



Analysing best (and worst) practices to support and manage latent and manifest forms of political participation

Purpose

This report aims to systematically analyse the factors that enable or hinder the sustainability and transformative potential of Collective Action Initiatives (CAIs) across Europe, focusing on which elements can facilitate the impact of CAIs and which barriers they encounter.

Moving beyond a simple “best and worst practices” approach, this report delves into the complex interactions at the niche and regime levels that shape whether CAIs succeed in driving social and political change toward sociotechnical transitions.

By applying a rigorous, multi-level perspective and systems-thinking framework, the deliverable contributes with essential empirical insights and strategic guidance for policymakers, civil society, and practitioners seeking to foster meaningful democratic engagement and governance innovation in climate action contexts.

Intended audience

This deliverable is specifically designed to inform a diverse set of actors vested in participatory governance and sustainability transitions:

The expansive case-based and multi-method insights provide valuable reference material to support evidence-based decision-making, design coherence, and replication of participatory governance innovations across different social and political landscapes.

Main users

- **Local, regional, and national policymakers** aiming to design inclusive, adaptive, and effective participatory governance frameworks that integrate grassroots energy and climate initiatives.
- **Civil society organizations, cooperatives, grassroots activists, and community leaders** who seek evidence-based strategies to more effectively manage, scale, and sustain their democratic and environmental engagement efforts.
- **Researchers, evaluators, and sustainability practitioners** interested in the socio-political dynamics of democratic innovations and multi-level system transitions.
- **European, national, and local funding bodies and international organizations** supporting participatory initiatives and improving the democratic legitimacy of sustainability policies.



Main activities

The deliverable carried out an extensive analysis of 18 diverse Historical Examples (HEs) of Collective Action Initiatives drawn from six European countries (Austria, Spain, Italy, Poland, Finland, and Estonia), encompassing a broad spectrum of political participation categories—*personal involvement, civic engagement, institutional participation, and activism*.

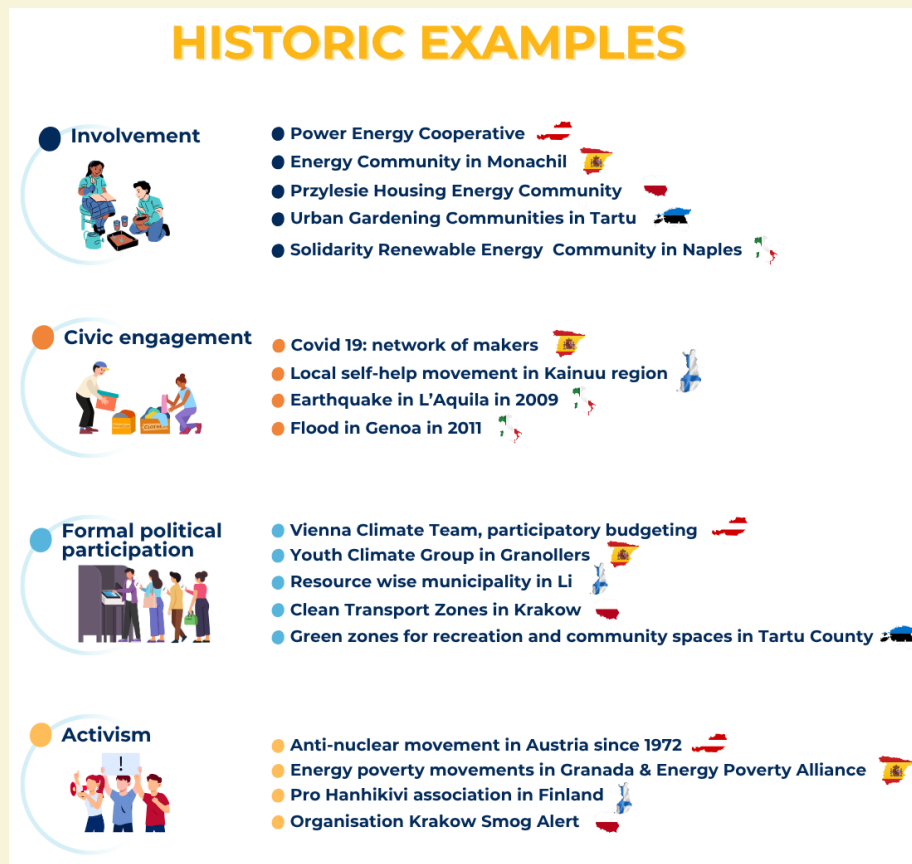


Figure 1: CO-SUSTAIN 18 Historical examples

Using the **Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) framework**, the research dissected how CAIs interact dynamically across three levels:

- The **niche level**, where internal community capacities, governance practices, norms, and social spaces manifest,
- The **regime level**, reflecting broader institutional and policy environments influencing CAI opportunities and constraints,
- The **landscape level**, capturing wider societal trends, crises, and disruptions that create pressure and opportunities for system change.

Employing complementary comparative methods—Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) and Most Different Systems Design (MDS)—the study distilled generalizable insights alongside context-specific findings.

Data sources included in-depth qualitative interviews with CAI participants and stakeholders, textual and discourse analyses, quantitative statistical evaluation using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), and network and system mapping to expose power dynamics and feedback loops.



Syntheses were crafted to highlight key factors shaping CAI effectiveness, sustainability, and systemic impact in the context of democratic climate governance.

Key results

The analysis identified a rich set of enabling and hindering factors organized at both niche and regime scales:

Enablers:

- **Niche-level enablers** highlighted the importance of well-resourced internal leadership, technical expertise, and socially cohesive networks as foundational. Democratic, horizontal governance and explicit efforts to create free social spaces foster safe experimentation and inclusive decision-making, resulting in resilient CAIs with adaptive learning capacities.
- **Regime-level enablers** included institutional openness to innovation, flexible legal frameworks that protect civic freedoms and participation, and supportive collaboration with public officials and private sector actors. Some successful initiatives exemplified how proactive government engagement could co-produce scalable sustainability innovations.

Barriers:

- **Niche-level barriers** frequently stemmed from precarious funding, volunteer exhaustion, unclear governance norms, and fragmentation within small or isolated networks. Autonomy was often challenged by institutional co-option or regulatory complexity.
- **Regime-level barriers** involved bureaucratic inertia, legal ambiguity impeding protest or activism, adversarial municipal relations, and opaque media landscapes limiting public discourse and awareness.

Transition pathways varied, with the majority of CAIs achieving **incremental reconfiguration or full transformation** of governance arrangements, supported by evolving discourse that shifted from activism toward formalized collaboration. Empowerment and social capital proved more pivotal for systemic change than technical innovation alone.

Systemic trends

- About 58% of CAIs contributed to deeper structural transformation; others produced more localised but still crucial impacts.
- The most effective CAIs combined bottom-up “social laboratories” with growing institutional support and transparency.
- Empowerment, education, and strong social capital were more decisive for transformation than purely technological innovation.

Policy implications

The findings point to crucial directions for policy and governance:

- **Embed civic participation structurally into governance** through legal recognition, stable funding, and facilitative administration to sustain initiatives beyond pilot phases.



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- **Promote partnerships** that bridge grassroots innovation with institutional actors, fostering trust, resource access, and mutual learning.
 - **Emphasise inclusiveness:** ensure gender, age, and minority representation in participatory processes.
 - **Establish reflexive governance mechanisms**, including ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive management to integrate citizen feedback meaningfully.
 - **Provide consistent, long-term support** (legal, financial, and recognition) to CAIs to ensure durability beyond initial project phases.
 - Recognize that **success factors vary contextually** and avoid one-size-fits-all approaches by enabling locally tailored solutions within overarching supportive frameworks.

Overall, these strategies are essential to convert isolated initiatives into durable engines of democratic and environmental transformation.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that achieving democratic climate transitions in Europe rests on enabling conditions that allow Collective Action Initiatives to flourish and scale. Success depends on horizontal governance, rich social capital, supportive legal-political regimes, and protection of civic autonomy.

Policy interventions must therefore build bridges between grassroots innovation and institutional change, ensuring adequate support, open frameworks, and reflexive adaptation to evolving challenges. *Empowering active citizenship not only increases policy effectiveness but is itself a core component of sustainable and democratic governance.*



Acknowledgements

This summary sheet was based on [Deliverable 2.3](#) of the CO-SUSTAIN project. CO-SUSTAIN aims to define and test new democratic pathways for a sustainable transition, enabling local policymakers to support various and novel forms of political participation and empowering citizens to act.

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