




Citizen Participation in Solidarity Policies: Current Landscape and Prospects



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SUMMARY

[1] As a lever for democratic renewal, a tool for improving policy relevance, and a means of empowering individuals, citizen participation carries significant promise. Several years after the "participation shock" initiated by France's national anti-poverty strategy, the General Inspectorate of Social Affairs (IGAS) has chosen to evaluate, as part of its work program, the current role and impact of direct citizen participation by those affected in the design and implementation of social solidarity policies.

[2] **This review aims to assess not only the presence but also the significance of direct involvement by individuals in shaping the policies that affect them—complementing more conventional stakeholder consultation methods. It also seeks to provide insights to better integrate participatory approaches into public action and align their outcomes with citizens' expectations.**

[3] Through an **in-depth analysis of citizen participation in three key policy areas—anti-poverty strategies, autonomy policies for people with disabilities, and those for the elderly—supplemented by a concise overview of participatory practices across other solidarity policies**, the mission first maps out the current state of direct citizen engagement in the social policy landscape. It then evaluates the maturity and effectiveness of these approaches and highlights the necessary conditions for maximizing their contribution, both in terms of public action methods and the specific needs of target populations. Throughout the investigation, the mission consistently prioritized the perspectives of individuals directly involved in participatory initiatives.

[4] **This mapping reveals a wide range of participatory initiatives, both at the national and local levels.** These include citizens' conventions, self-organized public debates, large-scale online consultations, citizen workshops, user committees, senior and children's councils—launched by either the State or local authorities. Local governments have been particularly active in promoting direct citizen engagement since the 1990s, supported by favorable local democracy legislation.

[5] **These initiatives often coexist—without strong integration—with formal advisory bodies created by law**, where affected individuals are typically represented by advocacy organizations. The level of direct involvement by affected individuals varies significantly across policy areas, especially for the most vulnerable or those using institutional services. Participation is robust in some bodies—such as the National Council for Policies Against Poverty and Social Exclusion (CNLE), the National and Regional Councils of People Receiving Support (CNPA and CRPA), the High Council for Gender Equality, and now the National Advisory Council for Persons with Disabilities (CNCPPH). In other forums, such as the National Council for Child Protection or the Departmental Councils for Citizenship and Autonomy (CDCA), direct participation is emerging or remains limited. **The growing recognition of the value of lived experience in complementing advocacy voices has driven public authorities to promote more direct forms of engagement.**

[6] **Individuals are engaged through a broad array of methods, from the design of national projects and local programs to the operational rollout of policies.** Most efforts remain at the consultation or dialogue stage. However, some initiatives involve citizens in co-creating public policies. Examples include departmental initiatives under the RSA (welfare-to-work program), co-designed projects involving older or disabled individuals, or the recent "zero non-take-up" policy pilot. The most in-depth forms of engagement typically focus on clearly defined or local issues.

[7] **When genuine listening occurs, citizen participation can produce meaningful benefits:** reconnecting individuals to public life, asserting full citizenship for marginalized groups, identifying overlooked needs, raising red flags about policy implementation gaps, and fostering more integrated public action. These benefits reflect the three core purposes of participation—democratic, managerial, and social.

[8] **However, the mission observed uneven adoption of key principles that enable effective participation**—principles established by experienced institutions such as the National Commission for Public Debate (CNDP), the Interministerial Center for Citizen participation, and the Economic, Social and Environmental Council. In the field of social solidarity, the National Solidarity Fund for Autonomy (CNSA) Council and the High Council for Social Work have also highlighted best practices for involving vulnerable populations. These practices—such as a detailed preliminary analysis of context and goals, a clear participation mandate, inclusion of diverse viewpoints, outreach to underrepresented groups, use of neutral facilitators, and transparent follow-up—are not consistently applied. Some participatory methods are still amateurish or ad hoc.

[9] **There is also insufficient coordination between direct citizen engagement and traditional representative structures, leading to parallel processes rather than mutually enriching ones.** This poses a democratic risk. While direct participation offers the strength of lived experience and a diverse, less institutional voice, representative bodies bring long-term perspective, collective expertise, and structure. **Civilian organizations remain essential partners for direct citizen participation**, helping individuals build empowerment, receive training, and sustain participatory groups.

[10] **Moreover, the unique needs of people affected by social policies—those living in poverty, disabled individuals, children, or the elderly—are not always adequately addressed.** Barriers include poor accessibility, the dominance of assembly-style debates (unsuitable for people with functional or cognitive limitations), and the lack of outreach to isolated individuals. **That said, many creative and promising practices have emerged**, tailored to those who struggle to speak up or requiring flexible engagement formats. Sharing and scaling these innovations is vital.

[11] Beyond procedural quality, **what matters to achieve a real impact is the integration of participation into political and administrative operations to unlock its full potential**—a challenge that hinges heavily on political commitment.

[12] **To fulfill the potential of citizen participation, political and administrative barriers must be lifted.** This includes tight timelines, unclear mandates for participation, limited influence on outcomes (practical, legal, or budgetary), weak participatory culture and training, and fragmented support structures. **Participation must also be linked to a broader continuum—from strategic planning to daily service delivery—ensuring a consistent response to users' needs and complaints.**

Participatory efforts gain credibility and scale when they are sincere and well-executed but suffer when they are poorly managed or tokenistic.

[13] In parallel with efforts to adjust public administration practices, **it is equally vital to support the empowerment of individuals affected by social solidarity policies—ranging from everyday self-determination in their personal journeys or living environments to broader, more collective and political forms of participation.** This empowerment is essential to build meaningful participation in public policy. Citizen participation cannot simply be decreed; it must be made truly accessible and feasible for a broader population, beyond the small group of over-solicited, highly engaged volunteers who currently carry the burden. **Achieving this requires a deliberate and proactive approach that promotes expression and active listening at every stage of a person's life path,** in their day-to-day environments. It also requires recognizing and valuing experiential knowledge, developing peer support mechanisms, and encouraging co-learning between citizens and professionals. Additionally, **sustained and reliable support must be provided for the facilitation of groups composed of people with lived experience—**whether within service organizations, through support programs, or in community-based associations. This ongoing investment is essential to ensure that calls for citizen participation reach an audience that is motivated, concerned, and confident in its capacity to contribute—an audience that has gradually developed this agency through meaningful and empowering interactions.

[14] The mission concludes that direct citizen participation responds to vital democratic challenges. It serves as a relevant and necessary driver for social solidarity policies and a force for social cohesion and personal empowerment. It therefore offers **general recommendations,** including:

- Sending a clear political signal by creating a continuum of participation throughout the design and implementation of social solidarity policies. A joint charter on citizen participation involving the State, local authorities, and operators would define shared principles and organizational support.
- Formalizing the complementarity between representation and participation by systematically incorporating direct citizen engagement into the work of national and local advisory bodies.
- Strengthening both interministerial and sector-specific ecosystems to support participatory initiatives and build public officials' capabilities.
- Making administrative processes compatible with citizen involvement at every stage of policymaking and providing necessary resources.
- Ensuring practical inclusion of the most vulnerable—through accessibility, logistical support, and creative engagement methods—and anchoring participation in broader empowerment strategies.

[15] Many of these reforms could be implemented without legislative changes; others could be introduced through sectoral laws, such as those focused on aging well. However, the mission recommends **considering, in the medium term, a major cross-cutting law on health and social solidarity to reinvigorate citizen participation processes, strengthen overall coherence, and establish robust support mechanisms.** In the meantime, a participation charter would serve as an important political signal. More immediately, **regulatory guidelines enshrining key quality**

standards—beyond the current baseline legal requirements—and granting a formal status to participants are essential.