



Participation in **H**olistic **EN**vironmental/Ecological **I**nnovations

GRANT AGREEMENT NUMBER: 101037328

Deliverable D2.1 **Sound Practices of Democratic Innovations**

Version: 2.0
Submission date: 27.09.2023
Lead: CNRS

Technical References	
Deliverable No.	2.1
Dissemination Level ¹	PU
Work Package	2
Task	2.1
Lead beneficiary	CNRS
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Due date of deliverable	September, 31, 2023 (M20)

PU = Public

PP = Restricted to other program participants (including the commission services)

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Version	Date	Modification(s)	Author(s)
V0.1	09.01.2023	First Draft	Abbas and Sintomer
V0.2	20.01.2023	Review	Sheila Holz and Giovanni Allegretti
V1.0	31.01.2023	Consolidated version for submission	Abbas and Sintomer
V1.1	20.09.2023	Reviewed version	Sintomer and Cordier
V1.2	25.09.2023	Review	Sheila Holz
V2.0	26.09.2023	Consolidated version	Sintomer and Cordier

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No. 101037328

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1.4. Interdependencies of societies and nature in democratic innovations for the ecological transition

From the very beginning, nature has been understood as a condition of opposition to the organization of social life, according to Latour (2004), reporting symbolically and practically to non-human elements in nature/culture collectives that vary according to the relative positions of each one. Bearing this in mind, the European Green Deal (EGD) transition pathway is a major challenge for Europe, whose ambition requires joint efforts to articulate diverse contexts and visions of humans/nature collectives and relations. The challenge is to understand and consider the social construction of nature and the environment, as contextual, produced by a web of different dimensions interrelated and interdependent, comprising different meanings that condition the implementation of EGD's measures.

The ecological transition (ET) drawn by EGD is fundamentally a concept that aims to implement a new social and economic model to respond to the main contemporary socio-ecological challenges, based on a redesign of the ways we live, work, and produce. However, the complexity of this transition relies on the need to adopt new deliberative and participatory models since the traditional ones are not able to address the current needs of societies (Andreta et al., 2022). When it comes to respecting the nature, the ET doesn't simply mean 'greening' the current system. It is a deep transformative policy that must overcome centuries of history where humanity has pushed at nature to dominate and exploit (Aldeia/Alves, 2019). This can only be done by reconciling nature with humans, by showing the paths that interpenetrate them in a single living organism. Restoring totality, interdependent relationships, and connections in what Jason W. Moore (2016) called the "Web of Life" where all forms of life belong and are related in multiple ways.

The adoption of innovative democratic models, following Smith's (2009) definition, implies deepening institutions of higher societal participation in public policy. This perspective recognizes the importance of collective action and, most importantly, the role of 'societal stakeholders besides citizens' (Hendriks, 2019, p. 445). The key question here is on who is included in the 'societal stakeholders' category. If there is a call to restore the society-nature relationship, maybe bringing nature to the heart of ET will be assumed as a democratic innovation. Therefore, how can we conceive new participatory models integrating the socio-cultural reality of each territory and its relationships with nature? The challenge here lies in overcoming Habermas's (Habermas, 1974, 1989) proposal regarding the principles for spaces for deliberation and citizen participation—general accessibility, elimination of privilege, and discovery of norms and rational legitimations. In fact, these principles may not fit the transition needed since they can exclude and marginalize, firstly, those underprivileged groups with limited access to these spaces of deliberation (Fraser, 2003, as cited in Caselunghe et al., 2019) and secondly, the non-humans 'societal

stakeholders’, that historically have been put outside the debate, neglecting their agency (Čapek, 2010) and with a diminished possibility of being heard since they need someone to represent, translate and mediate their interests. In fact, it may be dangerous to apply the concept of agency—traditionally attributed to humans—as the “...ability to convert ideas into purposeful actions” (Nash, 2005, p. 67), since it may reproduce an anthropocentric approach that still limits the recognition of non-humans as agents of change and subjects of history. However, maybe what needs to be done is to rethink the idea of the agency concept and its resignification. It is undeniable that nature is a powerful force that can take control of the landscape and shape it, constraining human actions.

The recognition of the ‘rights of nature’, which is connected with the nature agency concept, has been framed by several constitutional, legislative, and judicial enactments, which defend that non-humans and natural systems are entitled to legal personhood status (Stone, 1972). Despite this importance, and the overwhelming amount of ecological transition debate, there may be a risk of excluding non-humans from the deliberative process and locking them into this legal discussion. To avoid this and to strengthen democratic citizenship and participation, adopting a ‘discursive citizenship’. According to Dryzek (2000) discursive citizenship is “...pluralistic in embracing the necessity to communicate across difference without erasing difference, reflexive in its questioning orientation to established traditions (including the tradition of deliberative democracy itself), transnational in its capacity to extend across state boundaries into settings where there is no constitutional framework, ecological in terms of openness to communication with non-human nature, and dynamic in its openness to ever-changing constraints and opportunities for democratization.” (Dryzek, 2000, p. 3). In this type of citizenship, interspecies-communication is valued, constituting an ecological shift where the superiority of the human species is replaced by the moral recognition of non-humans.

The historic Cartesian duality between nature and society may also be deconstructed by the discursive citizenship, through the abandonment of the exclusivity of the anthropocentric narrative that over time excluded different classes of humans but, also made irrefutable that non-humans are outside the boundaries of the political sphere and in a condition of ‘nature’. However, this is, as Latour (1993) stated before, “ethically problematic and empirically false”. The interdependencies among all species, including humans, are undeniable and both biophysical and symbiotic interactions took place on different scales. Therefore, democratic innovation towards an ecological transition should not restrict the participation to only humans. If this criterion is used, the risk of an isolation from the whole—Moore’s ‘Web of life’—increases, limiting the possibilities of facing socioecological challenges and to meeting the needs of humans and non-humans, while

respecting their rights. New participatory processes should be grounded on the moral recognition of the entire web of life and not only some species. Non-humans may not be able to participate directly in deliberative processes, but this does not mean that their needs and interests should not and cannot be represented there. The implementation of a discursive citizenship implies that humans are responsible for representing the rights of non-humans'. This might well be the core of the democratic innovation that ET needs.

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