

# **Making participation sustainable: developing and testing a permanent participatory model in Verviers (Belgium)**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a case study on the development and testing of a permanent participatory model in the City of Verviers, Belgium. Faced with the imperative to involve residents in municipal decision-making and the challenge of ensuring representativeness and long-term viability, the City of Verviers initiated a pilot experiment with the methodological support of the University of Liège. Drawing on principles from existing participatory mechanisms and literature, particularly the permanent citizen dialogue in the German-speaking Community, the model is based on a permanent Participatory council, thematic Citizen assemblies, and a Permanent secretariat. Through a selection process involving random draws and demographic quotas, 75 residents were engaged in a participatory process on various municipal topics. Despite challenges such as recruitment difficulties in multicultural neighborhoods and uncertainty about the future of the model, the pilot demonstrated promising response rates and fruitful collaboration between citizens and municipal authorities. This article underscores the importance of ongoing monitoring and adaptation to ensure the long-term viability and effectiveness of this model.

## **1 Introduction**

Municipalities are confronted with intertwining social, economic, and environmental issues that call for collaboration with various stakeholders, including citizens. Sustainable development has

been characterized by a growing interest for citizen participation [1]. The need to involve citizens in the development of their territory is not a new challenge, as evidenced by the participatory initiatives undertaken since the early 70s [2] but is intensifying with the current ecological and democratic crises [1;3]. From the outset, the aim of citizen participation has been to give residents a voice and an opportunity for action in their day-to-day living environment [4], rather than to develop top-down solutions that might not meet the citizens' needs and perceptions and run the risk of inadaptation to the local context or even rejection by the population [5].

The growing interest in involving citizens in decision-making processes, sustainable projects and urban developments is reflected in a proliferation of participatory processes of all kinds [6], the standardization of some specific participatory tools [3] and the introduction of a participatory imperative for local governments [7]. While calling on a well-known participatory mechanism can pose problems in terms of its suitability to the area under consideration, reinventing the wheel with each new participatory attempt runs the risk of repeating certain mistakes and failing to capitalize on past experiences [8;9].

Faced with the need to involve residents and the desire to avoid a series of disconnected participatory initiatives, the City of Verviers (Belgium) decided to develop a structuring participatory model with the methodological support of the University of Liège. Verviers is a post-industrial city of 55,000 inhabitants in eastern Belgium. Verviers is in socio-economic decline and was hard hit by the dramatic floods of July 2021. Verviers is also characterized by governance issues related to an unstable political regime and a high migrant population. This context of crisis calls for renewed contact between residents and local government.

The specifications defined by the City of Verviers for the implementation of a new participatory model emphasized two key elements: permanence and representativeness. Firstly, the aim was to set up a model that could be applied progressively and over time to several projects or subjects in which citizens could participate. Secondly, the ambition was not to always involve the same (already invested) citizens, but to reach out to other residents. Based on these two principles, Section 2 presents a brief literature review of exemplary cases involving mechanisms to achieve greater representativeness, in particular drawing lots, and participatory bodies designed to be sustainable over time. Section 3 then describes the permanent participatory model developed and tested in Verviers, and Section 4 concludes the paper.

This article is part of the vast field of citizen participation, and more specifically its application in political science and urban governance [10]. It is intended for researchers, local authorities and administrations, and citizens who wish to develop and take part in a permanent participatory model in their municipality. In the context of our mission, the research question is therefore: what is the

added value of random sample and permanent bodies in terms of citizen participation? In response to this question, this paper sheds some methodological light on how to develop a global model that can be mobilized each time a new issue is submitted to citizen participation. The aim is not to develop an ad hoc tool or method tailored to a specific project or topic, but rather to provide a long-term framework for a range of initiatives with varying objectives and themes.

## **2 A brief review of inspiring cases of permanent participation**

This non-exhaustive review has focused on recent publications (from 2011 onwards) either analyzing several past applications of one specific, inspiring and already tested participatory mechanism (e.g., the citizens' assembly or the advisory council), or highlighting the development of a new type of innovative participatory mechanism.

Since the 1970s onwards, participatory processes whose members are drawn by lot have emerged in France. These attempts at democratic innovation, in particular citizen juries, consensus conferences, citizen-initiated referendums, and citizen assemblies, have been studied by Bedock and Pilet [11]. The main findings include: the primarily consultative nature of those citizen assemblies, which have no decision-making capacity to adopt new laws or regulations; the variability of the political impact of these assemblies, whose recommendations are rarely implemented and remain unfulfilled promises; and the fact that the support of social movements is sometimes greater than that of the governments that have introduced the participatory processes [11].

Since the 1980s in Spain, advisory councils have sprung up in a variety of forms. Even though these advisory councils build a connection between one level of government and other parties (associations, companies, trade unions, administrations, citizens, etc.), their vocation remains primarily informative, and they rarely have a direct influence on existing public policies [12]. Motos and Alarcón's study of seventy cases also shows that those advisory councils are characterized by the almost general absence of "ordinary" citizens [12]. Their review reveals that, paradoxically, better results are achieved when there is some organizational complexity by combining thematic working groups and a standing committee (i.e., a permanent body) [12].

Since the early 2010s, in response to the crisis of representative democracy, the loss of public confidence in politicians and major social and environmental issues, citizen assemblies have been organized in Europe, either on the initiative of citizens or in connection with research projects aimed at demonstrating the value of drawing lots and participatory democracy. For instance, the "We the citizens" initiative, developed in Dublin in 2011 in the context of the economic crisis, aimed to combine three bodies (an assembly of 100 citizens drawn by lot, a steering committee, and a

council of experts) to reform the Irish constitution [13]. This pilot research project was perceived as a citizens' initiative, despite being pushed by experts, and has given rise to further citizen assemblies [14]. While the legitimacy of citizens to debate sensitive issues is sometimes called into question [15], assemblies of participants drawn by lot and subsequent referenda have resulted in the integration by the government of clear and concrete recommendations on subjects such as marriage equality, abortion law and climate change [14].

At the same time in 2011, a manifesto authored by two Belgians (a writer and a journalist) after a year without federal government following the political crisis, paved the way for a new participatory mechanism: the G1000 [16]. This unprecedented experiment was conducted in two main phases without any direct connection with decision-making institutions: an online public consultation to define an agenda, and a deliberative summit on the three most popular topics joined by 704 out of 1,000 citizens drawn by lot and [16]. The desire for independence from traditional political bodies gave it extensive media coverage, but nevertheless confined it to a consultative role that limited the extent to which the debate could be translated into concrete decisions [16]. This first experience subsequently inspired other smaller-scale initiatives from 2014 onwards, such as one G100 in a Belgian municipality and eleven G1000s in nine cities in the Netherlands. Given the limited impact of the first G1000 in terms of concrete action and political follow-up, the new experiments have sought to reconnect with local political governments by integrating them into the promotion and/or facilitation of the process [16;17]. With regard to the topic submitted for citizen participation, Dutch G1000s have sometimes suffered from an overly open agenda that led to a reluctance from citizens to participate, given the uncertainty and fear of not being able to express ideas about unknown topics [17].

In 2019, the world's first experiments in citizen participation combining permanence and draw were launched: the "observatory of the city" in Madrid, Spain, and the "permanent citizen dialogue" in the German-speaking Community of Belgium [18;19;20]. Although based on similar principles, these two participatory models differ in several respects: the number and responsibilities of participatory bodies, and the link with institutions. The Spanish system consists of a single participatory body that can both issue recommendations in relation to subjects submitted by local government and determine whether public consultation is relevant for other subjects based on proposals and votes suggested by other citizens on a digital platform [18]. The East Belgian model comprises 3 bodies: a permanent citizen's council, which determines the topics to be addressed, convenes and organizes the citizen's assemblies and monitors the political follow-up to recommendations; one to three citizen's assemblies per year, each of which discusses a topic submitted by the permanent citizen's council, formulates recommendations and presents them to

the parliamentary commission; and a permanent secretariat, which provides administrative and logistical support for the other bodies and manages the budget [19;20]. While the Belgian model is still in use in particular thanks to the association of all the political parties represented in Parliament to avoid a majority versus opposition dynamic, the Spanish initiative was abandoned after just three months, following elections and a change of government [18]. The main limitations of the Spanish model lay in the temporal conflict between the permanent nature of the participatory body and the temporary nature of the initiator's political mandate, as well as in the confusion over the observatory's mission and its relative autonomy to set its own political agenda [18]. With regard to the permanent citizen dialogue, the authors underline the existence of a "participatory paradox", as there has been no contribution from citizens to the design of the model, which is proposed by elites (the G1000 experts), and they insist on the importance of developing communication and mobilization strategies to gain the support of the population [19].

These experiences provide us with insights on how to build a suitable model for Verviers. Here we summarize the main principles to be applied, each corresponding to broader criteria that come from the literature and can be used to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the participatory model implemented in Verviers (cf. Section 4).

A first principle is to combine several participatory bodies, some permanent and others temporary, in order to establish a stable relationship with the local government and distribute responsibilities among the participants [12;19;20]. In addition, it is important to ensure a rotation of members, with a regular draw and gradual replacement of past members, to avoid the quasi-political establishment of certain participants and potential fraudulent behaviors [18]. Those aspects of redistribution of power [21] and improvement of the representativeness among participants [10] confer legitimacy to the participatory model.

A second principle consists in monitoring initiatives and keeping promises. To this end, it is essential to clearly define the power of impact granted to citizens, and to put in place a monitoring and follow-up procedure to check whether the recommendations made have been considered, and to provide explanations when the authority decides to ignore the participants' contribution [11;12;19]. In this respect, even if the citizens' assembly remains consultative in nature, it is recommended that local politicians promise at the very least to consider proposals for approval or rejection, or to put them on the agenda for further debate [14]. The translation of the participants' proposals into actions is a proof of the efficiency of the participatory process, which is crucial to build trust and go beyond tokenism [10;21].

A third principle is the freedom of citizens to choose the subject of their participation [16;18;19]. This possibility of defining its own agenda relates to the degree of autonomy granted to the

participatory model [22]. However, this requires inviting experts to provide information and put all participants on an equal footing with regard to the subject at hand [17], as well as checking that the topic proposed corresponds to the field of competence of the political body concerned [18;19]. The participants' empowerment can be enforced through this knowledge exchange and valorization so that all the participants have the capacity to influence the decision-making process [23].

### **3 A permanent participatory model in Verviers**

This section presents the permanent participatory model that we developed and tested with the City of Verviers. This model is largely inspired by the permanent citizen dialogue of the parliament of the German-speaking Community (Belgium). In both cases, there is a close relationship between the participatory bodies and a decision-making body, be it the parliament of the German-speaking community or the Municipal council of the City of Verviers, which aims to have a concrete impact of citizen participation on decision-making. The following subsections detail the steps undertaken from the launch of the public tender to the presentation of the results. Figure 1 below summarizes the timeline and organization of the participatory process undertaken for just over a year, from February 2023 to March 2024.

FEB 2023	OVERVIEW	Literature review Previous initiatives in Verviers
MAR 2023	MODEL PROPOSITION	Diagram and mandates Validation of the Municipal Council
APR 2023		
MAY 2023	DRAW BY LOTS	Definition of quotas Extraction from the national register
JUN 2023	INVITATIONS, COMMUNICATION, MOBILIZATION, AND SELECTION	2000 invitation mailings Press conference and launch event Information session Website and online suggestion box Door-to-door mobilisation Reply and selection of participants
JUL 2023		
AUG 2023		
SEP 2023		
OCT 2023	PARTICIPATORY MEETINGS	Participatory council: 29/08, 19/09, 19/10 Citizen assembly 1: 07/09, 27/09, 07/11 Citizen assembly 2: 10/10, 08/11, 28/11
NOV 2023		
DEC 2023		
JAN 2024	SYNTHESIS OF THE PROPOSALS	Transcription of the data Structuration in a general table
FEB 2024	PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS	Participants' presentation Feasibility analysis
MAR 2024		
	REASONED DECISION AND EVALUATION	Council's decisions and arguments Retrospective focus groups

Figure 1 Verviers' participatory process.

### 3.1 Development of the model

In accordance with the specifications defined by the City of Verviers, our mission statement consisted in creating a unique, replicable model that can be used to frame a range of experiments involving residents in different municipal projects. After reviewing both the local situation (Section 3.1.1) and the scientific literature (cf. Section 2), a proposal for a permanent Verviers participatory model was developed including three bodies with distinct mandates (Section 3.1.2). During this development process, regular meetings were organized with the municipal agents and political representatives in order to iterative adapt and validate the model.

#### 3.1.1 Overview

A quick inventory of participation in Verviers was drawn up based on strategic documents and meetings with organizers of previous initiatives, to take stock of past participatory processes and build on the experience generated. Our aim was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the participatory approaches implemented locally in Verviers. Rather than starting from scratch or

reinventing the wheel, we drew inspiration from the successes and failures of previous participatory processes, some of them already mobilizing concepts such as drawing lots or permanent participation.

The overview of three relevant participatory initiatives conducted in Verviers is summarized in Table 1. The collected information comes from relatively short, informal exchanges with the project leaders, i.e. respectively (1) a former researcher from our research team, (2) an external service provider and (3) an agent from the City of Verviers; from the documents they were able to provide us with; and from further discussions with other stakeholders (other municipal agents from the strategy, population and communication units, other researchers with a good knowledge of the Verviers' context, and non-profit organizations active in the relevant neighborhoods).

Date and name	Short description	Identified strengths	Reported challenges
(1) 2009-2012 Interreg project Sustainable Urban Neighborhoods (SUN) (Valkering et al. 2013)	The SUN project aims to generate sustainable developments in seven post-industrial neighborhoods of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine, including Hodimont in Verviers. Four topics were covered: local economy, urban greening, energy in residential buildings, and social cohesion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- P+O: Active integration of the residents of the Hodimont neighborhood into very concrete actions (through call for projects, workshops, training sessions, events...)</li> <li>- P+U: Development of a platform for coordinating and networking associative players, as well as connecting with local authorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- P: Difficulty in recruiting and involving citizens with very diverse cultural and language background, which was overcome with the help of the local associative network</li> <li>- U: No more participatory initiatives undertaken in this neighborhood since the end of the project and the departure of the researcher-facilitators</li> </ul>
(2) 2016-2020 "Fabrique de liens citoyens" (English translation: "Citizen links factory")	The citizen links factory is a participatory platform with the aim of developing concrete actions that create social cohesion and links. Participants express their ideas and desires through the development of citizen-driven projects (e.g., a citizen book box, a collective garden, etc.).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- P: Verviers' first participatory initiative to use a draw system to select the participants (in search for more representativeness)</li> <li>- P: Attempt to mobilize all residents by multiplying and replicating activities in the various districts of Verviers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- O: Few traces of the process implemented, given that the service provider was external to the City of Verviers</li> <li>- P: Only three participants finally selected via a draw, the others having volunteered via an application form</li> <li>- U: No real interactions between the different neighborhoods</li> </ul>
(3) 2017-2020 Participatory budget	The participatory budget is a process that enables citizens to submit a project in a neighborhood outside the city center and to be involved in its implementation. Citizens' applications are written	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- P: Initiative associated with a budget to be distributed among citizen projects in the outlying districts around the city center</li> <li>- O: Concrete realization of bottom-up ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- P: No support provided for citizens who had to organize themselves to submit their projects</li> <li>- O: Significant delays between the selection of winning projects and their implementation, following a change in the municipal legislature</li> </ul>



	individually or by group and selected by the municipality.	- U: City's greater awareness of citizens' concerns	- U: Participants' loss of trust towards the City, demotivation and lack of understanding regarding the day-to-day municipal operation and the management of projects
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**Table 1** Strengths and weaknesses of three past participatory experiments in Verviers.

The strengths and weaknesses identified by those actors can be divided into three categories corresponding to three main sets of criteria generally used to evaluate participatory processes: process-based (selection, tools and methods, etc.), outcome-based (results, decisions, etc.) and user-based (e.g. satisfaction, personal and collective effects, etc.) [24]. Given the methodological goal of this analysis, our questions were mainly focused on process-related issues (P) but the different stakeholders also mentioned some strengths and challenges related to users (U) and outcomes (O). Their feedback from the field prompted us to create precise draw and facilitation procedures and to document the process rigorously.

### 3.1.2 Mandates

The model aims to involve a large number of citizens in a variety of topics in order to propose concrete solutions and recommendations, while ensuring their long-term follow-up. This model comprises three main bodies: one permanent Participatory council, Citizen assemblies and one Permanent secretariat. The mandates and relationships of each body are described below and illustrated in Figure 2.

The Participatory council is a permanent body comprising 32 citizens. In fact, the target number is 24 participants, but the selection process aims to recruit 8 additional people to anticipate occasional absences and mid-term dropouts. Members of the first Participatory council are drawn by lot from among all Verviers residents on the basis of the national register, respecting gender parity, representation of all age groups (18-24; 25-65; over 65) and equitable distribution between the seven main districts of Verviers (the city center and six outlying districts corresponding to former villages). The main role of the Participatory council is to identify and select the topics to be discussed by the Citizen assemblies. It is also responsible for supporting the activities of the Citizen assemblies, in particular by monitoring citizen projects and overseeing their implementation by the Municipal council. The Participatory council meets at least twice a year and sets the agenda for the number and subject of Citizen assemblies. A councilor's term of office lasts 24 months, and half the members are renewed every year by drawing lots among the participants in the Citizen assemblies.

Each Citizen assembly is invited to discuss and deliberate on a specific topic submitted by the Participatory council. The 32 members are drawn by lot from among the residents of the district(s) or neighborhood(s) concerned by the project for which they are asked to propose solutions and/or make recommendations. This is an ad hoc body that meets (at least) three times and is dissolved after submitting its proposals to the Municipal council. Former members of a Citizen assembly are eligible to join the Participatory council.

The Permanent secretariat is provided by an employee of the City of Verviers, who has a consultative vote on the Participatory council. Its role is to set up participatory bodies and organize meetings (preparation, moderation, feedback). It is also responsible for centralizing the topics proposed by the population (through an online form) and by the City of Verviers, then submitting them to the Participatory council for analysis. It can call on thematic experts to provide input for the Citizen assemblies, and on local organizations to reinforce communication and facilitation of the participatory process.

Three other key players are mobilized through this model.

The Municipal administration provides administrative and logistical support for the drawing of lots, the sending of invitations, the communication campaign, and the facilitation of meetings, in respect of GDPR. The relevant municipal services are also called upon by the Municipal council to implement the proposals and can call on the Participatory council and the Permanent secretariat for questions, clarifications, and possible modifications.

The Municipal council undertakes to consider the proposals put forward by the Citizen assemblies, and to justify any refusal. Approved proposals are implemented by the Municipal council and the concerned technical and administrative departments. In the same way as the citizens of Verviers, the Municipal council can propose a subject or project to the Participatory council, which will analyze the possibility of convening a Citizen assembly.

A Scientific committee has been formed temporarily to support the City of Verviers in implementing the model. It is made up of professors and researchers from the University of Liège, from three research laboratories with expertise in architecture, urban planning, territorial development, governance, citizen participation and co-design. The principal researcher and first author of this paper acts as the Permanent secretary for the first Participatory council and the first two Citizen assemblies. She is documenting the process and will transfer the role of Permanent secretary to one of the City of Verviers' agents at the end of her one-year mandate.

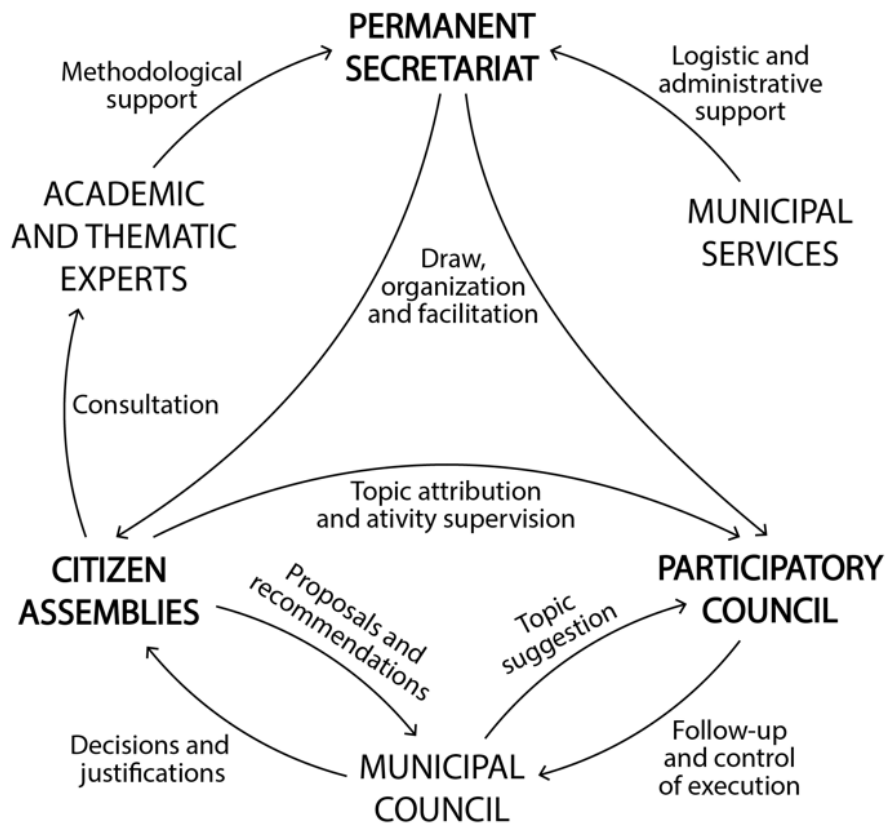


Figure 2 Verviers' permanent participatory model.

## 3.2 Test of the model

For this first experiment, the first Participatory council was set up and two Citizen assemblies were organized. For each of these bodies, participants were drawn by lot and selected according to the positive answers received and the quotas to be met (Section 3.2.1). Each member then took part in three meetings (Section 3.2.2), at the end of which proposals were submitted and presented to the Municipal council, which finally issued a reasoned opinion for each proposal (Section 3.2.3).

### 3.2.1 Draw lots and participants' selection

Once the model had been finalized and approved by the City of Verviers, one of the essential steps was the drawing of lots. Each participatory body should have a total of 32 members, drawn by lot from the entire Verviers population. The size of the bodies is similar to the permanent citizen dialogue bodies' in the German-speaking community, given that the number of Verviers inhabitants ( $n=56,000$ ) is comparable to the German-speaking population ( $n=78,000$ ). This group size also corresponds to the human resources available: the principal researcher acts as the main facilitator, and 4 to 5 students or city employees act as facilitators for tables of 5 to 8 participants.

The target was to recruit three groups of 24 to 32 citizens, for a total of 72 to 96 participants. According to similar experiences reported in the literature, the response rate to invitations sent out

following a random draw is around 5% [17;18]. It should be noted that the exceptional turnout at the Belgian G1000 was due to the emergency situation and media coverage [16]. Consequently, we had to draw lots for 2,000 inhabitants of Verviers to obtain about 5%, i.e. 100, positive responses required to constitute the bodies.

We defined three selection criteria, each corresponding to several possible categories of people, as shown in Table 2. Only seven districts were considered, whereas it would have been useful to distinguish certain neighborhoods from the city center, given its demographic density. This choice results from the data available in the national register, which only distinguishes former villages included in Belgian municipalities.

The limit had been set at three age groups, to ensure representation of young people, the working population, and senior citizens. It would have been possible to consider more age categories, but this would complicate the drawing procedure. Similarly, we did not consider other important criteria such as mother tongue, level of education or income [17;18]. In addition to data unavailability, the small size of participatory bodies tends to limit the number of criteria and selection categories that can be included. Indeed, the multiplication of criteria would mean that certain profiles would ultimately not be represented within the group. The procedure may seem modest, but three age groups, two genders and seven neighborhoods equate to forty-two theoretical profiles ( $3 \times 2 \times 7 = 42$ ) to consider for “only” 24 to 32 members per participatory body.

To best represent the diversity of residents within participatory bodies, quotas by selection category were also defined (Table 2). These quotas do not exactly reflect the actual proportions of the Verviers population but tend to come as close as possible. The discrepancies observed can be explained by the following reasons:

- As the size of the groups is limited, the percentages have been rounded off to ensure harmonious proportions and facilitate the composition of the bodies (e.g. 25% seniors rather than 24.5%);
- As the proportion of residents in the different districts varies greatly, a more equitable distribution has been proposed to avoid some districts having only one representative. Two residents of the city center are selected for one resident of the other districts, to take account of the high density of the city center.

Selection criteria	Selection categories	Actual population ratios	Selected quotas
Gender parity	Women	51.2%	50% = 1 in 2 participants
	Men	48.8%	50% = 1 in 2 participants

Representation of all age groups	18-24	11.6%	12.5% = 1 in 8 participants
	25-65	63.9%	62.5% = 5 in 8 participants
	Over 65	24.5%	25% = 1 in 4 participants
Equitable distribution by district	Verviers-center	46.1%	25% = 1 in 4 participants
	6 other districts (former villages with comparable surface areas)	Each district: from 5 to 14% Total for 6 districts: 53.9%	12.5% = 1 in 8 participants

**Table 2** Selection criteria, categories, and quotas for the draw by lots.

The district-related quotas were not systematically applied to all three bodies, which operate in slightly different contexts. The first Citizen assembly focused on the Hodimont priority district, while the second Citizen assembly covered the city center, and the Participatory council concerned the whole city. Consequently, the members of the first assembly should ideally all reside in the Hodimont district, while those of the two other bodies could come from the whole city of Verviers (on the assumption that everyone knows or frequents the city center). Based on the target number of members and the quotas presented above, Table 3 shows the desired composition of the three participatory bodies.

Participatory body	Participatory council			Citizen assembly 1			Citizen assembly 2		
	Desired	Actual		Desired	Actual		Desired	Actual	
Gender parity									
Women	16	15	51.7%	16	7	41.2%	16	12	41.3%
Men	16	14	48.3%	16	10	58.8%	16	17	58.7%
Representation of all age groups									
18-24	4	3	10.3%	4	1	5.9%	4	5	17.2%
25-65	20	19	65.5%	20	13	76.5%	20	19	65.5%

Over 65	8	7	24.1%	8	3	17.6%	8	5	17.2%
Equitable distribution by district									
Verviers-center (city center and nearby neighborhoods, including Hodimont)	8	7	24.1%	(N/A)	3	17.6%	8	8	27.6%
Hodimont	(N/A)	(N/A)		32	10	58.8%	(N/A)	(N/A)	
Petit-Rechain	4	2	6.9%	(N/A)	0	0.0%	4	3	10.3%
Lambermont	4	4	13.8%	(N/A)	0	0.0%	4	3	10.3%
Ensival	4	4	13.8%	(N/A)	1	5.9%	4	6	20.7%
Heusy	4	4	13.8%	(N/A)	1	5.9%	4	4	13.8%
Polleur	4	4	13.8%	(N/A)	1	5.9%	4	2	6.9%
Stembert	4	4	13.8%	(N/A)	1	5.9%	4	3	10.3%
TOTAL	32	29		32	17		32	29	

**Table 3** Desired versus actual composition of participatory bodies.

In practice, we observe a discrepancy between the desired theoretical composition and the composition actually achieved during participatory activities (see Table 3). These differences can be explained first and foremost by response and participation rates, which are the result of a multi-stage selection process summarized in Figure 3. This process consisted of two main phases: firstly, sending out personal invitation letters by post, to which interested parties could respond via a paper or electronic form; and secondly, contacting participants who had responded positively by e-mail and/or telephone (depending on participants' preferences) to inform them of the precise terms and conditions of their participation.

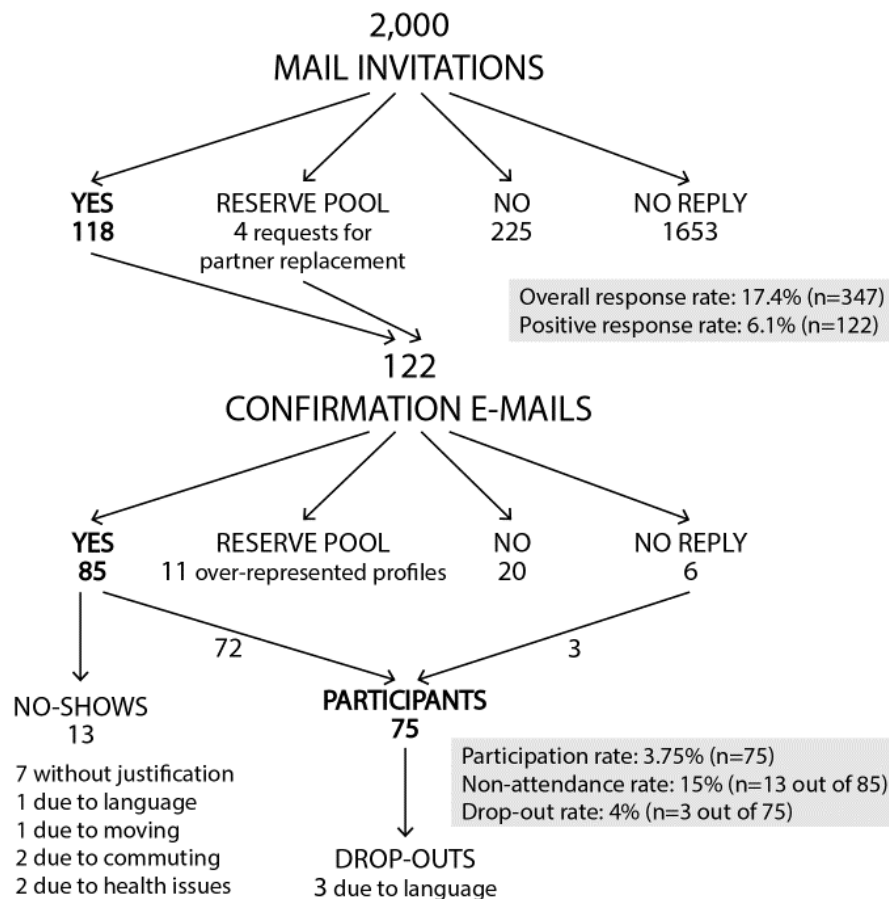


Figure 3 Drawing and selection process.

Even though we had initially received more than the expected 96 positive responses, we had to create a reserve recruitment pool for certain profiles over-represented in our sample. We decided to work with smaller groups than planned, as the participation of people from the reserve would have unbalanced the representativeness of the bodies to which they could have been added. The recruitment pool is made up of 11 people, all with a very similar profile: men living in the Verviers-center, Heusy or Ensival districts, mostly aged between 25 and 65 (n=9). If the participatory model continues in the future, those people eager to participate might be recontacted for the next Citizen assemblies.

In addition, twenty people who had initially agreed in principle to participate by responding positively to the mail invitation ended up having to withdraw from the process once the organizational details (meeting dates, times and locations) had been e-mailed to them. At this stage, some participants (n=6) never responded to our e-mails and phone calls, even though half of them eventually came to the participatory meetings.

Furthermore, thirteen expected participants did not show up in the end. Six of them eventually informed us of their absence, giving reasons such as an unforeseen move (n=1), transport

constraints to arrive on time or return home after the evening meeting (n=2), health problems that had arisen or worsened since agreeing to take part (n=2), or difficulty attending meetings in French (n=1); while the remaining seven were never heard from again despite our reminders by e-mail and SMS before each new meeting. These unforeseen absences (undeclared or announced too late, after the launch of participatory activities) obviously had repercussions on the representativeness of the groups, whose balance depended on the presence of all confirmed members. The presence of three unconfirmed members may also have intensified the imbalance: these were three men from the Citizen assembly 2, which ended up with 17 men (instead of 14) against 12 women.

Representativeness in terms of the three selection criteria is most critical for the Citizen assembly 1. The main reason for this is the low response rate in the Hodimont neighborhood, which is characterized not only by great cultural diversity, but also probably by a large proportion of people whose mother tongue is not French. Since the response rate among women and seniors was particularly low, we mapped the home addresses of the first forty-five Hodimont residents drawn at random who had not responded to our invitation and who met at least one of the following two criteria: being female and/or over 65. We then went door-to-door for half a day in the hope of meeting these potential participants, explaining the contents of the letter they had received and recruiting them. Unfortunately, most of the people we met made it clear that they would not be able to join the participatory activities, either because they did not speak French, or because they had to take care of children outside school hours. Four people left their contact details to receive the dates and times of the meetings, but finally did not take part. Given the lower level of interest in Hodimont, a limited number of residents from other neighborhoods, who were initially in the recruitment pool and agreed to work in a neighborhood other than their own, took part to the Citizen assembly 1.

In the end, 75 people took part in the Verviers' permanent participatory model. While some of them were unable to attend the three participatory meetings for reasons of availability, only three participants dropped out along the way (after attending two meetings) again for language reasons. Eventually, 17 and 36 participants registered to additional activities (than they initially had signed up for), respectively for the presentation evening of their proposals to the Municipal council and for retrospective focus groups.

### **3.2.2 Participatory meetings**

After selecting the participants, each body met three times, a measured investment to ensure sufficient time for exchange and reflection, and to avoid exhausting the participants. A facilitation protocol was defined for each meeting, always unique but with common principles for all sessions.



Every meeting was organized by the Permanent secretary, i.e., the main researcher, and facilitated by three to five other team members (a mix of municipal agents, student workers, and researchers). The Alderman in charge of citizen participation or the Mayor was also present at most of the meetings, usually for a maximum of half an hour in total at the beginning and/or end of the meeting. The purpose of this discreet presence was to show political support for the initiative, to listen to citizens' proposals without influencing them, and to answer participants' questions and constraints on the ground that could help them move their projects forward.

Each meeting lasted 2.5 hours and was held in the evening in a public venue located in the neighborhood in question (city center or Hodimont). A snack (soup or sandwich and drinks) was provided during the mid-meeting break. At the start of each session, the operating principles of the permanent participatory model were reiterated; the topics covered and the objectives pursued were clearly announced. Participants were often divided into small groups of 5 to 8 people, with one facilitator per table to ensure that each participant had sufficient speaking time. To ensure overall coherence, large-group pooling, voting phases and short feedback sessions were also planned, usually at the end of the evening, just before a convivial drink. Information and discussion sessions with guest experts were organized according to the themes explored and the needs expressed by participants. As past experiences with the participatory budget had shown a lack of understanding and knowledge on the part of citizens with regard to how the municipal administration works, an agent from the administration was systematically present to answer any questions, and a video was prepared by the City communication department to explain to participants how a development project generally unfolds (stages, delays, constraints...).

Beyond this shared framework, each body had its own objectives and its own methods of achieving them.

As far as the Participatory council is concerned, the first two meetings focused on defining a topic for the second Citizen assembly (the city of Verviers having already assigned a top-down theme to the first one). The aim of the first meeting was to explore and pre-select themes that should be the subject of citizen participation. Thanks to the responses received via the registration form (n=347 people drawn at random) and via an online suggestion box open to the public (n=15 respondents), the organizers collected topics of interest from Verviers residents. These were grouped by themes and presented in the form of a mind map to the members of the Participatory council, who had chosen their own selection criteria (relevance, impact, sustainability, and viability) to pre-select their favorite topics. At the second meeting, the participants identified the underlying root problems of each pre-selected topic and reformulated these problems in the form of actionable questions, aimed at turning general challenges into personal opportunities by asking

“How might we...?” [25]. They then voted for their favorite how-might-we question, which was submitted to Citizen assembly 2. The evening ended with a presentation by the experts supporting the permanent German-speaking citizen dialogue, to explain the other roles of the Participatory council and introduce the third meeting. At this last meeting, participants were asked to reflect on their own operating methods and on the longer-term organization of the Participatory council. Focus groups were organized to enable them to criticize the model that had been imposed on them, and to consider modifications based on their feelings and with regard to various issues (e.g. duration of mandates, topics for Citizen assemblies, renewal of members, roles and responsibilities, voting system, etc.).

For the purposes of this article, we won't differentiate between the two Citizen assemblies, because even if the contexts and themes are different, we have proposed relatively similar facilitation protocols. The main differences lie in the type of experts involved, or in the territory covered during the site visits. For the Citizen assembly 1, an inspiring presentation on urban greening was given at the first meeting, and the city's technical services helped participants draw up their project sheets at the third meeting. For Citizen assembly 2, the theme of revitalizing the commercial and socio-cultural aspects of the city center was introduced by a member of the Participatory council at the first meeting, and presentations relating to attractiveness, commerce and culture in Verviers were given at the second and third meetings.

In both cases, the aim of the first session was to gain a better understanding of the area under study and to set out the issues. The participants worked on a plan, which took some time to familiarize themselves with, given certain difficulties in locating themselves in space. They were able to delimit priority intervention zones, based on the problems and assets identified in the neighborhood. The second meeting consisted mainly of a one-hour commented walk [26] along the previously identified priority sites, so as to immerse oneself in the area and explore opportunities for improvement. After a break, a brainstorming session was organized to record and complete all the ideas generated during the walk. Finally, the third meeting focused on the convergence of ideas and the drafting of project sheets, which were then ranked in order of importance and eventually presented to the Municipal council.

### **3.2.3 Presentation and argumentation**

All discussions and documents produced at the third meetings of each of the three bodies were carefully transcribed. All the suggestions associated with the projects arising from the Citizen assemblies or with the questions addressed by the Participatory council were carefully recorded in a summary table, which was then analyzed by the relevant municipal services and presented to the Municipal council by the participants themselves. On the basis of these analyses and

presentations, the Municipal council then took part in a working session and issued a reasoned opinion for each of the citizens' proposals. The full argumentation was finally presented to participants at the start of the retrospective focus group sessions aimed at evaluating the experimental model.

## 4 Concluding observations

The participatory model implemented in Verviers is largely inspired by the German-speaking permanent citizen dialogue, but also by other similar experiences developed in Europe. This pilot experiment enabled us to test the feasibility of a process involving the principles of permanence and random selection of participants on a municipal scale.

The added value of random sample and permanent bodies is manifold, even though some challenges still need to be tackled in the future. The strengths and weaknesses of the process are summarized in the Table 4 according to the four criteria introduced earlier: legitimacy, efficiency, autonomy, and empowerment (cf. Section 2).

Criteria	Strengths	Challenges
Legitimacy	The participatory model is considered legitimate by participants and political authority thanks to qualities such as the effort of representativeness through the draw (response and participation rates within the average reported in the literature) [10], the clear allocation of roles to the various bodies [21], the support of the municipal and political actors [10], or the participatory evaluation and adaptation of the model [24].	The participatory model is perceived as legitimate by the involved stakeholders, but this legitimacy has not been assessed by non-participants (including non-selected but interested citizens who might therefore feel disappointed [27]). To maintain legitimacy, the available and documented participatory model will hopefully be transferred from one political majority to another.
Efficiency	The Participatory council identified a topic and defined a question. The Citizen assemblies issued 87 concrete proposals, which were approved at 68% by the Municipal council (18 rejected, 59 approved, 10 more accepted if subjected to small changes). Decisions were justified and the arguments were understood by the participants.	Verviers commissioned an external Permanent secretary for this pilot experiment, but this responsibility should be taken over by a municipal agent to ensure the continuity of the model beyond the end of the principal researcher's mandate. This transition is key to guarantee the implementation and follow-up of the proposals [10].

Autonomy	The participants are responsible for the agenda setting, which is a very powerful role that enable them to define their own priorities and interests, which could differ from ongoing municipal projects and political preexisting intentions [22].	The topic identified by the Participatory council remains broad (and difficult to tackle for the Citizen assembly), probably because participants took advantage of their newly acquired power to address as many issues as possible to make the most of this rare opportunity.
Empowerment	The participants benefited from the provision of popularized information by thematic experts and municipal agents. They appreciated to meet other stakeholders, learn more about their city (ongoing and future projects, existing procedures, etc.) and to get an opportunity to actively engage themselves in its development.	Only participants are involved in this empowerment process, but if the draw is repeated, new citizens will have the same opportunity and will in turn take part in sharing knowledge, learning new things and improving their city.

**Table 4** Strengths and weaknesses of the participatory model developed in Verviers.

An additional benefit is the creation of links and interactions between the municipal administration, elected officials and citizen-participants. A change in attitude was also observed among the members of the Municipal council, some of whom were initially rather skeptical, but seemed reassured by the realistic and reasonable nature of the citizens' proposals. As the literature already suggests, monitoring and implementation will be essential to maintain the legitimacy of the model and the motivation of participants over the long term.

As this is the first edition of a system that should become permanent, some limitations and avenues for improvement have also been identified. The first limitation concerns the limited one-year duration of this pilot experiment, which has certainly enabled us to set up procedures and test certain principles but does not yet guarantee the model's sustainability. Now that our methodological support mandate is coming to an end, it is imperative that local authorities, municipal administrative staff and citizens take ownership of the model so that it can survive. The current Municipal council has already expressed its great satisfaction with the model put in place and its hopes to see it continue by maintaining the Participatory council and organizing other Citizen assemblies. However, the municipal elections in October 2024 are creating a climate of uncertainty, and the model could already be interrupted pending the formation of a new local government. Further efforts and adaptations to the initial model are moreover required to overcome other limitations observed, such as the difficulty of recruiting in certain multicultural neighborhoods, the participants' limited understanding of the roles of the model's other bodies, and the need to rationalize the subjects assigned by the Participatory council to the Citizen assemblies in terms of thematic and geographical scope. Hopefully, the handover to the future Permanent Secretary of the City of Verviers would be as smooth as possible and the permanent nature of the process can be ensured in the long term, well after this first year of model testing.

However, these initial remarks are still based solely on our observations and initial exchanges with stakeholders during the process, while a formal evaluation process (through retrospective focus groups) is underway. Further publications should include the presentation and follow-up of the participants' suggestions regarding the different topics, but also their feedback regarding the participatory process, its outputs, and outcomes. No formal evaluation has been carried out with municipal staff and the local council, but it might be useful to also gather their feedback on this pilot experiment.

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