
13. Act4Growth

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Editors' summary: This ECI was initiated by women entrepreneurs to implement recommendations from an EESC report on entrepreneurship in the EU. Launched with tremendous enthusiasm and support from female entrepreneur organisations, it quickly encountered obstacles: a three month delay in registering the online collection system, inadequate human and financial resources, rules preventing contact with supporters, criticism of its motives and scepticism of its chances of success. It has, though, persevered and raised awareness of the need for better support for female entrepreneurship.

Do policy makers actually want the ECI to work?

So you want to be a change-maker? Then you are exactly what Europe needs. To accommodate the you's and me's of this world, the European Union created an instrument that allows us to take control. *"The EU Citizens' Initiative is a citizen's opportunity to change policy and become included in the decision making process in Europe."* OK. Cut the political speech. Since the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, promoted the ECI prior to the approval of the latest EU treaty, we have never heard him mention it again. Why? It is my impression that policy makers do not want individual citizens interfering in policy making. I would also add that I'm not so sure citizens themselves are keen to contribute.

From recommendation to action: female entrepreneurship is an economic imperative

I am an entrepreneur. I am also privileged to be a UK member of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). In July 2012, with the support of the UK Women's Enterprise Policy Group and in consultation with female entrepreneur organisations across Europe, I authored a report which highlighted the business, economic and social case for supporting more entrepreneurs in Europe. The EU Commission included some of the recommendations in its *Entrepreneurship Action Plan*. However, these actions are not mandatory and therefore will likely not be implemented. So, in order to have concrete actions, I initiated an ECI called *ACT4Growth*.

Why did I take this route? Because this is not a gender issue. This is an economic imperative. Female entrepreneurs are an economic resource of jobs, wealth creation and innovation. But they are currently ignored by national governments and EU policy makers. Europe is in trouble and this is one solution. Plus, all my networks were telling me they would help us with an ECI.

Initial enthusiasm and momentum collide with overwhelming practical obstacles

One million signatures? Easy! After all, there are 500 million people in Europe, 51% are women and most are over 18. My odds of success were good. Or so I thought.

The initial enthusiasm was fantastic. Everyone wanted to be part of it. There was real momentum. Collecting seven supporters from seven different countries for the mandatory ECI citizens' committee was easy.

The time frame to collect one million signatures is 12 months from when you register. So we registered. Then we found out we had to set up a signature collection system. That took us almost three months – during which the deadline clock kept ticking. Once we were ready to collect signatures, we only had nine months left!

Then we discovered that we couldn't contact the people who signed our ECI. So we couldn't ask them for help. We couldn't even tell them if we reached our goal!

Worst of all, as we lobbied people, we started to hear that the European Commission had set the ECI system up to fail. There is no way citizens lacking considerable financial resources could undertake an ECI. But citizens with funding could actually be classed as lobbies.

Running an ECI Campaign is a full-time job

Coordinating people from 28 member states while holding down a day job is simply not possible. Sending e-mails and managing social media is not only time-consuming, but extremely frustrating. Contacting hundreds of people means you get hundreds of responses: each with their own recommendation which needs a reply. We had to hire a professional communications manager, paid for by my company.

The initial momentum waned very quickly. We've all got busy lives after all. Then the scepticism began. Why are we doing this? Who is funding us? What are we gaining from it? Even organisations campaigning for the same goal started to question our policy recommendations and activities. We even started to doubt ourselves.

Then a new trend began. Students doing research on the ECI, its opportunities and challenges, started asking us in-depth questions. This took additional time, with no results to support us.

The support of other ECI campaigns kept us going

To be honest, it was only the other ECI campaigns taking place at the same time that kept us going. Something worth having is worth fighting for. The other ECI campaigns were also trying to make good changes recognised as necessary by the citizens of Europe. It was essential that we continue to support each other and fight together.

We are not giving up. We are trying everything possible to collect signatures. We've even started collecting signatures on paper since people seem more willing to give personal information on paper as opposed to online. We continually return to and reengage old networks. We try to find new ones. It's hard work, but we will do it. Organisations in some countries are very proactive and support our work. Others say "*we don't have a problem, so we don't engage*". Some people say promoting entrepreneurship is important, but they will not share their ID numbers online. Only time will tell.

There's also frightening news. Even if we get one million signatures, the Commission does not actually know what to do to change the policy. We're all waiting anxiously to see how the Commission responds to the successful *Right 2 Water* ECI.

At the end of the day, despite the challenges, the experience has been great. We raised awareness of the need to better support female entrepreneurship. If we do get the one million signatures, I personally guarantee that I will not let it have been in vain.

One million starts with one. That one is you!

Madi Sharma is the initiator and a member of the citizens' committee of the ECI Act4Growth.
www.act4growth.org

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Learning from the first two years of the European Citizens' Initiative

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