

MAIA 5th Policy Roundtable on Behavioural Change and Civil Society Knowledge in the European Sustainable Transition

20th March 2025

10:00 - 11:30 AM CET

Ambiorix Center, Square Ambiorix 7, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

INTRODUCTION:

This event explored how behavioural change and civil society knowledge could drive Europe's sustainable transition. With the need for radical change to mitigate and adapt to the consequences of climate change, the daily lives of European citizens will transform fundamentally. Because of this, the knowledge and agency of regular citizens play a pivotal, yet undefined role in the transition. By bridging the gap between research and policy, this policy roundtable aimed to inform EU strategies with actionable insights, fostering citizen-focused policies aligned with the European Green Deal and Horizon Europe's findings. Based on experiences and ideas from Horizon Europe and beyond, the discussion expands the notion of behavioural change. In contrast to a historical approach of incentives and nudging in the instrumentalisation of citizens, recent knowledge adds community-led action and interdisciplinary collaboration between stakeholders and citizens to the list of approaches. Collaboratively, this roundtable attempted to break this gridlock of cooperation and outlined the next policy steps for a transition that placed citizens at the centre.

ORGANISERS

The [MAIA project](#) is part of the EU Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change and aims to make the current dispersed knowledge and research at the EU level more accessible and connected to policymakers and practitioners for accelerating climate action through the organisation of policy outreach events, among other activities.

The [I-CHANGE project](#) (Citizen Actions on Climate Change and Environment) is an innovation action project that aims to demonstrate that behavioural change at the individual citizen level is possible through citizen science initiatives that use sensors, and that such change can have an impact on their environmental footprint.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Showcase diverse approaches to operationalising behavioural change, including:
 - Incentive-based strategies.
 - Participatory governance and citizen science.
 - Social and cultural narratives for sustainability.
2. Identify barriers and opportunities for engaging citizens in sustainable practices and decision-making.
3. Strengthen collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to design citizen-centered pathways for change.
4. Deliver actionable recommendations for integrating citizen-driven approaches into EU policies.

FORMAT

In-person and live-streamed.

AUDIENCE

The event brought together over 10 in-person and 15 online stakeholders, representing a diverse range of sectors.

The recording of the event has received over 95 views on YouTube (April 2025).

Participants included:

- Policymakers and representatives from European institutions
- Researchers and academics specialising in behavioural science and sustainability
- Civil society organisations and grassroots activists
- Experts from Horizon Europe-funded projects

SPEAKERS

THE SPEAKERS



Theresa Scavenius
PhD, Member of Danish
Parliament



Claude Garcia
Professor of International
Forest Governance, Berner
Fachhochschule BFH



Kamelia Georgieva
Climate and Sustainability
Sociologist
Co-founder, BehaviorSMART



Saha Balaganesh
Network Engagement Lead
(partner in NETS4DEM and
associated with SCALEDEM),
DemSoc



Ami Crowther
Postdoctoral Research Fellow,
Global Sustainability Institute,
Anglia Ruskin



Anant Jani
Researcher at the University of
Oxford
and Member of NNEdPro Global
Centre for Nutrition and Health

THE MODERATOR



Niels Tjelle Holm
Project Manager at Democracy X
and partner in the I-CHANGE EU
Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On March 20, 2025, the MAIA and I-CHANGE EU projects co-organised the 5th Policy Roundtable on Behavioural Change and Civil Society Knowledge in the European Sustainable Transition. Held at the Ambiorix Center in Brussels and livestreamed online, the event convened over 25 participants, including EU policymakers, behavioural scientists, civil society representatives, and experts from Horizon Europe projects. It aimed to explore how citizen engagement and behavioural change can be harnessed to support Europe's sustainable transition in alignment with the European Green Deal and the EU Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change.

At the heart of the discussion was a call to rethink behavioural change not as a set of top-down interventions, but as a co-created, participatory process. Participants challenged conventional models focused on nudging and incentives, highlighting the need for democratic renewal, transparent governance, and community empowerment. The event built on lessons from citizen science, participatory democracy, and interdisciplinary research, offering a richer, more inclusive understanding of how individuals and communities can help reshape societal systems—from energy and mobility to food and health.

Theresa Scavenius, Member of the Danish Parliament and keynote speaker, warned of a growing democratic deficit in climate governance. She called for structural changes that would allow citizens not only to be consulted but to have real decision-making power in shaping climate policy. Other panellists, such as Kamelia Georgieva and Ami Crowther, shared insights on how communication, trust-building, and local leadership are essential to bridging the gap between awareness and action. From Social Readiness Levels to radical inclusivity, the panel introduced innovative tools and frameworks for embedding citizen agency into institutional change.

An interactive session further explored how mental models, cultural narratives, and systemic barriers influence behavioural transformation. Speakers from academia, civil society, and policymaking circles underscored that empowering communities requires a shift in political culture—from hierarchical, expert-driven decision-making to shared governance based on co-creation and continuous dialogue. Participants emphasised that sustainable behaviours are more likely to be adopted and maintained when individuals feel a sense of ownership, purpose, and tangible impact in their communities.

The roundtable concluded with five key takeaways:

1. **Democracy Needs Deep Renewal** – Formal rights alone are insufficient; citizens must be empowered as co-creators of climate solutions.
2. **From Technocracy to Transparency** – Current governance must move beyond closed-door processes to embrace openness, dialogue, and trust.
3. **Behavioural Change Requires Co-Creation** – Context-specific, participatory approaches are essential for meaningful, lasting change.
4. **Empowered Communities Drive Transformation** – Citizens must be given genuine influence over the systems that shape their lives.
5. **Narratives Shape Possibility** – Shifting the cultural stories we tell about ourselves, society, and the environment is central to enabling transformation.

By amplifying citizen voices and promoting systems thinking, the roundtable laid the groundwork for integrating behavioural science and civil society insights into future EU strategies. It reinforced the need for inclusive, multi-level governance to ensure that Europe's green transition is not only environmentally effective but also socially just and democratically legitimate.

WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS

Moderator: Niels Tjelle Holm, Project Manager at Democracy X and partner in the I-CHANGE EU Project

Niels Tjelle Holm, representing the organisation Democracy X from Copenhagen, opened the event by thanking both in-person and online attendees. He introduced the two EU-funded projects involved in the organisation of the session: I-CHANGE and the MAIA project.

In his remarks, Niels emphasised that Europe is at a critical turning point. Quoting, "the future just isn't what it used to be," he pointed out the urgent need for transformation, not only at the policy level but also in the way citizens engage with democracy. He stressed that citizens must take on a more active role, both institutionally and culturally, for real change to happen.

He argued that our current democratic culture often limits citizen responsibility and participation. Referencing a provocative quote, he suggested that many Europeans call themselves democrats to avoid fully engaging with the demands of democracy. He concluded by underlining that for Europe to become more resilient and just in the face of climate change, systemic and behavioural shifts are needed, both among individuals and within institutions.

KEYNOTE PRESENTATION: CITIZENS AT THE CORE OF THE EUROPEAN GREEN TRANSITION

Speaker: Theresa Scavenius, Member of the Danish Parliament

Theresa Scavenius, a researcher from Aalborg University and a member of the Danish Parliament, reflected on her transition from academic work on climate and democracy to direct political engagement. She highlighted the structural challenges that undermine citizen-based democracy, both in Denmark and across Europe.

She argued that while democratic systems uphold formal rights like elections, they often lack genuine citizen influence in decision-making. Much of today's politics, she noted, is technocratic and driven by interest groups, sidelining both parliaments and public engagement. For example, in Denmark, critical decisions like oil projects or climate taxation are made administratively, not through elected representatives, despite public demand for greener policies.

She pointed out how complex technical details, such as the metric used for energy taxation (CO₂ tons vs. kilojoules), can completely shift policy outcomes, often without public awareness. This technical governance, coupled with strong party discipline and weak transparency, leads to a disconnect between citizens and real political processes.

Theresa warned of a growing polarisation, where politics becomes reduced to superficial campaigns and social media debates, while real decisions are made behind closed doors, influenced by well-connected stakeholders. She stressed the importance of access to knowledge, transparency, and strong, independent institutions like media, researchers, and NGOs to ensure citizens can meaningfully participate in governance.

Key message: democratic rights alone aren't enough—we must strengthen the entire system so that citizens' perspectives are integrated into how policies are made and implemented.

PANEL DISCUSSION: FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION – UNLOCKING BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

Panelists: Kamelia Georgieva, Co-founder, BehaviorSMART | Ami Crowther, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Global Sustainability Institute, Anglia Ruskin University | Theresa Scavenius, Member of the Danish Parliament

The panel opened with Kamelia Georgieva, who reflected on the concept of the "intention-action gap" — a well-known idea in behavioural science — and highlighted that it applies not only to individuals but also to institutions and political bodies. While many institutions express democratic values, they often fall short when it comes to implementation, even when the actions required are minor. She emphasised the importance of involving citizens from the beginning of the decision-making process, not just at the stage of consultation after a policy is drafted. She supported the idea of "redesigning the table" instead of just giving citizens a seat, meaning true co-creation with citizens from the start. Kamelia also introduced the concept of "Social Readiness Level", adapted from Denmark's Innovation Fund, which is meant to assess whether social or institutional innovations are mature enough to be implemented, similar to the Technology Readiness Level used for products. She stressed the need to move beyond top-down strategies, encouraging continuous interaction between grassroots initiatives and political frameworks (a "DNA spiral" approach). Successful behavioural change must be context-sensitive, adapted to specific communities (not one-size-fits-all), and anchored both socially and institutionally to create a lasting impact.

Ami Crowther emphasised the critical role of communication in sustainability transitions. Communication should happen at multiple stages and serve various purposes — not just informing people what to do and how, but also why it matters and who is there to support them. She highlighted the power of who delivers the message, noting that trust and understanding are built more effectively when messages come from local actors embedded in the community.

She discussed her work on the Share Green Deal, an EU project involving 24 local partners across Europe. These partners lead the design and implementation of local sustainability initiatives, allowing for more contextualised and relatable communication. This local involvement builds trust and increases community engagement.

Ami also stressed the importance of communicating the impact of people's actions. When communities see the positive results of their behaviour changes, they are more motivated to continue participating.

On the topic of social change and behaviour shifts, she pointed out that the process is not linear. Change takes time — especially when new technologies or practices are involved — and requires ongoing support, including peer-to-peer learning. People benefit from hearing real, honest experiences from others who have already navigated similar changes. Finally, she noted that behavioural changes must be tested and adapted to local contexts, as one-size-fits-all solutions rarely work.

Theresa Scavenius emphasised the importance of a strong, vibrant civil society that goes beyond digital spaces, acknowledging the value of community projects presented during the panel. However, she warned that while these efforts are meaningful, they are not enough to tackle the global, European, and national dimensions of climate politics. She cautioned against the illusion that local projects alone can drive systemic change. From her experience in politics, she observed that powerful interests at higher levels often steer society in the wrong direction, reducing climate politics to mere symbolic gestures rather than real change. This, combined with a polarised and fatigued society, makes political transformation extremely challenging.

She pointed out how many people either become angrily reactive or completely disengaged, a trend described by political scientists as news avoidance — people choosing to shut out political discourse altogether because it's overwhelming or disheartening. Theresa argued that a lack of knowledge about how political systems are structured is a major barrier to meaningful engagement. Without that understanding, it's difficult to mobilise people effectively. She also warned of a growing intolerance for dissent and independent thought, citing increasing tendencies toward authoritarian thinking, where only one narrative or solution is accepted, and critical questioning is discouraged. In conclusion, she urged a defence of pluralism and open debate, to avoid sliding into a totalitarian mindset, especially as emergency laws and securitisation of issues begin to concentrate power in ways that resist public scrutiny.

INTERACTIVE SESSION: CO-CREATING CITIZEN-CENTRED PATHWAYS

Panellists: Claude Garcia, Berner Fachhochschule (BFH) | Saha Balaganesh, Network Engagement Lead, DemSoc / NETS4DEM / SCALEDEM | Anant Jani, University of Oxford & NNEdPro Global Centre for Nutrition and Health | Theresa Scavenius, Danish Parliament

Anant Jani shared his insights on the importance of community empowerment, particularly in the context of healthcare and regenerative food systems. He referenced the philosopher Ivan Illich, who wrote *Limits to Medicine*, and discussed the concept of "expropriation" — the idea that people's health is taken away from them through a paternalistic system, which disempowers them. He also drew from Raghuram Rajan's book *The Third Pillar*, highlighting how the state and market often overshadow the community, leading to the rise of populism as a response to this disempowerment.

Jani emphasised the need for a shift in decision-making power, advocating for the principle "no decision about me without me" in healthcare. He applied this same idea to other sectors like food systems, energy, and housing, stressing that citizens should have a say in how their resources are used, instead of being excluded from such decisions, as in the case of military spending. He then transitioned to discussing the barriers to transitioning to regenerative food systems. Jani explained that the current food systems are top-down, and citizens have little influence over their design. One of the major challenges, he noted, is the mindset that once a solution is found, no further adaptation is needed. He advocated for a "test and learn" approach, where communities need to come together, address challenges, and continuously refine their solutions through collective action. The key to overcoming these barriers, according to Jani, is empowering citizens to communicate, collaborate, and actively redesign systems to better serve their needs.

Claude Garcia discussed the challenges of creating meaningful change and highlighted the importance of addressing the "mental model" that prevents transformation. He explained how, over the past decade, he has explored why individuals and societies fail to make changes. Using the example of the tragic Dana storm in Spain, he pointed out that people fail to act on critical information due to a range of factors: lack of awareness, denial, prioritising other concerns, or lack of means to act. These factors — information, beliefs, values, and means — must all be addressed for real change to happen. Garcia emphasised that, despite the scientific community's ability to produce information, it often fails to tackle beliefs and values effectively. He stressed that to bring about meaningful change, citizens need to have a voice and be actively engaged in decision-making processes. Furthermore, he shared an innovative approach he and his team are developing to facilitate dialogue between citizens, governments, and companies. They use strategy games to represent real-world systems and mental models, helping players understand the complexity of issues and fostering constructive discussions. This method is designed to be quick, cost-effective, and efficient, allowing for deeper engagement and problem-solving.

Currently, Garcia and his team are testing this approach in Colombia, working with various stakeholders to develop a socially just transition away from fossil fuels. Through this process, they have observed conflicts and solutions emerge as participants from government, business, and civil society work together to navigate complex challenges.

Niels raised the issue of power and the potential conflict when giving more responsibility to citizens, asking whether there might be resistance to sharing power with them. He linked this to the idea of making democratic processes more accessible, even suggesting a board game that explores legislation and democracy.

In her response, Theresa reflected on two key points. First, she addressed the sense of disempowerment many people feel, noting that frustration arises from the perception that they lack the means to create change. Despite this, she emphasised that society, particularly within the European Union and countries like Denmark, has significant resources and power. The failure to act is not due to a lack of means, but rather a power struggle. She acknowledged that not everyone wants to pursue climate or environmental politics, and that these power struggles are central to understanding why progress is often blocked.

Theresa then moved on to her second point, discussing the appeal of right-wing populism, particularly movements that criticise technocratic societies and advocate for tearing down established systems, like Trump's rhetoric of "draining the swamp." She pointed out that such movements attract people who feel disconnected from the political elites and promise more direct power to the people. Theresa suggested that left-wing or social-liberal politics might be failing to address this dissatisfaction, as many parties avoid confronting the reality of their shortcomings, particularly in areas like climate change, environmental policies, and equality. Instead, they maintain a technocratic view of society, promising only minor adjustments rather than a true transformation. She concluded by calling for more honesty and acknowledgement of the power struggles within politics.

Claude Garcia opened the session by challenging participants to reflect on the power of narratives in shaping behaviour. He highlighted the role of storytelling and cultural framing in driving behavioural change. He emphasised that solutions should be grounded in local realities and built through participatory methods, not imposed externally.

Claude Garcia brought a systems thinking lens to the conversation, focusing on mental models and change. He argued that transformation depends not only on policies or technologies but on the narratives people hold about themselves, society, and nature. These mental models shape what individuals consider possible or acceptable. For Garcia, the real challenge lies in helping people unlearn limiting narratives and embrace complexity. Change requires not just new information, but new ways of seeing the world—and of seeing themselves within it.

Saha Balaganesh shared insights from her work with NETS4DEM and SCALEDEM, underlining the power of networks and collective intelligence. She discussed the concept of "radical inclusivity," where deliberative processes are designed to include even those typically excluded from formal policymaking. Saha emphasised co-creation as a process, not a one-time event, and called for sustained community engagement, feedback loops, and capacity building.

Anant Jani approached the topic from a public health and systems perspective. He argued that many behavioural challenges—whether in health or sustainability—stem from upstream determinants. Jani suggested that policies must create enabling environments where healthy, sustainable choices are structurally supported. He drew on the concept of "proportionate universalism," ensuring that interventions are universal but implemented at a scale and intensity proportionate to need.

Anant Jani introduced the concept of the third pillar, which he defined as the role of community, civil society, and a shared sense of purpose in driving change. Alongside health and education, purpose gives people the reason to engage deeply with transformation. Without it, behaviour change can feel imposed or hollow. Jani also spoke about the barriers to change, noting that they are often systemic, emotional, and cultural—far beyond technical fixes. To overcome them, policies must go beyond incentives to create environments that make sustainable behaviour both the easiest and most meaningful choice.

Scavenius contributed further by stressing the link between climate justice and participatory governance. She reiterated that democratic renewal is essential for behavioural change to be more than superficial compliance.

The interactive portion encouraged contributions from attendees, generating practical insights on participatory tools, institutional reform, and community empowerment. The session emphasised experimentation, iterative learning, and the importance of trust-building between institutions and citizens.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The 5th Policy Roundtable, co-organised by the MAIA and I-CHANGE EU projects, brought together policymakers, researchers, and civil society actors to critically examine the role of behavioural change in Europe's sustainable transition. The discussion moved well beyond conventional approaches, calling for a fundamental shift in how we conceptualise and operationalise behavioural change in policy.

1. Democracy Needs Deep Renewal

Europe is at a turning point: formal democratic rights are not enough. Citizens must move from passive participants to active co-creators in policymaking, with real influence and shared responsibility.

2. From Technocracy to Transparency

Current governance often favours technical expertise and closed-door decisions, sidelining both parliaments and public engagement. Transparent systems and independent institutions are essential for rebuilding trust and democratic legitimacy.

3. Behavioural Change Requires Co-Creation

Sustainable change isn't achieved by top-down strategies. It needs participatory processes from the start, tailored to local contexts, and built on continuous feedback, learning, and genuine inclusion.

4. Empowered Communities Drive Transformation

Structural barriers disempower citizens across sectors like health, food, and energy. Empowerment means giving people real power over decisions that affect them—"no decision about me without me."

5. Narratives Shape Possibility

Beyond policy and facts, societal transformation hinges on shifting the stories we tell ourselves. Change starts when people reimagine their roles in society and adopt new mental models that embrace complexity and shared purpose.