



# CITIZENS' PANEL ON GOOD LIFE

How to **reduce** poverty and inequality while **maintaining** the well-being of Estonian people and nature?

RESULTS OF THE CITIZENS' PANEL



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# 1. The Citizens' Panel's purpose, theme and mandate

The Citizens' Panel on Good Life was held in January and February 2026 to discuss what needs to be done to increase the well-being of people and nature in Estonia. It was the sixth citizens' assembly in Estonia and the second nationwide.

At Praxis, we are working on introducing the citizens' assembly format in Estonia. We had **two goals** this time:

- to think about the well-being of people and nature and initiate the necessary changes in Estonia;
- to test a nationwide citizens' assembly as a small-scale process to introduce a decision-making method that is based on knowledge, overcomes disagreements, and focuses on the common ground.

This Citizens' Panel was attended by **29 Estonians** aged 16 and over, representing a cross-section of the population. Such a mini-Estonia often represents the population in its diversity better than traditional representative assemblies or participatory processes. Diversity, in turn, ensures the legitimacy of the results.

Citizens' assemblies are seen as a way to heal a polarized society ([PeoplePowered research brief](#) 2026). This was best expressed in the participants' repeated surprise that there couldn't be a cross-section of Estonians present, as everyone is friendly, polite, constructive and above disagreements. As organizers of the Citizens' Panel, we know that face-to-face meetings, where a respectful discussion space is created, bring out the best in people. This is how trust can be restored.



*"You kept repeating that we met a different Estonia – more open and caring than we experience on a daily basis. Maybe it wasn't Estonia that was different, but the way we communicated? If each of us passes this experience on to even 3 acquaintances, such an Estonia will begin to take shape around us."*

**Martin**, facilitator of group discussions

Mini-Estonia gathered **over three weekends**, for a total of five days, to learn from researchers, the views of interest groups, and discuss problems and possible solutions in groups. The discussions were framed by a data model created by international economists called [Earth For All](#), according to which a leap into a **new, desired sustainable future is possible, but to do so, the economy must prioritize the well-being of people and nature.**

The focus of the Citizens' Panel – **reducing poverty and economic inequality** – is an important turning point in this model. This focus was chosen by more than 600 people who signed up for the Panel. The results of the Panel answer the question "What needs to be done to reduce poverty and inequality and maintain the well-being of the people and nature of Estonia?".

During the Panel's work, we received criticism that the topic of well-being, and also the narrower focus topic chosen under it, is too general or even too ideological. We were warned that the results may remain just as general. We respond to this as follows: since people's trust in government institutions is at an all-time low, it is important to create discussion spaces where citizens can raise issues that are important to them. "Better politics" alone is not enough for systemic change. It is also necessary for people to perceive the change as fair and believe that the future can be created with today's actions and decisions. As organizers, we framed the topic selection, but with the process design we ensured that important issues were raised from the perspective of communal life – that are not priorities in today's public debate or in the government's coalition agreement. Reducing poverty and economic inequality has not been recognized as an economic problem in Estonia. That was the whole point of the undertaking: **to create a discussion space where issues concerning communal life can be raised that are truly important to Estonians.**

**The Citizens' Panel is like a laboratory for social innovation where important topics gain legitimacy.**

From the perspective of restoring general trust, it will be of critical importance to see how actively the results of the Panel are used in public debate and decision-making.

With the help of group discussion facilitators, the Panel reached a consensus on **five social pain points and twelve proposals** that would help alleviate them. Let us take them as a compass in making future decisions and use them to expand public debate.

Work with the results of the Panel continues: members of the Panel and NGOs whose advocacy interests are connected to the pain points and proposals will jointly create citizens' initiatives for the Parliament. In this way, we connect the results of the Panel with a deeply rooted democratic innovation in Estonia – the right of citizens' initiative.

This time, the Panel was commissioned and conducted by NGOs. We considered it important to create and coordinate the coalition of the Citizens' Panel in order to give more parties the experience of the Panel and ensure the effectiveness of the results, and "infect" the advocates of public interests. We have already seen that such networking has increased the ability to collaborate within the NGO community.

**This report provides an overview and presents the collective views of the Citizens' Panel.** An evaluation report will be published soon to address the results and impact of the Panel. As a follow-up, we will bring the views of the Panel to public debate and policymakers as citizens' initiatives, in cooperation with interest groups and members of the Panel.

“This was my fourth time co-organizing a public assembly. There were plenty of challenges this year, however, a wonderful team, mutual reflections on well-being, inspiring feedback from participants and observers, and satisfaction with what was achieved outweighed the chaos in the interim. This time, we also innovated more. Hopefully, this will help the effective method of deliberative democracy to gain a foothold in Estonian public administration soon.”



## Teele Pehk

Coordinator of Citizens’ Panel on Good Life

This Citizens’ Panel was organized by the **think tank Praxis** together with several NGOs: the **Estonian Cooperation Assembly (Eesti Koostöö Kogu)**, which manages the citizens’ initiative website; the **Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations (Vabaühenduste Liit)**, which is the voice of organizations operating in the public interest; the **Opinion Festival (Arvamusfestival)**, which supports the promotion of the culture of opinion; the **Estonian National Youth Council (Eesti Noorteühenduste Liit)**, which represents the voice of young people; the **Village Movement Kodukant**, which stands for rural life and communities; the **Estonian LEADER Association**; the **Open Estonia Foundation** and the **Estonian Human Rights Centre**. The organization of the Panel was supported by the **Strategy Office of the Government (Riigikantselei strateegiabüroo)**.



Avatud Eesti Fond  
Open Estonia Foundation



INIMÕIGUSTE  
KESKUS



EESTI NOORTE-  
ÜHENDUSTE LIIT

KO  
GU Eesti  
Koostöö  
Kogu

The Citizens’ Panel was organized with the support of the European Union and the Estonian Centre for International Development Cooperation (ESDTEV) from the Mondo project **NOPLANETB**. It was co-financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers’ Office in Estonia and the Democracy Centre. Praxis is responsible for the content of the Citizens’ Panel and it can in no way be considered to reflect the position of the European Union or ESDTEV.



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Põhjamaade Ministrite  
Nõukogu esindus Eestis

## 2. Public address by the Citizens' Panel:

### Five social pain points that Estonia needs to address immediately

Appeal published on the website [rahvakogu.info](http://rahvakogu.info).

There is a year left until parliamentary elections. We, the undersigned, used to believe that our opinion would only be considered once every four years. We felt that political parties would come to the elections with proposals that would take us further away from the main problems. And after the elections, the original promises would not be kept or things would be implemented that were not even an issue during the elections.

We participated in the Citizens' Panel on Good Life. We understood that this is also a way to participate in democracy – to discuss and decide on major issues as ordinary people.

We are people from all over Estonia: of all ages, with different levels of education, wealth, political preferences and opinions. A kind of mini-Estonia, who were not familiar with each other before. We did not get any personal benefit from participating in the Panel other than the opportunity to learn about issues and seek solutions together.

Many of us found that Estonians are people who can do everything themselves and do not rely too much on the state, but there were also those who expect more state intervention. Despite our beliefs, we feel that the state is not fulfilling its duty sufficiently. As one of us said: everyone is the blacksmith of their own fortune – but how can they forge their own destiny if they lack an anvil and a hammer?

Before the Citizens' Panel, we were given the choice of focusing on food security, gender equality, overcoming poverty, or reducing economic inequality. We decided to focus on reducing poverty and economic inequality, because in our opinion they cast the longest shadow on Estonia's future.

We listened to experts and interest groups and then discussed in a respectful atmosphere to reach a common understanding. Everyone had a chance to speak, and we discussed disagreements on topics thoroughly. We were surprised to find that we were more in agreement than we would have thought before meeting.

We agree that Estonia is in crisis. A crisis that will cut off our future.

#### **Social pain points**

We highlight five social pain points that the Panel reached a consensus on. These are not new topics but deep-seated problems that reproduce poverty and inequality and that need to be addressed as a priority in Estonia. Since the Panel focuses on finding common ground, we unanimously supported these pain points.

A well-functioning society requires that all people have a realistic chance for a dignified life. **That is why Estonia needs to urgently address the following pain points:**

1. Unequal starting position for children, youth and students
2. Deteriorating mental health
3. Unequal treatment
4. In-work poverty
5. The current economic model that does not serve well-being.

## Value shift

To find solutions to these pain points, we need a value shift. What should we give up in Estonia? Our political decision-makers should give up populism, pretense, political wrangling and rushing into decisions, fragmented budgeting and a narrative of success from top down.

We feel that many politicians do not work as a unified team to improve life in Estonia, but prefer to cover their own interests. At best, they imitate leadership. At the same time, the first step in becoming a real leader is listening to the people. Are there real leaders among our politicians who would listen?

As a result of thorough work done in our free time, we have reached what we believe are the main pain points that Estonia is facing. We expect nothing less than that journalists will help to hold a respectful public debate about them. We expect nothing less than that political parties will seek answers to these questions in their programs and that politicians will discuss them before the elections, agree on solutions, and implement the solutions after the elections.

But we do not believe that everything depends on politicians. On the contrary, we, all people living in Estonia, should look at ourselves the most. We should give up belittling poverty, disabilities and other such phenomena. We should think more about all Estonians as a whole and understand that we can only achieve a better life here together – by taking into account everyone's needs, listening to each other and discussing together. Just like we did for a good life in the Citizens' Panel. It is possible.

We turn to the representatives of the Estonian state and the public so that everyone thinks along. We believe that by thinking together, we can describe where we want to reach as a state and as Estonian people.



### The participants of the Citizens' Panel

Aare from Tammiku  
Aet from Sillamäe  
Algis from Tallinn  
Arje from Tartu  
Dagmar from Tallinn  
Eha from Pärnu  
Silva from Tallinn

Enelin from Tallinn  
Fredy from Hiiumaa  
Hannes from Rakvere  
Heino from Viljandimaa  
Hurmet from Narva  
Sten from Harjumaa  
Vanessa from Pärnu

Jaanus from Sangaste  
Juta from Kehra  
Kaili from Maardu  
Karmen from Tallinn  
Kaspar from Viljandimaa  
Lisette from Keila  
Vilmi from Tallinn

Maarja from Harjumaa  
Mare from Jõhvi  
Marika from Tallinn  
Marje from Haapsalu  
Mihkel Kaarel from Tallinn

### 3. The Citizens' Panel's proposals to alleviate pain points



#### **PAIN POINT 1: Unequal starting position for children, youth and students**

Poverty often begins in childhood. It is difficult to break out of a pattern, especially if it has lasted for generations. Higher education is expensive for young people, partly due to the high cost of living. The security of the country also depends on young people being healthy, avoiding risky behavior, and wanting to live in Estonia.

##### **Problem 1.1: Unequal starting position due to lack of support at home**

Many families do not receive enough support to prevent parenting problems. Lack of awareness and skills among parents can create poverty and mental health problems, giving children a worse starting position. The information and services available are fragmented and often do not reach those in need.

##### **Solution 1.1: Prevent problems through education of different generations (including parents) and a proactive approach of the "personal state", providing support before problems worsen.**

##### **During discussions, the following possible actions were suggested:**

- Integration of parent education: training and counseling in kindergartens/schools (e.g. within the framework of meetings), creating a unified system.
- Personal state approach: the state proactively sends training and support offers appropriate to the child's age (e.g. in the event of the birth of a child) so that information does not go unnoticed.
- Paid "parental days": the opportunity to take paid days off from work (similar to study leave) to participate in training or their child's development interviews.
- Material support: needs-based support for purchasing learning materials for low-income families.
- Expand the principle of the personal state, in addition to benefits, services, and training, what is offered by NGOs.

## **Problem 1.2: Economic barriers hinder commitment to learning**

Free higher education requires full-time study, but does not cover living expenses. Social guarantees for students are inadequate: there are few affordable dormitory places, the scholarship system is uneven, and student loan conditions are outdated (high interest, guarantor required). This forces students to work at the expense of their studies, which lowers the quality of education or forces disadvantaged young people to abandon their studies altogether.

## **Solution 1.2: Create more flexible learning opportunities for students and a functioning network of social guarantees.**

During discussions, the following possible actions were suggested:

- Flexibility of study load: Abandon rigid full-time requirement for free studies or lower the threshold (e.g. 15–20 ECTS) for students in financial difficulties, allowing better reconciliation of study and work.
- Housing market measures: Rent compensation for students or tax breaks for landlords who accommodate students.
- Student loan reform: Make student loans more attractive and accessible (lower interest, state guarantees for the underprivileged, more targeted loans). Additionally, student loan cancellation in cooperation with employers.
- Scholarships: Separate grants from parents' income if the student lives separately.



## PAIN POINT 2: Deteriorating mental health

The mental health of Estonians is deteriorating, among other things, due to poverty and inequality, as well as climate concerns and species loss. ([inimarengu aruande "Vaimne tervis ja heaolu" põhisõnumid](#), 2023). There is no shared responsibility for maintaining the continuity of well-being. Mental health care is available to affluent residents. However, a society is healthy when its members are mentally healthy, age healthily, and contribute to communities and collective activities.

### **Problem 2.1: Rural decline, loneliness and access to services**

Mental health problems and loneliness worsen in older age, especially in sparsely populated areas, where "natural meeting places" (post office, shop, library, etc.) disappear. When schools are closed, children also have fewer opportunities for hobby education and spending free time together. The long-term unemployed become discouraged if there are no supportive people around them. Adults often do not have time to take care of children or the elderly in addition to working. Poor transport connections isolate people, preventing access to services and social interaction.

**Solution 2.1: Use resources more wisely - concentrate services in focal points (village centers, multifunctional houses) and ensure access with flexible transportation. Mental health is maintained by socialization.**

During discussions, the following possible actions were suggested:

- Multifunctional activity centers: create centers in rural areas that bring different services together under one roof (library, kindergarten, nursing home, remote work places), promoting intergenerational communication and keeping services alive. Do not build a new center, but consolidate under an existing roof.
- Flexible transport: implement on-demand transport or ride-sharing systems to ensure access to centers even in sparsely populated areas.
- Health education: implement the "Healthy Life" program in schools and communities to shape health behavior early and prevent the development of health problems.
- Volunteer instructors: facilitate voluntary contributions and reduce obstacles (e.g. hall rental, need for a curriculum) when guiding different activities in activity centers. Hobby groups for people of different ages.
- Tax revenue sharing: allow a person to share their income tax between two municipalities (e.g. home and summer home) to support the budget of rural areas.

## PAIN POINT 3: Unequal treatment

Discrimination means unjustified unequal treatment compared to other people in a similar situation. Discrimination occurs, for example, when a person is not hired because of their disability or is refused a job offer because they have a small child or are caring for a family member. Discrimination occurs when a person is treated less favourably on the basis of a characteristic that they cannot change (e.g. ethnicity, gender, age, disability or long-term health condition, social or economic origin). Many people with disabilities and their carers are discriminated against, live at high risk of poverty and their well-being is not guaranteed. Discrimination is prohibited by law. As an Estonian society, we cannot allow a large number of people to be excluded.

### **Problem 3.1: The burden of care as a social contribution is not sufficiently recognized, acknowledged, or funded**

Reducing the care burden at the state and local government level is one of Estonia's most critical socio-economic challenges, as services that reduce the care burden are either limited or lacking. In Estonia, care is treated as an invisible family obligation, not a social contribution valued by the state. In Estonia, unpaid care work accounts for 12-30% of GDP, depending on the calculation method, which is why care work should be equated with paid work. In Estonia, care is poorly funded and there are no uniform nationwide rules; each local government can set its own conditions and prices for social services and care. The prices of services often depend on household income, which in turn exacerbates inequality.

### **Solution 3.1: To acknowledge, recognize and fund home care in a similar way to paid work.**

#### **During discussions, the following possible actions were suggested:**

- inclusion of care burden in GDP (gross domestic product);
- social guarantees (health insurance and pension guaranteed to caregivers on the same terms as employees);
- nationally harmonise the conditions for distributing care allowance;
- ensure that regional inequality is not passed on to inequality in care remuneration;
- ensure higher additional benefits for single parents raising a disabled child;
- increase care allowance to at least the level of the nationally established minimum wage;
- care insurance – similar to unemployment insurance – would spread risks and ensure that receiving assistance does not depend on the wallet of loved ones;
- interval care or temporary 24-hour care service – every person with a care burden should have the right to a certain number of days a year (e.g. 30 days) when the loved one being cared for can receive high-quality interval care;
- ensure better availability of local care services to allow caregivers the opportunity to work or rest during the day;
- ensure free counselling or experiential therapy and other health-supporting services for caregivers;
- integrate social and health data (the doctor needs to see the social worker's notes and vice versa so that important information is not lost or overlooked);
- improve the availability of information about the options available to the caregiver.



### **Problem 3.2: Discrimination against disabled people in the labor market**

Estonia, as a member state of the European Union, is a party to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which stipulates, among other things, that “States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others” (Article 27). Unfortunately, people with disabilities and special needs are not sufficiently included in the Estonian labor market and the work they do is not adequately remunerated, which exacerbates discrimination already stemming from societal attitudes. The risk of relative poverty for people with special needs is higher and their economic well-being is fragile, because their opportunities to participate equally in the labor market are limited and their incomes are lower. As a result, the care burden on the relatives of people with disabilities increases and the overall economic well-being of the country decreases.

### **Solution 3.2: Prevent social and economic vulnerability of people with disabilities by improving their opportunities in the labor market.**

**During discussions, the following possible actions were suggested:**

- Adapt existing jobs in different sectors so that there is more possibility to work part-time.
- Inform employers that the Unemployment Insurance Fund supports adapting the workplace to be suitable for people with disabilities.
- Recognize employers who include people with disabilities more widely in society.
- Check the physical accessibility of workplaces more closely.
- Make the assessment of work ability more human-centered.
- Inform people with disabilities/special needs and their caregivers about existing special care services and explain their content. Make maximum use of the possibilities of the personal state.
- Create an obligation for local governments to involve and take into account the opinions of representative bodies of people with disabilities, just as there is already an obligation to take into account, for example, the opinions of young people.
- Bring back the opportunity for sheltered work for people with mental disorders.
- Offer a job support service for people with partial work capacity.
- The state should support local governments with additional funding, especially in remote areas, so that support for people with disabilities/special needs increases. E.g., support regional initiatives and companies that offer employment opportunities to people with disabilities; or better pay for support persons and social workers of people with disabilities.

### **Problem 3.3: Inaccessibility of legal protection for disadvantaged and discriminated groups in society**

Legal advice with state support will be discontinued in Estonia from 2026, which means that many people, including vulnerable groups, will lose their previous opportunity to receive free or cheaper legal aid. Instead, a chatbot will operate, but the latter's answers are of an informative nature and for legal advice, you must still contact a qualified lawyer. Legal advice is guaranteed free of charge in Estonia for people with disabilities, but other vulnerable social groups have been left without protection. Underfunding legal aid can lead to a situation where a person is forced to feel wronged, because inaccessible legal aid increases the risk of accepting discrimination and injustice. Such a situation is a threat to the protection of fundamental rights, which has also been recognized by the Supreme Court of Estonia. The lack of legal protection and support increases the feeling of being alone and reduces trust in the state. This, in turn, increases social inequality, the risk of poverty and reduces the cohesion of society. A legal system accessible to all residents is also one of the best options for preserving the environment, as residents of poorer regions are more likely to resist the destruction of nature if they feel the support of the state in protecting the law.

### **Solution 3.3: Ensure access to free legal aid for disadvantaged and discriminated groups in society.**

**During discussions, the following possible actions were suggested:**

- The state must continue to provide affordable legal aid, not reduce or eliminate it.
- Use chatbots and artificial intelligence only when the technology is more mature to provide legal aid and it is guaranteed that the information provided is correct. Chatbots or artificial intelligence should not be the only way to get help.
- All groups in society should be educated about the functioning of the legal system and understanding legislation.



## **PAIN POINT 4: Wage poverty**

Many Estonians go to work every day and work hard, but their income is too low to live with dignity. In wage poverty, a person is busy every day with keeping their “head above water” and does not have time to think about improving their and their family’s opportunities or self-development. This is often related to low-paid, part-time or unstable work and insufficient opportunities to develop their skills or improve working conditions. According to the Central Confederation of Trade Unions, wage poverty occurs in 21% of cases in medium-intensity jobs. The social problems that arise from wage poverty only worsen over time and become a concern for the entire society.

When people receive sufficient wages, society is also healthier. Creating and maintaining well-being is a shared responsibility and is born from the caring interaction of the individual, the community, the employee and the employer.

### **Problem 4.1: Working does not save you from relative poverty**

The current tax system in Estonia disproportionately burdens low-income earners, which makes it even more difficult for them to cope. Poverty and inequality have a direct connection with human rights.

Poverty can mean that a person is unable to exercise their fundamental rights, e.g.:

- the right to education (quality of education issues, access to higher education, the opportunity to participate in hobby education);
- the right to health (long queues in the state system, specialist medical care and ER visit fee of 20 euros);
- the right to an adequate standard of living (food, housing).

Poverty and inequality are also risk factors and maintainers of mental health disorders.

### **Solution 4.1: Lighten the tax burden on low-wage earners**

**During discussions, the following possible actions were suggested:**

- Progressive income tax.
- Tax peace, i.e. ensuring a sufficiently long (at least 12 months) discussion and notice period when changing and establishing taxes.
- Lower the VAT on food.
- Increase the tax exemption for employers for health promotion expenses.
- Exempt pensions from income tax.

## **Problem 4.2: The education system does not sufficiently support further training and retraining for disadvantaged people**

The lack of flexible learning at different levels and forms of education (including distance learning, part-time, e-learning) limits the educational path through rigid schedules and location requirements, preventing people from starting and continuing their studies in formal education, further education and retraining. This creates barriers that force those interested to give up on acquiring education (Report of the Association of Adult Educators 2025). Education plays an increasing role in shaping people's course of life. However, the lack of flexible educational and self-improvement opportunities increases social inequality and exacerbates the poverty risk of disadvantaged people. The education gap is widening among both students and adults: the desire for education that disappears during school also shapes the education gap in adult participation in further education (Key messages of the Human Development Report 2026).

## **Solution 4.2: Ensure a flexible education system that can be combined with work and family life**

During discussions, the following possible actions were suggested:

- a free education system, including free (part-time) formal education and retraining;
- needs-based vocational training and micro-degree programs aimed at low-income people;
- flexible forms of study, where the learner can study at a time that suits them;
- enable self-improvement (retraining and further education) in the Employment Contracts Act under the same conditions as formal education.



### **Problem 4.3: “Personal state” developments do not reach prevention mechanisms and target groups**

Many people are not aware of the support and assistance opportunities offered by the state, which is often due to complex bureaucracy or lack of information. As a result, preventive measures such as social benefits and counseling services are used only when problems have worsened. Gaps in awareness and access hinder poverty prevention and limit the opportunities to develop and implement new, early intervention solutions that support people in a timely manner and help them get out of the risk of poverty.

The Personal State is a vision and the next stage of the Estonian digital state, where support and public services are proactive, user-centered, conveniently accessible and non-bureaucratic. In a personal state, a person interacts with the state as a single party, not with a group of different institutions. This means cross-using data and offering services according to a person’s life events, being available through different channels. The personal state also avoids redundant and/or duplicative services.

In 2024, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications presented a vision of a personal state and its practical development possibilities. Currently, the plan for a personal state is “off the table”.

### **Solution 4.3: The state is proactive in providing services and subsidies**

**During discussions, the following possible actions were suggested:**

- the state informs about all services, support opportunities and obligations if one qualifies for support or assistance;
- the state develops proactive services, expanding the area of support and services provided by local governments.

## PAIN POINT 5: The current economic model does not serve well-being

Economic decisions are driven primarily by the logic of continuous growth and profit maximization. It does not sufficiently consider people's quality of life, community functioning, or the limits of the natural environment. Today's economic model exacerbates the imbalance between humans and nature. In the constant thirst for growth, it is easy not to think about the well-being of current and future generations. A growth-oriented economy has reduced the diversity and biodiversity of nature, human relationships, and social systems. This approach breaks up communities and distances the human relationships that would be needed both to cope without the help of a large state and to maintain daily interpersonal support.

The economy must support the holistic well-being of society and be based on the regenerative capacity of nature. It is beneficial for the economy when communities flourish and people have strong relationships.

**Problem 5.1: Waste of food, materials and resources and low food and resource security**

**Solution 5.1: Move towards a circular economy and resource-efficient consumption**

During discussions, the following possible actions were suggested:

- Amend legislation to make it more difficult and costly to throw away edible food and other materials and resources than to donate, reuse or recycle them.
- Support food operators and companies that divert edible food and other materials for consumption or recycling (including tax incentives and simplification of administrative processes).
- Promote cooperation between companies and organizations involved in food or resource rescue (e.g. food banks, food distribution cabinets, recycling centers).
- Create a science-based reputation or well-being score model that measures companies' food and resource waste across the entire value chain.
- Launch a nationwide awareness-raising campaign focused on reducing household food waste and valuing resources.
- Support digital solutions and platforms that facilitate the sharing, donation and reuse of leftover food, materials and resources.



### **Problem 5.2: Little flexibility to work part-time**

### **Solution 5.2: Move towards a more flexible and inclusive work organization**

#### **During discussions, the following possible actions were suggested:**

- Widely introducing the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund's measures (supporting employment of people with health limitations, social tax compensation, wage subsidy) and consulting opportunities to employers and society.
- Normalizing flexible work arrangements (including home offices, a more comfortable work environment, adjusted working hours).
- Implementing a support person at the workplace for settling into working life and performing work tasks.
- Training owners, management and employees on diversity, cooperation and mental health.
- Creating guidance materials for employers on hiring employees with health limitations, young people and older people and keeping the actual workload and the official workload in line.
- Developing measures that support young people gaining work experience and increasing employers' awareness.
- Reducing the employer's bureaucracy so that it is easier for them to offer flexible and part-time work.
- Part-time work = part-time social tax.

### **Problem 5.3: Current economic metrics do not prioritize human and environmental well-being**

### **Solution 5.3: Moving towards a multidimensional welfare-based economic model**

In addition to GDP, the well-being of people and nature must be taken into account when assessing the success of the economy and society. Indicators such as quality of life, mental and physical health, working conditions, environmental impact, preservation of biodiversity and balance of ecosystems should play a greater role in decision-making. This would help guide both organizations and job seekers to value jobs and economic activities that support sustainable development, reduce stress and create a balance between the economy, society and the natural environment. Thanks to new metrics, it is possible to highlight the problem, address it and increase well-being.

#### **During discussions, the following possible actions were suggested:**

- In addition to GDP, use additional measures of societal well-being when making important decisions (e.g. human development index, national well-being index, general life satisfaction, satisfaction with a specific area of life).
- Create a digital well-being or civic activity wallet for citizens and organizations, where points are accumulated for social contributions. This could be used in education, services or other benefits.
- Make the employee well-being measurement mandatory for employers.



## 4. Members of the Citizens' Panel

The distinctive feature of the Citizens' Panel compared to other participatory and decision-making methods is that its members are selected by a democratic lottery and constitute a mini-public. This selection of participants follows the democratic principle that **everyone has an equal chance of being elected**. A diverse group of participants, in turn, ensures the legitimacy of the results of the Panel.

### Recruitment of Panel members

The participants of the Citizens' Panel were determined based on a two-stage stratified random sample, or **democratic lottery**. For the first time in the practice of Estonian citizens' panels, we created two opportunities to be elected to the Panel: a stratified random sample from the population register data and **sent a personal e-invitation to 20,000 people**. In addition, everyone could register their interest in participating on the Citizens' Panel website.

**628 people from all over Estonia registered their interest**, 58% of whom received a personal e-invitation and 42% responded to the public announcement. After checking the data and applying exclusionary conditions, we selected 35 people based on nine characteristics and a replacement panel for backup.

In the end, **29 people from all over Estonia participated in the Citizens' Panel**, reflecting the diversity of the Estonian population.




*"We won the lottery because we are able to participate!"*


**Aare** from Jõhvi

## Profile of Panel members

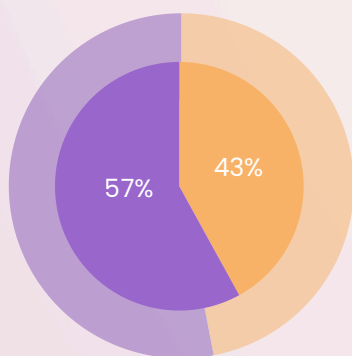
The following charts show the characteristics for ensuring diversity in the final composition of the Panel. The inner circle shows the distribution of the membership of the Panel while the outer one shows comparative data among Estonians aged 16+.

This approach ensured that an 18-year-old from Hiiumaa and a 78-year-old from Viljandimaa, an entrepreneur and a student, an optimist and a skeptic, came together around one table. At the same time, the Panel **cannot be called sociologically representative**. If we compare the participants with the Estonian population aged 16+, there were fewer participants e.g. living in central Estonia and urban settlements away from large centers, as well as unemployed people, people with lower levels of education and in difficult socio-economic situations. It must also be taken into account that the **least socially active people do not show a desire to participate**.

 The outer circle represents the distribution of the population

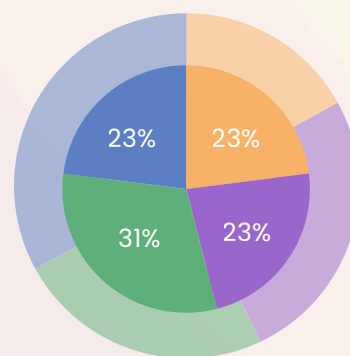
 The inner circle represents the composition of the Panel

### Gender



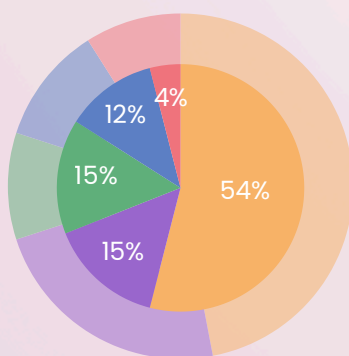
 female  male

### Age



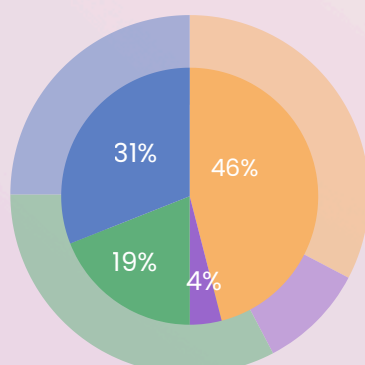
 16-29  30-44  45-59  60+





### Place of living





-  North Estonia (Harjumaa with Tallinn)
-  South Estonia (Tartu, Jõgeva, Põlva, Valga, Viljandi, Võru)
-  North-East Estonia (Ida-Viru)
-  West Estonia (Hiiumaa, Lääne, Saare, Pärnu)
-  Central Estonia (Rapla, Järva, Lääne-Viru)

### Settlement






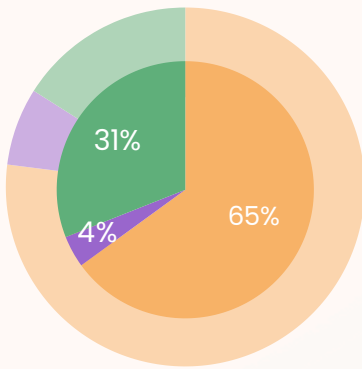
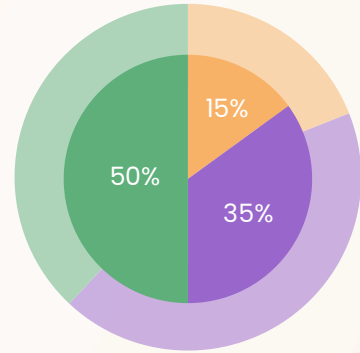
-  big city
-  suburb of a big city
-  city or other small urban settlement
-  village, farm or home in the countryside (scattered settlement)

 The outer circle represents the distribution of the population




 The inner circle represents the composition of the Panel

## Level of education




-  primary or basic education or no education
-  secondary, secondary specialized or vocational education
-  higher education

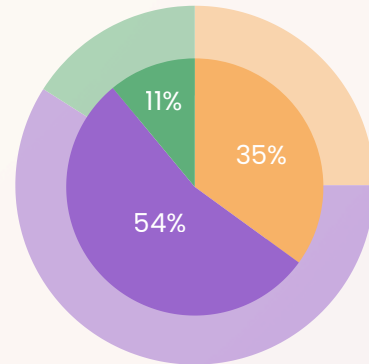


## Employment




-  employed (including working student/pensioner)
-  unemployed
-  other (including pensioner, non-working student, on maternity or childcare leave, homemaker)

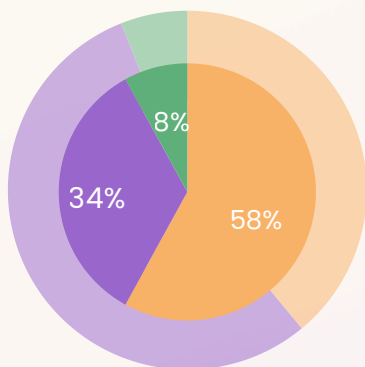
## Self-assessment for coping

-  we live comfortably on our current income
-  we get by
-  it is difficult to get by, it is very difficult to get by or I cannot say

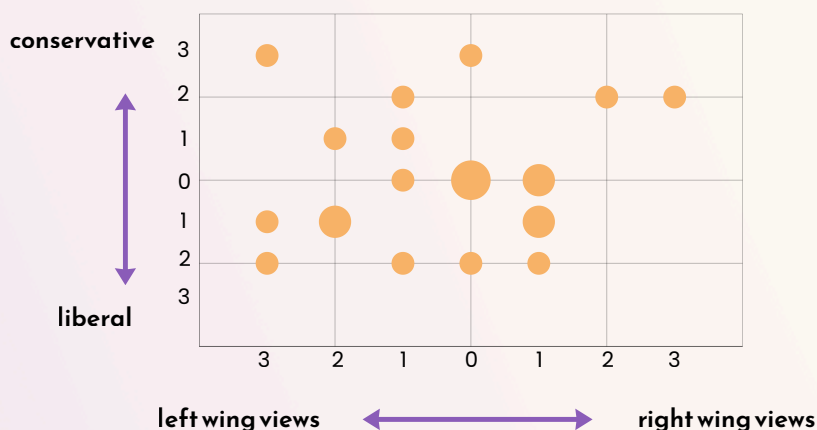


## To what extent do you trust the press?

-  I completely / rather trust
-  not at all / rather not trust
-  cannot say



## Ideological self-identification of Panel members



Explanation: In the feedback questionnaire, we asked the participants to define themselves on the scales of left-right and liberal-conservative views.

Left- or right-wing views: how important a person considers the protection of the public good and the development of the state compared to the protection of private interests and the development of the economy.

Conservative or liberal views: how important a person considers the protection of social order and traditional values compared to the protection of individual and minority rights.

Source: Results of the feedback survey of the participants; n=24

Nowadays, social discussions and political debates often get stuck because of conflicting goals and value-based polarization. The specific nature of the recruitment of participants for the Citizens' Panel ensured that its members included people with different political worldviews. The pain points formulated by the Panel thus show the way to achieving consensus on common interests.



*"Despite our different worldviews, we still find things that we are interested in and can improve together. This commonality is so much more powerful than the differences between us. For me, this is the most positive and probably the most lasting thing I will take away from here."*

**Aet from Sillamäe**

## What kind of support did the participants receive?

Participants received a 30 euro gift card as compensation for each meeting day. In addition, we reimbursed travel expenses and guaranteed accommodation and meals for participants on the meeting days.

The Panel is a participant-friendly process, and a contact person is very important to ensure this. She joined the team at the beginning to be able to answer questions from interested parties during recruitment, to later resolve participants' concerns and questions, to maintain relationships and to convey information. Since participating in the Panel is demanding, such special care creates a sense of security. Before and after each meeting, she sent explanatory emails and called those who were absent.

The venues for the Panel were accessible to everyone in settlements across Estonia with train and bus connections: Keila, Kadrina, and Elva.



Laura (center) interacted with the participants.



## 5. About the process of the Panel

After a 12-year hiatus, a national assembly was held in Estonia again, but differently than in 2013: over five days, learning from experts and interest groups, with fewer participants and as an initiative of civic associations. This Citizens' Panel was held only in the state language, as is the rule in national assemblies elsewhere in the world.

As customary in citizens' assemblies, the participants went through the usual stages of the practice, but we also added some additions:

1. **Building trust and clarity:** We started with a separate day for getting to know each other, making agreements, and mapping shared values regarding well-being.
2. **Learning together:** gaining knowledge from experts to create understanding of the topic, and listening to stakeholders to learn about possible solutions.
3. **Group discussions** to map and consider ideas, with a facilitator at each table of six.
4. Reaching a common position based on **shared values**.
5. Co-creating a public address with the Citizens' Panel **working group**.

### Virtual pre-meeting 6th January

An information session for the participants of the Panel was held online.

### Getting acquainted and learning 10th-11th January in Keila

During the two-day gathering, participants got to know each other, the organizers, and the process, conceptualized well-being, mapped common values, and learned about the Earth4All vision. They listened to presentations on the connections between poverty and inequality with the economy, society, and the environment, and had discussions with experts.

### Looking into the future 24th-25th January in Kadrina

Stakeholders from various fields presented their views on reducing poverty and economic inequality. Pain points were mapped and solutions were sought, initial proposals were made, and a working group was formed.

### Panel's agreements

- We maintain a friendly atmosphere.
- We are curious and open to different views.
- We value ideas, not people.
- We listen to each other and do not interrupt.
- We express ourselves boldly, clearly, briefly and honestly.
- We focus on common ground, also acknowledging differences.
- We are present with our thoughts (we avoid extraneous activities).
- We justify our positions.

### In the meantime: the proposals working group

gathered online to finalize the collected proposals for the next meeting.

### Common position 15th February in Elva

In the last meeting, the proposals were finalized, a common position was found (the proposals of the Panel were clarified), and the day ended with a celebration.

### Follow-up activities

The working group helped prepare a public appeal and a report on the proposals of the Panel.

We aimed for a family reunion type of atmosphere that will be remembered for a long time. In addition to the work, we went to the Kadrina community sauna with participants, organizers, and observers, listened to a concert by the children of the local music school in Elva, and celebrated the end of the gathering by eating cake.



Sauna visit in Kadrina. Photo: Teele Pehk

## How did the content unfold?

The original question "What is needed for a good life?" can be approached in different ways, which is why we chose the Earth For All model, compiled by economists around the world, as the foundation for looking toward the future.

### Earth4All or a rescue plan for humanity:

"A leap into a new, desired and sustainable future is possible, but for this to happen, the economy must prioritize the well-being of people and nature."

According to the data-based model of Earth4All, humanity needs to achieve the following revolutions:

- sustainable energy revolution;
- making the food system sustainable;
- ending poverty;
- increasing economic equality;
- reducing gender inequality.

As organizers, we left out the topic of the energy revolution because, compared to the other four revolutions, there is already an active societal discussion and real-world activities on this topic in Estonia. We asked people who registered their interest in participating to indicate which of the four topics they consider important to address in today's Estonia. The chosen ones were economic inequality and poverty. The Panel considered poverty and inequality as obstacles to a good life.

In the Panel, we considered the economy, society and environment as systems. The human perspective came in as well-being over the life span. In the background paper prepared for the participants of the Panel, we explored the interrelationships between these topics, based on the Estonian Human Development Reports.

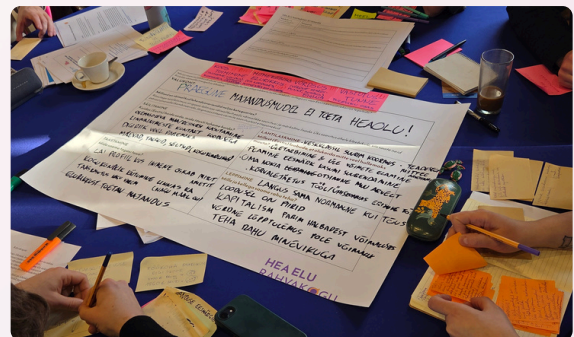
During the meetings, we mapped the participants' shared values to use as a foundation for decision-making. Agreeing on values took time, but it helped resolve substantive disagreements when describing pain points and proposals.

### Common values of the Panel

<p><b>1. Benevolent and considerate cooperation between people, the economy and nature</b></p> <p>Well-being is achieved when social order, economic activity and the natural environment operate in harmony and with mutual consideration, bearing responsibility for future generations. Caring, empathy and acceptance of differences are the basis of both everyday coexistence and social decisions.</p>	<p><b>2. Equal opportunities, dignity and security for everyone</b></p> <p>Everyone has the opportunity for a better life, regardless of their background, job, health, place of residence or special characteristics. Being a minority does not make anyone less human, and the existence of human rights are not subject to discussion. Everyone must have the opportunity to live and work in a way that allows them to cope with life with dignity and to feel safe.</p>
<p><b>3. Shared responsibility for maintaining well-being and balancing interests</b></p> <p>Creating, maintaining well-being and shaping the future is a shared responsibility and is born from the caring interaction of all parties (individual, community, employee, employer, decision-makers, etc.).</p>	<p><b>4. Consistent well-being throughout the lifespan</b></p> <p>Well-being and intergenerational cohesion must be created, maintained and supported consistently throughout the lifespan. Attention must be paid to both mental and physical health and to creating conditions for the next generations to grow up smarter.</p>

To identify pain points and possible solutions, we used questions familiar from deep adaptation and future thinking throughout:

1. How (in Estonia) can we keep what we really want to keep?
2. What should we give up (in Estonia) so as not to make the situation worse?
3. What can we bring back?
4. What and with whom can we make peace?



Replies of members of the Panel in order of priority

#### What is important to preserve in Estonia?

1. Free and accessible education throughout the life span
2. National minimum guarantees for ensuring economic security
3. A supportive and caring environment for mental health, a safe growth environment for children
4. Sustainable use of natural resources
5. A functioning and developing digital state in the service of access to services
6. Communities, non-governmental and voluntary activities as keepers of a sense of belonging and communion
7. Equal opportunities and a sense of justice

#### What should be abandoned in Estonia?

1. Hasty and ill-considered decision-making
2. Populism and empty metrics
3. Shaming and simplistic approach to poverty
4. Political confrontation and fighting
5. Overconsumption and living beyond means
6. Social stigmas that hinder well-being and cause exclusion
7. Fragmented budgeting and the logic of subsidies
8. Profit orientation
9. The attempt to be at the forefront of innovation (rushers)

## How were the experts and interest groups selected?

The Citizens' Panel is knowledge-based, as experts (researchers and analysts) first explained the connections between poverty and inequality of the economy, society and the environment. Three experts presented to the Panel, who were also advised by Lauri Leppik, Professor of Social and Population Policy at Tallinn University.



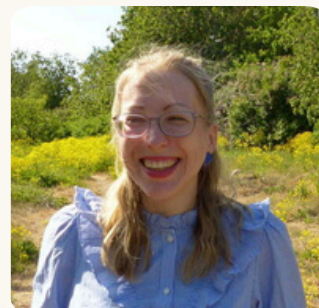
**Tairi Rõõm**

Head of the Economic Research Department of the Bank of Estonia; Professor at the Institute of Economic Analysis and Finance, Tallinn University of Technology



**Katre Pall**

Labor and Social Policy Analyst at Praxis



**Bianka Plüschke-Altöf**

Senior Researcher in Environmental Sociology, Tallinn University; Researcher in Regional Planning, University of Tartu

We invited experts based on the analysis of the topics and the goals of the Panel. The experts helped to open the focus topic, explained the main concepts and the current situation in Estonia. In addition, welfare researchers from the University of Tartu **Dagmar Kutsar** and **Oliver Nahkur** elaborated on the modern understanding of well-being and the life-course-based view of well-being. They will use the summaries of the Panel discussions to create a model of well-being for Estonians.

The idea behind involving **stakeholders** was to provide a sense of what different parties consider important for a secure good life in the future, which developments they want to see and why. Listening to stakeholders brings practical and real-life information to the Panel. Thanks to the input of stakeholders, members of the Panel were able to focus better on solutions and did not have to start from scratch. In this way, we value ideas circulating in society that have not yet become mainstream for one reason or another.

Since there is no central organization in Estonia that deals with reducing poverty and inequality, we involved stakeholders from the perspective of **three systems**: economy, society and environment. We mapped those NGOs whose activities help reduce poverty and inequality in different ways. We invited 18 organizations to present their positions to the Panel in writing (based on a common form, using the guiding questions of the Panel) and organized a virtual discussion round with them on the third day of the Panel meeting.

We published the presentations of experts and stakeholders and the answers to the questions on the website after the meeting days.

## How was a common position reached?

By the end of the fourth day of the Panel the initial proposals had been hatched under the five pain points. Then, a working group of the Panel (9 members chosen by the participants themselves) gathered, which was tasked with assessing the correspondence of the initial proposals to the identified problems and making the proposals more argumentative. The organizing team did not interfere with the content of the proposals.

We sent the working group's supplemented proposals to all participants via an e-survey so that everyone could assess the problems under the pain point and the proposals intended to alleviate them on a 3-point scale: I support, I do not support, I need clarification/improvement. We considered those that were supported by at least 80% of the participants to be the joint proposals of the Panel. This eliminated two topics which were considered too general and already covered by other proposals.

The remaining 12 proposals received additions and references from participants and experts via an e-survey. At the last meeting in Elva, the participants, who were divided into thematic groups, integrated the additions into the final wording. We then went through the 12 proposals one by one and the Panel unanimously approved them on the spot.

The Panel participants were divided into groups at all meetings and each group was assisted by an experienced facilitator. The facilitators helped the participants complete the tasks on time and, if necessary, resolve disagreements without interfering in the content. The Panel meetings were led by a chairperson.



*"The experience of the Panel had a very positive impact on me. I believed before that my opinion would be asked once every four years, you would vote for someone and it would be put in a box. But in the Panel I saw that an ordinary person has the opportunity to express their thoughts, formulate them beautifully and hope that it will eventually reach the decision-makers' table. It was very interesting to experience that we are more in agreement than I would have thought before the Panel."*

**Kaspar** from Viljandimaa

*"The Panel is a chance to meet people you probably wouldn't meet in your normal life. I also see it as a step out of your everyday life – five days where you're somewhere else and it's like you're living with this group of people. You form a small community that has its own topic to think about and find answers to."*



**Dagmar** from Tallinn (who also participated in a previous Citizens' Panel!)

## What happens next?

The Citizens' Panel concludes its work by publishing a **report**. As a follow-up, the identified pain points and proposals are forwarded to the Parliament as citizens' initiatives with interested participants and interest groups of the Panel. With Praxis, we coordinate the emergence of citizens' initiatives and thus pass on the results to interest groups and the public.

We distribute the pain points and proposals identified by the Citizens' Panel to the Government Chancellery, ministries and presidential advisors, and non-governmental organizations that protect public interests.

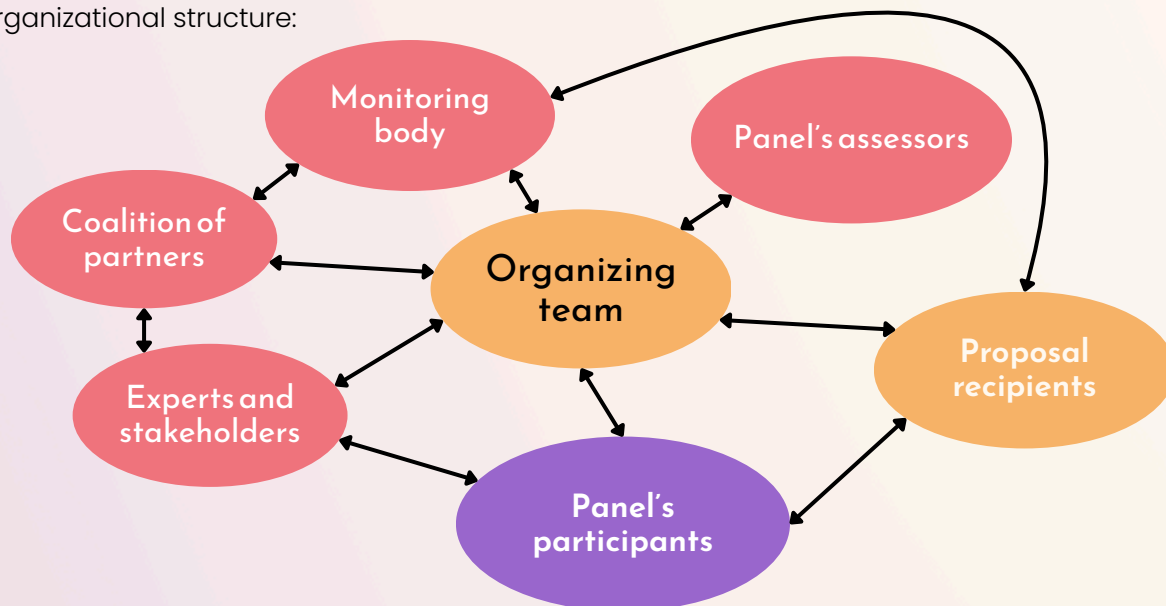
The results of the Citizens' Panel are a public good that can be used in policymaking and advocacy for the benefit of Estonia.



## 6. The organizers of the Panel

The preparation and implementation of the Citizens' Panel on Good Life and its subsequent impact were achieved thanks to many parties.

Organizational structure:



### Organizing Team

**Teele Pehk** – coordinator, main designer

**Maiu Lauring** – knowledge transfer leader, participant recruitment and assessment expert

**Laura Välik** – participant contact person, technical organization of meetings

**Meelika Hirmo** – outreach manager and NGO coalition leader

**Petrik Saks** – outreach and visuals

**Saskia Puusaar** – social media outreach, stakeholder engagement

**Urmo Kübar** – outreach and media relations

**Riinu Lepa** – expert involvement; group discussion facilitator

**Joanna Kurvits** – group discussion facilitator

**Karl Lembit Laane** – group discussion facilitator

**Meel Valk** – group discussion facilitator

**Martin Tiidelepp** – group discussion facilitator

**Kadri Kangro** – leader of the Panel meetings

PHOTO: organizers and facilitators in front of the Kadrina community center (Saskia Puusaar is missing from the photo)



## Monitoring body

The monitoring body advised the organizing team and monitored compliance with international standards. It included two experienced foreign practitioners (Zakia Elvang and Kyle Redman), two Citizens' Panel result receivers (Marten Lauri and Signe Riisalo), and political scientist Tõnis Leht. The monitoring body met virtually five times. Estonian members of the monitoring body visited Kadrina to observe the weekend.

## Partners

Eesti Koostöö Kogu (the administrator of [rahvaalgatus.ee](http://rahvaalgatus.ee)) and the Vabaühenduste Liit played an important role in organizing the Panel. During the process, we set the goal of growing the coalition of NGOs. At the end of the Panel, there were more partners: Opinion Festival, Estonian Youth Associations Association, Open Estonia Foundation, Village Movement Kodukant, Estonian LEADER Association and Estonian Human Rights Center.

We selected and invited partners according to the focus theme of the Panel so that the results would have more owners. Regular e-meetings were held with partners to provide insight into the organization of the Panel and to create future people's initiatives. Partners were given priority to observe the meeting days - this opportunity was actively used.



*"In the grand scheme of things, especially in this day and age, trust and listening to each other are something that needs to be especially created. Social media has almost completely hijacked this space, and it's taking a heavy toll on our daily relationships and ability to make decisions together."*

**Maarja-Leena Saar**, Eesti Koostöö Kogu, [rahvaalgatus.ee](http://rahvaalgatus.ee)

We have been communicating separately with the so-called receiving partners: **the Strategy Office of the Government Office, the Commissioner for Equal Opportunities and Gender Equality, and the Green Reform Department of the Ministry of Climate**. We will continue to communicate with them to help push the results of the Panel into the strategic directions of the country.

## Evaluators

The Citizens' Panel as a democratic innovation will be evaluated by university researchers and students according to international standards, in collaboration with Praxis. The evaluation report will be published soon.

## Funders

This time, the Panel was born as an initiative of non-governmental organizations. We received funding from the Mondo NoPlanetB application round (36,000 euros) and from the Nordic Council of Ministers (7,500 euros). The organizational work that began at the DD Democracy Center moved to Praxis in the summer of 2025, and both organizations contributed with their own financing.

Since the Panel was postponed several times due to the complexity of conducting a random sample, the total budget was 70,000 euros. This amount can be compared, e.g., to the cost of organizing a referendum or organizing elections, since they are also formats for obtaining a mandate from the public. For comparison: organizing the Riigikogu elections (excluding party campaigns) costs at least two million euros. There is no permanent funding for citizens' panels and other democratic innovations in Estonia.



## 7. Afterword of the Monitoring Group

### How did the Panel fit into the Estonian political context?

The process was very timely: half a year before the presidential election and a year before the parliamentary election, the Panel raised the issue of social and equality issues. These are related to the rising cost of living, which is likely to receive a lot of attention in the election campaigns. It is hoped that the outcome of the Panel will provide an opportunity to influence the election campaigns, although the issues compete with other major issues (security, economy, etc.).

The division of Estonian society (more liberal vs. conservative views) affects the reception of the results. Too broad an issue definition can reduce concrete political applicability.

### What was your role?

We were advisors to help the Panel achieve greater impact. On the other hand, we were supervisors to help the organizers comply with international standards.

Before the Panel, we drew attention to

- the need for a clear theme and goal setting
- different options for selecting participants with a democratic lottery, as the organizers had difficulty obtaining the necessary data
- the need to distinguish between the client and the organizer
- the importance of neutral moderation
- the balance between the topics discussed, the design of the process and the achievement of real results

During and after the Panel, we thought about how to maximize the quality of the process and advised on the further development of the results.

### How well did the Panel achieve its set goals?

The Panel succeeded in initiating two important discussions:

- 1) what is the next phase of mini-publics in Estonia?
- 2) how should we as a society address the pain points that the Panel reached?

The Panel achieved its goal as the participants held in-depth discussions and formulated comprehensive pain points and recommendations from the input received. Individual preferences were gradually moved to a collective position. The result of the Panel is a good starting point for creating more specific policy recommendations.

The organization was smooth and professional. The organizers quickly found solutions to the complexities. As observers, we gained valuable experience of the charms and bottlenecks of this format. We saw the activity and commitment of the participants and the quality of the dialogue up close.

"Now begins the difficult task of ensuring that the pain points raised by the participants in the Panel are considered. This follow-up is never easy and is more difficult in a situation where the mini-public has been initiated outside the government."

**Kyle Redman**



## What impact do you hope to see from the Citizens' Panel on Good Life in Estonia (and elsewhere in the world)?

In Estonia: the Panel proved the model's effectiveness. It could be applied to more specific topics or local issues in the future. It is important to reach politics and decision-making processes to increase citizen involvement and trust. The next Citizens' Panel will certainly deserve greater public attention.



"The result answers the questions that politicians face and the problems that all political parties acknowledge, but the solutions are naturally diverse due to worldviews. I think that the voice of citizens was well represented and it is also important that people learned that they want to be listened to. Only through dialogue can society be built, and this dialogue was opened up. The Citizens' Panel is an excellent platform to give people the opportunity to speak for themselves and make recommendations to elected representatives."

**Signe Riisalo**

Internationally, the Citizens' Panel offers a good example of a small country's experience in promoting deliberative democracy. It is important to share its lessons with the international community of practitioners in order to raise Estonia's profile among democracy promoters.

## Members of the Monitoring Group



**Signe Riisalo**

Chairwoman of the Social Affairs Committee of the Riigikogu



**Marten Lauri**

Advisor to the Strategy Office of the Government Office



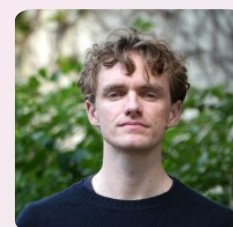
**Tõnis Leht**

Poliitika.guru political scientist



**Zakia Elvang**

WeDoDemocracy, Nordic Deliberation Network



**Kyle Redman**

Federation for Innovation in Democracy, Europe (FIDE)