

LET'S GET LOCAL: HOW COMMUNITY-DRIVEN INITIATIVES CAN SOLVE LOCAL PROBLEMS AND PROMOTE DEMOCRACY

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The disruptive actions of illiberal populists in power represent a double challenge for democratic actors. On the one hand, they must react to the chaos and attempt to limit the impact of undemocratic policies. On the other, they must create strategies to address an underlying question: How do we prove to citizens that liberal democracy is a better alternative? Experts have pointed to three important factors driving the rise of anti-democratic populism in Europe both from the demand (voters' preferences and attitudes) and the supply (political leaders and parties) sides. From the demand side, culture wars have been highlighted as the principal fuel. Economic anxiety is, to a lesser extent, also a cause. From the supply side, the [messaging formula](#) "for the nation, against the elite" has shown to be highly effective in rallying voters around anti-democratic populist agendas.

In this historic juncture, the question of how liberal democracies can adapt their political and social structures to withstand the rise of populist movements without compromising democratic values in a post-truth era becomes of critical importance. In the next paragraphs, I argue that community-driven programmes are essential both to de-escalate culture wars at the local level, through mediation and people-to-people negotiation, and to promote democratic values as consequential to the well-being of citizens. Moreover, I state that the European Union (EU) has had valuable experience in promoting development programmes in areas that later have shown remarkable resilience to the rise of illiberal populist agendas. This experience can become the basis for an EU-scale community-driven strategy to promote democratic values.

The theory of change as the basis of this argument is simple. If rural and urban communities all over the EU actively

construct collective micro-democratic initiatives that show tangible solutions to local issues, they will be more prone to protect and promote democratic values at a macro scale. In other words, effective community-driven projects can both de-escalate culture conflicts at the micro level and undermine the argument that democratic values only benefit the elites and are against national interests.

The structure of this policy paper is as follows. In the first section, I delve into the example of the Republic of Ireland as a case in point and argue this expertise could be quickly adapted for a broader community-driven strategy at the EU level. In the second section, I define community-driven projects and examine the opportunities and challenges of this proposal based, to a large extent, on the analysis made of the Irish case. In the last section, I propose three concrete areas that can directly tackle illiberalism in Europe. Importantly, this strategy requires complex, detailed, and coordinated planning at the EU, national, and local levels. Its success is not guaranteed. Nonetheless, it can provide the tangible results needed to counter the rise of populist movements without compromising democratic values.

The case of the Republic of Ireland

The set of interests that prompted Ireland's accession to the EU in 1973 were initially almost purely economic. Scholars have pointed to the highly transactional and utilitarian nature of the early integration impulses. Nonetheless, in the last five decades, more than 45 billion euros have been invested by the EU in the country, with a strong emphasis on local agriculture, social, regional and structural projects. The level of engagement with various communities from schoolchildren to farmers,[1] led these initiatives to become not only a development mechanism,

[1] An [example](#) is the Wild Atlantic Nature Programme, integrated in the EU LIFE programme for the environment and climate action.

but also a social cohesion strategy. The presence of a near and active armed conflict in Northern Ireland was also an important factor. EU projects were seen as critical for the advancement of peace efforts on the island of Ireland and were given a strong community drive and social dimension. [Data](#) shows that these initiatives achieved a thicker Europeanisation.

Though they were slow to arrive, the results did come. According to [EU Commission data](#), in 2018, the Republic of Ireland became a net contributor to EU funds and announced it was prepared to pay more into the EU budget to help other members of the Union. Importantly, the consensus in favour of the EU has gone beyond the Irish elites. In 2009, the second Lisbon referendum received a decisive yes, despite the unsuccessful first try. [In 2011](#), 93% of respondents believed Ireland should stay in the EU and 58% agreed that Ireland should contribute more to the EU budget. The consensus withstood the anti-EU rhetoric that shook the area before the Brexit referendum and the existential crisis that followed. In fact, [scholars](#) found that Brexit “rendered the Irish ‘choice for Europe’ that much clearer again.”

Benefits of community development projects

The [World Bank](#) has argued in favour of projects driven by local communities. Experience has shown that communities “effectively organize to identify priorities and address local challenges,” when given clear and transparent rules, access to information, and appropriate technical and financial support, and by working with appropriate institutions. The range of operations can go from small-scale infrastructure to delivering basic services and enhancing quality of life. Importantly, these projects can also provide legitimacy to deliberative processes and democratic values.

The term ‘community-driven’ has been widely used in development literature. According to [experts](#), a process can be characterised as community-driven when it a) has active participation of local communities in the planning and implementation processes, b) has formal inclusion of a wide range of community members, and c) has substantive inclusion, meaning the participation actually influences the outcomes. Although these kinds of projects are usually designed and implemented across a range of low to middle-income countries, characterised by widespread fragility, conflict, and violence, I argue that the rise of illiberal populism in Europe and the United States has shown that democracy is fragile anywhere.

The EU has had invaluable experience in the promotion of community-led projects. The initiatives advanced by both the EU and national actors in the Republic of Ireland provided data that helped scholars and policy-makers understand the benefits and challenges of community-driven development projects. A [case study](#) that interviewed members from eight community groups reflecting a diversity of projects found that the initiatives not only created jobs in rural areas but also developed the skills and talents of the local communities and opened possibilities for political and social recognition for those involved in the project. These benefits were additional to the ones achieved through the actual completion of the projects that ranged from promoting local tourism to supporting fishermen and recycling waste products.

Collected data also suggests that a wider range of benefits can be derived from community-driven initiatives. These include:

- Specific follow-up mechanisms for community issues at a micro level promoting the de-escalation of conflicts and timely resolutions of problems;

- Community fora and spaces for intergenerational and intercultural communication;
- Spaces for direct engagement between local communities and EU bodies where unelected officials can directly engage with citizens within the framework of the projects;
- Articulation of community-based visions and goals for specific geographical areas;
- Explicit recognition of cross-country/region interdependence in aspects of development;
- Concrete results for pro-democracy messaging at local, regional, and national levels.

Though possible benefits are clear, they are not guaranteed. Their achievements are contingent upon overcoming important obstacles.

Challenges: From financing to promoting effective inclusion

Financing is certainly one of the biggest challenges of community-driven projects. Community groups in Ireland have [identified problems](#) related to accessing funds. These include lack of resources, delayed decision-making, late arrival of money, lack of internal coordination, and a negative attitude towards certain types of projects. Identifying clear objectives for projects and setting their time frames can help experts tailor the financial backing to their needs. This may include directing them towards self-sufficiency models and/or increased support from local bodies and businesses from the onset, according to their nature and objectives.

Another set of challenges identified by experts are those related to the sudden growth of demand for community representatives. This can be especially [challenging](#) in areas with underdeveloped local capacity and/or desire to participate. The lack of qualified local representatives can lead to a) uneven

distribution of resources, b) overburdened work schedules of few representatives, c) a lack of real representation of the target group, and d) a slower pace of budgetary implementation. While some of these challenges are intrinsic to the process of capacity-building and therefore impossible to avoid, mitigation strategies can be put in place, such as active and continuous recruitment and coaching of local talent. This coaching can also help deal with the leakage of best practices.

Avoiding ineffective public messaging strategies is the third set of critical challenges. Since such an important part of the rise of illiberal populism has derived from disinformation and oversimplified undemocratic - but effective - messaging formulas, a lot of thought and planning must be put into the pro-democracy messaging strategies that will be used during the different phases of the projects. These must have clear objectives, appropriate ways of measuring their effectiveness, and adequate means of dissemination.

Other issues may arise, including the absence of meaningful cross-country and intergenerational exchanges among diverse projects and a lack of wide participation, defined as broader power-sharing. More [specifically](#), community-driven initiatives should steer away from partnership models in which the redistribution of power only occurs among a small local elite. This is but a short description of the key challenges. Planners and implementers will need to actively seek and solve issues as they arise.

Next steps: Three key areas for community-driven solutions

Three groups of community-driven solutions could promote democratic values and positively impact local communities by aiding professional development and cultural integration.

These are:

- **Work/study retraining programmes and professional coaching for adults:** Projects that contribute to reducing unemployment and underemployment in specific EU Member States' areas, while also promoting rapid adaptation to new technologies. Professional coaches can also serve as positive role models in areas where such backing is needed.
- **Integration mediators for schools, neighbourhoods, and workplaces:** Initiatives that create and maintain networks of local mediators to promote intercultural and intergenerational integration while also helping de-escalate micro conflicts.
- **Local development projects among diverse communities:** Community-driven micro infrastructure projects that solve locally identified problems, such as bike lanes, infrastructure for public parks, recycling collection facilities, etc.

Conclusion

Three key areas of community-driven solutions can be the start of an EU-level strategy that seeks to solve important issues at the local level and promote democratic values. These are work/study retraining programmes and professional coaching for adults, the integration of mediators for schools, neighbourhoods and workplaces, and local development projects among diverse communities. In these areas, citizens can effectively organise, identify priorities, and address local challenges while also countering the illiberal populist argument that democracy does not deliver results. This proposal coincides with important research that finds that a consensus on fundamental systemic principles is urgently needed in Europe.[2]

The process of arriving at this consensus must necessarily come from a broad exchange process among citizens. Coordinating these kinds of projects will take considerable complex planning and coordination at the EU, national, and local levels, but the importance of the end goal justifies the difficulty. Despite the challenges, the EU can draw from previous successful national and EU experiences to build a continental-level strategy. This paper has used the example of the Republic of Ireland and shortly referenced projects developed in Northern Ireland, but other successful experiences could also be helpful, such as Poland's participatory budgets and the experience of integration mediator networks in Germany.[3] Crucially, the aim of this proposal is to use these experiences to build a broader strategy.

[2] An example of this wider academic interest can be seen in the upcoming book by Maciej Kisilowski and Anna Wojciuk "Let's Agree on Poland, OUP: 2025."

[3] Readers can access information about the [Berlin Center for Integrative Mediation](#), among other experiences in the field.

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