

Love is in the air! Improving Air Quality Through Citizen Action Report

ECAS Brussels, 14 February 2023

Welcome

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
Opening remarks, Keynote speech and Citizen Handover	3
Panel 1: Enhancing Air Quality in Brussels and Europe – What is the State of Play and what are the plans for the future	6
Panel 2: Can Citizen Participation Improve Policy-Making in Europe? Lessons Learned from Crowdsourcing Solutions for Tackling Air Pollution.....	10
Annex 1: Agenda and Speakers	13
Annex 2: Citizens Solutions – Results from Brussels	14

INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations everyone on the planet has a right to a healthy environment, including clean air. Still, air pollution continues to negatively impact human health, Europe's nature and biodiversity, damaging agricultural crops, natural vegetation, historical buildings and monuments. Each year in the EU over 400,000 people die prematurely as a result of breathing toxic air.

In 2022, ECAS and partners crowdsourced the ideas of thousands of citizens from 10 European cities on how to improve air quality. On 14 February 2023, the event "Love is in the Air! Improving Air Quality in Europe through Citizen Action" presented the main problems with air quality identified by citizens in their cities, their proposals for solutions and top priorities for environmental action on local, national and European level.

OPENING REMARKS, KEYNOTE SPEECH AND CITIZEN HANDOVER

The first guest speaker was **Gilles Pelayo, Head of Unit, EACEA at the European Commission.**

He started his speech by pointing out that the new push for European democracy is the leading priority of the current Commission and EU Parliament and, in this framework, the Democracy Action Plan has launched many initiatives. The EU is improving its involvement of citizens in policy making with the petitions to the EU Parliament, complaint for infringement to Europe through the EU Ombudsman, the European Citizens' Initiative and so on.

The challenge is to go to the next level and to experiment with technologies to include even more citizens in EU policy making in all levels of governance.

Mr. Pelayo explained how through the Citizens, Equality and Values program (CERV 2021-2027) the European Commission continues to support democratic innovation in all of its dimensions and is glad to fund the Digidem project, of which one of the pilot cities was Brussels.



The second guest speaker of the event was **Mr. Alain Maron, Minister of the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region, responsible for Health, Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Participatory Democracy**. As a Patron of the 'Brussels for Clean Air Campaign', part of the DigiDem project, he was invited to share his work and experience on tackling air pollution in Brussels and to illustrate his vision for the future in this sector. Mr. Maron started his keynote speech by describing the launch of the 'Brussels breathes' plan, that aims to better understand air quality, to inform citizens about this issue in order to improve air quality by changing some of citizens' behaviour, like the way they travel or heat themselves.



He explained the main actions taken in the Region of Brussels to better understand air pollution, such as the installation of 3 new measurement stations, the remote sensing exercise measuring real pollution by cars, a lot higher than the one measured in labs, the biomonitoring of around 200 kids and other health studies. He also mentioned the actions around awareness raising, such as helping teachers to include air quality lessons into educational programmes, bringing air quality issues to doctors and campaigns like CurieuzenAIR.

Mr. Maron also reflected on the measures undertaken to efficiently reduce the main sources of air pollution in Brussels – mobility, the building sector and emissions coming from outside the region. Regarding mobility, the main priority is the modal shift, by investing overwhelmingly in public transportation, cycling and pedestrian infrastructures to offer a wide range of sustainable mobility solutions. Then it is also



important to impulse a motor shift in order to reduce the number of polluting cars in the streets of Brussels, and finally ban all thermic vehicles by 2035.

Regarding the building sector, Mr. Maron pointed out 'Renolution' – the regional building strategy, that aims to reduce energy consumption by 3-4 in 2050 and switch to renewable ones. He explained the strategy and its many additional benefits -such as lower energy bills, better living conditions and creation of local jobs, which will be achieved by investing in building renovations, allowing free assistance to all of those who wish to do energy works and also by launching a broad coalition of actors to speed-up renovation work in Brussels. When it comes to the third source of pollution, namely the one coming from outside Brussels, the Minister underlined the role of the EU to reach national objectives, giving EU Fit for 55 packages as an example.

After the keynote speech of Mr. Maron, **Elisa Lironi, ECAS's Programme Director for European Democracy**, presented in brief what had happened last year in the framework of the Digidem project. A transnational crowdsourcing to gather citizens' daily challenges and proposed solutions on the topic of air quality was organised in 10 different European cities and it was developed in 4 phases by asking people the following 4 main questions:

1. Problem Identification: What are the daily challenges you have with air pollution?
2. Solutions Proposal: What solutions would you like to see developed by decision makers?
3. E-Voting: What are the priorities among these solutions?
4. Co-Creation: Combining the main solutions from the 10 cities to present in a final policy document the top 10 solutions for for air quality in Europe.

Ms. Lironi explained that from Phase 1 to Phase 3, 304 Brussels citizens actively participated in this crowdsourcing exercise that resulted in 214 concrete contributions on air quality. She then handed over to the Minister the top 10 solutions proposed by Brussels citizens to improve air quality in their city (Annex 2).

Minister Maron expressed his gratitude for these contributions and focused on two of the suggestions given by Ms Lironi, as he hadn't mentioned them in his previous speech. The first one was the proposal to establish rules for zero-emissions industries target in the strategy "Shifting Economy" with more than 200 measures to make the Brussels economy more sustainable, led by Barbara Trachte, in charge of Economic Transition.

The second one was the end of the company car system, for which he explained that it is a federal government responsibility and that he will pass on the message to the Minister of Finances.



PANEL 1: ENHANCING AIR QUALITY IN BRUSSELS AND EUROPE – WHAT IS THE STATE OF PLAY AND WHAT ARE THE PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

The first panel was **moderated by Elisa Lironi, ECAS's Programme Director for European Democracy**, who introduced the panel and asked the speakers specific questions to give an overview of the situation of air quality in Brussels.



Q. Based on your work, can you give us briefly the state of play of air pollution in Brussels/Belgium and the effects on people's health?

Prof. Dr. Catherine Bouland, Director of the Research Center for Environmental and Occupational Health and President of the School of Public Health in Brussels, introduced a study which explained that 930 premature deaths in Brussels were due to the quality of the air. The study also showed that if no action is taken in 10 years there will be 40 thousand years of life lost, that equals to the loss of 1,5 billion euros. The study also mentioned that in the best-case scenario, when decreasing with 5% concentration of the two major pollutants related to traffic, in ten years' time only 7 000 years of life would be lost, that equals to 250 million euros. The difference between both scenarios allows to imagine the number of years of life that could be saved. This research is solely about outdoor air quality, not indoor air quality, which also brings other challenges, including saving energy, ventilation, mold and other harmful and underestimated factors for human health.



According to Prof. Bouland the main questions are if the right pollutants are being monitored and if the right health implications are being measured (as there are other components than the ones already being measured). Hence, what is measured, how is it measured and where the measuring stations are placed are all pertinent questions that need constant answers.

Although there are 21 measuring stations in the Brussels region, it is important to also have citizens' participation in measuring individual exposure with other devices for other types of pollution.



Another important parameter for pollution exposure and health effects is the distance from roads people are living in. This parameter not undertaken leads to an underestimation of around 30% of the cases of asthma, heart attacks and other illnesses. Last but not least, Prof. Bouland also pointed out that our health starts before we are born,

which means that the pollution can be hazardous even for a fetus in the womb.

The main conclusion of Prof. Boulard is that respiratory problems and cardiovascular diseases are only the tip of the iceberg and we need to take into account all other health issues that air pollution brings, when measuring the premature deaths.

Although raising awareness is very important, actions need to be taken: citizens not only need to contribute in the measurement of air quality but also to change the way they live and pressure for collective actions.

Q. Can you briefly explain Chercheurs D’Air and your most crucial demands? Are your demands similar to the ones chosen by citizens in our crowdsourcing?

Pierre Dornier, Founder and President at Chercheurs d’Air

started his presentation with a short introduction of the two areas his organisation is working on with regards to improving air quality – awareness raising and promotion of concrete solutions and measures. When it comes to raising awareness, Mr. Dornier pointed out their citizen science campaign that was organised together with 70 schools and 50 citizens, during which 130 locations were monitored over a period of 12 months. The results were expected – in all 70 schools the levels of pollution were higher than the ones in the guidelines of the WHO.



Mr. Dornier also outlined two of the measures that his organisation is promoting. First, “the low traffic neighborhood” is about giving less space for traffic and more space for the citizens and cyclists. Second, the other measure is called “School Street” that aims to close the streets nearby schools for traffic, not only for 30 minutes in the morning, but permanently. This initiative can reduce pollution by about 20%, as shown from a study in London.

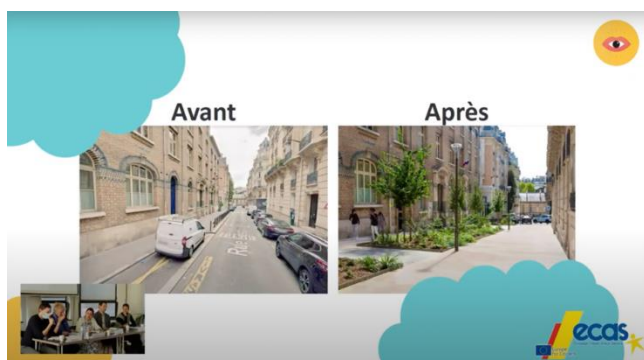


Mr. Dornier also commented on the demands made by citizens as proposed in the Digidem project. He agreed that increased cycling and walking infrastructure, creation of more green spaces, carefree cities/days are definitely important for improving air quality. However, we need denser cities - as the risk of developing

more public transport to reach the countryside is that the city will grow with people traveling more and this might cause a countereffect.

Q. Besides ECOLO, you have been an activist for the Belgian cycling advocacy group GRACQ. How does air quality affect people's choices in their daily lives e.g. such as their choices for more energy-efficient mobility solutions?

Geoffrey Usé, Political Advisor on Mobility for ECOLO and activist for the Belgian Cycling Advocacy Group, explained how air quality affects people's everyday choices with regards to energy efficiency, mobility solutions and other choices they are making. People want better air quality but they also need to change their habits when talking about mobility solutions and it is not that easy, because this affects their commute and daily practices and we still live in a car centric environment.

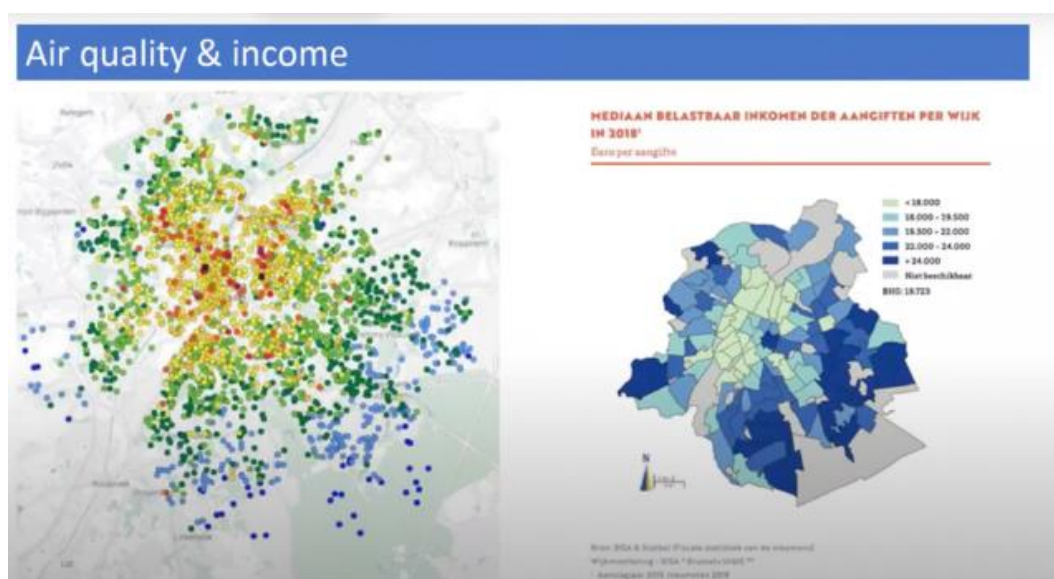


Mr. Usé outlined 3 main goals that need to be achieved in terms of mobility and its impact on air quality. First, to achieve a more livable, safer and sustainable environment. We need to improve the quality of life, which means that we need to put the public interest in the center of each decision. Second, to make this environment accessible for everyone by

developing better and more accessible infrastructure for people so that they have more choices. A better division of public space is necessary, with more options for the people and to develop shared mobility options such as shared cars, e-scooters, etc. Third, probably the most important goal, is more social justice, as some of the densest neighborhoods have the worst quality of air. It is not only a question of density, but also a question of access to green spaces and better connection to public transport. Air quality is a matter of social justice and we need to change the old car-centric principle as owning a car is not considered anymore a social achievement. Social measures need to benefit everyone, not only part of the people.

Q. Can you briefly explain CurieuzenAir and its results? What was the feedback from citizens to this citizen science initiative and going back in time is their anything you would have improved?

Lieselotte Gevens, Mobilité & Environnement, BRAL – highlighted the importance of citizen participation. She presented the initiative CurieuzenAir, as a co-initiator, which is a citizen science project on air quality, that placed 2483 measuring points in Brussels. The initiative partnered with the media to involve citizens and the results were that the worst air quality can be found in the city center and the further from the city center the higher the air quality is. However, the most important outcome from that research was that it showed a big social injustice linked to air quality. The neighborhoods inhabited by citizens with lower income are the ones with the worst air quality. The research also showed that young people and children, one of the most vulnerable groups to poor air quality, are the most present in the areas with the worst air quality. Ms. Gevens also mentioned that they would love to have worked with more citizens and also medical institutions, but the budget and timeframes did not allow it. She also assured that the initiative will go on with the installment of 20-30 more measuring points in the city.



PANEL 2: CAN CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IMPROVE POLICY-MAKING IN EUROPE? LESSONS LEARNED FROM CROWDSOURCING SOLUTIONS FOR TACKLING AIR POLLUTION

The second panel was **moderated by Andreas Müller, Managing Director at Democracy International, Germany**. This panel focused on citizen participation, its impact on policy making in Europe and the lessons learnt from the partners of the project



Q. Ms. Renzenbrink and Ms. Murić, what was your experience with the crowdsourcing at the local level in your specific countries and what were the lessons learnt?

Tessel Renzenbrink, Co-Director at Network Democratie, The Netherlands and partner in the DigiDem project, highlighted the importance of always complementing online participation with offline components. This ensures inclusion in the process as some citizens do not want to or cannot participate online. Ms. Renzenbrink stated how in the fourth phase of the crowdsourcing, Network Democratie organised a Democracy Dinner where citizens were invited to discuss the topic of air quality in Amsterdam and submit their answers together. She also emphasised that it is important to build communities when asking for citizen participation and to reach out to existing communities. Ms. Renzenbrink explained how Network Democratie established a relationship with an existing organisation, Hollandse Luchten, which had been active in the community on the topic of air quality. Ms. Renzenbrink concluded by stating that this synergy with existing communities allowed both Network Democratie to increase participation in the crowdsourcing and gave citizens the opportunity to influence policy-making.



Amina Murić, Deputy Director at Civic Alliance, Montenegro and partner in the Digidem project, underlined the importance of reaching out to the right stakeholders to connect you to citizens who will participate in the crowdsourcing project. She agreed with Ms. Rezenbrink on the need to complement online participation with offline activities. Specifically in Podgorica, it was important to connect with people on a grassroots level. Regarding the crowdsourcing platform, Ms. Muric emphasised the importance of a user-friendly platform with clear guidelines on how to participate. She concluded by stating that it is also essential to show the citizens who participated in the crowdsourcing the impact of their participation and how it can influence European policy.



Q. How can a transnational crowdsourcing project be promoted and how can it be successful?

Petko Georgiev, Director at ProInfo, Bulgaria, partner of the DigiDem project and responsible for the communication strategy, presented the communication strategy for the DigiDem project and how it needed to be adapted to each phase of the crowdsourcing. He highlighted that the communication campaign needed to be tailor-made to each city, as each had different cultural backgrounds, populations and democratic processes. Regarding lessons learnt, Mr. Georgiev emphasised the need to build a large network and connect with national and local authorities. He also agreed with the previous panelists on the importance of organising offline activities to further engage citizens.



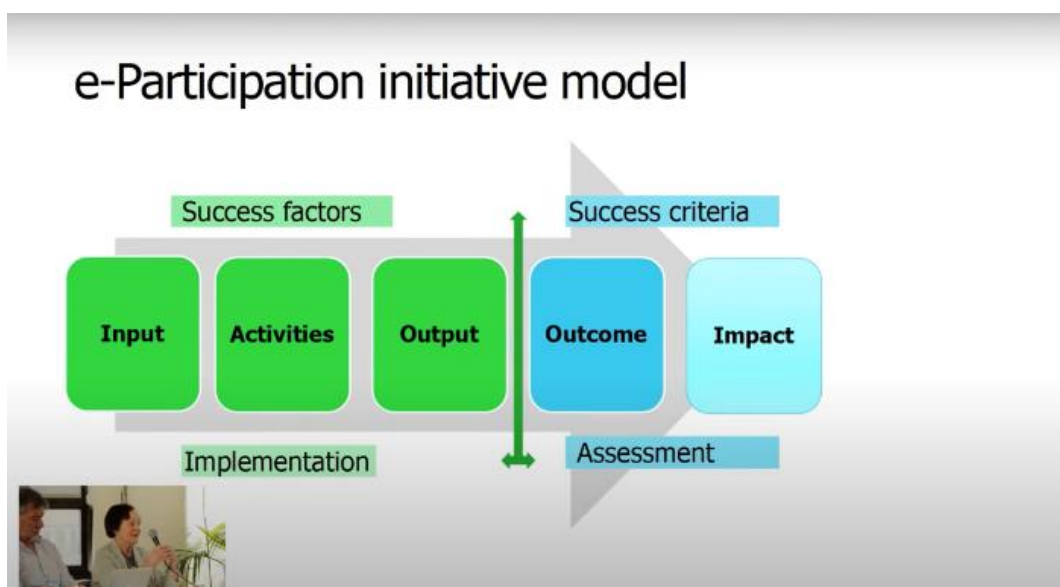
Regarding challenges, Mr. Georgiev highlighted the longevity of the project (one year) and sustaining the attention of the citizens. Additionally, the different technical and security requirements in the different phases of the crowdsourcing platform proved challenging for participants. At the local level, Burgas, Bulgaria, Mr. Georgiev experienced several other challenges. One of the biggest challenges was explaining what crowdsourcing is to citizens and gaining the trust of citizens to participate in the crowdsourcing.

Mr. Georgiev concluded by stating that in any crowdsourcing project it is important to have expertise in digital marketing and campaigning to ensure a successful crowdsourcing campaign. He also emphasised the importance of completing the feedback loop and showing citizens, those who participated and those that did not, what was achieved through this crowdsourcing exercise.

Q. How is the evaluation framework for this project and how was it created?

Liia Hänni, Senior Expert on e-Democracy at E-Governance Academy, Estonia

presented the E-Participation Assessment Framework developed to evaluate the crowdsourcing pilots in both the DigiDem and CODE Europe projects and her first impressions of the results. She highlighted that in order to create an e-participation comparative assessment framework the different initiatives have to have a shared goal/impact. In regard to the DigiDem project, this shared impact was increased participatory democracy and influence on policymaking. She also stated that there are two main criteria in a successful e-participation initiative, 1. The outcome and 2. The impact of the initiative. In order to measure the success of the initiative two questionnaires were created: one for the project partners (the organisers) and one for the participants (the citizens). Ms. Hänni highlighted that one of the lessons learnt from this project is to interview participants immediately after they participate in the crowdsourcing exercise. Another lesson learnt was to use one platform for all phases as multiple platforms can be confusing for participants. She also emphasised the importance of mapping out stakeholders to participate in the crowdsourcing. Ms. Hänni concluded by stating that the co-creation process between experts and citizen is important to create cooperative discussions at different stages of policy-making.



ANNEX 1: AGENDA AND SPEAKERS

10.00 Welcome from Gilles Pelayo, Head of Unit, EACEA, European Commission

10.10 Alain Maron, Minister of the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region, responsible for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Participatory Democracy

10.20 Citizen Handover of Air Quality Proposals to Minister Alain Maron

10.30 Panel 1: **Enhancing Air Quality in Brussels and Europe – What is the state of play and what are the plans for the future?**

Moderated by Elisa Lironi, Programme Director-European Democracy, ECAS

- Prof. Dr. Catherine Bouland, Présidente de l'Ecole de Santé Publique de l'ULB and Directrice du centre de recherche en santé environnementale et santé au travail
- Pierre Dornier, President, Chercheurs d'Air
- Geoffrey Usé, Conseiller politique mobilités, Ecolo
- Lieselotte Gevens, Mobilité & Environnement, BRAL – Brussels' urban movement, Co-initiator of CurieuzenAir.

Q&A with participants

11.30 Coffee Break

11.45 Panel 2: **Can Citizen Participation Improve Policy-Making in Europe? – Lessons Learnt from Crowdsourcing Solutions for Tackling Air Pollution in Cities.**

Moderated by Andreas Müller, Managing Director, Democracy International, Germany

- Petko Georgiev, Director, ProInfo, Bulgaria
- Liia Hanni, Senior Expert on e-Democracy, E-Governance Academy, Estonia
- Amina Murić, Deputy Director, Civic Alliance, Montenegro
- Tessel Renzenbrink, Co-Director, NetDem, The Netherlands

Q&A with participants

12.55 Concluding remarks

13.00 Lunch Buffet

ANNEX 2: CITIZENS SOLUTIONS – RESULTS FROM BRUSSELS

Rank	Name of the solution	Number of points
1	Support renewable energy infrastructures (e.g. Solar panels)	102
2	Tax big polluters (companies)	101
3	Increased cycling and walking infrastructures and their quality	97
4	More green spaces in cities	96
5	Car-free cities	79
6	Strengthen public transport network in non-urban areas	70
7	Building insulations	67
8	Workshops and school programs to increase awareness about air pollution and environmental protection	60
9	Establish rules to get zero-emissions industries	59
10	End the company car system	53
11	Subsidise purchasing of electric cars	46
12	Improve air pollution measurements	43
13	Speed limit to 30km/h in cities	41
14	Tax meat production and consumption	33
15	Less tax benefit and subsidies for large companies	33
16	Reduce livestock number	29
17	Support installation of heat pumps	26
18	Electric public transport	26
19	Support district heating facilities	24
20	Limiting the size and concentration of livestock housing	23

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