). The "Era of the City" as an Emerging Challenge to Liberal Constitutional Democracy. *Ethics & International Affairs*, *36*(4), 455–473. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679422000478

Holand, A. M., & Ellingsen, T. (2024). 6 Never Time to Meet? Time as a Constraint in Cross-Sectoral Co-Creation (Experiences from an Explorative Study of Co-Creation). In A. M. Holand (Ed.), *Time in Our Times: Stretching Contemporary Understandings of Time* (pp. 127–154). De Gruyter. https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783111428970-006/html

Hölscher, K., & Frantzeskaki, N. (2021). Perspectives on urban transformation research: Transformations in, of, and by cities. *Urban Transformations*, *3*(1), 2. https://doi.org/10.1186/s42854-021-00019-z

Hölscher, K., Wittmayer, J. M., & Loorbach, D. (2018). Transition versus transformation: What's the difference? *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, *27*, 1–3. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2017.10.007

Huttunen, S., Ojanen, M., Ott, A., & Saarikoski, H. (2022). What about citizens? A literature review of citizen engagement in sustainability transitions research. *Energy Research & Social Science*, *91*, 102714. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2022.102714

Jungherr, A. (2023). Artificial Intelligence and Democracy: A Conceptual Framework. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(3), 20563051231186353. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231186353

Kaftan, L., & Gessler, T. (2024). The Democracy I Like: Perceptions of Democracy and Opposition to Democratic Backsliding. *Government and Opposition*, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2024.12

King, M., & Wilson, R. (2023). Local government and democratic innovations: Reflections on the case of citizen assemblies on climate change. *Public Money & Management*, *43*(1), 73–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2022.2033462

Kleiner, T.-M. (2018). Public opinion polarisation and protest behaviour. *European Journal of Political Research*, *57*(4), 941–962. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12260

Koch, I., Fransham, M., Cant, S., Ebrey, J., Glucksberg, L., & Savage, M. (2021). Social Polarisation at the Local Level: A Four-Town Comparative Study on the Challenges of Politicising Inequality in Britain. *Sociology*, *55*(1), 3–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038520975593

Korhonen-Kurki, K., D'Amato, D., Belinskij, A., Lazarevic, D., Leskinen, P., Nylén, E.-J., Pappila, M., Penttilä, O., Pitzén, S., Pykäläinen, N., Turunen, T., & Vikström, S. (2025). Transformative governance: Exploring theory of change and the role of the law. *Earth System Governance*, *23*, 100230. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2024.100230

Krüger, A. E., Kurowski, S., Pollmann, K., Fronemann, N., & Peissner, M. (2017). Needs profile: Sensitising approach for user experience research. *Proceedings of the 29th Australian Conference on Computer-Human Interaction*, 41–48. https://doi.org/10.1145/3152771.3152776

Lavezzolo, S., & Ramiro, L. (2018). Stealth democracy and the support for new and challenger parties. *European Political Science Review*, *10*(2), 267–289. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773917000108

LeVasseur, T., Ruuska, T., & Heikkurinen, P. (2022). Imagining a Prosperous Periphery for the Rural in 2050 and Beyond. In W. Leal Filho, A. M. Azul, F. Doni, & A. L. Salvia (Eds.), *Handbook of Sustainability Science in the Future: Policies, Technologies and Education by 2050* (pp. 1–18). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68074-9_12-1

Li, T., & Jager, W. (2023). How Availability Heuristic, Confirmation Bias and Fear May Drive Societal Polarisation: An Opinion Dynamics Simulation of the Case of COVID-19 Vaccination. *Journal of Artificial Societies and Social Simulation*, *26*(4), 2.

Lipper, L., & Cavatassi, R. (2024). The challenge climate change poses to achieving resilient and inclusive rural transformation (RITI). *Global Food Security*, *43*, 100811. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2024.100811

Lockwood, M. (2018). Right-wing populism and the climate change agenda: Exploring the linkages. *Environmental Politics*, *27*(4), 712–732. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2018.1458411

Luhmann, N. (1976). The Future Cannot Begin: Temporal Structures in Modern Society. *Social Research*, *43*(1), 130–152.

Lupia, A., & Norton, A. (2017). Inequality is Always in the Room: Language & Power in Deliberative Democracy. *Daedalus*, *146*(3), 64–76. https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00447

Machin, A. (2022a). Climates of democracy: Skeptical, rational, and radical imaginaries. *WIREs Climate Change*, *13*(4), e774. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.774

Machin, A. (2022b). Green democracy: Political imaginaries of environmental movements. In *The Routledge Handbook of Environmental Movements*. Routledge.

Machin, A. (2023). Climate Change and Imaginaries of Democracy. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.013.859

Mao. Y (2017).Intercoder Reliability Techniques: Holsti Method. In M. Allen, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*. SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411.n258

Matsusaka, J. G. (2025). *Direct Democracy Backsliding, 1950-2024* (SSRN Scholarly Paper 4522377). Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4522377

Mechkova, V., Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2017). How Much Democratic Backsliding? *Journal of Democracy*, *28*(4), 162–169.

Medvic, S. (2019). Explaining Support for Stealth Democracy. *Representation*, *55*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2019.1581076

Milkoreit, M. (2017). Imaginary politics: Climate change and making the future. *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene*, *5*, 62. https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.249

Miller, T. R. (2020). Imaginaries of Sustainability: The Techno-Politics of Smart Cities. *Science as Culture*, *29*(3), 365–387. https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2019.1705273

Möller, T., Högner, A. E., Schleussner, C.-F., Bien, S., Kitzmann, N. H., Lamboll, R. D., Rogelj, J., Donges, J. F., Rockström, J., & Wunderling, N. (2024). Achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions critical to limit climate tipping risks. *Nature Communications*, *15*(1), 6192. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-024-49863-0

Moore, A. (2012). Following from the front: Theorizing deliberative facilitation. *Critical Policy Studies*, *6*(2), 146–162. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2012.689735

Moore, M.-L., & Milkoreit, M. (2020). Imagination and transformations to sustainable and just futures. *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene*, *8*(1), 081. https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.2020.081

Mouter, N., Shortall, R. M., Spruit, S. L., & Itten, A. V. (2021). Including young people, cutting time and producing useful outcomes: Participatory value evaluation as a new practice of public participation in the Dutch energy transition. *Energy Research & Social Science*, *75*, 101965. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.101965

Neblo, M. A., Esterling, K. M., Kennedy, R. P., Lazer, D. M. J., & Sokhey, A. E. (2010). Who Wants To Deliberate—And Why? *American Political Science Review*, *104*(3), 566–583. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055410000298

Niessen, C., & Reuchamps, M. (2022). Institutionalising Citizen Deliberation in Parliament: The Permanent Citizens' Dialogue in the German-speaking Community of Belgium. *Parliamentary Affairs*, *75*(1), 135–153. https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsaa056

Núñez, L., Close, C., & Bedock, C. (2016). Changing Democracy? Why Inertia is Winning Over Innovation. *Representation*, *52*(4), 341–357. https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2017.1317656

O'Neill, B. C., Kriegler, E., Ebi, K. L., Kemp-Benedict, E., Riahi, K., Rothman, D. S., van Ruijven, B. J., van Vuuren, D. P., Birkmann, J., Kok, K., Levy, M., & Solecki, W. (2017). The roads ahead: Narratives for shared socioeconomic pathways describing world futures in the 21st century. *Global Environmental Change*, *42*, 169–180. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.01.004

Osborne, S., Powell, M., Cucciniello, M., & Macfarlane, J. (2022). It is a relay not a sprint! Evolving co-design in a digital and virtual environment: Neighbourhood services for elders. *Global Public Policy and Governance*, *2*(4), 518–538. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43508-022-00053-y

Pastukhova, M., & Westphal, K. (2020). Governing the Global Energy Transformation. In M. Hafner & S. Tagliapietra (Eds.), *The Geopolitics of the Global Energy Transition* (pp. 341–364). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39066-2_15

Pickering, J., Coolsaet, B., Dawson, N., Suiseeya, K. M., Inoue, C. Y. A., & Lim, M. (2022). Rethinking and Upholding Justice and Equity in Transformative Biodiversity Governance. In I. J. Visseren-Hamakers & M. T. J. Kok (Eds.), *Transforming Biodiversity Governance* (pp. 155–178). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108856348.009

Pickering, J., Hickmann, T., Bäckstrand, K., Kalfagianni, A., Bloomfield, M., Mert, A., Ransan-Cooper, H., & Lo, A. Y. (2022). Democratising sustainability transformations: Assessing the transformative potential of democratic practices in environmental governance. *Earth System Governance*, *11*, 100131. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2021.100131

Reinikainen, I. (2024). *Transformation Imagination – Connecting citizen agency to political imaginaries of sustainability transformation*. https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi/handle/123456789/133631

Repo, P., & Matschoss, K. (2018). Citizen visions for European futures—Methodological considerations and implications. *European Journal of Futures Research*, *6*(1), 20. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40309-018-0149-5

Riedy, C., & Waddock, S. (2022). Imagining transformation: Change agent narratives of sustainable futures. *Futures*, *142*, 103010. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2022.103010

Ruostetsaari, I. (2017). Stealth democracy, elitism, and citizenship in Finnish energy policy. *Energy Research & Social Science*, *34*, 93–103. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.06.022

Sanders, E., & Stappers, P. (2012). *Convivial toolbox: Generative research for the front end of design*. Bis.

Sheppard, S. R. J., Shaw, A., Flanders, D., Burch, S., Wiek, A., Carmichael, J., Robinson, J., & Cohen, S. (2011). Future visioning of local climate change: A framework for community engagement and planning with scenarios and visualisation. *Futures*, *43*(4), 400–412. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2011.01.009

Smith, G. (2019). Lessons From Democratic Innovations. In H. Tam (Ed.), *Whose Government Is It?* (pp. 91–108). Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529200942.ch006

Smith, G. (2024). *We Need To Talk About Climate: How Citizens' Assemblies Can Help Us Solve The Climate Crisis*. University of Westminster Press. https://doi.org/10.16997/book73

Sorokin, P. A., & Merton, R. K. (1937). Social Time: A Methodological and Functional Analysis. *American Journal of Sociology*, *42*(5), 615–629. https://doi.org/10.1086/217540

Spaces for deliberation: Eight spatial qualities for designing…. (2025, April 10). DemocracyNext. https://www.demnext.org/projects/spaces-for-deliberation-paper

Spada, P., & Peixoto, T. C. (2025). The limits of representativeness in citizens' assemblies: A critical analysis of democratic minipublics. *Journal of Sortition*, *1*(1), 137–159. https://doi.org/10.53765/3050-0672.1.1.137

Tavory, I. (2018). Between Situations: Anticipation, Rhythms, and the Theory of Interaction. *Sociological Theory*, *36*(2), 117–133. https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275118777007

Wilson, J. L. (2020). Future imaginings: Nostalgia for unrealized possible selves. In *Nostalgia Now*. Routledge.

Woiwode, C., Schäpke, N., Bina, O., Veciana, S., Kunze, I., Parodi, O., Schweizer-Ries, P., & Wamsler, C. (2021). Inner transformation to sustainability as a deep leverage point: Fostering new avenues for change through dialogue and reflection. *Sustainability Science*, *16*(3), 841–858. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-020-00882-y

Xiang, W.-N. (2024). An open letter to the United Nations and the SEPR community about pursuing SDGs in the age of democratic backsliding. *Socio-Ecological Practice Research*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42532-024-00185-x

Data availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study – i.e. questionnaires and the two analysed questions from the booklets – were anonymised and are publicly available.

This data has been uploaded to ZENODO data repository: https://zenodo.org/records/16875620

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the support of all members of the INCITE-DEM project consortium in providing feedback on the development of the questionnaire and other materials used for this research. Funding for the research was primarily provided by the European Research Executive Agency (i.e., REA) through the Horizon European Programme (project INCITE-DEM, grant agreement 101094258). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or of the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority (REA) can be held responsible for them. In addition, funding was also provided by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT) through the first author's post-doc contract 2020.01663.CEECIND/CP1605/CT0005 (https://doi.org/10.54499/2020.01663.CEECIND/CP1605/CT0005).

Author contributions

The first and corresponding author, Inês Campos, contributed to developing the methodology, funding acquisition, conceptualisation of the article, data analysis and curation, data visualisation and writing of the original draft.

João Limão and Petteri Repo equally contributed to the article, both authors contributed to the methodological design, data collection, conceptualisation of the article and writing of the original draft.

Doris Fuchs contributed to funding acquisition, methodological design, data collection and review and editing of the draft.

Vanessa Buth contributed the methodological design, data collection and editing of the draft.

David Lamas and Daniel Peniche contributed to the methodological design, including the development of the generative design approach applied in the Democracy Labs and the review and editing of the draft.

Competing interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

Ethical statement

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained before the commencement of all research activities from the Ethical Commission of the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Lisbon on 14 June 2023 (approval number CEC/16/2023). The Commission (https://ciencias.ulisboa.pt/pt/comissao-etica-ciencias) operates in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, including Article 23 (paragraph 3). It is an independent body, transparent in its functioning, with adequate resources and diverse expertise, and has the authority to monitor, request modifications, suspend approval, and receive final reports.

The Lisbon Commission reviewed and approved the full international protocol, ensuring compliance with applicable international norms, EU directives, and national legislation in all participating countries (Portugal, Germany, Spain, Italy, and Slovenia). Each collaborating research team, namely Munster University (Germany), Kyoto Club (Italy), ECO-UNION (Spain), and FOCUS (Slovenia), provided a signed declaration formally acknowledging and accepting the Lisbon Commission's ethical approval.

In this way, the ethical approval obtained in Lisbon fulfilled both the sponsor-country and host-country requirements outlined in Article 23 of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Scope of approval: The Commission carefully considered the study objectives, methodology (including multi-country data collection), relevant ethical guidelines and protocols, and potential implications, and granted full approval.

Informed consent statement

Participants were provided with a participant's information sheet, informed consent and debriefing sheets. Informed consent was obtained from all research participants, ensuring their confidentiality and privacy and addressing any potential risks that may arise. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any time. No part of the study was exempt from ethical review.

This written informed consent was obtained from the research participants during the recruitment stage of their engagement in the research. Each responsible researcher from each of the research teams involved in each country has kept the informed consents obtained from participants. The dates vary between countries, since the 'democracy labs' were implemented on different dates between May and November 2024 in the six locations. In Lisbon, Portugal, informed consent was obtained on May 10, 2024. In Rome, Italy, informed consent was obtained on May 28, 2024. In Potsdam, Germany, informed consent was obtained on October 1, 2024. In Barcelona, Spain, informed consent was obtained on October 30, 2024. In Ljubljana, Slovenia, informed consent was obtained on November 14, 2024. Informed consent included confirmation that the participant has read and understood a participation information sheet (which was also handed along with the informed consent), confirming that participants understood their voluntary participation in the study. Participants were reassured that any personal data (e.g. name, or initiative they represent) will remain confidential and will not be shared with third parties, nor transferred between countries, and will be destroyed at the end of the project. Participants consented that all private information is anonymised and only accessible to the responsible researcher. Consent was also given to publish the results of the research

in reports and scientific publications. The study did not involve vulnerable individuals or minors, with one exception, as one 16-year-old participant was part of the German (Potsdam) Democracy Lab. In this case, informed consent was also provided by this participant, in compliance with the EU law, Art. 8 of the "General Data Protection Regulation" (i.e., adopted by the German Datenschutz-Grundverordnung, abbreviated EU-DSGVO), according to which 16 and 17-year-olds are capable of giving their own consent. The participant information sheets and informed consent were sent by mail to the 16-year-old participant's family home during the recruitment stage and collected on October 1, 2024, together with the consents from all other participants. Lastly, all participants were also debriefed following the research and were asked to provide any feedback on the events. Debriefing included a description of the procedures adopted to guarantee the participants' privacy. At the debriefing stage, participants were again reminded of the aims of the study and how research data will be treated, stored, and presented in final outputs, including internal reports and scientific articles to be published in peer-reviewed journals.

Artificial Intelligence Usage

The authors did not use Artificial Intelligence in writing the article. The Grammarly App was used to support accurate English language editing.