



9TH RENCONTRES EUROPÉENNES DE LA PARTICIPATION



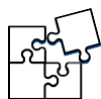
Democracy: The Urgency
of Building Together

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Adapter sans réinventer : défis et enjeux de la mise à l'échelle des innovations démocratiques



Scaling democratic innovations – Rencontres Européennes de la Participation 2025 (Strasbourg, 19 March 2025)

Interactive Workshop

This interactive workshop (part of the Horizon Europe ScaleDem project) explored how to broaden, deepen, institutionalize, and adapt democratic innovations without “reinventing the wheel.” It addressed the main challenges of scaling up participatory practices and identified strategies to replicate these innovations effectively in different contexts. The session combined a presentation of the project analytical framework for scaling democratic innovations with a collaborative exercise and group discussion on barriers and enabling factors for scaling such initiatives

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Overview of the Session

Overview: The workshop opened with an introduction to the topic of “scaling democratic innovations,” including an icebreaker asking participants whether they had heard of scaling in this context and what came to mind. The facilitators explained that the session was part of the ScaleDem project, an EU-funded initiative uniting think-tankers, researchers, practitioners, and science communicators to scale up solutions that strengthen democratic processes. Rather than duplicating existing participatory democracy efforts, ScaleDem aims to build on previous projects and scale them into new contexts. The goal of the workshop was to examine key scaling challenges for democratic innovations and share practical strategies to “adapt without reinventing” successful participation methods. The presenters outlined a conceptual framework for understanding scaling, centered on four scaling dimensions:

(1) Scaling Out – expanding the coverage of a democratic innovation from one context or locale to others (horizontal growth across communities or levels of governance)

(2) Scaling In – improving the quality and integrity of the innovation as it grows, ensuring it retains its core principles and effectiveness

(3) Scaling High – embedding the innovation within institutional and decision-making processes (vertical integration into formal governance structures)

(4) Scaling Deep – rooting the innovation in the culture and everyday practices of society (changing mindsets and norms to sustain the innovation)

. The presenters emphasized that successfully scaling any democratic innovation is inherently challenging, as various barriers often constrain growth

They noted that effective scaling requires a favorable configuration of factors – including supportive actors (champions or “democratic innovation entrepreneurs”), innovation-specific characteristics, and a conducive social, political, and economic context – to overcome these barriers. This analytical lens breaks down the problem by considering how the innovation itself, the people driving it, and the surrounding environment all influence scalability.

Interactive Group Exercise: Following the framework overview, the session shifted to an interactive exercise designed to apply these concepts. Participants formed small groups (up to ~6 people) and each group selected one of three common democratic innovations to focus on:

Participatory Budgeting (PB) – a process where citizens directly decide how to allocate portions of public funds

Deliberative Mini-Publics (DM) – structured panels of randomly selected citizens who deliberate on policy issues and formulate recommendations.

or Local Referenda (LR) – mechanisms that allow citizens to vote directly on local policy decisions

Using brief case descriptions provided, each group considered a real-world example of their chosen innovation that they had worked on or knew of. They were tasked to identify key barriers that might hinder scaling that case in at least two of the four scaling dimensions, and then to discuss enabling factors (or success factors) that could help overcome those barriers and support successful scaling across any of the scaling dimensions presented above. Groups recorded their findings in a worksheet table (see attachments).

Discussion and Wrap-Up: In the final segment, the facilitators brought everyone back together to debrief and highlight takeaways from the group work. An open discussion invited participants to reflect on the most surprising insights from the exercise and what lessons they would take back to their own practice (see key takeaways below).

The session concluded with the organizers noting **upcoming opportunities** within the ScaleDem project to continue this work – for example, a **twinning program** to test the scalability of democratic innovations from one community to another, and a **pilot program** to experiment with scaling innovations from theory into practice

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The general discussion revolved around comparing experiences across the different innovations and reinforcing the importance of context when scaling democratic practices. Participants recognized that scaling strategies must be **context-specific**. The exercise comparing Participatory Budgeting, Mini-Publics, and Referenda underscored that each innovation type and each local case may encounter unique combinations of barriers and facilitators.

There is **no one-size-fits-all formula** for scaling; success depends on understanding the local political, social, and institutional landscape and tailoring the approach accordingly. For example, scaling a participatory budgeting process in one city might require strong legal provisions and civic education, whereas scaling a deliberative mini-public in another context might hinge more on cultural acceptance and championing by key officials.

- **Four Dimensions of Scaling:** Scaling democratic innovations involves multiple dimensions. Scaling Out extends a practice to new sites or populations; Scaling In safeguards and enhances quality as the practice grows; Scaling High integrates the practice into formal institutions and policies; and Scaling Deep embeds the practice in the culture and values of society. All four dimensions must be considered for holistic growth.
- **Common Barriers:** Democratic innovations face a variety of barriers when attempting to scale. These include regulatory hurdles (e.g. legal constraints or rigid bureaucratic structures), cultural resistance (public skepticism or lack of civic tradition, as well as elite opposition), resource limitations (insufficient funding, expertise, or organizational capacity), and logistical/implementation challenges (complexity in execution, coordination difficulties, technical constraints).

That being said, a core insight of the session was the importance of **adapting existing democratic innovation models to new contexts rather than “reinventing the wheel.”** Rather than creating entirely new participation tools (often de facto reinventing something that already exists, failing to take into account previous learnings) for each situation, practitioners should leverage proven innovations (like PB, citizens’ assemblies, referenda) and modify them to fit local needs. By building on prior experiences and research (such as the SCALEDEM project’s findings), stakeholders can save effort and avoid past mistakes while spreading participatory practices more effectively. Crucial to successfully do so, is the identification of enabling factors for scaling across the four dimensions identifying above.

- **Enabling Factors for Scaling:** Key factors can help overcome barriers. Institutional support and openness (formal backing, legal frameworks, and political will) can address regulatory barriers, while fostering supportive culture and norms (building public trust and buy-in among leaders) helps tackle cultural barriers. Strong leadership and “innovation champions” (dedicated individuals or organizations driving the process) can mobilize resources and networks to surmount resource barriers. Meanwhile, good design and adaptability of the innovation itself (being flexible, user-friendly, and efficient) makes it easier to implement in new contexts and at larger scales. These enabling conditions increase the likelihood that a democratic innovation can successfully scale out, up, and deep.

One frequently mentioned barrier to scaling high – i.e., ensuring impact on policies and laws – was the reluctance of political actors to relinquish control or share decision-making power. This resistance, often rooted in fear of losing influence or authority, was seen as a major obstacle to embedding participatory or deliberative processes in formal institutions. Limited resources also emerged as a recurring constraint. Insufficient funding, particularly when democratic innovations are treated as symbolic or marginal, undermines both their

impact and their perceived legitimacy.

When it comes to scaling deep – i.e., innovations capacity to boost cultural and emotional change - participants emphasized the lack of a broader participatory or deliberative culture. Without shared norms that support citizen engagement and collective decision-making, innovative practices often remain isolated or fail to take root over time. The absence of clear follow-up mechanisms and feedback loops was also seen as damaging to trust and long-term engagement, as participants may feel that their contributions are not valued or acted upon.

Scaling in—relating to the quality and integrity of the processes themselves—was linked to concerns around integrity. Ensuring that democratic innovations are procedurally sound and genuinely inclusive was viewed as fundamental, yet often difficult to achieve.

In terms of scaling out – i.e., expanding reach and replication - participants pointed to the challenges of transferring democratic innovations across diverse contexts. Polarization, cultural differences, and limited human resources were all cited as barriers to diffusion. The lack of strong political communication strategies and sustained commitment further weakens efforts to broaden adoption.

A cross-cutting takeaway from the workshop was the strong and recurring emphasis on motivation and individual agency as key enabling factors, particularly for scaling deep and out. Many participants saw this motivation - whether among citizens, facilitators, or political allies - as a vital counterweight to structural constraints. Closely tied to this was the idea of "*butterfly effects*": the notion that small-scale initiatives or individual experiences, while seemingly isolated, can have wider ripple effects that inspire broader change.

Several barriers were also observed to interact across scaling dimensions, suggesting that successful scaling efforts often require an 'holistic' approach aimed at enabling progress on multiple fronts simultaneously. For example, institutional resistance can limit not only scaling high, but also discourage cultural embedding (scaling deep) and broader adoption (scaling out). Finally, transparency, legitimacy, and effective communication were frequently cited as essential conditions, not only for ensuring the quality of democratic innovations (scaling in), but also for gaining the political and public support necessary to extend them more widely.

ATTACHMENTS

If the workshop produced recommendations, visual elements, or any other outputs, please attach them with this report.