



# **CRETHINK - Co-creating sustainable cities**

**Final report**

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**With contributions from all CRETHINK partners  
– compiled by Center for Citizen Dialogue**

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## Summary

This report from the CRETHINK project evaluates the impact of the CRETHINK initiative and offers recommendations for actors from the public sector or civil society aiming at developing sustainable solutions through co-creation. The project 'CRETHINK - Co-creative RETHINKing for sustainable cities' comprises partners from Denmark, Iceland, Slovenia and Italy working to promote sustainable practices through co-creation methodologies through a local case in each country. The four local cases consist of:

- Reducing general waste in Hveragerði, Iceland
- Co-creating a new pedestrian area with students in Palermo, Italy
- Kick-starting a green journey for retail in the city of Vejle, Denmark
- Protecting urban trees in the town of Novo Mesto, Slovenia

The 'state of the art' section of the report introduces the concept of democratic co-creation defining it as 'the ambition of involving and giving influence to a range of different actors, including citizens, in working with complex societal challenges'.

The evaluation of the CRETHINK project is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with representatives from all four partner organisations as well as 23 change agents and other stakeholders. It adopts a holistic and long-term evaluation perspective, measuring the impact of CRETHINK in terms of 'public value', i.e. innovation and learning, democratic empowerment and building new bonds and relations between actors from different sectors.

The project has spurred innovation and learning both at the organisational and individual level, as actors have developed new organisational ways of working by adopting the co-creation mindset and approach of CRETHINK, applying the methods and practices in other contexts. Also, the initiatives are seen as stimulating the engagement and participation of groups of citizens, thus contributing to democratic empowerment and the development of citizen skills. Furthermore, the value of the initiatives in terms of building new bonds and networks between participants from different sectors and perspectives is underlined, particularly with respect to enabling collaboration between the public sector, civil society- and the business-sector. The initiatives have not within the project period succeeded in fully unfolding their potential in terms of sustainability value. None the less, they have all contributed with small steps towards the sustainability ambition. The report, finally, offers a list of recommendations for practitioners as well as policy recommendations.

## **Introduction**

This is the final report from the CRETHINK project, aimed at spreading knowledge about co-creation, evaluating the impact of the CRETHINK initiative in terms of sustainability, learning and democracy and offering recommendations for those who wish to develop sustainable solutions through co-creation.

The report is structured as follows:

- Section I explains the notion of democratic co-creation and describes state of the art
- Section II evaluates the impact the CRETHINK initiative and the toolbox
- Section III offers recommendations and advice on co-creation to policy makers as well as practitioners

## **The CRETHINK project**

The project 'CRETHINK - Co-creative RETHINKing for sustainable cities' comprises partners from Denmark, Iceland, Slovenia and Italy and has been coordinated by the municipality of Vejle, Denmark. During the project period December 31<sup>st</sup> 2019 - July 30<sup>th</sup> 2022, the CRETHINK project has worked to promote sustainable practices in four European cities through co-creation methodologies. The project aimed to foster citizens' active participation and influence in their local community and society. It did so by supporting actors from the public sector and civil society in gaining competences, specific methods and tools for co-creation and cross-sector cooperation towards sustainable development and complex problem solving.

The project has been organized in such a way as to support collaboration and co-creation. The partner organisation in each of the four cities has recruited and facilitated a team of four local 'change agents', i.e. local actors with relevant competences, affiliations and motivation for the topic. In each of the four CRETHINK cities, these local teams have collaborated to develop and implement local pilot projects employing co-creation methodologies to create sustainable change in the urban environment.

## **Co-creating sustainability: Four local cases**

The CRETHINK project comprises four cases developed and implemented by the local stakeholders in each of the four cities. Below you will find a short description of the local cases, the main focus of this evaluation.

### **The Icelandic case: Reducing general waste in Hveragerði**

The Icelandic team combined the CRETHINK project with an initiative regarding zero waste ideology that was about to start in the city of Hveragerði. The idea was to use the co-creation method to implement it in the municipality. The goal of the project was to reduce the general waste produced in Hveragerði by getting the inhabitants to sort their waste better, from their homes as well as from their local workplaces. This would mean that more waste would be recycled.

**Partner:** Association of Municipalities in South Iceland / SASS Iceland. SASS is a forum for co-operation between the local authorities in South Iceland.

**The change agents:** The four change agents from Iceland represented different sections of the community. One was head of the environmental committee of Hveragerði municipality; another was the quality manager in one of the biggest local companies in Hveragerði; the third was a teacher from the local elementary school who also manages the "green flag initiative" and the fourth represented a group of local environmental volunteers.

### **The Italian case: Co-creating a new pedestrian area with students in Palermo**

The Italian team in the city of Palermo decided to involve high school students in a process of co-creating a new pedestrian area through prototyping. The stretch of the street located in front of the school entrance was pedestrianized and set up to become a square, a safe area of socialization created by and for the students in the school.

**Partner:** CESIE, an NGO based in Palermo, Italy. CESIE is committed to promote the cultural, social, educational and economic development at local, national, European and international levels.

**The change agents:** A group of young professionals from relevant fields such as architecture, engineering, law, digital marketing and management of community projects, in collaboration with a couple of local associations (Tu Sei La Città and PUSH.)

### **The Danish case: Kick-starting a green journey for retail in the city of Vejle**

The team in Vejle has been working with a project with the aim of promoting a sustainable development of local retail businesses and thereby more green choices for their customers. The overall goal of the project called 'Vejle's Green Choices' (Vejles Grønne Valg) was both to support the resilience of small local businesses and facilitate a community of cooperation and support between the local businesses, customers and other relevant stakeholders.

**Partner:** Vejle Municipality, Grønt Forum (Green Forum), a network institution supporting collaboration between the municipality and civil society on sustainability.

**Change agents:** The five change agents represent a department of the Municipality of Vejle that work with innovation and business development (Spinderihallerne), a private company, Green Network, providing guidance and training for companies in CSR and sustainable development, and three volunteer citizens motivated to support local sustainable development. The three volunteers also have professional skills that are relevant to the project, i.e. facilitation of change processes, communication and social media management, and facilitation of design processes. The change agents collaborated with the local retail association City Vejle and the Business Development Department in Vejle Municipality.

#### **The Slovenian case: Protecting urban trees in the town of Novo Mesto**

The Slovenian team has been working on implementing better care of urban trees among decision-makers as well as the residents of Municipality of Novo mesto in the south-eastern part of Slovenia. The intention has been to improve the care of the local urban trees, using the co-creation method to engage as many people as possible (professional as well as the general public) and create a network of interested citizens.

**Partner:** DRUSTVO ZA RAZVIJANJE PROSTOVOLJNEGA DELA NOVO MESTO (Association for Developing Voluntary Work Novo mesto) is a Slovenian NGO, working with social care, youth and culture with a mission to contribute to more inclusive and open society for all.

**Change agents:** The Slovenian team consisted of four change agents from both the public sector and civil society with relevant professional backgrounds as well as skills and experiences. Among the change agents was a citizen, who was a member of a local NGO for protecting the trees as well as a manager from the section of the municipality working with green areas.

A more elaborate description of each of the four projects and the toolbox may be found at the projects' website ([www.crethink.eu](http://www.crethink.eu)).

In the following section we will unfold the idea of co-creation and describe the state of the art in the four participating countries, Italy, Iceland, Slovenia and Denmark.

## **Section I: Democratic co-creation: State of the art**

### **Introduction**

This section introduces the key concepts of co-creation and wicked problems. It then describes co-creation generally in an international context and the specific state of the art in the four national contexts of the CRETHINK countries: Italy, Iceland, Denmark and Slovenia. The final paragraph builds a bridge to the evaluation section, asking what impact we may realistically expect from co-creation – and introducing the concept of public value.

### **Co-creation and wicked problems**

Co-creation is known by a range of different names such as co-production, social innovation and network governance. It may be considered both a governance approach, a mind set and a set of methodologies. The basic idea of co-creation, however, is to encourage collaboration among actors from different sectors of society (state, market, civil society) to work with a range of so called ‘wicked problems’, that characterize our complex and interdependent society.

### **Defining co-creation**

The concept of co-creation is used in a broad sense to depict partnering, collaboration and network governance aimed at solving complex challenges such as the climate change.

Co-creation is taking place when actors from different sectors, e.g. public organisations, citizens, civil society organisations and private companies, collaborate to make better use of each other’s assets, resources and contributions to achieve innovation, better outcomes or improved efficiency (Tortzen, 2019). The term democratic co-creation refers to the ambition of involving and giving influence to a range of different actors, including citizens, in working with complex societal challenges.

Many of the challenges concerning social and environmental sustainability currently on the societal agenda may be considered wicked problems. A central idea in co-creation is that wicked problems such as sustainability and green transition must be tackled through collaboration among the relevant and affected stakeholders in ways that support mutual understanding and creative problem solving.

### **Wicked problems**

Wicked problems share the following characteristics:

- They are challenges, that affect a multitude of stakeholders
- There is disagreement about the nature of the challenge as well as possible solutions
- We are talking about complex challenges - standard solutions do not work
- These problems are context specific and ever changing

## **Co-creation in an international context – state of the art**

Within the last ten years, the idea of co-creation has occurred on the public agenda of many Western European countries, often driven by public sector organisations and resulting in a range of strategies, policies and initiatives on the local as well as the national level.

### **Why is co-creation on the agenda?**

There are several reasons that co-creation is currently on the governance agenda. Many western European countries are challenged by economic crisis, aging populations and decreasing trust in politicians (Fledderus, Brandsen, & Honingh, 2014). In sum, international research (Meijer, 2016; Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia, 2017; Pestoff, 2012) points to a range of societal and welfare challenges as the basis for the current co-creation discourse and agenda:

- Increasing complexity and wicked problems that call for cross-sector collaboration
- Fierce international competition and public welfare sectors under pressure
- Democratic deficit: Decrease in public support for political systems creates and a need for strengthening the active role of citizens in the welfare society

These societal developments have generally led to increased political and strategic focus on collaborating across sectors and mobilizing resources from private sector and civil society actors, particularly when working with challenges of a 'wicked' nature such as environmental and climate issues.

### **Europe: A varied co-creation picture**

However, co-creation initiatives are unevenly distributed among countries – and are framed and promoted differently according to the national cultural, political and administrative context. Different policy contexts and governance traditions, i.e. degree of centralization of the public sector and different traditions in terms of citizen involvement, create very different starting points for co-creation initiatives in European countries (Voorberg, Tummers, et al., 2015).



As a general picture, Northern European countries such as Holland, Belgium, Denmark, Norway and Great Britain appear to be ‘first movers’ in terms of the public sector adopting the idea of co-creation and network governance. Whereas countries in the south of Europe such as Spain, Portugal and Italy as well as in the Eastern European countries, are characterized by a political and administrative context constituting a less favourable starting point for co-creation initiatives.

### **Co-creation: State of the art in Italy, Iceland, Denmark, Slovenia**

It is of importance to know the context in which a specific co-creation initiative is taking place. This is so, because research points to the fact, that co-creation processes are very much dependent on the specific context in which they unfold. Thus, co-creation processes are a result of the complex interplay between individuals and their organisations that operate within a historically grown policy sector and/or national context (Voorberg, Tummers, et al., 2015).

The national contexts into which the four co-creation initiatives for sustainable development in the CRETHINK initiative are launched, are – not surprisingly – quite different. In the following we will briefly summarize and compare the current state of the art of the four national contexts. Interesting differences are to be found in terms of the way co-creation initiatives are framed in the four different countries. An example: In Slovenia co-creation seems to be largely absent from the agenda of the public sector. Whereas in Italy, co-creation initiatives are primarily understood within a framework of social innovation, the Icelandic discourse focusses on digital consultation and crowdsourcing. Likewise, the initiators and drivers of co-creation differ: Whereas NGOs play an important role in Slovenia as well as in Italy (together with private companies), the main driver of co-creation in the Scandinavian welfare states of Denmark and Iceland is the public sector.

Finally, the main challenges for co-creation processes are perceived differently among the four countries. While in Italy, Denmark and for some part also Slovenia, cultural and organisational barriers to co-creation are mentioned, in Iceland the most important challenge is seen to be the risk of excluding groups of citizens from co-creation processes, i.e. the democratic legitimacy.

A more elaborate description of the co-creation state of the art for each country may be found in the toolbox ([www.crethink.eu/toolbox](http://www.crethink.eu/toolbox)).

## **What may we gain from co-creation?**

As co-creation processes depend very much on the specific context, in which they take place, co-creation may best be studied from a so-called 'ecological perspective' (Osborne & Brown, 2011) emphasizing that these processes are shaped by the local interactions of relevant stakeholders that attach different meanings to a possible outcome. Meanings that reflect the specific interests and values of the involved actors and/or that stem from different (political, economic, socio-cultural and technological) environments (Bekkers & Edwards, 2007). We must take into account the network of involved stakeholders (their interests, their interdependencies and their power resources) in a process of co-creation as well as the governance traditions that are dominant in a country as well as in the local environment in which the process of co-creation takes place.

Co-creation researchers point to the fact that the value of co-creation processes is difficult to evidence and that, consequently, the evidence base for co-creation is relatively weak (Durose, Needham, Mangan, & Rees, 2015). It is common to distinguish between the product value (output) and the process value of co-creation (outcome). In general, researchers find it difficult to detect the product value of co-creation. Instead, research points to the fact that co-creation processes often lead to process value in terms of empowerment, relation-building and mutual trust between public stakeholders, i.e. professionals and citizens (Bovaird & Löffler, 2008, 2016; Needham & Carr, 2009; Voorberg, Bekkers, & Tummers, 2015).

Empirical research on co-creation shows that the value of co-creation initiatives is primarily to be found in terms of different forms of 'public value' (Bovaird, 2007; Bovaird & Löffler, 2012; Needham & Carr, 2009; OECD, 2011), i.e. values that are of importance for the public and contributes value to the public sphere. Thus, it is recommendable to adopt a holistic and long-term perspective when evaluating co-creation initiatives, which is what we will do in the following paragraph.

## **Section II Evaluation:**

### **The value and impact of the CRETHINK initiatives**

#### **Introduction**

This section unfolds the evaluation of CRETHINK applying a public value approach. Firstly, the idea and concept of public value is explained. Secondly, a range of different public value dimensions created by the project are unfolded. Thirdly, we conclude the evaluation of the CRETHINK project

by discussing to which extent it has succeeded in fulfilling the original aims and ambitions. Also, an evaluation of the use and features of the Toolbox on democratic co-creation for sustainable development is provided.

## Using a ‘public value’ framework to evaluate CRETHINK

This section evaluates the CRETHINK project by using a ‘public value’ framework. The chosen evaluation approach is based on research showing that the value of co-creation initiatives is primarily to be found in a range of intangible, long-term outcomes, that are perceived differently by different actors. To accommodate these characteristics of co-creation initiatives, we have decided to apply an explorative and qualitative approach to the evaluation based on qualitative interviews with the relevant stakeholders.

By using the ‘public value’ framework, the evaluation draws on a concept of value, that is multi-dimensional, holistic and dependent on the actors’ perspectives. Thus, the evaluation explores possible impacts of the CRETHINK project on the participants’ everyday practice as well as broader impacts in terms of sustainability, democracy and relations building.

### Public value

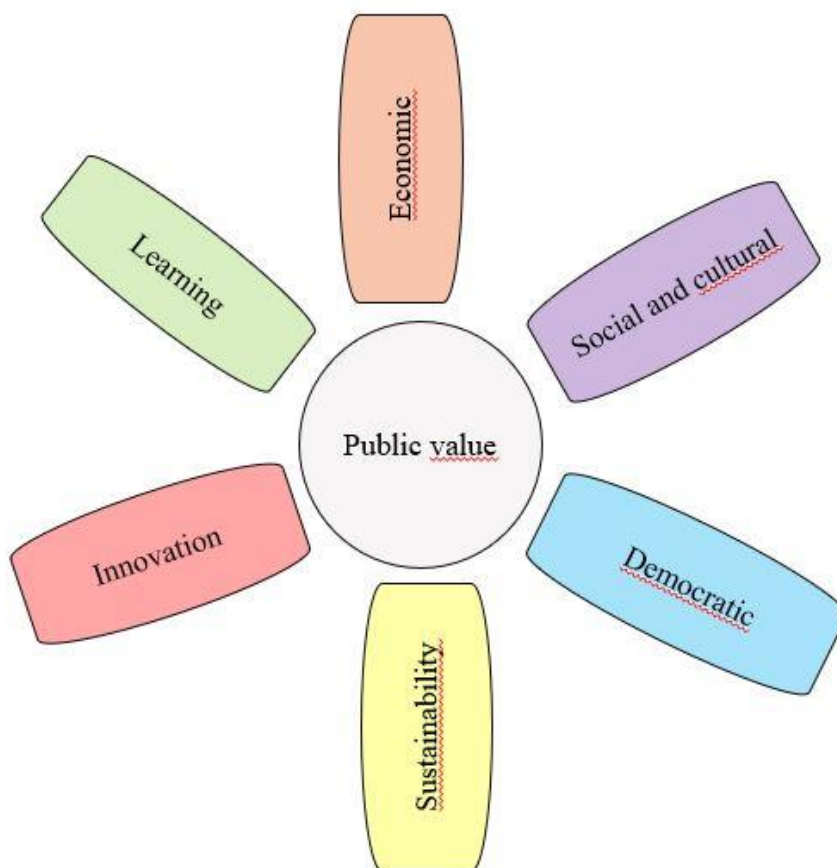
- The concept of ‘public value’ was initially launched by an American researcher, Mark Moore. Public values are values that are of importance for and contributes value to the public sphere
- Moore developed the idea of ‘public value’ in opposition to a purely economic cost-benefit oriented understanding of value creation.
- The concept springs from the idea that the public sector should balance the interests of a diversity of affected stakeholders, generating multiple types of value that are not purely economical
- References: (Agger & Andersen, 2018; Agger & Tortzen, 2018; Andersen, Greve, Klausen, & Torfing, 2020; Benington, 2011).

The following evaluation of the impacts created by the CRETHINK project will focus on a range of values that are relevant when evaluating co-creation initiatives:

- **Innovation and learning value:** Value in terms of Experimenting with and learning new and innovative methods, collaborations, solutions
- **Social and cultural value:** Value in terms of building networks, social relations, social capital or cultural identity

- **Democratic value:** Value in terms of stimulating and supporting democratic dialogue, participation and civil engagement
- **Sustainability value:** Value in terms of new sustainable solutions, reduce waste, emissions etc.
- **Economic value:** Value in terms of spurring entrepreneurship, business development, employment

## Public value



**The evaluation: Methodology and data**

**Methodology:** Qualitative interviews (semi-structured) with a strategic selection of respondents

**Data:** Interviews with representatives from all four partner organisations (7 respondents in total) conducted by CFCD.

Interviews with a total of 23 change agents and other stakeholders, conducted by the partners.

Main conclusions from interviews summarized and transcribed

Find the overview of respondents in Appendix A

## Measuring the impact of CRETHINK in terms of public value

So, what may we expect in terms of impact from an initiative like CRETHINK applying a co-creation approach to urban sustainability over a period of two years? In general, as mentioned in section I, co-creation initiatives may be expected to primarily produce value in terms of intangible effects, relations, democracy and innovation. Whereas value in terms of tangible effects, i.e. impact on sustainability and economy, may well occur in the long run, but should not be expected in the short run.

As might be expected, the CRETHINK project has produced some public value in terms of tangible effects on sustainability and economy. However, the initiative has primarily created public value in terms of innovation and learning as well as social, cultural and democratic value. Impacts that may be expected – in the long run – to produce more tangible values in terms of improvements in sustainability and economy.

In the following we will firstly examine the possible tangible impacts of the CRETHINK initiative in terms of sustainability. As economic value is not relevant in this context, we will leave this perspective out. Secondly, we will explore the intangible values and impacts that may be expected to enable more sustainable solutions in the long run.

## The value of CRETHINK in terms of sustainability

The overall aim of CRETHINK is to support the green transition through more sustainable solutions in the four participating cities through reducing waste and emissions. As could be expected, the initiatives have not within the project period succeeded in fully unfolding their potential in terms of sustainability value. None the less, they have all contributed with small steps towards the sustainability ambition.

### **Small steps towards sustainability**

The Italian and the Slovenian initiative were both initiated by civil society organisations. The Italian initiative focussing on creating a new urban space and social meeting point for students and members of the local community has managed to obtain support from the municipality. The legal and formal framework for the project is in place in the form of a protocol signed by the municipality and relevant parties. Also, part of the funds for the project has been raised through a crowdfunding initiative. The Slovenian initiative focussing on protecting and managing urban trees has likewise managed to obtain support from the public authorities in the city of Novo Mesto. More specifically, a concrete regulation and instructions on managing urban trees is being developed in the municipality. Also, an agenda has been established in the municipality that may lead to more resources for protecting and managing urban trees in the long run.

The Icelandic and the Danish initiatives were both initiated by public sector organisations. The Icelandic initiative, which focuses on waste reduction, has developed a systematic concept for local collaboration on reducing waste. This concept and methodology have been approved politically and will be scaled to several municipalities in the south region of Iceland, possibly improving and systematizing the effort to reduce waste considerably over time. In the city of Vejle, the Danish CRETHINK initiative has succeeded in raising awareness about sustainability and reducing packaging among shop owners. Also, some of the retail shops have taken first steps and gained experience with more sustainable behaviour. The aim of creating a more sustainable retail sector is anchored in an informal strategic partnership among key organisations corresponding well with a narrative of Vejle as a green commercial city.

### **The value of CRETHINK in terms of innovation and learning**

According to the respondents, an important impact of CRETHINK is in the field of innovation and learning. The value in terms of innovation and learning includes developing new organisational ways of working by adopting the co-creation mindset and approach of CRETHINK, applying the methods and practices in other contexts. Also, the learning value includes gaining insight into issues of sustainability as well as changing habits and behaviour in favour of sustainable choices and lifestyle. CRETHINK's value in terms of innovation and learning applies on the organisational level of both the partner-organisations, the change agents and other stakeholders – as well as on the individual level. In the following we will present key examples of the innovation and learning value created by the CRETHINK initiative.

### **Innovation and learning at the organisational level**

The partners from both Italy and Iceland point to the innovative value of CRETHINK as an inspiration for the work of their organisation. By adopting a co-creative approach, they have learned new methods and ways of working, which they will apply in future initiatives and projects. In Iceland, the partner organisation has decided to adopt the entire concept of the co-creation process introduced by CRETHINK (project manager, change agents, living labs etc.) for the future work with waste management in the municipalities of their area. With inspiration from CRETHINK a new concept, labelled 'around xx municipality' has been developed drawing on a co-creative approach to waste management in the municipalities. According to one partner:

*"We have managed to give this project an afterlife – that does not happen often...We have duplicated the CRETHINK method and it has really become a big thing here..."(Iceland, partner)*

Also, one of the change agents, a local politician from Hveragerði, who is the chairman of the municipality's environmental committee, labels the local co-creation initiative on waste 'an awakening' and stresses that it will inspire the future work of the municipality. According to this change agent:

*"I think what comes out of this is that the knowledge on how important it is to involve citizens as well as having open discussions gets more into our administration... The greatest achievement has been that we have managed to make this work part of the environmental committees' agenda – and we intend to work systematically on this, which we have not been doing until now" (Iceland, change agent)*

In Italy, the partner organisation, CESIE, a civil society organisation, appreciate the co-creative approach and methods learned from the CRETHINK initiative. The partner stresses, that the CRETHINK project has been very successful in terms of cross sectoral cooperation. The experiences and learning from the CRETHINK project have raised the organisation's capacity to conduct co-creation initiatives and will inspire and motivate other projects. According to the partner, the experiences and learning from the CRETHINK initiative will be used as a catalyst for other projects:

*"It is sustainable in the sense that we can use the practices, recommendations and challenges for other projects as well" (Italy, partner)*

*Specifically, in the Italian context, the partners underline the importance of the local CRETHINK initiative as an innovative and successful way of collaborating with the municipality on the co-creation of public spaces. According to one of the partners:*

*“With this initiative we have done something that can be replicated in the future. This has never happened before in Palermo – the co-creation of a public space, the municipality signing a Memorandum of Understanding taking responsibility for the sustainability of the project. In that sense I see it as a pilot for the municipality to create this kind of cooperation” (Italy, partner)*

The Italian initiative has also created value in terms of learning for the students and teachers involved. The students particularly stress the learning value of active participation and working in practice with environmental issues rather than just talking about the topic.

For the Danish Partner, the Municipality of Vejle, the CRETHINK initiative has added value in terms of organisational learning. The partner points specifically to insight into the central role as boundary spanner in co-creation and how to best act in this role:

*“We have learned a lot about the central role of boundary spanning. We talk a lot with our colleagues working with the climate agenda about the role of working ‘in the gaps’ and bringing different parties together. Co-creation does not happen on its own – a very central task is to make people act together” (Denmark, partner)*

Similarly, a Danish change agent employed by the municipality stresses that working with the CRETHINK project has taught her new ways of collaborating, which she is intent on implementing in her daily practice:

*“The co-creation process in our group has been very equal – and as a public employee, I have not been used to working with citizens in this way...” (Denmark, change agent)*

The same is true for one of the business stakeholders. Thus, this stakeholder from the local business service organisation intends on adapting the co-creation approach in her future work:

*“The initiative has underlined the potential of mobilizing engaged volunteers – and has made me more interested in the social and democratic agenda in innovation, which I will use in other contexts. The idea and the tools of co-creation are a must – to be built on from now on and everlasting” (Denmark, business stakeholder)*

Also, several stakeholders in the Slovenian initiative point to organisational learning and innovation as a value in CRETHINK. The Slovenian partner points to learning in terms of the role, the organisation is able to play in sustainable development of the local community as well as the importance of co-creation. The Slovenian actors particularly underline the value of co-creation in



terms of bringing different stakeholders and perspectives together to work on the same topic. According to one of the change agents:

*"(the project) brought together people who had never worked together before and helped the municipality to deal with the problem of urban trees in our city in a more integrated way"* (Slovenia, change agent).

### **Individual learning and changes in everyday practice**

CRETHINK's impact on learning at the individual level is also present in all the projects. Across projects, participants highlight the value in terms of learning more about sustainability issues and adopting changes in their everyday behaviour. According to one of the Slovenian stakeholders, the participants in the project have learned a lot from each other – as well as from invited experts: *"Each of us had a specific knowledge, that got transferred to the others through cooperation. What I enjoyed the most, was a workshop (conducted by two researchers). They took us around the town centre and explained a lot about urban trees....I learned lots more than during my time at university, and I am a landscape architect!"* (Slovenia, citizen).

This Icelandic change agent describes the impact of the CRETHINK initiative in terms of her personal learning as follows:

*"Personally, for me it has been a good school, it has opened my eyes to so many things... Now, for instance, I am better at not always going out to buy new things but stop to think if I really need this or if I can just re-use or go without it. You cannot buy happiness. In this process I have become very aware of everything, and it is a good sharpening"* (Iceland, change agent)

Finally, a Danish stakeholder from one of the shops states that the project has raised his awareness on sustainable choices and affected her everyday practice in the shop:

*"The project has inspired me in terms of more sustainable purchases. Also, the mindset, that you can do something actively every day for a greener future in terms of re-cycling and reduction of packaging"* (Denmark, business stakeholder).

### **The value of CRETHINK in terms of networks and social relations**

As multiparty collaboration is at the core of co-creation, it is not surprising that the social and cultural value is highlighted by participants across the CRETHINK initiatives. The value of the initiatives in terms of building new bonds and networks between participants from different sectors and perspectives is underlined, particularly with respect to enabling collaboration between the public sector, civil society and the business sector.

In terms of perspective and starting point for the network-building, the four initiatives are different, however. In Slovenia and Italy, the co-creation initiative originated with civil society aiming at collaborating with the public sector and authorities. On the contrary, in Iceland and Denmark, the co-creation initiative originated with the public sector, aiming at collaborating with civil society and the business sector.

In both Slovenia and Italy, the CRETHINK initiatives are perceived as having created social and cultural value by building stronger relations and cooperation with the public sector on sustainability issues. This has in both cases also resulted in formal documents and decisions being developed in favour of the CRETHINK sustainability initiative.

#### **Italy: Building ties to the municipality**

In Italy the partner stresses the value of recruiting change agents with a good network. This, combined with a persistent effort, made it possible to obtain and maintain sustainable ties with the municipality through the initiative:

*“we have been pleasantly surprised (by the participation of the public authorities) – we were not expecting them to be so participative. We have been lucky to get in contact with the right people, and it also helped that we gathered different actors around the table including the school – that made us noticed by the council”* (Italy, partner)

Also, the Italian change agents and their organisations underline that the CRETHINK initiative increased their awareness, that they are moving in the right direction. It inspired and motivated them as well as increasing their network and influence through the CRETHINK project.

#### **Slovenia: Building networks around a common agenda**

The Slovenian initiative is also seen to have contributed social and cultural value in terms of building and deepening social relations and networks across different sectors and perspectives around a common agenda of protecting the urban trees. According to the partner:

*“The project is the beginning of a collaboration between the civil sector and the public sector in the area addressed by the initiative – as well as the start of a more active collaboration with policy makers”* (Slovenia, partner)

Like in Italy, it has been an advantage to recruit change agents and other participants with a liaison to the municipality. The Slovenian initiative has succeeded – through building a collaborative relation to the municipality - to obtain tangible results in the field of urban trees and green spaces.

According to the partner, the CRETHINK initiative has enlarged the connection between the civil sector and the public institutions.

According to the participants, the building of networks and social relations among a multiplicity of actors is an important achievement of the initiative:

*"It showed the benefits of cooperation between experts, residents and all that care about the city's trees. This means a lot, especially for the continuation of this kind of practice through knowledge dissemination"* (Slovenia, citizen)

### **Denmark: Building relations with the business sector**

The Danish initiative is seen as contributing social and cultural value, particularly by building networks and links between public actors and actors in the field of business. New connections and networks that have resulted in a more sustainable agenda among shop owners and other business actors. According to one of the Danish partners:

*"The initiative has created new relations with the retail business and has pointed to an issue, nobody has dared to touch on before. This has been an eye opener for all actors involved and may lead to a big leap in terms of sustainability"* (Denmark, partner)

The CRETHINK project has made it possible to build links between actors from different sectors, i.e. the business sector and the public sector and civil society/citizens, that have not been used to collaborating. Through these new networks a community focusing on sustainable retail has been established. Furthermore, the initiative has succeeded in anchoring the collaboration and drawing on professional actors ready to carry on the initiative. According to one of the change agents:

*"The initiative has built bridges between a diversity of actors from the municipality and the business sector linking the different needs and resources"* (Denmark, change agent).

### **Iceland: Linking different sectors**

In the Icelandic initiative, existing networks of the partners proved valuable in getting together a group of change agents from different sectors, i.e. civil society and the business sector as well as the public sector and the political realm. According to one of the change agents the diversity in the group has been a positive factor:

*"(the process of collaboration) has been really good, because we came from different backgrounds – which has made us learn a lot from each other. ..If we had all been from the same sector, we would not have grown as much"* (Iceland, change agent)

## **The value of CRETHINK in terms of democracy**

The democratic value of the CRETHINK initiatives is highlighted by stakeholders across the projects, with particular focus on the Italian and Icelandic initiatives. The initiatives are seen as stimulating the engagement and participation of groups of citizens, thus contributing to democratic empowerment and the development of citizen skills.

### **Italy: Giving young students a voice**

The Italian initiative focusses on engaging high school students in co-designing a public space close to their local school. This initiative is perceived by the partners and change agents as well as the students themselves and their teachers as creating a high degree of democratic value. According to one of the Italian partners, the initiative had a big impact in terms of 'democratic education' of the pupils:

*"The initiative has had a big educational impact in that we had a group of students realizing that they can be active citizens and contribute to shaping the urban space by engaging in co-creation"* (Italy, partner)

Also, the other stakeholders (change agents, teacher etc.) underline the democratic value of engaging and listening to young people and of encouraging them to think about society at large, inclusion, sustainability etc. The students themselves particularly stress the value of working in practice with changing the physical surroundings close to their school. The initiative has given them new insights in sustainability as well as their role as active agents. They have experienced the CRETHINK initiative as empowering and creating a space for them to participate democratically and contribute to change:

*"Suddenly I had the opportunity of being a protagonist, whereas earlier on I have felt external to processes"* (Italy, student)

*"We have discovered a new world. This is not something that we do every day. We have gained more awareness and knowledge about the world around us... These projects open people's minds and make students realize that we can change our future for the better"* (Italy, student)

### **Iceland: Empowering local citizens**

In Iceland, the CRETHINK initiative has created democratic value for the change agents participating actively through the whole process as well as – to some extent - for the local community. The change agents have been empowered democratically by gaining knowledge of how to work with the public administration and now know much more about the 'pathways'. According to an Icelandic partner:

*“The group understands the system better – they now know that there are pathways. So they have started thinking: OK, here is a pathway – people will listen, if we go this way”* (Iceland, partner)

The Icelandic initiative also focused on engaging local stakeholders in the community of Hveragerði in improving waste management. A residents’ assembly was held by the end of the initiative, bringing local citizens, politicians and other local stakeholders together to discuss the waste challenge and deliberate on possible ideas and solutions. This assembly was highlighted by both partners, change agents and other stakeholders as adding democratic value as an arena for citizens to gain knowledge, deliberate and be heard. According to one of the partners:

*“The meeting that was set up for active participation, gave the citizens a voice and a pathway to speak out loud. They got an experience of being heard, that will hopefully stay with them”* (Iceland, partner)

As well as the possibility to deliberate about waste, the citizens in Hveragerði particularly valued the opportunity to gain information about the waste challenge in their town that had been collected, analyzed and disseminated as part of the CRETHINK project. According to one citizen:

*“The most important outcome is the information about the situation in the municipality. Things I discovered at the residence assembly, that I did not know. A new collection centre, a local sorting centre that will be opened near the town”* (Iceland, citizen)

### **Denmark: Engagement in sustainable choices**

The Danish initiative is also seen to have created a democratic impact by empowering the change agents, particularly the ‘ordinary citizens’:

*“They have gained more democratic self-confidence and awareness in terms of their possibilities to contribute and to make a difference”* (Denmark, partner)

Also, the Danish initiative is valued by the business stakeholders for engaging both shop-owners and consumers in sustainable choices. According to this stakeholder from the local business organisation the project has succeeded in placing sustainability on the agenda of the retail businesses:

*“The initiative has affected the atmosphere and created support. It has sparked the retailers’ inclination towards the green transition and has provided them with an urge to do something. They realize that it is meaningful for sustainability as well as for their business”* (Denmark, business stakeholder)

### **Slovenia: Engagement across sectors**

The democratic value of the Slovenian project is first and foremost to be found in the engagement and cooperation of stakeholders from different sectors around a common project as well as the engagement of citizens in the issue of urban trees. According to one of the change agents:

*“For me (the value lies in) the co-operation of different people that have the same goal. And building our bonds in local environment, so that we will be able to cooperate in the future – and also in engaging the general public in the topic of urban trees”* (Slovenia, change agent).

Also, the participants highlight the democratic and empowerment value of being involved in cross-sector cooperation. The initiative has taught them a lot about how to influence decision makers – and according to one of the change agents:

*“People have realized that they can achieve a lot more in a particular field if they gather together to collaborate with colleagues from different backgrounds”* (Slovenia, change agent)

### **Conclusion: To which extent has CRETHINK fulfilled the ambitions?**

A range of ambitions are inherent in the CRETHINK initiative. In the following, we will conclude on the evaluation in the light of these original ambitions and expectations.

**The ambition: ‘Citizens and public employees gain key citizen competences and skills that enable them to participate in co-creating processes and citizens to take on a more active role in their local society’**

CRETHINK has clearly had an important impact on learning and empowerment, leading to participants obtaining citizen and co-creation competences. This is particularly true for the actors working closely with the local projects, i.e. change agents and other stakeholders. In general, actors from civil society and business seem to have benefitted more than public sector employees. Also, not all the local projects have succeeded in reaching out to a larger group of citizens or other stakeholders. With respect to reach, the Italian and the Icelandic projects have been the most successful, managing to empower young students and local citizens respectively.

**The ambition: ‘Public workers gain more skills and awareness of the importance of democratic co-creation and citizen involvement in sustainable development’**

CRETHINK has generally succeeded in providing the public employees working closely with the local initiatives with skills and awareness of co-creation. However, it has been difficult to reach a broader group of public employees. And in spite of an ambition to influence the mindset of public institutions in a co-creative direction, this has proved difficult. An exception is Iceland, where a co-

creation-based concept of working with waste-reduction has been adopted broadly by the municipalities.

**The ambition: *'All partners are expected to strengthen their capacity for cross-sectorial co-operation, and to build upon each other's expertise, gaining knowledge and experience in co-creation methods'***

The CRETHINK project has been successful in this respect, as all partners have gained new competences and developed a more co-creative mindset, which they intend to apply in future initiatives. This is particularly true for the Icelandic and Italian partners.

The opportunity to collaborate and gain mutual inspiration within the group of partners has been somewhat restricted by corona measures. However, the diversity of the partner-group has been a supportive element for the partners in gaining knowledge about different perspectives on co-creation.

**The ambition: *'The project will build more sustainable ties between local authorities and civil society, creating stronger, more inclusive cities and regions, where the responsibility for community development is shared'***

The CRETHINK project constitutes one small step in a long journey of building more sustainable ties between local authorities and civil society. In spite of operating within very different governance contexts, all the local initiatives have managed to build or strengthen relations between civil society and the public sector. In the Slovenian and Italian contexts, the partner NGOs have succeeded at obtaining a collaborative relation with the relevant public authorities. In Iceland and Denmark, the public sector partners have managed to build new ties with stakeholders from civil society and the business sector respectively.

However, the sustainable ties between sectors seem limited to the CRETHINK initiative, and the journey towards shared responsibility for community development is still long.

## **Evaluation of the Toolbox on democratic cocreation methods for sustainable development**

In order to facilitate the co-creation process for partners, change agents and stakeholders, CRETHINK has created a Toolbox containing useful material to support the activities. It is praxis-oriented and suitable for self-training.

It is divided into four sections:

1. **National reports and best practices** – contains national reports on the context for co-creation and sustainability, and documents with examples of best practices from each partner country

2. **Documents on SDGs with a focus on SDG 11**– contains a list of relevant documents related to SDG divided by country
3. **Documents on Co-creation** – contains training material, guides, methodological documents and articles on co-creation.
4. **Open Sharing of materials** – contains additional external resources relevant for stakeholders applying co-creative methodologies, and case studies from partner countries highlighting the processes initiated and the methodologies used in each local project.

An evaluation session held during the Training held in Copenhagen in October 2021, allowed partners and change agents to reflect on the use and features of the Toolbox.

The tools that participants used the most were:

- Co-creation methodology documents, which were used to find common solutions
- Best practices reports which were used to get inspiration
- Documents about sustainability
- Models and templates, such as the Doughnut model and the interview template

Participants also gave very useful suggestions on additional external co-creation resources, which were later added to the box in the Open Sharing of materials section: Project Management Tools; Virtual co-creation tools (e.g. Miro); Design Thinking tools; Marketing Guides; and other cutting-edge co-creative methodologies and approaches (e.g. Tactical Urbanism, Dragon Dreaming). Some participants also suggested that an introductory guide or training session presenting the different features of the Toolbox would have facilitated its use.

In conclusion, partners highlighted that the Toolbox was mostly useful as a methodological reference for partners. The change agents were more focused on the practical implementation of activities and referred to partners when in need of methodological guidance. In some cases, they also engaged in further research of more specific co-creation methodologies (e.g. Tactical Urbanism in Italy) which were later added to the toolbox as additional external resources.

## Section III Recommendations for practitioners and policy makers

This section contains recommendations for actors with ambitions to develop sustainable solutions through co-creation. The recommendations are based on our experiences from the CRETHINK



initiative and directed at practitioners and policy makers respectively. By practitioners we mean those actors from both civil society and the public sector working ‘hands on’ with co-creation processes as project managers or facilitators. The policy recommendations are meant for actors at the level of decision making, i.e. politicians as well as managers in the public sector and civil society.

## **Recommendations for practitioners – based on CRETHINK experiences**

Based on our experiences, practitioners wishing to succeed with co-creative processes should remember the following six points, which will be elaborated in the following:

- Get the right team in place: Recruiting and linking ‘the right people’
- Work with local issues, hands-on, making a visible difference
- Recognize the participants’ motivation and interests, and motivate them continuously
- Strive to understand the agenda and logic of the different sectors and stakeholders
- Support collaboration with facilitation and leadership

This advice is based on learning points from the CRETHINK initiative in terms of drivers and challenges in co-creation. In the following, we elaborate on the six learning points, exploring, which elements participants of the CRETHINK initiative have perceived as supportive or challenging respectively for the co-creation process.

### **Get the team in place: Recruiting and linking ‘the right people’**

The importance of recruiting and linking ‘the right’ people when setting the team for co-creation initiatives, is underlined as crucial. It is productive for co-creation to put together a team with a relatively high degree of diversity as well as relevant competences and networks in relation to the task at hand. Also, it is important to pick participants open to working with a co-creative mindset, particularly among representatives from the public sector.

Networks and connections matter a good deal in co-creation! Thus, a strategic approach to recruiting team-members with relevant experience and relations, is perceived as supportive. An example: For the Italian partner, an NGO, it proved impossible to recruit change agents from the

public sector. Instead, the Italian team aimed at strengthening their impact in the public sector by including change agents with relations to the relevant public institutions. The Slovenian team succeeded in recruiting a relevant public employee as change agent as well as other change agents with relations to the public sector.

The Icelandic partners were challenged in terms of finding change agents from different sectors. By reaching out through their network and using a snowballing technique, they succeeded in building a diverse team. Also, the Icelandic project was promoted by including a local politician in the team and building a relation to the local mayor of the town early in the project.

Danish partners were not able to include representatives from relevant local associations in the team as intended. Instead, the team was comprised by engaged individuals from civil society – and the initiative strengthened by reaching out to strategic important partners in the business sector.

### **Work with local issues, hands-on, making a visible difference**

Working with tangible, local issues and making a visible difference is supportive for co-creation. It has been supportive for the CRETHINK initiatives, that the local teams in each of the four cities were able to work with sustainability topics, which they found relevant and meaningful in their local context. This approach of participant-driven work has generally ensured a high degree of motivation among the team and the stakeholders. However, this approach has also posed some challenges for the teams, as the open and complex nature of the task has at times led to unclarity, insecurity and inertia in the work of the team.

The participants find it supportive for the CRETHINK initiatives to work hands-on with specific topics and to experiment and be able to obtain small and visible successes in the process. The experience of making a positive difference has been an important motivator for the change agents. Therefore, setting goals, that are relatively modest, but feasible and manageable, has helped keeping up the participants' motivation and drive. Also, keeping in mind 'who we are doing this for' is important for the motivation.

### **Motivate the participants continuously**

A perceived challenge in the projects has been to organize collaboration and meetings to accommodate the participants' different needs and time schedules. Corona restrictions preventing face-to-face meetings has been a challenge. It has proved supportive for the co-creation process to continuously support the engagement of the team.

The partners have taken on an important task of making it meaningful and ‘fun’ to participate in the role as change agent. This is a voluntary role that is performed in the participants’ free time. Therefore, it has been supportive to invest energy in building a good team and maintaining the motivation of the participants. This may be done through continuously recognizing and securing the participants’ motivation and interests in the initiative. While other supportive measures have been social activities, visible results and respecting the time and other tasks of the team, i.e. by meeting after work and at night.

### **Support collaboration with facilitation and leadership**

Another essential factor for the CRETHINK initiatives has been the leadership and facilitation styles of the partners supporting the collaboration of the actors. Soft skills to motivate and facilitate participants are of vital importance in co-creation processes. Similarly, the competence of designing the right process for collaboration and of facilitating continuous dialogue among participants about the common ground and common goal of the initiative.

To some of the partners, it has taken some time to find themselves at ease in a role as facilitator. In particular, the partners in the Danish and Icelandic projects, that are used to working in public institutions, were challenged by taking a new role and finding productive ways of leading the work of the group. Including the balance of steering and supporting the work of the group as well as evoking the competences and resources of the team and find productive ways to link them.

According to the participants, the facilitation and leadership of the partners has played an important role by creating conducive conditions for collaboration between actors with different perspectives and backgrounds. Key elements in a supportive facilitation style are seen to be: Humbleness, i.e. leaving room for the actors to share their knowledge, priorities and perspectives and decide on the topic and activities. Also, awareness and recognition of the different needs and interests of the actors – working towards common ground. And finally, awareness of group dynamics and of the power in the room – working to create a safe and equal environment with a high level of respectfulness among participants.

### **Strive to understand the agenda and logic of different sectors and stakeholders**

A diversity of logics is inherent in co-creation. Therefore, understanding and acknowledging the logic of other sectors and actors is a crucial competence. The role of public sector institutions for implementation of the CRETHINK initiatives has proved vital in all the projects – and has turned out to be a challenge in some of the projects. Public sector employees (and politicians) have

played an important role as gatekeepers for the co-creation projects to succeed. In general, it has been supportive to the co-creation projects to pay attention to the framing of the initiatives, attempting to link them to an existing political agenda. In the Danish and the Icelandic case, this has happened relatively easily, as these projects were facilitated by partners with easy access to the political agenda.

In the Slovenian and Italian projects, that were both facilitated by NGOs, gaining access and support from the public sector has been a challenge, as has bureaucracy and red tape measures. In these initiatives, the framing and linking to the local political agenda has demanded more of an effort – and a fair amount of persistence in obtaining contact with the relevant public actors. Also, in these two cases, ‘playing by the formal rules’ of the political system, has proved productive to bypass red tape and bureaucracy and help implementation on the way. Thus, in the Italian case the team has succeeded in getting the legal and formal framework for the project in place in the form of a protocol signed by the municipality and relevant parties. While in the Slovenian initiative, the team has worked towards obtaining a new public regulation and developing instructions on managing urban trees.

## Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are directed at decision makers and policy makers in the public sector working to solve current challenges in society – challenges that may demand innovative and bold answers.

- **Finding solutions to complex and wicked challenges such as climate change calls for new ways of working**

Through co-creation the resources of relevant stakeholders may be mobilised and more innovative and sustainable solutions developed. Citizens, civil society organisations and companies represent a large resource of competences and knowledge that may be applied to solving sustainability challenges.
- **For co-creation to produce value, the right working conditions are needed**

The right conditions for co-creation should be established formally by the public sector putting supportive policies and a legal and organisations framework in place. Also, the public sector must take on a new role as facilitator of collaboration. This involves mobilizing the relevant and affected stakeholders, collaborating as equal partners and

communicating transparently about political and decision-making processes as well as by educating public sector employees.

- **Public sector employees need to develop a more co-creative mindset and new skills**  
to be able to take on new roles as facilitators and collaborators in co-creation. For this to happen, education is needed as well as support from management and the political level.
- **Co-creation holds a potential of bridging the gap between the voters and the elected politicians**  
For politicians, collaborating with citizens and other stakeholders towards a shared goal holds a democratic potential. By trying out new ways of collaborating democratically with citizens, politicians may strengthen and nurture their relation with citizens, thereby gaining courage to take innovative and bold actions. To develop a more co-creative mindset, politicians should take the opportunity to participate actively in co-creation processes.
- **The impact of co-creative processes should not be evaluated by traditional cost-benefit standards**  
Co-creation processes are not ‘quick fixes’ and should not be expected to produce feasible impacts in the short run. On the contrary, these processes may be expected to produce public value, i.e. intangible, long-term outcomes in terms of innovation and learning, network and relation-building and democracy, that may with time lead to impact in terms of sustainability.

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## Appendix a: Final evaluation - overview of respondents

Partner	CA	Citizens	CSO's	Pub. sec.	Priv. sec.	SH total	Part. Int.
<b>Iceland</b>	1	1		1	1	4	2
<b>Italy</b>	3	2		1	1	7	2
<b>Slovenia</b>	3	1	1	1		6	1
<b>Denmark</b>	3			1	2	6	2
<b>Total</b>	8	4	1	4	4	23	7

CA= change agents

SH = stakeholders

Stake holder subgroups: Citizens, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Public sector, Private sector

Part Int = Partner interview, number of partners participating