RECOMMENDATIONS

Suggestions and ideas for the future of the Europe for Citizens Programme and policies for enhancing citizens' active participation

THE EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP NETWORK OF TOWNS

Project number:
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The images in this publication provide a general illustration of the project activities implemented between 02/11/2020 - 01/11/2022

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1. About Europe for Citizens and CERV Programmes

The project would not have been possible without the funding and support of the Europe for Citizens Programme (EfC), which was implemented with a total budget of €187,718,000 for 2014-2020. The general aim of the Programme was to contribute to citizens' understanding of the EU, its history, and diversity and to encourage the democratic participation of citizens at the EU level.

Europe for Citizens consisted of two Strands:

1.1. European remembrance

Under this strand, the Programme supported initiatives that:
- discussed why and how the totalitarian regimes that blighted Europe's modern history came into power
- looked at the EU's other defining moments and reference points
- considered different historical perspectives.

1.2. Democratic engagement & civic participation

Action: Town twinning

Projects bringing together citizens from twinned towns to debate issues on the European political agenda. They were envisioned to develop opportunities for people to engage with each other and to volunteer at the EU level.

Action: Networks of Towns

Towns and Civil Society Organisations were encouraged to cooperate with each other in the long term to explore particular topics or themes, share resources, and interests, increase their influence, and/or face common challenges.

Action: Civil society projects

These projects gave citizens an opportunity to participate concretely in the EU policy-making process. They stimulated debates to propose practical solutions to issues through cooperation at the European level.

RESOURCES

Europe for Citizens 2014-2020 Programme:
https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/grants/2014-2020/europe-citizens_en

"Europe for Citizens 2014-2020 - 7 years of support", Publications Office of the European Union, 2021 - shorturl.at/vxDPZ

Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme

Europe for Citizens programme existed in the years 2014-2020. The new programme, its successor, is called The Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV), and with an overall budget of 1.55 billion euro for the next 7-year period, it represents **the biggest-ever EU fund for promoting and protecting fundamental rights, rule of law and democracy inside the EU.**

The Programme reflects the top priority of the European Commission to strengthen and promote EU rights and values.

Among financed activities are:
- workshops, seminars, conferences, training activities, expert meetings, webinars
- awareness-raising activities, data gathering, and consultation
- exchanges and dissemination of good practices amongst public authorities and civil society organisations
- communication tools and the use of social media.

RESOURCES

CERV - Funding Opportunities

https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/programmes/cerv

CERV in a nutshell

https://ec.europa.eu/info/departments/justice-and-consumers/justice-and-consumers-funding-tenders/funding-programmes/citizens-equality-rights-and-values-programme_en

2. Introduction to Networks of Towns (NTs)

Networks of Towns (NTs) under the Europe for Citizens Programme were foremost supposed to encourage local and regional authorities, supported by NGOs, to cooperate with each other on a long-term basis in order to explore particular topics or themes, share resources or interests, gain influence or face common challenges.

Under CERV Programme, the Network of Towns aims at promoting exchanges between citizens of different countries so as to afford them practical experience of the wealth and diversity of the common heritage of the Union and to make them aware that these constitute the foundation for a common future. This action relates primarily to the organization of various types of events, meetings, seminars, conferences, debates, networking activities, and other types of exchange based, inter alia, on information and communication technologies and social networks. Events organized within those actions are divided into two main typologies: in-situ events and online events.

3. EC-NET - objectives, partners, activities

EC-NET - objectives and achievements

The European Citizenship Network of Towns (EC-NET) was a ''network of Networks'' implemented in the years 2020-2022 thanks to the funding of Europe for Citizens Programme. The partnership was built on the experience of key partners of 15 successful Networks of Towns from 2009-2020, during which they were a part of over two rounds of Europe for Citizens (2007-2013 and 2014-2020).

The objective of putting these experienced municipalities, civil society groups, and their citizens together was to evaluate the long-term impact of the projects implemented as NTs over 10 years with regard to fostering European citizenship and encouraging democratic and civic participation. Core activities of the EC-NET consisted of six international events, accompanied by participatory research and interviews, local working groups, and project communication activities. The participants (policymakers, public officers, activists, citizens, volunteers, students) shared their practice and experience in order to:

1. Evaluate the long-term impact of the projects implemented as NT over 10 years on: citizens, direct participants, and participating institutions;
2. Enhance the understanding of the key programme priorities over the years - Euroscepticism, Solidarity, Active Citizenship, Intercultural Dialogue;
3. Draw recommendations for the new decade of Networks of Towns under the successor of Europe for Citizens programme - CERV;
4. Gain an opportunity to work together with other strong partners across Europe.

The most significant tangible results of the project are the "EC-NET Recommendations" containing the suggestions and ideas for the future of the Networks of Towns and policies for enhancing citizens' active participation, as well as the "EC-NET Toolkit" presenting a collection of tested methodologies from 15 successful Networks of Towns.

https://europeforcitizense.wixsite.com/ecnet/publications/final-outputs/ec-net-toolkit

EC-NET - partnership

The EC-NET project gathered citizens from nine countries (8 EU and 1 non-EU). Project participants actively contributed to the programme of the international events, as well as to the external communication about the project and to its dissemination at the local and European levels.

Each EC-NET international event collected on average 2-4 representatives from each partner, its stakeholders, and interested volunteers - policy makers, migrants, citizens, educators, students, youth, activists, and community leaders - people from different social and professional backgrounds. Methods used during the events (open spaces, field trips, workshops, collaborative learning) engaged diverse groups of citizens.

EC-NET - activities

The project "EC-NET" was implemented between November 2020 and November 202 The core activities of the project were six international events, accompanied by participatory research, interviews, and communication activities performed by each partner. They were based on collaboration among the engaged towns and citizens.

The below-described milestones of EC-NET outline the ways in which the project coordination team facilitated a structured reflection and the exchange of views between the partners along the project duration in order to collect the most significant thoughts of the EC-NET partnership on **the expected impacts of Networks of Towns.**

14-15 December 2020 - the first part of the first transnational project meeting with the aim to coordinate the work, get to know each other, learn the EfC programme rules and ensure that the partners together comply with its requirements. The event collected representatives of all the project partners. The official launch of the EC-NET at the EU level, and communication of its aims, objectives, and activities; giving visibility to the project partners as well as the Europe for Citizens programme; setting the guidelines for organizing the project activities. *Host: Fattoria Pugliese Diffusa, Italy.*

2 March 2021 - the second part of the first transnational project meeting. Focus: **Solidarity** and **Intercultural Dialogue**. The purpose of the event was to prepare the partners for the next step - organizing local working groups in 9 countries. The event collected representatives of all the partners & local citizens. *Host: Fattoria Pugliese Diffusa, Italy.*

Local working groups in 9 countries started evaluating the benefits the implemented NTs brought to their communities in terms of **Solidarity** and **Intercultural Dialogue** for active citizenship (through meetings, research, and interviews). The outcomes were presented in the next project events.

7-8 June 2021 - the second project event (hybrid) in Sofia, Bulgaria: "Promoting Solidarity for Active Citizenship". Focus: **Solidarity**. The event collected representatives of all the partners, local citizens invited by the host, and citizens of other countries. The aim was to explore the topics with keynote speakers, expert discussions, presentations of good practices, and key findings from surveys (Local Activity 1) conducted by working groups in 9 countries. *Host: BCLL, Bulgaria.*

25-27 November 2021 - the third project event (hybrid) in Rome, Italy: "Promoting Intercultural Dialogue for Active European Citizenship". Focus: **Intercultural Dialogue.** The event collected representatives of all the partners, local citizens invited by the host, and citizens of other countries. The event aimed to introduce the participants to the transversal projects' priority of fostering **Intercultural Dialogue** through a variety of methods, including the exchange of good practices, expert panels, workshops and cooperative learning. *Host: Fattoria Pugliese Diffusa, Italy.*

November 2021 - April 2022 - partners delivered local activities in their territory. Local groups continued working on evaluating the impact the implemented Networks of Towns had in their communities, in terms of contributing to the debate on the Future of Europe and working out proposals for how to foster civic participation at the Union level. Partners prepared materials (presentations, workshops) that were presented during the next project event.

16-18 May 2022 - the fourth project event (hybrid) in Poznan, Poland: "Ways to Raise Citizens' Voice". Focus: **Active Citizenship**. The event collected representatives of all the partners and local citizens. The aim of this event was to collect and exercise forms of

engagement of citizens, including decision-making at local and EU levels, and to facilitate critical approach to the existing tools and a constructive approach to propose and test new ones. *Host: Gmina Dąbrowa, Poland.*

13-16 June 2022 - the fifth project event (hybrid) in Martinique: "Debating the Future of Europe". Focus: **Euroscepticism**. The event collected representatives of all the partners and local citizens. The event aimed to facilitate the exchange of good practices and methodologies for Debating the Future of the EU- taking into account both the local and EU level. *Host: Da&Da, Martinique.*

September - October 2022 - Finalizing the EC-NET Recommendations and EC-NET Toolkit; evaluation survey and reporting. Follow up on Local Activities 2 and 3. The outcomes were presented in the event in Madrid.

25-27 October 2022 - the sixth project event in person "Dissemination and Follow-Up" in Madrid. The event gathered representatives of all the partners and local citizens and facilitated a structured reflection and the exchange of views between the partners in order to collect their **thoughts on the expected impacts of Networks of Towns**. *Host: Federación de Municipios de Madrid, Madrid.*

https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/europe-for-citizens/projects/efc-project-details-page/?nodeRef=workspace://SpacesStore/3515d1ae-d832-4a22-82f9-996ddb9f8c01

4. EC-NET Recommendations

Along the project, the EC-NET partners and their local stakeholders took part in diverse activities aiming to evaluate the value of Networks of Towns (NTs), as well as to envision their future.

Part 1

In November 2020 local working groups in 9 countries started evaluating the benefits the implemented NTs brought to their communities in terms of **Solidarity** and **Intercultural Dialogue** for active citizenship. The outcomes were presented in the next EC-NET events in Rome and Sofia.

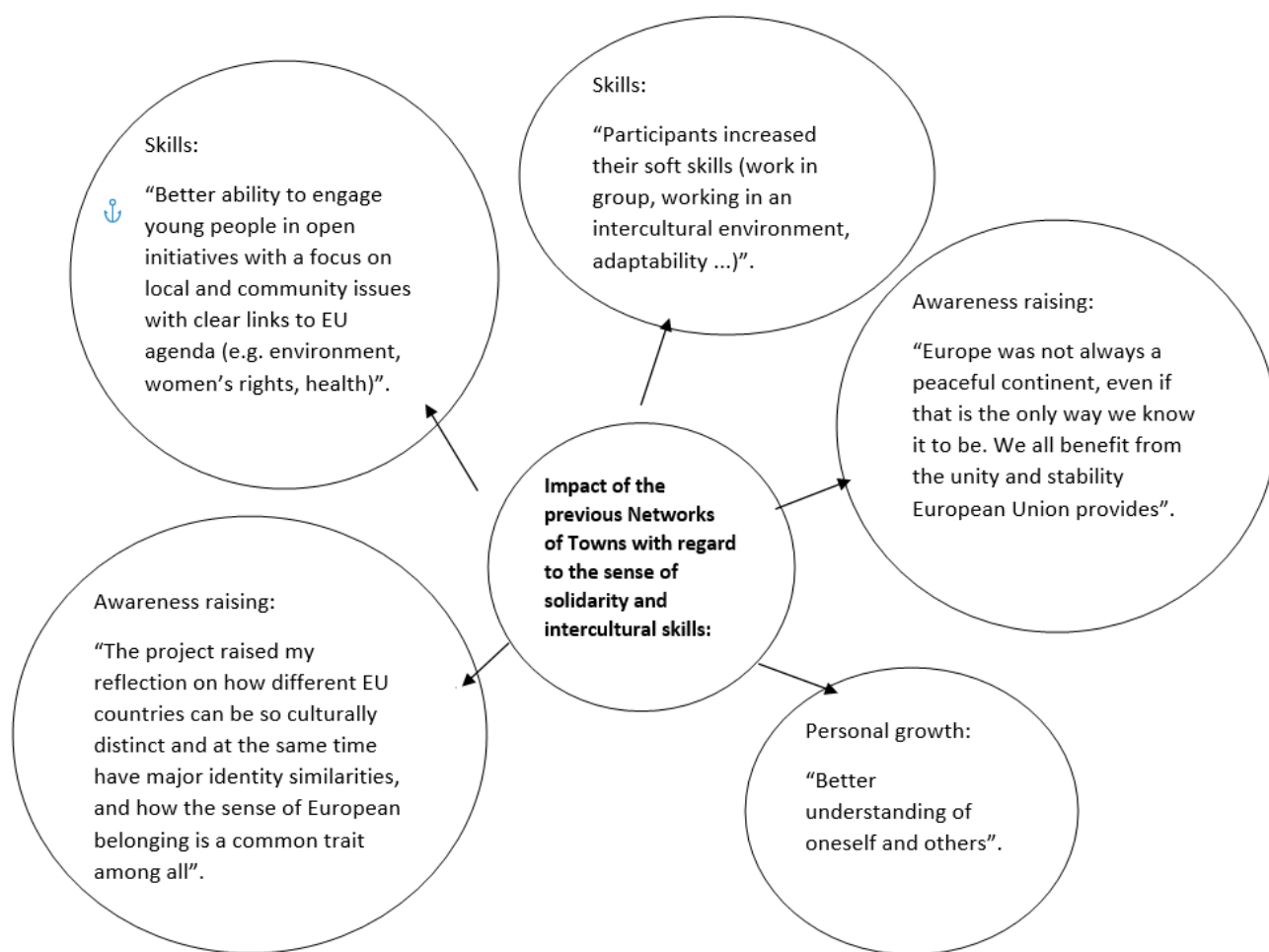The partners were invited to reflect and exchange views on the following topics:

SOLIDARITY: Since Networks of Towns are supposed to foster a sense of ownership and solidarity of the European Union among its citizens…

1) What was the **impact** of the project you took part in, on your personal feeling of belonging and European identity?
2) Which parts of the project increased your need for civic engagement?

INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE: Since Networks of Towns are supposed to engage participants in meaningful intercultural experiences…

1) What was the **impact** of the project you took part in, on your personal intercultural skills?
2) What were the most meaningful experiences of the project which improved your perceptions of citizens from other Member States?

Below you can see a very brief summary of what they considered to be the most significant **impact** of the projects on them and other participants, their personal skills, the feeling of belonging and European identity:

Skills:

"Better ability to engage young people in open initiatives with a focus on local and community issues with clear links to EU agenda (e.g. environment, women's rights, health)".

Skills:

"Participants increased their soft skills (work in group, working in an intercultural environment, adaptability ...)".

Awareness raising:

"Europe was not always a peaceful continent, even if that is the only way we know it to be. We all benefit from the unity and stability European Union provides".

Impact of the previous Networks of Towns with regard to the sense of solidarity and intercultural skills:

Awareness raising:

"The project raised my reflection on how different EU countries can be so culturally distinct and at the same time have major identity similarities, and how the sense of European belonging is a common trait among all".

Personal growth:

"Better understanding of oneself and others".

Graphic 4.1. The results of activity 1

https://m.facebook.com/EuropeanCitizenshipNET/photos/a.103597064956010/540211324627913/?type=3

Part 2

The main evaluative exercise took place in October 2022, initiated by the project coordination team to facilitate a structured reflection and the exchange of views between the partners in order to collect the most significant thoughts of the EC-NET partnership about the expected impacts of Networks of Towns.

All partners of EC-NET were experienced in different types of NTs and therefore were asked to share this expertise with questions, like: "What makes Networks of Towns work best?", "What can be the impact of Networks of Towns on the future of Europe?".

The aim of this exercise supported the main objectives of the project which were to:

- *enhance the understanding of the key programme priorities over the years: Euroscepticism, Solidarity, Active Citizenship, Intercultural Dialogue*
- *draw recommendations for the new decade of Networks of Towns and the successor of Europe for Citizens Programme (CERV).*

The outputs are multi-sided and are well aligned with the objectives of Networks of Towns under Europe for Citizens, as well as CERV Programme.

ACTIVITIES

Networks of Towns aimed to promote exchange between citizens of different countries. The moderator presented the partners with some examples of activities within NTs and asked all to rate them from 1 to 5 (where 1 is not effective and 5 - very effective).

Activities ranked as most effective:

- **Sharing experiences** - informal time, getting to know each other (78.2% of respondents rated them with 5 - very effective)
- **Meeting local activists** (72.73% rated them as 5)
- **Visits in places of cultural heritage** (56.52% rated them as 5)
- **Discussions among partners** (45.83% rated them as 5)
- **Workshops** (60.87% rated them as 4; 34.78% as 5)

Expert panels were evaluated as rather effective, under the following conditions:

1. being up to the point - focused and related to the level of operation of the public (local and regional level).
2. involving practitioners over academics.
3. composed of experts from different fields to allow for dialogue.

Online meetings were rated as the least effective of all (30.43% rated them as 2 - rather not effective; 43.48% as 3; and 26.09% as 4). The partners saw their potential however as tools to deliver trainings and to present operational questions (ie. project administration, management questions, etc.).

TOPICS

Networks of Towns should encourage cooperation between municipalities. The partners were asked which TOPICS should NTs focus on to make it attractive for municipalities to participate. Here are the most common ideas for TOPICS that would interest them in the future:

- youth engagement, cultural exchanges, finding work for young people, and their self-realization in Eastern European countries
- discrimination, inclusion, and communities
- cultural heritage, a sense of pride in being a citizen of a specific area
- multi-level governance, policies, learning about the states and Unions' architecture
- local self-sustainability when it comes to food, development of rural areas, smart villages
- environment and ambiental problems
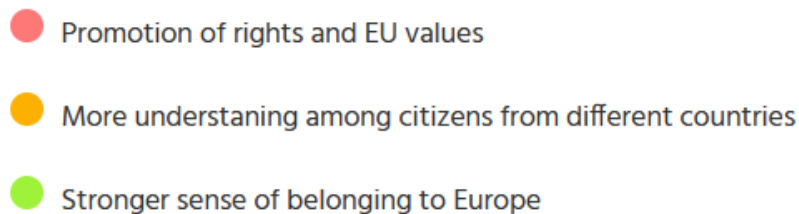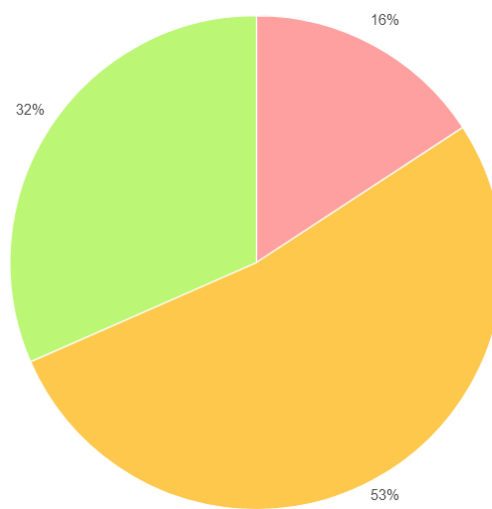- the future of the EU.

IMPACT

Partners were asked what, in their opinion, is the most significant IMPACT of Networks of Towns in the future of Europe (closed question).

53% indicated: More understanding among citizens from different countries

32% said: Stronger sense of belonging to Europe

16% chose: Promotion of rights and EU values

🔴 Promotion of rights and EU values

🟠 More understaning among citizens from different countries

🟢 Stronger sense of belonging to Europe

The same question was asked in an open way: in your opinion, what is the most significant IMPACT of Networks of Towns in the future of Europe?

1. **Peripheral areas**: "It's necessary to make known, especially in peripheral areas, the meaning of Europe and all the opportunities that the European Union offers. Furthermore, it's necessary to highlight the limits that the EU presents today and on these, it is necessary to present proposals and criticisms".

2. **The sense of unity**: "No matter how different we are, we can still find similar traits". "More understanding among citizens from different countries". "NTs are a great opportunity for intercultural exchange and understanding among small communities from all over Europe".

3. **Understanding the functioning of the European Union** in a good and bad sense (advantages/ disadvantages) and the impact of EU policies on local realities. "Sharing experience regarding EU rules and law implementation".

4. **Understanding other Europeans:** "The exchanges in formal and informal time offered by Networks of Towns allow one to discover and understand other European countries: what problems they are facing, the laws applied, their traditions, their culture, and many others. As participants in such projects, we each return to our structures (associations, municipalities) with clearer ideas about the realities of each participating country and this has an impact on our different target groups".

The EC-NET Recommendation is:

Preference should be given to Networks of Towns projects which clearly aim at building understanding among citizens from different countries.

CHALLENGES FOR Networks of Towns and further RECOMMENDATIONS

The partners were asked to discuss what makes it hard to cooperate transnationally and to participate in such projects. Here is the summary of their answers, accompanied by recommendations that can be very useful for future NT projects. It is interesting to observe that the partners' conclusions are in line with the "Mid-term evaluation of Europe for Citizens Programme 2014-2020" executed under the Multiple Framework Contract HOME/2015/EVAL/02 [1].

CHALLENGE 1: "New conditions after the COVID-19 crisis, organization, and re-connection for the network".

The EC-NET Recommendation is:

The aspect of the pandemic, canceled flights, people getting severely sick with COVID-19, postponed events and a general unpredictability of the situation definitely poses a challenge and it makes networking a way harder, however, not impossible. In EC-NET's case, restrictions resulting from COVID-19 forced us to apply a revised approach to planning and risk mitigation as well as to working methods, so that they could still allow for creating collaborative spaces for the participants. This adaptation of methods and tools could be observed during EC-NET events, especially when it came to hosting discussions in a hybrid way, i.e. simultaneously with participants present in conference rooms, online participants joining via Zoom, Teams, and the public following the activities via the FB streams. On a positive note, the use of online tools allowed the project to connect with prominent speakers, international experts, and high-level politicians whose presence otherwise would have not been possible. Thus, EC-NET strongly encourage future NTs to develop new ways of connecting citizens. This approach has already been applied with Networks of Towns under the CERV Programme, which envision face-to-face and online events already at the stage of planning the projects.

Preference should be given to Networks of Towns projects which offer innovative formats, adaptable to hybrid events.

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[1]
https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiiitg6lOb7Ah UZnf0HHUQRBRAQFnoECAwQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fec.europa.eu%2Fcitizenship%2Fpdf%2Fdg_home_efcp_final_ report_finalised_en.pdf&usg=AOvVaw0WvT4YjUKLY8sAMgjjnLYC, last access: 30.10.2022

CHALLENGE 2: "There is no widespread feeling of European citizenship and language is often a frightening limit".

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The EC-NET Recommendation is:

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This statement is absolutely true, and poses a challenge to exchange transnationally. However, what is a better way to get to know new people, places and methodologies, if not through direct contacts, networking and cooperation, which are encouraged by NTs? They are a great opportunity to learn something new, meet new people, expand views and plan new cooperation at all levels. The transnational element is a strong feature of successful projects. As another EC-NET participant framed it: "Relationships that we build can be strengthened and with them also the awareness of being all European citizens", seconded by another one who sais: "Every moment that allows for meaningful discussions between different people (who also have different nationalities) allows for a better understanding of people's different realities".

> *Preference should be given to Networks of Towns projects which ensure a strong transnational element.*

CHALLENGE 3: "Topics were not fully adjusted to partners' needs and context"

The EC-NET Recommendation is:

Networks of Towns are rarely sectoral projects with a narrow thematic focus, they oftentimes provide an intersectional approach, but should always concentrate on citizens' participation and EU values - the latter is more evidently present in CERV Programme. The NTs should aim at filling the gap between the EU and citizens by offering a horizontal pathway to informed dialogue on policy areas of interest to citizens, towns, and associations operating at the local and regional levels. As one of the EC-NET participants framed it: "It is refreshing to meet and talk with other EU citizens, exchanging experiences, ideas, common problems, and good solutions". This action allows one to expand horizons, learn about different cultures, politics, and the way of life in other countries, to exchange good practices, and reflect on how these could be handled in one's own environment.

Preference should be given to projects which build synergies between the priorities of Networks of Towns and other EU policies and provide formats that place project partners in the heart of the activities, e.g. by inviting them to be the experts in expert panels to share their own, particular experiences.