Context Questions for Citizen Engagement Processes

Understanding the context in which an engagement process takes place is just as important as defining its goals. Context includes available resources - such as time, budget, and skills - as well as political, cultural, historical, legal, and demographic factors. These conditions can create both constraints and opportunities, and many are not fixed; some may even be influenced or changed through the participatory process itself.

Considering context helps ensure an engagement process is feasible, responsive to local needs, and builds on existing strengths. This resource provides a set of guiding questions to support you in understanding your local context and designing more effective citizen engagement processes. Not every question will be relevant in every situation; rather, they are intended to be used selectively, as appropriate to your specific context.

Term	Description	Questions
Team & Budget	The team is the group of people responsible for planning, executing and evaluating the engagement process. The budget is the total cost that is needed for the project from start to finish. There should be a match between what is needed and what is available to implement the process.	• Who will run the process? • What skills are in your team? • Are there skill gaps? • What can be done internally? • For what roles would you need third parties? • Are there any constraints that need to be considered? • Who is in charge of defining the budget? • Are there any specificities you have to take into consideration regarding budget?
Political Will & Influence	The degree of interest and investment by political decision makers in the issue, how widespread this will is, and the extent to which these political figures can impact the issue.	• What interest and/or commitment do decision makers have in the process? • Is there broad political support for the process or is it backed by a specific political party or actor? • Can the process be framed in a way that increases broad political support? • Can it be aligned with existing city commitments? • What are potentially controversial and difficult issues?
Timing & Planning	Timing includes the timeline of when the process starts, how much planning is needed upfront, what the interim milestones are and when the process should be completed.	• How long is the process? • When does it have to take place? • How flexible is the timing of the process?

Culture & Norms	Culture is the norms, behaviours, beliefs, customs, and values shared by the population of the city, what citizens see as valuable. Culture emerges over the history of a city as a result of shared experiences.	• What do citizens in the city care about? • What are they sensitive to? • How would you describe the city's culture? • What appeals to residents? • What is the strength of this city that you can build on?
History	History is about past events, evolutions or legacies that are important to consider when designing the engagement process. This could include, for example, demographic changes, political sensitivities or language issues.	• What are important events in the (distant or near) past that still have an impact today? • What sensitivities does the city carry? • What are the city's historical strengths that you can build on when designing an engagement process? • What is the history of engagement in the city - are processes generally successful or disappointing? • Have related participatory processes taken place already? If so, who was involved and is information available? • Is there existing democratic infrastructure (relationships, working groups, communication channels etc.) that can be used again or built upon?
Climate & Environment	This context element is about to what extent the theme of climate is present in the city. This can involve both the impact of climate change impacts and the extent to which the theme of climate change is alive among citizens and stakeholders.	• What is the current climate? • What are the main climate impacts? • What areas and who is most affected by these? • Who has historically been most impacted by climate impacts? • How present are the climate and the environment in civic or political discussions?
Population & Demographics	The size, structure, and composition of the population, including age, gender, nationality, and migration patterns. Understanding demographics helps ensure the engagement process is inclusive, representative, and tailored to different needs and life situations.	• How many people live in the area? • How has the population changed over the past decade? • What is the migration balance (inflows vs. outflows)? • What is the population by nationality or citizenship? • What are the top 5 nationalities in your area? • What is the age structure of the population? • What is the percentage of women and men? • How many students live in the area?

Housing & Urban Environment	The physical living conditions of the city, including density, housing types, ownership, and building age. These factors shape daily life, influence access to services and green spaces, and affect how residents experience and engage with urban and climate-related issues.	• How densely populated is the area? • What are the housing types and ownership structures? • What is the average living space per person? • When were the buildings constructed?
Economy & Employment	The city's economic structure, employment patterns, and industries, which affect residents' resources, priorities, and capacity to engage in the process.	• How many residents commute for work, and how many commute into the area? • Where do the area's residents work? • What industries are most common at workplaces in the area? • How has unemployment developed over time?
Inequalities	Inequality refers to differential access to and use of resources, key information, services and power that result in disparities across gender, race/ethnicity, class, and other important social markers.	• How equal is the city? • Is inequality homogeneously distributed or are there (physical, demographic, etc.) pockets of equality/inequality? • What level of access, use and appropriation do different individuals and groups have for key information, services, power and other resources? • What are the key factors driving inequality? • How does that impact their meaningful participation in climate action? • How does it affect how they are impacted by climate action?
Technical Opportunities	NetZeroCities has identified a wide set of solutions to address the reduction in emissions across all sectors in cities. Solutions are organised around Thematic Areas: Stationary Energy; Energy Generation; Mobility and Transport; Green Industry; Circular Economy; Nature-based Solutions. These technical actions cannot come alone and must be integrated into a systemic portfolio of solutions that span different policy levers, social innovation, stakeholder engagement, and others to overcome barriers, and avoid drawbacks.	• What are the solutions you're aiming at integrating in your City action plan to address your city GHG Emissions? • Which of these technical solutions, to achieve success, is crucial for them to establish robust cooperation, partnerships and active participation of citizens, local businesses and other stakeholders?

Co-beneficiaries	Cities will need to link local actions (across domains of emissions and sectors) for climate neutrality with their indirect positive impacts in other areas and sectors, i.e. with their co-benefits. The identification of these co-benefits will help to develop "ownership" of the overall climate neutrality objective and thereby induce stronger local commitment. Co-benefits are meant to measure or point out an indirect impact from the implementation of a certain solution. NZC experts have mapped out the following co-benefits: climate resilience (Climate Adaptation , Mitigation), Health (Environment, wellbeing), Social (Inclusion, education), Economy (Local and global connection, entrepreneurship & innovation), Resource Efficiency, Biodiversity.	• To what degree can you more effectively achieve some of these co-benefits by engaging with citizens and urban stakeholders?