

# Public civil society partnerships for behavioural change

## Insights and policy recommendations from the ACCTING project

February 2025

Local authorities often lack the resources and capacity to address complex societal challenges, particularly those related to the Green Deal, while bottom-up community initiatives face barriers including poor communication with local governments and bureaucratic hurdles. These challenges hinder collaborative efforts that could leverage both local government resources and community-driven passion to tackle climate change and support vulnerable populations. The ACCTING project has demonstrated the benefits of partnerships between local governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) in addressing major societal challenges such as climate change. Successful partnerships should be systematic and strategic and be based on a shared vision of equity, transparency, and community engagement, with clear communication, flexibility, and a focus on sustainability. These strategic partnerships can help bridge the gap between local governments and CSOs, ultimately contributing to the Green Deal's broader goals by fostering systemic change and community involvement.

## Recommendations

Community engagement and interpersonal relationships can inspire individual awareness and knowledge. Conversely, a lack of social ties or appreciation, social resistance, and norms that continue to encourage negative environmental behaviour, make change a lonely and difficult process (ACCTING's own extensive research indicates that 'community belonging' is a key enabler of pro-environmental behaviour change). Mobilising and partnering local government with community-based initiatives and CSOs in a systematic and strategic way provides a basis to address these issues. In parallel, this can benefit both civil society organisations (ensuring more sustainable and systemic impact of their activities), and local authorities (boosting the resources and knowledge available to them and tackling those issues that are a priority for their communities). Considering the mutual benefit both actors can have, recommendations below suggest successful strategic partnerships between CSOs and local governments. This can serve as a springboard for citizen engagement and a multiplier of efforts to address major societal challenges. Essential elements of a successful, resilient, and sustainable partnership include:

### 1. The vision

Local authorities and CSOs engage in a dynamic and systematic dialogue to co-create a common vision, based on the principles of equity, justice, transparency and caring for the most vulnerable and marginalised. This can connect climate change (a global phenomenon) with local problems / situations (floods, loss of biodiversity, droughts) and bring together community knowledge with local resources in the search for solutions. The vision of the Partnership needs to:

- Define, respect, and protect the civic space.
- Be strategic: aim at mobilising and incentivising citizens to adopt behaviour and practices that make a positive contribution to tackling climate change.
- Be systematic: define mechanisms for continuous consultation and participation; continuously monitor challenges and opportunities and coordinate resources.
- Motivate citizens and activists to become ambassadors of change.
- Focus on building trust and confidence over the longer term. Local authorities should not hide behind bureaucracy but should strive to make the system work for the benefit of communities and CCOs that they partner with.



## 2. The approach

Local authorities recognising the need to systematically and strategically engage with civil society need to:

- Create a space and a platform to pool resources. This needs to have defined mechanisms for recognising needs and available skills and resources and offer a simple way to mobilise public and civic society capacities.
- Have clear lines of communication, assigning contact persons and ensuring that they are developing an ongoing relationship with civil society.
- Recognise widespread lack of facilitation and co-creation know-how within city administrations, investing in developing the skills and capacity needed to engage with and support communities and CSOs. This can include support in engagement and participation of citizens, and innovation at a governance level.
- Reward city officials for being brave enough to think outside the box and acting creatively and even bringing in external facilitation support where possible or necessary.
- Avoid overlapping work by ensuring an open dialogue and being transparent about needs and resources available.
- Plan but be flexible to tackle unforeseen challenges.
- Facilitate advocacy for policy change at higher levels by demonstrating the efficiency of locally developed solutions and initiatives.
- Build trust by treating CSOs and citizens as ambassadors of change. As far as possible, seek to minimise a perception of focus on rules, regulations and other bureaucratic hurdles, in favour of genuine support for substantive issues. This should create space for people to volunteer for practical activities that improve their community in a tangible way, since people rarely volunteer for administrative or bureaucratic activities.
- Foster social connections and support networks through community-building initiatives that prioritise environmental awareness and environmentally friendly practices.
- Promote and normalise environmentally friendly behaviours and climate change adaptation through positive messaging and role models, including politicians themselves acting in line with the Green Deal ambitions.

CSOs partnering with local authorities need to:

- Be transparent and open about their goals and capacity.
- Be ready to share skills and resources and cooperate in a way that has multiplying effects.
- Be proactive in bringing forward concerns and potential barriers.
- Be professional in contacting public authorities and other CSOs, with clear communication of goals and capacities, clear reporting, and clearly defined contact persons.



### 3. The tools

Tackling challenges associated with climate change and co-creating appropriate solutions requires the use of citizen engagement tools. The public – civil society partnership can be enhanced by:

- Engaging in meaningful dialogue.
- Using a palette of tools to engage citizens and tap into local knowledge, adapted to local specificities. These may include:
  - co-creation events
  - online consultations
  - citizen assemblies
  - citizen science initiatives
  - representative deliberative processes and
  - running of simulations and pilots.
- Using digital tools (including social media) but not exclusively, so that digitally illiterate citizens (oftentimes belonging to vulnerable groups) are not excluded.
- Making local data available to facilitate open innovation and crowdsourcing.
- Communicating the vision, the process, and the results of initiatives undertaken.
- Involving citizens in the monitoring and evaluation of public decisions, policies, and services.
- Streamlining available funding, supporting the vision in an accountable and transparent way.

Facilitating fundraising from private sector donors (i.e., through CSR). A systematic, community engaged vision for behavioural change can be appealing to private donors.

### 4. The sustainability of the partnership

The public – civil society partnership needs to move from one-off engagements to a sustainable relationship that nurtures continuous dialogue, openness, reflectiveness, and proactivity. It can strengthen public engagement and ensure inclusion and accessibility by involving CSOs and citizens in policy making decisions and facilitating their sense of agency. It can also raise awareness and facilitate public learning about climate change and the Green Deal and promote volunteerism as an essential element of the civil space at the local level.



## Findings from ACCTING

The following are experiences from the Pilot Actions that were supported by ACCTING. More about the Pilot Actions can be found on the ACCTING website [here](#).

**Dock, an NGO in Messinia, Peloponnese, Greece** cooperated with local authorities and engaged mountain communities to co-create a scenario for handling a wildfire disaster using a bottom-up approach, to inform and trigger behavioural change. Through a participatory design process, the project set up digital platforms to facilitate discussion on the ethical dimension of disaster management, and conducted hands-on scenarios to form a coordinated community-based response to disaster.

**Kokoza, an NGO in Prague, Czech Republic**, engaged local communities, municipalities and private developers in a collaboration regarding community gardens in the Czech Republic, resulting in agreements to include community gardens in urban planning, with a memorandum of understanding facilitating green spaces in new residential projects.

**Young Researchers of Serbia (YRS), an NGO in Belgrade**, developed a methodology that can support informal groups at the local level. It created a platform that is currently used by local and national authorities, as well as private donors, to streamline support to grassroots initiatives at a local level. This is important as it addresses a major hurdle: individuals and informal groups cannot be supported or held accountable for financial spending through projects and donations.

**Mamagea, an NGO in Thessaloniki, Greece** cooperated with the municipality of Thessaloniki to create a local action plan for sustainable food systems. This resulted in the creation of the Thessaloniki Food Council, charged with promoting healthy, environmentally sustainable food to local schools. Food is framed as a common good (instead of a commodity), which can lead to policies, practices and frameworks that achieve social justice across different socio-economic groups. The work of the pilot project facilitated the engagement of municipal employees, which typically is something that happens top-down, needs official permission and can lead to delays and disengagement.

## Better Stories

In ACCTING we use 'better stories', a concept borrowed from Dina Georgis<sup>1</sup>, to refer to promising practices that identify how a given societal situation can be ameliorated to improve existing practices.



CROATIA

**Gradski vrtovi Sisak (Urban Gardening Sisak)<sup>2</sup>** is a unique concept; ambitious volunteers cleared up construction and heavy industry waste at a site and turned it into an urban community garden in a city with the majority being low-income and elderly people. Sisak City officially became the seventh Croatian city that can boast of the City Gardens project with the full support of the Mayor. The project leader mentioned that the project idea came through observing other

cities in Croatia that have successfully transformed neglected land areas into splendid gardens. She said: "We intend to arrange this area in such a way that it will be possible to stay there all day because we plan to install swings and climbing frames for children, arrange a swimming pool and use this area for work and leisure, which will provide a pleasant and fun all-day stay for the whole family".



FINLAND

**Energy Community of Ii<sup>3</sup>** Over more than a decade, the approximately 10,000 residents of the municipality of Ii have reduced their municipality's emissions by 80 percent. Ii's municipal economic development strategy was revised after its previous tech-driven economy fell into crisis. Decision-makers took the important decision to stimulate the economy through sustainable means, as climate efforts were not seen as putting the brakes on business. The success of

the reduction was due to the joint efforts of the whole municipality working to reduce carbon emissions. Residents were asked for their ideas and input on the design of green services. The views of different age groups were heard in different ways. Through strategic efforts, renewable energy has become an important sector for the local economy, complementing various other industries (e.g., the rubber, plastics and packaging, construction, fine mechanics, and metal industries).



ITALY

**Voluntary system of civil defence of Florence<sup>4</sup>** Since the terrible floods in 1966, many citizens' organisations and groups have cooperated daily with the municipal civil defence system. It is a free and organised force. It represents an extraordinary resource in terms of skills and operational capacity with more than five thousand organisations across the country.

<sup>1</sup> Georgis, D. (2013). *The better story: Queer affects from the Middle East*. Suny Press.

<sup>2</sup> <https://zelenozlato.org/index.php/izgradnja-zajednica-i-inkluzija/9-gradski-vrtovi-sisak>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ii.fi/kestava-arki>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cittametropolitana.fi.it/protezione-civile>.



### **Soil-to-Soil Biodegradable Waste Management Project – We Make Life Better Environment and Climate Association<sup>5</sup>**

(“Yaşamı İyileştiriyoruz Çevre ve İklim Derneği”), collects biodegradable waste food, consisting of vegetables and fruits, from the marketplaces (bazaars) and transforms them into compost for soil regeneration in agriculture. Disadvantaged women are included in the project by working in the community kitchens/food banks where the usable food left in the

marketplace is cooked and distributed. The Association has established partnerships with 52 municipalities and several academics in Türkiye. The government authorities do not provide finances but can/do support in another way, such as designating lands that can be used as compost areas and providing the necessary equipment for compost production and distribution.

Below are case studies taken as an example demonstrating successful public civil society partnerships.

The **Municipalities in Transition<sup>6</sup>** project includes a great number of further case studies, categorised by country. Many include inspiration for CSO–local government collaboration such as:

- **Parceria Local de Telheiras (“Telheiras Local Partnership”)** is a neighbourhood partnership that brings local organisations, citizens, and local government representatives together to collectively identify local needs and solutions, thereby strengthening local identity and addressing a lack of resources. The project has been running since 2013, and in addition to hosting such community events, has established a website to publicise local events, services and skills, created a volunteer bank, and an institutional training and qualification process.
- **La Ruche qui dit Oui<sup>7</sup> (“The Beehive that says Yes”)** is an initiative active across numerous European countries that seeks to promote local food producers and shorter supply chains by using a website and app to link would-be consumers to producers in their region. A further aspect is the establishment of a series of “hives” located in different neighbourhoods, which serve as delivery and collection points. Consumers are also able to learn more about the needs and practicalities of these local producers.
- **Zukunftsstadt Dresden<sup>8</sup> (“Future City Dresden”)** is a municipality-led programme that ran between 2015 and 2022. It used a three-phase approach to incorporate citizen perspectives into urban development processes. Many individual visions for a sustainable city were gathered through workshops (phase I). These were combined into a common vision of the future (Phase II) and finally served as a guide for implementation of real-life projects (phase III).

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<sup>5</sup> <http://yasamiyilestiriyoruz.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://municipalitiesintransition.org/about-the-case-studies/case-studies/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://laruchequiditoui.fr/fr>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.zukunftsstadt-dresden.de/>

## References

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## About ACCTING

ACCTING is an EU-funded project aiming to understand the impact of Green Deal policies on vulnerable groups, prevent inequalities, and produce knowledge and innovations to advance behavioural change at individual and collective levels.

Running until May 2025 and based on two research cycles, ACCTING mobilises research experimentation and innovation to promote an inclusive and socially just European Green Deal, focusing on the inequalities produced by its policies.

Find out more about the project and discover more factsheets at <https://accting.eu>

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