Horizontal Priorities: Participation in Democratic Life, Common Values and Civic Engagement

In this briefing sheet, we focus on *participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement,* as one of four horizontal priorities for the Erasmus+ programme, and consider how this should be addressed when assessing a funding application or final report for a Small-Scale Partnership (KA210) or Cooperation Partnership (KA220). This briefing sheet was developed with the support of SALTO Participation & Information Resource Centre and builds on information and guidance provided in the *Erasmus+ Programme Guide, Guide for Experts on Quality Assessment, Handbook on the Lump Sum Funding Model,* the Youth Participation Strategy and the Erasmus+ and ESC Participation Strategy - Implementation Guidelines.

Setting the Scene

The Erasmus+ Programme Guide confirms the importance of recognising and addressing challenges and barriers to democratic participation and active citizenship, by providing the means, space, opportunity and support for active engagement in democratic society. It invites projects and activities that foster the development of competences that foster such participation, such as social and intercultural competences, critical thinking, media literacy and other skills. Projects are encouraged to provide participants with opportunities for democratic participation - including activities for engagement in the democratic and civic life of their communities and the opportunity to freely express their views, contribute to and influence societal decision-making - through meaningful learning experiences. This definition expands on participation beyond taking part in activities with positive societal impact and centres on the right of citizens of all ages to have a say in decisions that affect them and their communities.

Whilst having differing interpretations, participation in democratic life is recognised to include the dimensions of **civic engagement** (for example, remaining informed on causes, contributing to an initiative for common good) and **political engagement** (for example, voting in elections); civic participation (for example, volunteering with the goal of creating social change) and **political participation** (for example, influencing decision-makers, standing for election); **participation democracy** (for example, citizen assemblies); and **digital participation** (for example, e-voting, digital participatory budgeting); and **active citizenship** (dimensions of citizenship that go beyond a legal status and relate to human rights, responsibilities, participation and identity).

The benefits of participation for individual citizens centre on having their voices heard, and hopefully, through this process contributing to a fairer society and learning transversal skills. For decision-making bodies, actions, services and initiatives, participation provides them with a chance to develop a democratic culture from within and become more effective, relevant and inclusive, as well as having a positive impact on society.

Participation is also enshrined as a fundamental right in the **Treaty on European Union** which states that *"every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union"* and that *"decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen"* (Article 10(3)).

Erasmus+ additionally supports efforts to promote increased understanding and awareness of EU Values and the principles of unity and diversity, with all beneficiaries required to respect EU values centred on human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, in full compliance with the values and rights enshrined in the EU Treaties and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. For KA2, additional reference is made to the value of organisations and activities that contribute to population preparedness and building resilience, playing a key role in fostering digital and media literacy and critical thinking, and promoting civic engagement and democratic citizenship.

SALTO Participation & Information Resource Centre (SALTO PI) promotes participation in democratic life, civic engagement, and common values within the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes Under the motto of **'Inspiring Participation, Strengthening Democracy'**. By developing tools, exploring best practices, organising training and strengthening synergies among programme practitioners, it aims to support actors in Youth, Education and Training fields in promoting democratic participation across Europe. Its goals centre on fostering the involvement of key target groups (of projects and of participating institutions) in democratic decision-making; active participation of individuals and groups in civic and social life; developing expertise on evolving trends and developing competences for democratic participation; and providing guidance and support to National Agencies. In a dedicated platform, the Participation Resource Pool provides information, tools, project examples, news and other useful materials for young people, trainers, educators, youth workers, leaders and others. SALTO PI has also published the Youth Participation Strategy (2020-2027), connecting policy, practice and the Programmes, which is accompanied by the Youth Participation Toolkit (2021) that offers thematic insights for applicants, beneficiaries and assessors on working on this topic with young people.

The Quality Standards for Meaningful Youth Participation (2026) were recently published to provide a framing of key factors and criteria on how to make youth participation meaningful, including promoting the youth voice and the involvement of young people in project and wider decision-making. Initially developed in the Youth sector, the core messages of these documents are equally pertinent for anyone working with young people in education and training landscapes, including the core definition which centres on *"young people having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support to freely express their views, contribute to and influence societal decision-making on matters affecting them, and be active within the democratic and civic life of our communities"*. In the Quality Standards document, some valuable definitions are presented for youth participation and citizenship education, alongside references to key human rights legislation. A chapter on different means of engaging young people in democratic life is especially useful, as is the final chapter on quality standards for meaningful youth participation.

Erasmus+ and ESC Participation Strategy - Implementation Guidelines contextualise this important priority, including the policy framework, societal context and key definitions, citing its origins in the Youth Participation Strategy, and underlining the importance of developing and strengthening the role and impact of Erasmus+ and ESC as instruments to foster democratic participation and civic engagement that is aligned with EU values. A dedicated chapter considers how to address the participation priority in the different programme actions and activities, across the fields of education, training, youth and sport, underlining the importance of beneficiary engagement at all project stages (before, during and after) and highlighting the role of national agencies and resource centres.

Application Stage

SMALL-SCALE PARTNERSHIPS aim to widen access to the programme for small-scale actors and less experienced organisations. When assessing applications under this action, it is important to respect the principle of proportionality, ensuring that the proposed actions are consistent with the targeted aims, while recognising that these are smaller projects with limited funding and often more modest ambitions.

COOPERATION PARTNERSHIPS are larger projects with higher levels of funding, targeting transformation and change at individual, organisational and/or sectoral levels, including improved quality of work and practices, and strengthened capacity to work transnationally and across sectors.

Both partnership types require applicants to address at least one horizontal and/or relevant sectoral priority and, for the former, this includes the priority for *participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement*. Additionally, for both partnership types, as for any funded project under Erasmus+, applicants should consider how to embed all horizontal aspects of the programme (inclusion and diversity; environmental sustainability; digital dimension; participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement) within their application for funding.

In terms of how projects might implement the priority for *participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement*, the following options exist:

- projects which select the priority for participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement and which directly address this topic;
- projects where democratic participation, common values and/or civic engagement actions help in achieving other horizontal or wider programme priorities;
- projects which actively embed meaningful democratic participation, civic engagement and active citizenship actions and approaches into plans for delivering their activities.

The insights presented below, for the four core assessment criteria, should help in your assessment of the democratic participation dimension at the point of application.

Under RELEVANCE, you should consider:

- how effectively the project addresses *participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement,* where selected as a priority.
- how convincingly the selected priority aligns with wider project objectives, target groups, their needs and plans for their engagement, and ambitions for innovation.
- whether the proposal includes credible and well-planned activities that aim to foster active democratic participation by offering opportunities to engage in the civic and political life of the communities being reached by the project and/or providing competences and information that fosters and strengthens such engagement.
- the extent to which transnational cooperation offers added value in the targeted activities, including through collaboration, co-creation and an exchange of practices related to democratic active participation and civic engagement.

Under QUALITY OF PROJECT DESIGN, you should consider:

- how clearly the proposal integrates participation and civic engagement into its methodology and expected results.
- whether meaningful opportunities are foreseen for participants to take an active role, including in needs analysis, project design, management, decision-making and evaluation, in ways that are appropriate and relevant to their profile.
- whether the planned activities are sufficient to deliver on the listed objectives.
- whether efforts to build knowledge-skills-capacity-awareness are clear, credible and achievable, being designed to meet the needs of key target audiences and having clear plans for their engagement.
- whether actions centred on the development and testing of tools-platforms-frameworks-resources are clear, credible and achievable, being designed to meet the needs of key target audiences, and having clear plans for their engagement in consultation, testing and co-creation activities.

Under QUALITY OF THE PARTNERSHIP, you should consider:

- whether the required capacity and expertise exists to support democratic participation, civic engagement and the promotion of common values as a part of wider project delivery, including via staff who can facilitate and plan meaningful participation experiences.
- whether partner networks and outreach capacity is sufficient to reach the targeted individuals and communities in a way that will create sufficient mutual understanding, trust and openness, to deliver participatory spaces and to promote active and shared decision-making.

Under IMPACT, you should consider:

- the adequacy and sufficiency of the targeted actions, both during and beyond the project lifetime, going beyond one-off opportunities for engagement with topics related to participation and civic engagement and enhancing knowledge-skills-attitudes among the participating individuals, organisations, systems and communities in a way that encourages and supports future participation.
- how project successes and achievements tied to improved or enhanced participation and civic engagement are to be specifically measured and reported.

Final Reports for Small-Scale Partnerships

At the final report stage, Small-Scale Partnerships are judged against the same criteria used at the point of application (relevance, project design, partnership, impact) yet with a focus on results.

The insights presented below, for the four core assessment criteria, should help in your assessment of the democratic participation dimension at the final report stage.

Under RELEVANCE, you should consider:

- the extent to which the project effectively addressed *participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement,* where selected as a priority.
- the extent to which transnational cooperation added value to project delivery, including through collaboration, co-creation and an exchange of practices.

Under QUALITY OF PROJECT DESIGN, you should consider:

- the extent to which planned methods-actions-results centred on *participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement* were actually delivered.
- the extent to which plans for engaging participants in meaningful activities (for example, needs analysis, project design, management, decision-making and evaluation) were delivered.
- the extent to which plans to build knowledge-skills-capacity-awareness were effectively achieved, meeting the needs of key target audiences and with evidence of active engagement.
- the extent to which plans to develop and test tools-platforms-frameworks-resources were effectively delivered, meeting the needs of key target audiences and with evidence of active engagement.

Under QUALITY OF THE PARTNERSHIP, you should consider:

- the extent to which partner staff and networks were engaged as a means of reaching and effectively engaging the targeted individuals and communities, promoting mutual understanding, trust, openness and active and shared decision-making.

Under IMPACT, you should consider:

- the extent to which the targeted actions were sufficient to promote active participation, going beyond one-off opportunities for engagement and enhancing knowledge-skills-attitudes among the participating individuals-organisations-systems-communities to encourage and support future participation.
- the extent to which project successes and achievements tied to improved or enhanced participation and/or civic engagement were effectively measured and reported.

Additional insights into scoring bands and thresholds for SMALL-SCALE PARTNERSHIPS can be found in the Expert Briefing Sheet for KA210 Final Reports.

Final Reports for Cooperation Partnerships

At the final report stage, Cooperation Partnerships focus solely on Work Packages defined at the point of application, and on the quality and extent of achievement of all planned tasks and deliverables.

As a guiding principle, your assessment should focus on *the extent to which the project was implemented in line with the approved grant application*, as per Annex 2 of the beneficiary agreement, including reflections on horizontal priorities as a part of the overall assessment.

Efforts to address *participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement* in any aspect of project delivery, should be predominantly addressed under WORK PACKAGE 1, reflecting holistically on eventual project implementation and comparing this to the original project proposal. Where a beneficiary has selected *participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement* as a named priority at the point of application, it is especially important to reflect on the extent to which project delivery actively contributed to this priority, according to insights presented in the final report.

You might also reference this in OTHER WORK PACKAGES, where relevant actions were integrated into the original project design. In such cases, it is important to focus on the nature, extent and quality of task and output delivery, highlighting significant changes as well as positive aspects of project, task and output delivery that merit recognition.

Additional insights into scoring bands and thresholds for COOPERATION PARTNERSHIPS can be found in the Expert Briefing Sheet for KA220 Final Reports.