



Common Ground – Shaping Regions Across Borders

Summary of the Accompanying Study

1 The Initiative *Common Ground*

With *Common Ground – Shaping Regions Across Borders*, the Robert Bosch Stiftung (RBSG) funded eight projects with the central element of **cross-border citizen participation** in German border regions in a pilot phase between 2022 and 2025. Cross-border citizen participation is considered a desideratum in both practice and research and has so far not been implemented broadly or systematically. To receive funding, municipalities or counties, as well as administrative bodies and civil society organizations in the border regions, were to come together as project partners for cross-border projects.

An important motivator for the Robert Bosch foundation to initiate *Common Ground* was the strengthening of democracy against a backdrop of dwindling trust in representative democracy in Germany and Europe, or the EU: increasing sections of the population are rather ambivalent towards democracy and rarely or never engage in political or other participation processes.¹ The experience of a (cross-border) participation project can increase trust in politics and democracy, especially for this group, as well as promoting acceptance of political decisions and complex processes. The projects were therefore intended to develop innovative and inclusive participation formats in order to appeal to and involve all social groups. So-called “easy-to-forget” groups, which are underrepresented in many participation processes, were explicitly to be included.

Definition

Easy-to-forget-groups is a synonym for the so-called hard to reach target groups and reflects the fact that these people are often only “hard to reach” because they are not addressed in a target-group oriented manner. Their specific obstacles and needs are either not considered or forgotten. This applies, for example, to people with low social or professional standing or with a migration background. People who are disappointed by democracy and have turned their backs on it are also included here.

¹ This is demonstrated, for example, in the *More in Common* study commissioned by RBSG, „Beziehungskrise? Bürger und ihre Demokratie in Deutsch-

land, Frankreich, Großbritannien, Polen und den USA“ (2021).

Regions with varying levels of participation experience were selected. This included partners with little or no prior experience, as well as regions that had already conducted (cross-border) participation events. It was clear that organizing cross-border **citizen participation** would be more challenging than implementing participation processes in a national context. At the same time, some obstacles, such as different administrative structures, were already familiar from long-standing cross-border **cooperation**.

One objective of the three-year pilot phase was to test cross-border deliberative participation processes. Another key goal was to raise awareness of the added value of citizen participation among the involved **politicians, administrators, and civil society representatives**, thereby building participation skills within the administration. The aim was to use this as the basis for creating sustainable structures. Through positive experiences with participation, citizens were to be motivated towards ongoing political involvement. Finally, the targeted networking of regions (“peer-to-peer learning”) was to improve the transfer of knowledge and learning. In fall 2025, up to four regions were selected for continued funding to consolidate the results of the pilot program.

In addition to financial assistance, support for the projects also included ongoing advice on participation processes, further training opportunities, and networking between the projects, including three multi-day networking events at various project locations.

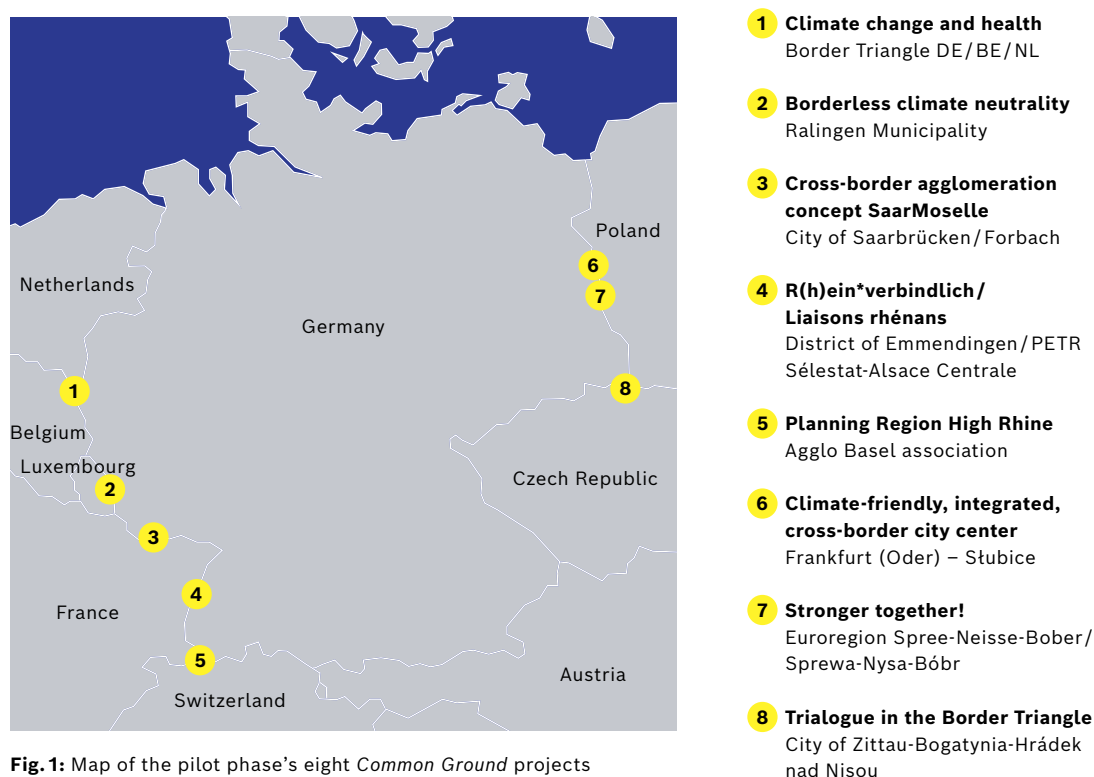


Fig. 1: Map of the pilot phase's eight *Common Ground* projects

These tasks, along with the coordination of the overall program and quality assurance, were handled by the *nexus Institute for Cooperation Management*. The program and its projects were also supported and advised by an advisory board of international experts on (cross-border) participation, cooperation, and innovative approaches to democracy work.

The scientific support conducted by com.X focused on the impact on the target groups of administration, politics, civil society, and citizens. The overall aim was to draw lessons for future participation processes in border regions. The support was designed as a continuous learning process in the sense of a formative evaluation. A multi-method design was used, combining quantitative methods such as surveys and qualitative methods such as interviews, participant observations, and desk research.

2 Challenges and Key Learnings

Cross-border regions are special spaces that potentially offer their citizens considerable scope for development, for example, with regard to infrastructure, services, education, health, culture, leisure, climate protection, or the labor market. However, this potential often remains untapped. On the one hand, in the 30 years since the EU began opening up to the east, cross-border relations and cooperation among citizens, politicians, and administrations have intensified in all German border regions. On the other hand, there are various inhibiting factors that make the joint shaping of border regions in general and the involvement of citizens in the political process in particular, more difficult.

These obstacles specific to border regions are compounded by the general challenges of deliberative participation processes, which sometimes reinforce each other. This became evident early on: from the outset, project partners saw the program as an approach that was “*well suited to the situation in the border regions*”, but at the same time considered it to be very “*ambitious*”. The compatibility of key objectives was viewed critically: from the perspective of many regions, it was already a challenge to organize citizen dialogues consistently across borders and taking existing language barriers into account. Groups that are distant from democracy and participation (“easy-to-forget” groups) were even more difficult to reach in this scenario. Even translation solutions can present obstacles for this group. The impression that the central, challenging goals of the program had to be met simultaneously was a major problem for the projects, especially in the initial phase.

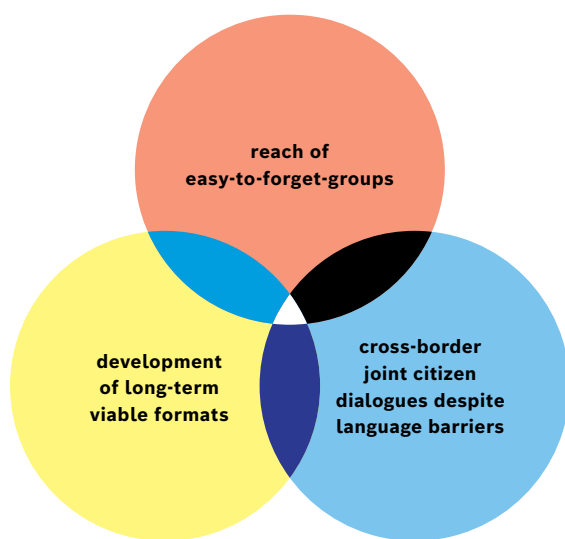


Fig.2: The challenging compatibility of central *Common Ground* objectives

In addition to reaching the target groups, there were further challenges specific to border regions, the significance of which only became clear over the course of the projects: apart from language, there are also differences in national culture and participation culture. Moreover, there are structural differences in the legal frameworks for cross-border cooperation and citizen participation, or on issues such as healthcare and climate protection. Finally, differences in political and administrative responsibilities, as well as the diversity of the actors and stakeholders to be involved, must be taken into account.

2.1 Language

In multilingual border regions, dealing with different languages is one of the greatest specific challenges or tasks. In order to enable equal participation for citizens at large and especially for “easy-to-forget” groups, there simply must be no language barriers.

The immense importance of this issue became apparent quickly: contrary to initial plans, even communication with project partners at the program level – for example at network meetings – was switched from English as the *lingua franca* to translations in the respective national languages. Over the course of the projects, most partners realized that interpreting at citizen events is essential but also resource-intensive. For the projects *Stronger together!* (Spree-Neisse-Bober), and the *Agglomeration Concept SaarMoselle* (Saarbrücken/Forbach), language itself even became a subject of citizen participation; for example, through educational offers for mutual language acquisition on both sides of the border. A Polish and a German citizen, respectively, commented on this already at the *Stronger Together!* kick-off event:

“Germany is an important labor market, our young people should recognize that and learn German.” “Here [on the German side], few people make an effort to learn Polish, but it’s different the other way around; this one-sidedness isn’t good. Day-care centers should already be bilingual.”

For the **translation** of media communication (e. g., event invitations), minutes, and also meetings within the project partner circles, pragmatic and resource-saving solutions were found by the projects. For the plenary sessions of larger events, such as major public project kick-offs and closing events or in larger citizens’ administrative councils, **simultaneous translation** was indispensable. This is equally important for comprehension and communication, since even citizens who understand and speak the neighboring language often feel barriers to active participation. Nuances are also often lost. (Simultaneous) interpretation is very costly and therefore must be budgeted from the outset.

Should simultaneous translation be the most sensible measure, it should be borne in mind that the technical solutions required for this, with microphones, headphones, radio transmissions, and translation booths, can give an event the atmosphere of an international conference. Especially for people who are not used to attending and taking part in information and discussion events, this can create an additional barrier. A particularly **welcoming and inviting atmosphere** is all the more important in these cases.

Info Box

The following measures tested in Common Ground are suitable for overcoming language barriers in small groups:

- Monolingual small group work, with results then translated simultaneously and (further) discussed in plenary.
- Support of larger, non-language-separated working groups by multilingual moderators, for example from the project team.
- Use of “language buddies”² to engage those who have little or no understanding of the other language.
- Use of digital tools for document translation.

² Language buddies are passive participants who do not actively take part in the discussion but support individuals who do not understand a language being used. These can be friends or family members,

who may also be entitled to an expense allowance and reimbursement of travel costs (cf. Bosch / Haas / Quast 2025).

Especially for **work in smaller groups**, the projects developed practical and resource-saving alternatives, which can be generally recommended for cross-border participation projects.

Particular attention should be paid to the inclusion of **newly arrived migrants** or **people with a migration background** (also frequently represented in the “easy-to-forget” groups). They may face additional language barriers, and the communication approach must be tailored to the target group. Here too, language buddies can be of help.

2.2 Culture

In addition to language, socio-cultural differences are also specific factors in the culture of participation for the border regions. The different participation cultures were examined in the course of the project by participation experts from the respective countries, documented in country reports, and published.³

In the German-Swiss project *Planning Region High Rhine* (Agglo Basel), project participants and citizens highlighted the distinctly direct democratic but less deliberative participation culture in **Switzerland**. This culture is tied to the high degree of self-determination on the part of the cantons and municipalities and is anchored firmly in politics, law, and Swiss identity (cf. Bach / Dantscher 2024).⁴ This would lead to deliberative discussions about projects being given less importance, possibly even being viewed with skepticism, and **“staying away, since the citizen has the final say anyway”** (quote from a citizen, *Planning Region High Rhine*). This example illustrates how strongly structural, legal, and political framework conditions and (participatory) culture are linked.

In **the Czech Republic** and, to a lesser extent, in **Poland**, citizens who take part in deliberative processes are often perceived like NGO representatives and are frequently met with criticism from the wider population. In **the Czech Republic**, people consider **“elections as the primary form of participation ... and citizen participation as ending at the ballot box”** (Bach / Dantscher 2024). This is particularly surprising in the younger democracies of the East, where civil society and citizens played a major role in the system transformation 30 years ago. Under such conditions, it is clearly more difficult to motivate citizens to participate. When participants in the Polish and Czech projects heard at a network meeting that other projects worked with expense allowances, they nevertheless rejected this idea on the following grounds: **“Participation in such a good cause must be voluntary and come from within”**

³ See: <https://www.commonground-participate.org/en/publications/country-reports>

⁴ Bach and Dantscher summarize eight reports (see appendix) on the country-specific significance

of citizen participation in politics and society, which were prepared by international participation experts for Common Ground and presented to the projects during further training courses. The reports form an important basis for this chapter.

(project participant *Stronger Together!*). In addition, in the former socialist countries, expense allowances may still be associated with “vote buying” to this day.

In **France**, the picture is more ambivalent. On the one hand, there has been a marked increase in deliberative participation processes in recent decades, which are widely accepted and supported by the population. This can be seen, for example, in the role of the regional citizen’s councils, the *Conseils de développement*, on the part of the French municipal association Forbach. On the other hand, political representatives in France often still view participation processes with mistrust and see their own legitimacy called into question. It is therefore understandable that the Franco-German project *R(h)einverbindlich – Liaisons rhénanes* (Emmendingen / PETR Sélestat-Alsace Centrale) placed great emphasis from the outset on involving politicians, such as local councilors and mayors, particularly on the French side in the project or closely binding them to it. French politicians see themselves as citizens (*citoyens*) first, and less as representatives of the people. This can have advantages for participation, because with this awareness, *citoyens* meet on an equal footing. It can, however, also have disadvantages: because the politician as *citoyen* already includes the citizens’ side and supposedly less citizen participation is needed.

The **Benelux countries**, especially Belgium, are in many ways pioneers when it comes to deliberative participation processes. These are supported by politicians and citizens alike and are widely accepted as a complement to representative democracy. This support and acceptance can now also be found in Germany. Nevertheless, many citizens in the countries mentioned here are not sufficiently aware of the significance and potential of deliberative participation processes, and the opportunities for participation are not adequately utilized.

Info Box

The following country-specific aspects can influence cross-border citizen participation and should therefore be taken into account in planning and implementation:

- Understanding of citizen participation,
- Differences in the relationship between citizens, politics, and administration,
- Experience with deliberation in political decision-making,
- Culture of communication and discussion in the countries, and
- General historical experiences with politics, democracy, or citizen participation.

As in many other intercultural contexts, cross-border participation requires consideration of different customs and cultural standards.

In order to address potential cultural challenges at an early stage, **a cross-border partnership structure based on equality**, as well as a strong **stakeholder network**, is particularly important. (see 2.4 Partnership Structure). In this way, cultural differences become visible and negotiable in the direct cooperation within the project team.

2.3 Politics, Administration, and Law

The example of Switzerland clearly demonstrates that structural and socio-cultural conditions for participation are virtually inseparable from one another. As the country reports show, the legal frameworks and the degree of political support for participation vary greatly, especially for deliberative forms of participation. Although **deliberative participation** is not enshrined in law in any of the eight participating countries, it is **politically supported** to varying degrees in the **Benelux countries, France, Poland, and Germany**.

2.3.1 Politics and Administration

The different responsibilities and authorizations in politics and administration in the border regions depend heavily on the organizational form of the countries involved. In federally organized countries such as Belgium, Germany, or Switzerland, the regions and municipalities are stronger and more independent than in centralized states like France or Poland, where they tend to function only as administrative units. Nonetheless, there is always a **multi-level system for political decisions** and administration, which can be relevant to the topics addressed in the projects. For example, *Stronger Together!* (Euroregion Spree-Neisse-Bober / Sprewa-Nysa-Bóbr) was able to implement a joint events calendar without difficulty, since that falls within the remit of the participating municipalities. However, for a concept to strengthen cross-border healthcare provisions, both partner countries have to turn to the highest political level of the state, as happened in an open letter. Here, the greatest challenge to deliberative participation becomes even more pronounced: ideas developed with citizens are not politically binding and are therefore sometimes not implemented (see below). This risk increases when issues are addressed that lie outside one's own decision-making authority. This is why political anchoring and the early inclusion of all relevant bodies are of particular importance for cross-border participation. The effort made to achieve this in the *Agglomeration Concept SaarMoselle* project (Saarbrücken / Forbach) has led to the citizens' advisory council established there now being continued at the Eurodistrict level.

2.3.2 Legal Frameworks

Different legal frameworks also influence cross-border participation projects. This includes, for example, regulations on data protection or in the areas of environment, spatial planning, and infrastructure (in some cases, participation itself is affected, especially in the case of “mandatory” formal participation procedures). The different legal frameworks clearly affect issues that were relevant in many projects: For example, in the project *Cross-Border Energy Region* (Ralingen / Rosport-Mompach), implementation of the joint virtual power plant was postponed by the municipal council in Rosport-Mompach until legal hurdles and uncertainties, among other things supply/purchase agreements with a state-owned Luxembourg energy supplier, had been clarified. This shows how important it is to **strive for a binding commitment** for a project **from the municipal committees of the partner countries**. The necessary departure from the project’s original idea then opened *Cross-Border Energy Region* (Ralingen / Rosport-Mompach) up to more topics, idea collections, and activities in the field of climate that were developed jointly with citizens, for example through a “future workshop”. In general, projects should **identify and refine the topics and objectives for participation together with citizens at an early stage**, in order to take their needs into account more effectively.

Especially for EU border regions, **special EU legislation, EU programs such as INTERREG** or **organizations like Euroregions and Eurodistricts** facilitate cooperation, not only in legal terms. They help to overcome or at least reduce structural differences between partner countries at the border.

2.4 Partnership Structure

The use of existing structures designed specifically for cross-border cooperation also proved conducive to cross-border citizen participation projects. One of the core ideas behind *Common Ground* was to promote participation skills in the individual municipalities. Contrary to initial considerations of only allowing municipalities and civil society to apply, already existing **organizations working across borders** were included in the program, such as *Euroregion Spree-Neisse-Bober e. V.*, *Agglo Basel*, the association responsible for cross-border spatial development, and the city alliance *Kleines Dreieck Zittau-Boatynia-Hrádek nad Nisou*. It became clear that the **integration of established cross-border structures** promotes political anchoring in the shared border region and that operational structures can be used for participation.

Due to the funding conditions, the project partner structure was already predetermined and had to consist of actors from politics, administration, and civil society in all participating countries: **planning teams for participation had to be cross-border and mixed**. The projects *Planning Region High Rhine* and *Climate Change and Health* were the only ones not to have a German lead partner, which created the risk that *Common*

Ground, with *RBSG* as a German funder, might be perceived in neighboring countries as a German project. However, parity and cross-border identification with the projects and with *Common Ground* gradually developed. This was evident not only in a **partnership structure based on equality** but also in the culture of discussion at network meetings, for example. On this basis, cultural differences or particularities in dealing with the citizens involved could and can be recognized as part of an iterative, ongoing process, critically reflected upon, and addressed with solutions.

Info Box

The following elements specified for program implementation proved helpful for good partnership-based cooperation:

- Early internal project kick-off meetings,
- Preparation of stakeholder mapping to establish a cross-border stakeholder network and involve other relevant country-specific actors,
- Involvement of civil society in order to access different approaches to citizens and to integrate other networks, knowledge, resources, and perspectives,
- Commissioning an external service provider specializing in participation for process support and moderation as well as quality assurance.

2.5 Space

The eight selected border regions vary greatly in terms of size – from Ralingen / Rosport-Mompach as the smallest border region with around 5,500 inhabitants, to the greater area in the border triangle of Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands with almost four million inhabitants. From the outset, it was assumed that the size and structure of the region would influence the choice of topics to be addressed and the organization of the citizen participation processes.

Some project regions have a much stronger mutual dependence in areas of public services and are networked accordingly. This is evident in the directly linked twin municipalities like Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice, Ralingen and Rosport-Mompach, or the project *Stronger Together!* with Guben and Gubin as the central twin city, as well as the *Agglomeration Concept SaarMoselle* with Saarbrücken as the largest city in the project area also functioning as a regional center, even across the border. Close cooperation is already established here, for example in healthcare, the labor market, and retail. For the citizens in these “close” twin structures, this is spatially immediate and part of their everyday experience. In larger regions, or the further one moves away from

the border, daily interaction is no longer so commonplace without a compelling necessity, such as commuting to work. **This raises the question of at what point one (no longer) considers oneself a border resident.** This led *Stronger Together!* to hold events not only in Guben and Gubin, but across the whole region. The situation is similar for the *Planning Region High Rhine*. Here, participating citizens reported that awareness of the shared border region and the need for joint planning is significantly higher in the twin towns such as Rheinfelden (CH and D), even though the entire High Rhine region benefits.

For the project *R(h)einverbindlich – Liaisons rhénanes*, the area presents itself quite differently: the **Rhine** is a **hard border** with few and far between crossings and practically no twin communities. Regional politicians emphasized this at the kick-off event, while at the same time stressing their determination to bring the region closer together. The “capitals” Sélestat and Emmendingen are about 30 kilometers of linear distance apart, and with Strasbourg and Colmar on the French side and Freiburg on the German side, there are service centers close by in both countries. Nonetheless, through the topic of climate and nature conservation in the shared natural environment and, specifically, the future use of a former customs platform on the Rhine, participation could be made tangible for many citizens with various hands-on activities.

The **size of a project** area itself and how far it extends into neighboring countries is important to consider in terms of identification (see above), but also in purely practical terms. Even more than for the *R(h)einverbindlich / Liaisons rhénanes* project, this applies for the project *Climate Change and Health*, with the largest project area: in order to be able to offer comprehensive participation at all, the project as primarily relied on **online formats**, which is indispensable for large project areas, but also effective overall.

Identification with a border region, and maybe a shared regional identity, can be strongly shaped by common historical experiences, as pointed out, for example, by citizens involved in the *Agglomeration Concept SaarMoselle* in Saarland: these include, in this case, changing national affiliations in the not-too-distant past and the subsequent strong cooperation in one the European regions with the highest number of cross-border commuters. Ralingen and Rosport-Mompach, too, are closely linked **in a small area** with few inhabitants, building and using sports facilities and other amenities together, or having similar customs. People in such a setting are already strongly interconnected, both with each other and with political representatives, through various structures, such as clubs and daily interactions. The purpose of “formal” deliberative participation may therefore be perceived as less evident, as project partners in Ralingen / Rosport-Mompach described.

The requirements dictated by size and structure of the area must be taken into account when selecting topics, choosing participation formats, organizing the participation process, and determining appropriate measures for accompanying and communicating results. In addition to stakeholder mapping, it is therefore useful to carry out spatial mapping in order to identify strengths and challenges and to be able to address the latter in particular.

3 Participation Squared – How cross-border citizen participation can succeed

Expectations for good participation processes are already high. In recent years, various best practices have become established.⁵ Implementing participation processes consistently across borders therefore means being aware of known challenges and addressing them in the context of language, culture, politics, administration, law, and space. Cross-border citizen participation can succeed, as the eight *Common Ground* regions demonstrated over three years – but it places additional specific demands on process design and facilitation. For **quality assurance purposes**, an **external service provider specializing in participation** is indispensable for process facilitation in general, and especially for cross-border projects, and was engaged by almost all the projects. Additional external expertise was brought in by an Advisory Board of international experts in (cross-border) participation or EU law, who advised the projects at the **network meetings**. This group recommended using the EU project b-solutions for legal advice. Reference was also made to the new *BRIDGEforEU* regulation⁶, an instrument that facilitates the identification and removal of cross-border barriers.

Diversity and the inclusion of “easy-to-forget” groups are already a major challenge for any (deliberative) participation process on a national level. In addition, the framework conditions outlined above make cross-border participation generally more difficult, as one Polish project actor summed up: **“For cross-border participation, especially at our border, practically everyone is hard to reach.”** Cross-border and diverse citizen participation was therefore considered the greatest and most difficult challenge to address.

One **established approach to achieving diversity is random selection**, but this is made difficult across borders by different access to population registers or (culturally specific) differences in the acceptance of random selection procedures in citizen participation. *R(h)einverbindlich – Liaisons rhénanes* and *Stronger Together!* carried out a random selection on at least the German side and were thus able to reach citizens from groups previously less represented.

As an alternative, **outreach methods** were also used. The project *Trialogue in the Border Triangle*, for example, supplemented an early (online) survey in Poland and Czech Republic with paper-based versions, distributed partly via multipliers such as clubs or directly door-to-door, to reach citizens and raise awareness of the project. As in other projects, **existing public events**, such as a popular tri-border festival, were

⁵ See State of Baden-Württemberg (2025): *Beteiligungportal – Regeln für gute Bürgerbeteiligung* or OECD (2020): *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions – Catching the deliberative wave*.

⁶ See <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/> and https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/whats-new/newsroom/05-06-2025-bridgeforeu-regulation-to-address-obstacles-in-border-regions-approved_en [accessed 7 Aug. 2025].

also used to reach citizens with an exhibition, among other things. The *Agglomeration Concept SaarMoselle*, for its part, relied on creative **pop-up campaigns** in places frequented by the general public, such as supermarket parking lots to reach citizens. The targeted use of online participation tools can also help reach a broader target group.

In order not to completely lose sight of the perspective of “easy-to-forget” groups, it makes sense to offer **low-threshold** and **attractive public events** in parallel with citizens administrative councils, not only at the start of the project but also on an ongoing basis – such as citizens’ picnics in the *Climate-friendly, integrated, cross-border City Center* project, citizens’ walks in the *Planning Region High Rhine* project, or hands-on formats, such as the joint tree-pruning campaigns in orchard meadows or themed bike tours at *R(h)einverbindlich / Liaisons rhénanes*. The use of such low-threshold, often initially purely informational formats is useful in making abstract and harder to grasp topics more concrete – like the spatial planning project of the *Planning Region High Rhine. Stronger Together!* implemented large public citizens’ dialogues closely linked with the citizens’ administrative council. The members of the administrative council accompanied the public and very well-attended workshops and integrated the results into their work in timely advisory board meetings.

Six of the projects established citizens’ administrative councils⁷, which require even more commitment and continuity from participating citizens than other formats. Compared with kick-off events or other one-off participation events, there was even less or no diversity; the share of already-experienced participants⁸ and older citizens was even higher. It is possible that **older people** (averaging just over 60 years of age across all projects and events) were reached even more than is usual in participation projects: in interviews, citizens emphasized that cross-border and inter-country collaboration was an important motivation for them to participate, and that older people, unlike younger ones, still remember a Europe with “hard” borders. At the same time, in line with the accompanying research, they see younger people in particular – often meaning those under 40 – as an important and underrepresented group.

A lack of political commitment as well as **uncertainty in dealing with results** of a deliberative participation process are general challenges because citizens who have been won over and become involved may be frustrated despite positive experiences in the project. By involving more than one country, responsibilities, authorization, and

⁷ A citizens’ administrative council is a permanent, i.e., at least repeatedly convening, smaller group of citizens with a more general advisory function. In contrast, the usually larger, temporary citizens’ councils are intended to develop recommendations for a specific task. The actual forms of councils used by the projects varied significantly in some cases.

⁸ Here, too, differences in the culture of participation play a role: from a French perspective, for example, it seemed obvious that members of the *Conseils de développement* could and should also be involved in the citizens’ council of the *SaarMoselle* project.

levels of politics multiply, which tends to reduce commitment and trust. From the outset, both the projects and the citizens involved considered this aspect to be a major challenge. **Political anchoring** and the early inclusion of all relevant bodies in cross-border participation are therefore of crucial importance.

However, **transparency** is also crucial when political responsibilities lie outside the border regions and it is therefore hardly possible to establish a binding commitment. Citizens can be actively involved in addressing higher political levels, as shown by the earlier example of the open letter from the citizens' administrative council to the highest political levels of government in the *Spree-Neisse-Bober* project. This not only promotes transparency and gives citizens the feeling of being active participants, but also, ideally, increases the chance of having their concerns heard. The rapid implementation of citizen proposals that are easy to put into action within the region – such as a bilingual events calendar – can help sustain motivation to participate. Projects should therefore be alert to opportunities for **quick wins** from the outset.

Surveys and interviews show that **all projects view the strengthening of cross-border cooperation between administrations and civil society as a lasting positive effect of their participation**. This also leads to greater commitment. Visible signs include the historic first joint district council meeting between the district of Emmendingen and the Comité Syndical of PETR Sélestat Alsace Centrale in the context of the *R(h)einverbindlich – Liaisons rhénanes* project, or the intensified exchange between the cities of Bogatynia, Hrádek nad Nisou, and Zittau in the *Triologue in the Border Triangle*. The project is not called Triologue for nothing, as it deals with a joint, forward-looking approach to the challenges of phasing out coal in the region. This is an issue that has even led to cross-border legal disputes in the past, but is now again the subject of more exchange.

Common Ground has provided important impetus for cross-border citizen participation. The program strengthened regional cross-border cooperation between municipal and civil society actors in the participating regions. For the projects, the program, and above all the experimentation with communication and participation formats under the expert guidance of the nexus Institute, yielded significant learning when it comes to the value and implementation of citizen participation in general and specifically in the shared border regions. The gain in participation skills experienced by actors and participating citizens provides a solid foundation for future projects and for establishing permanent cross-border participation structures in the regions. Initial approaches towards such consolidation can already be seen. Or, as one program participant put it:

“Cross-border citizen participation strengthens the border regions and helps to further develop a Europe without borders – shaped by the people on the ground.”

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Overview of eight *Common Ground* projects

1 Climate Change and Health

Tri-border Regions DE/BE/NL

Climate change knows no borders – that is something the people in the border triangle of Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands are keenly aware of. Together, the region is developing a cross-border climate and health concept – with the active participation of citizens through surveys and citizen summits.

2 Borderless climate neutrality

Ralingen (DE)/Rosport-Mompach (LU)

From energy region to climate neutrality: in Ralingen (Germany) and Rosport-Mompach (Luxembourg), a future workshop showed that more than shared energy is needed locally. Citizens developed ideas on environment and climate, which were recorded in a mission statement for the region.

3 Cross-Border Agglomeration Concept SaarMoselle

SaarMoselle D/F (Saarbrücken – Forbach)

A cross-border citizens' administrative council for a joint agglomeration concept: In SarMoselle, citizens identified areas with potential for improvement. Forty citizens – 20 from Germany and France each – then discussed key themes for the future of the region.

4 R(h)einverbindlich/Liaisons rhénanes

Emmendingen (D)/
PETR Sélestat-Alsace Centrale (F)

Democracy in action: the former customs island on the Rhine between Emmendingen and Sélestat-Alsace Centrale is to be revitalized. In the *R(h)einverbindlich* project, citizens contributed ideas for its future use – and for strengthening regional ties in mobility, nutrition, and biodiversity – through participatory activities.

5 Planning Region High Rhine

Agglo Basel D/CH (Rheinfelden)

Shared spaces for a diverse region: at the High Rhine, citizens developed a cross-border spatial concept. From public transport to public green spaces, they contributed their ideas – for a border region, where people's lives function well.

6 Climate-friendly, integrated, cross-border city center

Frankfurt (Oder) (DE) – Stubice (PL)

A picnic for the future: Frankfurt (Oder) – Stubice is planning a climate-friendly city center. At cross-border picnics, citizens contributed ideas on mobility and riverbank design – with success: initial measures such as joint plantings have already been implemented.

7 Stronger together!

Spree-Neisse-Bober DE/PL (Guben – Gubin)

Stronger together: after the pandemic, a cross-border crisis concept was needed in the Spree-Neisse-Bober region. It quickly became clear that more was needed. An intensive participation process followed – with many ideas from local people for a resilient future.

8 Trialogue in the border triangle

Small Triangle DE/PL/CZ
(Zittau – Bogatynia – Hrádek)

A region in transition: structural change is bringing major changes to the border triangle of Germany, Poland, and Czech Republic. Citizens were asked what they wanted the future to look like. Their wish: better cross-border public transport and language learning opportunities. These ideas are now being incorporated into the regional development concept.

A detailed description of the eight projects can be found at: www.commonground-participate.org

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