

**alda** \*



European Association  
for Local Democracy

# **LOCAL DEMOCRACY WILL SAVE DEMOCRACY**

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Citizens, Equality, Rights  
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# Introduction

The present theoretical framework was presented during the General Assembly of ALDA - the European Association for Local Democracy - on the 8th of June 2023. It capitalises on the experience of ALDA and its members and partners and it is an attempt to contribute to the challenges posed to Democracy in Europe and in the world. It identifies instruments responding to the multiple crises and offers options to support European institutions, in their efforts to strengthen Democracy as a pillar for peace and development. The paper also highlights warnings that should be taken into consideration.

The document is structured in a first part of a theoretical framework and a second part that recounts the work of ALDA which makes concrete many theories on democracies, in the plural. Over the last few decades, ALDA – the European Association for Local Democracy - has accepted challenges of representative, participatory, deliberative and contributory democracy. The bigger open question is how to regenerate the electoral participation, that is in a very strong crisis from the point of view of the quantitative decline of voters but also because of the quality of participatory policies, starting from the crisis of internal participation in political parties.

The hypothesis that is presented in the paper, is that local democracy will save democracy, in the sense that at the local level, the democracy of “decisions” is implemented in a new way (deliberative democracy) and the democracy of “cooperation” (contributive democracy) are practiced, being complementary to the democracy of the vote (representative democracy).

# Framing the topic, a theoretical dimension of local democracy

We usually think that democracy was born in the Greek city-states around the sixth century BC, but this belief is both spatially and temporally inaccurate. Some studies reveal embryonic forms of democracy since the 3rd millennium BC. in ancient Mesopotamia. Further studies illustrate how forms of assembly to discuss topics of common interest were already in use in the northern European area around 2000 BC. In all probability, there are two reasons why classical Greece is commonly considered the cradle of democracy, and both are socio-spatial if we look carefully.

First: the term polis indicated both the built city and the way in which it was governed by the male and free citizens. Second: the urbanistic invention of the agora coincided with the place where one participated in local government, the square in the heart of the lower city where one met in assembly and was equal before the law, and where one could exercise the right to speak as if to keep silent.

What democracies do we experience, in different phases of history and in different contexts, as inhabitants of cities and territories? Throughout history, the term "democracy" has been accompanied by different adjectives. On the one hand, there are consolidated definitions, such as Athenian democracy, and representative. On the other hand, we find less known and more recent characterizations, such as participatory, deliberative, contributory democracy. The purpose of this contribution is to argue the thesis according to which local democracy will save democracy.

In this introduction we can't forget to mention Harriet Martineau (1837). She lived in the 19th century being one of the first sociologists in history, with severe deafness problems and simultaneously active listening to the voices of blacks and women.

Her paradigmatic warning was about a coeval enormous paradox, namely that the declaration of independence of the United States of America, the incipit of which had proclaimed the equality of all men in 1776, was not valid for women, i.e. for half of the human race.

As if to remind us that, when we speak about democracy, we always refer to theoretical ideals which do not in themselves provide a measure of the level of civilization of a society.

The warning that is always valid in the same way is that every time we talk about community, we must always think about the community in and the community out. When we talk about communities of beneficiaries of local public services we usually think of the most fragile and traditionally excluded subjects. But even when we talk about communities in action for the care of common goods, we must be vigilant in tackling mechanisms of exclusion.

The lack of access to rights adds to the emerging problem of the practice of the rights by those who already obtained them. When we talk about representative democracy, there are two questions. Who has the right to vote, and who doesn't? Who could vote but don't vote (anymore), and why? The fact that more and more people in the world are moving to live and work in urbanized contexts means that we are increasingly asking questions about specific issues of urban democracy.

If the heart of representative democracy is the right to vote, the rights on which attention is focused in the study of the local democratic experience of citizens, according to the different urban contexts in which they live, are also others: for example, the one to participate in decisions on urban transformations or to take care of some common spaces. The assignment of one's preference to whoever is running for mayor and to the various local political roles, however, has more and more to do with experiences other than voting, but which have an impact on it.

A famous article by Sherry Arnstein dates back to 1969, in which a "ladder of citizens' participation" is developed in order to help citizens become aware of manipulative and misleading political rhetoric. She focused on the management of power from the bottom-up questioning the top-down logic of electoral objectives. The incipit of this article referred to the heated controversy over contemporary policies for the inclusion of low-income individuals. Provocatively the author states that :



*"The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you. Participation of the governed in their government is, in theory, the cornerstone of democracy—a revered idea that is vigorously applauded by virtually everyone. The applause is reduced to polite handclaps, however, when this principle is advocated by the have-not blacks, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Indians, Eskimos, and whites. And when the have-nots define participation as redistribution of power, the American consensus on the fundamental principle explodes into many shades of outright racial, ethnic, ideological, and political opposition. [...] In short: What is citizen participation and what is its relationship to the social?"*

This same attitude of advocacy of the rights of the inhabitants is also well represented by Jane Jacobs, author of the well-known book "The Death and Life of Great American Cities", an essay on metropolis published in the United States in 1961. The object of her reflection is the vitality of cities in relation to a human centered design, starting from the quality of the (im)possible proximity relationships between the inhabitants, urban public spaces and the size of the blocks. Particular attention was paid to the social role of streets (safe or dangerous) and neighborhoods (regenerated or poor).

Where are we in Europe, more than half a century after these reflections, on the other side of the ocean? In our reconstruction of the recent history of participatory processes (Ciaffi and Mela, 2011), both the 1980s represented a phase of individualistic involution and the 1990s, on the contrary, a participatory culture of urban and territorial transformations was taken and relaunched.

A particular push in this direction has been given by the European urban regeneration policies. Thanks to European policies and programmes, many deprived areas have been redeveloped physically and accompanied the social work. These pilot experiences have also been encouraged towards a reciprocal comparison of approaches, exchange of methodologies for action-research (Lewin, 1946), circulation of best practices, transfer of so-called "good policies".

Where do the families of social actions on which participatory processes focus in terms of communication, events, consultation and empowerment "land", so to speak?

According to the theory of the ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), each of us moves in concentric ecological niches that extend from the spaces of our most intimate and private life towards semi-public places, through public places that we know more or less well, gradually up to known supra-local spaces and those we do not know. The virtual sphere, as we know, runs through them all.

When a participatory process of social and spatial transformation is locally launched, it is interesting to ask oneself about these different places as training grounds for democracy. It is clear that it is on a local scale that these democratic experiences are practiced or are not.

The measure of the success or failure of a project is given first of all by the inhabitants, because "people vote with their feet": it is precisely with their presence, as well as with their absence, that they express an opinion on the places, and on the choices of transformation of spaces, as well as services, and their social innovation.

From the roof of the Lyon opera house in France to the traceable waste cycle in Boston-USA, the transition takes place from the interactivity of the technological architectural object to technology as a widespread tool for society. The goal then became not only the behavioral changes but also the social monitor of local urban policies, both cultural and environmental. The input of the designers, in both cases, remains the starting point.

It is different for those experiences born spontaneously around **digital platforms to support social aggregation**, as in the case of the self-organization of the inhabitants in social streets. But cities are increasingly intelligent and less equitable. Urban areas are in most cases at the same time more and more populated by homogeneous groups that do not communicate with each other. The inhabitants are individuals increasingly encapsulated in isolated private spaces, often with pathological consequences for their health.

In the new millennium, the digital revolution and the economic crisis together open the doors to the economic and social concept of sharing, understood as an alternative to possession and consumption. One of the most extraordinary experiences of global reach takes place virtually. The sharing of knowledge through a single web platform. In parallel, the symbolic metropolis of the Western avant-garde began to populate with shared transport services where the priority is no longer to own a car or a bicycle, but to be able to use them.

Beyond the services offered by subjects such as Wikipedia and the number of bike and car sharing operators, it is extremely interesting to note how, in the daily life of millions of citizens, some goods and services are once again conceived as commonly used, even before than as public and private goods and services.

The sharing city, in a similar way to the smart city, is among the most powerful contemporary rhetoric, in the sense that public discourse uses it to prefigure a possible future of cities and territories, or its opposite. In any case substantially empty keywords often arrive to citizens, and scholars can recognize some obscure sides (Mela, 2013).

There are, on the contrary, experiences that fill these keywords with meaning, enriching themselves with intellectual commitment and regaining civil and moral sense. The reference is to ways of acting and behaving that break out routines and make the city and the territories leaders of change. In terms of sharing, it is important to note that more and more citizens share actions to take care of the city and the territory, so as to arrive at theorizing that, in response to the crisis, a caring society has in fact formed (Nakano, 2000). The challenge is that private problems confined to the children, the women, the migrants, the sick and the elderly, become collective issues that concern everyone.

Rather than representing an alternative to the society of mass consumption, it is likely that the caring society coexists in hybrid forms. The bottom-up responses that cross the traditional local welfare system are constantly increasing the number of "hybrid and shared services" (Ciaffi, 2020) whereby classic health services become cultural and health services or public and private educational places are open to anyone and used as neighborhood houses or gardens after the end of school hours (Labsus, 2023). This is the case in the transition towns movement, where the stated objective on the web is the creation of a network between people who have experienced the benefits of joining forces to take care of themselves, their community and their planet.

Frequently these communities begin to **experiment with forms of circular economy** in order to do this, for example by beating alternative currency in their neighborhood, as in the case of the Brixton pound in the suburbs of London, while living in a reality that is still mostly organized according to the logic of the free market.

This passage from ideas to actions is the link among these effervescent experiences oriented towards a caring society: in the case of cities in transition, for example, daily behaviors change towards a sustainable lifestyle and a no-oil world.

At the same time, the third sector moves to a leading position from a traditionally marginal one compared to the public and private sector, starting from the unfortunate denomination: residual indeed, compared to the first two. Contributing to take care and jointly defining the general interest are increasingly becoming activities not only reserved for public officials. Still rarely, however, the instruments of administrative law are included among the factors accelerating change in the government of the city and the territory, while these can be central. The municipality of Bologna in Italy, followed by hundreds of other local administrations, adopted in 2014 a regulation for the **shared administration of the commons**.

This regulation puts into practice, through the device of the **collaboration agreement**, the principle of **Horizontal Subsidiarity** introduced in the Italian Constitution in 2001 through the article 118, last paragraph: «The State, Regions, Metropolitan Cities, Provinces and Municipalities favor the autonomous initiative of citizens, single or associated, for carrying out activities of general interest, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity".

The seven thousand collaboration agreements stipulated in Italy (Labsus, 2022) are an important sign of what has been called "**contributory democracy**" (Barbot et al., 2016), in which marginal groups and subjects acquire a leading role, often excluded from representation (such as undocumented foreigners or children) but also from participatory **processes top-down governed** (such as street dwellers or football supporters).

A very important difference is that, unlike a concession that is concluded in an authoritative form between the public responsible and the citizens' association, the collaboration pact is always open to new contractors, thus favoring the social mix increasingly rare in our society. In the majority of cases, the collaboration pact is an agreement that is stipulated with the technical staff of the local public administration, and not with the political one, thus overcoming the party label of some projects which too often end with the closing of the political cycle that signed them.

Administrative innovation, which is making possible a season of extraordinary collaboration in Italy between public, private and third sector entities, can be inscribed in a more general trend that we can recognize in the western panorama.

**Community activism** increasingly works as a forerunner for more equal and less authoritative local public policies (Gallent, Ciaffi, 2014).

Since the 2000s, the hypotheses about the void left by party politics has been filled by other subjects became increasingly frequent, including millions of people involved in associations, committees, campaigns, movements, to carry out what is defined as "spread politics" (Marcon, 2005). Can the modern liquid society, i.e. individualized, privatized, uncertain, flexible, insatiable and vulnerable (Bauman, 2000), still have some hope of reconsolidating from the local bottom-up energies?

One issue that we think is central to the city as a **democratic laboratory** is the definition of general interest. To pick up where we started from, in fact, if the birth of democracy is commonly associated with Pericles' Athens, Robespierre's Paris is the place to which the idea of modern democracy is associated.

Decades before the French Revolution, it was Rousseau (1762) who developed the concept of general interest, which replaced that of the common good during the second half of the eighteenth century. Before, it was the so-called "community rights" that guaranteed all inhabitants access to water, pastures and other resources. The commons therefore have their origins in very ancient forms of rights.

And yet, although the commons have recently returned to the public debate (Coriat, 2015 and 2020), they are not contemplated in our categories of law, where instead every right is defined under the two categories of public and private goods. Similarly, public and private interests are very well defined, while the general interest is a concept that appears only in some national constitutions, including the Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and American ones. In any case, the fundamental question for those who observe and interpret the (power) dynamics between urban actors is: who, in our democracies, defines the general interest?

To return with an anecdotal parenthesis to the history of the French Revolution, the concept of general interest showed all its degenerative risks for the first time when it was embodied by Robespierre alone, convinced that he knew what was the general will and the good of all. The historical result was the time of Terror!

We could interpret the 2008 financial crisis in a similar way, when all the limits of an idea of general and global interest based on growth were manifested, according to a definition given by an alliance between the public sphere and private finance. Cities and their inhabitants were the first victims of the crisis, which primarily involved the urban real estate market.

But the first reactions came from the cities, because **urban ecosystems are the place of choice for experimenting with local models as alternatives to government models.** Networks of cities (in transition, which have adopted the regulation for the shared administration of common goods, virtuous municipalities, etc.) are examples of places where the concept of general interest is reworked in an original and creative way, while ministries of the Economy substantially continue to make it coincide with growth in terms of GDP (Haëntjens, 2012) :

*“While states are exhausted chasing after growth that is spurring them, some cities are posting insolent progress, and attracting residents, businesses and talent alike. At a time when States are postponing their environmental policies, they are investing massively in ecology and energy independence. When national leaders are systematically disavowed, the mayors of these cities are regularly re-elected. These cities have a secret: they are interested in satisfactions and resources before being interested in wealth. They have perfected a method which, sooner or later, will be imposed on States.”*

*(Jean Haëntjens, 2012)*

Is asking who defines the general interest very different from asking who is responsible for public policy? Yes, and the European Union knows this well when it defines services of general interest as those services that can be provided by the State or the private sector. Examples of services of general interest include: public transport, postal services and healthcare.

These services of general interest are divided into three categories – economic, non-economic and social – and may variously be subject to laws rather than market rules. In particular, social services of general interest are those that respond to the needs of vulnerable citizens. They are based on the principles of solidarity and equal access; they can be both economic and non-economic in nature, for example social security and employment services or social housing.

The theme that seems to emerge with increasing clarity is that the definition of the general interest must emerge from the sole responsibility of political decision makers and, more generally, from the bipolar scheme on the basis of which the social body is governed by a political head: from on one side the voters who are passively governed, on the other side the elected ones who actively govern.

This paradigm is questioned by the most recent practices of contributory democracy, locally based on the reversal of the bipolar paradigm into one based instead on the sharing of administrative responsibilities, on an equal footing, between those who govern and those who are governed (Arena, 2020).

The local level is the ecosystem in which the inhabitants have direct experience – sometimes violent and traumatizing – of feeling different and therefore marginalized and excluded from any type of political decision. In urban contexts, economic inequalities and social, but also environmental, injustices take physical form in ghetto neighborhoods, degraded areas, areas with inadequate or absent services, such as schools, hospitals, public transport, green areas.

On the one hand, these suburbs (which are sometimes found in central urban areas) are easy targets for electoral promises, if not a direct source of illegal mechanisms to encourage vote buying and selling. On the other hand, in some virtuous cases, these same areas of degradation have become emblematic of urban regeneration processes based on pluralistic and inclusive participatory processes, founded on the right to participate (participatory democracy); deliberative paths, based on the right to decide (deliberative democracy); tangible and intangible care actions, based on the right to contribute (contributory democracy).



# Local Democracy

ALDA implements various forms of citizen engagement locally on various themes and topics. To respond to some of the questions, we have selected key cases or samples of our activities, to make the concept and the lessons learned and messages clearer.

## Why?



### BECAUSE WE NEED PARTICIPATION!

*“Let us not question why some people want to dominate. Instead, let us ask ourselves how things work at the level of the processes that subjugate our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors”.*

*Michel Foucault*

Participation and citizen engagement is an absolute need to respond to complex and integrated societies.

The need for participation is clear for several reasons.

The first one is that the public sector needs more resources. The evidence shows that no municipal, regional or sub regional level have enough resources for the tasks assigned, even in the legislative context of high decentralization with a consequent level of transfer of resources and responsibilities. No mayor, no president of a province or region, would ever say that they have enough resources. And this is clear to everyone since the city and the local community is the place where all the problems and issues “land” and needs to be addressed, going from housing, post industrialization, urban transformation of some areas of immigration as well as areas which are entirely losing population.



The task of cities and local communities are always bigger than what the public sector could perform. Therefore, we need a constant multiplication of resources that are to be found in a **profound and substantial** partnership with citizens and civil society, which can contribute with trust, time, connections, resources and engagement, in their turn.

The second reason is the need for public affairs and sectors to adapt to a **complex and quick global transformation**. Both at the societal level and in economic terms, the mandate assigned to local political bodies (usually 4 or 5 years) is too long to again engage in a dialogue only through elections. Therefore, the dialogue must take place constantly for changing situations and for new deliberations and scenarios. Politics that per se decide without interacting in policy making with citizens and society is deemed to fail.

**Complex society needs complex governance.** It is globally clear and not only in the West World or in Europe. Each community interacts with different cultural elements, including internet and modernity but also archaic tradition or strong religious influence. In this context, simple governance models strive to work but non-cooperation with civil society will bring (is bringing) to an authoritarian model of governance that runs after the “control of the uncontrollable”. Democracy in a complex society is to be a participative democracy, to take into consideration all possible elements composing society and communities.



Citizens are asking for more participation and have ambitious goals. Participation is needed because... it is also requested. Citizens in most countries are asking for being heard and for having a role to play in decision-making processes affecting their lives. They are less and less inclined to accept that a decision is made against their own interest without being engaged. The sense of awareness of civil society and citizens, makes participation in democracy an absolute need.

In a world that is rediscussing its model of governance, including economic and social relationship, local democracy can give a strong contribution to save democracy as a model of deliberation and respect for everyone's views with capacity for conflict mediation and solution.

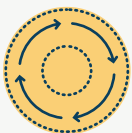
ALDA has contributed to strengthening citizens' participation at the local level since its establishment in 1999. Based on its practice and analysis it contributed to, among others:



Development of the Code of Good Practice Civil participation of the Council of Europe and its implementation;



Elaboration and implementation the European Support for Local Democracy;



Definition of the priorities of the programme Europe for Citizens (civil society and twinning of towns) for 14 years engaging more than 25 million people, implementing actions in different fields of local democracy and citizens engagement, like migration, environment and sustainability, human rights and fight against discrimination, digitalization, local economic development and youth;



Promotion of the participative models in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, Mediterranean area, Turkey and beyond);



Promotion and coordination of the European Year of Citizens in 2013;



Democracy recommendations for the Civil Society Convention in the Conference on the Future of Europe 2021-2022;



Dissemination of the Charter of Direct Democracy;



Chairing of the Jury of the European Capital of Democracy;



Representation of the local democracy component in the community of the European Partnership for Democracy.

ALDA has implemented more than 500 projects on local democracy and citizens engagement in Europe and beyond. The organization is an accredited agency for the assessment of **Eloge of the Council of Europe**, including benchmarks on good local and inclusive governance.

The experience of ALDA shows that the concept of democracy at the local level and its added value overcome the geographic barriers and topics and methodologies could be appropriate to many political and social contexts, with an approach which could be very similar .



## WARNINGS

1

The need to participate is not always explicitly perceived because it may have been neutered, it may not be part of the education received or it may never have been first-hand experience.

2

Participants are not always all adults, male, white, educated, employed, digitally connected, of the prevailing religions in the Western world, etc.

3

It is necessary to recognize the contexts in which even basic information is lacking from the more advanced ones, in which even rather complex consultation actions can be perceived as trivial.

4

Animation actions almost always encourage participation, for example by sharing music, food, play-role and collective rituals it is possible to speak a language not only verbal but also of the body and emotions.

5

There are big differences between policies for local development and Not In My Back Yard localist measures.

6

For every “community-in” there is always a “community-out”. It is therefore always necessary to keep a close watch on the conditions of access and openness of participatory processes, even the most pluralistic and inclusive ones.

# Who?



## **CIVIC POWER, GIRL POWER, YOUNG POWER!**

*“No one frees anyone,  
no one frees themselves:  
we free ourselves together”*

*Paulo Freire*

Local democracy is a key factor for democratic transition, stabilization and development. It is fully implemented thanks to the empowerment of civil society groups and citizens working together with LAs to solve local problems and shape the future through engagement and participation. Catching up to challenges like the COVID 19 pandemic and other global challenges (environment, democracy, migrations and demography), civic initiatives at the local level are fundamental from a social and economic point of view, to build and rebuild resilient and successful communities. Indeed, with CSOs and citizens playing an active role, collective processes allow to: bring solutions effectively responding to community's needs and challenges; generate community's welfare difficult to be reached with strategies mainly based on the public services provision; positively strengthen the relationship between local authorities and citizens, and thus re-building trust towards public bodies. In this view, with 40 EU funded projects and 750 implemented activities in 27 European countries, ALDA based its mission and success on decentralisation and horizontal subsidiarity, empowering local communities in all aspects of the public life, to make their voice heard through engagement and participation.

Among other target groups, ALDA is committed to promoting gender equity and avoiding all forms of discrimination, which are key values of several projects ALDA implemented throughout the years. For instance, “**Empowering Women in Local Authorities**”, **WEMIN** and **PARFAIT**, were all projects involved in the thematic of women empowerment and participation, while **GET UP** and **WOM-COM** had a focus on Gender Equality.



In line with the international and European policy priorities on youth, among its prior thematic, ALDA invests in young citizens' empowerment to shape a better future, with a particular attention on vulnerable groups.

Here below the most relevant focuses:

**Young people and social inclusion:** supporting young people through youth work, with particular attention to disadvantaged groups (NEETs, returnees, young women, young migrants, etc. ) and young people living in rural areas not to be left behind, to provide them with relevant skills and knowledge, to make them aware and active citizens, to raise their awareness on social and economic issues, and to benefit from existing mobility, job, and formal and non-formal education opportunities;

**Young people and digital transition:** enhancing education opportunities to strengthen youngsters' hard and soft skills; promoting interactive, digital and dynamic tools (gaming, social media) to proactively engage young citizens, to prevent social exclusion and to ensure digital accessibility and inclusiveness (digital transition for all); also, promoting virtual reality as a tool to prevent social exclusion and to enhance social interaction;

**Young people and green transition:** raising awareness, improving education and knowledge level on the main climate, energy and environment priorities, and exchanging good practices.



A specific focus is given to the **active engagement of young people in the decision-making process**, as the definition of the main youth policy agendas and priorities is key at international, national and local level. Indeed, in the upcoming 2024 EU elections, ALDA is running several EU funded initiatives to act not merely on enthusiastic young citizens, but especially on skeptical and ambivalent citizens who are less supportive and not particularly engaged. The ultimate goal is thus to involve the hard-to-reach groups in order to confirm the positive trend of the last EU Parliament elections; this will positively affect the democratic setting in the national contexts too, with a positive impact on future scenarios at national and international level.

ALDA includes a panoply of instruments supporting local democracy through a civil society viewpoint, such as projects, initiatives, expertise, and contributing to:



**Creating rooms for dialogue, as spaces and infrastructure for discussions and decisions by citizens**, taking different forms, consultative committee, citizens' assembly, agora etc. An example is the **Scintilla project**, a 2-year consultative process aimed at promoting the re-qualification of a neighbourhood of Vicenza (IT) by involving its inhabitants in the decision-making process regarding its future; at increasing the sense of community and local dialogue between citizens and the local stakeholders involved, to come up with a plan for the requalification of the neighbourhood. It resulted in a document encompassing structural urban regeneration proposals and social inclusion initiatives;



**Supporting LAs in building strategic partnerships** with civil society organizations and umbrella organizations at European level, to rely on expertise for training policy makers, planning and leading participatory processes, connecting with citizens etc.

ALDA coordinated a successful project called EPIC, funded by the EU, in which multilevel governance and multi stakeholder approach has been promoted and applied to foster LAs and CSO cooperation when it comes to deal with migration issues and challenges. As results: 5 MoU have been signed between 5 European cities and their local CSOs to work together on integration policy-making and migrants' involvement; 1 international network made of EU CSOS and LAs to develop common initiatives and advocacy; 4 narrative campaigns to counteract negative migrants' perception; 8 local participatory paths in 8 EU countries;



**Building the capacity of policy makers, CSOs** about planning, implementing, evaluating and capitalizing participatory processes to engage citizens in the governance process.

ALDA has consequently adapted its strategies pushing forward for raising the awareness and training of the European citizens on all the above-mentioned topics and much more and also engaging itself for being a valuable bridge between citizens, local communities, local authorities and the organised civil society towards the European Institutions and the international community;



**Running collective and participatory processes** through art, gaming, sport etc. to engage citizens in the debate of the most relevant international challenges. STAR - Street ART is a 2-year European funded project co-coordinated by ALDA, and aimed at tackling intolerance and isolation of groups of people, in marginalised areas of European cities, by using the power of street art in order to raise awareness about the importance of solidarity and coexistence of plural attitudes and cultures. Through a bottom-up approach promoting local citizens' participation, 14 murals have been realized in 14 European cities expressing EU values;





**Boosting political participation** by developing solutions for and with citizens. A concrete example the “TALE - Take the Lead in the EU Elections” coordinated by ALDA, and aimed to reach and engage a greater number of voters, reduce the gap of voters turnout among the various EU member states, and, through participatory processes, activate and empower them to play an active role and thus vote in the next European parliamentary elections in 2024;



**Boosting women empowerment in politics.** A successful example to mention is the PARFAIT's goal was to improve female participation in local governance in Tunisia, which was notably low when the project was launched back in 2017. The realization of the objective was achieved thanks to several innovative actions that engaged different actors, from Local Authorities to media all down to local CSOs, female activists and women elected locally.





## WARNINGS

1

The most common mistake of youth policies is that they are not designed by young people. On the other hand, unique, original and surprising inputs emerge from interaction experiences with children and young people who are truly at the center of policy planning.

2

Gender homogeneity is certainly appropriate in some phases of particular participatory processes, but separate clubs of women only or men only contrast with the idea of a mixed society that is the cornerstone of participatory democracy.

3

Compared to public and private subjects, civil society is a much less defined collective subject, which is sometimes indicated as a third party with respect to the other two, with a nuance of minor importance. On the contrary, in participatory processes, the civic energies that emanate from below are often the real drivers of change.

4

The more time passes, the more social innovators criticize the fact that it is not only projects for young people, women, civil society groups to be supported. They emphasize above all that policy makers have to work with them in a peer-to-peer process, funding the organizations set up by them and not just the projects that advance.

# What?



## INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION, EDUCATION, DIGITAL CONSULTATION AND PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS

*"E-topia: urban life, Jim,  
but not as we know it"*

*William Mitchell*

ALDA implements numerous types of projects in order to support local communities and implement local democracy. An aspect of it is here tackled.

Since the turn of **globalisation**, these have been intense years for the spread and use of digital technologies that have shortened 'physical' distances and substantially changed the perception of the sense of belonging, historically much more rooted to places. The exponential use of digital technology for everyday exchange in the professional sphere, but in personal situations as well, has led to the creation of real digital communities based on the sharing of values and methodologies, even without there ever being an actual face-to-face meeting.

**Digital transition** is nowadays one of the main pillars in the shaping process of our society, not only at the European level but also worldwide, especially following the limits and needs shown off by the global pandemic of COVID-19.

Amplified by the **COVID wave**, recent studies are delving into the socio-cultural and psychological implications of this new digital paradigm, especially its impact on the younger generations, in paving the way to an inclusive development of new forms of participation and means of information able to guarantee a democratic, inclusive and informed participation.



Undoubtedly, in terms of values and human rights, it has enormous potential to give space and voice to demands that otherwise would have remained less expressed and heard. It is highly recognised as digitalisation is an opportunity for involving communities closer to the local governments and how new technologies can make democracy more representative and participative.



ALDA's methodology could be synthesised in key pillars:



Localised action for consultation, education and awareness raising, or empowerment of citizens and vulnerable groups by empowering EU citizens to make informed decisions, by fighting disinformation in the democratic debate, engaging citizens mainly young people in innovative way, in order to raise awareness on EU Values using new communication and visibility tools;



Supporting local authorities and civil society for improving their collaboration and space of dialogue, empowering them and engaging them for assuming an active role in the local development processes;



Practical and long-term assistance and capacity building approach, in order to spread competences and methods in a participatory and democratic environment. In this sense, digital transformation is a challenge and, at the same time, an opportunity. Therefore, using digital tools in a meaningful way to help citizens, with a democratic and inclusive approach, is paramount.





## WARNINGS

1

In terms of consultation, the opportunities offered by e-participation and e-voting systems are certainly many, but the issue of those who do not have access to the web has always to be stressed, along with the fact that the online participants stop exercising the face to face dialogue with people different from them and tending to isolate themselves in a bubble of those that agree with them.

2

E-participation has ways and times that are very different from the participation in the presence. For example, virtual advocacy groups - not carrying out face-to-face meetings in parallel - often catch fire on social platforms as quickly as they go out of it.

3

It is quite easy to create digital participatory platforms (especially when there is no ambitions of independence from the big global players and rely on them) but often these initiatives overlap with existing similar ones, with the risk of stressing people who are asked to participate in projects that can be integrated but who do not communicate with each other.



# Where?



## LOCAL DEMOCRACY AGENCIES

*“Rules should fit local circumstances. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to common resource management. Rules should be dictated by local people and local ecological needs [...] Commons need the right to organise. Your commons rules won't count for anything if a higher local authority doesn't recognise them as legitimate”*

*Elinor Ostrom*

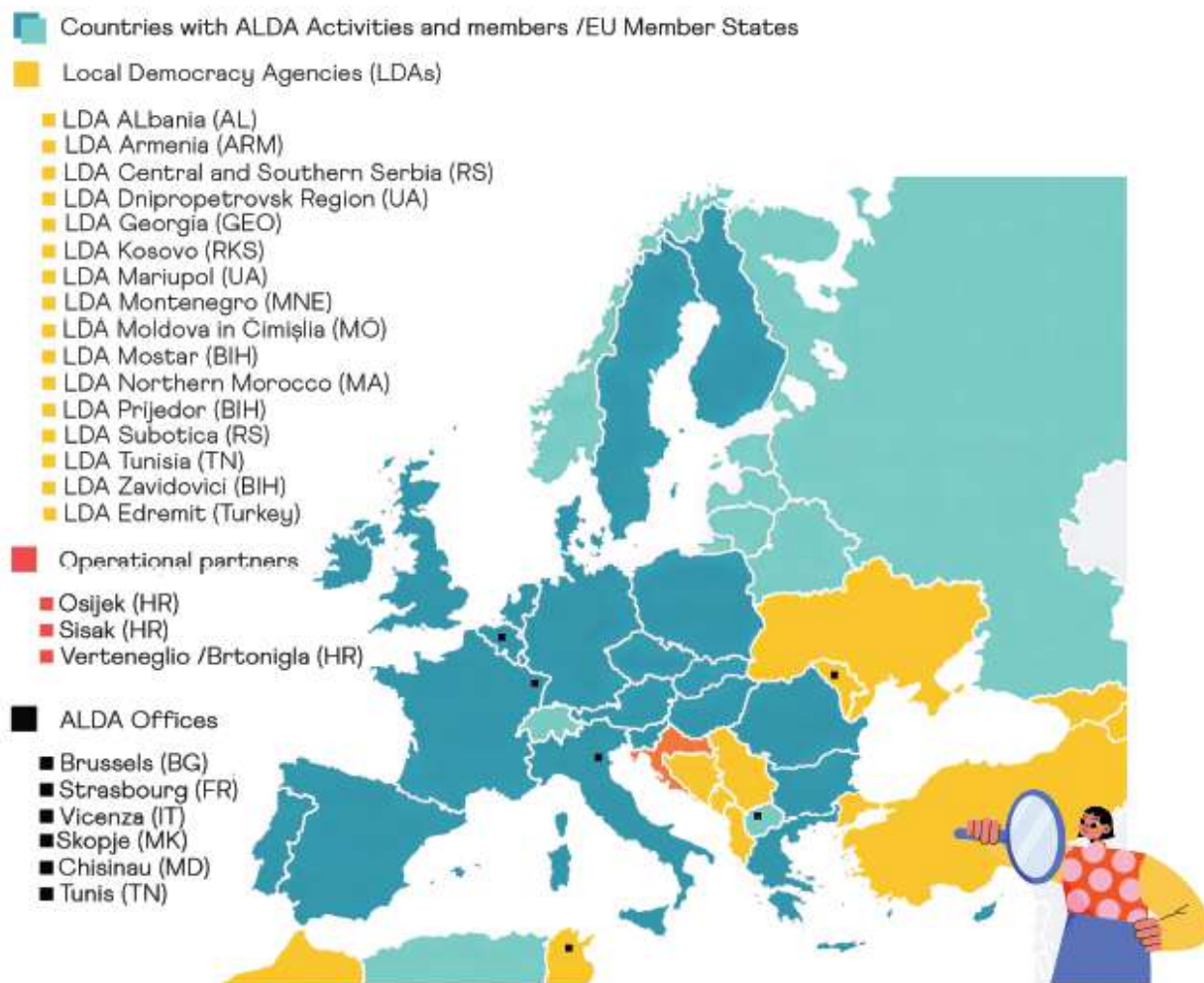
ALDA works in local communities all over Europe and beyond. It focuses on small and medium- size communities, also with a territorial approach (see the territorial approach to local development, i.e. TALD). A specific action localized is the programme outside the EU and mainly (so far) in the neighborhood, the Local Democracy Agencies programme.

ALDA coordinates and supports the network of 15 Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs) in their activities. Initiated by the Council of Europe in the early '90s, the LDAs represent a unique and successful experiment of democratic support, with full engagement of local governments and civil society organizations from Europe and the neighboring countries. Today we celebrate 30 years of activities of the LDAs in the Balkans. The LDAs are locally based organizations, funded and supported by both local partners and international associates with a long-term joint program providing financial and political support to fulfill their mandate and to accompany local democracy and civil society empowerment.

Indeed, **partnership-building** is a crucial aspect for each LDA, as their work is based on the innovative method of multilateral decentralized cooperation. The LDAs are also operational in the field of city diplomacy. Each LDA is locally registered and works with local staff coordinated by ALDA.

Local Democracy Agencies are recognised by the Congress as an instrument for promoting city diplomacy and long-term support, also in view of peacebuilding and future accession to the EU (Resolution 257/251 – 2008 - recognizing LDAs as an instrument of City Diplomacy).

On a yearly basis, the LDAs receive from ALDA's Governing Board, the label of the LDA after assessment of their report of activities, actions plans, partnership support, and sustainability. They are built on local partnership (the local city or region supports logistically the local office also with activities) with local authorities and civil society engagement. They also engage European partners that contribute with a partnership for supporting local staff and then engage in activities that are funded by ALDA and its partners.





ALDA's flagship initiative for Ukraine : 9 Local Democracy Agencies in progress



The partnership of the Local Democracy Agencies is the backbone of the activities of ALDA in Ukraine, especially after the full fledged invasion. After a year of difficult management, due to the ongoing war, is bringing back activities into tracks aiming, on one hand, at further strengthening and consolidating (given the circumstances) the existing LDAs in Dnipro and Mariupol and, on the other hand, at opening new LDAs in other regions of Ukraine.



The Local Democracy Agencies in Ukraine are an instrument of stabilization and cohesion in a community that is torn by the conflict. The communities need help, support and medium long term support, accompanied towards unity. ALDA has been active in Ukraine since the beginning of the invasion also thanks to its clear political stand and for supporting humanitarian support within the country and in Europe.





**! WARNINGS**

- Keeping on quoting the Nobel Prize Elinor Ostrom: “Commons work best when nested within larger networks. Some things can be managed locally, but some might need wider regional cooperation – for example an irrigation network might depend on a river that others also draw on upstream”.
- Local development accompaniment must think about what happens after the accompaniment itself, in terms of empowerment of local actors. Otherwise, there will be an unhealthy dependency on professional facilitators, who will try to maintain their niche participation market.

# When?



## MILESTONES OF ALDA AND BUILDING TODAY'S EUROPE

*“For the first time in its history, this Parliament is debating the state of our Union as war rages on European soil.*

*This is a war against our energy security, against our economy, against our values and against our future. A war of autocracy against democracy.”*

*Ursula Von Der Leyen*

The **Local Democracy Agencies** were born in 1993 with the first opening of the LDA in Subotica, Serbia. The programme started with the structural transformation of Europe after the end of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Balkans war is historically placed in this difficult period of redefinition of borders and balances in Europe. Many organizations, including ALDA, supporting this transition but also peace building in countries in Former Yugoslavia, were established in those days. The period of stabilisation in the region entirely involved ALDA and the LDAs, especially after the Thessaloniki Summit where the European Commission President, Romano Prodi, started the process of accession of this region into the EU.

The process of building and strengthening Europe from below with a **strong engagement of local communities**, including policies of decentralization and new local governance, continued also with the process of enlargement towards East and in particular with the big leap in 2004. Local governance was at the core of the enlargement requiring new forms of relationship in powers and with citizens. The focus on local democracy and its role in engaging citizens was also marked in the empowerment and enlargement of the Council of Europe and the signature of the European Charter of local governance of the Congress.



An example of this period is the strong emphasis given to decentralization and local governance reform in Poland, that paved the way not only for democratic development of the country but economic.



Key phases in the history - and for the history - of ALDA:





## WARNINGS

1

Time is not linear and we don't learn from the past. Evolution and societal changes are sometimes circular and we don't focus enough carefully to transition which are not ended or repeat themselves, as it is happening those days in some countries where we started working 30 years ago.

2

On the other hand, development and democratic transition are not "finalized" in Europe while they are back in other countries, which are catching up. This line of time and process could be inverted. Indeed, in some municipalities and countries where ALDA works (in Senegal or Algeria, for example) cases of citizens participants, which have a traditional background, are really good examples of carrying about common goods.

# How much?



## NUMBERS OF ALDA

*“In modern capitalism, value-extraction is rewarded more highly than value-creation: the productive process that drives a healthy economy and society”*

*Mariana Mazzucato*

The growth of ALDA could be read as a metaphor. A seedling that blossoms its first leaves in the western Balkan region and then spreads over time involving other territories and other communities.

Established in 1999 at the initiative of the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, ALDA takes root thanks to the first seed planted with the LDA in Subotica, Serbia and then the following Local Democracy Agencies created in the early 1990s.

The lifeblood is evident. **Continuous contacts between the citizens across borders** are indispensable for a citizens' Europe. By establishing a network between local authorities and civil-society organizations all over Europe and by offering a forum for the exchange of best practices, ALDA contributed greatly and was increasingly recognised as a key actor to facilitate citizens' involvement and good governance.

In order to trigger a significant change, which may impact the surrounding environment, it is crucial that there is a **community**, a growing group of people who recognise themselves in those values, who take responsibility for carrying out that challenge and who in turn can contaminate and involve others. A sounding board, this is how we could represent ALDA, a living organism in continuous evolution and growth, ready to welcome anyone who is ready to work together with a participative approach for resilient, inclusive and sustainable communities.



In its journey, ALDA has evolved significantly in terms of members, partners and actors involved, projects and activities implemented, as well as resources mobilised.



It has created a community involving and reaching around 2 million people through its activities at local level, and 30,000 followers across social media, websites and digital channels to narrate its initiatives and spread key messages of our networks.

	1999	2009	2019 20 years of ALDA	TODAY
LDAs	5	11	18	18
COUNTRIES INVOLVED	5	30	54	60+
MEMBERS	5	100	300+	350+
PROJECTS	0	102	429	500+
BUDGET	0	10M	43M	59+M



## WARNINGS

1

The project-based activity of ALDA brings us to count figures and projects and people, while focusing less on societal impact assessment. This is a lacking figure to overcome

2

The costs of the projects do not always reflect the impact. Often small scale projects have a bigger impact on communities than big scale ones. That's why the regranting schemes present some good aspects.



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