



# **MANUAL ON STRUCTURED DIALOGUE, GOOD PRACTICES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Project Number: 101089825



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# Project Partners



Manos  
Tendidas

Fundación Manos Tendidas, Spain



**aproximar**  
COOPERATIVA DE SOLIDARIEDADE SOCIAL, CRL

Aproximar, Portugal



Kūrybinės ateities idėjos, Lithuania



ALDA, France



KMOP, Greece

Click on the partner logos to find out more.

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# Executive Summary

**Extraordinary Citizens (Extra-C)** is an EU funded project (Project number: 101089825) that aims to **raise awareness and improve inclusive participatory democracy by promoting the active participation of young people with intellectual, psychosocial and developmental disabilities in the democratic life of their (local/regional/national) environment and at a EU Level.**

The present document is based on the insights and reports provided by each project partner involved in the **Structured Dialogues with policy makers** which were organised as part of the Extra-C project. The main objective is to offer a comprehensive analysis of the key issues addressed, with the goal of informing and guiding future actions to enhance the impact and effectiveness of similar initiatives.

The paper develops a **comprehensive set of policy recommendations directed at policymakers, with the purpose of advocating for and bringing attention to the political participation of persons with intellectual disabilities.** These recommendations are intended to raise awareness and foster concrete actions to address the challenges identified during the various meetings and activities carried out within the EXTRA - C project. The identified barriers, alongside proposed solutions, will be detailed throughout the paper, urging policymakers to take meaningful steps toward inclusive political engagement for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

The subsequent section will provide a detailed account of the structured dialogues events organised by each project partner, including the challenges encountered, the outcomes achieved, and the overarching recommendations. In order to ensure a clear presentation, the following paragraphs will be divided by project partners.



# ALDA - European Association for Local Democracy

The structured dialogue took place online on October 17th, 2024, bringing together **Carole Zielinski**, Deputy Mayor of Strasbourg in charge of Local Democracy, Citizens' Initiatives and Participation and members of **Cle Autiste** (**Communiquer, Lire, Écrire Autisme**).

The **main objective of the structured dialogue** was to **create meaningful exchanges between participants and policymakers, with a focus on enhancing the democratic participation of people with disabilities**. This initiative aims to foster an inclusive dialogue that enables individuals with disabilities to engage directly with decision-makers, thereby promoting a deeper understanding of their perspectives and needs. By facilitating these exchanges, the project seeks to address existing barriers to democratic participation, highlight challenges faced by people with disabilities, and collaboratively develop solutions to ensure their active and equal involvement in civic and political processes.

During the structured dialogue, several key points emerged, shedding light on critical issues that affect the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in democratic processes.

Firstly, participants emphasised the **importance of using appropriate terminology when discussing disabilities**. Participants advocated for the term "neurodivergent" instead of referring to individuals as "disabled persons," highlighting the need to shift language towards a more respectful and inclusive vocabulary that recognizes the diversity of cognitive and neurological differences.



## ALDA - European Association for Local Democracy

Secondly, the dialogue underscored the **significance of adopting an intersectional approach in policy making**. This approach acknowledges the complex ways in which various social identities—**such as disability, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status—interact and contribute to unique experiences of discrimination or disadvantage**. Participants argued that policies should be designed with this intersectionality in mind to ensure that the needs of all individuals, including those from marginalised groups, are effectively addressed.

A recurring theme throughout the discussions was **the fear of social judgement**, which many individuals with disabilities experience. This fear can lead to **reluctance in openly declaring one's disability or actively participating in public consultations or decision-making processes**. This issue was particularly highlighted in the context of a successful initiative organised by the City of Strasbourg, which demonstrated an innovative approach to participatory democracy. The initiative involved citizens in the decision-making process regarding the use of public spaces during the Christmas period through two main tools: a randomly selected jury and a public survey. The randomly selected jury, formed through a civic lottery or sortition, included citizens chosen to reflect a fair and diverse representation of the population, encompassing different ages, social backgrounds, and origins. These jury members engaged in discussions, evaluated proposals, and provided recommendations on how to create a more welcoming and participatory atmosphere in Strasbourg's public spaces during the festive season. In parallel, the City of Strasbourg conducted a public survey to gather broader community input, allowing residents to share their opinions and suggestions on the use of public spaces.



## ALDA - European Association for Local Democracy

This dual approach aimed to create a transparent, inclusive, and community-oriented decision-making process that gave citizens a direct voice in shaping the city's public life.

Notably, the jury's composition was intentionally designed based on criteria such as gender, place of residence, and social and professional categories, ensuring a diverse mix of perspectives. This inclusive approach encouraged participants to reflect on the different forms of discrimination experienced by members of various communities, fostering a deeper understanding through an intersectional lens.

Despite these efforts, the results of the survey revealed a **lack of representation from people with disabilities**. This observation led to questions about the reasons behind their absence, with one possible explanation being the fear of social judgement that might have deterred individuals from disclosing their disabilities when participating in the survey. This finding highlights the need for more **deliberate and supportive measures to ensure that people with disabilities feel safe, valued, and encouraged to actively engage in such participatory processes**.



## Fundación Manos Tendidas

The seventeen participants that have attended the **Structured Dialogue with Decision Makers** are young people with **intellectual and physical disabilities, aged between 25 and 34 and are daily users of Fundación Manos Tendidas**, as well as one city councillor for social affairs of the municipality of Madrid and other representatives. Although the target group of the Project is young people aged 18-29, Manos Tendidas had to recruit some people over 29 because of lack of users capable of attending such activity due to their mental health conditions. Therefore, in accordance with the Project Officer, Manos Tendidas (as the rest of partners) has been granted some flexibility for the age of the participants.

All of the young participants with disabilities have high school education, as no one has carried on with their studies. Most participants have Down syndrome with a moderate to severe intellectual disability. Of the 10 participants, 8 have 2nd degree of dependency and 2 have 1st degree of dependency. The participants were recruited after the Manos Tendidas staff, social workers, and coordinators met in order to understand what the activity was about (topics, level of difficulty...) and then select the most suitable and capable young people of the Foundation. After a fair process of selection, and having the young people (together with their parents) understood what the training was about and accepted to participate, they were recruited. The people that have been selected, were chosen through crucial criteria so that they could benefit from this training and eventually be able to help in the future other people that are/have/live a similar situation.



# Fundación Manos Tendidas

The main objective of this activity is to have **debate/meeting/activity, in which young people with intellectual disability get together with decision makers (or policy makers) where they can have the opportunity to engage in a political dialogue regardless of their intellectual abilities.** This is why Fundación Manos Tendidas has invited to this activity the local councillor for social affairs of the Arganzuela district (municipality of Madrid).

Before this activity, the target group has participated in the previous sessions (Youth Training, Debate, Peer to Peer Dialogue) of the project so that they had sufficient knowledge and capabilities to have a political and social dialogue with decision makers. Also, the staff of Manos Tendidas prepared the participants for this event by asking them what they wanted to debate about with the councillor. As a result, during this session, the participants prepared the following questions for the city councillor:

1. **What are the barriers that currently limit/condition European democratic values (equality, freedom, human dignity, democracy...)?**
2. **What barriers exist for people with diversity to be able to make fully autonomous decisions?**
3. **What can we do to guarantee the right to free and unbiased expression of people with diversity?**
4. **Why is it necessary and important to have a plan/strategy that guarantees the democratic rights of people with diversity?**
5. **How can the quality of life and equal participation of people with diversity be improved? What actions are carried out by the Madrid City Council to guarantee this?**
6. **How is the right to vote guaranteed for people with diversity? What specific measures or mechanisms exist in the Madrid City Council to guarantee the right to vote for people with diversity?**



## Fundación Manos Tendidas

During the session with the city councillor, each participant asked her one of each question. Firstly, the councillor would give her opinion, and, then, there would be a ten minute debate about the question and the city councillor's answer.

As mentioned before, Fundación Manos Tendidas staff prepared the young participants for this activities by:

- Revising the previous topics that have been explored in the previous tasks of the Project (Youth Training, Debate and Peer to Peer Dialogue). This part was very important, as many participants **needed support to remember everything, as the topics can be challenging for them.**
- At the end of the revising session, participants elaborated autonomously the **questions that they wanted to ask to the city councillors** (topics that they felt important for their daily lives).
- Fundación Manos Tendidas had also a **bilateral call with the city councillor** to explain what the activity was about, the description of our target group and their necessities.



# KMOP - Education & Innovation Hub

The structured dialogue with policymakers focused on amplifying the voices of individuals with autism and moderate to severe intellectual disabilities in political life. The discussion centred on **the ongoing efforts to ensure their perspectives are heard in decision-making processes. While some participants engaged more actively than others, overall, the event was successful in fostering meaningful dialogue.**

Participants shared the obstacles they face in accessing inclusive environments and emphasised the importance of such spaces. The session also addressed questions regarding the work of **EEPAA**, with participants offering personal insights into their experiences.

The methodology **followed the** Guidelines for Structured Dialogue with Decision Makers, with necessary adaptations to ensure that the topics were accessible and understandable to participants.

The discussion underscored several **key areas for improvement**. While participants valued the opportunity to engage with policymakers, concerns were raised about the **underrepresentation of individuals with intellectual disabilities in such dialogues**. Additionally, the **presence of caregivers** provided support and reassurance for many younger participants, and their ongoing involvement should be encouraged, albeit in a balanced way. **Expanding opportunities for dialogue and further adapting sessions to accommodate the needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities will contribute to a more inclusive and empowering environment.**



## APROXIMAR - Cooperativa de Solidariedade Social, CRL

In the **Structured dialogue with decision makers**, that took place on 17th October 2024, two staff members from Aproximar and eight young participants with disabilities, members of the Vila Nova de Gaia Social Inclusion Centre (CIS), had the possibility to confront with two politicians from the municipality and from the parish council of the centre Avintes.

This meeting was crucial for the young participants to gain a **deeper understanding of local services, particularly those provided by the Junta de Freguesia**, the local authority closest to the community and most responsive to their concerns. During the session, the young people **shared their development journey through youth training initiatives and recounted their visit to European institutions in Strasbourg**. They also had the opportunity to ask the mayor several questions and learned that they could attend public meetings, held monthly, as well as community meetings, organised four times a year. The President of the Junta personally invited them to the next public meeting, scheduled for October 28 at 9:30 PM at the Junta de Freguesia.

The meeting began with an overview of the project and its activities to date, followed by participant introductions. The session was structured to allow ample time for questions, comments, and the free expression of opinions. Instead of using a PowerPoint presentation, the focus was on creating an open dialogue. At the end, participants were invited to complete an evaluation form.



## KAI - Kūrybinės ateities idėjos

In the **Structured Dialogue** that took place on 14 June 2024, six members from Klaipeda and Kaunas deaf organisations had the opportunity to confront with two politicians of **Klaipeda Municipality Council** and with one **responsible for election process of the municipality**.

The session began with trainers **explaining the purpose and format of the structured dialogue, highlighting key techniques and strategies for effective communication**. To facilitate better communication, two sign language interpreters were arranged for the event.

The participants explored issues related to **people with disabilities, focusing on their relationship with society, societal attitudes, and the specific challenges they face**. Politicians shared their experiences and insights regarding these issues. One politician, in particular, spoke about the difficulties he has encountered as a visually impaired individual navigating the city.

A significant part of the discussion, then, centred on the **involvement of young people in democratic life**. The primary question that has been raised is the following: **Why do young people, both with and without disabilities, tend to disengage from active politics?**

From the discussion, young people with disabilities emphasised **external barriers** that limit their participation in democratic processes, such as feeling isolated from society and finding it difficult to access information. In contrast, politicians and decision-makers pointed to **internal factors**, such as low levels of engagement and a lack of motivation among youth. Politicians encouraged young people to take a more active role in advocating for their rights, urging them to attend municipal meetings, raise concerns, and propose solutions.



# Recommendations

These **recommendations** represent a comprehensive set of insights that emerged from the structured dialogues organised by each project partner with local decision-makers. The feedback gathered during these dialogues highlights the **need for specific actions to foster a more inclusive and participatory environment for young people, especially those with disabilities.**

- **Provide Safe Spaces for Expression:** Create environments where young people, especially those with disabilities, have the opportunity to speak freely and express their opinions without restrictions. It is important to moderate these dialogues impartially, without imposing any bias or conditioning, to ensure that all voices are genuinely heard.
- **Engage Local Authorities and Policymakers:** Regularly involve local authorities and policymakers in discussions with young people and their communities. This direct engagement not only facilitates a more meaningful dialogue but also ensures that decision-makers are aware of the issues faced by youth, particularly those with disabilities.
- **Expand Opportunities for Dialogue:** Organise more frequent exchanges and discussions with politicians and decision-makers, making these interactions a standard practice. Such efforts should be extended to include a wider range of participants, encompassing more young people and those with diverse disabilities.
- **Involve Caregivers in Structured Dialogues:** Encourage the participation of caregivers (such as parents) in dialogues with young individuals with disabilities. Their involvement can create a more supportive atmosphere that helps young people feel more comfortable and confident during discussions. Structured dialogues that include both caregivers and young individuals contribute to a more inclusive and engaging environment.



# Recommendations

- **Make Inclusivity a Systematic Principle:** Move beyond viewing inclusivity as just a label or checkbox in policy documents and practices. Inclusivity should be ingrained as a fundamental and systematic principle within institutions. By treating inclusivity as the norm, we can foster a culture where equality and accessibility are standard expectations, integrated naturally into all aspects of decision-making and implementation.
- **Systematic Consultation with Disability Associations:** Regularly engage in systematic consultations with associations of people with disabilities. By directly interacting with these groups, decision-makers can ensure that the voices and experiences of those most affected are at the forefront of policy making. This approach builds trust and demonstrates a genuine commitment to addressing the needs of the disability community.
- **Broaden Focus to Include Invisible Disabilities:** Expand the focus of inclusion efforts beyond just physical disabilities to also address invisible disabilities, such as cognitive, psychological, and sensory impairments. These conditions are often overlooked, leading to a lack of appropriate support. Prioritising invisible disabilities in discussions about inclusion will lead to more comprehensive and effective initiatives.
- **Enhance Training Programs for Inclusivity:** Implement comprehensive training programs to equip stakeholders, including civil society organisations and local authorities, with the skills and knowledge necessary to overcome administrative and logistical barriers to inclusion. These programs are essential to building the capacity to engage effectively with diverse groups, ensuring that inclusivity becomes a standard practice.



# Conclusions

The policy recommendations outlined in this paper highlight the **critical need to promote the political participation of individuals with disabilities**. By addressing the barriers identified during the structured dialogues, we can create a more inclusive environment that empowers young people with disabilities to actively engage in decision-making processes. **The recommendations call for the creation of safe spaces, enhanced engagement with local authorities, and systematic inclusivity, ensuring that the voices of those with disabilities are heard and acted upon.** Moving forward, these strategies offer a **roadmap for policymakers to foster meaningful change, ensuring that political participation is not only accessible but also integral to the broader fabric of inclusive governance.** It is our hope that these recommendations will guide future initiatives and inform lasting actions that bring us closer to achieving true equality and representation for all.



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