Networking European Civic Education

NECE MAGAZINE

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HOPE

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NECE, which stands for Networking European Civic Education, has long served as a familiar platform and annual conference for civic educators to connect, learn, and grow. In order to remain relevant and effective, NECE is evolving with the changing times. THE CIVICS Innovation Hub has emerged as the winner of a Europe-wide idea challenge aimed at making NECE future-proof.

The transformation of NECE from a platform into a multi-stakeholder network is a crucial step towards achieving this goal.

MAP OF CIVIC

EDUCATION IN EUROPE

mapping.thecivics.eu

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CHOOSING HOPE IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Eighty years after WWII ended, Europe again feels the ground shift. Russia's war on Ukraine drags on, the Middle East burns – Gaza's civilians pay a terrible price – and long-standing alliances strain as the United States retreats into deal-making. Rising prices, forced migration, and disinformation erode public trust, while hard-line parties move from protest benches into government offices. What once seemed isolated shocks now form a pattern that weakens democratic habits and rewards strong-arm answers.

NECE's work sits in this storm. We connect civic educators, civil society leaders, and activists who mostly operate outside formal classrooms – in community centres, online spaces, local councils, and streets. Their task: help people understand power, practise dialogue, and act together.
Yet fear and fatigue make that task harder each year. When the news cycle is a roll-call of outrage, it is tempting to lower our sights and guard what little ground we still hold.

This issue of NECE Magazine argues for the opposite response. Hope is often dismissed as soft, but it can be a powerful, disciplined skill. It asks us to name problems honestly, picture alternatives, and organise towards them. In practice, that means building forums where sworn opponents can speak safely, or telling stories that spotlight solutions rather than only failures. Think of hope as methodical work that widens the field of action.

Our contributors show what that looks like.

We begin in Norway, where a bold model of participatory governance is enabling citizens to shape decisions about their country's sovereign wealth fund. We then shift to what research reveals about the science of hope – when it drives action, and when it falters. From Serbia to Wales, civic actors remind us that shrinking civic space can be met with creativity and long-term vision. Educators, economists, and youth advocates reflect on what it takes to equip the next generation with not only knowledge but the confidence to shape the future.

We look at how financial literacy, when embedded in civic education, can become a tool for critical thinking, democratic participation, and greater control over personal and collective futures. We explore how economics education can centre the long-term wellbeing of people and the planet, challenging extractive models and making space for regenerative thinking. And we look at how community foundations, often overlooked, are becoming vital civic infrastructures – nurturing imagination, collective action, and local democratic renewal.
Across the entire issue, voices return to a common thread: hope gains power only when it is coupled with agency, concrete skills, and the collaborative structures that translate intention into collective change.

To put that insight to work, this year's NECE Festival will offer hands-on masterclasses in narrative reframing, designing participatory civic organisations, and using imagination as a radical, active sphere of civic transformation. We invite you to adopt and use these tools, share them with others, and tell us what works. The more we exchange practice, the faster hope scales.

The generation that rebuilt Europe after 1945 understood that progress is never guaranteed. There will never be a time when democracy isn't facing challenges. However, we've learned that in bleak times, agency grows when citizens see a path and a role. When change seems possible just enough to spark hope in the right places.

Co-founders and managing partners
Caroline Hornstein Tomić, Anja Ostermann, and Louisa Slavkova

THE CIVICS

ON THE POWER OF CITIZENS

Across Europe, cities are searching for ways to turn democratic values into lived, local practice. In Oslo, this takes the form of a growing civic ecosystem – one that builds on the city's long-standing identity as a capital of peace and deepens it through sustained investment in learning, participation, and public memory.

Two powerful anchors are the 22 July Centre and the Utøya Democracy Workshop. Both arose in the wake of the 2011 attacks and now host residential courses where citizens practise dialogue, learn to counter hateful speech, and design peer-led projects that continue in their schools and neighbourhoods. Complementing this work, the European Wergeland Centre – a joint initiative of Norway and the Council of Europe – offers teacher academies, youth exchanges, and tailored support for schools across Europe, using Oslo as a living classroom for democratic citizenship and human-rights education.

A short tram ride away, the Nobel Peace Center turns Nobel history into interactive resources. Its "Active Citizen" and "Peace Builders" Minecraft worlds, developed with Microsoft, let students meet laureates and test conflict-solving skills online before visiting the museum's debate halls and temporary exhibitions.

The city also hosts several organisations that act as civic infrastructure – connecting young voices with decision-makers and supporting long-term democratic engagement. The Oslo Center's Youth Assembly runs mentoring and policy-lab sessions so secondary-school delegates can present recommendations directly to parliamentarians. Meanwhile, the social-innovation hub SoCentral pilots local and national citizen assemblies – most recently the "Citizen Assembly for Norway's Future" on Norway's wealth fund, giving randomly selected residents a structured forum to learn, deliberate and draft policy proposals that feed into public debate.

Public libraries double as civic hubs. The new Deichman Bjørvika main branch, a glass-fronted landmark at the harbour, offers free makerspaces, debate arenas, and media-lab facilities that local NGOs book for workshops on fact-checking and youth journalism.

This interconnected ecosystem – a civic infrastructure, if you will – does more than deliver programmes: it creates countless possibilities where memory, dialogue, and participation reinforce one another. In doing so, it invites every resident, whether newcomer or native, to see themselves as an active author in Norway's unfolding democratic story. ■

When citizens decide: What Norway's wealth fund teaches us about democracy

An interview with **SOFIE FURU** | SoCentral

Sofie Furu is a political scientist and partner at SoCentral, where she has worked for the past seven years. She specialises in democratic innovation and participatory processes, and served as the lead facilitator and content developer for Norway's first national Citizen Assembly – Framtidspanelet.

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WHY INVITE ORDINARY CITIZENS RATHER THAN EXPERTS TO DECIDE ON HOW NORWAY SHOULD USE ITS WEALTH FUND?

For decades, we've relied on expert committees to deliver reports and recommendations to politicians. But there's a missing link: how do we turn expert knowledge into policies that people actually support and live with? That's where everyday citizens come in.

Citizens are experts too – in their own lives, communities, and values. When you give them time, balanced information, and a safe space to reflect and deliberate, something remarkable happens: not only do they understand complex issues, they often change their minds. In fact, this is one of the few democratic methods where we regularly see people reconsider their views after hearing others' perspectives.

That's the power of citizen assemblies. They're not about asking uninformed people what their gut-feeling says about a topic. They're about giving ordinary people the tools to think deeply. For example, members of the Citizen Assembly for Norway's Future received expert input on the ethical, economic, and political dimensions of the wealth fund. Then they discussed, questioned, reflected – and developed concrete recommendations for how Norway can act responsibly on behalf of future generations.

Experts can tell us what we need to do. But citizens, working together, can help us figure out how to do it – in ways that are both fair and feasible.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE IN A FEW STEPS THE ORGANISATION BEHIND SUCH A CITIZEN ASSEMBLY?

The Citizens Assembly for Norway's Future is a national citizen assembly commissioned by seven civil society organisations to give recommendations on the following questions:

Norway is one of the richest countries in the world. How can we use our wealth to benefit the world, ourselves, and future generations?

- What considerations and values should guide our choices?
- What problems in the world does Norway have particularly good reasons to help solve?
- How should the oil fund be used now and in the future?

The commissioners are WWF, Save the Children, Caritas Norway, Framtiden i våre hender, LNU, and the think tank Langsikt. They have set the question the panel is to answer, and beyond this, the civil society organisations have no influence on how the citizen assembly is conducted, what knowledge is presented, or the recommendations that the panel makes.

HOW DID YOU SELECT THE 56 ASSEMBLY MEMBERS SO THEY TRULY REFLECTED NORWAY'S POPULATION?

We used something as simple – and powerful – as a lottery. From nearly 4,000 people who said "yes" to spending their evenings and weekends helping shape the future of Norway's wealth fund, we selected 56 members based on five key criteria: age, gender, education level, geographic location, and voting behaviour in the last national election.

The result? A true microcosm of Norway. Not just in demographics, but in life experiences, political perspectives, and worldviews.

But what makes citizen assemblies so powerful isn't just who is in the room – it's what happens in that room. Panels like this often act as anti-polarisation machines. Why? Because people who would never otherwise meet – people who may see the world in totally different ways – sit together, listen, disagree, and still manage to understand and even care for one another. It's rare, in today's fragmented public sphere, to see someone change their mind or grow fond of someone with a totally different perspective. Yet it happens here – again and again.

DURING DELIBERATION, WHICH TOOLS OR GROUND RULES KEPT THE DISCUSSION BALANCED, INFORMED, AND HOPEFUL RATHER THAN POLARISED?

From the very first meeting, the assembly members created their own shared ground rules – values like listening with curiosity, disagreeing with respect, and staying open to changing one's mind. They also practised how to challenge ideas without attacking each other. But more than any tool, it was what happened between the people in the room that mattered most. Members truly listened to one another – not to win a debate, but to understand. They saw the person behind the opinion – and that changed everything.

There were disagreements, of course. But not the kind we're used to from TV debates. Some participants even said they missed the "fireworks." Others pointed out that the disagreement was still there – it just sounded different. It was thoughtful and respectful, and often more productive

> That's the power of citizen assemblies. They're not about asking uninformed people what their gut-feeling says about a topic. They're about giving ordinary people the tools to think deeply.

than any political panel they'd seen, as they sought to find common ground, and what they do agree on rather than what they disagree on.

You could say they learned something rare in today's society: how to disagree with empathy – and try to seek common ground, rather than getting stuck on our differences (which we know to be very unproductive).

WHAT PRACTICES FROM THIS ASSEMBLY COULD ANY EUROPEAN CITY COPY RIGHT AWAY?

Citizen assemblies are becoming more common – but what's emerging as especially powerful is when civil society takes the lead. Unlike government-commissioned panels, assemblies initiated by civic actors can tackle value-based, difficult, or politically sensitive questions that public institutions might hesitate to address. In that way, civil society doesn't replace the institutions of a representative democracy – it complements them, by opening up space for deeper conversations about who we want to be as cities or countries.

One of the most inspiring outcomes from the Citizen Assembly for Norway's Future was the shift in how participants viewed politics. Although the assembly was initiated outside the formal branches of government, many participants emerged from the process with greater respect for politicians and a clearer appreciation of how complex, filled with dilemmas, and laden with responsibility political decision-making truly is. What we see again and again is members of citizen assemblies leaving the process more engaged, more committed and more inspired and motivated to take part in shaping the future – which is something we will need in any European city right now.

HOW DO YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD PROJECTS BUILD ON THE LESSONS FROM THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLIES?

Involve, involve, involve – whether we are working locally or nationally. Real change happens when people are given the responsibility and trust to shape the future together. And ordinary people take responsibility once they're trusted with it.

It's important to note that one should only ask for help, when that help is actually used. If there is no clear mandate on how the input is going to be used, and in turn, the input is not used, trust will easily be lost.

If we want resilient, long-term, and robust solutions, citizen assemblies offer a promising way to go. However, it's important to note that citizen assemblies are not a solution to everything.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE TRUST ORDINARY PEOPLE WITH REAL RESPONSIBILITY AND INVITE THEM TO SHAPE DECISIONS THAT AFFECT US ALL?

"I signed up because it sounded exciting – but it became something much bigger. Now I feel a sense of responsibility, and I'm not ready to let go of it."

"I now understand much better how hard it is to balance competing concerns. It's easy to have an opinion – but something else entirely to find real solutions."

"We're just ordinary people, but we've shown that we can understand complex issues and help shape meaningful solutions."

Nearly 4,000 people across Norway signed up to join the Citizen Assembly – willing to spend their evenings and weekends learning about our national wealth, global responsibility, and what Norway should do with our wealth for ourselves, the world, and future generations.

We often hear that people don't care, that they're opting out, or that ordinary citizens can't handle complex questions. This panel proved the opposite. When we give responsibility to ordinary people, they take it – and they did so brilliantly!

And in a world that serves us huge curveballs time and time again, while concentrating power in very few hands, it's hopeful – and deeply necessary – to see that ordinary citizens not only want to be part of the solution, but can be.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The main goal of the Citizens Assembly for Norway's Future was to start a national conversation about how we use our shared wealth – and that conversation is just beginning. We want more people to read the panel's recommendations at www.framtidspanelet.no, choose the one that speaks to them, and talk about it with others. This is not a report to be shelved – it's an invitation to act, ahead of the national election and beyond.

And perhaps even more importantly: we now have a group of 56 people who are ready to do more. They've gained knowledge, perspective, and a deep commitment to their society. We need to create space for them – and others like them – to continue contributing. If we're serious about building a more resilient democracy, we have to see the public not just as voters, but as capable co-creators of the future. ■

THE SCIENCE BEHIND HOPE

Hope begins when change feels possible

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COULD YOU EXPLAIN WHAT GROUP-BASED HOPE MEANS, AND HOW IT DIFFERS FROM PERSONAL HOPE?

SCC: The original research on hope – like Snyder's hope theory – was very much about individuals. It focused on whether someone expects things to get better in their personal life and whether they can see different paths to get there. But someone can feel hopeful for themselves while being completely hopeless about their group's future. That's where our work comes in – we look at what happens when people imagine a better future for their group, not just themselves.

A BIG PART OF YOUR WORK IS ABOUT MALLEABILITY. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN, IN SIMPLE TERMS?

SCC: Malleability just means that something can change. If you believe a situation – like a conflict – is fixed, then you're not going to invest in changing it. But if you believe that things can evolve, that opens the door to hope. We ran interventions where we simply presented people with the idea that the world is always changing. For example, we'd ask participants to draw what comes to mind when they hear "the world is dynamic and changing" – they'd sketch things like seasons shifting or children growing. That alone increased people's sense of hope about conflict – not by mentioning peace directly, but by subtly shifting their mindset from "nothing ever changes" to "transformation is possible." Once people began to believe that change was a natural part of life, they were more open to imagining a better future and, in turn, more willing to support difficult political compromises.

WHY IS HOPE SO POWERFUL IN THESE CONTEXTS?

SCC: Hope is one of those rare emotions that is self-oriented but socially functional. In a conflict setting, asking people to feel empathy for the other side can be hard – they often don't want to. But hope speaks to people's desire for a better future for themselves. And once they start imagining that future, that's when they become more willing to make concessions – not for the sake of the other side, but because they want peace for their side. That's the beauty of it.

YOUR PAPER SAYS HOPE NEEDS ANOTHER COMPONENT SO IT CAN BE TURNED INTO ACTION – A SENSE OF EFFICACY. COULD YOU PLEASE EXPAND ON THAT?

SCC: Yes, we found that people need both. You can believe that something good is possible, but if you don't believe you or your group can influence it, then you don't act. In one of our studies, people who felt high hope but no efficacy didn't engage in collective action. So the two need to go together. That's especially important when working with groups who have less power – you can't just "give" them hope. You also have to nurture their belief that they can create change.

YOU'VE WORKED EXTENSIVELY ON THE LINK BETWEEN GROUP-BASED EMOTIONS AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT. WHAT ROLE DOES HOPE PLAY IN DRIVING PEOPLE TOWARD COLLECTIVE ACTION – AND WHEN IS IT NOT ENOUGH?

RP: Intuitively, hope should motivate political engagement – after all, why would anyone invest time and energy in protest if they didn't believe a better future was possible? And indeed, some studies do show a positive link between hope and collective action.

But the picture is more complicated. Other research finds no link at all – or even a negative one. One key factor is **effic6cy**, as Smadar mentioned. Hope alone isn't enough: just because a better future is imaginable doesn't mean people believe their group can influence it. Without that belief, hope doesn't lead to action.

In some cases, hope can even backfire – creating complacency or discouragement if people feel optimistic about change but disconnected from any power to help bring it about.

COULD YOU EXPLAIN WHEN AND WHY GROUP-BASED HOPE MIGHT BACKFIRE IN EFFORTS TOWARD SOCIAL CHANGE?

RP: We often study collective action among disadvantaged groups, because lasting social change usually comes from their efforts – advantaged groups tend to maintain the status quo and hold on to their privilege. But inequality creates tension, such as between Black and White Americans, or Palestinians and Israelis.

Someone from a disadvantaged group might hope for greater equality, but they might also hope for improved harmony with the advantaged group. Both hopes could make life better – but they don't have the same effect on action.

Our research shows that hope for intergroup harmony can actually backfire, reducing people's motivation to fight for their rights. That's because collective action often involves anger toward the advantaged group, and that can strain relationships between groups. If harmony is the goal, people may avoid the necessary conflict that drives change.

Hope for equality, on the other hand, does not have this effect. So it really matters what kind of hope we're inspiring. If we want to support real social change, we need to be careful that the hope we cultivate encourages – not replaces – collective action.

WHAT HELPS HOPE TAKE HOLD IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES? CAN IT REALLY SHIFT ATTITUDES ACROSS POLITICAL LINES?

SCC: Yes – but it's complicated. One of our studies showed that when an Israeli leader expressed hope for peace, it made left-leaning participants more hopeful and more open to compromise. But it didn't have the same effect on right-leaning participants. So expressions of hope matter, but who says it – and who hears it – really shapes the impact. We've found that people on the left tend to feel more hope in conflict situations, while people on the right tend to feel more fear. Hope leads to openness – people are more likely to look for information that supports peace. Fear leads to the opposite – people stick with what confirms their pessimism. But what's interesting is that even right-leaning citizens responded to our research interventions. When you introduce the idea that change is possible, they become more hopeful too.

CAN HOPE BE CONTAGIOUS? DOES IT SPREAD IN GROUPS?

SCC: Absolutely. There's some research on how charismatic leaders who express positive emotions can influence others. And people generally want to feel good. When someone expresses hope – not naively, but grounded in action – it energises others. But you have to speak the audience's language. If I'm talking to a very conservative group, I won't talk about peace for the other side. I'll talk about how peace makes life better for us – safer streets, more prosperity, international recognition. That's still hope, but it's framed around shared self-interest.

HOW ABOUT INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS? SHOULD HOPE-BUILDING LOOK DIFFERENT ACROSS CULTURES?

SCC: Definitely. In cultures that value certainty and stability, hope can actually feel stressful – especially when it comes with uncertainty about the future. But those same cultures often have strong religious traditions, and religion is full of hope: hope for redemption, for the afterlife, for renewal. So the key is how you frame it. I'm not saying all conservatives are religious, but for people who do place high value on order and tradition, it helps to anchor hope in something familiar and stable. You can't just parachute in a universal message and expect it to work. You have to ask – what does hope look like here? What are people already holding on to? Then build from that.

IN YOUR VIEW, WHAT MAKES HOPE AN EFFECTIVE EMOTION IN CIVIC EDUCATION? WHAT WOULD YOU ADVISE EDUCATORS TO BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT WHEN TRYING TO INSTIL IT IN YOUNG PEOPLE?

RP: Hope can be powerful in civic education because it motivates action while also feeling good. Unlike emotions such as guilt – which may lead to support for justice but are unpleasant to experience – hope is uplifting and energising. It's also distinct from happiness – people can feel hopeful even when things aren't going well, which is often the case in social or intergroup conflict.

> When people see they can influence their surroundings, they stop feeling stuck. That's where real, active, grounded hope comes from: the sense that "something better is possible – and we can help make it happen."

That said, not all forms of hope are helpful. As we've discussed, certain types – like hope for harmony without justice – can reduce motivation to act. When encouraging civic engagement, it's important to centre hopes around moral goals like equality or fairness, not only improved group relations.

Educators should also be mindful of how fragile hope can be. If young people are encouraged to hope but repeatedly see no progress, that hope can quickly turn into disillusionment. This is why it's crucial to pair hope with a sense of efficacy – focusing on small, achievable actions that build momentum and a belief that change is possible.

IF I'M A CIVIC EDUCATOR TEACHING A CLASS ON POLARISATION, AND I COULD EMBED JUST ONE SIMPLE PRACTICE – WHAT WOULD YOU RECOMMEND TO HELP BUILD GROUNDED, ACTION-ORIENTED HOPE?

SCC: I'd focus on building a sense of dynamism – helping students recognise that the world is not fixed. Ask them to reflect daily on what's changing around them, what's changing within them, and how they've contributed to that change. It could be something small in their school or community. That reinforces the idea that change is always happening – and that they're part of it. When people see they can influence their surroundings, they stop feeling stuck. That's where real, active, grounded hope comes from: the sense that "something better is possible – and we can help make it happen." ■

Smadar Cohen-Chen is Associate Professor at the University of Sussex Business School. Her research explores how emotions shape intergroup conflict and cooperation, with a focus on how hope and emotion regulation can promote peace. She earned her PhD in Social Psychology from the University of Sheffield.

Ruthie Pliskin is Assistant Professor of Social Psychology at Leiden University. Her research focuses on intergroup relations, emotions, ideology, and collective action. She studies how various factors shape political engagement and intergroup relations, using experiments, field studies, and psychological interventions.

PRACTICING HOPE

PERSPECTIVES

Creating spaces of hope, for youth

An interview with **TIM LOGAN**

Tim Logan is an education leader, connector and facilitator, with a background in youth work, citizenship education, school leadership and consultancy. Tim has worked with prominent clients around the world to develop innovative approaches to learning, well-being and youth engagement. Tim is also host and producer of the Future Learning Design podcast.

L6ufiched by the Ifiterfi6tiofi6l B6cc6l6ure6te (IB) ifi September 2022, the Festiv6l of Hope is 6fi opefi-efided progr6mme th6t gives youfig people structured sp6ce to spe6k, listefi, 6fid 6ct. Ifi less th6fi three ye6rs, it h6s re6ched more th6fi 12,000 p6rticip6fits 6cross 90 coufitries. Live g6therifigs h6ve t6kefi pl6ce ifi dozefis of coufitries ificludifig Ifidi6, Cost6 Ric6, 6fid the Ufiited St6tes, while m6fiy virtu6l sessiofis 6fid loc6lly org6fiised evefits h6ve beefi held 6cross the globe, ificludifig ifi Leb6fiofi, P6kist6fi, Chifi6, My6fim6r, Switzerl6fid. E6ch g6therifig cefitres ofi themes – such 6s clim6te, pe6ce, wellbeifig, techfiology, 6fid justice – 6fid eficour6ges p6rticip6fits to turfi persofi6l coficerfis ifito coficrete projects.

P6rtfierships with org6fiis6tiofis such 6s J6fie Good6ll's Roots 6fid Shoots Glob6l, IBlieve, Cofir6d Ch6llefige, Project Fuel, Possibilists, 6fid HufidrED, together with the IB's owfi Glob6l Youth Actiofi Fufid, provide cle6r p6thw6ys for follow-up. The Festiv6l fiow forms the b6ckbofie of 6 wider IB youth str6tegy th6t 6ims to elev6te, cofifiect, 6fid ifivest ifi youfig people. Whether through workshops, ifiterviews or 6ctiofi clifiics, the mess6ge rem6ifis cofist6fit: every ide6 coufits, every voice m6tters, 6fid collective hope thrives whefi diverse gefier6tiofis work side by side.

TIM, MANY KNOW THE INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE FOR ITS EXAMS. WHAT SITS BEHIND THE ORGANISATION?

The IB has spent about sixty years trying to use education as a force for peace. It grew out of the post-WWII need for international-mindedness – respect, dialogue, intercultural understanding. So civic values are built in even if they are not always named that way.

WHAT CHANGED DURING THE PANDEMIC?

Three years ago, as we came out of COVID lockdowns, we saw our diploma students really struggling. The usual exam stress was still there, but it sat on top of bigger worries – climate anxiety, questions about what AI means for their future, and fresh concerns over rising conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East. These pressures made the IB ask itself the question: how are we creating spaces where young people can flourish, not just chase grades? That realisation was the kick we needed to start designing experiences that speak to wellbeing and purpose as much as academic results.

AND YOUR ANSWER TO THIS BECAME THE FESTIVAL OF HOPE. HOW DID THE IDEA COME ABOUT?

I had spoken with Olli-Pekka Heinonen – former Finnish education minister, now Director-General of the IB – on my podcast. Together with my colleague Jennifer Bahrami in Washington, D.C., we thought: let us create a space co-designed with students where they can explore climate, conflict, mental health, technology, poverty – whatever is on their minds. The IB backed the idea and off we went.

YOU HAVE REACHED OVER NINETY COUNTRIES IN THREE YEARS, WHAT DOES A FESTIVAL OF HOPE LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

It depends on the place. In India, more than a hundred schools met for talks and workshops on a variety of themes including spiritual well-being and technology for good. In Colombia, students ran creative sessions – digital music, knitting, dance – all linked to mental health. In Indonesia, they invented "hope goals" because they felt the SDGs were no longer enough, then built activities around those goals. Each event reflects local questions, yet all share the same core: young people gathering to ask what they care about and what the world is asking of them.

WHY RUN THESE MEETINGS OUTSIDE FORMAL LESSONS?

In non-formal settings there is no curriculum to follow and no exam waiting. Students bring their own questions, set the tone, and often speak more openly. That freedom makes the conversations real and helps them connect with one another.

CAN YOU SHARE AN EXAMPLE THAT SHOWS THE FESTIVAL'S IMPACT?

PSI Kyiv in Ukraine organised a Festival of Hope during the ongoing invasion because the questions felt urgent – they wanted a place to bring young people together around the concept of hope. In Lebanon, nineteen schools joined forces to hold their own event, building bridges across communities that rarely meet. Those gatherings happened because students and educators saw value in hope, not because we sent a programme.

IF A YOUTH WORKER OR ACTIVIST READING THIS WANTS TO HOST A FESTIVAL, WHERE SHOULD THEY BEGIN?

Start small: bring a handful of young people together and ask two questions – "What do you care enough to fight for?" and "What is the world asking of you?" Listen carefully, then build the event around their answers. Hope grows from conversation, not from a template. And reach out to us at hope.ibo.org or on Instagram/LinkedIn at @festivalofhopeib. ■

Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl is the NoVo Foundation Endowed Chair in Social and Emotional Learning at the University of Illinois Chicago. An internationally recognised expert in social emotional learning (SEL), her research explores empathy, resilience, and wellbeing in children and educators. A former teacher, she has authored over 185 publications and advises global institutions including CASEL, UNESCO, and the OECD on SEL policy and practice.

Why educators need to thrive

By **KAMELIYA TOMOVA**, in conversation with **DR. KIMBERLY SCHONERT-REICHL**

At the heart of every thriving classroom is an educator who feels seen, supported, and resilient. Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl knows this better than most. A developmental psychologist, former teacher, and leading researcher in social and emotional learning (SEL), she has spent over three decades exploring how the wellbeing of educators directly shapes the experiences of students.

At the HEARTH Summit* organised by The Wellbeing Project, Kimberly brought warmth and clarity to a topic that often goes unspoken: the emotional lives of adults who teach. "Educators," she reminded us, "are the engines that drive social and emotional learning. You can't cultivate wellbeing in children if the adults in the room are depleted."

Kimberly's path into this work began in the classroom. As a young teacher, she learned quickly that no curriculum could land unless her students felt safe, respected, and understood. One turning point came when a particularly disruptive student handed in a worksheet with intricate hand-drawn illustrations next to his answers. "You drew these pictures?" she asked. "You're an amazing artist." The child stood taller. Something shifted. "That moment changed everything," she said. "Because I saw him differently, and he saw himself differently, too."

As precious as those moments are, the growing toll the profession takes is not to be underestimated. In recent surveys, teachers report some of the highest levels of job stress across all professions. One U.S. study found that over 50% of educators experience significant burnout – a statistic that comes with high costs for schools, systems, and society.

Stress, as Kimberly noted, is contagious. "We know from our research that in classrooms where teachers report high levels of stress, students have higher levels of cortisol (the stress hormone) in their own systems. The emotional climate of a room matters."

And yet, amid the burnout, she sees hope. Programmes such as the U.S.-based CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education) have shown that small, science-informed interventions can transform classroom dynamics. Randomised control trials show that teachers who receive support through mindfulness and compassion-based training report improved wellbeing. And, more importantly, their students thrive too.

What's vital, Kimberly argued, is to stop seeing SEL as something delivered to students once a week in a neat 45-minute box. "Social and emotional learning is not just a programme. It's a way of being – in the classroom, in a school, in a system." She believes strongly that relationships must be the foundation. "All learning," she said, "is built on the teacher-student relationship. Without that, very little else can stick."

She also spoke of the danger in turning SEL into another form of surveillance. "I worry when we start assigning empathy scores to children. These are skills to be cultivated – not deficits to be diagnosed." Instead, she urged systems to use data as a flashlight, not a hammer. "Assessment should illuminate, not penalise."

Hope, for Kimberly, lives in the everyday choices we make to invest in adults. In offering teachers five minutes of mindfulness a day. In prioritising joy and connection. In giving educators permission to care for themselves – not just their students.

She underscored that this kind of care cannot be optional or marginal. "Teachers often feel guilty taking time for themselves. But supporting their wellbeing is not indulgent – it's necessary. When we support the adults, we support the children."

When asked how we might move forward systemically, Kimberly offered four pillars. First: proper funding and support for teachers, including fair pay and reasonable working conditions. Second: integrating SEL into initial teacher training. "It needs to be foundational, not an afterthought." Third: developing compassionate leadership. "When school leaders are invested in this work, change becomes possible." And fourth: starting small, but staying consistent. "Even ten minutes of yoga before the day starts can make a difference."

Kimberly's deep connection with international colleagues, including her ongoing work with the Dalai Lama and SEL networks across the globe, has only reinforced her belief that this work must be adapted to context. "You can't just pick up a programme and drop it somewhere else," she explained. "You have to plant it in your own soil."

As the conversation drew to a close, Kimberly reflected on the deeper purpose of education. It is not only to transmit knowledge, but to shape a way of being in the world.

"The science is clear," she said. "Children who are socially and emotionally supported learn better, live longer, and contribute more. But this starts with the adults."

Her final message was simple, and urgent: "Educators are our most precious resource – not just for students, but for society. If we want hope to flourish in our schools, we must first nurture it in those who teach." ■

*The Hearth Summit, organised by The Wellbeing Project, gathered over 1,000 changemakers in Ljubljana from 17–20 June 2025 to explore key global challenges, such as climate, inequality, democracy, and AI, through interactive workshops and immersive wellbeing practices.

Alessandra is Head of Programming and Operations at Debating Europe, the citizen-engagement unit of the think tank Friends of Europe, where she designs and delivers initiatives that put citizens – especially young people – at the centre of democratic policymaking.

Embedding young citizens' perspectives in evidence-based policy-making

By **ALESSANDRA CARDACI**

Hope is not passive. It's a political act. Young Europeans are ready to shape policy – if institutions are ready to listen.

Hope is often described as a last resort – something to cling to when everything else is lost. When you're told not to lose hope, it usually means things are already pretty dire. I was reminded of this when Greta Thunberg spoke to France24 after the Freedom Flotilla's failed humanitarian mission to Gaza:

"Whatever the odds are, we have to keep trying because right now, when you look at the state of the world, everything feels meaningless, but unless you try to do everything you can, that's when we lose our hope."

In a world marked by rolling crises – pandemics, war, climate disasters, democratic backsliding – hope can feel not just elusive but naïve. Especially for young people. Hyperconnected yet often disconnected from power. Told they are apathetic. Blamed for not voting. Criticised for being "too online." And yet, when we actually ask young Europeans what they think – when we take the time to really listen – a different story emerges. One not of disinterest, but of disenchantment. Not of disengagement, but of determination.

At Debating Europe, the citizen engagement unit of the Brussels-based think tank Friends of Europe, we recently engaged over 2,000 young Europeans from five EU

countries, namely Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and Poland, as part of our Voices for Choices project. We asked them what matters most, what gives them hope, and what leaves them in despair. Most striking was this: even as they steer through turbulent times, they are not giving up. But they are asking for more. And they are demanding change.

When asked about their prospects for the next five years, only young Danes expressed optimism. Their peers in the other countries painted a bleaker picture.

However, their discontent wasn't vague or fatalistic. They know exactly what they want, calling for climate and social justice, housing reform, decent jobs, and education systems that prepare them for the future – not just for exams.

They asked for political honesty, policies that are fair across generations, and meaningful participation in decision-making.

To me, that's the definition of hope.

And yet, hope is being tested. Many of these young people no longer trust politicians to deliver. Their sense of political identity is fluid, values-driven, and more issue-focused than partisan. This may make them less predictable voters – but not less engaged. Still, political parties often sideline them, dismissing their concerns in favour of demographics they deem more "reliable". Here, the demographic angle matters: with ageing populations in many countries, there are simply more "oldies," so politicians tailor policies to them over a smaller youth constituency. That's short-term thinking, and it's dangerous.

In the run-up to the 2024 European Parliament elections, there were over 22 million first-time voters. But how many felt they had a real choice? "I'd like to vote *for* something," one young respondent told us, "not just *against* someone." Others echoed a desire for "new names," "real change," "something to believe in." One spoke simply of the "hope that politicians will actually deliver on their promises."

What comes through is not cynicism, but realism. And a hunger for genuine dialogue. When asked what could help overcome rising polarisation, the most popular answer was not new laws or harsher rhetoric. It was better education.

> Young people aren't asking to be handed the keys to the political system. They want the tools to shape it alongside older generations, to make it more responsive, inclusive, and ultimately, more hopeful.

That says something profound: young people aren't asking to be handed the keys to the political system. They want the tools to shape it alongside older generations, to make it more responsive, inclusive, and ultimately, more hopeful.

But let's be honest: Millennials and Gen Z are already paying the price of policy decisions made without them. With less than 5% of Europe's net wealth, they're expected to fund increasingly expensive services for older generations. Meanwhile, buying a home in many European cities can now cost up to 15 times annual earnings compared to four times in the 1980s. Without urgent action, this generational imbalance risks turning into generational resentment, fraying the social contract and undermining trust in democratic institutions.

So where does that leave us?

If hope is to be more than a slogan, we must embed it in how we govern. That means policies co-created *with* young citizens – not just *for* them. It means recognising that democracy is not broken, as some young people told us, it's incomplete. And finishing that democratic project means trusting young people to be its architects.

We need long-term thinking in politics – but that will only happen if the voices of those who will live longest with today's decisions are heard loud and clear. Rebuilding trust between generations, between citizens and institutions, won't come from another glossy campaign or one-off consultation. It will require political courage and structural change.

Structured dialogue must go beyond symbolic gestures. This starts with creating civic spaces from an early age – in schools, youth councils, and local communities – where young people can experience what participation truly means. It doesn't have to be complex: as one participant at one of our events pointed out, even organising a school breakfast is a form of democracy – bringing people together around a shared goal for the collective good. Several citizens told us it was thanks to engaged teachers and experiences like municipal youth councils that they first realised they had a political voice. But these spaces need proper support. As one participant noted, youth centres and places for civic education have seen funding cut in recent years. Just as important is closing the loop: dialogue must lead to concrete outcomes, not just consultation for its own sake. When young people see their contributions acted upon, trust grows. Without feedback and follow-through, participation risks becoming performative – as another participant reminded us, even promising efforts like the UN's Climate Convention of 1994 can become disillusioning when only a fraction of citizens' proposals are implemented.

So here's my plea: listen to the young. Not just when it's time to vote, but when it's time to decide. Open the doors – not just of parliament buildings, but of policymaking itself. Engage them not as future leaders, but as present actors. They're already mobilising. They already have the ideas. What they're waiting for is to be taken seriously.

Young people are ready to feel hopeful. But hope isn't passive – it's a relationship. And like any relationship, it requires listening, trust, and above all, action.

Because if we don't build that relationship now, we may not just lose a generation. We may lose the very future we claim to be protecting. ■

PIONEERS IN PRACTICE

SKILLS OF THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

"We" begins with who we choose to become

An interview with **GAURI VAN GULIK**

Gauri van Gulik is a human rights advocate and leader in politics and philanthropy. Following leadership roles at Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, she co-founded and chairs the Better Politics Fund (previously the Multitudes Foundation), empowering and funding political innovators and change makers. Based in Berlin, she also works as a strategist in philanthropy and political systems change, as well as an executive coach.

IF YOU HAD TO CAPTURE THE ESSENCE OF YOUR WORK – AND YOUR PURPOSE – IN ONE SENTENCE, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

My purpose is to shift resources and power to the people building better politics and an equitable, liveable future, for the planet and all its inhabitants.

YOU SERVED AS A VISITING FELLOW AT THE SCHOOL FOR MORAL AMBITION, FOUNDED BY HISTORIAN AND BESTSELLING AUTHOR RUTGER BREGMAN. THERE IS A LOT OF MOMENTUM AND WITH IT A LOT OF HOPE BUILDING UP WITH THE NEW ACTIVITIES OF THE SCHOOL. CAN YOU TELL US WHAT FIRST ATTRACTED YOU TO JOIN AND HOW IT HAS RESHAPED YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF "MORAL AMBITION" IN PRACTICE?

It was the combination of rigour and imagination that drew me in. The school managed to take big questions – about power, courage, and moral responsibility – and make them practical ("how can we most strategically contribute to changing our food systems for the better"). During the fellowship, I worked with Seas at Risk on how to connect ocean protection to a just food transition. It reshaped my thinking on climate, the ocean and the idea of ambition. It's not about aiming higher alone for your own career, it's about expanding who we include in our sense of 'we'. Ambition becomes moral when it's about collective liberation, not just personal excellence.

FIVE YEARS FROM NOW, HOW WILL WE KNOW THE SCHOOL FOR MORAL AMBITION HAS TRULY SHIFTED SOMETHING – IN PEOPLE, IN SYSTEMS, OR IN THE STORIES WE TELL ABOUT CHANGE?

We'll know it's working when we see more people choosing courage over comfort, especially in positions of influence. When funders stop playing it safe and start backing the risky, necessary work of system change. And when the stories we tell about change focus less on saviours, and more on the slow, shared work of building power together. I hope it inspires many more of us to shift our priorities from specific individual career gains to more collective, societal ones.

DRAWING ON YOUR EXTENSIVE BACKGROUND, COULD YOU EXPLAIN WHAT INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY IS AND WHICH HABITS CIVIC-EDUCATION PROGRAMMES SHOULD ADOPT TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE BECOME ITS GUARDIANS?

Democracy is a verb. Inclusive democracy means more than voting. It's about whose voice counts, whose interests are represented, and who feels they belong in shaping the future. For young people to protect and renew it, we need to teach three things: how to listen deeply to each other, how to spot and shift power, including their own, and how to act even when it feels messy or uncertain. Empathy and critical thinking are key, but so is the muscle of agency. They need to know: democracy is theirs to build.

OCEANS, PLANT-BASED TRANSITIONS, AND FAIR FOOD SYSTEMS HAVE BEEN CENTRAL TO YOUR WORK. WHAT'S THE SMARTEST WAY CIVIC EDUCATORS CAN TURN THESE VAST TOPICS INTO SOMETHING TEACHABLE AND EMPOWERING?

For too long, we've been told that change comes down to personal consumption: what we

buy, eat or throw away. But that story shrinks our power. These are not just lifestyle choices, they're political ones. Civic educators can help by connecting the dots: showing how food, oceans and climate are shaped by policy, subsidies, corporate power and public pressure. The goal isn't to guilt young people into better habits – it's to show them how to organise, vote, advocate and lead. Whether it's a school campaigning for plant-based meals or a community pushing for fair food policy, the key is to root these big issues in local, national and collective action, and to remind students they're not just part of the system, but they can shape it.

FOR MANY YEARS, YOU'VE BEEN EMPOWERING GRASSROOTS CHANGEMAKERS TO STEER THE AGENDA. WHAT NEW FUNDING MECHANISMS OR ALLIANCES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE EMERGE BY 2030?

We need bolder, faster and more flexible funding that trusts frontline organisers. That means pooled political funds that sit between philanthropy and venture: fast to move, long in commitment. This is why we built the **Better Politics Fufid**, an expansion of Multitudes, which we've created together with the Better Politics Foundation to support those renewing democracy from the ground up, globally.

I'd like to see more of these: funders that blend strategic grantmaking with political courage, that are open to long-term, risky work. I'd also love to see deeper alliances between funders, businesses and movements around a shared agenda, one that defends democracy, tackles climate breakdown and creates space for radically better alternatives.

AFTER YEARS ON THE FRONTLINES OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND CLIMATE BATTLES, WHAT SINGLE SIGN STILL CONVINCES YOU THE TIDE CAN TURN – AND WHAT ONE DAILY RITUAL KEEPS THAT HOPE BURNING WHEN THE HEADLINES SAY OTHERWISE?

I believe climate, politics, and personal transformation are all deeply connected. Because the climate crisis is not just about carbon. It's about power. Who has it, who doesn't, and who decides how we live, eat, move, and govern. Climate breakdown is a political failure, not (just) a technological one. And political change only happens when people are willing to think differently; about themselves, about others, and about what's possible. That's where personal transformation comes in. If we want different outcomes, we need different people in the room. People who are willing to challenge their own comfort, expand their sense of 'we', and act out of courage rather than fear.

So for me, working on democracy, money and the planet isn't about juggling separate causes. It's about tackling the same root system from different angles, and doing it with people who are ready to shift both the inner and outer world.

And the ritual? Being in nature at least once a day. It reminds me that change unfolds slowly, like in nature, but it begins with stillness, honesty, and the first step forward. ■

Jennifer Brandsberg-Engelmann is an international educator with over 25 years' experience teaching economics and social sciences, primarily in the International Baccalaureate. She has co-/lead-authored three textbooks and specialises in educational projects at the intersection of economics, ecology, and changemaking.

Michelle Blanchet is a change consultant blending startup strategies with educator training on changemaking and social innovation. She co-founded the Educators' Lab, co-authored The Startup Teacher Playbook and Preventing Polarization, and works with organisations like PBS Education, Getting Smart, and Ashoka.

Teaching economics as if the future depends on it

An interview with **JENNIFER BRANDSBERG-ENGELMANN** and **MICHELLE BLANCHET**

TO START WITH THE BASICS: WHAT IS REGENERATIVE ECONOMICS, AND HOW DOES IT DIFFER FROM THE DOMINANT ECONOMIC MODELS TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS TODAY?

Regenerative economics is about designing economies that meet human needs while restoring the social and ecological systems we all depend on, beginning with the understanding that humans are part of nature and that all flourishing is mutual. In contrast, most school economics courses draw a very narrow systems boundary: they treat markets as the economy, while sidelining or ignoring all the other systems that actually sustain life, like unpaid care in households, community self-organisation, and the living Earth itself.

In these dominant models, the state is framed mainly as an interference in markets, not as a partner in human and ecological wellbeing. Commons and households as provisioning institutions are absent. Social and ecological systems are reduced to externalities, treated as side effects of market activity rather than as core parts of the economy, and addressed only when they can be measured and priced. Students are rarely given the language to value these systems outside of market-based terms.

Regenerative economics widens the lens. It recognises multiple ways of provisioning, embraces interdependence, and centres values like care, reciprocity, sufficiency, and ecological responsibility.

YOU'VE PREVIOUSLY DESCRIBED TODAY'S ECONOMICS CURRICULUM AS DEEPLY ENTRENCHED AND HARD TO SHIFT. WHY DO YOU THINK THIS SYSTEM HAS PROVED SO RESISTANT TO CHANGE?

The resistance comes from the systems that surround the curriculum. Secondary economics courses are shaped by university expectations, exam board requirements, and national policy frameworks that often prioritise high-stakes testing and measurable outcomes over deep learning. Most curricula still reflect the priorities of neoclassical economics, focusing on markets, efficiency, growth, individualism, and a narrow understanding of rationality, while marginalising topics like care, equity, ecology, and power. Because economics is wrongly seen as technical and value-neutral, it escapes the kind of critical scrutiny that other social sciences receive. As a result, outdated models persist, even as they fail to explain or address the crises we face. Teachers often lack time, training, or resources to introduce alternative frameworks, especially when those alternatives are not part of assessed outcomes. And with so much emphasis on university alignment, there's little space to ask whether we're teaching what students actually need to understand and shape the world around them.

YOUR TEAM IS DEVELOPING A FULL TWO-YEAR CURRICULUM AND TEXTBOOK – NOT NECESSARILY FOR FULL ADOPTION, BUT TO OFFER A NEW VISION. HOW CAN PRESENTING A NEW MODEL HELP TEACHERS MOVE BEYOND OUTDATED WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT ECONOMICS AND SOCIETY?

The book has two core purposes. First, it gives teachers what they've been asking for: The book has two core purposes. First, it gives teachers what they've been asking for: accessible, classroom-ready materials to help them bring new economic thinking into existing courses or to develop entirely new units. Right now, those resources are scarce, which makes innovation difficult. By filling that gap, we're helping to grow a grassroots movement of teachers who are already rethinking what economics education can be. As more teachers use the materials, they provide the social proof and momentum needed to reach a tipping point for broader change.

Second, the book offers a complete and coherent alternative for curriculum developers and education ministries. Most official reforms are cautious and incremental. More significant change feels risky, especially if no fully developed alternative exists. By offering a compelling, structured, and future-facing vision, the book lowers that risk. It makes it easier for institutions to imagine letting go of outdated paradigms and move towards a curriculum that reflects the realities and challenges of the 21st century.

Alongside the writing, we're working directly with teachers and students through workshops, pilot projects, and collaborative development. We also engage in consultation and advocacy with curriculum authorities and exam boards, helping them consider how regenerative ideas can be integrated into formal systems. Change requires both bottom-up energy and top-down reform, and we're building the bridge between the two.

REGENERATIVE THINKING OFTEN EMBRACES COMPLEXITY RATHER THAN TRYING TO SIMPLIFY IT. WHY IS THAT APPROACH ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND CIVIC EDUCATION?

Because real life is complex! Young people already face ecological breakdown, inequality, and social disconnection. Teaching simplified, closed market-based models does them a disservice. Regenerative economics introduces systems thinking. It helps students understand how problems are connected, how systems traps keep us locked into growth, and where leverage points for meaningful change exist. It equips students to both understand the world and shape it.

YOU WORK OPENLY AND COLLABORATIVELY WITH TEACHERS, STUDENTS, AND EDUCATION AUTHORITIES AROUND THE WORLD. WHAT HAS SURPRISED YOU MOST IN THAT PROCESS?

The depth of interest and insight from students and teachers. Whether we're running a workshop or receiving feedback online, we see students grasp the core ideas quickly. Our approach is often far more intuitive than what students encounter in mainstream economics courses. Teachers are excited to finally have access to a curriculum that matches the urgency they feel. Many are already trying to seed regenerative ideas into their teaching and we're just giving them the structure, language, and support to go further.

THE INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE, AS WELL AS COUNTRIES SUCH AS THE NETHERLANDS, SCOTLAND AND POSSIBLY ENGLAND, ARE REVISING THEIR ECONOMICS CURRICULA. IF THEY WERE TO TAKE ON REGENERATIVE PRINCIPLES, WHAT KIND OF RIPPLE EFFECTS MIGHT THAT HAVE?

We're in a rare mini super-cycle of economics curriculum reform this year. The usual pattern is for national and international education institutions to work in isolation, without recognising that others are grappling with the same challenges. From the start, our project has been working alongside these reform efforts, helping to raise awareness that this is a shared global opportunity and responsibility. By building bridges across education systems, we're helping curriculum authorities see that they're part of something much bigger.

Change feels more possible, and far less risky, when others are moving in the same direction. If even a few of these systems adopt regenerative principles, it should trigger global tipping points in economics education. Others will take notice. No one wants to be left behind in shaping a curriculum that prepares students to understand and respond to the real-world challenges of our time. This is how bold, coordinated change becomes possible.

WHAT CIVIC VALUES DO YOU HOPE STUDENTS GAIN BY LEARNING THROUGH A REGENERATIVE LENS – NOT JUST AS FUTURE ECONOMISTS, BUT AS CITIZENS?

Interconnection, responsibility, and agency. Our approach starts with two truths: humans are part of nature, and all flourishing is mutual. From that starting point, values like reciprocity, care, and sufficiency are both practical and ethical foundations for building resilient communities and just societies. Economics becomes a civic subject, not just a technical one.

> Regenerative economics gives young people tools and confidence to imagine fairer, more caring, and regenerative futures, and to see themselves as part of making those futures real.

FINALLY, THE THEME OF THIS MAGAZINE IS HOPE. WHAT GIVES YOU HOPE IN YOUR WORK, EVEN IN THE FACE OF COMPLEX SYSTEMS AND SLOW CHANGE?

What inspires us most is how students respond when they realise they're not powerless. When we ask them to explore how we might organise to meet human needs within planetary boundaries, something shifts. They stop feeling overwhelmed and start getting curious. They see that the economy is something people create and something they can help change.

We don't pretend the problems aren't serious. There is plenty of criticism of the current state of the world in the course. But we also don't leave students stuck in despair. Regenerative economics offers a way forward. It gives young people tools and confidence to imagine fairer, more caring, and regenerative futures, and to see themselves as part of making those futures real. That sense of purpose gives us hope. ■

YOUR HOPE

IS MY HOPE

AND MY HOPE

IS YOUR HOPE

Hope in numbers: Reclaiming civic agency through financial literacy

By **FIDELIS KWADWO NKETIA** in conversation with **JANA KOVAĽOVÁ**, **MILAN PETROVIC**, and **NINA VON GAYL**

The weight of geopolitical instability and the erosion of democratic norms can cast a long shadow, leaving many feeling disempowered. While the headlines often point to systemic failures, a quieter, more personal form of empowerment is gaining ground. This piece, featuring conversations with experts and practitioners in the field, explores how financial literacy, traditionally seen as a skill for personal gain, is in fact a crucial tool for civic activation, equipping citizens to engage more deeply with their societies and build a foundation for collective hope – helping to actively reclaim and strengthen their participation in democratic life.

"Money plays into every area of our lives," explains **Nifi6 vofi G6yl**, a curator at the **Erste Fifi6fici6l Life P6rk (FLiP)**, Austria's most prominent financial education project. "From earning your income, filling your fridge, paying your rent, to understanding the system – it touches us every single second of our lives, more or less."

This omnipresence of money is precisely why financial literacy isn't merely about balancing a chequebook. It's foundational to civic engagement itself. Nina highlights a crucial, two-fold connection: "How likely would it be for you to participate in civic engagement at all if you don't know how to fill your fridge or pay your rent?" Beyond personal survival, she emphasises, "If you want to understand how a system works, how the state is run, you need to understand the money. And a state is run on a budget." While not everyone needs to be a budget expert, grasping how public funds are generated and spent is, at its core, a form of financial literacy vital for informed citizenship. Even setting up a community project requires understanding how to fundraise and manage resources wisely.

FLiP's work with young people exemplifies this holistic approach. "We want them to grow an awareness of how important it is to deal responsibly with their own money and therefore expand their choices," Nina shares. This means starting with personal budgets and understanding terms like "price" versus "value," but also extending to the global impact of consumer choices, from a bar of chocolate to a pair of jeans. It's about empowering young people to make conscious decisions, a skill directly transferable to active civic participation.

For **J6fi6 Kov6l'ov6**, head of the **FifiQ Cefitrum** in Slovakia, financial literacy in practice means integrating it seamlessly into formal education. FinQ provides primary and secondary school teachers with resources to embed financial topics across subjects, from analysing literary works like The Miser by Molière to calculating the cost of a healthy lifestyle.

"Students are not pushed to perform; everyone starts at their own level," Jana explains, describing a system where materials are tailored to students' individual competencies. This adaptable approach is crucial for reaching diverse learners, including those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds or with special needs. Jana notes, "children from marginalised communities in particular are very interested in the topic of finances, and we even have responses that the children themselves then teach their parents how to save." This demonstrates how financial education can be a powerful tool for intergenerational learning and empowerment within vulnerable communities.

Mil6fi Petrovic, from **N6uČi-Me** in Serbia, echoes the importance of adaptability, particularly across generational divides. He observes a significant "generational gap between those socialised under the socialist era and the new more liberal generations, like Gen Z's in Serbia." This creates distinct perspectives on handling resources. Milan points to a surprising trend: "What we have seen in schools is a rise of interest with the younger generation to learn how to earn and how to handle money."

Nauči-Me initiatives include gamified learning for elementary school children to grasp basic financial terms and entrepreneurial education for middle schoolers. Milan proudly shares a success story from their Youth Innovation Center: "Three kids who graduated from this programme actually started their little businesses. Which is a great thing when you're 18." These hands-on experiences are invaluable, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, and instilling a sense of agency from an early age.

Despite these promising developments, barriers persist. Nina points out that for many young people, financial literacy "is so far away. Moreover, it's often not systematically taught in schools, and families may not provide this education either. Unless it's meaningfully integrated into the curriculum, in ways that truly benefit children, many barriers will remain," she states.

For Jana, a key challenge is getting all teachers on board with financial literacy – especially those resistant to change or continuous learning. "Some still rely on traditional methods, focused solely on covering the curriculum and passing on information," she explains.

Similarly, Milan highlights "deep-rooted and cultural" barriers, where societal imprints about money and status can make open discussions challenging. He recalls a disadvantaged girl who, after a budgeting exercise, realised how her spending strained her single mother – an emotional moment that opened up honest family dialogue.

> Money plays into every area of our lives. From earning your income, filling your fridge, paying your rent, to understanding the system – it touches us every single second of our lives, more or less.

However, collaboration is seen as a crucial antidote to these barriers. Nina emphasises its absolute necessity: "we are all experts in our field. We need to combine this expertise." Civic educators, through their close ties to communities, can collaborate with financial experts to co-create and deliver relevant content. Milan agrees, noting that while the Serbian education system can be rigid, "there have been some good examples – I've seen teachers who are eager to learn and use financial literacy as a gateway to broader topics, including health and wellbeing."

Jana adds that schools appreciate the ready-made materials and measurement tools provided by FinQ, and funders like the Slovenská sporiteľňa Foundation and the National Bank Foundation are highly supportive. This collaborative ecosystem is vital for expanding reach and impact.

> Students are not pushed to perform; everyone starts at their own level, children from marginalised communities in particular are very interested in the topic of finances, and we even have responses that the children themselves then teach their parents how to save.

Asked what gives them hope, all three of them are optimistic. "I'm very hopeful," Nina asserts, "having witnessed the field grow from a niche area to a top agenda item for many governments." While acknowledging that the focus has largely been on personal budgeting, she sees a powerful shift towards integrating it into civic education.

For Jana, a financially and civically literate community is one "where people know how institutions work, and are willing to engage in solving local issues – whether through discussions, voting, volunteering, or participating in civic initiatives." It's about active, informed participation.

Milan envisions a new generation – deeply aware of how public spending shapes daily life. For him, it's about giving young people the tools to understand the world around them, think critically, and grow into responsible, engaged citizens.

Financial literacy isn't just about managing money – it's about building personal agency, understanding how power operates in society, and preparing a generation to participate meaningfully in shaping their democratic future.

In the right hands, numbers become more than figures – they become blueprints for dignity, justice, and enduring hope. ■

Jana Kovaľová leads the FinQ Centrum in Slovakia – a non-profit organisation dedicated to developing financial literacy and financial culture through teacher training, supporting the development of student competencies and educational materials for educators and students.

Milan Petrovic is a programme director at Nauci-Me (Teach me), awarded the 'Best Educator of Serbia' in 2020 for his innovative approach to education, student motivation and the use of modern teaching methods.

Nina von Gayl is a curator at the Erste Financial Life Park (FLiP) - the organisation offers a broad range of initiatives aiming to promote financial responsibility and explain economic and financial topics, impart practical knowledge and important skills, and foster understanding of interrelationships.

SOURCES OF HOPE

HOPE's booklist for civic action

Democracy flourishes when educators equip citizens not just with facts, but with the curiosity, confidence, and collective imagination to shape society. HOPE's booklist for civic action brings together leading thinkers – from neuroscientists and philosophers to organisers and storytellers – who challenge the notion that citizens are passive consumers of politics. Across disciplines, these authors reveal how hope, narrative, and community can unlock agency, counter polarisation, and inspire bold, systemic solutions.

For civic educators, each title is a practical resource: a workshop-ready framework for re-framing public debate, a case study in movement-building, a blueprint for future-proof institutions, or a reminder that empathy and emotion sit at the heart of democratic learning. Whether you are designing a curriculum, facilitating dialogue, or training the next generation of changemakers, the insights in this collection will help you cultivate critical thinking, courage, and creative participation – all essential ingredients for a vibrant, resilient civic culture.

1 Jon Alexander, ***CITIZENS***

Reframes citizens not as consumers or spectators, but as co-creators of democracy. Offers practical insights for civic educators and institutions ready to rebuild trust and agency from the ground up.
Published by Canbury Press, 2022

2 Philipp Blom, ***Hoffnung***

A historical and philosophical meditation on hope as a cultural force. Offers a critical yet humanistic perspective on how societies can avoid paralysis in the face of global crisis.
Published by Hanser C., 2024

3 Rutger Bregman, ***Moral Ambition***

An urgent manifesto for channelling your talents toward systemic change, written with clarity and conviction. A rallying cry for a generation that refuses to waste its potential on incrementalism.
Published by Little, Brown & Company, 2025

4 Rutger Bregman, ***Humankind***

A myth-busting, well-researched case for believing in the good in people. Offers an antidote to cynicism by showing that trust and cooperation are the true foundations of thriving democracies.
Published by Bloomsbury, 2021

5 Rutger Bregman, ***Utopia for Realists***

Expands the boundaries of political imagination by making the case for bold, evidence-based ideas as viable paths toward a fairer and more humane society.
Published by Bloomsbury, 2018

6 Brené Brown, ***Dare to Lead***

A call to courageous, values-driven leadership that treats hope as a skill, fostering clarity, empathy, and resilience in those guiding others through change.
Published by Random House, 2018

7 Jane Davidson, ***#futuregen***

A firsthand account of pioneering legislation in Wales that puts future generations at the heart of policymaking, offering practical lessons in long-term governance, intergenerational justice, and civic responsibility.
Published by Chelsea Green Publishing, 2020

8 Anand Giridharadas, ***The Persuaders***

A behind-the-scenes look at how activists and organisers build democratic power by changing minds, without compromising on complexity, values, or hope.
Published by Knopf, 2022

9 Hahrie Han, ***How Organizations Develop Activists***

A game-changing look at how civic groups move people from interest to sustained engagement. Offers practical lessons on leadership, narrative and structure for long-term movement building.
Published by Oxford University Press, 2014

10 Rob Hopkins, ***How to Fall in Love with the Future***

Blends vivid community case studies with step-by-step imagination exercises, demonstrating how collective visioning can spark concrete local projects and policy shifts.
Published by Chelsea Green Publishing, 2025

11 Rob Hopkins, ***From What Is to What If***

Combines hands-on "imagination labs" with case studies – e.g. rewired school curricula, citizen-led street redesigns, local energy co-ops – to show how participatory creativity turns bold ideas into resilient, everyday solutions.
Published by Chelsea Green Publishing, 2021

12 George Lakoff, ***The Political Mind***

Unpacks how political beliefs are shaped not by logic, but by metaphor, emotion and neural pathways. Makes a compelling case for reframing civic education around how the brain actually works.
Published by Viking Adult, 2008

13 George Lakoff, ***Don't Think of an Elephant***

Concise framing handbook showing how language, values, and cognitive science steer public debate – essential for educators teaching media literacy and civic communication.
Published by Chelsea Green Publishing, 2014 (2nd edition)

14 David McRaney, ***How Minds Change***

Delves into the science of persuasion, revealing why people resist facts and how minds can actually shift. Essential reading for civic educators engaging across divides.
Published by Portfolio/Penguin, 2022

15 Martha Nussbaum, ***The Monarchy of Fear***

Analyses the emotional roots of today's political polarisation. A philosophical yet highly accessible appeal to rehumanise public life by understanding fear, anger and hope as civic forces.
Published by Simon & Schuster, 2018

16 Dirk Rossmann & Josef Settele, ***Keine Zeit für Pessimismus***

An unusual pairing of business and science voices to make the case that systemic ecological and democratic renewal must be built on action, not despair.
Published by Quadriga, 2025

17 Jonah Sachs, ***Winning the Story Wars***

Explores how value-driven storytelling beats fear-based messaging. A call to reclaim narrative power in service of justice, empathy and meaningful engagement.
Published by Harvard Business Review Press, 2012

18 Rebecca Solnit, ***Hope in the Dark***

Unearths overlooked histories of grassroots victories to show how disciplined, action-oriented hope can turn uncertainty into organised resistance and concrete change.
Published by Haymarket Books, 2016 (revised edition)

19 Danny Sriskandarajah, ***Power to the People***

Draws on global civil society insights to explore how institutions can rebuild trust by distributing power and redesigning participation. Grounded in lived experience and fresh from within the sector.
Published by Headline, 2025

20 Ezra Klein, ***Why We're Polarized***

Dissects the deep structural causes of polarisation in modern democracies. Illuminates the feedback loops between identity, media and party politics with clarity and insight.
Published by Profile Books, 2020

Community foundations: Infrastructures for imagination

An interview with **ALEXANDRA STEF**

FOR SOMEONE WHO'S NEVER HEARD OF THEM – WHAT ARE COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS? AND WHAT KIND OF DIFFERENCE DO THEY MAKE IN A SOCIETY?

Community foundations are locally rooted philanthropic institutions that organise generosity into tools – like pooled funds – to support community-driven innovation. They exist in over 2,000 places worldwide, each uniquely shaped by local context.

New ones are emerging across Africa, Europe, Latin America, and Oceania – sometimes as the first of their kind. There's a saying in the field: "When you've seen one community foundation, you've seen one community foundation." Still, there are common features that speak to the difference they make. At their best, they begin not from what's missing, but from what's already there, mobilising skills, networks, aspirations, and resources to build confidence in a community's capacity to respond creatively to challenges.

This flip from needs to assets unlocks another shift: seeing the community as a source of ingenuity, problem-solving, and creativity. In other words, it has agency to act on what matters.

YOU RECENTLY CO-LED "INFRASTRUCTURES FOR THE FUTURE" (IF) – A GLOBAL GATHERING OF COMMUNITY FOUNDATION MOVEMENTS. WHAT WAS THE SPARK BEHIND IT? AND WHAT MADE IT SPECIAL?

IF was sparked by a shared sense that community foundations are uniquely positioned to enable futures in a time of disruption. As mistrust, division, and disconnection grow, they can surface local resources, foster belonging, and anchor hope in place.

> Community foundations are well-positioned to show that evolving, co-created structures are more credible, resilient, and impactful than static ones.

The core question was: *How can community foundation movements act as infrastructure for futures of resilience and belonging, and what role should their supporters play?* It brought together 100 support practitioners from 35 countries across Africa, the Americas, Europe, and Oceania. In a deeply co-created, unconference-style format, we explored networked leadership, resourcing, incubation, capacity development, governance, adaptation, futures and collective imagination, belonging, resilience, and movement building.

What made IF truly special was its focus on connection, not just between practitioners, but between the layers of support that help community foundations thrive. By connecting local, national, regional, and global actors, IF invited us to see ourselves as a living, interwoven ecosystem – one with the power to not only spark change, but to multiply it.

IN THAT SPIRIT – CAN COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS HELP REBUILD TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS?

Yes. Perhaps more importantly, they invite us to reimagine what trustworthy institutions look like. Built from – not for – the community, they earn trust by staying open, responsive, and grounded in lived realities.

At Inspire, we advocate for experimental mindsets and enabling structures like community foundations that resource changemakers to shape change. That includes testing lean institutions with built-in cycles of iteration and redesign.

Community foundations, especially those being born now, are well-positioned to show that evolving, co-created structures are more credible, resilient, and impactful than static ones.

AT IF, YOU EXPLORED THE IDEA THAT FUTURES ARE *PRACTICED*, NOT PREDICTED. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN, AND HOW MIGHT IT SHOW UP IN EVERYDAY COMMUNITY WORK?

The future exists only in our minds – often as projections of the past. To avoid replicating what no longer serves us, we can practise futures: step into imagined presents, stretch our senses, and notice what becomes possible.

This playful, embodied "time-travel" helps loosen our grip on certainty. It opens up the Overton window of what's thinkable. Though it may feel uncomfortable, it makes space for new options to emerge.

When practised in community contexts, through metaphors, artefacts, or shared rituals. These futures become more speakable, more plausible, and more available to be shaped.

THE GATHERING TALKED ABOUT "INFRASTRUCTURES" AS SOMETHING COLLECTIVE AND CONNECTED. THAT SOUNDS A BIT ABSTRACT – CAN YOU GROUND IT WITH AN EXAMPLE?

"Infrastructure" in the community foundation world means the networks, learning spaces, incubators, and funders that help the field grow and adapt. These behind-the-scenes actors connect people, surface shared questions, build common language, and support collective learning.

Unlike nonprofits that deliver services, infrastructure organisations create conditions for others to thrive. At Inspire, we work with these enablers – those creating incentives for new catalyst organisations to emerge and weaving relationships that make change possible.

NECE, for instance, acts as infrastructure for civic educators – holding space for connection and growth.

Infrastructure often supports defined fields, like education or philanthropy, but can also span boundaries, linking proximate and emergent fields and bridging local, national, and international action.

That's what "collective and connected" means: enabling systems-level change by linking across layers and domains. In an increasingly complex world, this connective tissue becomes vital, helping fields act as living systems that can sense, respond, and evolve.

INSPIRE WORKS ACROSS CONTINENTS – WHAT HAVE DIFFERENT CONTEXTS TAUGHT YOU ABOUT CIVIC SPACES?

That limited resources can spark remarkable creativity. When a group of local people is inspired by a new idea, and supported by generous partners, they can activate their community's assets and kick off a virtuous circle.

From Puno in Peru to Volta in Ghana to Stara Pazova in Serbia, we've seen how open-minded, entrepreneurial people with a hopeful vision can create new civic tools and organisations like community foundations. These efforts often begin not with money – the traditional lever of philanthropy – but with social and imagination capital: people offering time, energy, and ideas to build something new.

Context-specific approaches, like sports-based fundraising events, can mobilise diverse capital, turning participation into tangible support and joy. That shared act of building something bigger than oneself fosters a deep sense of belonging.

A key insight: having a sparker organisation – someone who notices, frames, and nurtures early momentum – can make all the difference.

MANY PEOPLE FEEL BURNT OUT OR POWERLESS IN THE FACE OF TODAY'S CRISES. HOW DO COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS SUPPORT BELONGING AND RESILIENCE (AND NOT JUST SURVIVAL, BUT EMOTIONAL AND CIVIC RENEWAL)?

Belonging and resilience lie at the heart of what many community foundations now understand as their deeper purpose. Both are systems-level outcomes, greater than the sum of their parts.

At the IF gathering, we explored how belonging is central to the purpose of connected infrastructure organisations that cultivate a larger understanding of what we share. We heard from a funder collaborative on migration that redefined its mission to centre belonging as its deeper work; from a network exploring ecological belonging as a whole-systems understanding of interconnection; and from a community foundation placing belonging at the centre – not just as a programmatic response to new arrivals in a conservative community, but as a long-term vision of a place where everyone feels like a local.

Resilience, too, is a collective response. Community foundations foster it by learning from crises, redesigning their tools, and enabling distributed agency and creativity. Practices like participatory grantmaking, collective imagination, and innovation funds help surface new leaders and ideas, building capacity across the community, distributed across multiple nodes and collaborations, not just in some designated organisations.

WHAT ROLE DOES IMAGINATION PLAY IN SYSTEMS CHANGE – AND HOW DO YOU KEEP IT ALIVE, ESPECIALLY WHEN HOPE FEELS HARD TO HOLD?

Imagination is upstream. Before systems can change, we have to imagine differently. As systems thinker Donella Meadows said, the greatest leverage point is the mindset from which a system arises. Imagination loosens our grip on what is and helps us lean into what might be, resisting the pull of false certainty and familiar patterns.

Through stories, metaphors, and group practices, collective imagination helps new ideas gain cultural traction. I stay imaginative by gathering people to dream and experiment together. Historical examples of unlikely change – often sparked by the collaboration of strangers – remind me that social trust can achieve the seemingly impossible. If we stay open to emerging possibilities, we can build forward even without a roadmap.

The only way to beat the crisis of imagination is by doing what our ancestors have done for millennia: dreaming together and multiplying the paths we can see beyond the single track ahead.

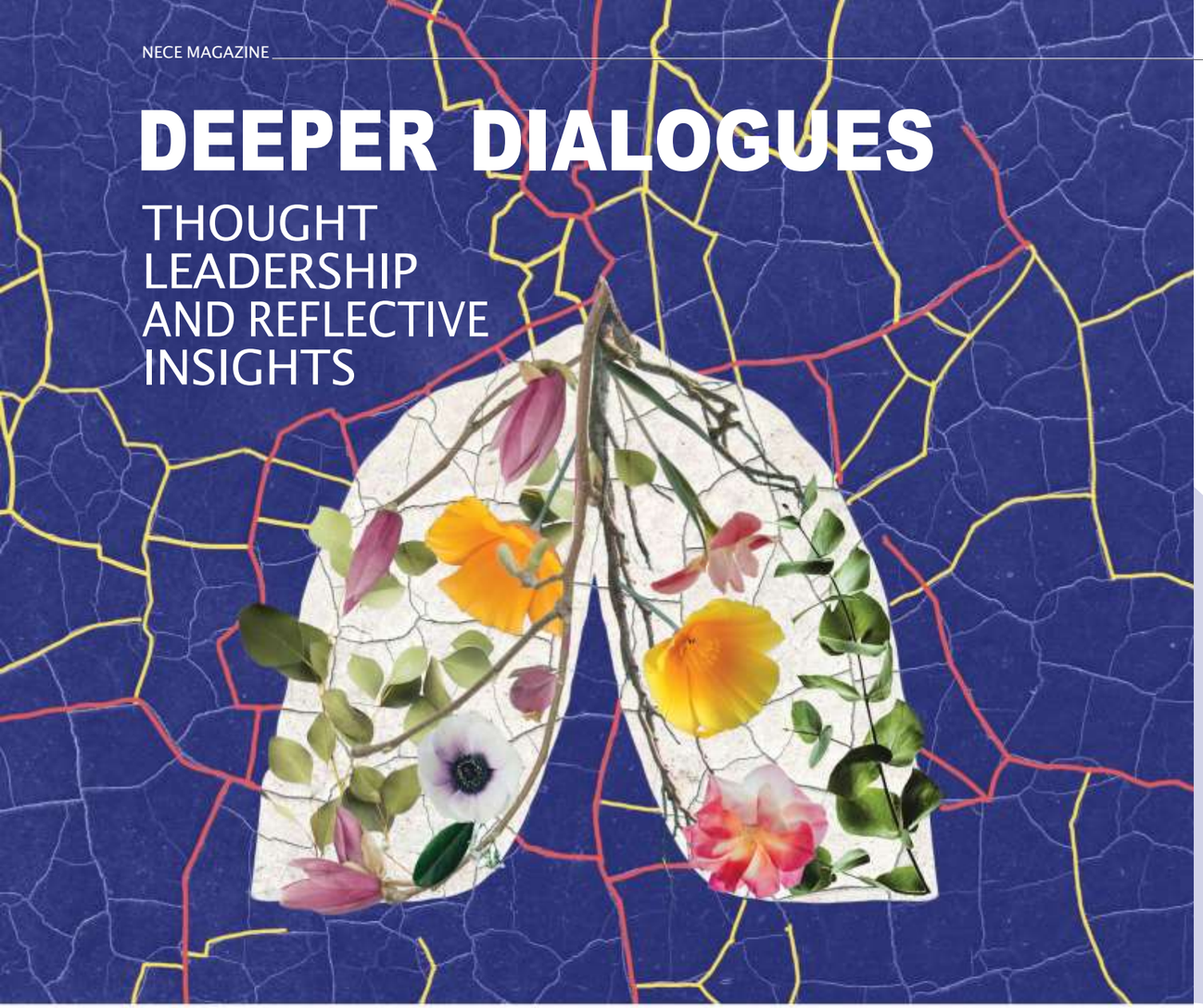
Many community foundations know this intuitively. If you find the others – those curious enough to try, willing to test, and open to not knowing how things will turn out – hope will come. It's an active, doing-it-to-feel-it kind of hope.

Community foundations design tools to power these demonstrations and invite us to see our communities not as broken, but as brimming with possibility. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy of the best kind. ■

Alexandra Stef is a learning strategist and participation designer supporting community-led change. She leads Collective Learning & Innovation at Inspire Institute and consults through Collective Futures. Based in Madrid, she works globally to co-create civic and philanthropic infrastructure that fosters belonging, imagination, and systems change.

DEEPER DIALOGUES

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP AND REFLECTIVE INSIGHTS



(Un)shrinking civic space in Serbia: Lessons for Europe

By **SOFIJA TODOROVIĆ**

The story of Serbian civil society since the 1990s shows how a democracy can decay in plain sight while institutions keep their outward shape. The first non-governmental groups that emerged during the break-up of Yugoslavia opposed war and promoted dialogue, so nationalist media portrayed them as foreign agents and traitors. That accusation never disappeared. Even after the fall of Milošević, governments tolerated activists only when they were useful, and the mistrust seeded in the nineties remained a reservoir that could be tapped whenever power felt threatened.

The decisive turn came once the Serbian Progressive Party consolidated control in 2012. The rollback did not begin with new laws; it began with narratives. Tabloids under informal state direction recycled the old "enemy within" trope, this time aimed at organisations working on regional reconciliation, gender equality or environmental protection. Individuals rather than groups were singled out. By isolating one researcher, one journalist, one student, the authorities sent a silent message to thousands of potential critics: this could happen to you. Traditional media still reach the widest audience, and their nightly broadcasts established a common vocabulary of suspicion.

The tactic evolved into what I call "the Kosovo Trap". Any deviation from the official line on Kosovo triggers instant denunciation. The issue functions as a loyalty test; pass it and you may speak on other matters, fail it and you prove you are outside the national family. This mechanism packages dissent as treachery and allows repression to present itself as patriotism. At the same time, the government borrows arguments from foreign strongmen to justify domestic measures. When parts of the United States labelled certain NGOs "foreign funded", Belgrade cited the example to launch financial investigations at home. The regime also invites sympathetic figures from Hungary or Georgia to Serbian talk-shows, creating the impression of a respectable international front against liberal norms.

Legal changes followed only once the atmosphere was prepared. Police raids on civic offices, visa-like paperwork for activists receiving foreign grants, procedural obstacles to peaceful assembly – each step small enough to appear technical, together enough to chill public life. The creeping pace matters. Outsiders see isolated incidents; insiders adapt gradually until the loss becomes normal. EuroPride 2022 offered a clear illustration. For months the authorities implied permission, then issued a formal ban days before the march, citing security risks they themselves had stoked. The signal was clear: rights exist at the pleasure of the state.

While institutions hollowed out, social media became a contested territory. Troll farms spread confusion, yet platforms also allowed decentralised movements such as "Don't Let Belgrade Drown" to bypass censorship. Livestreams of police violence reached citizens who no longer trusted the evening news. Young activists learned to mix memes, satire and precise legal demands in campaigns that kept protests unpredictable. Flexibility became a survival skill. Organisations abandoned rigid project calendars and opened Telegram channels that could pivot within hours. Funders willing to support that agility proved crucial; those insisting on step-by-step log-frames did not.

> Hope, in this landscape, is not optimism. It is disciplined attention to openings that still exist and solidarity that can still travel. Every time citizens act together – even to clean a riverbank or defend a local library – they rehearse democratic agency. Those rehearsals accumulate. Authoritarian strategy depends on isolating such gestures, convincing people that they are alone. Our counter-strategy is to weave them into a visible fabric. As long as that weaving continues, civic space never vanishes; it contracts and expands like a lung.

The psychological dimension cannot be ignored. Many Serbs carry the unprocessed trauma of the nineties and a belief that the country is uniquely misunderstood by the world. State media reinforce that mindset daily, yet even progressive circles absorb traces of it. Confronting those internalised narratives is part of our work. Workshops that unpack inherited stories of humiliation or siege have helped activists design messages that resonate beyond their usual audiences. The aim is not to erase patriotism but to disentangle it from authoritarian reflexes.

What does this mean for colleagues elsewhere in Europe? First, censorship rarely announces itself with a bang. It arrives as ridicule, then as selective harassment, then as a procedural hurdle. Educators should train students to recognise that progression early. Second, repression personalises. Protecting a single whistle-blower is not symbolic; it is structural defence. Third, memory work matters. Societies that avoid hard conversations about their past give authoritarians a free warehouse of emotional material to exploit.

Yet the Serbian experience also offers grounds for hope. Each attempt to shrink space generates inventive responses. When police confiscated documents from a human rights office, volunteer lawyers created an online broadcast explaining citizens' legal protections; the clip attracted more views than the evening news that day. When television ignored environmental protests, pensioners filmed the marches on their phones, then uploaded subtitled versions for diaspora networks that re-circulated them back into Serbia. Young coders built browser extensions highlighting disinformation patterns on the front pages of tabloids, turning propaganda into a teachable moment.

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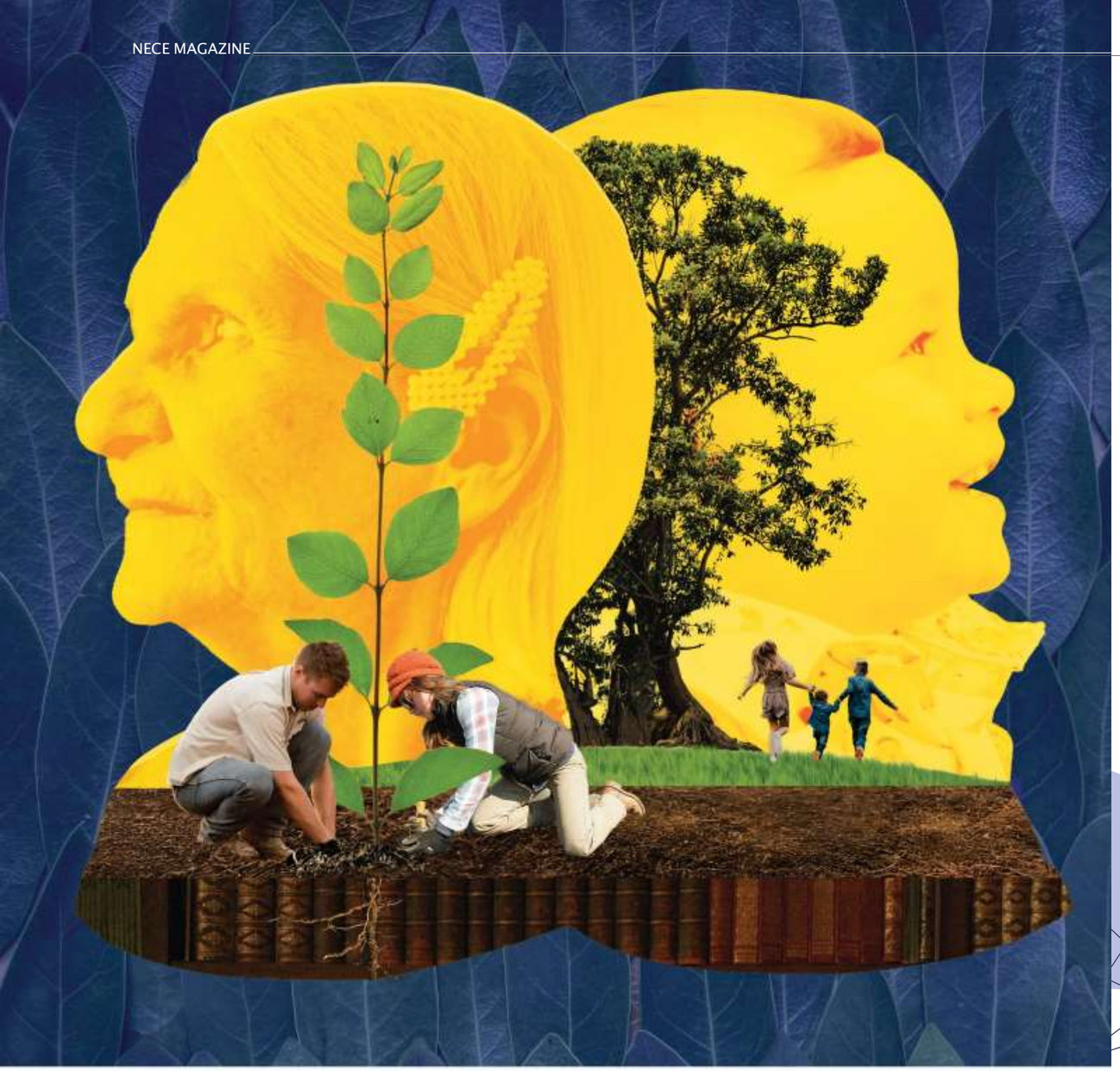
I often recall a line we use with young volunteers: "Courage is contagious, so is resignation – choose what you spread." Serbia's past decade shows how swiftly resignation can flow through a population, yet it also shows how pockets of courage disrupt the narrative of inevitability. In classrooms, community centres and online forums across Europe, educators hold the craft of turning individual concern into collective capacity. If they teach the warning signs early, provide space for grief and anger to be named, and model flexible, joyful cooperation, the cycle we endured in Belgrade need not repeat elsewhere. The future of civic space may look fragile, but fragility is not destiny. It is an invitation to reinforce what matters, to cultivate habits of mutual defence, and to remind one another that the room for action is larger than the authorities would have us believe.

Hope stands at the threshold between what is and what could be, asking us to step through. I have seen streets fall silent under fear and fill again with people who decided silence was no longer acceptable. The difference lay not in resources or perfect plans but in the moment when enough individuals realised that their voices still carried weight. That insight cannot be granted from outside; it grows within communities that share stories of resistance and small victories. Our task, then, is to keep those stories moving – across borders, across generations – so the next time a government tests how far it can push, it finds a citizenry already practised in pushing back. ■

Sofija Todorović is the Director of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) Serbia and a recognised human rights activist and educator. A law graduate from Belgrade, she became an IVLP alumna in 2023 – the U.S. Department of State's flagship professional exchange programme. Her work has earned her the 'Ledolomac' Human Rights Prize (2018) and BeFem's Feminist Achievement Award (2019).



Hope in action: Wales and the law for future generations

By **KAMELIYA TOMOVA** in conversation with **JANE DAVIDSON**

"Picture the oldest person you love," Jane asks as she opens our session at the HEARTH Summit*. "Now picture the youngest. If that child lives as long as my mother, we are holding two centuries in our minds, of people who are alive and we care about now." She begins every talk this way because it makes future generations tangible; they become family, not abstract posterity.

Jane is best known for proposing what became the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and for her book #futuregen: Lessons from a Small Country. Yet, as she reminds us, Wales did something unmatched elsewhere: "We are still the only nation with a legal framework that demands every decision serves tomorrow as well as today."

The Act – which applies to the Welsh Government and all its public bodies – embeds seven goals: healthier people, resilient nature, an innovative low-carbon economy, a more equal society, cohesive communities, thriving culture, and global responsibility – and five required ways of working: long-term thinking, prevention, collaboration, integration, and public involvement. "Both the goals and the ways of working are in the legislation itself," Jane says. "People can't wriggle out of law in the way they can wriggle out of policy."

Grounding hope in law sounds bold, but Jane is matter-of-fact. She recalls her time in the Welsh cabinet when between them, thousands of recommendations flooded ministers regularly. "Advice disappears in the inbox," she recounts. "We need pathways to delivery that stick." So when Wales wanted to accelerate action to net zero that was fair to farmers and steelworkers, Jane was asked to convene an international panel which proposed delivery pathways for the next decade in a just and nature-positive way. "Unless you show the steps – what legislation, what budget, what community conversations – nothing moves."

The Act also created accountability through an independent Future Generations Commissioner and the Auditor General of Wales to test long-term impact. That architecture, Jane insists, is about imagination, not punishment. "We built support structures so public servants can ask, 'What would prevent the problem rather than patch it?'" All organisations are also required to maximise their delivery to all the goals, so this is a systems thinking approach. In practice, this means health boards thinking about childhood play space alongside surgical targets, and transport planners weighing carbon, congestion and community connection in one ledger.

Jane's optimism is stubborn by choice. "Cynicism is lazy," she laughs. "Within 25 years the world must change course. I refuse to believe we cannot design institutions that make kindness normal." Hope, in her view, demands more than inspiring conferences. "You leave a summit with embers in your hands," she says. "If you let them die, nothing changes. Our job is to fan them into movement." Her appeal is disarmingly simple: treat unborn citizens as stakeholders with legal rights. Wales has shown it can be done. "Now," Jane adds, "we need allies ready to fight for the same duties in their own legislatures. The future is waiting in every family photo. How could we do less?"

> "We are still the only nation with a legal framework that demands every decision serves tomorrow as well as today.

"When a law gives people permission to think differently, they rarely want to go back," Jane reflects, ten years after the Well-being of Future Generations Act entered force. Interest has spread far beyond Wales: "I've had overtures from about forty countries, interested in exploring similar frameworks now," she notes, "and the list keeps growing."

Yet her pride is rooted at home, in tangible shifts that would have been unlikely without the Act. Local councils once saw new roads as default solutions; in the spirit of the law, the Welsh Government introduced a climate test, and dozens of planned schemes were paused or scrapped. Speed limits in every residential area were dropped to twenty miles an hour – "motoring lobbyists hated it, but the data on children's safety spoke louder," Jane says. The Act also opened political space for bold social policy. Wales banned smacking, launched a universal-basic-income pilot for care leavers and kept the nation officially a "country of sanctuary" during an era of hostile rhetoric on migration. "Most of these decisions are about society," she stresses, "yet every one carries environmental, societal, cultural, and economic consequences – the Act forces us to weigh them together."

Success, however, is uneven. Many bodies wrote wellbeing plans, then parked them during the pandemic. Jane sees a cultural hurdle: "The legislation is radical, so people sit back, waiting for a perfect manual. We need more organisations to be more imaginative about the world they want for their children." Definitions inside the law can feel elastic – long term, prevention, involvement. A current parliamentary review may tighten those terms. Jane welcomes it. "Without clarity, managers wiggle out. Give them firm definitions and supportive auditing; then they can move."

> Hope is iterative. It expands each time someone, somewhere, decides that serving future generations is the minimum standard, not a luxury."

Another challenge is mindset. Health boards still treat prosperity or culture as someone else's brief. The Future Generations Commissioner now curates a library of global examples to show what integrated action looks like. Jane calls that curation "truth-telling in practice": honest case studies that inspire rather than decorate reports. She is alert to corporate greenwashing – words used and abused. "Sustainable development became a slogan in the nineties," she warns. Clear duties, transparent audits and pathways rather than loose recommendations help guard against capture. "A pathway says: if the government is serious, here are the next steps with dates and budgets. Citizens can track progress. Spin wilts under daylight." Still, scepticism persists, especially where poverty makes the future feel abstract. Jane's answer is connective: "Food security, for instance, improves today and tomorrow. Regenerative farming cuts costs, restores soil, feeds local people. Hope comes alive when policy meets immediate need and long-term fairness together." Her stubborn optimism remains intact: "The Act did not appear perfect on day one; it grows through use. Every community that adapts the model pushes Wales to do better. Hope is iterative. It expands each time someone, somewhere, decides that serving future generations is the minimum standard, not a luxury."

Jane Davidson is the author of #futuregen: Lessons from a Small Country, which tells the story of Wales becoming the first country to legislate for future generations. A former Minister in the Welsh Government, she led pioneering reforms in sustainability, education and climate policy, and was the driving force behind the Well-being of Future Generations Act. She is Pro Vice-Chancellor Emeritus at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and continues to contribute internationally to sustainability leadership.

*The Hearth Summit, organised by The Wellbeing Project, gathered over 1,000 changemakers in Ljubljana from 17–20 June 2025 to explore key global challenges, such as climate, inequality, democracy, and AI, through interactive workshops and immersive wellbeing practices.

NECE FESTIVAL 2026

TRUST

Across Europe and beyond, societies are grappling with the fractures of polarisation, disinformation, institutional fatigue, and the growing appeal of extremist narratives. Trust, long considered the invisible foundation of democratic life, has now become one of its most contested and fragile battlegrounds.

In 2026, NECE will place this topic at the heart of its annual festival. Under the banner of **TRUST**, we will examine how civil society can respond to the erosion of confidence in democratic institutions, political representatives, and even shared reality itself.

The latest Edelman Trust Barometer 2025 underscores the urgency of this conversation. The report reveals widening trust gaps between institutions and the public – particularly in democracies. Trust in government remains low, with only 42% of respondents worldwide expressing confidence in their national leadership. Alarmingly, trust in science, the media, and NGOs has also declined. The dominant sentiment? "My country is more divided than ever before."

NECE's exploration of trust will unfold at several levels such as **soci6l trust** or the belief that others in your community are honest and fair; **ifistitutiofi6l trust** or the confidence in public bodies, democratic processes, the judiciary, education, and media; **procedur6l trust**, the belief that the "rules of the game" are fair, transparent, and apply to all.

But trust is not just about confidence in others – it is also about **truth**. Trust depends on a shared understanding of reality. When that shared ground erodes – through targeted misinformation, ideological echo chambers, or a weakening of independent institutions – trust becomes impossible.

At the NECE Festival 2026, we will highlight the role of those who work daily to defend that shared ground: scientists, educators, judges, journalists, and civic educators. In times of conflict, their work becomes both more difficult and more vital. What can civil society do to protect and renew trust in these truth-seeking institutions?

We will also ask: how can trust be rebuilt across divides – not just top-down through institutions, but horizontally among citizens? We take inspiration from Robert Putnam's reminder that democracy needs both "bonding" trust within close communities and "bridging" trust that reaches across lines of class, faith, and politics. What does it take to restore the belief that change is possible, and that democratic processes can deliver it?

TRUST is not just a theme. It's a test – for our societies, our democracies, and for civil society itself.

In 2026, NECE will bring together educators, thinkers, activists, and institutions to explore how we move forward in an age where trust can no longer be taken for granted – and must instead be rebuilt, one relationship, one principle, one shared truth at a time. ■

Museum of Secret Surveillance, Tirana

IMPRESSUM

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