



Annual Report Year 16

Democratic Society
July 2021 – June 2022



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Who We Are & What We Do

Demsoc seeks to make democracy work for everyone, by creating opportunities for people to take part in decision making and be listened to.

Demsoc is a networked membership organization, and we're working in 28 countries across Europe and beyond. For over a decade, we've worked with our partners to support thriving democratic spaces, dialogue and mutual comprehension. In that time, we have undertaken numerous projects and worked with thousands of participants.

We have recently released our Theory of Change, setting out our purpose and our plan for change structured around a two-fold objective: strengthening democracy, and re-imagine it. Since it's a theory, it will adapt to changing circumstances. For instance, the aggression against Ukraine is also a reminder of the fragility of our democracies. A strategy that drowns out citizens' voices and crushes democratic institutions will never prevail in the long run, and Demsoc also exists to remind people of that simple fact.



We consider ourselves to be part of the wider democratic movement along with a variety of organisations working at different levels and with different scopes. We see ourselves as activists, creators of democratic spaces, reformers, innovators, connectors and partners. We have identified challenges we aim to tackle by building participation infrastructures, enhancing democratic principles beyond government, using – fighting power and re-thinking our common futures in democracy.



What it also means is, as we observe the participatory wave faltering, it's on us to think about new innovative and inclusive ways to engage with citizens and instill participation and democracy everywhere we can.



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A networked organisation, we work across Europe to connect citizens with the decisions that shape their lives.

Our Team



Our team has grown over the past year and we are now 48 Demsoc staff members working across 12 countries.

23 new staff joined over the past operating year. This has enabled to better structure the Research & Design Team, to expand both Benelux and UK teams, and to structure the Corporate Department with Communications, Finance, Development and Human Resources functions.

48

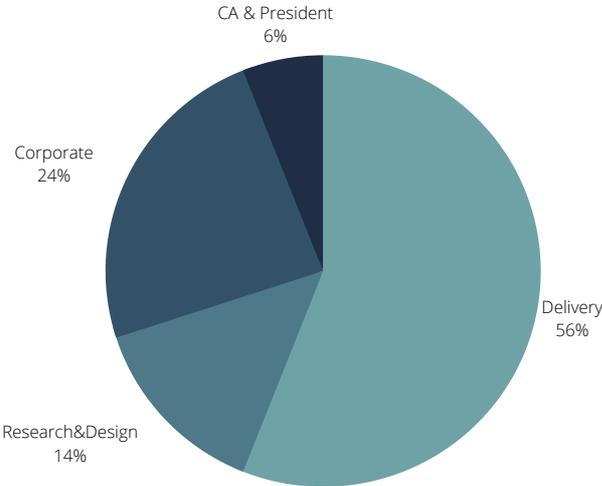
STAFF

23

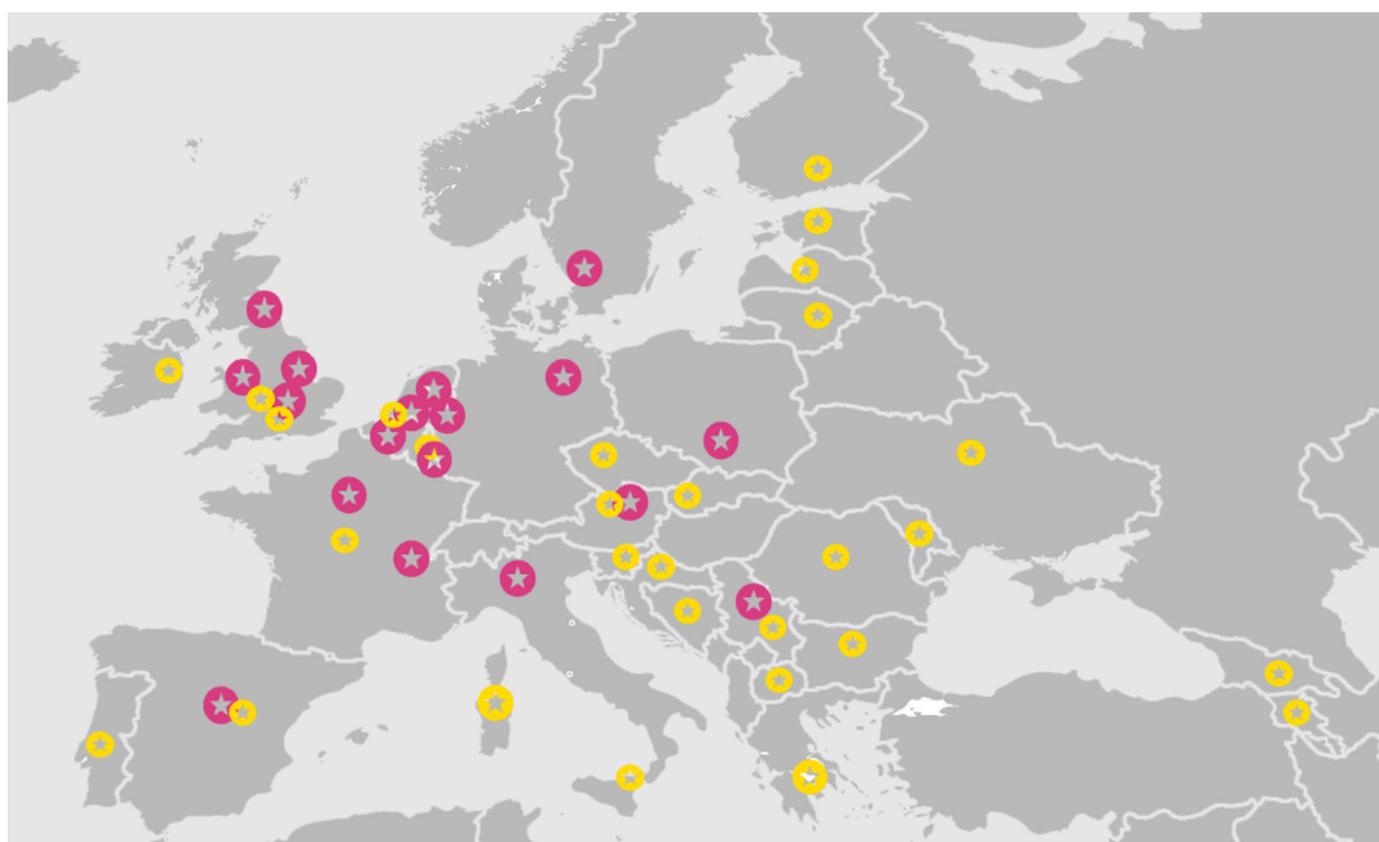
NEW STARTERS

12

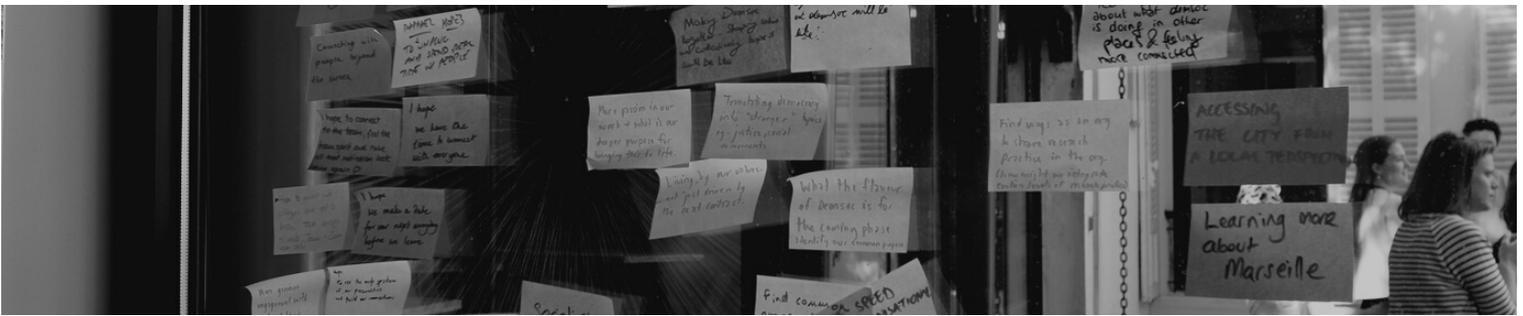
COUNTRIES



Where are we?

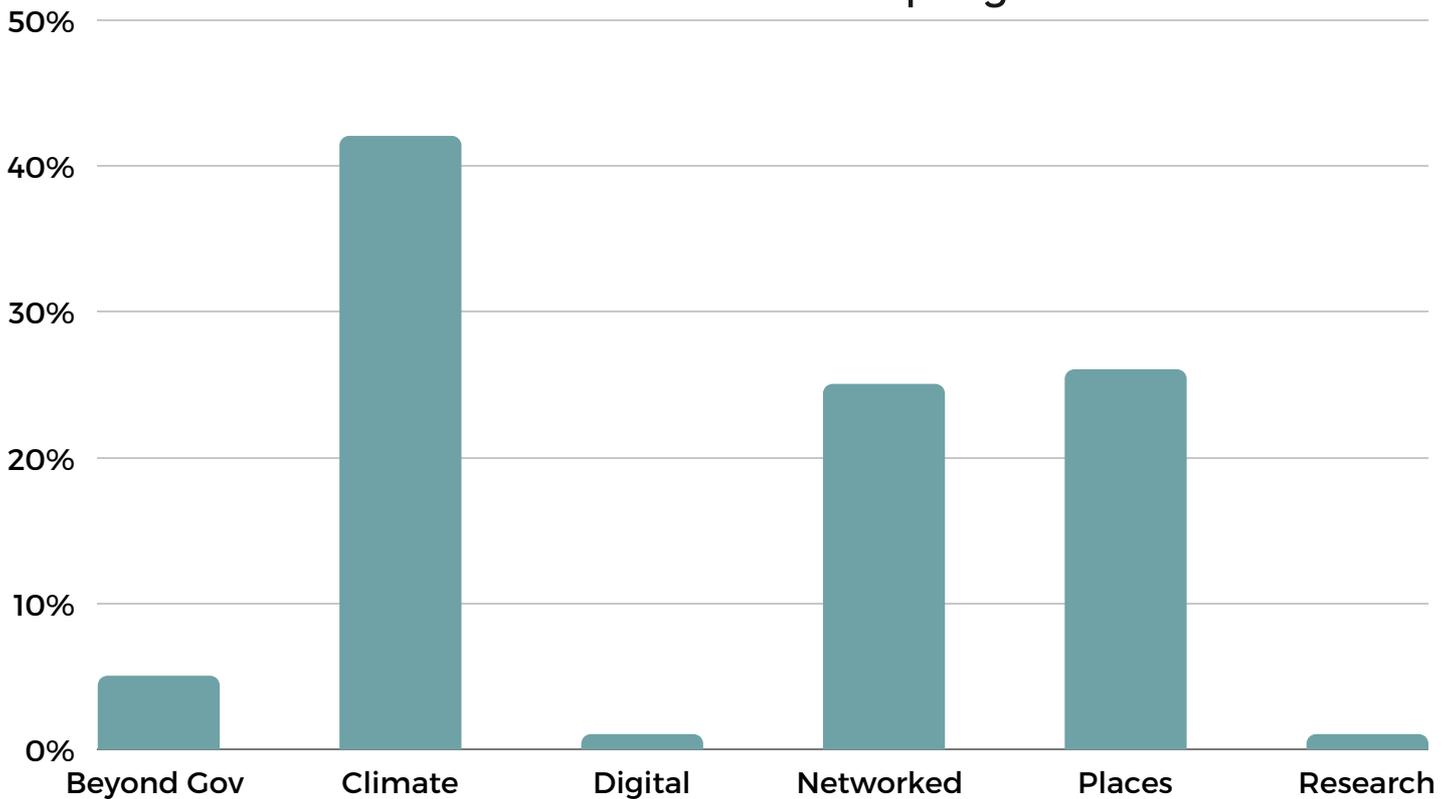


- ★ Staff locations
- ★ Project locations



Finances

Our revenue by programmes



Over the past operating year, we have been delivering and working on 31 projects. We've also been working on our very first research projects, which means Research & Design is gradually becoming a revenue centre, and no longer a cost centre.

We've been working around the budget structure of our programmes, which enables us to have a clear view of funding streams and budgeting.

While our we've seen a sustained financial growth, we're also facing the challenges of managing a growing organisation, seeking stability.

Read more on our funding on our ['who funds us'](#) website section.

Our Theory of Change

Part of wider democratic movements, we strive to strengthen today's democracies, as activists, creators of democratic spaces, and reformers.

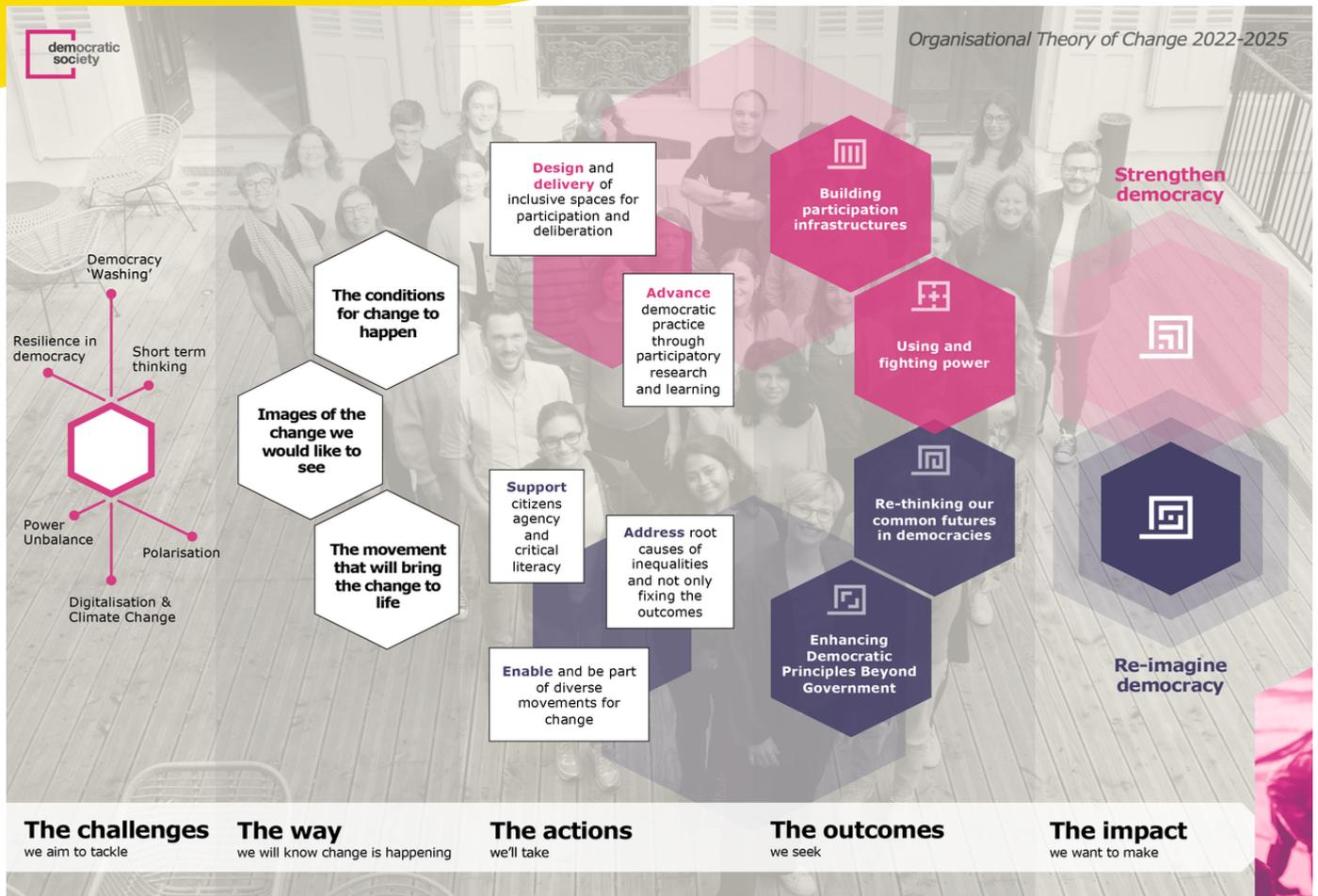
As innovators and connectors, we are helping build the infrastructure to re-imagine the future of democracy.

Launch of our Theory of Change

Launched in March 2022, our Theory of Change sets out our purpose, the logic behind what we are trying to do – what we mean when we say we want democracy to work, what the practical steps might be to get there, and what we are and will be doing to make them happen. It is giving our work a frame. It is based on assumptions – we are learning and experimenting as we go – and it was developed in collaboration with everyone in the organisation and some of our closer partners. And as the world changes, it will too.

Our approach to the outcomes we seek

Learning and experimenting as we go, setting the practical action that we and others will take to improve and strengthen democracy. Our Theory of Change is our contribution to today's argument.



Our Programmes

Launched in 2021, our five programmes give our work a frame, developing their own strategy while adhering to our Theory of Change

DEMOCRATIC PLACES

Developing thriving democratic places and spaces in people's immediate surroundings is some of the most important and impactful work we do. We support and facilitate citizens and organisations to take part in policymaking and governance, based on inclusive and rigorous, continuously improved methods.

Decisions by local governments strongly shape the lives of citizens and neighborhoods, and we strive to create the space, the opportunity, and the motivation for people to have their voices heard and to influence the decisions that affect them. We work with local civil servants and elected officials and communities to design transparent, participatory, and accountable processes. We work on capacity building, access and training in local civil society, private sector, and public services. We do this to ensure a local democratic culture can take hold, and help enable effective governance, individual wellbeing, and future transitions. Demsoc also delivers independent and collaborative research on the impact, evaluation and improvement of local participation, and is the foundation for much of our other work.



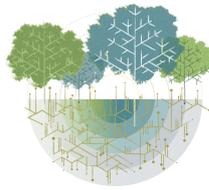
NETWORKED DEMOCRACY

Over the years, Demsoc has experienced a strong need for a connected European and global conversation, to address the cross-border and transitional needs we all face. In the Networked Democracy Programme, we seek to build a European Networked Architecture for Democracy, a permanent structure of trained and coordinated local partners following a common approach to participation and a strong alignment with the policy making processes in international institutions. We look to create a clear expectation that citizens will be involved in major forward-looking strategies of the EU, Council of Europe and UN – but also a proven record of facilitating that conversation in a transparent, rigorous, and credible way, across borders, languages and logistical challenges.

Through the Networked Democracy Programme, we also support and help grow our many local and national partners, to enable a European democratic space that is not reliant on political campaigns or time-limited projects but can be a lasting cultural and social architecture.

CLIMATE

Demsoc's Climate Programme focuses on democratising climate action and involving people in the transition to a just, resilient climate future.



We bring expertise in democratic and deliberative practice, research and innovation to strengthen governance. We're engaging cities and citizens on topics including climate-neutral smart cities, circular economy, mobility, energy transition, and nature-based solutions.

Since 2019 we have been working with over 14 cities across Europe, collaborating with governments at all levels, citizen-led initiatives, funders, researchers, and other NGOs to achieve climate resilience through democratic means, what we term 'climate democracy': taking climate action in ways that reinforce democracy.

DEMOCRACY BEYOND GOVERNMENT

Decision-making takes place all around us, and governance structures and power dynamics



are therefore present in every type of human organisation. For Demsoc, this means our principles of participation and democracy can also be applied outside of governments and public spaces, namely in private sector companies, labour unions, civil society organisations, political parties, and many others. In these cases, we seek to understand governance arrangements, find opportunities for people at every level to make their voice heard, for party strategies to be co-developed and widely carried, for supply chain relationships to be levelled out, and power and risk to be distributed more fairly, for board decisions to be informed by deliberative practices. This also means learning and practicing democracy at work.

The Democracy Beyond Government Programme seeks to create more impactful, inclusive and dynamic organisations by involving customers, members and employees in the strategic decision making of the organisations they are connected to.

DIGITAL & DEMOCRACY

The impact of the expansive, fast-changing digitalisation of our societies cannot be



CITIZEN
VOICES
FØR
DIGITAL
RIGHTS

overstated, and raises new issues for democracy to address. It is an area that holds many promises for participation as well, but only if governments and citizens develop the right expertise and support to ensure a digitalisation that benefits the most and not the least. In a widely researched field, Demsoc chooses to focus on the needs and priorities expressed by citizens themselves:

- Digital Democracy, new ways in which we can use technology to improve democracy
- Digital Rights, ensuring citizen voices are heard and that people have the tools to advocate for their own and their communities' digital rights
- Platform Governance, the wider impact that technology is having on our democracy and the quality of our (digital) public space to make sure better participatory governance and public oversights on these platforms are ensured.

Demsoc also provides research in this field, such as international comparisons of how digital is used in public services, including the response to COVID-19, but also proposal for innovative governance structures for data. The Digital Programme seeks to surface citizens' rights, needs and priorities for the digital era, and work with governments at all levels to provide a credible response to these.

Project Highlights



"This mission, the platform we're building, the services we'll offer, and everything we'll learn along the way will change our capacity to democratically address our most wicked problems. NZC demands our most thoughtful and ingenuitive approaches to enable the repair and creation of effective democratic infrastructure across 100+ European cities."
– Max Stearns, Systems Designer & Strategist



NetZeroCities kick-off and design stage

As part of a European consortium, we will be working towards inclusive, thriving, climate resilient and sustainable futures. Demsoc is leading the NetZeroCities work to support cities engage citizens and urban stakeholders. We will be using our experience in citizen engagement on climate to build just and inclusive approaches for and towards climate democracy on a bigger scale than ever before.

We recently released a Citizens' Engagement report where we make the case for cities to transform decision-making processes and engage citizens and urban stakeholders in meaningful participation to contribute towards this goal. Our aim is to challenge, inspire and support cities to reimagine the role of citizen engagement in their journeys to climate neutrality.

NetZeroCities will enable us to:

- Further develop our own thinking around climate democracy, and build on the latest research and extensive experience and expertise of our partners;
- Further establish, advance and actualize climate democracy and democratic climate practices in cities across Europe, within NetZeroCities and beyond.

Vienna Participatory Budget on Climate Action

In April 2022, the City of Vienna launched the Vienna Climate Team – Wiener Klimateam - A Participatory Budget on Climate Action that includes deliberative and innovative elements. Democratic Society will be designing and implementing the citizens panel responsible for making the decision which project and ideas receive funding.

Wiener Klimateam (Vienna Climate Team) is a participatory budget using innovative and deliberative elements. After the idea generation phase, all ideas that fulfill the requirements enter the co-creation phase where idea-givers are invited to collectively develop project proposals with experts, artists and city staff. The decision on which project proposals should be implemented is taken by a citizens' jury. Currently, the project is in a pilot phase: three pioneer districts were selected to test the process. If successful, the project may be scaled up to the whole city. Democratic Society supported the City of Vienna in designing the process of the participatory budget. The City's ambition is to use the project as a lever for governance innovation, deepening democracy and socially just climate actions.



"Mutig & unkonventionell bleiben. Danke für den Mut, uns zum Spielen zu bringen".

"Be bold and unconventional. Thank you for being so courageous to let us play!"

– Workshop participants



Waltham Forest – Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Summit

The London Borough of Waltham Forest are committed to tackling the scale of structural inequalities that residents face in the borough, initially through a multi-method engagement on the theme of Making a Living. Democratic Society have been working with Waltham Forest Council to bring communities together with key stakeholders to make clear recommendations for the council to act upon.

Great care and attention was given in the design and delivery of the summit, to make sure all participants were able to fully take part in-person. The summit members have reviewed evidence collected so far from a series of wider engagement of 400 hours with 550 residents, including digital surveys, mass outreach events, ethnographic research and 20 workshops with EDI target groups hosted by nine VCS organisations.

Renew Europe Discussion Tables

Since September 2021, Democratic Society has been working with Renew Europe Group at the European Parliament to bring together citizens from all over the EU to voice their priorities on the future of Europe over the next 70 years. These discussion tables took place in almost all the member states in two rounds before culminating in Strasbourg's High Level Event. A total of 350 citizens met in December 2021 in their own national tables simultaneously in a joint effort to decide on which priorities mattered to them the most to be taken up by EU decision makers. Guided by our pan-European network of facilitators, the three themes that received the most votes were: Climate Change, Rule of Law and a Stronger EU.

"For the first time in my life I have been able to participate to something that might have an impact. [...] An incredible pan-European experience. Engagement as a way to foster democracy absolutely works"
– Participant to the Renew Europe Discussion Tables



The Europe Challenge for Libraries

Libraries have a unique role in helping communities to meet the challenges of where we live, challenges that are common across Europe. Contributing to the building of public spaces and engaging in democratic conversations

Working with the European Cultural Foundation (ECF), we have established the pilot of the Europe Challenge – now working on the full first edition started in 2022. In the pilot year, invited seven libraries to work with their citizens and communities Bringing libraries and communities together to define their most pressing challenges, and supports them to find ways to tackle those.

"Involving the local community in the planning of activities offers you the possibility of networking with library users and local communities that you otherwise would not reach. Such cooperation means activating the local community, strengthening the importance of public space, addressing topics that are important for active citizenship and broadening perspectives by connecting different skills."
– Kranj City library

2022-2023 Streams of Work

What we foresee for the
year ahead

"Our recent experience as an evaluator of the Conference on the Future of Europe illustrated once more the need for a long-term vision to enable citizen participation on a European scale."

– Hanne Bastiaensen, Head of Democratic Infrastructure



Our work on democratic infrastructure

In more than ten years operating at European level the organisation has led a numerous amount of deliberative and participatory events: citizens' convention, tables of discussion, citizens assembly, people panels, follow-up committee, etc. Our recent experience as an evaluator of the Conference on the Future of Europe illustrated once more the need for a long-term vision to enable citizen participation on a European scale. To address some of the issues that we have encountered in our practice we have started recently designing a new approach that is based on the ambition to build and maintain democratic infrastructures through our work.

From where we stand, we see that current democratic infrastructures are many times ill suited, in poor repair, or yet to be imagined. By putting forward our idea of better democratic infrastructure our main objective is to ensure participatory democratic process that embrace the long-term, both in the sense of allowing democracy to be enacted beyond eventful moments of deliberative or participatory processes, and of providing the resources, the skills and the attitudes that are needed to address democracy myopia. We aim to achieve this by building networks of diverse communities of practices, ideas and actions at different scale, as well as by promoting the sharing of expertise and the dissemination of participatory methods.

Our membership offer relaunch

Demsoc is a membership organization. We will be officially re-launching our membership offer in 2022, aiming at creating a network, building a platforms for encounters and fostering discussions. Membership is fully in line with our Theory of Change and our infrastructure work and the outcomes we seek.

We've been designing an offer and setting ambitious objectives to make sure we design a space that allows us and our members to re-think our shared futures in democracies. We've built a test and learn approach for the first six months, which will enable our existing and new members to shape membership at Demsoc with us.



Providing a membership for Demsoc is our way of bringing people together, to share experiences and to enable discussion and inspiration. Its a way of helping build democratic 'infrastructure'
– Léna Ndoye, Project Officer



NetZeroCities

While NetZeroCities is still in early stages, we have clear objectives as to what we're trying to achieve as a team at Demsoc:

- Build weaving capacity and an approach to learning ecosystem in cities. Cultivate learning capacities across different levels: individual level (self-awareness), groups (deep listening and dialogue), organisations (from centralized to networks), and larger systems.
- Enable transformative spaces: inspire city actors to act more cohesively and purposefully. By creating a space for authentic communication, learning and a relational approach, enable actors learn to see different possibilities for our shared-future we can "co-create" together.
- Support the conditions for long-term collective action for which all parts of the city-system need to be involved in the transition towards climate neutrality.

"By deepening our understanding and practices, we will enable and support a holistic leadership capacity to take collective action and form a pro-active impact network able to support and scale up emergent and evolving transition democratic initiatives."

– Adriana O'Phelan, NetZeroCities Lead

Beyond the Rules 2

Beyond the Rules is a collective enquiry into systemic governance and the inequalities people experience in relation to decision making and power structures in organisations. We also explore how, even in the world of 'social good' these inequalities are re-produced and replicated in structures, governance and performance management relationships we create in our work.

Beyond the Rules has developed from a single project into a common core of questions that underpin a set of connected issues, each of which we have investigated:

- Open governance
- Better funding
- Participative culture

In phase 2.0 Demsoc proposes to continue our focus on open governance and participative culture. A core question for Demsoc is how do processes, practices and power relations need to change to involve those who are farthest from participation in spaces of organisational practice and delivery? Developing better answers to this question, and putting them into practice, is at the heart of our approach to this phase of work.

Building on the deep dives we have held during earlier stages of Beyond the Rules, we will work with a small number of organisations and one place to develop a programme which will include:

- Relationship building, understanding their internal and external context, setting the challenge
- Action learning for key participants in the organisation/place and their partners, and co-design of the approach.
- Implementation and exploration of alternative governance or working arrangements
- Tailored work with the organisation/place



"How do processes, practices and power relations need to change to involve those who are farthest from participation in spaces of organisational practice and delivery? Developing better answers to this question, and putting them into practice, is at the heart of our approach to this phase of work."

– Paula Black, Network and Delivery Manager



Engaged. Independent. Non-partisan.

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