Theory of Change

2022 - 2025

**democratic
society**

I believe that the imaginative and creative capacities of society will allow it to resolve problems that today may appear to us insoluble, and other whose formulation we cannot even suspect at this time.

Cornelius Castoriadis, 1974

January 2022

Who we are and where we want to go

We aim to build on the work of the reformers of the past. We follow millions who have created new democracies, reformed oppressive governments, secured the rights of women, freed -enslaved people, and fought for equality.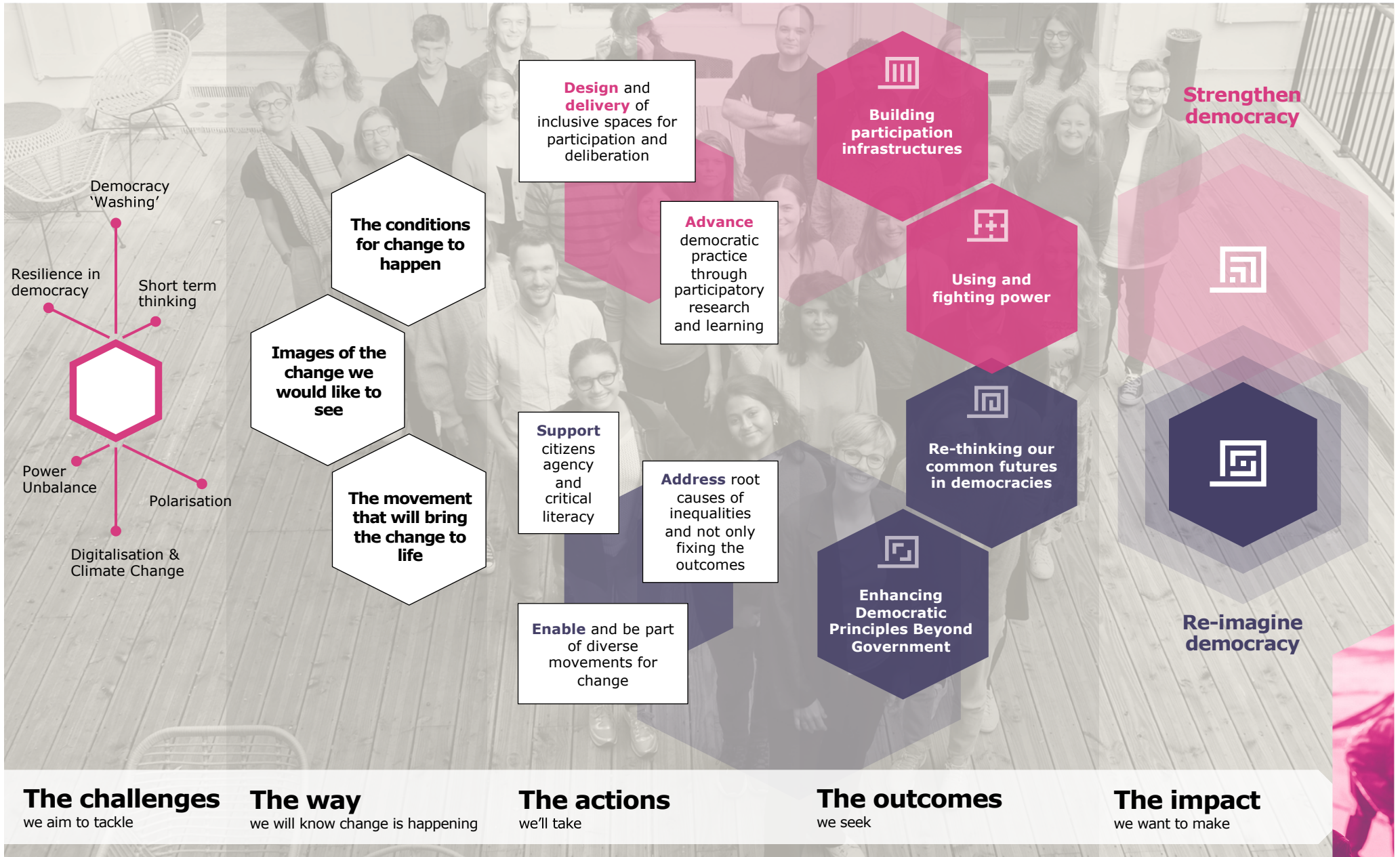 We build on what was created by Athens, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the growth of mass democracy. We take inspiration from what they achieved, we learn from their mistakes, and we see their prejudices and failures.

We come from the tradition of human rights and internationalism. Our principles are that the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government *(as from Article 21 of the Universal Declaration)*; that all people are born and remain free and equal in rights *(like in Article 1 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen)*; and seeking an ever-closer union between the peoples of Europe *(Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union)*.

We believe that, if those principles are to have life, people must continually reinvent and improve democracy, to extend those rights to those who are unable to fully realise them, and to give those who do enjoy them the opportunity to develop them further.

We are a membership organisation that aims at creating a network of members and participants who are inspired to support our work and are enabled to create greater democratic action in their communities.

The challenges
we aim to tackle

Democracy 'Washing'

Resilience in democracy

Short term thinking

Power Unbalance

Polarisation

Digitalisation & Climate Change

The way
we will know change is happening

The conditions for change to happen

Images of the change we would like to see

The movement that will bring the change to life

The actions
we'll take

Design and delivery of inclusive spaces for participation and deliberation

Advance democratic practice through participatory research and learning

Support citizens agency and critical literacy

Address root causes of inequalities and not only fixing the outcomes

Enable and be part of diverse movements for change

The outcomes
we seek

Building participation infrastructures

Using and fighting power

Re-thinking our common futures in democracies

Enhancing Democratic Principles Beyond Government

The impact
we want to make

Strengthen democracy

Re-imagine democracy

Why we need a Theory of Change

We see that the digitalisation of societies, globalisation and climate change are fundamental challenges to the state-based democracies of the 20th century. In a world where communities are not just geographical, states are not the only decision makers, and the greatest challenges are global in their nature, we need to build a networked democracy, one that can at the same time be local and personal, European and global, while still rooted in principles of equality, rights and open governance.

We are conscious of the threats to democracy, from those who openly reject it, from those who give the name democracy to unequal or oppressive systems, and from those who, while supporting it, want to disrupt or warp decision making in their own interests.

Our wider movement

We consider ourselves to be part of the wider *democratic movements* that include a variety of organisations working at different levels and with different scopes. For us at Democratic Society, these movements include – among others - those who work to secure human rights and democracy in places where these are under threat; those who work in communities to enable citizens[1] to exercise their rights with confidence; those who develop new civic and democratic technology; those who develop new processes and modes of democracy; and those who want to expand the frontiers of participation and open governance.

Our theory of change sets out the places within those movements where we see ourselves best able to work, *to contribute most effectively to collective action that advances democracy across Europe and the world.*

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1 When we refer to 'citizen' in this document we mean anyone who has a clear connection to a place and this includes people experiencing homelessness, asylum seekers and refugees

Our roles

We work within democratic movements to strengthen today's democracies, and to build the infrastructure of future democracy in our roles as:

Activists
Encouraging people to take on their role as citizens, and going deeper into communities to make democratic conversations more inclusive and equal

Creators of democratic spaces
Creating and holding informed, open and inclusive spaces for democratic action, in person and online

Reformers
Working with government and other decision-making institutions to ensure participative methods and citizen voice are at the centre.

We build the infrastructure to re-imagine the future of democracy in our roles as:

Innovators
Working collaboratively to create and implement new democratic methods and governance, inside traditional government structures and beyond them.

Connectors
Connecting citizens and democratic spaces across Europe and the world to create a networked democratic infrastructure.

As well as our individual roles, we are also partners. We work in partnerships to build a stronger and better-connected democratic sector, working with civil society, social movements, governments and other democratic actors.

Our home region is Europe, though we are open to growing beyond Europe in the future, and we want to find opportunities to learn from others and share our learning more widely.

The Challenges we aim to tackle

Polarization
As polarisation shrinks common public spaces, people are increasingly exposed to very different information and we end up having less in common. If we don't address this first, democracy will have less capacity to face the most pressing issues of our time *(e.g. migration, climate, etc)*.

What we are witnessing is the polarisation and politicisation of participation needs, as more populist parties and groups fill the gap that old institutions and modes of democracy have left open. As one of our roles is to create inclusive spaces for democratic action, polarisation is a problem we should address directly. One way to address this is by supporting citizens to develop new critical skills and literacy, but also spaces for listening and dialogue *(e.g. power and digital literacy, dialogic skills, critical thinking).*

Democracy 'Washing'
From our work on the ground at different levels of Governments, we have observed an increased mismatch between more citizens wanting to be engaged on one hand, and the lack of actions and results on the other. In these instances, democracy washing risks using the label of "democracy" as a guise, to maintain current power relations and interests rather than challenging them. We are potentially undermining the same tools we use if we do not close the loop of more participation with better impact. When trust from the public diminishes, this might lead to lack of interest in future participation in the longer term.

Democracy 'Myopia'
There is a risk that our democracies might not have the capacity, capability and means to safeguard the future. Democracies have many times struggled to deal with the long-term, both in terms of addressing the long-term

consequences of people's actions, and to plan for future generations and build strong visions for the future of health and social care systems, as well as climate, biodiversity and inclusive technologies. We need to explore the drivers of short-termism and introduce democratic designs that can help re-imagining our futures.

Power Unbalance
This is one of the root causes of many of the problems of democracy that we see today. As a more vibrant civil society is acting and taking demands to the streets and as social movements are increasingly interested in ways in which they can institutionalise their demands, we at Demsoc will be thinking about what role we could play to ensure movements are influencing political change. We also observe with preoccupation how the power of the economic sector in the public sphere is increasing with less accountability.

Digitalisation and Climate Change
These are two specific but interrelated processes that raise new and unprecedented issues for democracy to address, and that will increasingly impact our work for the future. Both are areas in dramatic transition that put additional pressure on democracy to develop new expertise and fast responses. There is a need to better understand and address the potential benefits and harms that internet and digitalisation could pose to democracy (not just to human rights, but also to the environment and our public

space). Better governance and citizens engagement are also needed to advance climate action, as well as democratic action.

Ensure resilience in democracy
As societies go through unprecedented change, we need to build resilient democracies that can better deal with transitions and institutions that are better equipped to respond to present and future crises, in ways that are inclusive and just.
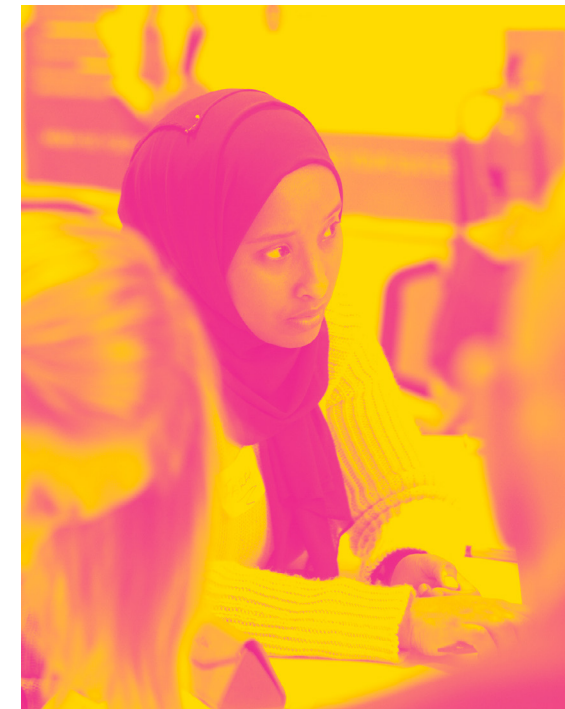
Building participation infrastructures

As we witness a wave of citizens engagement and deliberative democracy initiatives *(OECD, 2020)*, we want to ensure that participation is here to stay and become embedded in modes of governance and through legislation for the long-term. Whilst projects-based interventions still have a place, as they help demonstrate the value and impact that participation can have, at Democratic Society we will focus our effort on ensuring that we start building infrastructures for participation, so that this is more equitable, inclusive, impactful and fit for the long run.

We will know we are making progress in this field when:

Short term
- Participation is not an after-thought but is planned in advance, well-resourced and embedded in democratic practices;
- Citizens, social movements and organised groups have the opportunities, the information and the confidence to participate on a par with other actors and shape key decisions within society;
- A healthy public space (including the digital space) is ensured, where conflict is allowed in a respectful and constructive way, where each other's rights to a voice and an opinion are recognised and people are willing to listen and collaborate for societal good;

Long term
- Through better and deeper participation our democracies are able to address effectively the most pressing issues of our time (migration, digitalisation, climate change, etc) and our democratic systems will be more stable overall.

Using power – Fighting Power

Democracy needs power, but healthy democratic institutions also need to build the places and the mechanisms where the ongoing critique of their own power can be achieved. We need to re-design those democratic institutions that traditionally hold power to make sure that their power is questioned and challenged. Democratic Society will focus on developing better tools to understand, map, use, and share power from the bottom-up.

We will know we are making progress in this field when:

Short term
- In all our work, people involved (including our staff) feel that they can talk openly about power as they have the knowledge, the confidence and the spaces to do so;
- Citizens (especially under-represented groups) and social movements have more opportunities to form alliances and work together for better access to and more control over economic, natural and intellectual resources (e.g. knowledge and access to information);
- Institutions and actors that reinforce and sustain existing power structures (such as the state, market, education, media etc) are challenged to be more transparent and open to change from actors from the outside;

Long term
- Ideologies that justify and sustain social inequality are challenged and new ways of advancing social equality and promoting justice become mainstream and embedded in governments and societies.

Enhancing **democratic principles beyond governments**

In order to advance democratic principles we need to expand democracy beyond governments and bring the democratic principles and the public oversight in institutions, organisations and companies – especially those that play key roles in society. These actors *(political parties, civil society organisations at large, but also tech companies and other key economic actors)* have the power to influence the societies in which we live and the values that we embed. Our work in the next years will focus on *ensuring public oversight, transparency and accountability are expanded to key actors of our democratic space, to make sure companies/orgs operate on democratic principles and that these key actors play a more positive role to reinforce democracy wherever they operate.*

We will know we are making progress in this field when:

Short term
- Support and peer-network opportunities are available to those innovators and 'doers' that operate within organisations (including social NGOs, civil servants, community groups) and who want to make changes in their workplace/ group/ network to bring more democratic principles and experiment with other ways of doing governance and organisational design;

- More people and organisations are aware of the links of democracy in the workplace and how this impacts democratic principles and engagement overall;

Long term
- More organisations (from different fields) are open to change, more inclusive, accountable and people and planet centred.

Re-thinking our common **futures in democracy**

A society where the majority of the people feel they have no control over their own future(s), if not choosing among pre-defined ones, is a society that has lost its power to imagine, think and act differently. As trust in democracy and in each other is diminishing, we at Democratic Society will focus our work to reimagine democracy and the basis of the social contract that keeps us together and allows more people to regain trust in each other and in a common future(s).

We will know we are making progress in this field when:

Short term
- More people and institutions feel comfortable and able to engage in debates about the longer term and the future of democracy, through increased 'future literacy' and the introduction in governments and beyond of participatory methods for imagining the future;

- More people have the power to imagine different future realities as the first step towards mobilising in order to make those realities possible in the present;

- From local to EU level, new policies are designed that are visionary and allow citizens to re-imagine our social contract creatively and collaboratively;

Long term
- New modes of democratic design and governance are developed or combined so that society can best respond to the challenges /opportunities we face.

The Way we see Change happening

The Democratic Society exists to design, create and support democratic civic spaces of dialogue, through which everyone can develop the skills and confidence needed to involve themselves in the decisions that shape their lives; and those who exercise power can do so in continuous conversation with those who are affected by it.

We know change does not happen easily, nor does it occur in linear ways. We are dealing with complexity and operating at different scales. If we intend to achieve our mission, we need to add systems-approaches and awareness to our work. This presents an opportunity for Demsoc. We can lead at the local, European, and global levels as systems orchestrators, innovators, and agitators. With Strategies for a Networked Approach, we can work on structural change in local places and cultivate the networks and relationships necessary to shift systems. And, with a Macro-Systems Strategy, we can take insightful and audacious action at the European and Global scale. More specifically, we could coordinate democratic practitioners and actors to identify - at sector level - (1) what forces and conditions support or constrain change, (2) what joint actions are available to take, and (3) how we can act together with cohesion to achieve democratic systems change.

In our field we see change happening as a result of **three** main factors

I.

Building the conditions for change

For change to happen, people need to have (or regain) the trust in democracy and have the confidence, the skills and the opportunity to take on their role as critical citizens and take part in democratic conversations. Cultivating a healthy (digital) public space in the next years to come is for us at Democratic Society the main condition for any democratic change to happen.

II.

Building the narrative and images of the change we would like to see

Too often people only act against the status-quo, rather than being for an alternative vision of what our democratic places might look like. We believe that producing new imagination and narratives of the change that we want to see would be a better way to mobilise people to act. When these alternative practices and examples are already available, we will amplify these voices to make our case for change.

III.

Building the movements that will bring the change to life

We consider ourselves to be part of wider democratic movements that include a variety of organisations working at different levels and with different scopes. Our theory of change sets out the places and issues within that movement where we see ourselves best able to work, to contribute most effectively to collective action that advances democracy across Europe and the world.

Who we are and will be working with?

In order to achieve the ambitious changes that we want to see, we realise that we need to work with diverse actors within an ecosystem that are all crucial to make change happen. Based on our ToC we will try to expand this list significantly and diversify who we work with to ensure we engage with groups like artists, activists, researchers, grassroots groups, civil society, as well as companies, governments, and journalists at local, national and European level.

What Actions will we undertake?

1. These help us maximise our impact at system level, by building stronger and networked democracies from the local to the European level

2. They allow us to expand democracy beyond government and bring the democratic principles and ethos in all the places where these can create transparency, better decision making and more opportunities for individuals to get involved

3. They reach out to new types of actors and allow us to diversify who we work with (e.g. engaging with economic actors, social movements, young people, etc.) We will be paying particular attention to are those who are under-represented

and disenfranchised.

4. They introduce future methods and increase future literacy, in order to respond to the challenges of the short-termism in our democratic infrastructure

5. They address the root causes of the problems we see with our democracies and help us connecting people and power in our work

6. These support citizens' action and agency and contribute to building and developing their critical citizenship skills.

Democratic Society, our members and our partners choose to address the systemic issues in democracy, and take on a broad scope of challenges and societal dynamics. In doing so, we are particularly aware that comes with three inevitable complexities;

We can only enable democratic action at scale and with significant impact when we collaborate with diverse partners, on an equal footing. Together with our members and as part of existing movements for democracy, developing lasting solutions also implies discovering the needs and requirements of committed, human collaboration.

Secondly, working at systems level implies we must strategically respond to information asymmetries and non-linear impact pathways. It requires it to be conscientious with the details we have, and courageous with the known unknowns. An organisational acceptance of the complexity in which we work, will be our best enabler for adapting to future needs.

And lastly, working at systems level is also difficult because some systems are intangible or too complex to be mapped. And yet, it is critical to take a systems approach. Without it, we miss the opportunity to recognise and engage our work at the scale of impact it truly has; to create synergies within and across the sector; to amplify the positive trends and map the dependencies; and to act systemically and systematically to address all democratic threats, and opportunities.

www.demsoc.org