Democracy Lab: Call for city challenges - guidelines

Barcelona, 17-19 September 2024

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About Nets4Dem

Nets4Dem is a novel initiative to foster collaboration among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers across Europe to enhance civic deliberation, participation, and democratic innovation. Recognising the pressing need for democratic renewal in the face of challenges such as citizen dissatisfaction, polarization, and technological disruptions to civic discourse, Nets4Dem seeks to address these issues by facilitating better connections, collaboration, and knowledge dissemination.

The initiative acknowledges that traditional approaches to democratic renewal have not been sufficiently impactful and that there's a lack of consistent and meaningful democratic practice. This is exacerbated by fragmented knowledge and siloed work among practitioners, researchers, and organisations. Nets4Dem aims to bridge these gaps by establishing a European community focused on fostering inclusive societies and resilient democracies through collective action.

Key objectives of Nets4Dem include promoting greater connectedness among diverse stakeholders to facilitate holistic conversations and mutual learning, providing better access to research and knowledge resources, and fostering collaboration and innovative partnerships across sectors and levels of governance. Additionally, Nets4Dem is committed to empowering countries, populations, and communities that stand to benefit the most from civic engagement efforts.

Eurocities is one of the twelve founding members of Nets4Dem. Next to Eurocities, the project consortium consists of Democracy Reporting International (DRI) – project coordinator, Demos Helsinki, Democratic Society (Demsoc), European Partnership for Democracy (EPD), Coglobal, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory of the University of Belgrade, Opensource Politics, Trans-European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA), Egmont Institute, Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, and People Powered.

The initiative creates a range of possibilities for local government officials and policymakers to train their democracy muscles and enable mainstream democracy innovations across urban policy-making through capacity-building programmes and initiatives. Democracy Lab, coordinated by Eurocities, is dedicated to urban actors to foster peer exchange and capitalise on the broad Nets4Dem network of democracy experts and practitioners. The first edition of Democracy Lab will take place from 17 to 19 September 2024 and is co-organised with and hosted by the City of Barcelona, the European Capital of Democracy 2023-2024.

About European Capital of Democracy

Barcelona was named the first European Capital of Democracy (ECoD) on January 18, 2023. The technical office is comprised of the Barcelona City Council and the Metropolitan Strategic Plan of Barcelona (PEMB), and its duration is one year (September 2023 - October 2024). As the European Capital of Democracy, Barcelona and its metropolitan region host a series of events, conferences, and activities related to democratic innovation and citizen participation, as well as culture, education, and public space. The ECoD aims to establish a space for reflection and high visibility where European citizens can meet, engage, experiment with new forms of participatory and

inclusive democracy in collective action, and be inspired by a comprehensive program designed to advance democracy and build or rebuild trust in it.

About these guidelines

These guidelines are to help local government officials and other interested entities understand the process of applying their local challenges to participate in the Democracy Lab. The guidelines outline the event format, objectives, requirements, and selection criteria.

This call for challenges aims to select up to eight cities/regions/affiliated local actors to present their challenges and act as team leads and challenge owners at the Democracy Lab in Barcelona. The call is open <mark>until 15 July 2024</mark>.

About Democracy Lab

Background

Cities face complex societal challenges, from housing crises to rising inequalities to the threats of climate change and environmental degradation. These issues often stem from interconnected systems involving and impacting multiple stakeholders with diverse perspectives and needs. Addressing these challenges in a democratic fashion creates opportunities for people from all walks of life to be heard and seen. Democratic innovation encompasses various participatory approaches, empowering citizens to actively engage in decision-making beyond traditional electoral cycles. It allows for the engagement of community members in shaping policies and solutions that directly affect their lives, thus improving the quality and impact of policy. By embracing democratic innovation, cities can tap into the collective wisdom of their residents, leading to more sustainable, fair, and effective outcomes that reflect the needs and aspirations of the entire community.

> *Democratic innovations are processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence. (…) We identify four families of democratic innovations: mini-publics, participatory budgeting, collaborative governance and referenda and citizens' initiatives, while highlighting the proliferation of hybrids often aided by digital participation.* (Elstub & Escobar, 2019)

The theme of Democracy Lab in Barcelona is Democracy Innovation in Digital Transformation. The rise of digital technologies brings opportunities and threats to local democracies, making safeguarding and exercising citizens' digital rights a key challenge of our time. The right to privacy, freedom of expression, access to information and open digital infrastructures are fundamental in the digital age. The first edition of Nets4Dem's Democracy Lab will focus on enhancing democratic processes in the rapidly evolving digital landscape. Hosted by Barcelona, the European Capital of Democracy 2023-2024, the Lab will leverage the city's extensive experience and innovative practices in this area, providing a rich context for addressing multifaceted urban challenges. Discussions, speakers' presentations and group work will revolve around four main focus areas.

1. Civic Tech: Linking Online and In-Person Participation

Participants will explore the potential of civic technology to support citizen engagement through digital platforms like Decidim. They will learn why Decidim was deployed as a free/libre open-source infrastructure, how it supports online and in-person participation, and the capacities it builds. Civic technology can support various city participatory processes, such as participatory budgeting, urban planning, and crowdsourcing. Participants will gain insights into the political framework, multiple uses of hybrid participation, and the effective implementation of these tools.

2. Open Data, open technologies and Smart City

Participants will learn how open data and smart city solutions can drive democratic decision-making. This area focuses on how the Municipal Data Office uses data to make informed and tailored decisions that improve urban life. The concept of a 15-minute city, applied as a digital twin, allows for real-world improvements in neighbourhoods. Participants will also understand how democratising data helps citizens engage with local issues. Discussions will include the ethical use of data and its role in building democratic infrastructure, enhancing transparency, and fostering community-driven problem-solving.

3. Artificial Intelligence in Government and Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Participants will engage with Barcelona's AI Strategy, a collaborative effort between government, academia, and civil society. The strategy focuses on implementing algorithmic systems at the municipal level in accordance with legal, ethical, and technical standards. Participants will learn about the AI Advisory Council and citizen committees that design and evaluate AI policies and explore the process of building these committees with diverse expertise.

4. Democratic Culture in the Digital Era

This focus area emphasises the importance of building digital literacy and ensuring that technology is accessible and beneficial to all citizens, thus strengthening democratic engagement. Participants will address the need for fostering a democratic culture around technology. They will learn how municipal platforms such as Decidim and other initiatives strengthen digital literacy among different population groups and develop strategies for bridging the digital divide and integrating digital education into community practices.

Overview

Democracy Lab serves as a platform for local government officials and democracy practitioners to promote collaborative problem-solving and democratic innovation at the local level. The event takes place in Barcelona from 17 to 19 September 20204, bringing together diverse stakeholders to delve into democratic innovations by jointly working on the real-life challenges presented by cities – the challenge owners. Selected cities will come to the Lab with a specific challenge they face. They will work in small teams of peers, assisted by a facilitator, to design actionable, ready-to-implement democratic interventions to bring them back to their administrations. In this creative effort, the teams will be assisted by mentors: democracy experts and practitioners from the Nets4Dem network, Barcelona staff and experts, and local stakeholders. To ensure learning exchange and breadth of perspectives, participants will take part in study visits and speak with local community members. The working language of Democracy Lab is English. Participation in the event is open to cities and towns in the EU and Horizon Europe countries[1].

Participating cities will also receive assistance in post-event solutions development and implementation: They will be invited to participate in the capacity-building programme Democracy Accelerator and/or get tailored mentorship through the Rising Stars programme. There will also be periodic (online) meetings for the cohort, where participants can discuss the implementation progress and get feedback.

Solutions developed during Democracy Lab will be featured in a Democratic Innovation Toolbox – an open-source digital dissemination resource encompassing policy recommendations for embracing democratic innovations and promoting impactful real-life approaches. Cities participating in a Lab will also be entitled to compete for the Democratic Innovation Award, granted towards the end of the Nets4Dem project (mid-2026).

Objectives

Democracy Lab aspires to empower cities to address complex societal challenges in a democratic spirit by facilitating peer collaboration, enhanced by the involvement of experts and communities affected by the issue. This way, we aim to encourage policymakers to view issues from diverse perspectives and engage directly with citizens. This process enables a holistic understanding of the issues and ensures solutions are rooted in real-world experiences.

Expected outputs:

- actionable implementation plans / frameworks / roadmaps addressing challenges presented by challenge owners
- a set of novel approaches to addressing pressing urban challenges in a democratic way
- a set of learnings to feed into development of policy recommendations on mainstreaming democratic innovation at different levels of government.

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[1] Albania, Armenia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Faroe Islands, Georgia, Iceland, Israel, Kosovo, Morocco, Moldova, Montenegro, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Tunisia, Türkiye, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

Participants

The event will bring together 50-70 participants. There will be 6-8 teams, each comprising 5-7 participants, including 1-2 challenge city representatives (challenge owners), 1 facilitator, and 2-4 peers and/or experts. This structure ensures a flow of ideas, expertise, and experience. Teams will be assisted by mentors representing the Nets4Dem network and host city staff members.

Participants categories:

- Local government's representation (technicians, policymakers, or representatives of other entities affiliated with the local administration) – **challenge owners**
- Local government's representation (technicians, policymakers, or representatives of other entities affiliated with the local administration) – **peers** joining the teams as practitioners and experts to share experiences and learn from one another.
- **Stakeholders** – practitioners and experts from academia, civil society organisations, activists, and community and business representatives
- **Mentors** – Nets4Dem members, Barcelona staff and experts
- **Facilitators** experienced in group process, supporting teams with effective collaboration and ensuring they reach their goals

Format guidelines

The Democracy Lab concept draws from the social hackathon methodology that brings together multidisciplinary teams who collaborate intensively over a short period to develop prototypes of solutions. Leveraging expertise from the Nets4Dem network, the Lab provides a unique opportunity for cities' staff members to co-create action plans alongside diverse partners, including peers, democracy innovation experts from civil society organizations and academia, and community representatives. Integrating tried and tested methods from Eurocities, the Lab incorporates site visits, guest interventions, and mutual learning to inspire and develop solutions collaboratively with those directly affected by the issues. Teams will be guided by experienced facilitators who understand the group process and are grounded in the principles of design thinking to navigate the iterative process of solutions development.

Indicative agenda

	Tuesday **17 September**	**Wednesday** **18 September**	**Thursday** **19 September**
Morning	Welcome and introduction Setting the scene: Keynote address City challenges presentations	Site visit(s)	Final presentations and feedback session Event conclusion
Lunch	Networking lunch	Networking lunch	Lunch and participants' departure

Afternoon	Teams formation and problem-framing Ideation session	Prototyping workshops	
Evening	Optional – informal dinner in newly formed teams	Optional – joint dinner for all participants	

Guidelines for submitting city challenge

Who is the challenge owner?

The challenge owner is a representative from a local government entity, such as a city or region, or organisation affiliated with the local government, tasked with presenting a specific urban challenge at the Democracy Lab. The challenge should be relevant: reflecting the specific context and problems faced by the local administration, with a strong likelihood that the solutions developed during the Lab will be implemented to address the issue. The Challenge owner's role is central to the lab's collaborative problem-solving process. Challenge owners provide real-life context and insights into their city's issues, ensuring that the discussions and solutions developed are grounded in urban experiences.

What's in it for your city?

Acting as a challenge owner, these representatives will lead their city's participation in the Democracy Lab, working closely with a dedicated team of peers, experts, and facilitators to co-create actionable solutions (5-7 participants per team). They will present their challenge, contribute to problem framing, and guide the team through the iterative process of developing democratic interventions. This role offers several benefits:

- **Enhanced Problem-Solving:** By collaborating with a diverse group of stakeholders, challenge owners gain new perspectives and innovative approaches to addressing their city's challenges. This is a unique opportunity for cities to work on their projects with an unusual group of collaborators, with the support of diverse experts and in an experimental setting.
- **Capacity Building:** The process provides valuable learning opportunities, equipping challenge owners with new skills and methodologies in democratic innovation and digital transformation.
- **Navigating Democracy in the Digital Era:** Challenge owners play a role in steering the discourse around democracy in the digital age, ensuring that digital transformation aligns with democratic values and citizens' rights.
- **Networking Opportunities:** Challenge owners will connect with experts and peers across Europe, fostering relationships that can lead to future collaborations and support.
- **Implementation Support:** Beyond the event, challenge owners will receive assistance through initiatives like the Democracy Accelerator and the Rising Stars programme, which ensure that the solutions developed during the lab are effectively brought to life.

- **Policy Influence:** Involvement in other Nets4Dem activities such as policy dialogues, providing input for recommendations to mainstream democratic innovations at different levels of government.
- **Visibility and Recognition**: Solutions and successes from the lab will be featured in the Democratic Innovation Toolbox, giving cities recognition for their efforts and contributions to advancing democratic practices.
- **Competing for the Democratic Innovation Award:** Challenge owners can compete for the Democratic Innovation Award, granted by a jury of democracy experts and peers.
- **Reimbursement**: Travel and accommodation expenses for one representative of the challenge cities will be reimbursed. Further information will be communicated to the selected cities.

How will the challenge owners be selected?

The selection will be carried out by the Democracy Lab organisational team, comprising Barcelona's European Capital of Democracy team and Nets4Dem representatives (Eurocities and Democratic Society) based on the following criteria:

- Overall quality of the application
- Relevance of the challenge to the lab theme: Democracy Innovation in Digital Transformation. To help applicants define their challenge, we advise reviewing the four main focus areas on page 5.
- Geographical balance between participating cities to ensure diversity of contexts.
- Commitment to follow-up and implementation of the ideas developed during the lab in your administration.
- Commitment to taking an active part in the Lab over its entire duration and preparing quality materials to effectively guide your team's work.

What is expected of the challenge owners if selected?

If your city challenge is selected, you are expected to:

- Delegate one or more representatives to travel to Barcelona for the whole event and actively engage in teamwork
- Participate in an online preparation meeting with the organisational team member to help you understand your role and prepare for the event. You will be asked to present your city and challenge to all participants, and answer their questions.
- Prepare a poster presenting your challenge and background document (1-1,5 pages), based on the guidelines provided by the organisational team.
- Contribute to a follow-up with Eurocities to evaluate how participation in the event has improved democratic practices in your city. You may be invited to participate in or provide input for Nets4Dem initiatives like policy dialogues, working groups, conferences, etc.

How to apply?

Cities interested in submitting their challenge are asked to complete the online application form by Monday, 15 July 2024.

All applicants will be notified about the application results by the end of July.

If you have questions regarding this call or Democracy Lab, please contact the Nets4Dem coordinator at Eurocities, Aleksandra Ziętek, at aleksandra.zietek@eurocities.eu.