



Conference on the Future of Europe

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The EU: a diverse and complex reality

The European Union reunites 27 countries, has 24 official languages and is a home to almost 450 million people. There is a great diversity among citizens and peoples in cultural and religious backgrounds and political and historical experiences. Also the socio-economic realities in which the people find themselves differs greatly.

Co-leadership in the EU: an impossible endeavour?

As you can imagine, at this magnitude and in this context of diversity, it is not obvious to speak about (co-) leadership “as the capacity to co-sense and co-shape the future”, to use the definition of Otto Scharmer which was highlighted by Prisca before.

It is not easy to develop leadership processes involving a broad participation which is at the same time representative for a population as diverse as the EU citizens and which is capable of defining and concretizing common goals and projects for the future. Today I would like to bring your attention to an initiative in which the EU, its institutions and its citizens have aimed to do exactly this. Where the EU has aimed to involve its citizens directly in reflecting on how the Europe of the future will take shape.

A conference on the future of Europe: Why?

The ‘Conference on the Future of Europe’ was launched by the European Commission, the European council (these are the heads of state of the EU member states) and the European Parliament. The aim was to provide a *forum* to the European citizens and organisations within civil society, where they could express their views on important issues for the future such as e.g. European democracy, climate change and the environment, health, the digital transformation, the role of the EU in the world, and more...

The EU institutions wanted to reach out to its citizens following upon a period of consecutive crises: think for example of the global financial crisis in 2008 and the subsequent political crises in the Member States, the Brexit in 2015, the migration influx, the challenges related to global warming and the loss of biodiversity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and more ...

Another important incentive was the declining participation of the citizens in national and European elections and the reproach towards the EU that it wasn’t democratic enough.



Therefore, in the words of the European Commission : “The Conference aimed to reflect our diversity, and to bring Europe beyond its capital cities, reaching every corner of the EU, strengthening the link between Europeans and the institutions that serve them.”¹

A conference on the future of Europe: How?

The main phase of the programme ran from April 2021 until May 2022 and involved a great number of citizens with more than 650.000 event participants and over 5 million unique visitors to the online platform. They took part in 18,000 debates and over 6,500 registered events.

The ‘Conference on the Future of Europe’ consisted of “a series of citizen-led debates and discussions”. The EU saw it as a “major pan-European democratic exercise, which was to enable people from across Europe to share their ideas and help shape our common future”.² Citizens took the lead and their proposals have eventually also led to concrete policy initiatives in a range of fields.

Discussions happened in citizen panels, where people shared proposals and exchanged views. There were both national citizen panels and European citizen panels, where people met in smaller or larger groups to discuss and work on what Europe should look like in the future. Furthermore, every European citizen could share ideas on an innovative Multilingual Digital Platform. In May 2022 a report was published in which 49 proposals in 9 different domains were shared with people representing the EU policy-making institutions.

What is important for the credibility of this kind of initiatives is that it culminates in a concrete follow-up in the policy-making process and eventually results in new policy. In a joint statement called “Putting Vision into Concrete Action”, the EU Institutions laid out how they would do this. For instance, building on the success of the European Citizens’ Panels, the Commission will enable these panels to deliberate and make recommendations ahead of certain key proposals in the future. Other proposals were made regarding for example media literacy and disinformation, environmental policies and social justice. In December 2022 a group of representatives of the European citizens panels were called back together to discuss the progress which had been made in this sense.

Why can we see this as an initiative which can help us in reflecting on ways to advance co-leadership? Also within an African context

The approach is obviously different in character and orientation than the initiatives at a local or regional level, where institutions find themselves closer and oftentimes more responsive to expressions of leadership within civil society.



Even if there are many things we could say about the conference on the future of Europe and its final output and there is probably a lot of space for improvement, there are things we can learn from the conference on the future of Europe.

The experience of the conference on the future of Europe shows how even big and complex realities can reach out to the most diverse social and cultural groups within society and give a voice to people who usually don't get to the stage and bring them together to learn from each other.

Also, the topic-centred approach allowed for a dialogue between politicians and citizens, a dialogue in which the initiative remained with the citizens. I believe this practice and methodology could be applied in different contexts. The process also showed how citizens can bring together politicians and institutions which sometimes didn't share views and goals before.

Personally I was part of a process in which young Catholics from around Europe, whom had never met before and who started from very diverse viewpoints and backgrounds discussed topics such as democracy, social justice, the ecological transition and the European enlargement process.

These discussions took first place amongst ourselves, where some proposals have been worked out. Later on, these proposal were shared with representatives of the European Parliament and the European Commission. The event was organised within the margin of the Conference and managed to engage young people in a reflection where they co-sensed the reality of Europe from different angles and on this basis co-shaped it, becoming protagonist in this way. And this was just one of the many experiences.