

# Going out of the town hall

## The benefits and how they can be achieved

### Key points:

- This policy brief explores new ways of engagement between local governments and bottom-up initiatives addressing the complex challenges facing local communities
- Getting in touch with initiatives helps local governments to be an active player in their community's change dynamics
- Embracing characteristics of the 'community arena' approach can be fruitful for local governments and engaged citizens to jointly develop pathways towards more sustainable communities
- In open-ended processes without a pre-set agenda, actors should meet as individuals—not as representatives of their institutions
- Long-term visions can unify even diverse groups, generate new ideas and experiments and serve as a compass for the daily work

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### HOW CAN WE UNLEASH THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES? —THE INCONTEXT PROJECT

In an exemplary manner, InContext has identified framework conditions that enable societal transitions towards an environmentally sound, economically successful, and culturally diverse future. The goal was to better understand how sustainable behaviour is shaped by an interplay between external factors (e.g. social norms, policies, and infrastructure) and internal conditions (e.g. values and beliefs). Research was carried out in four case studies and three pilot projects: The case studies looked at existing cases of alternative practices in energy and food consumption. The pilot projects developed an innovative action-research method, the 'community arena', and applied it in three local communities. The processes aimed at empowering individuals to develop a long-term vision for a sustainable community and to take immediate action.

The three-year project was carried out by Ecologic Institute, Dutch Research Institute for Transitions (DRIFT), ICLEI- Local Governments for Sustainability, Institute for Agriculture and Forest Environment of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN), Sustainable Europe Research Institute (SERI), Delft University of Technology (TU-Delft), Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research (UFZ) and L'Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB).

# 1 The times they are a-changing

Further reading: [Alternative collective consumption and production niches. Case Study Synthesis Report](#)

Change is happening in local communities. From urban gardening and networks of sharing to community-owned wind farms: citizens' initiatives emerge all over Europe in a quest to find new answers to today's pressing challenges. The aims of the engagement might be very concrete—revaluing a deserted inner city or increasing demand for locally-farmed food—, but the topics are linked to the wider societal challenges of an ageing society in a long-lasting economic downturn, of a global society which puts enormous pressures on the natural environment and still remains deeply unjust.

On the other side, we have local governments and their growing experience with participation processes over the last decades. In these processes local governments often are in the driving seat: They propose the agenda, invite the participants and define the process, and sometimes even desired outcomes, e.g. to gain consent for an infrastructure project or get feedback on city planning. Other participation procedures are wider in approach, such as Local Agenda 21 processes started in many communities since the 1990s. It is not easy to organise successful public participation processes. Rows of empty seats in public meetings and 'the usual suspects' bringing up the same issues over and over again are familiar to all those responsible for implementing participation on the ground.

This policy brief explores new ways for engaging with local actors who are already working on or want to tackle the sustainability challenges facing their local communities. It builds on the experiences gathered during the InContext project. In this research, the team observed four existing initiatives of alternative ways to produce and consume food and energy and actively started three local transition processes, referred to as 'community arenas'. Building on the principles of transition management, researchers worked with engaged citizens to define a long-term vision and agenda for a sustainable community. Additional insights come from intense exchange with local government representatives in three 'Reality-check Workshops' organised during the course of the project.

## 2 The fun and benefits of meeting people

### WHY MIGHT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS LIKE TO GET IN TOUCH WITH THE INITIATIVES THAT DEVELOP WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITY?

Local, bottom-up initiatives contribute to shaping societal transformation. These initiatives are sometimes sparked by the wish to contribute to the participants' or the community's wellbeing, at other times they are an expression of the growing dissatisfaction with current production and consumption systems. In some cases, the initiatives and projects develop in co-operation with local government representatives, but often they emerge without any support or acknowledgement from the municipality.

When faced with this type of initiatives, local governments can take the role of bystanders, passengers, or drivers. They can simply leave them alone; they can try to steer or institutionalise the activities; or they can engage in constructive dialogue on

Cooperating with citizen initiatives helps the local government to stay relevant and be an active player in the ongoing change dynamics

eyelevel. The InContext research suggests that there are mutual benefits to engaging in dialogue.

## THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AS BYSTANDER

Initiatives are always impacted by public authorities

All local efforts to start change in the community are influenced by government decisions. Even if they develop without public support, the groups are still bound by regulations set at the local, national or even European level. For example, the biodynamic farm studied in InContext received European farm subsidies and had to comply with the rules that come with these. Similarly, the community-led energy investments are subject to national and local planning procedures and many other rules.

In addition to regulation, it is also the availability and the use of public space which impacts local initiatives. Will agricultural land be turned into building ground or will it be available for organic farming? Will a community centre be maintained as a meeting place or will the building be sold to private investors? Without communicating, the local government does not learn about the challenges that these initiatives face, nor will the groups receive support when needed.

Further reading: Empirical case study report

Some initiatives do not feel the need to cooperate with the local government or might even try to avoid it out of fear to run into conflict. In these cases, a sensitive approach, and sometimes even mindful non-interference is advisable. The focus should be on exchanging on eyelevel and building trust.

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT AS CO-PILOT

The co-operation of local governments and bottom-up initiatives can be beneficial for both sides

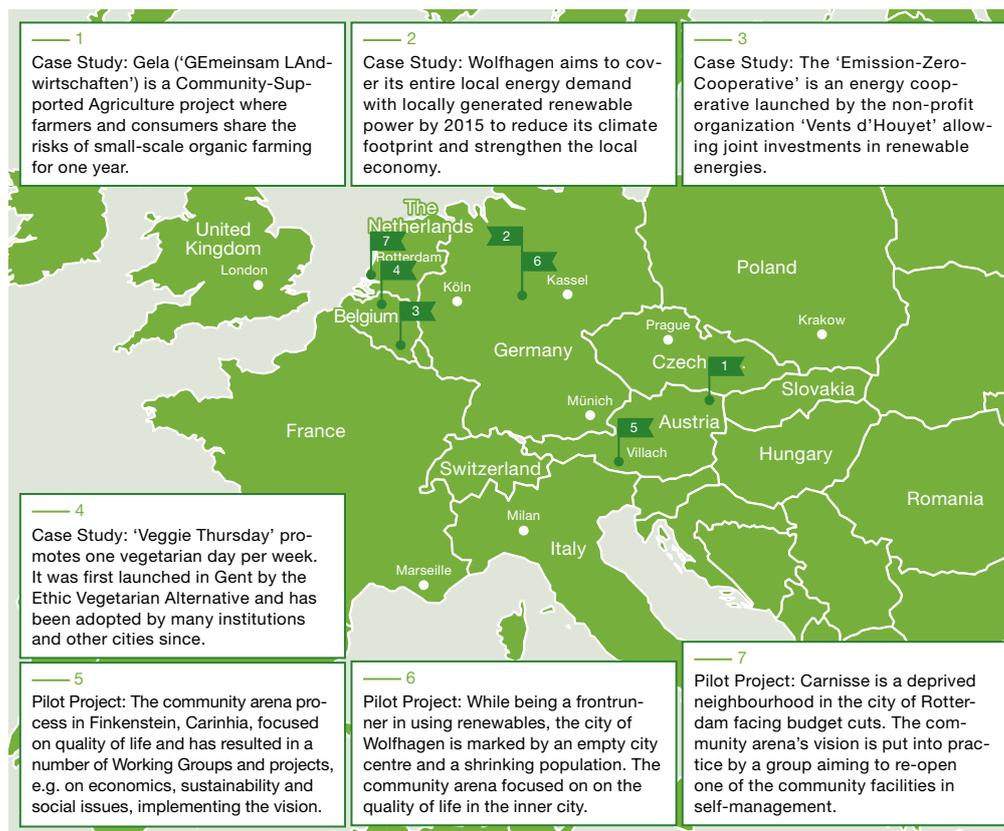
Getting in touch with bottom-up projects can help local governments to learn about the bigger societal changes and how they might be addressed in their local community. Many of the initiatives are in line with the long-term goals of national governments, e.g. initiatives for sustainable food production support national health and environmental targets. Thus local governments can get fresh ideas how to take these goals forward. Furthermore the local government can gain ‘insider knowledge’ about the needs of their community which might have gone unnoticed previously. In short, exchange with initiatives for alternative living can help local governments to be an active player in the ongoing change dynamics in their community, and thus allows them to stay relevant.

Further reading: The community arena. Methodological guidelines

While dialogue and co-operation can take many forms, one option for a more structured process is the ‘community arena’. First and foremost, the arena processes aim at empowering the citizens to develop a long-term vision for their community and to identify fields for immediate action. The ‘community arena’ builds on the principles of transition management, which, in turn, was developed to shape transitions towards sustainability. The underlying assumption is that today’s society faces a number of complex problems that are linked to value decisions, subject to uncertainty and involve many actors (also called ‘wicked problems’). The understanding is that these challenges will only be successfully addressed if we achieve fundamental structural and cultural change.

The following sections discuss a few key characteristics of the ‘community arena’ approach and how they can be fruitfully applied when local governments engage with bottom-up initiatives.

Figure 1:  
Overview of InContext pilot projects  
and case studies



### 3 Out of the town hall

Shared engagement comes with shared power

When local governments come together with engaged citizens, all actors should work collaboratively, bringing their respective insights in. Researchers of sustainability transitions assume that shared engagement comes with shared power. In working towards sustainability, local governments should not decide early on a limited agenda, but rather embrace the diversity in their municipality and keep the options in the process open. This way the citizens can bring up the issues considered most relevant for the community—rather than the local government predefining them.

In the InContext pilot projects the processes started with an open agenda. The participants of the process—mainly citizens—set the priorities and themes for discussion. While the approach left room for the citizens to discuss without the interference of local governments, there was a regular exchange between the participants and the local government at a later stage.

#### TAKING A VACATION FROM ROLES IN A PROTECTED SPACE

Change starts with people, institutions can follow

In more traditional participation formats local government actors and citizens are usually heavily bound by their assigned roles. These roles often include certain expectations of the other actors and shared beliefs and assumptions within one group, be it the local authority, the scientific community or the local initiatives. In order to find innovative solutions, using new forms of participation a different type of cooperation is needed. It requires stepping out of the traditional definition of one's role.

To create opportunities for actors to reflect on their beliefs and assumptions including those connected to a specific role, it is helpful to exchange in a setting of respect, facilitated by a skilled moderator. The basic aim of this conversation is to allow for the creation of a shared understanding of what the problem is and where the community wants to go. The creation of shared purpose and the search for custom-fit solutions may follow eventually.

In the community arena people meet as individuals, including their values, emotions and hopes on one side and their institutional environments on the other. It is a 'protected space' in a figurative, but also in a physical sense: meetings should take place on neutral ground—out of the town hall! Provided that it is useful in the local context and both facilitators and participants are comfortable with it, this setting can also allow exploring the underlying needs of participants that lead to certain behaviour (referred to as the 'inner context'). One option is to introduce step-by-step questions like "Why is this important for you?".

Austria's first community-supported agriculture scheme



Organisers should be explicit about what they aim to achieve with the process and where the limitations are

### ALIGNING EXPECTATIONS

In many participation processes, the objective, the type of participation and the possible outcome are not clear to participants. Ambiguities about these basic questions can become a source of misunderstandings and frustrations. To avoid this, expectations should be aligned at the very beginning of the process.

Organisers or moderators should clarify expectations towards all basic elements of the process, including the 'who' (stakeholders, active citizens, politicians or local authorities), the 'why' (information, planning, legitimization of decisions or empowerment), the 'where' and 'how'. Even if this seems obvious, the general experience with participatory processes demonstrates that expectations are rarely explicitly addressed. Often actors act upon their individual assumptions and believe that they are generally shared. All parties should therefore openly discuss potential limitations of their commitment, especially with regard to time and financial constraints. E.g., in the community arena processes started within InContext, moderators informed participants at the beginning if and to what extent there would be money available to put some of the participants' ideas into practice.

**Creating a common vision for the community has a strong guiding and unifying power**

Further reading: Pilot project reports for year 1, 2 and 3

Image from the vision document for Carnisse

**THE GUIDING POWER OF VISIONS**

The challenges that municipalities face and local initiatives try to counter are by their nature complex and have no pre-defined solution. Rather, possible solution(s) need to be explored in a cooperative learning process, allowing for trial and error and for adaptation along the way. There can be no doubt that this journey cannot always be smooth, no matter how well the parties understand each other's position, how well the process is moderated or how clear everybody is about the process. At times people will disagree on what would be good for the community.

In the community arena processes of InContext, creating a vision of how the community should look like in the long term has helped to unify the groups. A long-term vision puts the actions of the citizens and activists involved into a bigger picture. It allows putting oneself at a place in the future (e.g. 2050) and look back towards the present, reflecting what would have to have happened for this future to become reality, a process known as 'backcasting'. The actions identified in this way can then become immediate 'next steps'. As opposed to conventional policy processes that often only span one electoral period, this shared vision of a common future enables people to move beyond their immediate interests. Furthermore, it allows bringing in long-term goals, such as sustainability, which are not easily implemented in day-to-day actions.



**4 Challenges and constraints**

**QUESTIONS OF DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY**

How public decisions are being taken and to what extent decision-making is representative are core questions of democracy. Public authorities might question the legitimacy of local initiatives to shape their immediate environment. Elected leaders or public servants may experience local initiatives in an ambivalent way: on the one hand they might want to support engaged citizens. On the other, they might see

local initiatives as a threat to the self-concept of being a representative body that holds special expertise and is elected to fulfil public duties.

Questions of democratic legitimacy are important and should not be swept aside. However, the local initiatives do not perform public duties. Instead, they address issues that have been overlooked or step into voids left by a retreating local (or national) government. By getting in touch with these initiatives, local governments can widen their thematic scope and can find better ways of performing their tasks and responding to the community's needs.

Public participation processes, including transition management, are never fully representative. However, if they are understood as an arena for generating ideas, rather than a decision-making body, acceptability can be more easily secured. Organisers, facilitators and participants should discuss the question of democratic legitimacy and define a procedure for sharing the process's results with the wider community and—if needed—how concrete proposals can be taken to representative decision-making bodies like the city council. In the arena processes started within InContext, for example, the arena groups presented their long-term vision in public hearings and invited feedback from fellow citizens.

### ACCOUNTABILITY FOR OPEN-ENDED PROCESSES

Public authorities are held accountable for their actions and the quality of public services delivered. Elected representatives are evaluated by voters, while administrators are accountable to their superiors. As a consequence, public authorities have an interest to set aims and to demonstrate that public money and staff time will be invested to achieve these as efficiently as possible. Even in cases where no public money is spent—or where the funds for the initiative come from other levels such as the EU—public authorities may be held accountable for the choice of whom to involve or support.

By contrast, many local initiatives or transition management processes are much more process oriented. The aim of transition management e.g. is to open space for engaged citizens to create a shared vision and to implement their ideas of how the quality of life can be improved. This process is by definition open-ended and experimental in character. Therefore, it is neither desirable nor possible to predefine in advance, for what concrete purposes public money will be spent. In addition, aiming for a sustainability transition tends to be more time-consuming and therefore more expensive (at least at face value) than implementing ordinary top-down approaches. Local authorities who engage in costly processes without direct control will be held accountable for their actions.

To justify their decisions, local authorities need to point to the advantages of open-ended processes based on best-practice examples in other communities. It could be a helpful exercise for both, local initiatives and public authorities, to jointly discuss potential benefits of open-ended processes and communicate them to a wider audience. The relative unpredictability of open processes may lead to new insights and solutions, which would have been impossible to achieve with ordinary expert planning processes. A part of this is creating space for failure to learn from mistakes. While open-ended processes are not a solution for everything, their experimental character certainly favours learning and empowerment of citizens.

## 5 The power of trustful relationships

All bottom-up initiatives are different, and the local government needs to define its role depending on the individual case. Often however, the cooperation will be wished for by the initiative and beneficial for the local government. Transition management processes, such as the ‘community arena’ developed in InContext, allow for new forms of engagement to address the pressing, fundamental challenges of today’s communities. For these processes to be fruitful, they need to be designed in a thoughtful way. The inclusion of the ‘engaged citizens’ is a pre-requisite for the process to flourish. The cooperation of the engaged citizens and the local government needs to be on equal footing, each bringing in their knowledge, values and ideas. The nature of the relationship in transition management approaches is thus fundamentally different from the traditional forms of governance dominated by expert-knowledge and top-down policy making. It is characterised by respect, non-directivity, openness of agenda and creativity.

### GLOSSARY

Community arena	The community arena is a co-creation tool for sustainable behaviour by local communities integrating insights from transition management, backcasting and social psychology. Through collaboratively working on understanding the current challenges, envisioning a common future, identifying pathways and starting the first experiments to put these into practice, this tool supports a multi-actor learning process in the transition towards sustainability.
Local initiative (or niche)	A (partially) protected space for experimenting with innovative practices which could produce new ways of meeting social needs. These ‘alternative’ consumption and production niches emerge in partial contradiction to the ‘usual’ way of consuming and producing.
Transition	A transition can be defined as a gradual, continuous process of change where the structural character of a society (or a complex sub-system of society) transforms. Transitions are not uniform nor is the transition process deterministic: there are large differences in the scale of change and the period over which it occurs. Transitions involve a range of possible development paths, whose direction, scale and speed government policy can influence, but never entirely control.
Transition management	Transition Management aims to deal with persistent societal problems by proposing an innovative governance concept based on complexity theory, social theories, and insights from the field of governance. Transition management focuses on creating space for and organizing a societal searching and learning process.
Sustainability transition	Sustainability transition describes a special kind of transition, a radical transformation towards a sustainable society as a response to a number of persistent problems confronting contemporary modern societies.
Vision	A vision expresses a desirable future.

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