



ACHIEVING HIGH-INTEGRITY VOLUNTARY CLIMATE ACTION

Cities and Citizens – Partnering for Climate Action

Webinar, June 27th 2025
Summary report

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Summary

The ACHIEVE project – ACHIEVE stands for *Achieving High-Integrity Voluntary Climate Action* – is a European Union-funded initiative focused on advancing the integrity, effectiveness, and scalability of voluntary climate action (VCA) by non-state and subnational actors. With the urgency of climate mitigation and the growing number of local and voluntary commitments, ACHIEVE seeks to build the scientific and governance foundations necessary to scale VCA with credibility. The project involves a highly interdisciplinary consortium and engages a range of stakeholders—from policymakers to civil society groups—in the co-design of tools, methods, and recommendations for impactful climate action. It particularly emphasizes transparent monitoring, high-integrity carbon credits, climate financing, and inclusive, citizen-driven action. One of the priorities of the project is to analyse the role of municipalities as voluntary actors in climate action.

The webinar, titled “Cities and Citizens: Partnering for Climate Action,” was hosted on June 27, 2025, as part of ACHIEVE Work Package 3.2. It provided a platform for city practitioners and civic initiatives from across Europe to share best practices, strategies, and barriers related to citizen engagement in local climate action. The event was structured in two main blocks: (1) the role of municipalities in fostering citizen involvement, and (2) citizen-led social innovations that enable collaborative governance. Speakers represented both municipal administrations and grassroots initiatives, offering a well-rounded view of top-down and bottom-up engagement models. A final Q&A session enabled further reflection and mutual learning.

1.1 Block 1: Role of Municipalities

In the first segment of the webinar, Julia Wegenast from the City of Freiburg and Kinga Lőcsei-Tóth from the City of Budapest presented institutional strategies for engaging citizens in climate policy.

Kinga presented three key approaches to citizen engagement at the municipal level in Budapest. She began by describing the city’s unique characteristics, including its size (1.7 million residents, 3 million with the metropolitan area) and its two-tier governance system with 23 district municipalities, which operate without a clear hierarchy. Despite this complexity, cooperation has improved in recent years—especially around climate action and citizen participation. One major initiative was the “Cities for People” project, where citizens were asked for the first time to identify mobility challenges. Together, they co-created three pilot projects, including the establishment of “mobility points.”

These mobility points range from simple parking for e-scooters to larger multimodal hubs, and over 1,100 now exist across the city. Another tool has been the introduction of citizen assemblies focused on climate issues such as the climate emergency and air quality. Their recommendations were integrated into strategic city documents like the Climate Action Plan, and helped lead to the creation of a climate agency to support building renovations. In addition, the city launched a participatory budgeting process, now in its fifth cycle, which invites citizens to propose and vote on local projects across all districts.

The budgeting process is divided into three themes: Green Budapest (climate-related), Open Budapest, and Caring Budapest. Successful initiatives include community gardens, secure bicycle





storage in residential areas, and a popular “repair café” for fixing electronics. Overall, Budapest demonstrates how inclusive, citizen-driven processes can generate innovative and sustainable urban solutions.

Julia presented lessons learned from Freiburg’s “Climate District” initiative, which aims to mobilize citizens at the neighborhood level to take climate action in areas like energy, mobility, food, consumption, and green spaces. The project supports Freiburg’s goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2035 and emphasizes community collaboration as a key driver of transformation. In the first pilot district, Waldsee (2020–2023), the city initially took the lead, commissioning citizen initiatives for specific actions—but found that civil society did not naturally assume a leadership role as hoped.

One key lesson was the importance of clearly defining roles from the beginning, with citizen groups ideally taking the lead, while the city focuses on creating supportive conditions. Another finding was the need to involve residents early on to co-develop a shared vision; during the pilot, pandemic-related restrictions limited engagement, leading to top-down measures that didn’t fully reflect residents’ needs. The new project in Zähringen will therefore prioritize early community visioning and more tailored actions.

A third insight was the missed opportunity to allow spillover effects—limiting the pilot geographically meant that similar challenges in nearby districts weren’t addressed. Going forward, the program will connect with a wider area and facilitate knowledge-sharing between initiatives. The speaker also highlighted successful citizen-led projects funded through a small grant scheme, such as a “Library of Things” and Do-it-yourself - solar workshops, which will be expanded and digitally networked in the new project.

Additionally, the city plans to offer training for climate-engaged individuals to improve their skills and impact. Finally, the pilot showed that long-term engagement is hard to sustain without adequate funding and support, especially when led by volunteers—thus future climate districts will receive structural backing to ensure continuity beyond the initial phase.

Both speakers emphasized the administrative challenges of citizen engagement. Budapest has created two departments—one for Climate and Environment and another for Citizen Engagement—with a combined team of 40 staff. In contrast, Freiburg, facing limited internal capacity, has relied on external consultants to support field implementation. Effective participation, they noted, hinges on framing climate action as a shared mission, supporting citizen-led ideas, and maintaining transparent communication between departments and stakeholders.

Inclusion and equity were recurring themes. Julia explained that Freiburg avoids segregating participants by socio-economic status and instead encourages integrated group discussions to foster mutual understanding and promote gender mainstreaming. Kinga added that building a sense of ownership among participants helps ensure initiatives are meaningful, inclusive, and durable.

Takeaways from the Q&A Session

The Q&A session offered deeper insight into the practical challenges and opportunities surrounding citizen engagement. Participants asked how citizen assemblies are formed and how to ensure equitable representation. In response, Kinga Lőcsei-Tóth explained that Budapest used a randomized invitation process, sending out 10,000 invitations and selecting participants based





on criteria such as age, gender, and transport use. This approach led to a diverse and highly responsive group, demonstrating the effectiveness of intentional, inclusive design. Julia Wegenast added that the success of any engagement process hinges on ensuring diverse voices are heard from the outset, especially when developing a shared vision for a neighborhood or district.

Another recurring theme was the challenge of maintaining momentum once initial project funding ends. Julia emphasized that while enthusiasm may be high at the start, sustained participation often requires financial compensation, especially for core volunteers. In Freiburg, plans are underway to include previous climate districts in knowledge-sharing and peer-learning opportunities, though the city still faces difficulties in securing long-term support. The discussion also explored team structures: Budapest has built substantial administrative capacity with over 40 staff dedicated to climate and citizen engagement, while Freiburg's effort is led primarily by a small, dedicated team supported by partnerships with local initiatives.

Several questions addressed institutional coordination and cross-sector collaboration. Both cities acknowledged the difficulty of bridging silos within municipal government. In Freiburg, internal coordination remains a work in progress, prompting the city to contract out fieldwork to citizen-led initiatives. Budapest, working within a complex governance system of 23 autonomous districts, has managed to foster greater alignment around climate action goals by prioritizing open communication and shared ownership. To build equitable engagement, Freiburg plans to tailor early-stage visioning workshops to the needs of different socio-economic groups, allowing for inclusive dialogue before merging perspectives into a shared climate vision. This approach helps address power imbalances and ensures all community members feel heard.

Finally, speakers were asked how new initiatives can be kickstarted in cities that lack existing engagement structures. Both Kinga and Julia stressed the importance of fostering internal ownership among municipal staff, establishing trust with communities, and supporting grassroots leadership with clear mandates and accessible tools. They also acknowledged the tension between maintaining independence and seeking structural support, particularly for community initiatives that wish to remain agile and citizen led.

1.2 Block 2: Citizen-led Social Innovations

In the second segment, Lisa Kühnemann from Münster's Hansa Forum and Chris Vrettos from REScoop EU-project explored grassroots-led models for civic engagement and cooperation with municipalities.

The Hansa Forum is a community-driven neighborhood initiative in Münster, Germany, established in 2018 to foster socio-ecological transformation through participatory methods and common-good-oriented development. Though not explicitly focused on climate action, the initiative integrates environmental themes into broader questions of community well-being and democratic participation. A key tool is the *Neighborhood Common Good Index*, developed through citizen science, which visualizes community needs and values—ranging from sustainability to justice and cultural life.

Each year, the *Hansa Convent* brings together around 100 randomly selected residents to vote on





neighborhood project proposals tied to the index, with funding and implementation support provided. The *Hansa Kremium*, a bimonthly roundtable, facilitates dialogue between residents, city officials, and politicians, helping ensure transparency, trust, and responsiveness to local concerns. The Forum acts as an intermediary—offering coordination, guidance, and network-building—staffed by a small paid team and supported by volunteers and interns.

Challenges include financial instability, dependency on short-term funding, and bureaucratic barriers when trying to implement innovative ideas like an urban "climate forest." Although the initiative enjoys political recognition, it lacks consistent structural support, making long-term planning difficult. The team is also working to broaden participation beyond its current base of mostly young, educated volunteers, by co-developing inclusive participation guidelines. Ultimately, the Hansa Forum promotes experimental, grassroots democracy while striving to remain independent, community-led, and anchored in shared values of the common good.

Chris, representing REScoop—the European Federation of Citizen Energy Cooperatives—highlighted how energy communities are partnering with municipalities to drive the energy transition. Energy communities, unlike commercial providers, aim to generate local social and environmental benefits, which strengthens community resilience and keeps economic value within local areas. Concrete partnerships include "one-stop shops" that guide citizens through home renovations and renewable installations, like the Energy Communities Tipperary Cooperative in Ireland. Many municipalities are now offering public rooftops and spaces for solar installations, enabling local energy sharing—as seen in projects in Greece, Spain, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Croatia.

These partnerships often provide free or subsidized energy to vulnerable households and involve shared ownership between communities and local governments. Some mature energy communities have launched their own revolving funds, such as *Énergie Partagée* in France or *Goyener* in Spain, reducing dependence on banks and scaling investments. REScoop also developed a free online "Tinder" training platform to match municipalities with energy communities and provide accreditation. On the policy front, the upcoming EU "Citizen Energy Package" and the Social Climate Fund are key opportunities to support co-ownership and unlock funding for local energy projects.

There are already legal frameworks in countries like Denmark, the Netherlands, and Belgium requiring citizen participation in new renewable projects. The speaker closed with a call to action, emphasizing that while individual efforts matter, collective community action in collaboration with municipalities is essential—and already proving effective across Europe.

Both speakers noted challenges in long-term funding and gaining recognition for their work as paid labor rather than volunteerism. Financial support typically comes from national and EU grants, as well as modest service fees. Legal intermediaries are often necessary to overcome barriers in accessing traditional bank financing.

Takeaways from the Q&A Session

One topic addressed in the Q&A sessions was the one about how energy communities can combat energy poverty. A common model involves citizens partnering with municipalities to install solar panels on public spaces like rooftops or parking lots. The generated energy is partially used by the municipality, partially by citizen investors, and a portion is donated to vulnerable households.





or community services such as social kitchens or pharmacies. This approach creates a local, inclusive energy ecosystem. One-stop shops, for example in Ireland, additionally offer renovation support and personalized guidance to low-income households, funded through government grants and EU programs. Intermediary cooperatives, such as GoiEner in Spain, help bridge trust between community energy projects and banks by standardizing financial and legal processes.

The next question was about if Hansa Forum can be transferred to other cities and what would be needed to transfer it or what would be needed in these other cities to start initiatives like the Hansa Forum. It was stated that the Hansa Forum model is adaptable to other cities but must be tailored to specific local conditions and community needs. The initiative's success in Münster was driven by committed citizens from diverse fields and close cooperation with a sociocultural center and universities. A sociocratic, bottom-up governance approach fosters inclusion and long-term engagement. Political and administrative support, including informal networks and consistent participation, is crucial for maintaining momentum. Public funding alone is not enough—paid positions are essential to ensure the continuity of such initiatives beyond volunteer effort. Toolkits and guides, though currently only in German, are available to help replicate the Forum model. Ultimately, successful social resilience initiatives depend on a mix of grassroots motivation, structural support, sustainable financing, and adaptive implementation.

Finally, grassroots initiatives like Münster's Hansa Forum and REScoop's energy cooperatives demonstrated how community-led action can drive social and environmental impact. The Hansa Forum uses participatory tools like the Neighborhood Common Good Index and citizen conventions to prioritize projects, while REScoop supports energy communities that deliver local benefits and tackle energy poverty.

Both emphasized the need for structural backing and paid roles. Volunteer-led models struggle without stable funding or formal recognition. Solutions include revolving funds, shared ownership models, and partnerships with municipalities that provide space, technical support, and legitimacy.

Lastly, speakers stressed that replication requires adaptability. Success depends on tailoring models to local contexts and fostering peer learning. To scale high-integrity climate action, cities must embed trust, equity, and shared ownership into the core of climate governance.

1.3 Conclusion

The ACHIEVE webinar underscored the critical role of participatory governance in advancing high-integrity voluntary climate action. Whether led by municipalities or citizen groups, successful initiatives share a common foundation: trust, ownership, and inclusive design. From Budapest's participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies to Freiburg's neighborhood-based climate districts and Münster's community-driven Hansa Forum, the case studies illustrated that local engagement can meaningfully shape climate outcomes.

However, the presentations and discussion made clear that participation alone is not enough. Structural support is essential for citizen-led models to endure. Initiatives often falter when reliant on short-term project funding or overextended volunteers. As several speakers emphasized, long-



term success depends on providing financial and institutional backing, clear roles, and the resources needed to build local capacity. Municipalities can serve as enablers by offering public space, technical assistance, and policy support—but they must also be willing to share power and adapt their frameworks to fit the needs of communities.

A key takeaway was that effective collaboration requires experimentation. Speakers from Münster and REScoop EU described how grassroots initiatives have pioneered new tools, from “common good” indices to revolving energy funds, and how these innovations have created ripple effects far beyond their local contexts. Many of these efforts thrive not despite but because of their bottom-up, iterative nature. Still, speakers also highlighted ongoing barriers: financial precarity, administrative silos, and the challenge of reaching underrepresented groups.

Lastly, the webinar highlighted the importance of peer learning and transnational exchange. The ACHIEVE platform created space for cities and communities across Europe to reflect on shared experiences and discover new strategies. As cities look toward 2030 and beyond, the message is clear: climate goals cannot be achieved through technical measures alone. They must be built with, by, and for the people who inhabit these cities. Only by embedding equity, accountability, and co-creation into climate action can we ensure the transition is not only effective—but just.

