



European Economic  
and Social Committee



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# ECI DAY • 8 June 2023

## Upskilling citizens for a successful ECI with impact!

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# ECI Day: Upskilling citizens for a successful ECI with impact!

On 8 June, the European Economic and Social Committee hosted the 2023 edition of its annual European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) Day, providing a platform to engage with high-level institutional representatives, civil society organisations and ECI organisers and supporters.

As part of the European Year of Skills, ECI Day 2023 focused on the skills that organisers need to make their initiative a success. This included providing participants with practical tips and recommendations in the form of "How-To" workshops on topics such as how influencers can help an ECI succeed, or turning an idea into a European Citizens' Initiative. Drawing on organisers' experience, the opening session discussed ways to enhance the ECI tool itself.

The afternoon discussions explored the potential role of the ECI tool in European Citizens' Panels, identified links to European Parliament elections and investigated the skills needed for young people to be actively and successfully involved in participatory democracy, particularly the ECI. As in previous years, organisers were also given the opportunity to present their initiatives.

## Key findings:

### *Democracy and participation*

- For a democracy to work well, the broadest possible and most active **participation by citizens – not only in elections – is essential.**
- **Social and political skills** are of paramount importance to empower citizens and to lead them towards an impactful engagement with EU institutions.
- **Involvement of young people** – the leaders of the future – is crucial. We must give them more room to voice their views and opinions, to get involved and get familiar with political processes. An **interactive and attractive format** is needed to attract and keep their attention.
- The **ECI Educational toolkit** for schools was officially launched as part of ECI Day 2023. The toolkit is tailored for teenagers as of the age of 16, to learn in a playful way about the EU and about the ECI itself.

### *European Citizens' Initiative*

- The ECI is a **unique tool** to participate in democracy and influence EU policies. It has **huge potential, but it also needs to be improved** to become an established and powerful tool and to make the voice of citizens really heard at EU institutional level.
- The **experiences of ECI organisers** revealed some "construction sites" to be looked at. In particular, the **low level of awareness** about the tool, its **low impact** on EU legislation, non-readiness of citizens to share personal data and **lack of financial resources** (especially if there is no legal body created) were mentioned as the major challenges faced by organisers. Obtaining support from NGOs and networking among ECI organisers, as well as the political process after the successful collection period, were also causing difficulties.



- **ECI cannot be a process that leads nowhere:** ensuring the success of an ECI is not enough. We must **make sure that its impact on EU policies is strengthened**, because only this way we will be able to provide citizens with a concrete opportunity to meaningfully participate in decision- and policy-making processes.
- **Reform of ECI is thus needed.** Shortcomings need to be addressed. The process should be as **digital** as possible.
- The ECI as a tool for **matching specific individual demands with EU democracy** and a tool for **agenda setting** (even in long-term, e.g. successful ECI on Right2water and EESC call for a “Blue Deal”).
- ECI tool can be used as a **tool to promote European Citizenship**, to develop citizens’ ownership to European challenges and enhance their awareness of our open democracy.
- **The ECIs usually focus on 3 dominant areas:** Environment and climate; Social rights; and Democracy, justice and rights. **Why not to organise citizens’ panels around them?**

#### **How-to...**

The four parallel how-to workshops achieved the important goal of sharing best practices and providing key tips to ensure the success of an ECI:

- Turning an idea into a registered ECI and successful campaign can be challenging. Potential ECI organisers have at their disposal **supportive tools such as the ECI Forum**, a highly useful body providing very concrete practical and legal guidance on what potential organisers need to consider and to do to get their initiative registered.
- Good strategy when turning your idea into an ECI is based on **clarity**: clarity on objective, clarity on desired legal act from the Commission, and clarity on the kind of legal act.
- General **suggestions** were made on how to best organise an ECI campaign ranging from having good preparation, thinking in advance about the campaign’s length and difficulties, securing a budget to get one million signatures, and above all **being original** in the ways to advertise the campaign.
- Setting up a **strong and successful communication campaign** in support of an ECI campaign: to integrate – ideally a combination of – multipliers and influencers, i.e. reaching out to activists, celebrities from politics (MPs and MEPs), cinema and entertainment, as well as partners such as NGOs, proves to be particularly useful to develop credibility, raise awareness about the ECI and benefit from a multiplier effect on social media.
- The importance of providing influencers with materials and pictures explaining the ECI’s objectives in **easy-to-deliver messages**.
- Successful and future ECIs also shared best practices on how to navigate the EP election cycle to tackle key challenges facing the EU.
- There is no single European Parliament elections momentum due to the **differences between Member States**. It is also important to test what works and what does not.
- Focus on **digital dimension**, i.e. to decentralise the EP elections with digital tools.



- A single **European digital citizenship** would give citizens access to services and rights and institutionalise a permanent EU Citizens' Assembly.
- **Young people should have a say** in decisions that influence their lives directly or indirectly. They have a lot of concerns and want to be involved. It is essential to upskill them and make them aware of the participatory tools they have at their disposal. There is a lot of information available, but without a framework. Giving this information to young people when they are still at school is highly useful.
- The **ECI Educational toolkit**, launched by the European Commission as part of ECI Day 2023, is available in all EU languages and published on the Commission's ECI website and the EU Learning Corner. There are four modules with interesting exercises that will help students to develop skills they can also use in their day to day lives and in their prospective careers.
- Youth is a target group for ECIs, while the ECI as such might be a **good introduction into participatory democracy**. Young people from candidate countries could be made aware of the tool already during the accession process.

#### *More deliberation leads to more consensus and more impact*

- The **deliberative potential of the ECI** should be boosted and ways should be found to increase the **EU institutions' responsiveness** to citizens' requests. This is why it is important to explore ways in which instruments of participatory democracy like the ECI can be connected with instruments of deliberative democracy like citizens' panels.
- Deliberations means **progress for democracy**. Unlike a simple online consultation of individual citizens, deliberation ensures the exchange of opinions. Citizens' panels to enlighten decision makers.
- Participation will help to create **trust** of citizens towards the EU and enable the EU to fit people's needs. It is also important to seek the views of those who usually do not participate.
- Citizens assemblies / panels to become a **permanent feature** of EU politics. A new Commission DG for participatory and deliberative democracy should be created that could work together with a European Parliament Intergroup.
- There would clearly be **benefits in combining citizens panels and the ECI**. But when best to combine both (before launching an ECI, after collecting 1 million signatures, or after Commission's answer...)? The combination of ECI (number) and CP (depth) also needs a **link to the national level**.
- **New online one-stop-shop** will be established by the Commission to find best synergies between participatory instruments. It will combine citizens' consultations, the ECI, and a new space inspired by CoFoE multilingual platform to allow citizens to deliberate between each other.

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