

# Transforming towards a democracy of the people

Reflection paper of the  
Nova Helvetia working  
group “Democracy in  
Transformation”

(SDG 16)

## About Nova Helvetia

Nova Helvetia is a process to address the urgent need to reinvent the human-made systems that are causing and aggravating the current crisis, or being outed as inadequate by it.

With numerous partner organisations, collaboratio helvetica launched a 3 month process to engage pioneers and stakeholders in sense-making, discovering the root causes of the current crisis, and sharing reflections and possible solutions that address them.

[Find out more about Nova Helvetia on our website.](#)

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## In a nutshell

Nova Helvetia created a safe space to explore core issues affecting emerging needs in our democracy, to identify and address places of disconnect between those who are in charge and the citizens, and to reflect beyond these boundaries.

We acknowledge that democracy in Switzerland is at a point, where it faces profound and complex problems, calling for solutions that require a closer interaction and exchange, bridging the gap between politicians and citizens.

In order to strengthen Swiss democracy, there is a need for interactive democratic mechanisms on various topics, enabling a sharing of knowledge, open discussions and collaboration, in developing prototypes of democratic processes.

## Can involving citizens in the political process help solve complex problems?

The Nova Helvetia group, 'Democracy in Transformation', evaluated the potential for a change in politics, by reflecting on how the democratic process can be strengthened, by examining the hurdles in the current democratic system, and identifying the most pressing complex issues, such as the crises of climate and ecology. Furthermore, the group focussed on a more active role of citizens, in political discussions and in the voting process.

Our calling question in the Nova Helvetia journey reads as follows: How can the active involvement of citizens help in resolving today's complex problems? We examined a potential solution with the establishment of citizen councils and assemblies, their impact and their limitations.

## Reflections

### What do we see?

Switzerland is one of the few places, where citizens have political instruments of referendums and initiatives, to shape key societal decisions. In the first two sessions, we identified core problems, such as an inefficient decision-making process, in solving complex problems such as the climate and ecological crises, resulting in a political backlog of unfinished work, and also as a result of a lack of parliamentary majority to tackle these important issues. We also recognised a disjoint in the democratic participatory process that excluded non-citizens, reducing the potential for a vibrant

and living democracy. The communication gap between citizens and politicians is substantiated in surveys and our own observations. This is manifested in very low turnouts at election polls that exhibit a particularly non-participatory democratic process, and with the exclusion of non-Swiss citizens, with the caveat that a few local communes provide for the participation of non-Swiss citizens, on a local level. The situation is exacerbated, by the increasing divide between political parties, leading to a standstill in societal reforms, some of which is attributable to the influence of lobby interests, preventing far-sighted and timely decisions.

During our deliberative process, we came to the core question in all the projects: Where is the disruptive or disconnected place in the overall chain of responsibility?

## Root Causes

The problems, as a result of the weaknesses of the current political system, point to three levels, where different aspects appear to interact. This is not an exhaustive analysis, but its importance requires to be addressed. The practice of direct democracy, compared to other countries, is an achievement, though this group believes that improvements are possible.

**Process:** A backlog in reforms, as a result of difficult consensus building, caused by inadequate processes that prevent long-term solutions and an inability to co-opt citizens in developing out-of-the-box radical solutions.

**Internal factors:** Power struggles between and within parties, the influence of lobbyists, particular interests of politicians (biases and lack of focus on citizen interests) and undue influence of party whip and stakeholders with financial wherewithal.

**External factors:** Loss of public confidence in politics, low rate of citizen participation (citizens are unaware or do not grasp their (potential) influence in the political process), a non-transparent communication of political issues to citizens and an inadequate level of civic education in schools.

## Processes

To ensure an even-handed analysis that went beyond our own passion and focus on citizen empowerment in the political process, we reflected on other prevalent political instruments or processes and their benefits and risks. Our evaluation of existing processes, involving both citizens and politicians, found these to be time consuming and inadequate, to address current complex problems such as the climate change crisis and inadequate social justice, amongst other issues.

Collection of citizen involvement processes in citizen assemblies:

- [Democracy R&D: Helping make hard decisions and build public trust.](#)
- [Demoscan | Information citoyenne pour un vote éclairé](#)
- Bürgergespräche
- [Participative Consultation Framework](#)
- [Civic Tech projects in Switzerland and worldwide](#)
- [Participation.World – Involve Your People | Learn participative governance principles](#)

## What do we need?

In our journey, we concluded that there is a lack of an open communicative exchange between citizens and politicians, as a result of internal and external factors as mentioned earlier. These observations point to the need for a new interactive level between citizens and politicians, as a key factor to understand the needs and contexts of the counterpart. This is a prerequisite to find support within the Swiss community and to create policies that represent the needs and hopes of the citizens they represent.

New participatory forms that provide added value to both citizens and public authorities are required, to help us in our common search for long-term solutions to our complex challenges.

There are various participatory forms that could address this problem, such as citizen forums, citizen assemblies (CAs), online forums and sortition. It may be that these changes may not entirely resolve the problems, but they can provide a stepping stone to a better solution.

The participatory forms listed above have been tried out in various contexts such as the MLB process in Canada, Climate Citizen Assemblies in Ireland and France and Demoscan in Sion. It has been shown that such forms of citizen involvement offer the following:

- **Robust procedures:** CAs come with tested processes, to develop political decisions based on inclusion and in-depth (comprehensive) deliberation. The current political system does not provide these strong deliberative procedures.
- **Diversity:** Policy making requires more than just politicians sharing similar viewpoints. We need to interact and co-opt different interests in consensus, and include the interests of citizens who may not be actively involved.
- **Real neutrality:** The current political system is built on competition and lobbying for particular interests, CAs on the contrary are based on collaboration and aim for the common good.
- **Inclusion:** It is clear that the current system is not able to include those who do not trust, value or have the (voting) right to proactively participate in the decision-making process, and do not have access to interact with politicians from the entire political spectrum. This calls for new exchange (plat-)forms.

As there are many individuals and organisations focussed on improving the democratic process, we realised that there is a need to have an intensive exchange in Switzerland. This requires a common platform permitting sharing, enabling, exchanging and collaborating on projects strengthening democracy. We learned that the space provided by Nova Helvetia is essential to deepen the understanding of the underlying problem.

## Vision of the future

It's 2030, and looking back on how ten years ago we dreamt of having an inclusive and real democracy, that is able to target global, regional and local challenges we were confronted with. And we did fulfil this dream! We put citizens at the heart of politics. Citizens are making and shaping politics, not big business or multinationals. We brought about a dialogue between citizens and politicians, in the heart of the democratic process, and we learned to hear and be empathic to the views of people with other opinions. We have grown together as one, one humanity that is able to go into deeper layers and decide to together unlearn unhealthy things for our society and the planet, and learn how to hear, listen and feel for and with each other.

## Conclusions and new questions that arise

We know this is the time for change. It is now that we have to revitalise and energise the citizens in Switzerland and around the world, and show them a democratic path to be able to address the complex challenges we face today. Citizens do want to interact and act together, but they do not know how and where. Politicians do want to have clear and efficient solutions and represent the wishes of the people they believe they represent, but they start to feel that they might not really see the entire picture, they might not find a way in a traditional process as it exists now.

We just need catalysts, nodal points and electric jolts!

We realised that we still have to find a way to connect people and actors and not only have another project that saps our energy.

It is still challenging to find a way to engage people proactively in the discussion, to think outside of their own project, this is the bigger aim we have.

## A prototype to address key challenges that we found

We believe that organisations active in this field must be aware of each other's activities, so that synergies can develop and real change in the political system becomes possible. In addition to the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary, we want to establish a fourth power, the Consultative, and thus strengthen the democratic system.

1. Need for a platform/ overview to see who does what, in what form and when in Switzerland, to better connect the different participative democracy movements. This platform will provide the synergy, where workshops can be arranged.
2. Prototype 1-day workshops to bring actors / the community together and work on one key issue/ project on that day (e.g. climate and ecological crises, migration, lobbyist in politics, etc.). The workshop, on the one hand, generates awareness about planned or ongoing projects and, on the other hand, strengthens the process itself by helping to identify specific inputs to different components of such processes: Communication, mobilisation, deliberation, sensitisation, over implementation and control. Our aim is to support each other and help create dynamic, responsive and synergised processes, to design solutions that mutually reinforce each other, with a common understanding, narrative and direction of the intended collaboration.

A first prototype is planned for early autumn 2020 focusing on how citizen assemblies can help to tackle the climate and ecological crisis.

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