

WORKING SESSIONS

Theme 1

Empowerment and participation: key elements for democracy and social cohesion

Parallel Working Session 1A

Thursday 13 October

2.30 p.m. – 5.30 p.m.

Coffee break mid-afternoon

Promoting and enabling broad democratic engagement by empowering all members of society

People's ability and motivation to engage in public affairs requires a range of skills, resources and opportunities. Modern democracies should facilitate the capacity of citizens and non-citizens to acquire the social, cultural and political capital required to enable them to navigate the institutional framework, concretise their rights and participate in democratic processes rooted in a process of reforms and power-sharing.

Associations and NGOs representing minority and vulnerable groups play an important role in aggregating consensus and reducing social conflict. However, they must avoid exacerbating fragmentation.

There is also growing concern with self-exclusion which concerns both vulnerable groups, who cannot imagine themselves as part of the decision-making processes, and the middle classes who choose to opt out of using certain public services.

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How can policy makers and civil society organisations facilitate the acquisition of the necessary skills, resources and opportunities by all members of society, including the most vulnerable, thereby ensuring that their voice is heard and their needs are taken into greater account?

How can access to social rights be made more robust in order to reduce systemic disempowerment and exclusion? Is self-exclusion from the use of public services a threat to democratic wellbeing and progress?

Is there a need to adapt accepted structures, standards and practices to better address the notion of "rights and responsibilities" on the part of all?

What about the participation of minorities and migrants, including "new minorities", especially those originating from "circular migration" (i.e. migrants coming to a country to work and returning home later)?

(See details on speakers in programme)

Parallel working session 1B

Friday 14 October
9.30 a.m. – 12.30 p.m.
Coffee break mid-morning

Enhancing civic dialogue and social solidarity for the well-being of all

Despite unprecedented overall levels of wealth, the economic and social disparities between rich and vulnerable populations in Europe are growing. These trends are weakening the human bonds of solidarity and shared responsibility, thereby threatening concepts of welfare and social, environmental and intergenerational justice.

Civil society plays a crucial role in building social sustainability by facilitating social integration and cohesion as well as raising awareness of the long-term consequences of policy decisions.

Innovative ways of thinking about inclusion and participation, for example active citizenship and shared social responsibility, highlight the interdependencies and co-responsibilities of all elements of society.

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How should participatory processes be structured in order to facilitate consensus that seeks the common good above the advancement of special interests?

How can processes and practices which foster reciprocity, solidarity and co-operation be further developed and implemented in order to consolidate social capital, intergenerational solidarity and connected communities?

How can active citizenship be given greater substance and meaning?

(See details on speakers in programme)

Theme 2

Democratic institutions, active citizenship and social cohesion

Parallel working session 2A

Thursday 13 October
2.30 p.m. – 5.30 p.m.
Coffee break mid-afternoon

Creating and improving processes for participation by all members of society

A modern democracy aims to enhance the mandate of the political actors by ensuring that the entire population is involved in decision shaping in ways that complement democratic electoral processes.

Innovatory participatory and direct democracy structures, for example consultative assemblies and citizens' juries, have been successfully introduced, particularly at the local level. If such forums are to be truly democratic, people's participation needs to be closely interlinked with a sense of co-responsibility.

At a time when access to social rights, i.e. education, health, social protection, employment and housing, are deteriorating because of the economic crisis, it is particularly challenging and important that all members of society, including the most vulnerable, are involved in participation processes.

Furthermore, services are increasingly organised in such a way that users are required to make consumer-type choices, for example in selecting schools or hospitals. If public service offer is to retain its democratic ideal, all users, including vulnerable consumers, should know how to access and shape services.

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How can participatory structures and processes be developed to offer new forms and spaces for participation, thereby fostering social cohesion and sustainable democracy?

What are the linkages between participation across different levels of governance and what are the requirements for participatory approaches to be scaled up beyond the community and local level?

How can the democratic nature of participatory structures and their representativeness be assured and demonstrable?

How to ensure that marginalised populations, who may not be citizens of the country they live in, are not excluded from political processes?

The internet and electronic democracy offer unprecedented opportunities for people to participate in decision-making processes. How can we make certain that these and other emerging tools are used to truly strengthen democracy, rather than to reinforce the voice of already prevailing groups?

(See details on speakers in programme)

Parallel working session 2B

Friday 14 October
9.30 a.m. – 12.30 p.m.
Coffee break mid-morning

Creating and improving structures for sustainable and cohesive democratic societies

A sustainable society fosters democratic practices and processes within the institutions and organisations which frame people's daily lives. The regulation and management of institutions and services should assist the development of organisations which are responsive, adaptable and accountable.

Democratic governance of institutions also requires that the people managing and working in them understand the importance of transparency and openness, the need for dialogue and partnerships, and the relevance of intercultural issues.

The watchdog and monitoring role of civil society is also key in fostering the democratic functioning of institutions.

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How can institutions enhance the awareness of their staff of the importance of accountability, openness and intercultural competence, and build closer partnerships with civil society and with their user groups?

What constitutes an 'educated user' in relation to democratic structures and processes (including public services) and how can a situation be reached in which all users are fully informed about their choices and are given options that are appropriate to their situation?

How can participative processes help extend democratic practices into everyday life, for example the workplace?

How can civil society find the resources it needs to modernise and become more participative?

(See details on speakers in programme)