



SoNeC

Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles in Europe:

How participatory decision making can empower neighbours to work together and address local and global needs, effectively



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the European Union

Editorial

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1. Introduction

SoNeC -[Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles](#) - is a framework for creating neighbourhood-based, participatory and inclusive decision-making processes as a means to address local issues and realise a more socially just and ecologically sustainable future.

SoNeC is inspired by the [Neighbourhood Parliaments](#) that have been successfully implemented in India since the 1970s. There, 370.000 neighbourhood-based citizens' circles have been an active voice to solve everyday life problems at a local level.

1.1 What is a SoNeC?

A Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circle (SoNeC) is a group of neighbours that come together in a circle. Everyone living in the same neighbourhood, regardless of their social status, from elected political representatives to homeless people, is welcome to be part of a SoNeC. Any issues that affect the neighbourhood, which people care about and have the ability to resolve together can be addressed in a SoNeC. For example, a neighbourhood circle can decide to work on: cleanliness, construction and maintenance of common places and facilities (such as playgrounds or parks), advocating for infrastructure improvements (such as reducing traffic to make pedestrian streets or improving roads), improving the local ecology (such as planting trees and protecting habitats), developing alternative energy communities and resource sharing, or improving local social work and organising protection from hazards (such as syringe collection or stormwater drainage systems). Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles work to create a more inclusive and socially just neighbourhood through education, health initiatives, community meeting places and neighbourhood events. By working together in circles and ensuring collaboration with the local governmental authorities, existing initiatives and salient organisations, neighbours can take care of their local community more effectively.

SoNeC is a framework for citizen participation. Depending on the desired level of participation¹, implementation will vary from place to place. Citizen groups have increasingly demanded participation in Europe since the beginning of the pandemic crisis². Municipal councils and city parliaments ask for more participation and joint responsibility from citizens³. SoNeC enables citizens to (co-)decide on matters directly affecting their living environment. Experiences in sociocratic organisations and neighbourhood projects show that common decision-making engenders co-responsibility⁴. SoNeC is a place to learn political action and cooperation between neighbours. Social competence, solidarity, discussion of values, exchange of knowledge are all possible through SoNeC.

1.2 Who we are - The SoNeC Partnership

The SoNeC partnership includes nine organisations from seven European countries. Together, we researched, explored and exchanged best practices for developing neighbourhood-based projects in Europe. The Director of Networking of the Neighbourhood Community Network (NCN) and trainer for Indian “Neighbourhood Parliaments”, Joseph Rathinam, was involved as an advisor to the partnership. During the 26 months of the project, SoNeC partners jointly developed the overall concept for SoNeC and now aim to share their work with hundreds of municipalities and associations across Europe to promote the concept and its potential for social, political and environmental transformation.

The SoNeC partnership was funded by the EU “[KA2 Erasmus+ Exchange of good practice](#)” from 2020 to 2022. The aim was to explore the potential of neighbourhood-based social communities, with bottom-up, participatory and inclusive decision-making processes to solve local social and environmental problems considering [European values](#), the [European Fundamental Rights](#), the [European Green Deal](#), as well as the [UN SDGs](#). The SoNeC Partnership aims to raise awareness of the practices of common decision making, shared responsibility, participation and more generally, political action of citizens on a local level.

SoNeC PARTNER organisations

Legal name and country:



[Soziokratie Zentrum Österreich](#), Austria



[Szövetkezetiséget Támogató Egyesület](#), Hungary



Die [Wiener Volkshochschulen GmbH](#), Austria



[Stadt Augsburg](#), Germany



Stichting [Biotope City](#), Netherlands



[Evolving Cycles](#), Greece



[Miutcánk Kft.](#), Hungary



[Laboratorio Sicilia 2030](#), Italy



[A Fairer Society](#), United Kingdom

1.3 The SoNeC Concept - a basic framework

The basic SoNeC framework is designed with European values, e.g. tolerance, mutual respect, non-discrimination, solidarity and gender equality in mind. SoNeC encourages change through the sharing of knowledge, information, as well as providing a supportive network.

The SoNeC concept is based on three well-developed and proven concepts:

- The Neighbourhood Parliaments⁵ were developed in India in the 1970s and have spread to Africa and South America since 2018 as a means to empower citizens to solve local problems.
- The Sociocratic Circle-organisation Method (SCM)⁶ - or Sociocracy⁷ was developed in the Netherlands in the 1970s⁸ and has spread around the world since 1990. As an organisational approach based on four basic principles, it is designed to strengthen the responsibility of the individual within organisations.
- The design-principles of “Governing the Commons” by Nobel-laureate Elinor Ostrom⁹ provide a framework for the collective management and sharing of common resources on a local level without centralised control.

Based on these three approaches, the SoNeC partnership has developed specific SoNeC principles for the European context (see chapter 3.2).

The SoNeC Concept is a framework for adapting and implementing the Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles into the European context. Therefore, the concept includes the findings of our own research on 12 European case studies, the experiences from the practice-based concept of co-housing communities¹⁰ and the theoretical concepts of the commons¹¹ and *vita activa*¹².

In this paper, we intend to provide high quality-information for an evolving framework called SoNeC to municipal councils, city councils, municipalities and all interested policymakers, neighbourhood based organisations, communities and corresponding initiatives and citizens. We hope that you, our reader, will implement and also adapt this concept to be socially and politically relevant within your unique contexts.

SoNeC opens up a viable approach for real citizen participation with a potentially major impact to address the needs of the people in a certain neighbourhood facing the ever increasing climate and current democratic crisis. SoNeC facilitates us as communities to contribute, to evolve our systems, to create more effective strategies, and to address our most pressing challenges.

1.4 Why do we need SoNeC?

The multiple crises that we and our children are facing right now are real and well documented by academics and scientists alike. SoNeC is designed to creatively and successfully resolve many of the endemic and problematic issues we face, by working together. The concerns are fact-based and not fake news, and founded on practical and scientific knowledge. The man-made climate crisis threatens the livelihoods of our descendants¹³; the window of opportunity to prevent the risk of a major collapse of ecosystems is closing in a few years. The pandemic has left deep scars on our society on psychological, social, legal, educational and economic levels. Meanwhile, the Russian war is triggering the most serious security crisis in Europe since the Second World War. These crises exacerbate the smouldering crisis of democracy of late modernity in Europe¹⁴. Democracy is under pressure worldwide due to the increasing number of autocratic states¹⁵ and the election of illiberal or authoritarian parties¹⁶, which undermine “checks and balances” as well as democratic institutions¹⁷. Western societies face populist challenges, large-scale corruption and disruptions of the political party system.

There is a prevalent problem of social isolation, a sense of loneliness and an increasing anxiety related to the crises. A sense of powerlessness, a detachment from politics, and a feeling that the political elite does not represent the interest of citizens, increasingly results in those same citizens abstaining from political participation. This implies a declining legitimacy for politicians. At the same time, more and more people are demanding a different political culture, transparent decision-making and real participation in political decision-making processes¹⁸. The crises challenge us to develop and implement new forms of solidarity, citizenship and political action in the sense of a *vita activa*¹⁹.

Many new approaches to political action, such as the Transition Town Movement²⁰, the commons movement²¹, Global Ecovillage Network²², Urban Gardening and food cooperatives, start at the local community level. The coronavirus crisis in particular has impressively shown the high value of neighbourly relations and networks. They form the basis of our societies, provide support in extreme cases and provide the level at which people can organise themselves efficiently. Although there are many initiatives, they have not yet reached the scale necessary to respond effectively to the crises; they often lack a stable and facile organisation of collaboration and a clearly structured process of joint decision making.

Many people are disillusioned by the power structures and politics that have contributed to creating this situation and are looking for alternative solutions. Local governments are also very aware of these problems. In order to start a change process the engagement of (all) citizens is needed. For citizens, neighbourhoods are the place to live. This is the level at which they get to know each other, build relationships and take action to achieve political and socio-ecological change²³. Neighbourhood is the space where people can realise and understand the problems and discuss possible solutions collectively, instead of being helplessly confronted with abstract threats. Citizens who take responsibility in their neighbourhoods give municipalities direct feedback on what has to be done and how they can contribute to solve problems.

1.5 Challenges and Opportunities of SoNeC

Changes in political systems are usually a result of crises or problems that are being experienced in society but that could not be solved by previous means. Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles offer effective citizen participation and thus an important complement to the representative democratic system at local level. By opening up new, genuine ways of participation, SoNeC will transform the political system of a local government. Therefore, we propose that challenges and opportunities carefully be considered in order to reach the most innovative and effective variations for implementation within the various cultural contexts across European Society, as we are aware that these changes will inevitably have certain effects on existing systems.

Challenges might be

It may be that initially only a few citizens take part in the neighbourhood groups, or even feel excluded due to a lack of time or money. It will depend on the initial project group how inclusive they make their invitations and whether there are visible improvements and attractive activities in the neighbourhood.

Citizens are no longer used to taking care of affairs that were previously organised by governments. Today, however, there are deficits in supply due to the reduction in social benefits and demographic developments, among other things. Here, civil society must assume more responsibility without training. If, in addition, the necessary financial resources are lacking, the citizens will not be able to adequately meet expectations either.

The opportunity to help shape your own neighbourhood empowers people and turns them into “responsible citizens”. That could require greater accountability from elected officials. Will they appreciate the potential of self-organising neighbourhood circles?

Opportunities we see

It has been shown that the commitment and engagement of citizens to local social and political problems increases significantly when they work together sociocratically, on an equal footing. This strengthens social cohesion and people are more willing to support measures that serve the general public.

SoNeC leads to the development of skills and knowledge, as people both take part in training courses and learn from each other. New experiences are made in going through community processes, with effects on the value system and the democratic awareness of the individual.

Sociocratic decision-making increases the problem-solving skills and thus the resilience of a neighbourhood, so that crisis-related challenges such as climate change, demographic developments, a war in Europe or a pandemic can be mastered more easily.

2. The Research behind SoNeC

In 2021, nine SoNeC partner organisations collected case studies in their respective countries following three criteria: working on the implementation of the SDGs, already applying sociocratic elements and based in actual neighbourhoods. Out of 104 diverse projects throughout Europe two projects per country were selected in a joint selection process considering the availability of data and contacts. Zoom interviews in the local language were used to ask about the practices, decision-making process, organisational structure and outcomes of the selected case studies. Twelve qualitative interviews were analysed using Grounded Theory²⁴. As a result, the most relevant core processes on how to build a strong local community or neighbourhood were identified, which were significant in all projects in different ways.

- Youth Council of the Municipality of Thermi (GR)
- Save your Hood (GR)
- Gemeinwesen St. Andrä-Wördern (A)
- Local Agenda 21 Vienna 7 (A)
- ZICO - Teatro Duomo (I)
- Casa di Quartiere Torino (I)
- Telepesek/Kis erdővédők (HU)
- Lebendige Nachbarschaft Am Bogen Augsburg (Ger)
- Wohnzimmer im Schwabencenter (Ger)
- Frome Neighbourhood Network (UK)
- Cloughjordan ecovillage (Eire)
- Utrechtse-Heuvelrug, city council (NL)

2.1 Different kinds of neighbourhoods?

The analysis of these case studies identified three different approaches to neighbourhood as such, affecting every other aspect of the projects.

- Local neighbourhood (geographically defined as a number of houses in a street or a number of multi story houses), people literally living next door
- Extended neighbourhood (in an area, district), centred around a meeting place (what has turned out to be a good starting point for neighbourhood projects) where people from different neighbourhoods meet
- Virtual neighbourhood around a topic or a specific interest being active in local neighbourhoods (which can be also a starting point for activities in the local neighbourhood)

2.2 Motivation to start a neighbourhood project

The reasons for launching the initiatives were diverse. Three approaches can be distinguished, which may well overlap in practice:

- Common objective on a local level, like a specific problem
- Neighbourhood cooperation to build better relationships, without a specific objective
- An individual takes the initiative to build a neighbourhood community, driven by a vision of a better world.

In most cases, the first approach could be observed: the trigger for the project is a specific problem, or set of problems, and an idea on how to solve them. In our case studies, these are, for example,

- the increasing amounts of pollution and rubbish in neighbourhoods, solved by groups coming together to collect trash;
- A series of short-sighted, unfounded decisions of local political leaders, mitigated by expertise from the population;
- political deadlocks in the city council solved by more participation;
- the diminishing municipal services substituted by civic engagement;
- the lack of political participation of young people improved through neighbourhood parliaments;
- lack of connectivity of neighbours remedied through neighbourhood groups;
- and the mitigation of the environmental crisis through the development of a more sustainable way of living in an ecovillage.

2.3 Different Types of Initiators

In the SoNeC case studies there are four different types of initiators of new community projects based in neighbourhoods:

- local government,
- governmental organisations,
- non-governmental organisations or activists and
- existing communities.



2.4 The first Steps

Initial vision

The initiators take the first essential step of naming the problem and recognising the need for change. They develop an initial vision of the solution process, articulate their goals, formulate their view of the changes needed and invite other people to join in. In another scenario, the initiators step up, make themselves visible with their concern and invite people to join them in creating the actions needed to solve the identified problems.

Initiators' invitation

Depending on local circumstances, the initiators' invitation to other people to follow their idea can look different. It can be the invitation to jointly create a meeting place, to collectively solve a local environmental problem, to strengthen the participation of the residents in local politics or to create a better, sustainable life. The invitation can be done by word of mouth, flyers, info sessions, public events and gatherings or door-to-door contacts. It is important to communicate in a way that reaches everyone in the neighbourhood.

Stable framework

When people accept the invitation, the second phase of the process begins. Now the circle of actors expands and a stable framework for the process is needed. It is this framework that determines how effective and participatory the process will be, how much power in joint action can be developed and how individuals can get involved. The initiators can develop this framework (rules for cooperation, meeting structure, communication culture, transparency) in advance and present it as an offer, or develop it in cooperation with the people who were the first to accept the invitation. People' motivation to accept the invitation of the initiators can be very diverse. At this point it is important to find a shared vision and mission that everyone can commit to.

Passing on the leadership function

Initiators need an important quality: they have to recognise when it is time - after the process has been established, when more people are able to lead the process and according to the development of the self-organisation - to withdraw and release the position of the initial leader. They step back and contribute to the process where they can best use their skills and knowledge. Without this transition from initiator to member the process and the self-organisation cannot fully develop.

2.5 Achievements of the case study projects

The achievements of the selected neighbourhood based projects included positive impact in terms of social cohesion, integration, activation of citizens, training and education, job creation, arts and cultural activities, as well as ecological sustainability.

Many interviewees express that there is an increased sense of belonging, trust and interest in each other's lives, mutual support and solidarity, getting along with strangers or sharing competences and doing "good things" together. The communities tend to integrate people with different ages, ethnic backgrounds, cultures. This can include offers of social services, cultural projects, caring for abandoned public space, celebrating and decision making. There was an increasing activation or in other words citizen participation, where people take more responsibility and are empowered to make changes in their local community. It is often related to specific reasons and occasions: a protest against the cutting of a forest, reshaping of an abandoned playground, creating green spaces for humans and non-humans. Solidarity economy or gift economy, the sharing of resources and skills are prevalent in most communities. There is a clear positive impact in terms of skills and knowledge generated. The project participants often receive training or support from professionals or public authorities and part of their activities is to educate other citizens.

The projects have a positive impact on ecological sustainability in various ways, including a conscious reduction of the ecological footprint by operating a repair cafe and upcycling clothes, by running a food cooperative or Community Supported Agriculture, sharing compost, or organising garbage collection, by small green infrastructure projects or by protecting the local forest, by creating alternative energy and eco-buildings.

The municipality and the city also benefited from the self-organised management of public services that are the responsibility of the municipality. For example, stronger community bonds led to public security initiatives in the face of arson attacks (police and firefighter work), self organised sharing of unwanted items (waste management) and taking responsibility for public spaces through weeding, community gardens and planting projects (park and public space maintenance).

Community organising projects foster collaboration between neighbourhoods to address issues of local ecology and support sustainable living programs. Many of the projects initiated by case studies organisations not only benefited those in their network but the neighbourhood as a whole. Some initiated resource sharing programs like sharing boxes: "People put in things they no longer need such as books, food, hairdryers and children's toys, for anyone to take. This is a lovely way of giving and taking, and it's completely free for everyone in the neighbourhood. This generates a good feeling and is being replicated in the area." Local concerns were addressed collectively and thereby benefited the natural ecology by initiating projects such as tree planting, planting shrubs on an embankment of a local river or a road, and saving local wildlife such as trout and frogs (STAW). In one case study, many cities and towns across the country have benefited from the neighbourhood initiatives to clean up public space, parks and natural environments such as beaches and forests.

2.6 Synergy effects, cross-neighborhood projects

The neighbourhood projects become conveners for people with shared concerns and like-minded initiatives. Once a neighbourhood organisation is initiated it becomes an access point for those who have ideas or concerns. Many of the organisations became a way for people to network with their neighbours and then get more involved in community-based activities. The events created stronger bonds in the neighbourhoods. Several case studies discussed how simple community events, such as collectively managing weeds, pressing apple juice and providing food at Christmas to neighbours, brought together people who had previously not worked together as it gave them a way to connect. Some case studies have become well-known enough that they are now being contacted from outside their organisation to address local issues. They became a conduit to connect people in the neighbourhood who share similar concerns, so they can be empowered by working together. Interestingly, an extra-organizational connection was even a way for a town councillor to become more involved in his own neighbourhood. He started an initiative in response to the town council's regular use of toxic weed killers. He organised his neighbourhood through the network and controlled the weeds through collective people power without poisonous weed killer. Additional benefits of this project were that it was an enjoyable way for people to meet their neighbours; moreover, it has been replicated in other neighbourhoods. This method of connecting people through events was also mentioned in other case study interviews. In one case study they found that pressing apple juice together was a good opportunity to do something and talk and meet each other. In one case study, the organisation created links with the neighbourhood through community outreach. A local shopkeeper saw a poster for one of their movie events in a shop; he then called to ask if he could also have a poster for his shop. So the organisation got to know the shopkeeper and got him involved.

2.7 Support from local governments

From our case studies research we found that some organisations were initiated or had substantial support from local government and public municipal institutions. This can be seen as a recognition that elected officials understand the benefits for the city or town from the work and projects implemented by more active citizens and neighbourhood initiatives. Some of the organisations were supported by free suitable space or room for meetings and events, paid support staff, funds for projects and simplifying of the city permitting process.

One neighbourhood project is supported by the Town Council who provides a paid community development officer. This officer helps with meeting administration and publicises the newsletter. This person facilitates community connections. She takes notes and sends out details of the meeting minutes. She compiles the newsletter, although the Neighbourhood Network produces the content.

Two of the case study projects were initiated by the local government. The city organised the initial meeting for the neighbours to share their ideas and wishes. The neighbourhood management continues to support the project and hands out invitations for people to get involved. Another lobbied the local municipality for a space, which they were given, and in general the municipality has been open to their proposals and financing plans for the coming years.

In some cases, a local neighbourhood initiative was formed because the responsible administrative authorities or local politicians seemed unable to act. In this case, competition could develop between the institution and the initiative.

2.8 External ties and networks

Many of the neighbourhood organisations were able to support and initiate new projects and businesses. Some long standing neighbourhood organisations were impressive in their ability to create extra-organizational projects including kindergartens, schools, a bicycle workshop and repair cafe. They also were able to create paid jobs for the management of alternative energy projects, food co-operatives, community supported agricultural projects (CSAs). For example, one case study manages 4 kindergartens, 2 maternal schools, 5 apartments, and provides settlement services for immigrants and refugees. Another case study has a bicycle workshop and a Repair Cafe. A third has a food co-op with 10 staff, and strives to set up projects that could lead to more jobs for their community. They have also established their own district heating project and are connected to a community energy company. Examples of other extra-organisational initiatives include a research project about gardening which has a popular Youtube channel, a successful Community Supported Agriculture initiative with 75 subscribers, and a partnership with other sustainability-oriented projects in the larger charity of which their organisation is a part.

2.9 Key elements for success

The commitment of community members - the amount of time and intensity of their engagement - depends not just on the common vision and goals, but also on the possibilities of participation. A high amount of inclusive participation depends not just on the process of decision making, but also on accessibility.

How to meet, where to meet and how often are some of the crucial questions for success of neighbourhood based activities:

- Is there a space to meet for a (large) group of people - indoors or outdoors in a public place?
- Is there good infrastructure for meetings (table, whiteboard, Flipchart, digital equipment, storage room, toilets, kitchen?)
- Is there financial support from public funding, from organisations, foundations or other funding sources, to buy material, pay for flyers and to meet additional needs of the projects?
- Are there digital resources for online meetings in the neighbourhood, do people have access to the technology needed to participate?

The case studies show that space is relevant as well as infrastructure and some financial resources. Funding makes certain activities possible, and ensures that events or creative projects can include people who have little or no money.

3. The SoNeC Approach

Research and experience have enabled us to understand different approaches and helped us to harvest good practice and mitigate failing practices in order to design an innovative framework that builds upon these learnings in order to arrive at the current, most effective ways to implement.

3.1 Basis of the SoNeC Principles

The SoNeC concept builds upon three well-developed and well-tested concepts:

- The Indian Neighbourhood Parliaments - Neighbourocracy
- The Sociocratic Circle Organisation Method (SCM) - Sociocracy
- The design-principles of the Commons

The Indian neighbourhood parliaments have been tried and tested for 20 years, have been continuously developed and recently supplemented by the sociocratic basic principles, consent and open elections.

In addition to these two basic principles, Sociocracy contains many other tools that contribute to effective organisation with the participation of all.

The principles that Elinor Ostrom holds responsible for the success of jointly managed resources largely coincide with the rules of Sociocracy. A neighbourhood organises its decision area (domain) like a common. Sociocracy provides the concrete tools and processes to implement Ostrom's principles for the success of jointly managed goods.

In our view, these three approaches are consistent and complement each other (see Table 1 below). Based on the principles of these three approaches, in addition, the SoNeC partnership has developed specific SoNeC principles for the European context.

Table 1: The Main principles of the three sources of SoNeC:
Neighborhoodocracy, Sociocracy and Commons - in comparison

Neighborhood-Principles	Sociocracy-Principles	Commons-Principles
<p>Smallness in size: Limited number of households in a neighbourhood circle. approximately 30 (20 – 40) households.</p>	<p>Circle Principle: Responsibilities are clearly defined through domains, divided into smaller sub-circles, connected and coordinated by the Circle.</p>	<p>Clearly defined boundaries: There are clear and locally accepted boundaries between legitimate users and non-authorized users. There are also clear boundaries between a specific common resource system and a larger socio-ecological system.</p>
<p>Neighbourhood based: Clear belonging of households to a neighbourhood.</p>	<p>Clear membership in circles and shared leadership with roles of circle-leader, facilitator, and secretary/administrator.</p>	
<p>Inclusiveness: Everybody living in this neighbourhood is invited and welcomed.</p>	<p>All members who are affected by a decision, are included into the decision-making process.</p>	<p>Most people affected by a resource system can participate in modifying the rules of use.</p>
<p>Numerical uniformity: All circles of all ages and levels consist of approximately the same number of participants.</p>	<p>At all levels of circles, the number of participants shall not be more than 20 people for effective decisions-making.</p>	
<p>Recall scope: Elected representatives to other circles can be recalled in case the circle has reasons and decides to elect another person.</p>	<p>Double-linking: All circles of an organisation or neighbourhood are connected at the next level through the leader of the circle and an elected delegate. Recalling roles is possible. If needed, "cross-links" are applied between circles to connect them horizontally.</p>	
<p>Horizontal and vertical federation: Horizontal links between children-, youth- and adults-circles. Vertical links from each neighbourhood-circle to a common network-circle, for encouraging collaboration.</p>		
<p>Convergence: All entities, associations, institutions and stakeholders in this neighbourhood and the environment are well connected and influenced by the neighbourhood circle.</p>	<p>Topcircle: Sociocratic organisations are linked to the outside environment through external stakeholders, who are included in the decision-making of the topcircle.</p>	<p>Embedded Institutions, polycentric Governance: When a common resource is closely associated with a large resource system, governance structures are "nested" at multiple levels.</p>

<p>Subsidiarity: Whatever a neighbourhood can solve themselves shall not be solved by another entity.</p>	<p>Subsidiarity is a must have in all self organising systems, like Sociocracy is one.</p>	<p>Government Recognition of the organisation's autonomy: Make sure the rule-making rights of community members are respected by outside authorities. Rules should be determined by local people and local ecological needs.</p>
<p>Sociocratic Open election and consent decisions making processes are implemented in Neighborocracy mostly in Children Parliaments.</p>	<p>Open Election: Functions and roles are elected with open voting of all members and with consent. A facilitated, inclusive process helps to find for a role the most suitable person.</p>	<p>Rules for collective decisions: Participatory decision making is vital. Most people affected by a resource system can participate (although many do not) in modifying the rules of use.</p>
	<p>Consent decision making: Any voice matters! There is a facilitated inclusive process of creating a solution. The decision is made, if nobody in the circle has a paramount objection to a proposal. High transparency, clear feedback-culture and flexibility.</p>	<p>Congruence: The rules for appropriating and reproducing a resource correspond to local and cultural conditions. Appropriation and deployment rules are aligned; the distribution of costs among users is proportional to the distribution of benefits.</p>
<p><i>If things are not congruent, circle members measure it through feeling tensions and address it at the next meeting agenda.</i></p>		<p>Monitoring: Monitoring of members' behaviour and monitoring of resources by members or responsible bodies. There must be sufficient control over resources to prevent breaches of the rules.</p>
<p>In Neighborocracy monitoring and evaluating takes place in each meeting. All roles are reporting from their progress. If actions do not function, the group finds a new way how to deal with it.</p>	<p>In Sociocracy all circles create measurements to measure the success of implementation of actions. Roles are created for "leading", "acting" and "measuring" planned activities. Through "progress-reports" in every meeting monitoring takes place. "Sanctions" are decided with consent if necessary. Normally for all problems the circle-members find new solutions together. Also conflict resolution mechanisms will be created by the circle members if needed.</p>	<p>Graduated Sanctions: Sanctions imposed should be proportionate to the problem caused. Punishment for rule violations starts at a low level and increases when users violate a rule multiple times.</p> <p>Conflict resolution mechanisms: Fast, at low cost, accepted as fair by members. There are local spaces for resolving conflicts between users and between users and authorities.</p>

3.2 Main Principles of a SoNeC

1. Neighbourhood based

- 1.1. The geographic boundaries are clearly defined.
- 1.2. Limited size (with neighbourhoods not substantially larger than Dunbar's number, and each household contributing one active participant, a neighbourhood circle will be a working group that is small enough to self-facilitate).
- 1.3. All residents living in a neighbourhood are invited and welcomed to the neighbourhood circle (inclusiveness).

2. Subsidiarity

- 2.1. Whatever neighbourhood-circles can solve themselves should not be solved by another entity.
- 2.2. Decisions and actions are made on the most immediate level.
- 2.3. The Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circle's autonomy over their domain (sphere of action) is recognised by the local government.

3. Sociocratic circle structure

- 3.1. A SoNeC is made up of interconnected circles as a form of collective governance (circular organisation).
- 3.2. SoNeCs can have age-specific circles (children, youth and adult circles).
- 3.3. Each SoNeC can create sub-circles for specific topics and areas of responsibility in their own neighbourhood.
- 3.4. SoNeCs are connected to the SoNeC-network through elected representatives, which can be recalled through the sociocratic process, if needed.
- 3.5. Each SoNeC has an agreed domain (sphere of action) with clear responsibilities, rights, roles and tasks.

4. Joint steering and learning

- 4.1. SoNeCs use the sociocratic meeting-structure which includes setting the agenda, facilitation, and logbook-keeping.
- 4.2. Consent-decision making is used to establish activities, policies, definition of functions, roles and tasks.
- 4.3. The roles are determined through open elections.
- 4.4. Monitoring and evaluation is a part of every circle's processes including conflict resolution.
- 4.5. SoNeCs encourage continuous learning through educational programs and training about SoNeC-principles, European Values, SDGs and other topics.

5. Polycentric governance

- 5.1. SoNeCs are interconnected with and influence relevant associations, institutions and stakeholders (convergence, embedded institutions).

3.3 Challenges and Opportunities of SoNeC

By following these principles SoNeC will transform the political system of a local government. Therefore, challenges and opportunities should be carefully considered in order to reach the most innovative and effective variations for implementation within the various cultural contexts across European society.

The main challenges represent at the same time the source of SoNeC's opportunities.



Challenges:

- More self-confident citizens speak out more politically. Empowered citizens who take up their agency within their local communities challenge the current systems. This can be seen as a nuisance or an opportunity. It will demand greater accountability from elected officials that may not be welcomed, but it will also provide them with feedback that can make their job a lot easier and more effective. This renewed sense of agency and responsibility from ordinary citizens for their neighbourhoods will produce a continual regulating feedback loop that provides elected officials the opportunity to respond by making adjustments to their policies to support regenerative community development.
- There is a risk that only a few citizens will participate in their sociocratic neighbourhood circles initially and some may feel excluded due to various factors like language barriers, lack of time, lack of confidence or even financial means etc. The people who take the initiative shape the process and invite everyone to participate according to a motto such as, 'Let's Make Sense Together' as part of a launch strategy, so that when they are ready they have an open invitation to participate. Once the actions taken by the early adopters produce positive impact for all the neighbours then people will inevitably join in as they are then provided with proof of concept. If we want this change to happen, we need some pioneers to get started and step by step change peoples' mindsets to join in.
- Citizens are currently not accustomed to participating in local politics themselves because, historically, public bodies have taken care of public services. However, accelerated reduction of public services, initiated in the 1990s, to varying degrees across Europe, has resulted in enormous deficits in all European countries. As a result, civil society has had to step up and take greater responsibility. Civil society has not had appropriate training for taking responsibility because the necessary time and resources have not been allocated. This challenge cannot be solved at the local level alone (e.g. by adapting the form, times and places of meetings to the needs of vulnerable groups). It also requires joint efforts at the national level (education, reduction of working hours, childcare, basic income, etc.) to enable people to engage socially and politically in their local communities.
- Neighbourhood circles consist of up to 40 people, representing their households. They need a place to meet and have a dialogue with each other without disturbance. These spaces are not always available free of charge and at the required time. These spaces also need a certain infrastructure to include all groups of the society (chairs, whiteboard, Flipchart, digital equipment, storage room, toilets, kitchen)
- If neighbourhood associations also take on public administration tasks, they need a budget. This must be realistic and secure, otherwise there is a danger that even more tasks will be shifted from the administration to voluntary work because it is unpaid.
- SoNeC has its foundations in a care centred economy and therefore may not be compatible without a serious commitment to change from our current, commodities driven economic and political systems, that are based on (the belief that everything is a tradable economic good)²⁵. This may lead to distortions at the interface of the two systems. However, because it is rooted at the local level, SoNeC will unfold its transformative potential in steps that can be managed by local communities.

Opportunities:

- Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles create resilient local communities by working together through an already proven cooperation method called “Sociocracy”, where every voice matters and all decide as equals with each other.
- SoNeC will raise capacity for solution finding of empowered and self organised neighbourhood groups. It is a space to express one’s opinion and to learn and train transparent and fair decision making processes. The method ensures that the decisions are shaped by everyone. The focus on neighbourhood-based issues allows the members to find better solutions to improve their everyday lives.
- SoNeC creates an environment where we can close the gap between the political system and the citizens. As the crises of the last years have shown, solutions can only be achieved together. With the right tools and the always open invitation to everyone involved, neighbours can become political beings and contribute their capacities to meet the great challenges we face.
- Residents can improve their conversational skills and strengthen their relationships in the neighbourhood by getting to know each other better and through the support of the sociocratic communication culture.
- This leads to a sense of belonging, more trust and solidarity among each other. It generally improves the self-confidence of the citizens and leads to more co-responsibility as a condition to address local and global issues.
- In other contexts around the world where Sociocracy is practised it provides proof that citizens’ commitment and engagement to local social and political issues significantly increase, as well as their willingness to support measures that may even restrict their own privileges, in order to support a sustainable lifestyle for all living and future beings.
- SoNeC, more than any intentional community (that comes together for specific reasons and occasions), will help to integrate people of different ages, ethnic backgrounds, cultures. It is because no one can be excluded. Everyone is a neighbour somewhere. This radically inclusive approach is significantly more challenging than creating communities of like-minded people, but it offers the opportunity for a more just and therefore more resilient society.
- There will be a clear positive impact in terms of skills and knowledge generated. SoNeC aims to organise training and support from professionals or public authorities to educate citizens. Moreover, neighbours learn from each other in an organised way.

3.4 SoNeC goals and international policy strategies

The core principles of SoNeC are fully aligned with the European Values, the European Green Deal and UN SDGs Sustainable Development Goals. The implemented SoNeC principles leaves room to each SoNeC to include its own goals that support the further development of social cohesion and problem-solving skills in their neighbourhood.

- **The European Values** (as outlined in the [Treaty of Lisbon 2007](#)): respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

“The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”²⁶

With respect to actual international strategic policy frameworks, the SoNeC approach could potentially bring about results related to these areas, but not limited to these:

- **Der European Green Deal²⁷**: by supporting the path to climate neutrality, climate adaptation, clean energy transition, sustainable travel system as well as the Just Transition (“no one is left behind”) with specific actions by citizens.
- **SDGs²⁸ (The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022)**:
 - SDG3 “Good health and well-being”: by reducing the prevalence of anxiety and depression (on the rise as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic) as well as other mental health problems by reducing social isolation and improving well-being.
 - SDG5: “Gender equality”: by ensuring equal rights for women within the neighbourhood circles, encouraging women’s leadership, openly addressing issues of particular relevance for women.
 - SDG10 “Reduced inequalities”: by actively preventing discrimination of any sort within the neighbourhood circles, by devising actions based on solidarity.
 - SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities: by making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, for example by citizen engagement in well-planned urbanisation, the creation of open spaces, high quality infrastructure development, the reduction of air pollution and the development of our ability to respond to future crises.
 - SDG 12 “Responsible consumption and production”: by working together with governments to improve resource efficiency, reduce waste and pollution, and shape a new circular economy.
 - SDG 16 “Peace, justice and strong institutions”:
 - by actively supporting the efforts to build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels,
 - by creating safety, inclusion and trust on a local level via community engagement of citizens.

3.5 Model for a Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circle prototype

In this section we explain some general conditions of a model of a possible prototype for SoNeC. The framework is designed out of the learnings, as described above, and the experiences of many people in participatory projects in Europe and the 370,000 neighbourhood parliaments in India. This framework is designed to set up and test a prototype in Europe under conditions that are “safe enough to try” for all actors.

We invite initiators to test the model and participate in a further learning exchange, one where they share their experiences, ideas and challenges with each other. In the hopes that SoNeCs will be ever evolving into the most effective versions, given the fact that our solutions need to be evolutionary so they never become outdated and ineffective.

Number of people, different ages

Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles (SoNeC) ideally consist of between 20-40 households (with 1 adult representative per household) in the same local neighbourhood. The neighbourhood should be mapped so that the total population of the neighbourhood will fall within “Dunbar’s number” of residents, or 150 people, the number with whom most humans can easily maintain personal relations.

A SoNeC includes all neighbours in a defined area. Every dot represents a person elected by his/her respective household (family, partnership, shared apartment, individual) that decided to join the meetings of the circle regularly.

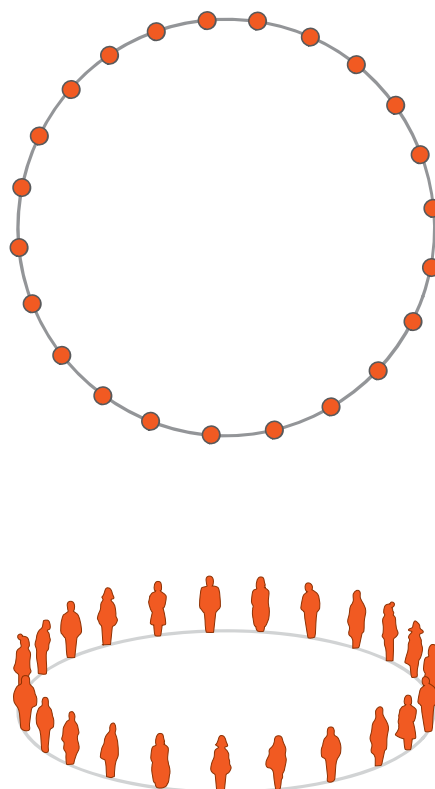


Figure 1: A SoNeC is a frequent meeting of neighbours to solve their own problems and create projects together.

Connection of age-specific circles inside the SoNeC (horizontal links)

The SoNeC can be divided into age-specific circles, for instance, children (6 - 12 years), youth (13 - 18 years) and adults (19+ years). Each age-specific circle is linked with representatives to the other two age-specific circles. Children and youth-circles should be supported by trained adults.

When a SoNeC-initiative starts in a region, all adults, youth, and children in the neighbourhood (20-40 households) are invited to take a place in age-specific circles. Note that, because many households have no children, the young people's circles will likely be smaller than the adult circle when all households contribute an adult representative.

An elected representative from the Adult Circle attends and supports the Youth Circle and another person supports the Children's Circle, but these adult support people do not advocate for decisions in those circles. One elected representative from the Children's Circle as well as the Youth Circle attends the Adult circle, and in this case takes part in decision-making. This horizontal double-link makes sure that younger people's decisions are not determined by the adults, and that at the same time they have a say in the decisions of the SoNeC.

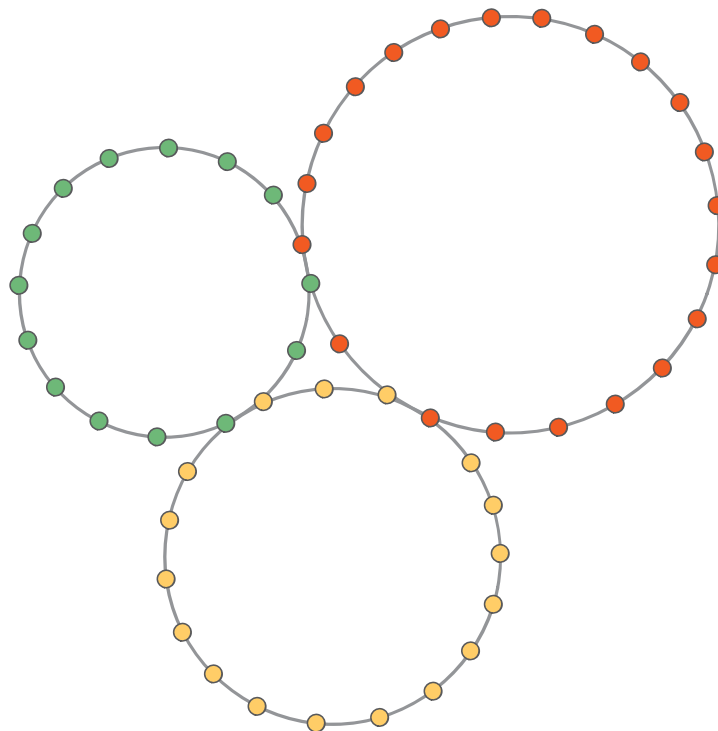


Figure 2: Age-specific circles are connected with each other. Some of the adults (red dots), youths (green dots) and the children (yellow dots) are part of two circles connecting these two circles horizontally.

Topic-specific Sub-circles

A SoNeC can establish topic-specific sub-circles with its own domain (sphere of action), created out of a need or common goal of the neighbourhood.

Within each SoNeC, there may be topic-specific sub-circles in which adults, youth and/or children participate, according to the topic. The topic-specific sub-circles can be applied in all age-specific circles. For example, a senior-circle can be included as a sub-circle into the circle structure of the adult-circle.

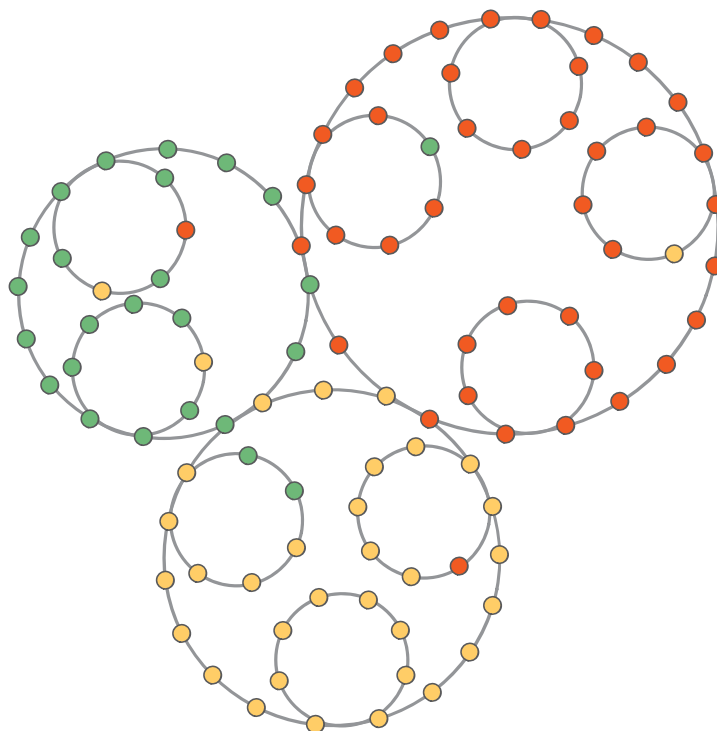


Figure 3: Topic-specific circles can involve adults (red dots), youths (green dots) and the children (yellow dots) depending on the topic.

The sub-circle is a means to ensure important and time sensitive tasks are accomplished. The sub-circle works autonomously and reports back to the SoNeC.

Open elections decide who will care for a specific task and take the role of responsible circle member. Everybody should feel included and valuable within the circle. Ideally everybody can do something, depending on his or her skills. Working in sub-circles allows everyone to be an active member and take on responsibilities, sometimes even small tasks help to make people feel included.

Examples for topics of sub-circles:

- Support for parents with young children
- 70+elderly people exchange-group
- Car- and bike sharing in the neighbourhood
- Caring Community for people with care needs
- Guidelines for how to use the street as a playground
- Sustainable food production and sharing
- Caring for nature and planting trees in the street
- Building a small common chicken-farm
- Birthday celebration committee
- Learning from each others competences

Frequency of meetings

Neighbourhood circles meet regularly (once a week, every two weeks or once a month) to consult with each other and make decisions about things that directly affect the local neighbourhood. The number of meetings depends on the structure of SoNeCs in a region. If a SoNeC creates sub-circles for operational issues, the sub-circles usually meet more often than the Circle. A SoNeC without sub-circles, ideally has weekly meetings to ensure successful participation.

Sociocratic organisation - shared responsibility

Every SoNeC should be organised with the sociocratic circle-organisation method. Each circle in the structure should have a clear domain (sphere of actions) and defined roles, use agenda-setting, facilitation and consent decision-making, open election and logbook-keeping. Every circle shares responsibilities and distributes tasks as needed. The training program offers workshops on how to run sociocratic teamwork.

Domain (sphere of action), issues to deal with

The issues a SoNeC decides to address arise from the local neighbourhood situation, and the needs and goals of the circle. Issues can be both, personal and/or common concerns, such as improvements at the local school, speed limits on their street, planting and caring for trees in the courtyard of a housing complex, needs of young people, care of elderly or sick persons, loss of jobs, founding of an energy cooperative, car sharing, a community garden, assistance with legal requirements, participating in local government decisions, celebrating festivals, etc.

Continuous learning

SoNeCs can be a starting point for political education. Active and informed people have more knowledge and are often better able to make good decisions for their neighbourhood. Successful projects and actions need to start with a phase in which information is collected (picture forming) and a collective vision for the future is clearly defined and agreed upon. There are many experts in various fields in a neighbourhood. A local SoNeC network can work together to organise training or share expertise amongst themselves.

Support from SoNeC Facilitators

Initiators of SoNeCs should get in contact with a SoNeC Facilitator. In the chapter “Role of SoNeC-Facilitators” you will find more detailed information on SoNeC-Facilitators creating a supportive program with training and resources to help establish a successful SoNeC.

Creating a SoNeC Network (vertical links)

Once the number of SoNeCs in a local region begin to grow they form a Network Circle. Each age-specific neighbourhood circle sends a representative to the respective age-specific SoNeC Network Circle (single vertical link). This interconnection of the individual SoNeCs with the other SoNeCs connects about 700 households. This is important for joint decision-making on issues that affect several neighbourhoods, to organise joint training courses and to better communicate with the city administration. This is the level at which contact with political representatives takes place. The Network Circle can send a representative to the public meetings of the municipal council and thus establish a connection. This will initially be just an exchange of information. However, it can gradually become an organised consultation process. The aim is to enable the elected representatives to experience the qualities of the circles, to increase mutual trust and thus make more and more actual participation possible.



Figure 4: In a SoNeC Network-Circle up to 20-40 SoNeCs in a local community will be connected. Each SoNeC and their age-specific circles send one person to this connecting circle.

Convergence network²⁹

Engaged residents often are involved in regional associations through various activities like sports, urban-gardening, religious communities or schools, thus they have a lot of knowledge of local issues and are well connected with organisations and community stakeholders. These connections can be used to build a so-called [Collective Impact Network](#) in the region and beyond. This is a network of community members, organisations and institutions who by working in collaboration with the local SoNeCs can advance equity (equal opportunity) by learning together, aligning, and integrating their actions to achieve real change.

Personal Development

SoNeC encourages us to engage in our personal inner development that is intertwined with our collective social and political development as acknowledged by the UN's recent Inner Development Goals.

As we act in our community and our world to make positive change, we respond to conscious or unconscious design blueprints: our understandings of ideal outcomes and how to achieve them. Irresponsible design (often unconscious design) offers us 'progress traps': ways to increase our wealth or power that ultimately harm us and/or harm others, including the communities and ecosystems on which we depend. Responsible design begins with paradigm, worldview and value system shifts that encode new values (such as the values represented by the UN Inner Development Goals) into solutions that intentionally mitigate 'progress traps' and no longer externalise environmental and social impacts.

Personal development will speed up the adoption and wise implementation of the SoNeC strategy because, as we re-examine our values and develop new ways of being in ourselves and in relationship, we replace unconscious design blueprints with ones that match who and how we genuinely want to be.



3.6 Potential SoNeC Initiators

To start something new, someone needs to take the initiative. These individuals take the risk for the community to set the first steps and to convince others to join in. Taking the initiative for collective action is a political act³⁰ and means taking responsibility for their own lifeworld. In the case of SoNeC we identified three different actors who can take initiative:

A) NGOs and existing initiatives

- NGOs like Economy of the Common Good, WWF, GreenPeace, Amnesty International, ATTAC, Pioneers of Change, etc. have the knowhow and resources to mobilise citizens in local areas.
- European and national communities and their stakeholders, like local churches, local sports associations and schools, public health systems, etc. are the bodies and groups that citizens belong to, because their needs are met there.
- Professionals, such as organisational developers, process facilitators, urban developers, scientists and researchers, etc., are potential implementers and transformers of SoNeC.
- Neighbourhood based NGOs, like Caritas, Red Cross offer services in the immediate neighbourhood (Caring Communities).

B) Local governments

- Politicians of European municipalities, like mayors and members of local governments and city councillors have the power to make a change.
- Administrational leadership persons, executive directors and responsible employees work where global and local problems meet.
- Supraregional bodies like LEADER-management and Agenda21 coordinators, as well as district managers and state- or provincial administrations for development are responsible for reaching European and Global goals.

C) Citizens

- All European Citizens and residents can initiate a SoNeC because they are potential members and they are the ones that really know the specific problems which can be solved best together with neighbours. They can spread and support the idea and start the implementation bottom-up.
- Existing neighbourhood based, local projects, like cohousings, ecovillages, community-gardens, food-coops, transition towns, etc know how to create an impact in terms of SDGs and European Values.

A. Initiative by NGOs and existing initiatives

In India, neighbourhood circles are often started by NGOs. They work with the communities, know the people and the local problems. They have access to funding and bring the know-how for community building. In Europe, too, some NGOs work at the local level and with local people. They often have a good overview of the situation, connections with other initiatives and organisations and also with political representatives. In addition they have experience using grants.

Challenges of an NGO Launch

- The initiative by NGO has some undeniable advantages, but also some challenges. Indian Neighborhood initiatives had to realise that the movement supported and funded by global NGOs will stop as soon as the funding ends. Neighbourhood groups could only sustain in those places where organisations had a great regional interest in the functioning of the neighbourhoods, e.g. the Christian communities in Tamil-Nadu.
- NGOs are often linked to a specific issue (such as health care) and considered only from that perspective. A broader agenda might fall outside their remit and may be challenged both within the organisation and by the population.
- There may also be an imbalance in the project group if some members are paid (NGOs) and others are not (citizens). If the proactive members of the NGO do not also live in one of the neighbourhoods concerned, they have a status as external advisors, which puts them in a different position in the project group. However, there is a lot of experience from the field of community work on how to deal with this.
- Another challenge comes from the relationship between NGOs and the party-system. As we see in Austria, each major party runs their own sports clubs, ambulances and kindergartens and separates people even at the neighbourhood level. It is very essential to start a SoNeC with NGOs that are not closely connected to political parties.

As a result of our case studies, we can recommend that those NGOs that are already working sustainably on the implementation of SDGs and European Values at neighbourhood level are most suitable to start SoNeCs. The organisation should be independent but well connected with other stakeholders and governmental organisations.

B. Initiative by local government and governmental organisations (GOs)

When the municipality decides to start SoNeC, they should also first find a SoNeC Facilitator, and then form an Implementation Circle (I-Circle) with the same steps as mentioned above to create a plan of the implementation. The plan will be presented to the municipality council (department, regional office), improved and agreed upon. Then the implementation can start right away.

If the existing municipal council is reluctant to allow more participation and taking over of local responsibility by citizens, a transition process is needed first. We have seen such a transition process in one of our case studies. Thereby, the approach of the [Transitions network](#) can be followed to create the conditions for a healthy human culture that meets our needs for community, livelihood and fun. Cycles of transition and the intergenerational phases between old and new are key drivers in transition processes for individuals and organisations. This takes some time, but when the local government is made up of people who support change, it becomes easier for SoNeC to get a decision.

Challenges of a Governmental Launch

- Usually it will be individual members of the government who are convinced that SoNeC can be a valuable contribution to their local community. They may try to put forward a proposal and convince other parties of the idea. In a favourable case, they win a positive decision with a majority. However, it can be a long and tough struggle to gain the approval of the local government. Out of the case-studies, we discovered that the party-system is not supportive of change. For example, if the mayor's party initiated the neighbourhood circles, the opposition party might for that reason not support them.
- If blocks are formed to defeat the opponent, the compulsion to defend allies will prevent city-councillors from expressing their own opinions. This will not lead to an "inclusive approach" as it is needed for a SoNeC.
- If individual neighbours participate in a SoNeC as "members of a political party" and if they are generally not willing to include all opinions, this can lead to the participation of only those neighbours who are associated with the majority bloc. This means the SoNeC is misused to strengthen one's own party. It is the facilitator's task to be aware of this dynamic.
- The political system is currently based on opposition. There is a fundamental question of how an inclusive, neighbourhood-oriented approach can be implemented when the current political system is generally based on winning and losing. SoNeC is an inclusive approach and therefore cannot simply be integrated into the existing political party system.

There are multiple examples of how a city-council can work together with consent of all members³¹. There we learn how an inclusive approach can also work with several parties. The impact of this approach is that all neighbours feel included and work together. The cooperative spirit in the municipality is thus particularly strengthened by the SoNeC network.

C. Initiative by citizens

If an individual or several citizens take the initiative to establish a SoNeC, they can basically follow the example of establishing a citizens' initiative in chapter 4. However, it must be clear that the project of establishing a SONEC is not about creating an intentional community or addressing a specific issue, as is often the case for citizen initiatives, but about involving everyone living in the place. Again, an implementation circle is needed to learn what SoNeC means, formulate their own goals and framework adapted to their situation, and design a plan for implementation, including how they will interact with political representatives. Then the implementation can start (see next Chapter).

Challenges of an Citizen Launch

- If the local government does not agree to implement SoNeC, resources are lacking and only domains that do not conflict with the government can be formulated for the neighbourhood circles. If there is overlap, each activity can be petitioned separately for approval, but this makes it more difficult to establish the SoNeCs.
- Even if it is possible to achieve improvements that are visible to all through the activities of the circles, for example in the area of social justice, the broader success of the circles remains dependent on the approval of the elected representatives.

However, once established, the circles can guide and accelerate a transition process.

4. How to implement a SoNeC

Once all hurdles are cleared and the project group is ready to start, there are several ways in which a SoNeC can be implemented. There is no one-size-fits-all model of implementation. The centrepiece will be the principles of SoNeC and these can be implemented and safeguarded in a variety of ways, depending on the situation. The possibilities for implementation described here, are the result of the findings from the case studies, the manifold experiences of the Indian neighbourhood parliaments and the numerous implementation processes of SCM in Europe.

4.1 Roles within the implementation process

In the process of implementation, we distinguish between four different roles, each of them making an important contribution to success:

- SoNeC-Facilitator
- Neighbourhood Organiser
- Circle member in charge
- Neighbours

They have different characteristics, functions and tasks during the process.

Role of SoNeC-Facilitator

SoNeC Facilitator is the role of an expert who is familiar with the SoNeC concept and guides the process of implementation in a neighbourhood or district.

Whenever a change takes place in an existing system tensions arise in the system that must be taken seriously and dealt with, so that the change can be experienced positively by everyone, or at least most people in the system. It is therefore important and helpful to have this change process accompanied by an external expert, at least in the initial phase. The SoNeC-Facilitator is a competent consultant who is experienced in change processes and has the knowledge to accompany the people involved to their desired goal.

A SoNeC Facilitator should be connected with other SoNeC Facilitators and other allies to implement Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles in an area, and to support existing communities and networks that are willing to start a SoNeC. The SoNeC facilitator can be a paid professional or a volunteer, can act as the initiator and first organiser or focus on supporting local organisers in a neighbourhood through specific skills.

SoNeC Facilitators are active from the early stages of launching Sociocratic Neighborhood Circles through the process of spreading SoNeCs across a city or region, through the ongoing maintenance and advancement in a region where Sociocratic Neighborhood Circles become the norm.

We explain this important role of a SoNeC facilitator in terms of its mission, aims, offers, and in terms of the competencies that this person needs in order to lead in different settings. SoNeC facilitators should be intrinsically motivated people with the goal of establishing SoNeCs in a region together with the respective organisations and citizens.

Mission of a SoNeC Facilitator:

The successful work of SoNeC Facilitators will contribute to a Europe where we live by the [European values](#), and a world where we have accomplished the [2030 Sustainable Development Goals](#) or their successors.

A SoNeC Facilitator works with a team of other facilitators and allies to support a city or region in adopting sociocratic neighbourhood circles, and to connect and support other SDGs-related projects in a SoNeC-network.

Aims and offers of a SoNeC Facilitator:

- Consultancy for key leaders, decision-makers, community builders and organisations in the city or region.
- Accompanying regional SoNeC implementation processes from the start till the stable running.
- Offers for training of local neighbourhood organisers, to implement SoNeC.
- Organising training on the SoNeC principles, the European Values and SDGs for all neighbours.
- Facilitating meetings of local groups as they become sociocratic neighbourhood circles and facilitating meetings of both neighbourhood circles and other allied initiatives as they develop patterns of convergence at the neighbourhood-network, in their area and district (Allied initiatives may include citizen groups, businesses or NGOs, like charities, religious groups, local governments, etc.).

Competencies a SoNeC Facilitator needs:

- Experience as an initiator organising one's own neighbourhood (or assisting in someone else's neighbourhood)
- Understanding of Neighborocracy
- Understanding of Sociocracy and practice as a sociocratic facilitator, trainer and consultant
- Understanding of the Design-principles of the Commons
- Understanding of the SDGs and the European Values
- Understanding of life skills and citizenship education
- Belief in the abilities of every human being and the understanding that we need all their different talents
- Community organising skills (e.g. Asset Based Community Development)
- Consultancy skills and used to work with regional leaders in government, business, NGOs, activist networks, local citizen action groups, etc.
- Ability to work in a team and lead it with the capacity to serve the process
- Knowledge of how to get in-depth training and support on all aspects of the SoNeC model if one's own knowledge and experience are not sufficient

Role of the Neighbourhood Organiser

To set up a SoNeC in a neighbourhood, an initial group or person is needed. This Neighbourhood Organiser(s) make sure that all residents in this respective Neighbourhood are personally invited to come to the neighbourhood's events, like celebrations and circle-meetings, and also to the SoNeC-trainings. This role is very similar to the role of "Community Connector" in Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), and may actually be a person explicitly playing the role of Community Connector in a community using ABCD.³²

The Neighbourhood Organiser

- joins the first SoNeC-trainings in the region
- builds the first relationships to all neighbours in a selected area
- organises first events to get to know each other and informing the neighbours about the SoNeC-program
- keep everybody informed about all activities during the whole set-up process
- Is guided by the Implementation Circles
meets the other Neighbourhood Organiser(s) in the SoNeC Network meeting

Role of responsible circle member

Every running SoNeC has several roles and responsibilities for the activities and tasks this specific SoNeC decides to do. Activities will be created with consent out of the goals the neighbours have agreed on.

- When the task is clear, a member of the circle will be elected with open election by all circle members.
- If more neighbours are needed to fulfil the tasks, they create a sub-circle under the lead of the SoNeC. The Subcircle's organiser (leader) can be called "Responsible".

Role of the Neighbour

Every person living in a specific place is a neighbour and therefore a potential member of a SoNeC.

- Every neighbour is invited to the events and circle meetings of his or her SoNeC.
- Each household should be represented by at least one adult person in the age-specific Circle of adults or one of the sub-circles.
- All children and young people in a household should attend their age specific circle.
- Some neighbours may additionally or alternatively be part of one or more sub-circles in their SoNeC.

As a member of an age-specific circle or topic-specific circle, you can put your own topics on the agenda, have a say in all agenda items, take on tasks and be involved in all activities. If a neighbour cannot or does not want to take part in the circle meetings, he/she should take part in other SoNeC events and activities as often as possible.

4.2 The general steps to launch a SoNeC

In this section we show the process of implementation in detail. It is led by a certified SoNeC-Facilitator & a regional Implementation Circle (I-Circle) delivering a SoNeC implementation in that region. There are three options for initiating an implementation process, we explain here three options of launching a SoNeC:

- A. A local issue-centric organisation with strong community connections, or a coalition of organisations with a focus on the SDGs or similar holistic goals
 - ▷ **NGO LAUNCH**

- B. An initiative of a municipality or city, to start SoNeC in the whole area of this community
 - ▷ **GOVERNMENTAL LAUNCH**

- C. With personal initiative of citizens, inviting their own neighbours to start a Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circle for themselves.
 - ▷ **CITIZEN LAUNCH**

NOTE: As an individual citizen, you may want to start with your own neighbourhood (C.). This can lead on to a NGO LAUNCH (A.) or a GOVERNMENTAL LAUNCH. later

The following show the way of SONEC implementation for A) NGO, B) GOVERNMENTAL LAUNCH and C) CITIZEN LAUNCH.

4.3 A. NGO LAUNCH

Developing an Implementation Process for a region

If you are a national or regional coalition of organisations with a focus on the SDGs, or a local issue-centric organisation with strong community connections, start here.

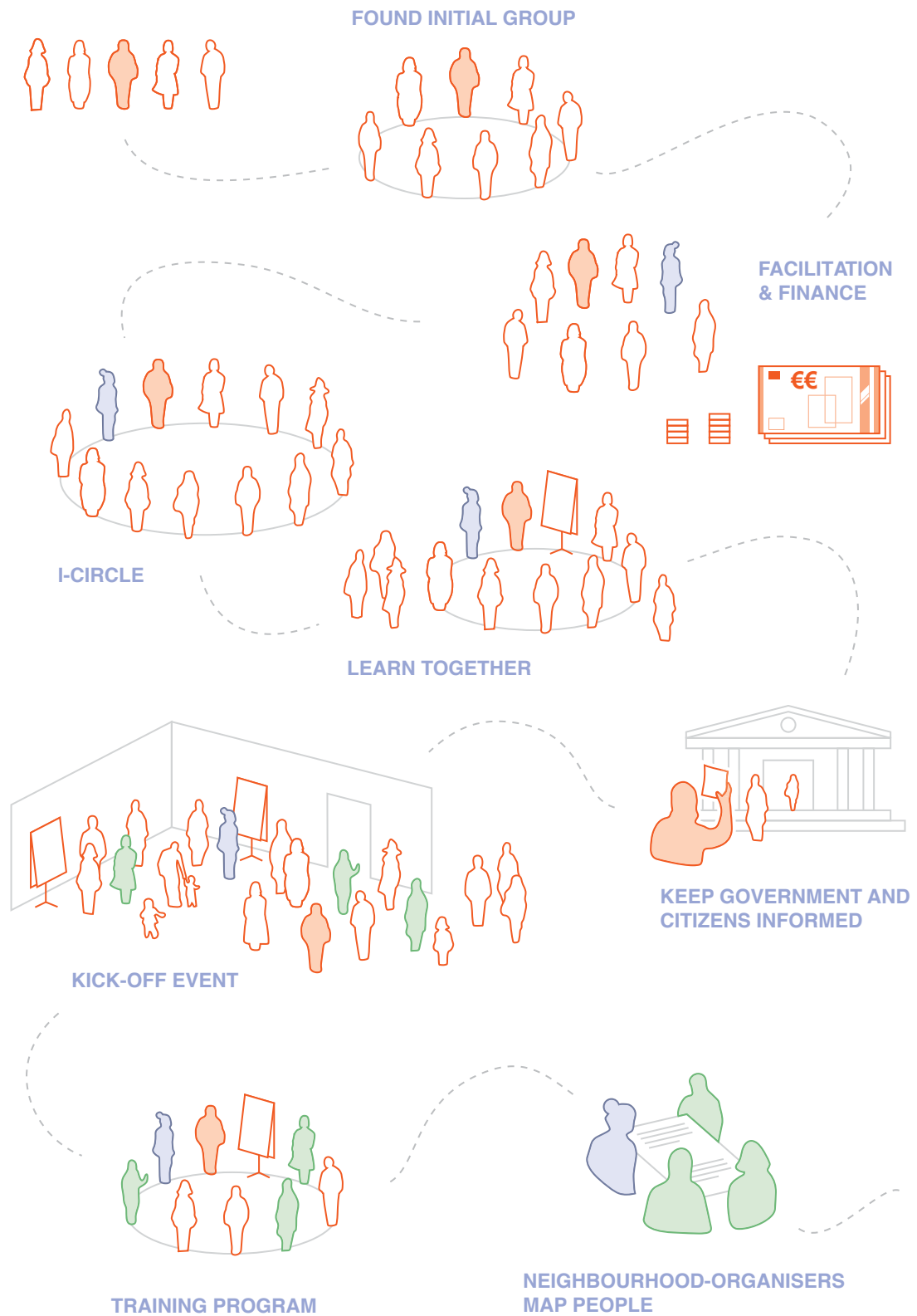


Figure 5: Initial process for the NGO LAUNCH

- Initiator
- SoNeC facilitator
- Neighbourhood organisers

FOUND INITIAL GROUP ... form a regional support group

You as an initiator map your area of impact, it may be a village, a district, a city or whole area to find your focus for the initial efforts. In that process you will find the people who want to support your idea personally. Found the initial group with them.

FINANCE ... take care of calculation and financing

As an initial group, you should develop and agree on a financial model for the implementation. If your model includes external funding:

- Inform regional funders of the SoNeC-concept, examples, and options for adoption.
- Apply for one or more grants and/or contracts.
- Negotiate a contract with the city government if appropriate.

FACILITATION ... find a SONEC facilitator

The model should specify the position of the SoNeC Facilitators whether this person is engaged as:

- Independent professionals
- Volunteer or
- Employee of partner organisations (organisations committed to supporting this initiative with staff time)

Your model may use all three or only one. You may change your model.

I-CIRCLE ... find the right people and found the Implementation-Circle

Together with the SoNeC Facilitator you can now identify potential members for the Implementation Circle, including influential local citizens' (groups) and other allies. The Implementation Circle consists of 10 – 12 people from as many sectors of your region as possible.

LEARN TOGETHER ... learn together with the SoNeC Facilitator more about SoNeC

The Implementation Circle starts with learning about the concept, examples and options for adoption. Out of that it creates

- a) the goals for the implementation (WHY SoNeC shall be implemented in this region)
- b) the mapping of existing networks and relevant stakeholders in the region, experts and projects
- c) the structure (number and demarcation of neighbourhoods, ages-specific circles,) and how to connect all SoNeCs to a SoNeC-Network
- d) the domains of the Neighbourhood Circles, their area of responsibility and decision making
- e) the process how to get neighbours involved and how to find the Neighborhood Organizers
- f) the educational program to train the Neighborhood Organisers and the Neighbours
- g) the roadmap for implementation (timelines, milestones)

KEEP GOVERNMENT AND CITIZENS INFORMED ... as NGO-consortium keep your government and the citizens well informed

This implementation plan will be presented to the NGO-consortium, the citizens and the local government to be improved and agreed upon. You as an NGO start the implementation as decided in the plan, and keep the city government and the citizens informed through the whole process.

KICK-OFF EVENT ... the first regional event takes place as a “kick-off” with all residents

Based on the implementation process of the I-circle, various events such as kick-off, lectures, performance, future workshop, world café, etc. can be organised to involve as many citizens as possible. Out of this and other activities you will find the first neighborhood organizers. From the kick-off events, all interested neighbours can be invited to the training program.

TRAINING PROGRAM ... a training program is conducted for neighbourhood organisers and interested neighbours

The Implementation Circle is mapping the initiatives and associations in the region. There will probably be some groups that are already trying to solve the problems for which also SoNeC wants to create solutions, like transition-town initiatives, food-coops, car-sharing providers, etc. They might be the first Neighborhood Organizers and could use their expertise to start a SoNeC in their area of impact and pull others into the training.

The Implementations Circle creates and conducts a training program for Neighbourhood Organisers and Neighbours, built on the resources (existing expertise) in the region or city.

Trainings can be for example:

- Sociocratic facilitation and teamwork
- Life skills and communication skills (conflict resolution methods)
- Community organising skills
- Training of the SDGs and the European Values

Interested Neighbours will book the training or come to the first Neighbourhood Organisers meetings. Out of the kick-off events, SONEC facilitators might invite all neighbours who are interested.

NEIGHBOURHOOD-ORGANISERS MAP PEOPLE ... SoNeC organisers mapping engaged people in their neighbourhood

You form the group of neighbourhood organisers and they run the steps for Neighbourhood organisers as described in C CITIZEN LAUNCH.

4.4 B. GOVERNMENTAL LAUNCH

Developing Implementation Process for a city or metropolitan area

If you are working for a city government, or believe you can establish a strong positive relationship with the city government fairly easily, start here.

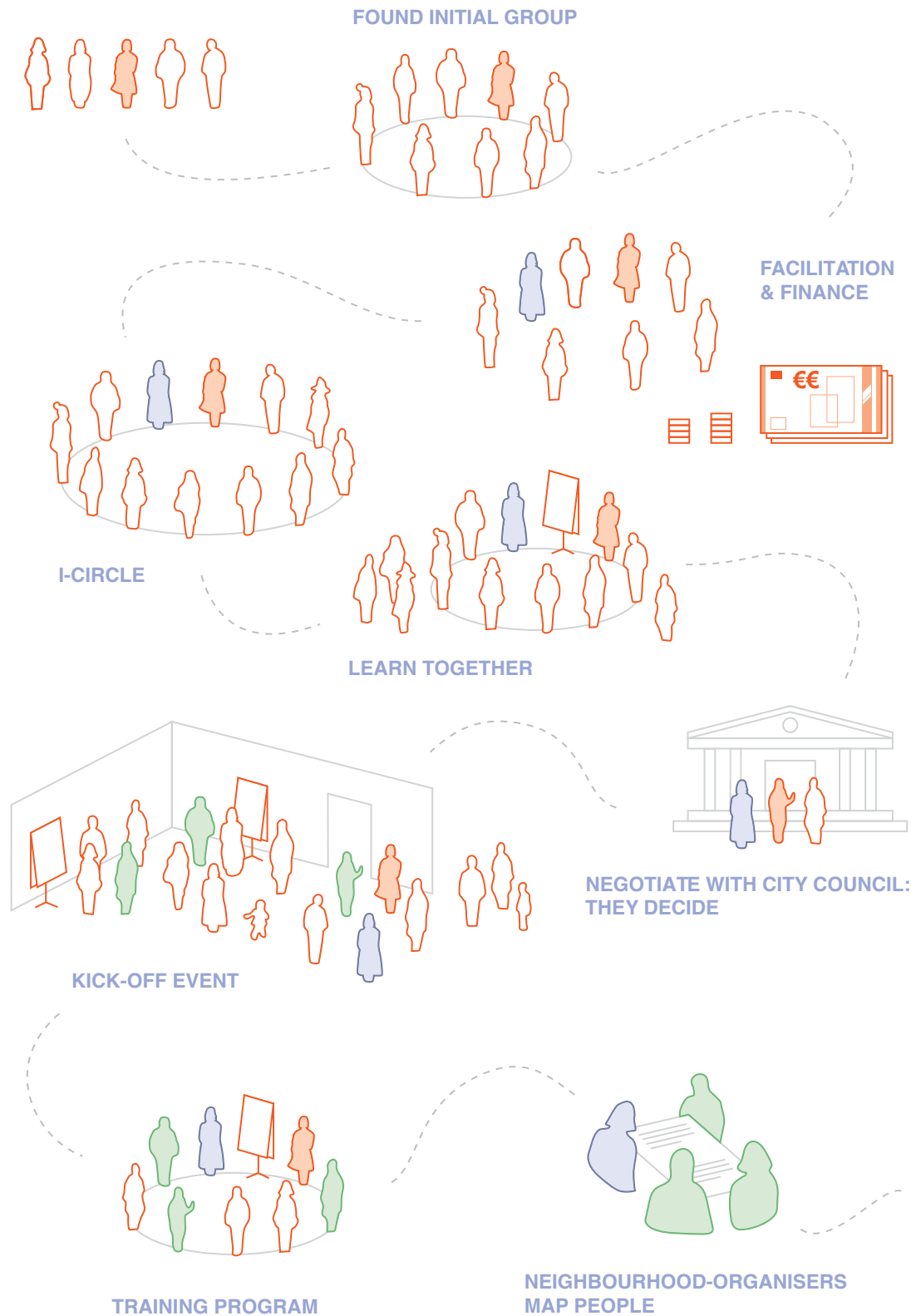


Figure 6: Initial process for the GOVERNMENTAL LAUNCH

- Initiator
- SoNeC facilitator
- Neighbourhood organisers

FOUND INITIAL GROUP ... form a regional support group

As an initial person in a city council or administration, talk to others and find people who will support your idea. With inspired people inside of the governmental body, you can establish the initial group to take the first steps.

FACILITATION ... find a SONEC facilitator

As a person or a group who is taking initiative in your city you first should get to know more about the SoNeC-Concept. If you decide to go for it, invite a SoNeC Facilitator to support you with information about the whole process and how to start.

FINANCE ... take care of calculation and financing

If external funding is needed:

First you create a business model for implementing SoNeC, and together with the city administration apply for fundings. The application includes a contract between the city government and the SoNeC Facilitator.

I-CIRCLE ... find the right people and found the Implementation-Circle

When funding is granted, you as the initiator together with the SoNeC Facilitator identify potential members and create an Implementation Circle for the whole city which consists of 10 – 12 people who are

- representatives from the initial group
- elected citizens
- elected stakeholder (eg. a representative of a church, a local doctor, a schools-director)
- the mayor
- the leader of the administrative department of citizen participation
- and the SoNeC facilitator

LEARN TOGETHER ... learn together with the SoNeC Facilitator more about SoNeC

The Implementation Circle starts with learning about the concept, examples and options for adoption. Out of that it creates

- a) the goals for the implementation (WHY SoNeC shall be implemented),
- b) the mapping of the existing network of relevant stakeholders in the city, experts and projects
- c) the structure (areas, levels, ages-specific circles,) and where the SoNeC-Network shall take place,
- d) the domains of the Neighbourhood Circles, their area of responsibility and decision making,
- e) the process how to get neighbours involved and how to find the Neighbourhood Organisers,
- f) the educational program for training the Neighbourhood Organisers and the Neighbours,
- g) the roadmap for implementation (timelines, milestones).

NEGOTIATE WITH CITY COUNCIL: THEY DECIDE ...

The Implementation Circle negotiates the process with the city-council, funders, allies and locals and adapt the plan respectively. The city council decides on the proposal. If they give the order, the implementation phase starts.

KICK-OFF EVENT ... the first regional event takes place as a “kick-off” with all residents

Start to run your decided process, which includes a kick-off event to involve as many citizens as possible. Out of this and other activities you will find the first neighbourhood organisers.

TRAINING PROGRAM ... a training program is conducted for neighbourhood organisers and interested neighbours

The training program see above ...

NEIGHBOURHOOD-ORGANISERS MAP PEOPLE ... SoNeC organisers mapping engaged people in their neighbourhood

You form the group of neighbourhood organisers and they run the steps for neighbourhood organisers as described in C CITIZEN LAUNCH.

4.5 C. CITIZEN LAUNCH

Developing an Implementation Process for your neighbourhood.

If you are an engaged, well-connected citizen who believes to be able to establish a strong movement and if you have a good relationship with the city government, start here.

NOTE: If you start with your own neighbourhood (C.) this can lead to a regional NGO LAUNCH (A.) or to a GOVERNMENTAL LAUNCH (B.) later.

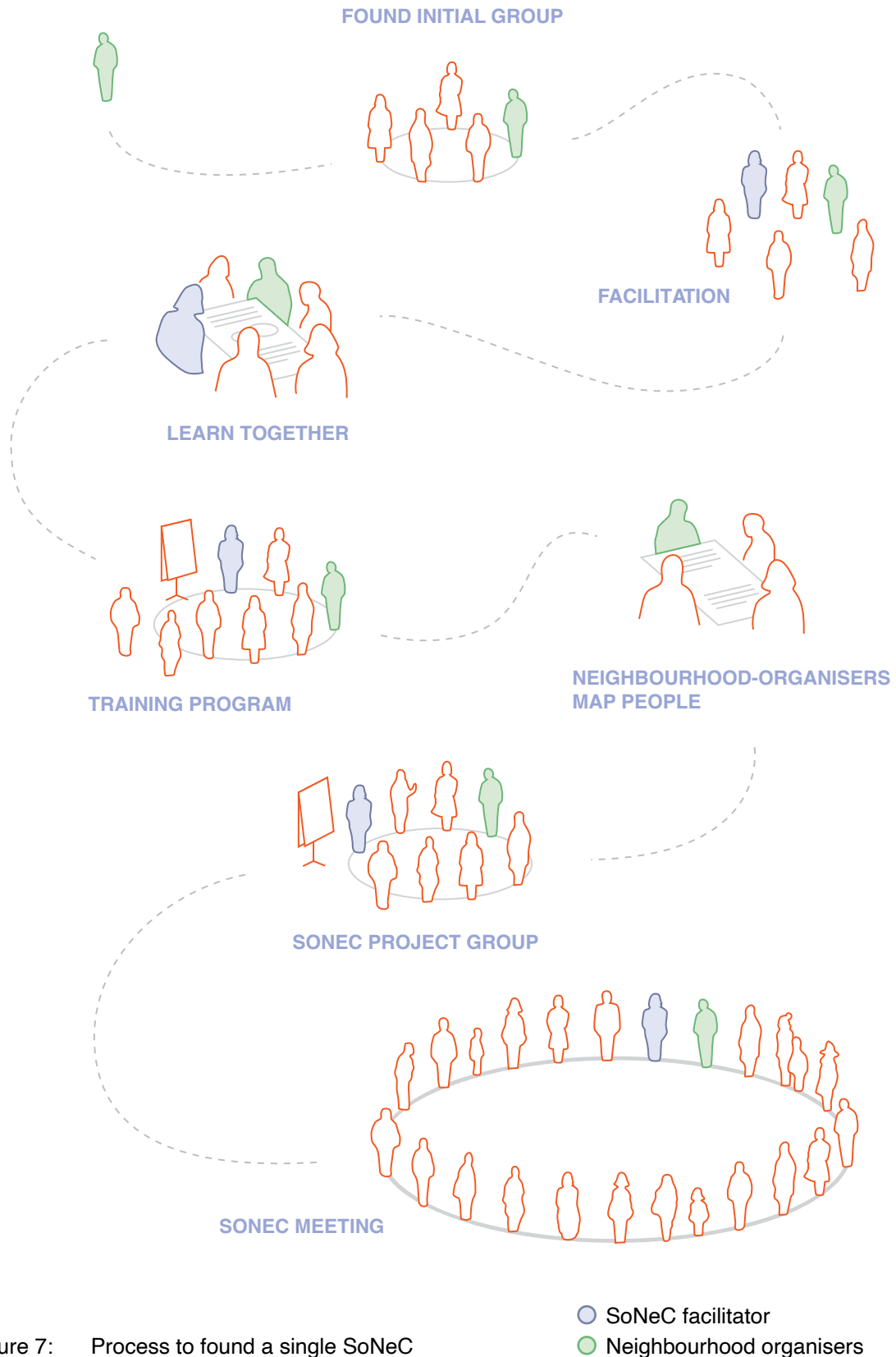


Figure 7: Process to found a single SoNeC

FOUND INITIAL GROUP ... form a regional support group

As a person or a group who is taking initiative in your own neighbourhood or your city, you can take the role of the Neighbourhood Organiser. The first step should be to form an initial group and learn more about the SoNeC-Concept together.

FACILITATION ... find a SONEC facilitator

If you are convinced that SoNeC can bring the necessary process of change to your neighbourhood and your city, invite a SoNeC facilitator.

LEARN TOGETHER ... learn together with the SoNeC Facilitator more about SoNeC

He/she can explain the process and together you can design the first steps of the process. Then you know how to get started.

TRAINING PROGRAM ... a training program is conducted for neighbourhood organisers and interested neighbours

Together with the Facilitator you can create a training program for Neighbourhood Organisers to learn about the four key activities of a SoNeC:

1. socialising together
2. running development projects
3. learning together
4. solving together identified problems

For more information on the training program see above in A).

NEIGHBOURHOOD-ORGANISERS MAP PEOPLE ... SoNeC organisers mapping engaged people in their neighbourhood

With support from SoNeC Facilitators, you can start a local mapping process. Invite any neighbours you believe are interested. You map all the engaged people and projects in your neighbourhood.

SONEC PROJECT GROUP ... for the specific SoNeC a project group is formed

Then you can invite all these identified projects and engaged people to start a project group in your neighbourhood. If members of your initial group are living in different neighbourhoods, you may start implementing SoNeC in two or three neighbourhoods parallel and support each other during this first stage.

The members of your project group learn to know the SoNeC-implementation program from the SoNeC Facilitator, or from the regional I-Circle in case of A. and B. LAUNCH. They learn to work as a sociocratic team and create their own plan for their SoNeC (inline with a regional I-Circle, if one exists.). Through conducting their first events, such as street festivals, pot-lucks and other celebration-events in their respective neighbourhood, they learn to distribute tasks and include all neighbours. Our recommendation to SONEC project groups: "Begin by meeting people in your neighbourhood. Form genuine open-hearted connections. Throw parties and get curious about your neighbours - who they are and what they need. This is the foundation, and will continue as long as your neighbourhood does."

SONEC MEETING ... the project group organises the first SoNeC meetings and further ones

When a solid Neighbourhood Implementation Circle is operating in the neighbourhood with a good social connection to most neighbours and trained in basics of SoNeC, they invite every household to contribute a representative, and conduct the official launch of their SoNeC with the first meetings.

Through the first meetings they possibly ...

- present a short version of the SoNeC-concept and the potential it contains for the neighbourhood,
- identify problems addressed by neighbours, or interests of neighbours,
- define initial goals and create activities,
- study the history of the neighbourhood, special incidents, very important people in the past,
- map the residents in the present and discuss the possible structure of adult-, youth- and children-circles,
- create sub-circles for specific tasks and involve more neighbours,
- analyse the resources, knowledge and expertise in EU-values and SDGs to participate in specific trainings,
- map the network of organisations, institutions and projects, where some of the neighbours are involved, and have an exchange about it,
- organising ongoing socialising activities for all neighbours, celebration-activities and trainings,
- find ways how to involve all neighbours of all ages in the circle-structure for decision-making to develop projects and solving problems together, ...

The Implementation Circle with the help of SoNeC Facilitators evaluate how your SoNeC pilot projects are working within agreed parameters. If you need additional support use your Implementation circle.

4.6. SoNeC Network

If you have managed to implement the first steps of a SoNeC in one of the ways described above, then you should start networking right away. To do so, ask all Neighbourhood Organizers from pilot SoNeCs in your region to build a circle for exchanging their experiences and supporting each other. This organiser's circle may be led by the SoNeC-Facilitator or other members of the I-Circle. This is important to support the initial phase to get all planned SoNeCs started.

Parallel to the circle of Neighbourhood Organizers with their specific tasks, every SoNeC elects one representative with open election to build the SoNeC-network circle in their district out of 20 – 40 SoNeCs. Step by step they start organising district-wide activities out of the needs of their SoNeCs, monitored by the I-Circle and well connected with the municipality or city administration.

Continuous learning and development will be organised by the SoNeC Network Circle. It includes the SDGs, EU-values and other topics which are important for the necessary change processes. Furthermore, trainings by other organisations can be joined by neighbours from different circles. This can lead to cooperation between neighbourhoods.

After the Implementation phase the I-Circle will be transformed into a monitoring and support circle, supporting the ongoing roll-out of SoNeCs in a city or area. If, after the initial successes, the local government is willing to work together on a partnership level, all SoNeC network circles can send an elected representative to a monitoring circle where citizens and governmental representatives can consult together.



5. The potential impact of SoNeC

IMPACT of SoNeC on a LOCAL LEVEL

SoNeC implemented in municipalities is expected to increase social cohesion, trust and solidarity between neighbours, reduce social isolation and conflicts, create a relationship between neighbours and give them the responsibility for participating in the promotion of European values as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN. Non-discrimination is supported through SoNeC. SoNeC is expected to reduce loneliness and helplessness and this can boost physical and mental health. It creates Capacity Building and we expect to increase political engagement on a local level, as people will have the adequate means, the network, and the opportunity, to contribute to the solution of their problems. From the start, we are building resilient communities.

IMPACT on a REGIONAL LEVEL

SoNeC can be implemented in a whole region in the medium run. Any LEADER-Region³³ or an Agenda 21-Region³⁴ can launch it. Climate-related efforts like carbon emission reduction as well as other public policy goals can be supported through civic initiatives, like food-coops, community-gardens and co-housing. Our initiative for bringing all citizens together in their neighbourhoods, including those who are already engaged in such regional innovative initiatives, would radically scale up civic participation and also increase their effectiveness.

IMPACT on a EUROPEAN LEVEL

The SoNeC-Concept runs in alignment with the European Values and Fundamental Rights, and with the SDGs. We are confident that Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles can contribute significantly to their dissemination and implementation.

We expect that Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles (SoNeC) as a European version of the Neighbourhood Parliaments will play a vital role in promoting European values and addressing the climate crisis. SoNeC will enhance behavioural change by sharing knowledge, information, as well as providing a supportive network and resilient communities. For this, it is essential, that the group norms and functioning of these neighbourhood circles fulfil a set of basic principles in line with European values, e.g. tolerance, mutual respect and non-discrimination, solidarity, equality between genders. The building of sociocratic communities to achieve the SDGs and to implement European values in the neighbourhoods in all European countries should support the European Green Deal and lead to compliance with the Paris Climate Agreement by creating resilient social structures to cope with an uncertain future.

The different national and regional social spaces in Europe have different socio-structural characteristics of the population (age, education, income, household size, religious beliefs, etc.) and are at different stages of development in terms of, for example, civic participation, democratic practices, citizen empowerment, etc.

With the SoNec Concept we created an adaptable framework that can be adapted to the different national social and political conditions in all European countries and to different socio-spatial dimensions as well as to urban and rural contexts.

SoNeC is created to build resilient communities, to build capacity by giving people the knowledge and new options to address the different aspects of the SDGs and European Values in their specific living environment. Communities will be able to use the processes of Sociocracy to decide together promoting citizens' empowerment and participation.

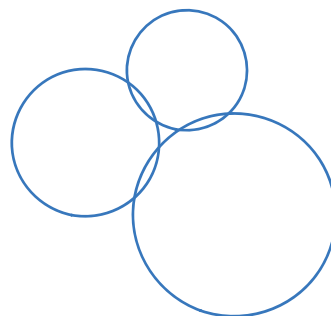
This approach and theoretical framework is a first step towards the implementation of SoNeC and towards resilient neighbourhoods. The next step is to apply the proposed implementation plan in three pilot projects, thereby testing, evaluating and improving it.

Thus the European SoNeC network can be started and helps to work out a best-practice implementation-plan through the first pilot projects. We invite everybody to start their pilot-project and share their experiences in the SoNeC-network.

If municipalities and citizens discover the potential of SoNeC, a major transformation towards a sustainable livelihood and resilient communities can be expected in the longer term.

ARE YOU INTERESTED?

Please contact us by filling out the form in:
sonec.org/partners/questionnaire/



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Further reading

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