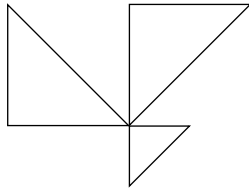


The Edgeryders guide to the future

**A handbook
for policy makers and designers
of policy-oriented online communities**



Foreword

*Edgeryders*¹ has been a unique experience for many of us working in public administration with responsibility for framing policies. This online platform, co-funded by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion and by the Council of Europe, had a specific aim: to understand, via an innovative approach which deliberately sought not to impose any institutional forms of dialogue, the difficulties faced by young Europeans and the solutions they come up with, based on their experiences of the transition towards an independent life in a rapidly changing, increasingly insecure environment.

The platform was designed to freely encourage horizontal interaction and exchanges. Nevertheless, at a time when the speed of communication means that opinions are expressed in just a few sentences – often using shortcuts that are understandable only to the initiated – *Edgeryders* asked the young participants to focus their voluntary participation on six themes or “campaigns”: Making a Living; We, the People; Living Together; Caring for Commons; Learning; and Resilience.² They were asked to produce “mission reports” or comments in response to open questions which were always formulated in co-operation, both within the Council of Europe and with the participants themselves.

1. Throughout this guide, the term “Edgeryder(s)” will refer to project participants while the italicised “*Edgeryders*” will refer to the project and the online platform.

2. Resilience can generally be understood as the capacity of humans to come out of an extreme shock, damage and trauma and adapt to new living conditions.

Why did the Council of Europe create this prototype of an interactive dialogue with young citizens? Some reasons included:

- encouraging institutions to take a fresh look at those they serve, and in particular giving voice to the valuable contribution that citizens can make;
- obtaining a better idea of the extent of insecurity in society. Exclusion, growing vulnerability and the lack of prospects are no longer solely the lot of those without qualifications. Instability is becoming a way of life for many, so there has to be a new political response;
- drawing attention to the political interpretation of statistics, particularly where they flag up a problem in society. For example, the statistics on NEETs (Not in Employment, Education or Training) place a large proportion of young people and their potential in a black hole. A different approach that prioritises this human potential and the solutions young people come up with to deal with emerging insecurity can influence policy choices.

What has the Council of Europe learned? Amongst other things, that:

- legitimacy and institutional commitment can facilitate constructive dialogue;
- it is possible to reconcile citizens and institutions if there is mutual trust and if each can learn from the other;
- by considering the experiences and creativity of citizens to be knowledge tools, public policies can make a greater impact and bring about change;
- it is possible to work with vulnerable groups without necessarily stigmatising them and that – contrary to the widespread perception of “problem groups” – these sections of the community have interests in and opinions on a wide range of societal issues;
- horizontal relationships (peer-to-peer, sharing, commons) and networked interaction can provide fresh meaning and new solutions in order to satisfy needs, without any additional pressure on existing resources;
- learning is not necessarily top-down;
- creativity is fundamental to policy design and a true knowledge tool to discover the full potential, rather than just the limits, of citizens and their situations;
- in order to build the future, it is essential to co-operate with those whose future it will be.

There are also many questions raised by this type of online tool.

Responding to citizens’ expectations often presents public authorities with a real challenge. It is not merely a question of addressing existing inertia, but of establishing a

balance between what authorities and elected representatives can do and what they can – in contrast – facilitate. In a spirit of co-operation, authorities and elected representatives can promote the sharing of responsibilities, ideas, goods and values so as to involve society in horizontal, inclusive, solidarity-based and social cohesion-oriented approaches.

Over and above the challenges of how to structure a response to the question of citizen participation, an interactive tool requires a good measure of internal institutional readiness to act in terms of follow-up and response, and above all a willingness to give fresh political meaning to dialogue. This presupposes giving value to solutions that emerge from interactions with citizens.

There are also questions concerning the users of online tools. Despite growing Internet access in Europe, the chances of interacting with citizens will depend on their level of interest in public affairs. It is not easy to reach vulnerable groups who feel they have no influence. In order to raise interest and sustain dialogue in the long term, online interaction must be followed up by concrete measures and by a demonstration of the legitimacy of citizen action for fostering inclusion.

These thoughts would not be complete without some words of thanks. The design and development of the prototype are thanks to the intelligence and passion of Alberto Cottica and Nadia El-Imam. Noemi Salantiu, Lyne Robichaud, Chara Oikonomidou and Vinay Gupta played their role as engagement managers. Rebecca Collins, Valentina Cuzzocrea, Barbara Giovanna Bello, Dunja Potocnik, Sladjana Petkovic, Magnus Eriksson, Piotr Mikiewicz and Prudencia Gutiérrez Esteban, by using their research skills and applying ethnographical analysis to the data, gave meaning to the mission reports and participants' comments. They helped us understand their experiences while retaining the power of the individual messages. Ivan Vaghi and Paolo Mainardi contributed with their professional competences to the technical development of the platform.

Many other participants in what is now known as the "*Edgeryders* community" contributed their time, thoughts and passion to this work. Among Council of Europe staff, Malcolm Cox has put in particular effort.

I should also like to thank the Council of Europe's Committee for Social Cohesion, whose members have lent their support to the process and have found in *Edgeryders* a means of generating hope and renewal.

This guide is – like the platform itself – the result of co-ordinated but free expression. We have not sought to smooth out any rough edges in the text, for without rough edges, humankind cannot provide the footholds its individual members need to develop.