

Citizen Engagement Practices That Promote Justice, Mutual Learning, and Collaboration in Situated Climate Adaptation Initiatives

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Stakeholder and Citizen Engagement: Lessons Learnt and Steps Ahead

What: During the course of two workshops, experts in citizen and stakeholder engagement from the A Gathering Place to Co-Design and Co-Creat Adaptation (AGORA) project met to identify, debate, and situate practices for engaging stakeholders and citizens in climate adaptation activities. Two interactive meetings were designed using experience emerging from research and implementation activities within AGORA to identify causal links between practices and outcomes for stakeholder and citizen engagement. Participants were challenged to identify which practices enable or hinder the realization of four specific outcomes and when these practices should be carried out during engagement activities.

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1. Introduction—Citizen engagement’s pathway to climate adaptation

There is a long history of environmental decision-making processes that seek to involve and engage local citizens (Wagenet and Pfeffer 2007). Closely linked to debates around the practice of deliberative democracy, much of the work in this area emerged from early criticism of the instrumentalisation of citizens or the superficial engagement mechanisms that “consult” citizens rather than empower them to support environmental decision-making. In parallel, wider engagement can bring new perspectives and lead to better-informed decision-making processes. Similar to experiences elsewhere, within the European Union (EU) over the last decade, climate action planning has increasingly included deeper forms of public participation to support ideation and, to a lesser extent, decision-making, yet these remain relatively rare and research in this area is still required (Huttunen et al. 2022). Reflecting the strong bias toward climate mitigation over adaptation in EU, national, and local policy, most of these planning and engagement activities have focused on mitigation-related issues, like the transition to sustainable energy systems (for a recent review, see Revez et al. 2022). Going forward, there are likely to be far more adaptation-related examples as policy mandates increasingly require public participation, for example, the EU’s Mission on Climate Adaptation “test[s] integrated solutions that can achieve the vision of climate resilience by 2050 with an emphasis on citizen engagement” [European Commission (EC) 2021] and all related funding requires the establishment of “mechanisms to ensure the meaningful engagement of citizens and local stakeholders.”¹

Climate adaptation action can clearly build on and learn from experiences developed in other social and environmental settings, yet it also, in many ways, is sufficiently unique to warrant tailoring these practices to adaptation contexts.

As part of the AGORA project,² 13 different research and practitioner groups are collaborating to theorise, evaluate, test, and scale up good practices for engaging citizens. Project partners are based in 9 countries and bring a wide range of stakeholder and citizen engagement experience across diverse purposes and a variety of contexts.

One of our initial contributions to the AGORA project is to compile adaptation-relevant experiences in citizen engagement initiatives (CEIs) and distill helpful practices to achieve specific goals that relate to better quality engagement (e.g., accounting for power or generating mutual learning).

Following discussion and iteration, and based on the work of Chambers (2003), our working definition of an adaptation-relevant CEI is one that

must

- include discourse with other citizens: actions of talking, discussing, debating, and/or deliberating, expressly considering “talking” as a form of participation
- focuses on local, national, or international issues of public concern, which for AGORA specifically refers to climate change adaptation action

¹ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe/eu-missions-citizen-engagement-activities_en (Accessed 30 April 2024).

² <https://adaptationagora.eu/>.

can

- be linked to civic and political processes
- occur through a variety of media (not only face-to-face exchanges)

Reviewing academic literature and practitioner databases (Baulenas and Pickard 2024), we found a proliferation of methodologies, methods, practices, and tools to engage citizens in climate change adaptation. However, among this body of work, relatively little has thus far sought to understand the impact of different citizen engagement practices in climate adaptation projects (Hügel and Davies 2020). In addition, like for CEIs convened for other issues, guidance for adaptation-related CEIs is usually presented in a general way rather than engaging with the unique attributes of the broad universe of distinct methodologies, methods, and practices documented by the various CEI databases. Even fewer works in this area seek to define a “good” or “bad” engagement, much less how specific practices can achieve positive or negative outcomes or effects. Nonetheless, our summary analysis of work that did engage with these questions suggested that two considerations are particularly important to understanding how successful a CEI was: the context within which the CEI exists and the decisions taken at each step of the engagement process.

To take advantage of the diversity of experiences and expertise within the AGORA partners, the meetings below were designed as an interim step in the iterative development of good practices for adaptation-related CEIs, falling between our literature and database review in 2023 and a series of in-depth interviews with CEI experts during summer 2024.

2. Meeting details

a. Part 1: Generating stakeholder practices. The first meeting was held online via Microsoft Teams in November 2023 and was attended by 16 people. The main aspect of the work presented below was derived from facilitated interactive workshops where participants worked in parallel groups to identify practices carried out at different stages of engagement in order to achieve different aims. The first meeting began with presentations from the different groups leading in engagement research and practice within AGORA to set the scene and introduce the wider group to existing areas of knowledge (covering best practices from literature, experiences in AGORA’s four pilot regions, and policy-level barriers and levers to facilitate engagement). We asked presenters to focus on engagement of stakeholders more broadly, to also include experiences in coproduction processes where citizens were not present. The guiding questions sought to understand the evolution of our collective knowledge, asking where we started, what we had learned in the first year of the project, and what and how we wanted to continue developing out knowledge around CEIs in the years to come.

Following the presentations, participants were asked to divide themselves by choosing a “team” in which to continue. This step aimed to avoid the generalisations common in the literature with each team focusing on a specific goal of a CEI. The four goals used were the four pillars of the recently developed AGORA Evaluation Framework (Englund et al. 2023):

- 1) Producing relevant knowledge and action adapted to local needs
- 2) Achieving just representation and participation
- 3) Generating mutual learning
- 4) Producing improved collaboration

Noting our findings from the literature review that suggested practices that can affect the outcomes of citizen engagement can be divided into activities, methods, and decisions

TABLE 1. Number of good (supporting) and bad (hampering) practices gathered per goal per stage.

		Practices per goal							
		Relevant knowledge		Just representation		Mutual learning		Improved collaboration	
		Good	Bad	Good	Bad	Good	Bad	Good	Bad
Stage	Context	11	11	7	5	12	7	8	2
	Pre	8	6	20	2	9	6	5	3
	During	14	8	17	3	11	7	7	2
	Post	9	5	1	0	8	5	6	4
	Total	42	30	45	10	40	25	26	11

taking place in three main phases and the importance of context or purpose of the CEI, we intentionally divided the discussion into the following four sections and asked each team to move through them sequentially:

- 1) The context and purpose of the CEI
- 2) Pre-engagement (planning and preparing)
- 3) On-the-day engagement (how activities are carried out)
- 4) Postengagement (evaluation and next steps)

For each team, in each stage, participants were asked to provide examples of good or bad practices that would likely support or hamper the realization of their team's goal. The discussion was actively facilitated to focus on specific practices with 10–15 min provided to each stage. We collected responses on an online whiteboard.

To facilitate deliberation and to attempt to ensure a broad range of views and experiences with fewer than expected attendees, we decided to split the online group only among the first two teams. Thus, at the end of the first online workshop, we had suggested practices for two of the four goals and agreed that we would add examples to the remaining goals' whiteboards individually/asynchronously before the second meeting. Table 1 shows the number of inputs provided to each goal/stage.

b. Part 2: From stakeholder to citizens. The second meeting was held in person with 34 people in January 2024 in Zaragoza on the sidelines of the AGORA general assembly. Having gathered a large number (229) of practices for engaging stakeholders via the online whiteboards, our next planned step was to use our meeting in Zaragoza to convert these stakeholder-relevant practices to citizen-relevant practices. However, having lightly edited the responses to enhance clarity and focus on practices, a preliminary analysis suggested considerable repetition and—in the authors' opinion at least—many practices that would be better located in other goals or engagement stages. We thus began the in-person meeting with a sorting exercise.

The group was again divided into teams reflecting the project's four goals. This time, we purposively mixed participants from different parts of the AGORA project and different partner institutions within the teams. Each team was given a hard copy of the practices for each stage of the engagement process for their goal suggested via the online whiteboard. The practices were printed on removable cards that were lightly stuck onto boards. Each team was then asked to carry out three tasks.

First, each team had to decide whether each practice was most closely related to their team's goal, or if it would be better suited in another team. At the end of this round, practices deemed more applicable to another team's goal were passed to that team. In general, this was

straightforward, but in a few cases, practices circulated between the teams, suggesting they may be relevant to more than one goal.

Teams were then asked to identify the most appropriate stage of the engagement process for each of the practices (both those they had kept and those that they had been given by other teams), collating those that seemed similar and/or repetitions. This generated our second version of stakeholder-engagement practices.

Finally, teams were asked to consider the relevance of each stakeholder-engagement practice for engaging with citizens. A practice could be

- directly relevant, in which case teams ticked the box
- relevant with modifications, in which case teams wrote on the card the required modifications
- not relevant, in which case teams put a cross in the box

1) RESULTS. This generated a version of good and bad citizen engagement practices that can be carried out at different points of the engagement process to support or hinder the realization of the four key pillars of what is an “effective” CEI for the AGORA project. Most stakeholder-focused practices were considered directly transferable to engaging citizens. However, in some cases, respondents emphasized the need to consider citizens’ as a unique group (i.e., to tailor even more specifically to citizens’ needs and capacities).

Following the workshop, we edited the responses to streamline the suggested guidelines. Recognizing that good and bad practices often “spoke” to each other (i.e., good practices were often the opposite versions of bad practices), the main change we made was to convert the unhelpful practices into positive recommendations (e.g., “sufficient” instead of “a lack of” resources). These were then edited for clarity and collated, though we did not move practices between goals/stages. This revised version of the good practices for the four pillars of CEIs in the AGORA project is presented in Table S1 in the online supplemental material.

2) NEXT STEPS. The list of good practices is a living document that we will continue to develop over the coming year via further engagement with the AGORA community, an online expert survey, key informant interviews, an online webinar, and presentations at academic and stakeholder meetings. We are keen to represent many and diverse views. Thus, if you would like to share your experience with adaptation-related CEIs in Europe, please contact the authors.

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