



## **The education and training stakeholders' role in the Future of Europe - Reaching out to citizens deserves serious commitment**

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) comes at a time where citizens' confidence in national governments and, by consequence, in European institutions is constantly decreasing<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, the current health crisis is turning into a democratic crisis dividing citizens and spreading hate speech from all sides. Social movements are evolving and citizens' engagement is on the rise, and yet they remain unheard. The CoFoE is a crucial democratic exercise that the Lifelong Learning Platform welcomes: in times of struggle, it is an important reminder that active citizenship and participation in political life should not be limited to elections, but are rather continually exercised at different levels and times. It can help bring Europe closer to its citizens - and vice versa.

At the same time, LLLP holds that the Conference can substantially contribute to an ongoing process of discussing the very essence of **civil dialogue mechanisms** in the EU and Member States. The need for such a structured dialogue cannot be questioned - as it is an enabler of basic democratic rights - but the efficacy and real impact of such mechanisms should be the object of discussion. The time of top-down policy and decision-making is coming to an end and we must prepare for new ways of deliberating, with citizens at the heart.

This is all the more true in the context of the **pandemic**, which is showing us that countries all over the world are resorting to top-down initiatives - with the state of emergency as a convenient back-up for all sorts of policies. Lest we confine this trend to other parts of the world, for Europe is no exception: its Member States are not exempt from such dynamics, and are taking up the bad habit of excluding citizens from policy-making processes. The pandemic showed a complete absence of robust civil dialogue mechanisms to face such emergencies: well-established structures would have made decisions more legitimate, more concerted - and probably better.

The Lifelong Learning Platform, as the voice of **education and training stakeholders**, such as education and training providers, learners, educators, civil society organisations, holds that these actors are particularly relevant for the scope of the Conference and the Future of Europe. It is a worthy reminder to consider that enrollment in learning enhances an individual's participation in their society: socialisation and learning processes both start at birth, and shall therefore not be

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_1867](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_1867)

considered separately. Back in 2017, we called for a Future of Europe that is Learning Europe<sup>2</sup>: four years later we cannot help but notice that our cry went unheard and we cannot stress enough the crucial role education and training play in safeguarding our democracies. The revamped importance of citizenship education in curricula is a witness of the role that education stakeholders can play for our democracies, which shall not be neglected in the processes of the CoFoE.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a positive step towards a renewed approach to inclusion of citizens in decision making. However, the way the Conference has come to life raises several concerns, worryingly linked to the democratic spirit of the initiative. The Conference had the ambition to put citizens at the centre of the process: while a good idea and operated in good faith, this meant bypassing their chosen safe spaces of mobilisation such as civil society organisations (CSOs), social movements, campaigns, etc. and turned out to be far from a success. Since its beginning, the Conference aimed to reach out to citizens directly - without the sounding board of civil society organisations. However, it is clear that without the commitment of CSOs, who were initially left out of the political processes, citizens will be playing a passive role. Getting Europe closer to citizens is a noble scope, but civil society organisations and their unique role shall not be sacrificed on this altar. To fill in this gap, the Lifelong Learning Platform has joined the Civil Society Convention on the CoFoE<sup>3</sup> initiated by Civil Society Europe, to support the involvement and key role of civil society organisations in this democratic exercise.

After observing the process of the CoFoE more closely and having gained insights on its functioning, it is with great regret that we acknowledge an absolute and generalised **lack of transparency** and **inadequate timeline** on the decisions taken during the Plenaries and on the involvement of citizens throughout the process. In particular, LLLP stresses an unmatched absence of clarity on the role of the Working Groups - which should be the main place where the proposals are discussed, but are now a simulacrum of democracy; from logistical shortcomings to missing invitations, from obscure system to invite experts, to the total absence of content and space for debates in meetings, it is now clear that they serve a tokenist purpose and are destitute of any democratic meaning whatsoever. Moreover, the functioning Working Groups have brought to our attention that the Conference is (purposefully?) sliding towards a silos-based workflow. This goes against the initial spirit of the Conference, the objective to achieve policy coherence across areas, but also the simple idea that sectors should be bridged - not divided.

The same can be said for the **online platform** that serves as the main repository for citizens' ideas: set aside its navigation and technical shortcomings, the ideas proposed suggest that the division in thematic areas is inadequate, as many users rightfully challenge the limits of a given topic. Despite proclaims of inclusion, the platform presents many accessibility issues that drive it astray for citizens with disabilities<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the idea that the most upvoted proposals are also the most important ideas is an absurd own-goal: is the voice of the majority the only one

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<sup>2</sup> [The Lifelong Learning Platform vision on the Future of Europe - "The future of Europe is a Learning Europe for all its citizens!"](#)

<sup>3</sup> [The Civil Society Convention on the Future of Europe is ready to work](#)

<sup>4</sup> [EDF - The Conference on the Future of Europe](#)

worth listening to? Despite these drawbacks, the Lifelong Learning Platform has engaged individually and collectively on the platform, in the hope to gather consensus and harvest ideas.

The **involvement of citizens** represents another point of concern. While the idea of picking random citizens sounded reasonable to try out new ways of deliberative democracy, the lack of transparency within the whole process has been detrimental to their meaningful participation. Throwing regular citizens into political arenas without proper guidance or training means transforming a well-grounded democratic exercise into institutional tourism (at best) and into a political instrumentalisation (at worst). LLLP has, since the design of the process, highlighted the issue of preparing citizens for a meaningful discussion by providing better information and capacity-building opportunities in order to ensure they are able to contribute constructively to the future of Europe.

The greatest concern of all is linked to the **outcomes** of the Conference. The absence of clear communication around the CoFoE translates into an absolute lack of clarity around the use of the results of such an important democratic process. The Lifelong Learning Platform fears that the ideas will not be adequately harvested nor transformed into actionable policies by the European institutions. The whole process of collecting, reviewing, and voting citizens' ideas feels rushed, badly-sketched and flawed in its procedures, and it is easy to see how all this can hamper its results. At the same time, Member States' commitment to their implementation is (deliberatively?) not clear: weak, blurry outcomes are even more likely to be left hanging in the European institutional maze without proper follow-up at national level.

The CoFoE is an unprecedented experiment of deliberative democracy in the EU but risks raising high hopes and expectations just to let citizens down and further alienate them from democratic processes if the outcomes are not taken in due consideration. With the final decisions and its outcomes in the hands of representative democracy and its bureaucratic machine with elected representatives able to dismiss them altogether. LLLP calls upon all stakeholders to ensure that the outcomes of the CoFoE see the light in the form of policy reforms. It is worth remembering how such disappointing outcomes have already been observed in France with the consultations on climate change. European civil society shall take up a watchdog role on this, but we also call on European institutions (including the European Ombudsman) to be vigilant.

This is all the more true for **education policies**, which - as we know - are not a shared EU competence. Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union<sup>5</sup> states that the EU shall support cooperation and exchange while respecting the **subsidiarity principle**. However, such support for cooperation and exchange is fading away in light of the scattered process we are witnessing - and, what's more, it risks affecting education and training policies more than others.

The Lifelong Learning Platform calls for an **increased dialogue** and reinforced cooperation with education and training stakeholders, providers and civil society networks in building the future of

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<sup>5</sup> [12012E/TXT - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

Europe. As we stated back in 2017, the future of Europe is a learning Europe. Education and training, despite remaining national competences, are crucial to the Member States' and Union's social and economic developments and most importantly to safeguard its democracy. We call on the CoFoE to reflect on such a long-standing request for dialogue (see ideas on the digital platform<sup>6</sup>), including the repeated proposals to make it more regular and structured<sup>7</sup>. This should also be an opportunity to reflect on **other forms of citizens' participation and democratic instruments**, such as - but not limited to - Civil Dialogue, Structured Dialogue, and Open Public Consultations. The hic-ups that we are witnessing in the CoFoE are by no means an isolated case, and should rather serve as a warning that Europe might indeed be falling too much into the pit of a technocratic and top-down approach; which Member States are often not shy to follow, as exemplified by the sidelining of civil society in the designs of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans<sup>8</sup>.

These difficulties highlight the crucial role that **citizenship education** plays in Europe: without a holistic and cross-sector approach, democracy will remain an empty signifier. The Lifelong Learning Platform calls on EU institutions to uphold their commitment to education stakeholders in Europe and envision citizenship education policies with learners at their centre. Citizenship education is a constant, never-ending yet high-rewarding effort, which nurtures social cohesion and empowers active citizenship for better societies. Let's live up to this idea.

With these numerous concerns in mind, we call on European institutions to set a clear timeline for the upcoming months, scope and communication for the Conference, overcome logistical shortcomings, and most of all enable the conditions for a **meaningful contribution of citizens**. So far, the Conference on the Future of Europe has not been *by* citizens and certainly not *for* citizens.

The Lifelong Learning Platform strongly believes in the underlying ideas of the Conference on the Future of Europe: our presence, commitment and efforts testify that we hold in the highest consideration its purpose and scope. With renewed dedication to Europe's democratic values, we will keep on working to turn Europe into a learning society.

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<sup>6</sup> [EUCIS-LLL CALLS FOR A STRUCTURED DIALOGUE IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Give Civil Society a Real Say in EU Education Policies](#)

<sup>8</sup> [The EESC calls for real involvement of organised civil society in the implementation phase of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans](#)