



SoNeC

Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles in Europe:

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

Abridged Version



Editorial

This brochure is based on the collaborative work of the members of nine organisations in seven European countries (Austria as Lead, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, United Kingdom, Hungary) in the years 2020 to 2022. The cooperation was financed by the EU funding programme KA2 Erasmus+ Exchange of good practice.

sonec.org/

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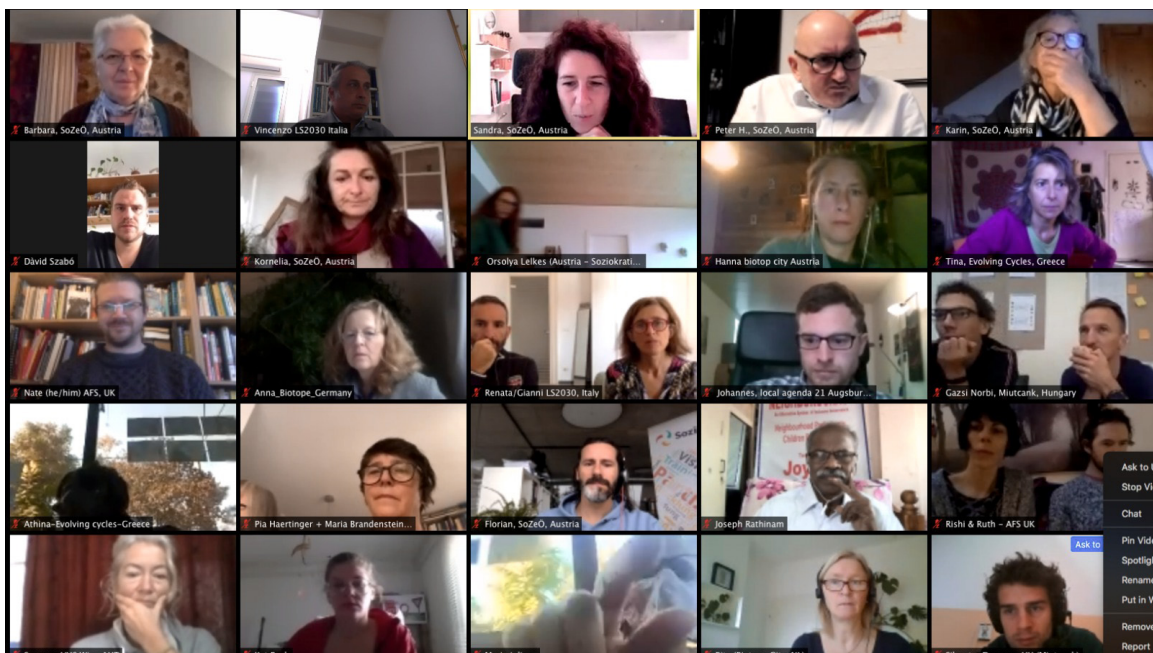
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1. Introduction

1.1 Who is writing this booklet, and why?

SoNeC - Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles is an [EU-funded initiative](#), active from 2020 to 2022. Its aim was to explore the potential of neighbourhood-based social communities with bottom-up, participatory and inclusive decision-making processes to solve local social and environmental problems. The SoNeC Partnership aims to raise awareness of the practices of common decision making, shared responsibility, participation and more generally, political action of citizens on a local level. The ambition of this approach is to promote and thus contribute to the development of [European values](#), the [European Green Deal](#), as well as the [UN SDGs](#) in a way which is accessible to European neighbourhoods, and thus to all European citizens.

The [SoNeC partnership](#) included nine organisations from seven European countries. Together, they researched, explored and exchanged best practices for developing neighbourhood-based projects in Europe. Joseph Rathinam, Director of Networking of the Neighbourhood Community Network (NCN) with over 25 years of experience training Indian “[Neighbourhood Parliaments](#)”, was involved as an advisor to the partnership. During the 26 months of the project, SoNeC partners jointly developed the overall concept for SoNeC and now aim to share their work with municipalities and associations across Europe to promote the concept and its potential for social, political and environmental transformation.

Citizen groups in Europe have increasingly demanded participation, especially since the beginning of the pandemic crisis. At the same time, Municipal councils and city parliaments ask for more participation and joint responsibility from citizens. The SoNeC approach offers a framework for effective citizen participation and enables citizens to (co-)decide on matters directly affecting their living environment.

In this document, we intend to provide high quality-information for an evolving framework called SoNeC to municipal councils, city councils, municipalities and all interested policymakers, neighbourhood-based organisations, communities and corresponding initiatives and citizens. We hope that you, the reader, will implement and also adapt this concept to be socially and politically relevant within your unique context. This booklet offers an overview, for more information, see the long version in your language <https://sonec.org/sonec-handbook/>

1.2 What is a Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circle?

A Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circle, or SoNeC, is a group of neighbours that come together regularly in a circle. Everyone living in the same neighbourhood, regardless of their social status, is welcome to be part of a SoNeC, from elected political representatives to homeless people. Any issues that affect the neighbourhood that people care about and have the ability to influence or resolve together can be addressed.

SoNeC empowers local communities to create more inclusive and socially just neighbourhoods, to address many of the pressing challenges (e.g. climate change adaptation, food sovereignty, energy security) on a local level. It allows finding more effective solutions and evolving political participation at the same time. By working together in circles in neighbourhood-based, participatory and inclusive decision-making processes and by ensuring collaboration with local governmental authorities, existing initiatives and like-minded organisations, neighbours can help to take care of their local community more effectively.

Experiences in sociocratic organisations and neighbourhood projects show that common decision-making engenders co-responsibility. SoNeC becomes a place to learn and practise political action and cooperation, social competence, solidarity, values and to exchange knowledge.

1.3 The SoNeC Concept - origins of the framework

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

- [Neighbourhood Parliaments](#) developed in India in the 1970s and spread to Africa and South America in 2018 as a means to empower citizens to solve local problems.
- The Sociocratic Circle-organisation Method (SCM) - or [Sociocracy](#) - was developed in the Netherlands in the 1970s and has spread around the world since 1990. As an organisational approach, it is designed to strengthen the responsibility of individuals within organisations.
- The design-principles of "[Governing the Commons](#)" by economist Nobel-laureate Elinor Ostrom, which provide a framework for collective management and sharing of common resources on a local level without centralised control.

The SoNeC Concept is a framework for adapting and implementing Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles into the European context. It is specifically designed with European values in mind, such as tolerance, mutual respect, non-discrimination, solidarity and gender equality. SoNeC encourages change through sharing knowledge, information, as well as providing a supportive network.

For a more detailed description of concept and the research behind it see <https://sonec.org/sonec-handbook/>

1.4 Why start a SoNeC?

The motivations for launching a neighbourhood initiative can be diverse. Three main approaches can be distinguished, which may overlap in practice:

1. Common objective on a local level, like a specific problem
2. Neighbourhood cooperation to build better relationships
3. An individual takes the initiative to build a neighbourhood community, driven by a vision of a better world.

For example, a neighbourhood circle can decide to work on:

- **Climate change adaptation** (aquifer recharge or sustainable stormwater drainage systems)
- **Biodiversity** (protecting habitats or planting trees)
- **Food security** (food-coops, community Supported Agriculture or community gardens)
- **Energy safety** (energy communities or biomass district heating)
- **Infrastructure improvements** (streets or playgrounds),
- **Sustainable mobility** (reduce traffic or create pedestrian streets),
- **Cleanliness** (joint rubbish collection or community waste management)
- **Caring Community** (communal elderly care strategy or intergenerational learning)

1.5 Impacts at local, regional and European level

Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circles (SoNeC) offer effective citizen participation and thus an important complement to the representative democratic system at local level. By opening up new, genuine ways of participation, SoNeC can help transform political participation and decision-making, not just on a local, but also at regional, national and European levels.

Extensive experience both internationally and within Europe lends strong evidence of the many opportunities and benefits of sociocratic neighbourhood circles:

- Creating resilient local communities that work together through cooperation
- Creating safe spaces to express opinions
- Learning and practising transparent and fair decision-making processes
- Closing the gap between political participation and citizens
- Raising capacity to find solutions in empowered and self-organised groups
- Solving neighbourhood issues and improving everyday lives in the face of multiple crises
- Improving communication skills and strengthening relationships in the neighbourhood
- Increasing the sense of belonging, trust and solidarity among neighbours
- Increasing cooperation and conflict-resolution capabilities
- Improving self-confidence of citizens and leading to more co-responsibility
- Increasing citizens' commitment and engagement to local social and political issues
- Integrating people of different ages, ethnic backgrounds and cultures
- Increasing the skills and knowledge present in the neighbourhood.

As we saw in our case studies, there can be many positive impacts in implementing SoNeC initiatives. Many of these can be directly felt at a **local level**, meaning the neighbourhood itself and the local government authorities and other institutions working aiming to work at local level. However, the benefits of SoNeC can easily scale-up to the **regional level** whenever such an initiative is launched by a LEADER-Region or Agenda 21-Region, for instance. Finally, the benefits of SoNeC can also be felt at **national and European level**, supporting many of the most crucial policies currently being implemented (such as the European Green Deal).

By offering a framework for inclusive participation, SoNeC creates networks that can support better regulation and evidence-based policies at all levels of decision-making, while generating structures that promote implementation and adaptation of policies to the local conditions.

1.6 Key elements for success

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

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

- Is there a space to meet for a larger group of people – indoors or outdoors – in public space?
- Is there good infrastructure for meetings (table, whiteboard, Flipchart, digital equipment, storage room, toilets, kitchen?)
- Are there digital resources for online meetings in the neighbourhood, do people have access to the technology needed to participate?
- Could there be financial support to buy material, pay for flyers and meet additional needs of the initiative?



2. The SoNeC Approach

2.1 Main Principles of a SoNeC

The following principles can be used to describe SoNeC as an innovative framework for the self-organisation of the political-public space. They are based on a comparison of the approaches of Indian [Neighbourhood Parliaments](#), [Sociocracy](#) and the [Commons](#) as well as our own experiences. Strong convergence is evident here, as described comprehensively in the [full version](#).

1. Neighbourhood based

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

2. Subsidiarity

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

3. Sociocratic circle structure

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

4. Joint steering and learning

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

5. Polycentric governance

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

2.2 The basic structure of a SoNeC

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

The Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circle (SoNeC)

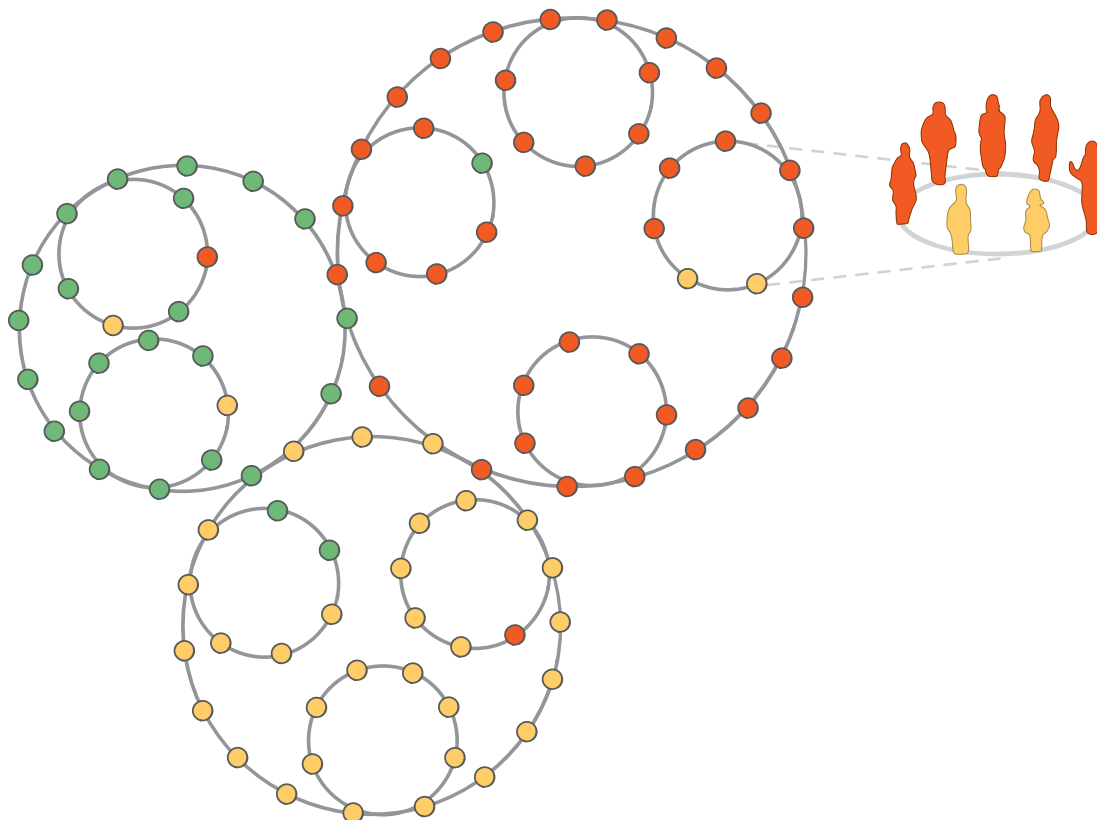
ideally consists of 20-40 households in the same local neighbourhood. The members of the SoNeC are elected by his/her respective household (family, partnership, shared apartment, individual) and decide to join the meetings of the circle regularly.

The age-specific SoNeC

Each SoNeC can be divided into age-specific circles, for instance, children (6 - 12 years), youth (13 - 18 years) and adults (19+ years).

Topic-specific sub-circles within a SoNeC

A SoNeC can establish topic-specific sub-circles with a specific sphere of action, created out of a need or common goal of the neighbourhood. The sub-circle is a means to ensure important and time sensitive tasks are accomplished. Open elections decide who will care for a specific task and take the role of responsible circle member. Working in sub-circles allows everyone to be an active member, take on responsibilities, and feel included.

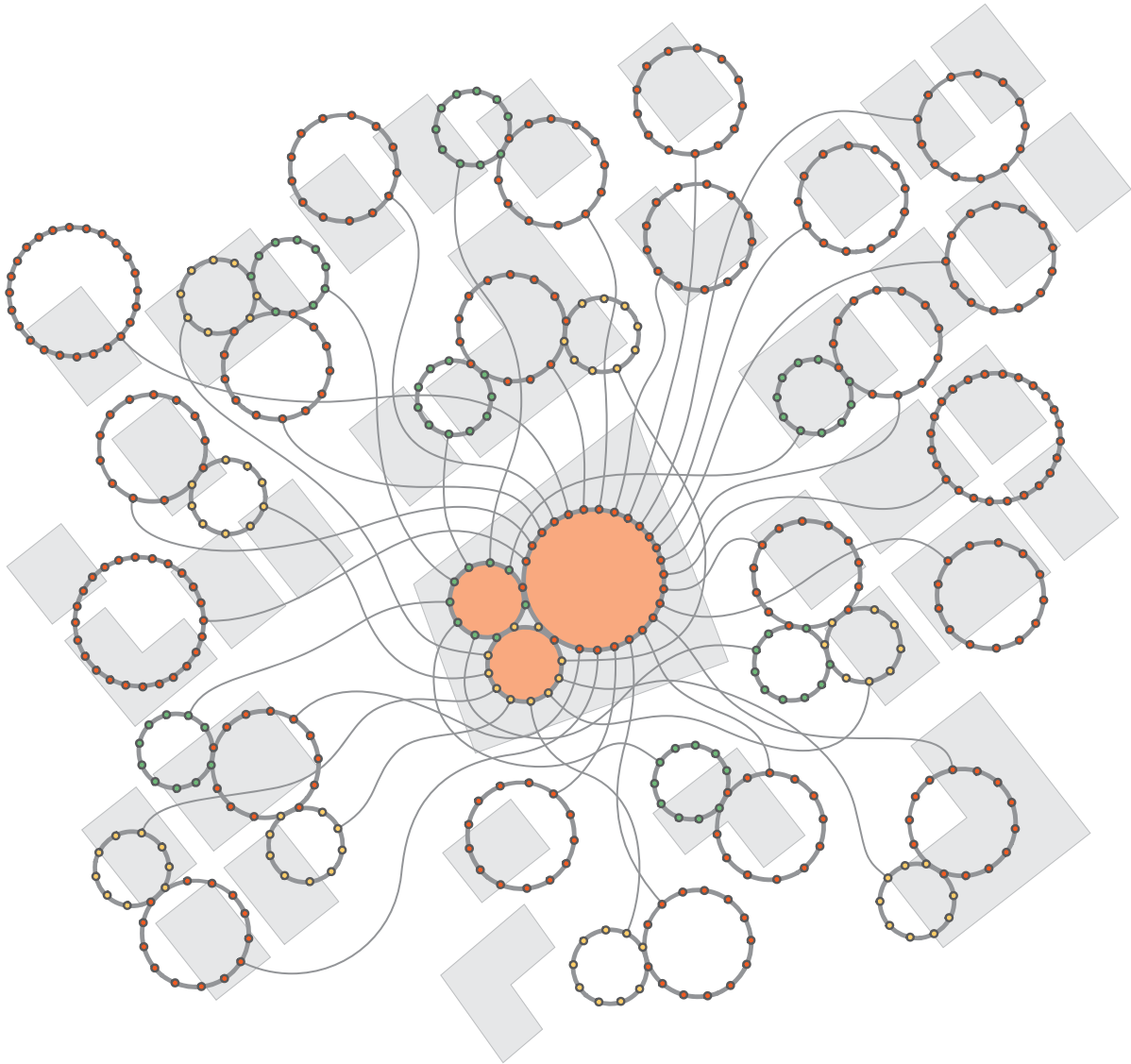


Age-specific circles are connected with each other. Some of the adults (red dots), youths (green dots) and the children (yellow dots) are part of two circles connecting these two circles horizontally.

Topic-specific circles can involve adults, youths and the children working together on a specific topic.

The SoNeC Network Circle connects individual SoNeCs. Every SoNeC elects one representative through open election to build a SoNeC Network Circle. It is made up of representatives from 20 – 40 SoNeCs connecting about 700 households. They organise activities in the wider neighbourhood out of the needs of the local SoNeCs and should be connected to the local administration.

If the local government is willing to work together on a local issue, all local SoNeCs or SoNeC Network Circles can send an elected representative to a monitoring circle where citizens and governmental representatives can consult together.



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

Even if there are no other local SoNeCs to form a SoNeC Network Circle, once a local SoNeC is implemented it should start networking to reach other like-minded communities. Neighbourhood Organizers from other pilot SoNeCs in the region may build a circle for exchanging their experiences and supporting each other. This is called the Circle of Neighbourhood Organisers, and should have its own specific tasks. Continuous learning and development should be organised, ideally by the SoNeC Network Circle, or by the regional Circle of Neighbourhood Organisers if there is no SoNeC Network Circle in the early stages.

2.2 The importance of support from local governments

From our case studies we found that projects work best if they have support from local government and public municipal institutions, which does not have to be financial in nature (but can also be). This can be seen as a recognition that elected politicians understand the benefits from real citizen participation.

Supporting a local SoNeC can mean providing free suitable space or room for meetings and events, supporting the administration of meetings or publicising a local SoNeC newsletter. It can also mean providing paid support staff, direct funds for projects or support for the approval process in requesting funds.



3. Setting up a SoNeC

3.1 Roles within the implementation process

In the process of implementation, we distinguish between five different roles, each with different functions during the process:

- Initiator
- Neighbourhood Organiser
- Responsible Circle member
- Neighbours
- SoNeC Facilitator

Role of the Initiator

Initiators take the essential step of naming the problem and recognising the need for change. They develop an initial vision of the solution process, articulate their goals, formulate their view of the changes needed and convince others to join in. The initiators start the process of learning together about the SoNeC framework, getting in touch with a SoNeC Facilitator. When starting a “regional” or “district” SoNeC, they found the “Implementation Circle” (or I-Circle) which will carry out a mapping of existing initiatives in the region in order to establish synergies from the start.

When the initiator together with the I-Circle and the neighbourhood organisers has built up a strong process of inviting all neighbours and the SoNeC is sustainably established, the initiator can step back from his role and become an equal member of the SoNeC.

Role of the Neighbourhood Organiser

The Neighbourhood Organiser is a person that knows the neighbourhood well and is well connected with the residents. The Neighbourhood Organiser:

- joins the first SoNeC trainings in the region
- builds the first relationships to all neighbours in a selected area
- organises the first events to get to know each other
- informs all stakeholders of any activities throughout the implementation process and meets the other Neighbourhood Organisers at the Circle or Neighbourhood Organisers.

Role of the Responsible Circle Member

Every SoNeC has several roles and responsibilities for the activities and tasks this specific SoNeC decides to carry out. Activities will be created with consent, out of the goals the neighbours have agreed on. When a task is clear a member of the circle will be appointed to fulfil it, elected through open election. When more neighbours are needed to fulfil a task, they create a sub-circle under the lead of the Responsible circle member elected.

Role of the Neighbour

Every person living in a specific place is a neighbour and therefore a potential member of a SoNeC. Every neighbour is invited to the events and circle meetings of their local SoNeC. Each household should be represented by at least one person in the age-specific circle or one of the sub-circles. As a member of an age-specific circle or topic-specific circle, neighbours can put their own topics on the agenda, have a say in all agenda items, take on tasks and be involved in all activities. If a neighbour cannot or does not want to take part in the circle meetings, he/she is invited to take part in other SoNeC events and activities.

Role of the SoNeC Facilitator

A SoNeC Facilitator is familiar with the SoNeC concept and guides the process of implementation in a neighbourhood or district. The SoNeC-Facilitator is experienced in change processes and has the knowledge to accompany the people involved to their desired goal.

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

For more information, see the long version in your language <https://sonec.org/sonec-handbook/>

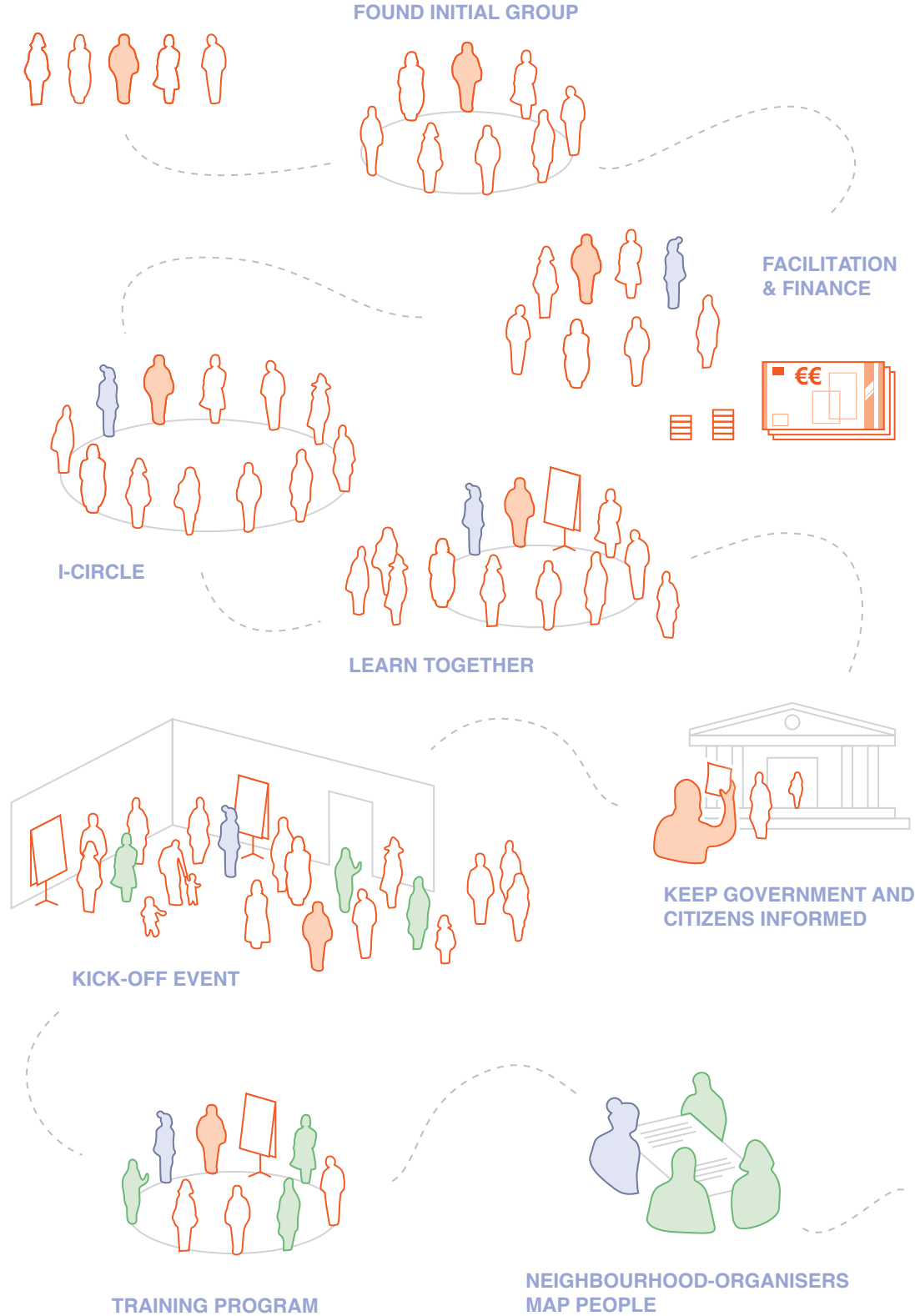
3.2 The ways to launch a SoNeC

To start something new, someone needs to take the initiative. These individuals take the first steps and convince others to join in. Taking the initiative for collective action is also a political act and means taking responsibility for one's own life-world and that of others. We have identified three different actors who may take the initiative to start a SoNeC:

- NGOs and existing regional or local initiatives, such as churches, sports or cultural associations know the people and the local problems. They may have access to funding or bring know-how for community building.
- Local governments, mayors and members of the city council have the democratically legitimised power to initiate change. They can decide to fund and launch a SoNeC in their municipality top-down.
- Citizens can initiate a SoNeC because they are the ones that really know the specific problems which can best be solved together with neighbours. They can spread the idea, find allies and start the implementation bottom-up.

**Developing an implementation process for a whole village or city district -
NGO or Governmental Launch**

If you are working for a local government or if you are part of a national, regional or local issue-centric organisation with strong community connections, start here.



- Initiator
- Neighbour
- SoNeC facilitator
- Neighbourhood organisers

1. FOUND INITIAL GROUP ... form a regional support group

Map your area of impact, it may be a village, a district, a city or whole area to find your focus for the initial efforts and find the people who want to support your idea

2. FINANCE ... take care of calculation and financing

Develop and agree on a financial model for the implementation

3. FACILITATION ... find a SONEC facilitator

The SoNeC Facilitators can be engaged as independent professional, volunteer or employee of partner organisations (organisations committed to supporting this initiative with staff time)

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

Identify potential members for the Implementation Circle (I-Circle), including influential local citizens' (groups) and other allies. The I-Circle consists of 10 – 12 people from as many sectors of your region as possible.

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

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

Present the implementation-plan to your NGO-consortium, the citizens and the local government to be improved and agreed upon. Keep the city government and the citizens informed through the whole process.

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

Launch various events such as kick-off, lectures, performance, future workshop, world café, etc. to involve as many citizens as possible. Therefore, the I-Circle should map existing initiatives and associations in the region. During the Kick-off you will find the first Neighbourhood Organizers. They can use their expertise to start a SoNeC in their area of impact and bring others into the training.

7. TRAINING PROGRAM ... for Neighbourhood Organisers and interested neighbours

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

For more information look to the long version in your language on www.sonec.org

8. NEIGHBOURHOOD-ORGANISERS MAP PEOPLE... Neighbourhood Organisers find engaged people in their neighbourhood

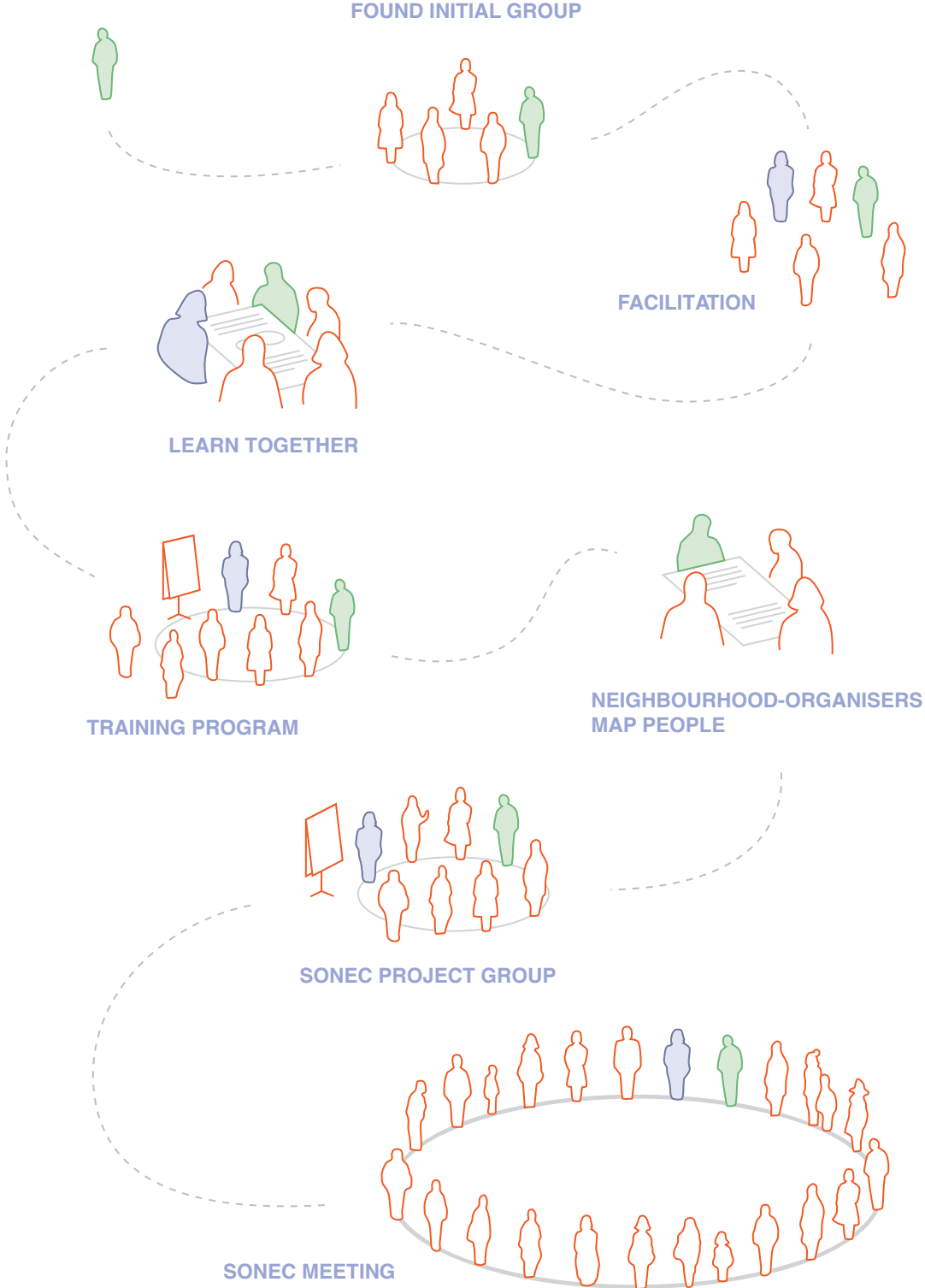
In the group of Neighbourhood Organisers every single Neighbourhood Organiser maps all engaged people in his/her single neighbourhood. They start the process that is described in the next chapter: the implementation process in your own neighbourhood - CITIZEN LAUNCH.

For more information about NGO and Local Government launch, see the long version in your language <https://sonec.org/sonec-handbook/>

Developing an implementation process in your own neighbourhood –

Citizen Launch

If you are an engaged, well-connected citizen who believes to be able to establish a strong movement and if you have a good relationship with the city government, start here. If you start with your own neighbourhood this can lead to implementation via NGO or local government for a whole city district or village later (see above).



- Neighbour
- SoNeC facilitator
- Neighbourhood organiser / Initiator

1. FOUND INITIAL GROUP ... form a regional support group

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

2. FACILITATION ... find a SONEC facilitator

Invite a SoNeC facilitator.

3. LEARN TOGETHER ... learn more about SoNeC

Together with the SoNeC Facilitator you can learn more about the process and together you can design the first steps of the process.

4. TRAINING PROGRAM ... for neighbourhood organisers and interested neighbours

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

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

5. ORGANISERS MAPS PEOPLE ... SoNeC organisers find engaged people in their neighbourhood

Map all the engaged people and projects in your neighbourhood.

6. SONEC PROJECT GROUP ... form the specific SoNeC project group

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

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

When a solid SoNEC project group is operating in the neighbourhood with a good social connection to most neighbours and trained in basics of SoNeC, they invite every household to contribute a representative to conduct their first SoNeC meeting.

For more information, see the long version in your language <https://sonec.org/sonec-handbook/>

Conclusion

SoNeCs can be a starting point for (re)politicisation. Informed, active people are more knowledgeable and able to make good decisions for their environment. Once launched an effective SoNeC will create its own culture of success. By experiencing greater inclusion, empowerment and belonging, as well as concrete improvements in local conditions, SoNeC members will be inspired and motivated to continue. Each Sociocratic Neighbourhood Circle will find the level and range of participation that suits their members needs, conditions and opportunities.

Developing good relationships with local government authorities and being integrated into the political life of their localities in an effective and meaningful way will ensure the longevity and sustainability of SoNeCs, and allow them to fulfil their potential as tools that can increase, deepen and improve political participation and democratic practice throughout Europe. When 'bottom up' and 'top down' systems can meet and create new solutions, democracy can be further developed and outcomes can be improved for all.

Networking SoNeCs across regions allows increased scope of action, and amplifies experience of connection and empowerment.

In the medium term (5-15 years) SoNeCs can become a recognised feature in the political culture and architecture of Europe.

Be part of the change

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

send an email info@sonec.org

or find a facilitator on sonec.org/facilitators/

