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101091100 – BEYOND (Rural Communities pushing BEYOND COVID-19)

Summary of data collected during Event 3 in Heiningen, Germany

I. Introduction

During the 3rd event for Project “BEYOND”, which was held in Heiningen, Germany from September 27th to 29th, 2023; one of the important activities during the event was gathering citizens’ opinions and views on various environmental issues and issues relating to adapting to circumstances in the post-COVID 19 era. Overall, there were two surveys conducted. The first survey was made via mentimeter and was conducted on September 27th during the opening presentation. The survey questions mainly focused on the participants’ views regarding life in their community in the post-COVID 19 world. The second survey was conducted via Slido and focused on gathering participants’ views and opinions regarding environmental protection in their communities. Through the collection of these data, the partnership aims to develop new projects and approaches for their communities that better promote social inclusion and environmental protection.

II. Survey results – Mentimeter survey

The survey was conducted electronically, and the participants took part in the survey via a link sent to their mobile phones. 27 persons took part online and those who couldn’t access the survey (due to not having their phone available, not being able to connect to the internet, or not having a smartphone) contributed to the discussions. In total there were five key questions asked to the participants:

Question 1) What impact did the Corona pandemic have on the work of the/your municipality?

Question 2) Are there climate protection projects in your community? Or are there any planned?

Question 3) How much do you agree with the following statements?

a) We have learned from the Corona pandemic and are now better prepared for future pandemics.

b) The municipalities have grown closer together due to the pandemic.

c) Climate protection was ignored during the pandemic.

Question 4) What was the most important lesson you learned from the pandemic? (One-word answer, multiple answers permitted)

Question 5) What effects did Corona have on Environmental protection? (One-word answers, multiple answers allowed)

Regarding question 1, most participants pointed out that there were even positives coming out of the pandemic despite the disruptions it caused. Citizens stated that the pandemic resulted in more digitalization in the community and increased cooperation between towns in rural areas. During discussions, participants (which were from rural areas) pointed out that digital networks were enhanced immensely during the pandemic and that has enhanced communications between citizens. The pandemic also forced municipalities to pool resources, communicate, and share best practices more often, to protect citizens and enhance their quality of life. On the other hand, it was also pointed out by participants that traditional face-to-face activities (doctor appointments, meetings, etc.) have not returned back to normal. At times a digital approach is not effective (e.g. during doctor’s



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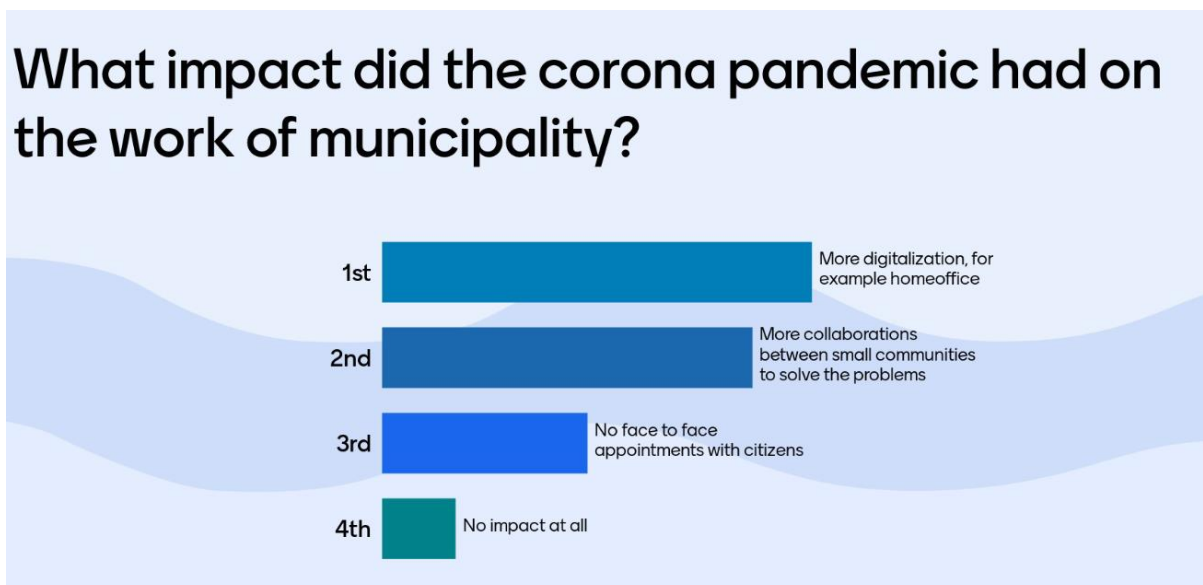




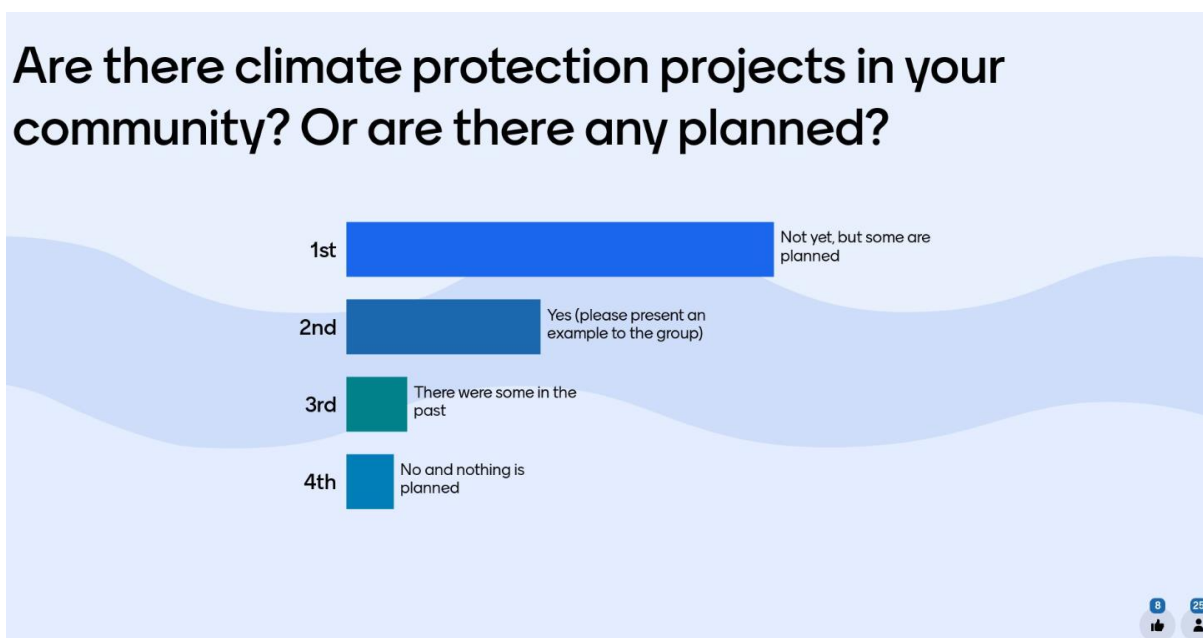
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appointments) as it is hard to read the body language of the other person and get a full picture of the situation. The answers are shown below:



Regarding question 2, the majority participants responded that they know of projects that are planned, but not running. During the discussion, the participants per partner mentioned key projects that have been implemented over the past year (upgrading of sewage, creating new nature protection areas, etc.). This outcome shows that municipalities could put more efforts into promoting their environmental projects to include citizens in these actions. The answers are shown below:



Regarding question 3, parts a thru c were answered via a scale where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree. The responses were in the 3.2 to 3.7 range, indicating that the majority of the



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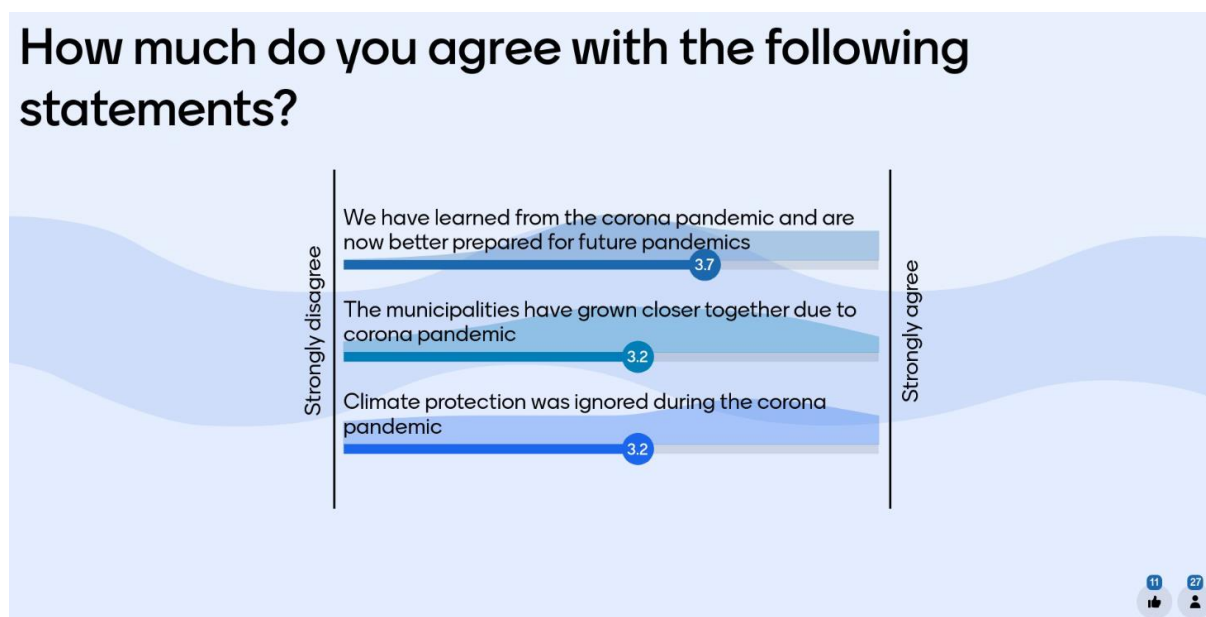




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respondents are still assessing the outcomes personally. By not being able to give stronger responses, it could show that the pandemic is still lingering in the minds of citizens. In other words, it is too soon to say what exactly the impact of pandemic has been among citizens. As these answers contrast those in question 1 (where stronger responses were provided) it is recommended to revisit this question/theme (i.e. the impact of the pandemic on citizens in terms of improving or worsening the quality of life) in future surveys during the project. The answers are shown below:



Regarding question 4, The main words that came to mind were “discipline”, “Solidarity” and “Health”. Given the fact that new rules and laws (with consequences) were strictly administered during the pandemic, and that everyone feared the impacts of the Coronavirus; these words were not considered so surprising as answers. The term “solidarity” was cited by many participants as well. This could be considered a positive outcome of the pandemic (despite there being many negatives). The participants elaborated during discussions that they volunteered more, they tried their best to help their neighbours and fellow citizens and worked together to get through the worst parts of the pandemic.

The answers are shown below:



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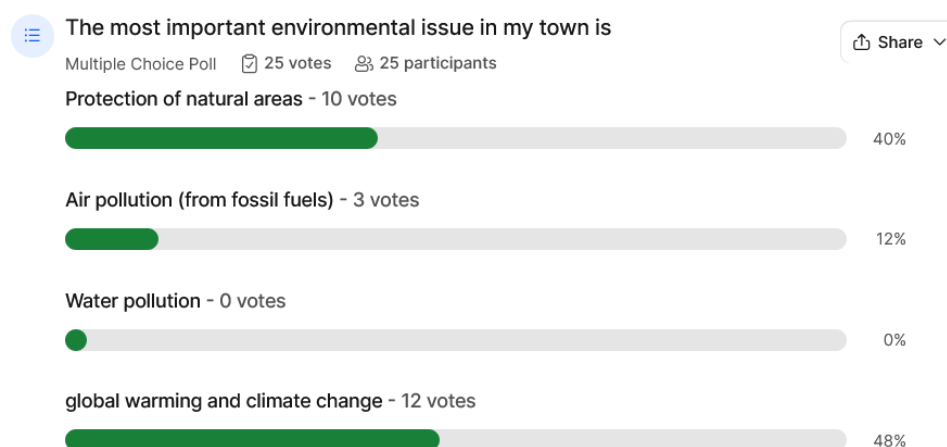
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III. Survey results – Slido

The Slido survey took place on day 2 on the event before the presentation on the European Green Deal. It served to further assess the opinions of the participants on environmental issues and the impact of EU policies (especially the European Green Deal) on environmental protection in their towns. In total, 31 participants took part in the survey via their mobile devices. Like on day 1, many other participants at the session could not participate in the survey via mobile phone due to connection issues and/or not having a smartphone. The survey was organized as 5 questions:

In the first question, the participants were asked to mention what the most important environmental issue is in their town. The format and votes are shown below:



Regarding the answers, the participants mentioned in the session that they are all concerned about global warming and climate change, as it is constantly being mentioned as a existential threat to humanity. Protection of natural areas is considered as an important way to address climate change. Oddly, water pollution was not considered by the participants, and this was mentioned. Participants replied that the protection of natural areas in most of their views was a part of the protection of natural areas.

The purpose of the second question was to determine how much participants know about the European Green Deal. The survey found that most of the participants had knowledge about the policy and its main aims. However, they were unaware of the goals or how it functions. The tally of votes is found below:



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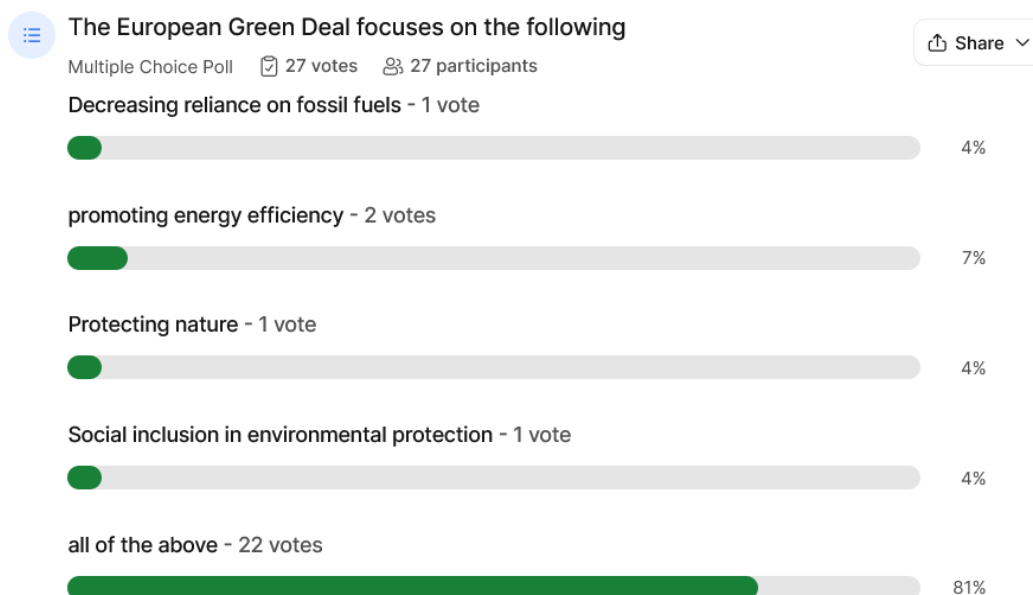
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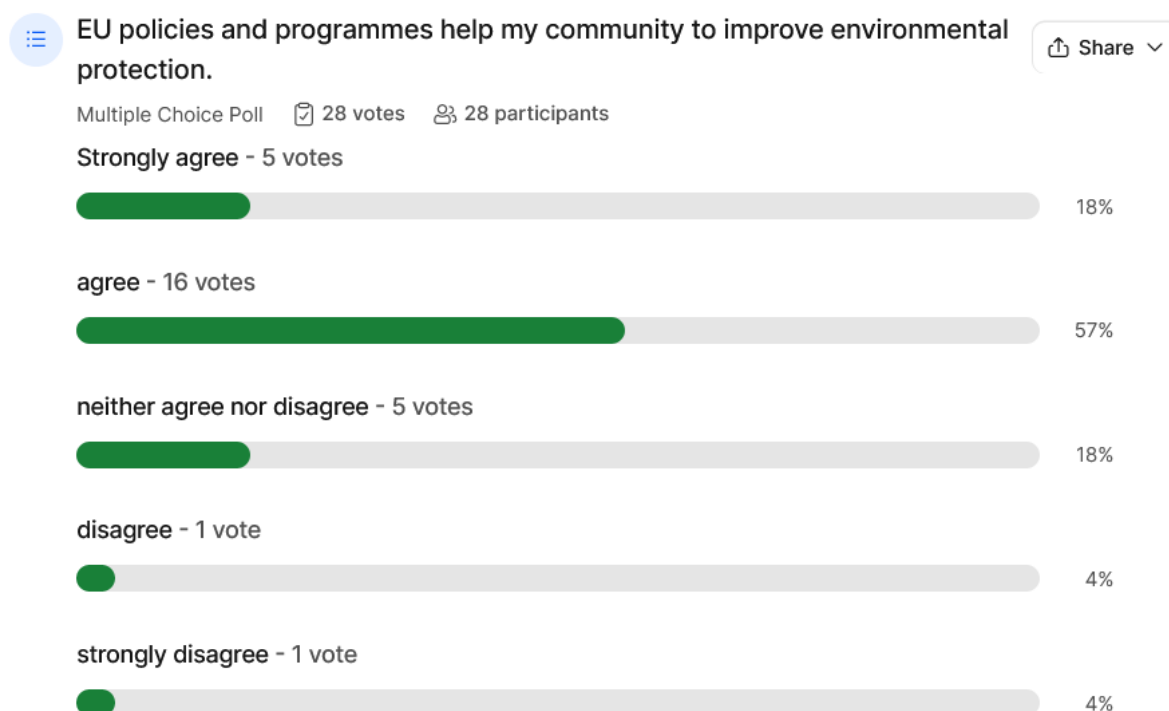


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As a follow up to question 2, the next question was setup to determine whether the participants regarded the EU as positive force in their community. The results are shown below:



Most of the participants regard the EU programmes and initiatives as a positive force for environmental protection in their community. They mentioned that they were aware of specific



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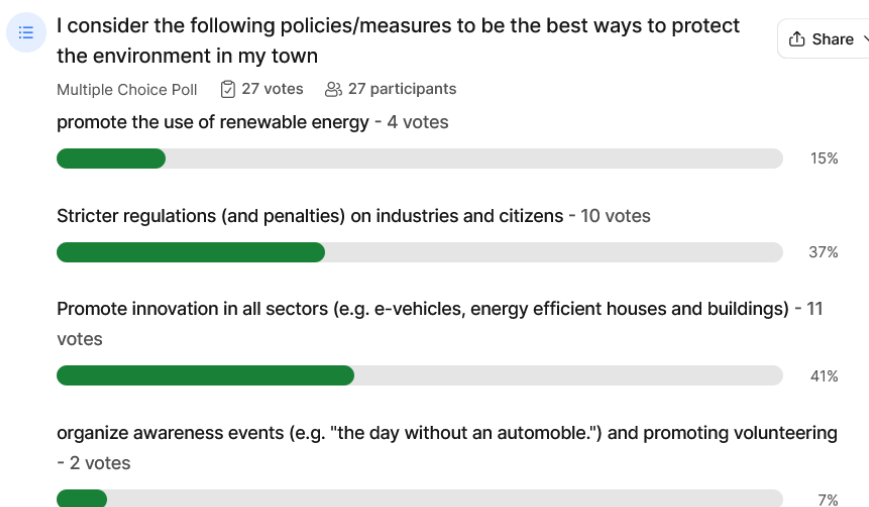
projects in their towns and that they were EU co-financed. Others mentioned that the overall policy push has served to push environmental protection in their community.

In question 4, the main idea was to find out what the participants are already doing to ensure environmental protection in their community. The findings from the survey are shown below.



The results show that most participants see environmental protection as a personal responsibility since the main response was “changing my behaviour”. As for taking advantages of the EU programmes, the results show that most participants have not considered applying to EU funding opportunities. That points out that more actions could be carried out to engage citizens and encourage them to apply for EU funds.

The purpose of the final question was to find out what policies citizens think are most important for environmental protection. The results are shown below:



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Based on the answers, the policies that are best for environmental protection relate to stricter regulations on industry and the promotion of innovation in all sectors. The participants added during the discussions that first and foremost industry needs to follow stricter rules regarding emissions and pollution (air, soil and water). Innovation policy is seen as another tool that can ensure improved energy efficiency, less waste and better environmental protection in their communities. Renewable energy (i.e. solar, wind, biogas, etc.) was regarded with scepticism and awareness events were regarded as unnecessary.

IV. Conclusions

Based on the responses received, it can be concluded that despite the COVID-19 pandemic being declared over, citizens are still struggling to “get back to normal.” Many participants mentioned that digital formats are now the preferred manner of communications instead of traditional face-to-face communications. Regarding environmental protection and the connection to the EU, the main conclusion that can be drawn is that citizens in EU communities considered environmental protection as an essential element in ensuring good quality of life. Many are taking personal responsibility for the environment, but they are unaware overall what the EU wants and how they can engage EU programmes relating to environmental protection. In the post COVID-19 age, more activities that make citizens aware of the European Green Deal and what it means for them should be organized in rural communities.



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