CONSUL DEMOCRACY

26 CONSUL CON

15 - 17 September 2026

Munich, Germany

CONFERENCE REPORT

#consulcon 26



Dear Consul Community,

Three days of CONSULCON26 in Munich showed how CONSUL DEMOCRACY has grown beyond a participation platform into an international community committed to participatory democracy and open-source software.

Dozens of representatives of municipalities, platform users, researchers, civil society stakeholders, developers and international partners, got together, collaborated and discussed, on stage and in parallel conversations.

We learned about practical use cases of our software in different countries, about AI applications for citizen participation, about how the city of Munich is supporting open source software. Together, we explored how participation can become more inclusive and effective, how open-source software can support European digital sovereignty, and how community members can contribute to CONSUL DEMOCRACY and, more fundamentally:

> How can we continue to grow the CONSUL DEMOCRACY ecosystem in a way that is beneficial to all stakeholders?

This document aims to capture some of the lessons learned, success factors and roadblocks we identified over the three-day conference, along this year's thematic tracks: AI, participation, open source and municipal best practices.

We are extremely grateful for such an active community that wants to build, work and grow together. Thank you for attending CONSULCON26 and making it one of our best encounters yet! Let's see where we will land late 2027 or early 2028...

Warm wishes,

Achim Wölfl, Kristina Henry, Jannik Tepe, Simon Strohmenger, Jens Kimmel, Julia Thomaschki, Arnaud Lesur, Lucia Luzuriaga





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Participation has never been easier



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© Photos: Alvand Fayeghi and Lena Skrotzki


CONSULCON 26




CASE STUDY #5: CONSUL DEMOCRACY
CONSUL
DEMOCRACY


Official County Website (nairobi.go.ke)
Current Dynamic: The county portal acts as the centralized host for downloadable policy drafts, County Integrated Development Plans (CIDP), annual development plans, and official notices.
Limitations: Dense policy PDFs hosted on the website can be difficult to read and process on mobile devices, rendering the portal a one-way information broadcast rather than an interactive dialog platform.

Who shapes the city?

First Munich Democracy Festival

on the International Day of Democracy, 15 September 2026
at FLUX at the Pinakothek der Moderne

The opening event made democracy tangible, when people discussed the difficult questions: *Who is missing from the room? Whose contribution is heard and whose is not? Who does the work when a pilot participation project becomes permanent infrastructure?*

The CONSULCON26 began with city tours that traced local democracy in Munich from the aftermath of the Second World War to the present.

Afterwards the FLUX turned into an open meeting place where Munich residents and international CONSULCON participants could encounter the people and initiatives shaping civic life in Munich today. At an 'initiatives market' local organisations showcased their projects, including Mehr Demokratie Bayern, Offen!, Umweltinstitut, LMU, Rehab, BDKJ and the Münchner Flüchtlingsrat.

FLUX also provided a fitting setting for the panel discussion where festival participants discussed with Lena Radau (LMU Munich) and Martin Speidel (Munich City Museum) the festival's guiding question *Who shapes the city?*

The exchange of international as well as local, participatory practices of the city of Munich, including the "MunichBudget", an annual €1 million participatory budget, was equally important to increasing a public understanding of how an idea turns into concrete change in the city, and why proposals move forward and others do not.





Keynotes and Shared Vision

CONSUL DEMOCRACY Foundation Director Simon Strohmenger mapped out the community behind the platform:

“Municipalities that know what residents need, technical partners who implement and improve the software, regional partners with deep networks and expertise in participation, and the Foundation team that maintains the core of this ecosystem.”
Full speech report

With over 300 cities and organizations using the CONSUL DEMOCRACY platform, Simon emphasised the need for financial and non-financial support to maintain the software, respond to rapid developments and reach more users in different regions.

Welcoming participants to Munich’s IT department, Chief Digital Officer Laura Dornheim connected the city’s commitment to open source with its role as the conference’s host and supporter of the CONSUL DEMOCRACY project.

Munich’s participation platform gives residents a way to contribute ideas to local decisions, while the city’s support for open source software in general and CONSUL DEMOCRACY in particular helps sustain the infrastructure behind that engagement. Her welcome highlighted the responsibility public administrations can take for the digital tools they depend on: using them, contributing to their development and supporting their long-term maintenance.
Full speech report





In her keynote Sophie Bloemen encouraged governments and civil society to address and incentivize contributions to open source software and digital commons: open technology that is collaboratively owned and developed and performs important public functions.

According to the director of Commons Network, digital sovereignty begins with self-determination: people should be able to understand technologies, exercise control over their data and move between services. Open standards, interoperability and data portability - all important technical building blocks of digital commons - make that choice possible. Her keynote raised a question for every municipality using open source tools: what would it mean (and take) to help govern and sustain the shared resource which your organizations use and depend on? Publicly available source code is the starting point for these questions, not their answer.

Full Keynote Recap

In his keynote speech Roman Huber, the director of Mehr Demokratie, asked what participation can offer when people feel that the world is becoming **VUCA:** Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous - meaning the political and climate crises multiplied by technological upheaval that is stressing our collective nervous system, where unspoken feelings of fear, anger and uncertainty do not disappear; but shape how people hear one another. Democratic spaces, according to Roman, need room for both emotion and evidence.

Roman also addressed how institutions tackle complex problems such as housing, poverty and climate change. Namely, solving these problems requires people affected by decisions to help define the problem, test approaches and learn from the results. For Roman platforms such as CONSUL DEMOCRACY can support such collective learning through which participation becomes a source of shared intelligence.

Full Keynote Recap



Democratic experimentation under pressure

Lessons from California: participation, political follow-through and the courage to learn from failure.

Journalist and democracy practitioner Joe Mathews brought a candid account of democratic experimentation in California. Against a backdrop of democratic decline, he described how reporting on participation had led him into the difficult work of organising it. His Los Angeles experience exposed the gap between creating a space for citizens and securing political action on their recommendations.



One of the processes Mathews helped to organize formed part of an effort to reform Los Angeles's city charter following corruption scandals and a crisis of representation. Organisers raised funding through an improvised coalition, recruited participants by lottery and brought them together over two weekends. Participants heard testimony and produced nine recommendations, including one on expanding the city council.

The charter reform commission accepted the recommendations, but the council subsequently postponed action. Mathews openly judged the assembly a failure against its immediate ambitions. Too little time, a limited learning phase and weak political follow-through constrained the process. He also challenged the assumption that AI-generated background material is inherently neutral, recounting factual errors in material proposed for the assembly.

Informed deliberation requires reliable evidence and enough time to examine it. Yet the experience also built capacity. Volunteer facilitators gained skills, and Mathews reported that the initiative helped inspire further assemblies elsewhere in California. His account left room for both disappointment and continued experimentation: a process can fall short of its political aims while leaving people better equipped to organise the next one

Full Keynote Recap



Panel Discussion: According To The User

North Ayrshire, Flensburg, Montes de Oca, Nairobi and Nova Gorica.

The use cases ranged from participatory budgets to neighbourhood consultations, but the discussion kept returning to one question: *who can actually participate?*

North Ayrshire described involving young people throughout its participatory budget process. Flensburg had made many consultations easier to enter by removing mandatory registration where it was unnecessary. Montes de Oca combined online proposals with advice in its districts and in-person assemblies, particularly important for residents less familiar with digital tools. And Nova Gorica complements digital processes on CONSUL DEMOCRACY with personal contact, especially for older residents.

Martha Lemba from Nairobi City County, which is just kicking off their digital participation project, aims to include young people who are unlikely to attend a formal meeting through mobile engagement. In Nairobi many youngsters earn their living day by day. In-person participation takes precious time away from work in order to spend a day at a town hall forum, something Lemba is keen on changing with the new digital project.

Nairobi is developing its CONSUL-DEMOCRACY-powered SemaNai platform to offer another route into budgeting and public decisions. The Nairobi example shows why digital participation can be an instrument of inclusion: it can give people a chance to contribute without being present at a particular place and time. It also shows why a platform must be judged by the people it reaches, the feedback it provides and its connection to decisions.

Session Recap

1 Across all five cities, the lesson was to design participation around people's lives- and to keep learning from those who still cannot take part.

Practical Deep Dive

Participation becomes accessible when its design takes account of how people live, communicate and encounter public institutions. These sessions explored the practical choices that help turn an invitation into sustained involvement

Communication and digital participation: experiences from Montes de Oca and Málaga

Massiel Villanueva Ilama, Municipio de Montes de Oca
David Aurusa, Enreda Coop

Communication emerged as part of the participation process itself. Montes de Oca combines its CONSUL DEMOCRACY platform with district assemblies, training and advice that helps residents develop workable proposals before submitting them. Málaga connects online participation with neighbourhood voting locations and has adapted the platform to municipal procedures, including generating documents staff need for formal reporting. Both examples showed why participation requires support on two sides: residents need a clear invitation and help navigating the process, while municipal colleagues need tools that fit their everyday work. Connecting online and in-person routes makes the process easier to enter and sustain. Full session report

Using Digital Platforms for Elections: Experiments from Bavaria and Scotland

Maria Hörtrich, Bavarian digital ministry
John Munro, COSLA

Bavaria's U18 voting pilot and Glasgow's youth elections explored how digital platforms can support electoral participation in specific settings. Hörtrich described starting with a manageable, varied group of pilot municipalities and issuing individual access credentials through municipal channels. Munro showed how CONSUL DEMOCRACY's participatory-budgeting functions could be adapted for candidates, constituencies, election phases and results. Their experiences highlighted the importance of clear invitations, simple access and accountable administration. They also underlined that youth and local pilot elections have their own requirements: lessons about usability need to be considered alongside the safeguards appropriate to each electoral context.
Full session report





In Nairobi: developing the SemaNai model for hybrid participation

Martha Lemba and Goeffrey Omatoke Mosiria
Nairobi County Government

Nairobi's developing SemaNai platform offers an additional route into public participation, including planning and budgeting. The delegates made the stakes of access tangible: for someone earning a daily income, attending a lengthy public meeting can mean losing the money needed for that day's food. Digital participation can allow a contribution without that same demand on time and travel. The discussion also described community project committees and cooperation with neighbourhood associations, connecting participation to local services and follow-through. SemaNai's promise lies in strengthening this hybrid approach, with digital access complementing community relationships and opportunities to understand how public decisions are made.

Full session report

How German Public Administrations Improve Participation Quality and Inclusiveness

Rebecca Palm, Municipality of Siegburg
Annick Poirot, Municipality of Flensburg



> Participation needs a visible connection between invitation, conversation, deliberation and result.

Flensburg presented accessibility as a responsibility spanning technology, language, visual and auditory information, organisation, physical access and the whole participation procedure. Its examples included screen-reader improvements, selected sign-language content, paper alternatives and direct engagement with people with disabilities. Siegburg demonstrated an AI assistant that guides residents from an idea in everyday language to an editable budget proposal, alongside assistance for staff setting up projects. Both presentations showed that accessibility requires ongoing attention: clear steps, realistic deadlines, approachable contact people and understandable results matter throughout the process. Digital assistance works best alongside accessible ways to participate in person.

Full session report

Improving Participation

The track asked what makes participation democratically meaningful. Its sessions examined power, disagreement, representation and the organisational conditions that help participation become established practice

Workshop: Score Your Platform Applying Democratic Value to Evaluate Digital Participation

Alexandros Melidis, GFOSS

Alexandros invited participants to evaluate platforms through his Co-creation of Democratic Value framework, asking who shapes the rules, sets the agenda, produces and interprets contributions, governs the platform and evaluates its effects.

Inclusion, transparency and accountability run through that assessment. Worksho participants scored platforms against evidence of their current operation, making gaps between technical capabilities and actual citizen influence visible. The workshop offered a practical reminder that user satisfaction and a long list of features can coexist with limited public power. Evaluation needs to examine how influence is distributed across the process.

Full session report

Workshop: No Either-Or-Participation Without Forced Consensus

Dominik Gallenberger, University of Innsbruck

Gallenberger's workshop explored how participation can work with persistent disagreement and competing responsibilities. Through cases involving environmental protection, development and affected communities, participants examined trade-offs and the different ways scientific, political and social actors describe a problem. The exercise encouraged attention to whose knowledge counts, who bears the consequences and how arguments can be understood across those perspectives. Its contribution to the track was to treat disagreement as material for designing workable outcomes. A process can clarify choices and responsibilities without requiring everyone to share the same view.

Full session report





Evaluating the Inclusiveness and Quality of Digital Participation Platforms

Anna Mikhaylovskaya, University of Groningen;
Erica Celine Yu and Cesare Maria Dalbagno,
Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences
Nicolien Janssens, Erasmus University Rotterdam / LMU Munich

The research session distinguished access to participation from influence within it. Mikhaylovskaya showed why inclusive founding principles do not guarantee inclusive practice: design choices and existing power relationships still matter. Yu examined how representation can connect broad public participation with smaller groups able to deliberate in depth, presenting research conducted with Dalbagno. Janssens explored what citizens' assemblies and online platforms can learn from each other, including better feedback on public input and closer attention to which contributions people actually see.

Together, the presentations argued for evaluating both who enters a process and how their perspectives reach deliberation and decisions.

Full session report

Success factors of local e-participation in Germany

Nadja Wilker, University of Düsseldorf

Wilker presented research based on around 2,300 municipal responses: roughly one third of responding municipalities reported offering digital participation. Size, financial capacity and access to a central platform helped explain adoption; more established and varied use was also associated with specialised administrative teams and a stronger commitment to democratic goals. She distinguished these indicators of maturity from evidence of quality or political impact, which the survey could not establish. The discussion returned to a practical starting point: define the purpose, the people who need to be involved and how their input will be used before selecting a tool. Success should be judged against those aims.

Full session report



Afternoon with AI

These sessions explored AI-supported services across the participation lifecycle: planning processes, helping people contribute, distributing attention and working with results. They also kept human review and the distinction between working features and experiments in view.

How AI Can Improve the Design of Citizen Participation Processes

Lotte Kirch, Initiative Offene Gesellschaft
Tobias Klug, wer denkt was

Lotte Kirch presented BEA (bea-ki.de), an AI-supported participation process planning aid for municipal teams with limited time and resources. It helps design processes by clarifying a project's context, formulating questions, selecting methods and structuring planning.

Tobias Klug's idea management system addressed the later stages, bringing contributions from different formats into a workspace for analysis and follow-through. He demonstrated AI-assisted categorisation with manual correction and outlined plans for traceable changes, reporting, responsibilities and links to earlier participation results.

The presentations connected process design with institutional memory, asking how assistance can help municipalities retain citizens' ideas and understand what happens to them over time. Make participation easier while keeping people in control.
Full session report

> Good AI improves the participation process without taking decisions away from people.





CONSUL DEMOCRACY & AI: Making the Platform More Inclusive, Accessible and Effective

Maja Cimerman, Danes Je Nov Dan, Slovenia and John Munro, COSLA, Scotland

demonstrated the AI features being developed for CONSUL DEMOCRACY. Maja showed how user-submitted proposals could be translated on request, how an image could be suggested for a proposal, and how speech could become editable text in real time.

John shared his experience with content moderation and with sorting and summarising contributions. Crucially, he described a moderation queue in which staff can review a flagged comment, see which model acted and why, and reverse the action. Some functions are still being tested.

Full session report

The discussion focused on where AI can improve access, support participation and ease administrative work.

AI for Better Citizen Participation: Testing New Tools for Cities

Carina Hausladen, University of Konstanz
Tobias Weinmann, Demokratie Today

Which proposals citizens see first can shape a participatory budget. Carina Hausladen's *FairFeed prototype* explored how recommendations could reflect personal interests while giving underexposed ideas more visibility through an alternative to rankings that favour already popular ideas.

Tobias Weinmann demonstrated assistance for project setup, citizen contributions and the analysis of results, including guided submissions, thematic clustering and reports linked to their sources.

The session showed that AI design shapes both administrative work and the distribution of attention within a democratic process.

Full session report



Open Source, Open Gov

Open source becomes shared democratic infrastructure through maintenance, contribution, governance and cooperation. This track examined how municipalities can use that infrastructure, support it and connect it to other tools.

In Munich: Open Source Advocacy and Urban Verified for Private and Verifiable Digital Voting

Klaus Müller, Munich IT Department
Luis Bezzenberger, brainbot



Munich connected its open-source approach to the practical challenge of trustworthy digital voting. Müller's "use, improve, publish" approach encourages administrations to reuse existing software, support its development and share what they build. The Urban Verified demonstration explored how ballot privacy could coexist with public verification: voters could locate their encrypted ballot, while independent observers could inspect the evidence and recompute the result. Different dashboard views offered progressively more technical detail. The session connected public control over software with the ability to scrutinise a democratic procedure, while acknowledging the challenge of making cryptographic verification understandable.

Full session report

Open Source Adoption in Local Governments: Lessons from CONSUL DEMOCRACY and Four Other Tools

Nicholas Gates, Open Forum Europe

Gates presented comparative research on local-government open-source collaboration, looking at how public administrations, suppliers, communities and foundations organise development and reuse. The CONSUL DEMOCRACY discussion made the benefits and tensions of decentralisation concrete: local versions can respond to particular needs, while bringing useful improvements back into the shared project requires coordination and careful review. Sustainable adoption depends on understanding who maintains the software, how priorities are agreed and how continuing work is funded. Municipalities therefore need to consider the relationships and governance behind a tool alongside its technical suitability.

Full session report



use, improve, publish.

Open-Source = Democratic Infrastructure

CONSUL and APIs: Interoperating Participation Platforms and Communication Tools

Tilman Hampl, Municipality of Würzburg
Sabrina Wehrend, Municipality of Lübeck

The speakers explored how participation can reach people through channels they already use. Würzburg's API work connects CONSUL content with municipal event services and other interfaces; a live messenger demonstration showed how people could discover projects and submit ideas through a conversational route. The discussion linked this to wider cooperation between municipal tools and community platforms. Interfaces can reduce repeated publishing work and give residents additional entry points, while CONSUL remains the participation backend. The messenger example also prompted questions about authentication and the data passing through external services, showing that convenience and public control both need attention.
Full session report

Open Source Participation Infrastructure: Towards a European Digital Commons

Timo Väliharju, COSS
Lukas Salecker, deliberAIde

Väliharju presented Voxit's development as a European open-source collaboration, with shared questions about governance, maintenance and funding beyond the initial project. Salecker demonstrated connections between deliberAIde, Voxit and CONSUL: assembly recommendations could be opened to wider public responses and those responses brought back into the working document. His reusable "bridges" offered a way for AI tools to interact with different platforms without building every connection separately. Together, the presentations showed a practical direction for a digital commons: independent projects cooperating through accessible interfaces, with continued coordination on permissions, meaning and the origins of information.
Full session report







How to contribute to CONSUL Democracy?

Javier (Javi) Martín, Rock&Ror
CONSUL's core developer

Javi encouraged users to tell the maintenance team how they use CONSUL DEMOCRACY, which versions they run and where they encounter difficulties. Reports about upgrades, accessibility and local modifications help the team understand what needs attention. Translations and clear issue reports are valuable contributions alongside code.

For developers, he recommended starting with a manageable change that the small core team can review and integrate. Sharing local problems and improvements helps the wider community benefit from work already happening in individual cities.

Local problems become shared knowledge, shared knowledge improves the platform, and better tools make new forms of local participation possible.
Full session report

> The number of installations is not the only measure of an open-source community. What matters is whether cities share what they learn and whether the people who operate, maintain and develop the software receive lasting support.



DEMOCRACY FITNESS

Like muscles, democratic skills grow stronger through practice

Democracy Fitness is a training concept that expands traditional ideas of what democracy is. Julia Thomaschki and Achim Wölfl trained with the participations both, disagreement and mobilisation muscle in a fun, active and challenging way. Each session takes around 30 minutes and can be the starting point for a strong democracy.

MOBILISATION

In a democracy,we can do more, if we do it together. When you make room for others, your idea can become a common cause.

ACTION

Ina democracy, you can act on what you believe is important. Find your spark and get going!

DISAGREEMENT

In ademocracy, disagreement is natural, but it can feel uncomfortable. If you disagree with respect, the discomfort turns into knowledge.

EMPATHY

In a democracy, we have different perspectives. If we put ourselves in each other's shoes, we create mutual understanding.

COURAGE

Democracy isall of us. Find the courage to challenge yourself and cheer on others. Be brave.

OPINION

In ademocracy, you have the right to have opinions - and to change them. When we share them with each other, they are challenged and take shape.

ACTIVE LISTENING

In ademocracy, everyone has the right to speak. Being heard requires that others listen actively.

VERBAL CONFIDENCE

Ina democracy, we all have a voice. If you do voicework, you can use it to make an impact.

COMPROMISE

Inademocracy, we findsolutions together. If we make room for different approaches, more people can accept the decisions.

CURIOSITY

Ina democracy, we have the right to ask. When we are open and creative, we discover new possibilities.

Read more at democracyfitness.org

Closing panel

Keeping the CONSUL community connected

The final Main Stage panel had the spotlight on key partners of the CONSUL DEMOCRACY Foundation and looked ahead to the future of CONSUL as an international community.
The project's decentralized nature allows cities and organizations to adapt the platform to local needs, but the speakers also identified shared challenges: exchanging knowledge across countries, bringing useful developments from local versions back into the core software, and securing stable funding for the Foundation. Alexandros Melidis called for stronger peer learning and knowledge hubs, describing CONSUL as digital public infrastructure for democracy.

The panel ended with practical ideas for what the community could build together: a place to share plugins and customizations, a participatory strategy for the next three to five years, and more opportunities to meet between conferences.

Klaus Müller offered a telling example: even cities using CONSUL within Germany had rarely spoken directly before meeting in Munich. The closing discussion made clear that the platform's future depends as much on relationships between its users and contributors as on the software they develop.



In Conclusion...

Who can take part at all?
And who can meaningfully influence what happens once they do?

Access and influence are two distinct aspects of inclusion. A formally open platform does not create equal opportunities when language, time, technology or an intimidating discussion prevents people from taking part. A diverse list of registered participants tells us little about whose arguments ultimately shape the outcome.

At the Democracy Festival, a participant described vividly how poverty can obstruct participation even when an opportunity has been widely publicised.

People with certain disabilities face technical and communication obstacles; others need translation or plainer language. Some are reluctant to speak in public, while others find a safer point of entry online. People with little money often face an additional barrier that forms do not show: finding the time and energy, and sometimes overcoming shame, before approaching a public authority at all.

In conclusion, inclusion requires more than outreach to additional target groups. It changes the design of the process, the questions that are asked, in which language and in what setting? Whether people must register or disclose sensitive aspects of their lives or if there is room for a conversation, a short response and a detailed submission? Are dissenting views moderated respectfully?

Test inclusion at every transition: from invitation to entry, entry to discussion, discussion to decision, and decision to feedback. These are the points where voices are most easily lost.

Participation is not a single method, municipalities conclude: A participatory budget, a debate about urban development and a short survey at a market stall, all have different advantages and functions. Online tools let people contribute without attending a meeting at a fixed time. In-person encounters can generate spontaneous conversations and trust. Good processes connect these routes rather than confining people to one channel.



Across the four tracks, a shared lesson emerged: meaningful participation requires accessible processes, a credible connection to decisions and infrastructure that communities can sustain together. AI can support this work, while open-source collaboration allows local improvements to become shared resources.

Participants shared advice, challenges and reflections throughout the conference.
These notes capture some of the conversations we want to continue



> *Let's create CONSUL Country Hubs!!*

> *+ Privacy in digital communication*

> *START TO: How do we integrate the participation of kids and youth (age 8-14)? Co-creation via App ■ How to integrate in Consul?*

> *The democracy is in the kids of future — CONSUL in school.*

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What would you like to share with the community?

Write an idea, a learning, a project, a need or a wish.

Put it on the community wall.

Landeshauptstadt München

MEHR DEMOKRATIE

Participation fails when ...

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”

It's purpose, process and design are only set up from the top.

Something that sounds good in theory but rarely works in practice is ...

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Anarchism

If I could give one piece of advice to someone designing a participation process, it would be ...

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Democracy is an endless meeting.

Have you successfully involved traditionally underrepresented or marginalised groups? How did you do it?

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'Stay analog!' Address people directly, offer food, always stay open to people's needs. [orig. German: 'analog bleiben'! Klar ansprechen, Essen anbieten, stets offen für die Bedürfnisse sein]

How can we meaningfully involve children and young people in participation?

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Don't assume they 'want to get it'; keep it simple and find something tangible. Use small grants that they can vote on and see the result of quickly. (And involve them at every stage!)

If I could give one piece of advice to someone designing a participation process, it would be ...

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Think it from the end: how are results integrated in decision making? How will participants be informed about it?



Thank you for making CONSULCON26 so special!

You want to use, improve or spread CONSUL DEMOCRACY?

Get in touch via hello@consuldemocracy.org!

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