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Proactively engaging citizens in European Union Cohesion Policy

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Introduction

European Union (EU) Cohesion Policy is the one area of EU policy competence with the highest potential for directly engaging citizens in EU policymaking processes. While the European Commission has introduced many cohesion policy instruments that bring policymaking closer to regional and local levels, direct citizen involvement in this policy sphere remains negligible. A citizen focused approach needs to be embedded within existing cohesion policy structures to maximize the potential of cohesion policy for strengthening the connection between the EU and citizens. This policy paper provides key recommendations outlining ways to proactively engage citizens in EU cohesion policy processes. The recommendations are designed to support EU, national, and regional level policymakers to achieve the priority goal for the 2021-2027 EU cohesion policy programme period of bringing 'Europe closer to citizens'.



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Why is citizen engagement in EU Cohesion policy important?

The greatest existential threat to the EU project is growing citizen support for right wing national populist political parties (Rodríguez-Pose et al 2024; Dijkstra et al 2020). The recent Eurobarometer poll shows that 49% of Europeans lack trust in EU institutions and policymakers (Eurobarometer 2024). This lack of trust is reflected in the increasing electoral success of Eurosceptic political parties that peddle the myth that the EU is dominated by a faceless technocratic elite of unelected and unaccountable experts who undermine national sovereignty and democracy (Moodie 2017). Support for Eurosceptic parties is especially high in so-called "geographies of discontent", which are regions suffering from long-term socio-economic decline, where citizens feel they have been neglected by policymakers and left behind by the forces of globalization and the knowledge-based economy (Rodríguez-Pose and Dijkstra 2021). In this politically sensitive environment, EU policymakers need to do more to connect with citizens by raising their awareness and knowledge of how the EU functions, highlighting the impact the EU has on their daily lives, and finding ways to engage citizens directly in EU policymaking processes.

EU Cohesion Policy has a vital role to play in strengthening the connection between the EU and citizens. It is the one area of EU policy competence that is most tangible to citizens and where proactive citizen engagement in policymaking would appear feasible, as cohesion policy: 1) addresses socio-economic and environmental policy challenges and opportunities closest to citizens; 2) focuses policy and funding directly at regional and local levels; and 3) is an area where the local knowledge and interests of citizens could be expected to contribute significantly to informing the direction of policies and funding (Capello & Perucca 2019a). While this is a policy

field that closely links to citizens, over 50% of EU citizens are unaware of the existence of EU cohesion policy, and those that are aware perceive little personal benefit from cohesion policies and funding (Charron 2023). This suggests that EU policymakers have not done enough to maximize the potential of cohesion policy as a tool for strengthening the connection between the EU and citizens. If the EU cannot enhance direct citizen involvement in this policy field, then it is very unlikely to engage citizens in more complex and technical areas of EU policy competence. Cohesion policy is a vital area for engaging citizens directly in EU policymaking processes; more proactive citizen engagement in this policy sphere could help rebuild citizen trust in EU institutions, foster stronger European identities, and enhance overall support for the EU project (Moodie et al 2022).

What are the current levels of citizen involvement in EU Cohesion Policymaking?

The direct involvement of citizens in EU cohesion policymaking is negligible (OECD 2022). EU documents outlining key cohesion policy structures make no reference to a direct role for citizens in cohesion policy processes (European Commission 2022a, European Commission 2014; European Parliament and Council 2021). Citizens have been designated as the passive recipients of cohesion policies, rather than being considered as proactive contributors to the policy process. The 5th priority objective of the 2021-2027 EU cohesion policy programme is to bring 'Europe closer to its citizens', but this objective does not address bringing Europe closer to citizens via direct participation in cohesion policy processes (European Parliament and Council 2021).

Traditionally, direct involvement in EU cohesion policy is reserved for the "usual suspect" stakeholders/beneficiaries (e.g. universities, industries, business, NGOs, and civil society groups) that regularly participate in the development and implementation of cohesion policy programmes (Stapper 2024). The role of citizens as passive recipients of cohesion policy is characterized by the top-down communication of cohesion policy to citizens via the dissemination of online impact assessment reports that have little readership outside policy and academic communities (Moodie et al 2022). Symbolic imagery has also been used to communicate the impact of cohesion policy to citizens, such as placing EU plaques on regional infrastructure constructed with cohesion policy funds. These communication efforts have proved to enhance citizen awareness of cohesion policy and support for European integration (Dabrowski et al 2021). Research has also shown that the active involvement of the "usual suspect" stakeholders/beneficiaries fosters learning and socialization dynamics that have the potential to alter the beliefs and norms of cohesion policy participants (Bachtler et al 2014). There is the possibility for the same learning and socialization dynamics to be transferred to citizens if they are actively involved in EU cohesion policy formulation and implementation processes. This suggests that more direct citizen engagement tools are needed in this policy sphere.

Is there political support for enhancing citizen involvement in EU Cohesion Policy?

The European Commission, European Parliament, and Committee of the Regions have been committed to empowering sub-national level actors in EU cohesion policymaking (Moodie et al 2021a). This has been achieved through introducing policy concepts and instruments that promote policymaking at regional and local levels, including territorial governance, active subsidiarity, place-based policymaking, the partnership principle, smart specialization, LEADER, community led local developments (CLLD), and integrated territorial investments (ITIs; Mendez et al 2019). While these different concepts and instruments have enhanced the territorial focus of cohesion policy, they have not proactively engaged citizens in cohesion policymaking processes beyond the “usual suspect” stakeholders/beneficiaries. Consequently, the direct engagement of citizens in cohesion policy has become a more salient topic of discussion in policy and academic circles, including the 2020 EU high-level conference on ‘Engaging Citizens for good governance in Cohesion Policy’ (European Commission 2020; Moodie et al 2022; Mendez et al 2024). Discussions at the March 2023 Cohesion Alliance High Level Event - “Cohesion as a bridge to a united and fairer Europe”, also focused on how to engage citizens in cohesion policy (Cohesion Alliance 2023).

More recently, there has been a shift from general discussions towards the search for practical solutions and tools for engaging citizens. Working together with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Commission launched two pilot actions in 2020-2021 to provide EU cohesion policy Managing Authorities (MAs) across Europe with practical knowledge and financial support to improve their citizen engagement skills and capacities (OECD 2022). The European Commission followed this up in 2024 by offering training sessions for MAs on the application of different citizen engagement methods in cohesion policy. The REGIO Peer2Peer + scheme also provides a platform for MAs to share knowledge and best practices on citizen engagement. While political and practical support for enhancing citizen engagement is strong amongst EU institutions and sub-national level actors, national governments remain a firm obstacle to bottom-up cohesion policy processes due to their unwillingness to devolve policymaking responsibility to the sub-national level (Bache 2010). A stronger role for sub-national actors and citizens is especially challenging in EU member states with centralized governance systems, where cohesion policy programmes are controlled by central governments (Dabrowski 2014).



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What are the main barriers to citizen engagement in EU Cohesion Policy?

There are multiple policy level and practical governance issues that present obstacles for citizen participation in EU cohesion policy, including:

- **Top-down multi-level governance structures:** cohesion policymaking has traditionally been characterized by top-down, multi-level governance processes dominated by national level actors. The role of sub-national level stakeholders and citizens has been curtailed by central government control over the direction of cohesion policy programmes and funding (Dabrowski et al 2014). There is also the issue of pork barrel politics within cohesion policy, where funds are used to support local authorities politically aligned with central governments (Dotti 2016).
- **Weak implementation of subsidiarity:** the principle of subsidiarity has been vaguely defined and narrowly applied in policy competence disputes between the EU and national levels, rather than being used as a tool for empowering sub-national level actors and bringing decision-making closer to the citizen (Moodie et al 2021b).
- **Complex terminology:** "cohesion" is a vague and highly contested concept (Medeiros 2016). As a policy and academic construct, notions of 'cohesion' are not easily comprehensible or relatable to citizens, thereby creating a disconnect between citizens and their understanding of what cohesion policy is and how it affects them (Corchado et al 2018).
- **Poorly defined role of territory:** The concept and role of "territory" remains ill-defined in cohesion policy (Luukkonen & Moilanen. 2012). Nested

administrative regional boundaries are important constructs for framing citizen engagement processes. EU policymakers current focus on fostering interregional and cross-border cohesion through "integrated territorial development", "soft space planning", and the development of "functional areas" takes cohesion policy further away from citizens. Citizens identify closely with regional identities and the territories in which they live and work, therefore, the role of territory needs to be reconsidered in relation to cohesion policy and citizen engagement (Moodie et al 2021b).

- **Focus on economic growth:** Local and regional stakeholders have been critical of the economic growth orientated focus of EU cohesion policies, arguing that a primary focus on economic development does not solve other underlying social and environmental challenges important at regional and local levels (ESPON 2020). A narrow focus on economic growth also targets cohesion policy funding on larger urban areas with critical innovation infrastructures. This stimulates the involvement of the "usual suspect" cohesion policy stakeholders/beneficiaries with an interest in business and innovation growth (e.g. industries, businesses, and universities) rather than citizens.
- **Impact assessment bias:** The European Commission prioritizes the dissemination of technical impact assessment reports as the most effective mechanism for communicating EU cohesion policy to citizens. This ex-post passive engagement of citizens reinforces the perspective that citizens are merely the recipients of cohesion policies rather than potential contributors (Moodie et al 2022).
- **Lack of capacities:** Research has shown that the overall administrative quality and performance of regional and local public authorities can impact on the delivery of EU cohesion policies (Mendez & Bachtler 2022). Regional and local public authorities often lack the capacities, time, and resources to implement citizen engagement methods effectively, and are reliant on expert facilitators to assist with these processes (OECD 2022).
- **Limitations of citizen engagement tools:** Many citizen participation tools are time and resource intensive. Levels of openness and inclusivity can be restricted to those citizens selected to participate, or citizens with the time, interest, resources, and knowledge to participate (Elstub & Escobar 2019). Citizen involvement efforts can also be viewed as window dressing exercises if they do not impact directly on policy, or if discussions are framed around an agenda predetermined by politicians and experts, which restrict the capacity of citizens to drive the overall direction of discussion (Baiocchi & Ganuza 2016).

What are the benefits of citizen engagement in EU Cohesion Policy?

The benefits of increased citizen engagement in EU cohesion policy are potentially wide ranging, including:

- **Increase awareness and learning:** Direct citizen involvement can serve to enhance citizen awareness and understanding of EU cohesion policy and how it impacts on their daily lives (Dabrowski et al 2019).
- **Strengthen support for policies:** Citizen engagement can enhance the acceptance, support and uptake of EU cohesion policy decisions, thereby reducing the potential for public conflict and disagreement (López-Bazo 2022).
- **Improve quality of policies:** The information, ideas, and knowledge provided by citizens can help ensure that policies better address regional challenges, opportunities, and citizen needs (Moodie et 2022).
- **Enhance democratic legitimacy:** Citizen engagement can boost inclusivity, equality of access, and the diversity of actors involved in EU cohesion policymaking processes, including increased participation of underrepresented or marginalized societal groups (OECD 2022).
- **Build social capital and trust:** Collaborative policymaking approaches can help build trust relationships between citizens and public institutional actors, experts, and other cohesion policy stakeholders/beneficiaries (Capello & Perucca 2019b).
- **Foster civic empowerment:** Direct involvement gives citizens ownership of EU cohesion policies by providing them with the capacity to influence the direction of policies that impact on their lives and local areas (OECD 2022).
- **Strengthen sub-national level power and resilience:** A critical mass of citizen support behind policy proposals can strengthen the position of the sub-national level in multi-level governance negotiations with national and EU level actors (Moodie et al 2022).
- **Promote European identities and support for the EU project:** Direct participation can help increase citizen knowledge and awareness of EU cohesion policy, which can contribute towards building European identities and enhancing overall support for the EU project (Capello & Perucca 2019b).



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Conclusions and Recommendations for citizen engagement in EU Cohesion Policy

High levels of citizen distrust in EU institutions and policymakers and the growing support for right-wing populist Eurosceptic political parties pose as an existential threat to the future of the EU. More indirect representative democracy through the creation of an elected European Regional Assembly, as proposed at the High-level Conference on the Future EU Democracy, is not the solution to this challenge (European Commission 2022b). Citizen awareness, knowledge, and support for the EU is better enhanced through clear communication and the direct engagement of citizens in EU cohesion policymaking (Moodie et al 2022; Cunico et al 2021). Cohesion policy is the area of EU policy competence closest to citizens and with the strongest potential for proactively engaging citizens in EU policy processes. EU policymakers have not so far maximized the potential of cohesion policy as a vital tool for establishing a stronger connection between the EU and citizens. The following recommendations are targeted at EU, national, and regional policymakers to help enhance citizen engagement in the sphere of cohesion policy.

Policy Communication Recommendations: Cohesion policy needs to be communicated using a language that is comprehensible to citizens. This is essential for raising citizen awareness and understanding of EU cohesion policy, as well as encouraging citizens to participate in policymaking processes. The following policy communication recommendations are targeted at EU level and regional policymakers to help increase citizen understanding of this policy sphere.

- **Refer to this area of EU policy competence as regional policy and not cohesion policy:** EU policymakers should revert back to consistently referring to this area of EU policy as 'regional policy' rather than 'cohesion policy'. 'Regional policy' is something that is easily understandable to citizens, as regions and municipalities constitute places where citizens live, work, and socialize. In contrast, the term 'cohesion policy' takes this area of policy further away from citizens, as 'cohesion' is a vague policy and academic construct that is not easily comprehensible or relatable to citizens. On a semantic and communicative level, using the term 'cohesion policy' over 'regional policy' is politically naïve and potentially problematic in the current climate where support for Eurosceptic parties is growing. The notion of cohesion has strong connotations with federalist ideas, therefore, EU policymakers should be aware of the semantic dangers of referring to 'cohesion policy' in providing fuel for populist parties advocating the threat of a European superstate. EU policymakers need to think like citizens in the language they apply when communicating this policy area. Eurosceptic political parties are highly skilled at connecting with citizens using uncomplicated language and simplistic messages. EU policymakers need to follow suit and be more politically strategic and savvy in communicating EU policy competence using a simple language that is easily accessible to citizens. 'Regional policy' is a more easily understandable term which policymakers can use to connect with citizens and communicate the role of this policy sphere in citizens daily lives.
- **Emphasize to citizens that the central objective of cohesion policy is to reduce disparities and promote socio-economic and environmental growth and development within their regions:** As one speaker at the Cohesion Alliance high level event noted, if policymakers cannot clearly define the aims and objectives of cohesion policy, then how can we explain it effectively to citizens (Cohesion Alliance 2023). The term 'cohesion policy' does not accurately reflect or communicate to citizens the primary aims and objectives of this policy sphere. Promoting cohesion between regions is one goal of cohesion policy, but the primary focus of cohesion policy and funding is to reduce disparities and enhance growth within regions. Referring to this policy sphere as 'regional policy' would make it easier for EU and regional policymakers to communicate this primary goal to citizens. Policymakers should emphasize this primary objective in communication with citizens, as reducing disparities and promoting growth within regions is a policy that citizens will most likely understand, support, and engage directly with in policymaking processes. This highlights the importance of policymakers using understandable language in communicating a clear message to citizens regarding the main aims of cohesion policy.
- **Use digital tools to enhance cohesion policy communication to citizens throughout the whole programme cycle, especially the programming phase:**

The communication of cohesion policy to citizens has largely evolved around the use of symbolic imagery (i.e. EU plaques on buildings) and the passive online dissemination of information, including the results from cohesion policy projects and policy impact assessment reports. Communication to citizens is somewhat backloaded to the programme implementation and evaluation stages, thereby confirming the position of citizens as the recipients of cohesion policy. Regional and local authorities should maximize digital and social media tools, while also working in collaboration with local media, to communicate cohesion policy to citizens at all stages of the policy programme cycle (Moodie et al 2022). Each cohesion policy programme should develop a citizen communication strategy with a stronger emphasis on promoting citizen awareness and knowledge of cohesion policy at the programming phase (European Commission 2020). Effective early-stage communication of local cohesion policy citizen engagement events, using social media, is vital to increase citizen participation levels. This communication should emphasize the opportunity for citizens to participate in discussions that will inform and influence the direction of EU cohesion policy and funding in their own regions.

Strategic Political Recommendations: The European Commission, European Parliament, Committee of the Regions, and regional and local authorities support a place-based approach to EU cohesion policymaking, but there is still national level resistance. The following strategic political recommendations are targeted at EU and regional level policymakers to help persuade national governments to devolve greater cohesion policy power and responsibility to the sub-national level.

- **Lobby member state national governments to devolve EU cohesion policymaking responsibilities by promoting the benefits of sub-national level empowerment and citizen involvement:** The Cohesion Alliance high-level event highlighted that national governments remain the greatest obstacle to implementing place-based cohesion policymaking (Cohesion Alliance 2023). EU and regional level policymakers must work together to put pressure on national governments by highlighting the potential benefits to national governments of empowering sub-national level actors and citizens. Growing distrust in political elites is a phenomenon that negatively impacts both the EU and national levels. National governments should recognize the potential benefits of working with citizens in cohesion policymaking for helping to rebuild citizen trust and social capital in national level policymakers, especially in so-called geographies of discontent. The direct involvement of citizens in cohesion policymaking can also help national governments improve the focus of national level regional policies by raising their awareness and understanding of citizen needs within specific regions. A greater willingness of national governments to devolve decision-making responsibility to the sub-national level is paramount for facilitating citizen engagement efforts.

- **EU institutions should initiate political level discussions with member state national governments to make citizen engagement a mandatory element of EU cohesion policymaking processes:** Recent informal discussions on enhancing citizen engagement in cohesion policy have involved EU institutions and regional and local authorities predisposed to the idea of empowering sub-national level actors and citizens. This debate needs to be conducted formally with EU member state national governments if citizen engagement is to become a mandatory element of cohesion policymaking. This discussion should focus on enshrining citizen participation within key EU cohesion policy legislative documents, including the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) and European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP).

Policy Framing Recommendations: Changes in the current policy framework are needed if citizens are to be proactively engaged in EU cohesion policymaking. The following policy framing recommendations provide EU and regional policymakers with suggestions on how to reframe EU cohesion policy to facilitate greater citizen involvement.

- **Emphasize territorial governance and place-based policymaking over multi-level governance in core EU cohesion policy documents:** In core EU cohesion policy documents, including the CPR, multi-level governance (MLG) remains the dominant EU cohesion policymaking paradigm. The current top-down nature of MLG processes in this policy field provides a dominant role for national governments and EU institutions, which weakens the position of sub-national level actors and reduces the potential for citizen engagement. The lack of a firm commitment and references to bottom-up policymaking in key cohesion policy documents reaffirms MLG as the dominant paradigm, which serves to perpetuate existing top-down cohesion policy structures. A stronger focus on territorial governance and place-based policymaking approaches is needed in core EU cohesion policy documents (Moodie et al 2021b). This would highlight a shift of policymaking power and responsibility to sub-national level actors and citizens, with EU and national level actors playing a supporting role in these processes.
- **The concept of 'active subsidiarity' should be enshrined in EU Treaty as the basis for EU cohesion policymaking:** Effective citizen engagement in EU cohesion policy requires a stronger role for sub-national level institutions as key facilitators of citizen involvement at regional and local levels. To empower sub-national level actors, 'active subsidiarity' needs to become the foundational basis for cohesion policymaking within both EU Treaties and key EU cohesion policy documents. The concept of active subsidiarity has been advocated by the European Commission to give a stronger voice to regional and local authorities. While there is no strict definition of active subsidiarity,

the concept goes one step further than the original principle of subsidiarity by emphasizing the proactive participation of regional and local authorities in creating and executing EU policies (Aleksieva & Orejarena 2024; Moodie et al 2021b). Policymakers and scholars should explore the potential for extending the concept of active subsidiarity to include citizens, so the focus is on engaging citizens directly in policymaking rather than just moving the EU closer to citizens. The implementation of active subsidiarity is a fundamental legal and structural change required to lay the foundations for proactively engaging citizens in place-based EU cohesion policymaking.

- **Clearly define the important role of territory in EU cohesion policy:** Policymakers should embrace the concept of territory as an essential foundation for engaging citizens in EU cohesion policymaking (Moodie et al 2021b). Notions of territory, based on nested regional and local administrative boundaries, are not only important for democratic legitimacy, but provide an important construct around which to actively involve citizen in cohesion policy discussions. Policymakers and academics in the field of EU cohesion policy have become too focused on notions of soft space planning, integrated territorial development, and functional areas. These ideas take cohesion policymaking further away from citizen by underestimating the importance of territorial units as essential social constructs around which local stakeholders and citizens base their identities and understand their own realities. The current challenges facing Europe might transcend administrative boundaries, but it does not mean that citizens perceive these issues independently of their own regional and local contexts, networks, and experiences. Regional identities are also growing stronger during a period in which trust in the EU and national governments is at an all-time low. Within this context, a clearly defined notion of territory is needed within EU cohesion policy to enhance democracy and links with citizens.
- **Consider citizens as contributors to EU cohesion policy and not just recipients:** The proactive engagement of citizens requires policymakers to overhaul antiquated rhetoric that reduces the role of citizens to recipients of cohesion policies (Moodie et al 2022). This is most evidently reflected in the Commission's reliance on ex-post impact assessments as the primary tool for connecting, communicating, and justifying cohesion policy to citizens. Classifying citizens solely as recipients has largely restricted citizen participation in this policy field to a small number of "usual suspect" stakeholders/beneficiaries that are regularly involved in cohesion policy programme development and implementation. Citizen's need to be considered as active contributors to EU cohesion policymaking as they have an important stake in determining the overall direction of EU cohesion policies and funding in their own regions. Referring to citizens as contributors recognizes that their regional and local knowledge can play a vital role in

improving the quality and local embeddedness of EU cohesion policies. Thinking of citizens as contributors is also a pivotal first step for initiating a serious debate on how to better integrate citizens into EU cohesion policymaking processes.

- **Ensure that economic growth is not overprioritized as a key objective of cohesion policy:** Cohesion Policy has increasingly focused on larger urban areas and cities and their capabilities to stimulate economic growth and innovation. While economic growth is an important objective of cohesion policy, other social and environmental objectives should not be neglected (ESPON 2020). A balanced policy objective portfolio is needed to ensure that cohesion policy addresses all regional and local challenges and opportunities important to citizens. This could help increase citizen participation beyond the cohesion policy “usual suspects”, including industries, businesses, and universities interested in regional innovation and economic growth potential.

Policy Process Recommendations: A citizen focused approach needs to be embedded within EU cohesion policymaking structures. The following policy process recommendations are targeted at EU and regional level policymakers to facilitate citizen engagement within existing cohesion policy processes.

- **Build a citizen engagement logic into key EU cohesion policy documents:** There are currently no references to direct citizen involvement within the CPR or ECCP. Citizen involvement needs to become embedded within these core cohesion policy documents if citizen engagement is going to become a regular institutionalized practice in EU cohesion policymaking. Within these core documents, EU policymakers need to make it clear at what stages of the process citizens should be involved and how this can be done in practice. The EU can supplement these core documents with practical citizen engagement handbooks designed to support regional and local authorities to facilitate citizen engagement activities.
- **Engage citizens at all stages of cohesion policymaking but emphasize early-stage involvement in the programming phase:** Citizens have the potential to play an active role at all stages of the cohesion policymaking process. In the policy programming phase, they can help determine the overall direction of policy and funding focus in their regions. They can also support the selection of projects at the policy implementation phase and assess the quality of projects and the overall programme at the policy evaluation phase (OECD 2022). Policymakers need to move beyond one way information sharing and towards proactive citizen deliberation and collaboration in EU cohesion policymaking. Interactive citizen involvement at the policy programming phase is particularly essential for enhancing input legitimacy by increasing citizen ownership and support for cohesion policy through their active

participation in policy cocreation processes. Early-stage citizen involvement can increase citizen interest, knowledge, and awareness of the policy implementation process (throughput legitimacy), while also strengthening how citizens perceive and understand cohesion policy results (output legitimacy). Citizen engagement at the programming phase is an important supplement to the output legitimacy bestowed by impact assessments, putting less pressure on programme storytelling and ex-post evaluations as the main source of building citizen awareness and support for cohesion policy (Moodie et al 2022).

- **Target citizen engagement in the preparation of overarching cohesion policy programme documents:** Citizen engagement is costly and time consuming, so it is not possible to conduct citizen engagement initiatives for all cohesion policy instruments. Regional and local authorities would need to be selective and prioritize citizen engagement around the preparation of partnership agreements and operational programme documents that outline regional and local priority policies and funding objectives for the whole cohesion policy programming period. EU cohesion policy MAs are currently suffering from strategy development fatigue. EU policymakers should, therefore, explore the possibility of consolidating citizen engagement around the preparation of one key overarching cohesion policy programme document. The citizen-led inputs outlined in this overarching document could then be used to inform the development of smart specialization strategies, CLLD, LEADER, ITI and cross-border programmes (Moodie et al 2022). This would enable MAs to save resources and capacity by limiting the number of citizen engagement processes required.
- **Map existing citizen engagement tools against current cohesion policymaking instruments:** Policymakers do not need to develop new citizen engagement tools to enhance citizen involvement in cohesion policy as a plethora of democratic citizen innovation tools already exist. EU policymakers should map how these existing citizen engagement tools can be more actively applied within current cohesion policymaking instruments (Moodie et al 2022). For example, citizens could be engaged in the development of partnership agreements, operational programmes, and LEADER, CLLD, ITI, and Interreg programmes. Different programmes might require different citizen engagement tools, so a provisional mapping of these tools could be beneficial for regional and local authorities responsible for developing and implementing cohesion policy programmes.
- **Develop permanent regional level forums for citizen engagement:** Citizen engagement throughout the cohesion policy cycle could be fostered through the development of permanent regional level citizen engagement forums

(Moodie et al 2024). Local Action Groups (LAGs) are an important stakeholder platform within EU cohesion policy LEADER and CLLD programmes. LAGs are currently dominated by the “usual suspect” cohesion policy stakeholders/beneficiaries but have the potential to be opened to wider citizen participation. Existing LAGs could provide a potential framework for regular citizen engagement. The ongoing Horizon Europe DUST project is experimenting with Regional Future Literacy Labs as a tool for promoting citizen engagement in sustainability transition policymaking (Balz et al 2023). Similarly, the Horizon 2020 SHERPA and Horizon Europe Granular projects developed and implemented multi-actor platforms (MAPs) and Living Lab (LL) models for engaging traditional EU cohesion policy stakeholders in a science-society-policy dialogue (Slätmo 2020; Martino et al 2024). Further research is needed on whether these models can be extended to include citizens in cohesion policy discussions. Models such as MAPs and Living Labs have the potential to become permanent forums for engaging citizens in cohesion policymaking processes. More significantly, engaging citizens in a science-society-policy deliberation can enhance citizen understanding of cohesion policy and potentially build trust and social capital between citizens, policymakers, and experts.

Capacity Building Recommendations: Effective citizen engagement in EU cohesion policy requires significant time and resources. The following capacity building recommendations are targeted at EU and regional level actors to help raise knowledge and expertise on citizen engagement tools.

- **Provide regional and local authorities with targeted investment for developing and implementing citizen engagement activities:** Citizen engagement can be time consuming and resource intensive so targeted funding for regional and local authorities is required to 1) raise their knowledge and understanding of citizen engagement tools; 2) train policymakers to implement citizen engagement tools effectively; 3) cover the costs of citizen engagement events (OECD 2022). Funding might also be required for external actors to facilitate citizen engagement activities, including researchers and consultants with a knowledge and experience citizen engagement tools. EU cohesion policy funds could be used to develop capacity and experiment with citizen engagement; for example, dedicated technical assistance and capacity building funding could be included in operational programmes to support citizen engagement efforts.
- **Develop a citizen engagement roadmap for EU cohesion policy programmes:** Policymakers would benefit from the development a citizen engagement roadmap which provides a feasible timeline for citizen engagement activities in the preparation of cohesion policies post-2027. The central goal of

policymakers should be to proactively engage citizens in the preparation of key cohesion policy documents for the post-2027 programming period. A roadmap outlining when to begin citizen engagement efforts would help regional and local policymakers to plan effectively for policy cocreation processes. A roadmap should recognise different capacities, institutional traditions, and experiences in citizen engagement across EU countries and the regions within them. Such a roadmap should be tailored to meet place-specificities and outline measures to develop capacity for participation where these are lacking on both on the sides of public authorities and citizens.

- **Programme Managing Authorities should work closely with local universities with a knowledge and experience of citizen engagement tools to help facilitate learning and practical events:** MAs require knowledge, skills, and training to deliver effective citizen engagement activities. Regional and local universities can play an important role in raising the knowledge and expertise of managing authorities on current citizen engagement tools, as well as playing an important role in facilitating citizen participation events (Moodie et al 2022). The EU could also provide a platform for academics specialising with citizen engagement to provide advice, share experiences, and highlight new knowledge on existing and newly emerging citizen engagement tools.
- **Share experiences and good practices of citizen engagements methods:** Given the plethora of new digital and traditional citizen engagement tools available, policymakers could benefit from a comprehensive mapping of these different methods, including: 1) an analysis of the relative strengths and weaknesses of each approach; and 2) examples of how to implement effective citizen engagement activities in practice. Here, the results and best practices from recent research focused on citizen engagement within cohesion policy could be useful, such as, the Commission and OECD pilot project scheme supporting managing authorities to develop new knowledge and skills for engaging citizens (OECD 2022). The ongoing Horizon Europe DUST project is also applying digital tools to raise citizen awareness and involvement in sustainable transition policymaking processes. The results of the DUST project will provide important insights on the challenges and benefits of engaging citizens in relation to EU Territorial Just Transition Plan processes (Balz et al 2023; Georgieva & Ferry 2023; Georgieva & Ferry 2024). The REGIO Peer2Peer + scheme could provide an existing repository for citizen engagement knowledge and good practices. Such repositories have their value and utility, but they are also potentially problematic as they tend to be uncritical, which may hinder learning regarding how citizen engagement tools are transferrable in different contexts. It is, therefore, important that regional and local authorities approach good practice information with dose of caution and ensure that any information used is carefully considered in relation to local specificities.

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