

## CitizenCentral CHAPTER 3 transcript

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**Speaker 2** [00:00:12] Ask the EU to stop caging animals.

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**Speaker 3** [00:00:21] To master the challenges of the digital age.

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**Speaker 1** [00:00:28] It is about where we want to go and who we want to be.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:00:39] Hello, there, welcome to CitizenCentral, a podcast series all about the first transnational democracy instrument in the world: the European Citizens' Initiative. Brought about back in the Lisbon Treaty, the ECI gives people the chance to pitch their own EU policies to the European Commission by gathering one million signatures from seven EU states. My name is Méabh Mc Mahon. I'm an Irish reporter in Brussels and on CitizenCentral, I'll be finding out what exactly the ECI is, how you can launch or support one, and what drives people to give up their time and energy for a cause they care deeply about. Despite a finning ban coming in a couple of years ago, shark finning still occurs in the EU and it's something our next guest is determined to end. Nils, can you tell us how you ended up setting up this ECI and what it is all about?

**Dr Nils Kluger** [00:01:31] My name is Nils Kluger. I'm the spokesperson of the ECI 'Stop Finning, Stop the Trade,' and our goal is to end the shark fin trade within the EU. I'm a diver myself, and while diving, you realise how endangered our oceans are. And that's why I started to engage in marine conservation. And one big, big part of marine conservation is caring about the marine ecosystem and how it's structured. Once you do that, you realise that sharks play a vital role in marine ecosystems, and that's how I got engaged with NGOs in marine conservation. I finally ended up building up the group that's behind this European Citizens' Initiative.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:02:17] What would happen to the marine ecosystem if there were no more sharks?

**Dr Nils Kluger** [00:02:21] You know that you can just transfer that onto land, and you can compare it maybe to the Serengeti, where you also have food chains. And very simply said, the food chain works from the lower-level animals up to the highest-level ones. And if you compare the oceans to the Serengeti, you have a lot of antelopes running around, and then you have the bigger animals like the lions eating the other animals. And if you take out the lions, you will have a bunch of antelopes eating off all the grass leading to desertification. Food chains are way more complicated, but one thing is true for the ocean: the shark is the one animal that eats everything else. So, if you put it that away, the whole ecosystem is put in tremendous danger.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:03:09] Tourism and, of course, diving had to be stopped in many cases because of COVID. Who else is supporting your ECI?

**Dr Nils Kluger** [00:03:15] We had to move our strategy a bit away from the diver target group. People care more and more about what they eat now. This is a very good target group to focus on because since the 'Fins Naturally Attached' regulation was put in place in Europe, shark finning is not allowed anymore. They must land the sharks with the fins naturally attached to the body. But what happened is they started to search for shark meat markets. So, right now, more and more people in Europe have started to eat shark meat, sometimes without even knowing. And this is something that raises interest in people who care about what they eat. They don't want to eat mercury-poisoned shark meat.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:03:59] What would you say to people that eat shark fins as a cultural habit?

**Dr Nils Kluger** [00:04:03] Anywhere in life, you have a hard time if you start fighting culture. I would like to tell them, please rethink your cultural implications as your population has grown significantly since your culture was established, and this is not working for the oceans anymore. We're just too many now.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:04:23] What kind of reactions has your ECI been getting?

**Dr Nils Kluger** [00:04:26] I tell everyone I meet that EU nations are still amongst the top shark-catching nations in the world. People understand what the problem is, and I have rarely seen anybody not signing the initiative. We, as Europeans, cannot point our fingers towards Asia, where shark fin soup is consumed. Why were our hands opened for the cash that we're getting out of this business? We have to clean our own backyard first and stop profiting. If we're profiting from it, we don't say anything about it. There are 500 shark species. Not all of them are endangered. So, first of all, it's very hard. If you see a shark fin, is it a protected species or not? That's hard to tell. There are just too many species, and protecting them one by one once they're endangered is not the right way to do it, especially as long as shark fin trade remains allowed. And you can just mix species in the shark fin cargo. No one can tell what species are in there. They are just labelled as shark fin.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:05:22] What is the plan to hit those one million signatures?

**Dr Nils Kluger** [00:05:26] We're working a lot with partner organisations, but still, the topic has problems getting attention in the broader media. Whenever we have made it to the media, people are convinced about the initiative. If I should pitch them, I would say to them, do you know that hundreds of sharks are killed every single minute for shark fin soup and that Europe is one of the major players in this business? We have to end that.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:05:51] Ok, Nils, thank you so much for being with us on CitizenCentral.

**Dr Nils Kluger** [00:05:54] Thanks for having me.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:05:58] Well, next we can head to the Netherlands to meet a true shark expert, a marine biologist that dedicated over 15 years of her life to protecting sharks. Irene Kingma, thank you so much for joining us on CitizenCentral.

**Irene Kingma** [00:06:11] Thank you.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:06:12] Tell us in what state the shark population is in the EU.

**Irene Kingma** [00:06:15] Not so good. There was a worldwide review of the status of all biodiversity and wildlife. It was from the World Conservation Union. That's the red list of the critically endangered species. And it turns out about 40 % are threatened with extinction. So they're not doing well, unfortunately.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:06:33] So, if that's the state of our sharks, what state are laws in?

**Irene Kingma** [00:06:37] In Europe we use a system of quota, and that's an economics-based system. When they started doing that about 30, 40 years ago, it was like, France has always produced this much cod and this much haddock, so you get 20 % of the catch. It was based on economics because fisheries are an economics discipline in classic EU thinking. But they didn't do that for the bycatch species also. And that's what sharks are, and there are just no limits attached to them. So, there was no handle on limiting the number of sharks and rays that came out of the ocean. That's the main issue still, because some species now have a limit, for example older ray species, and you see those populations climbing again, and they are improving. But for many shark species, there are still no limits on the amount taken from the ocean. For example, here in Northern Europe you have the tope shark: a proper shark, it can grow up to two metres. It's grey, it's oblong, and there's no limit on it, just on paper. If I look at the shark, it is an endangered species. But there's no management on it whatsoever. So, you can just land it, sell it, throw it overboard, kill it, whatever. You can do what you want with that animal. But if you catch a basking shark – the biggest fish we have in Europe, it can grow to 11 metres; those are under very strict protection laws by the Convention of Migratory Species because this fish migrates all around the world – immediately you have to throw it back in the water, and hopefully, it's still alive then. And that's the difference if you have some form of management on them or not.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:08:03] Can you tell us exactly what happens when an apex predator disappears from an ecosystem?

**Irene Kingma** [00:08:08] Now, the ocean will always find a new balance, but what happens is that it's going to be a balance of lower diversity. I mean, should the sharks be the main top predators or do you sort of regulate the species below them? And if you take the top predator away, you get to think that what is below it will increase.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:08:25] Is the solution just to quit fish? I mean, should we not be screaming louder about the state of our oceans?

**Irene Kingma** [00:08:30] That's not my choice. My choice is to stick here in Europe, go to every meeting, talk to people, try to get this legislation through and also keep the conversation going. Because, in the end, humans have to solve this. And humans are also fishermen, and humans are also politicians. So, it's not just, I'm going to only work with this sample of the human population. If you look at it holistically, we have the climate crisis, the biodiversity crisis; everything is coming together. But we also have the EU Green Deal now and incredible, strong lobbying for agriculture, fisheries, water, everything. But it's there. It's allowing us to make strong EU-wide statements of the world we want to be living in.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:09:10] Thank you so much for your time and for joining us on CitizenCentral.

**Irene Kingma** [00:09:13] Thank you.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:09:17] Once sharks are gone, they take a long time to replenish in the oceans. And that's part of the story of our next guest, Alessandro de Maddalena, a marine biologist from Italy and a true shark aficionado. To continue studying sharks, he had to leave Europe and move to South Africa as there are so few sharks left in the Mediterranean.

**Alessandro de Maddalena** [00:09:37] I started working here in 2010. I wanted to work with sharks without the problems that we have in Europe and Italy. Some specialists used to say that we should catch and eat more sharks as they are a good source of meat, and plentiful. And just a few decades later, we can see dramatic decreases in the shark populations, because there are too many people, and fishing vessels, that are destroying the environment. Many people are wondering where all the fish have gone, but the huge fishing vessels are really destroying the oceans. There is a lot of talk about the importance of the animals, the food chain, the ecosystem. That's something that I read somewhere in a book once, but it doesn't apply when I go to a restaurant or when I'm cooking or when I go to the supermarket. People might say that they have never eaten shark in their life. In most cases it is not true because they eat shark, but they don't know it as it can also appear in other foods and cosmetics.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:11:26] Taking care of nature can take so many shapes, especially in our cities. And that's exactly what our next guest is trying to achieve. First, Almog, please tell us about yourself and your ECI.

**Almog Sade** [00:11:38] My full name is Almog Yoana Sade. I'm half German and half Israeli. Education-wise, I have a double bachelor's degree in business administration and accounting and a master's degree in physical economics, which I obtained from the Netherlands, Maastricht. Together with my brother, we created this initiative, which is called 'Green Garden Roof Tops'. We got six of our friends from six different EU countries to come together and apply for an ECI.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:12:10] So, you're proof that the ECI can just be citizen-led. Yourself and your brother, what a great story. Tell us more about why you decided to take on this project together as siblings.

**Almog Sade** [00:12:21] We thought about this idea during the lockdown period. We care about the environment, about nature, and by doing so, we care about our future. So, we asked ourselves, how can we contribute? How can we improve our environment, our current situation? From there came the idea that we can make cities greener. We have so much unused space existing on rooftops. And how nice would it be with the green not only looking good but contributing to and supporting the environment?

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:12:55] What an amazing idea because we've seen, of course, with this pandemic, a massive mental health crisis as well. So, I guess with the ECI, you're trying to contribute to that too.

**Almog Sade** [00:13:05] Exactly. When we thought about this idea, when I started putting this initiative on paper, we said, yes, the goal is indeed to support the environment, but we took into consideration all the other factors that are relevant here. So, first, economic

interests, the government in the current situation and, of course, the citizens, ourselves as human beings.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:13:28] How did you find out about the ECI?

**Almog Sade** [00:13:31] I discovered it through social media, the social media platform of the EU. I'd never heard of it before so I was reading about it a bit, and then I found there was a great possibility to take this idea and make it a reality.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:13:47] And that's when you started calling your friends from different EU Member States and making sure that they would come on board. How did they react initially when you invited them to this ECI project?

**Almog Sade** [00:13:56] When I was researching the ECI, I saw that, yes, you need a group of six citizens around the European Member States. So, of course, it wasn't an easy task to gather six people that were going to be available for it. But when I explained the initiative and what it could do for our future, they were all on board, and they were super supportive.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:14:19] How has the journey been since then? What has it been like trying to turn six into one million signatures?

**Almog Sade** [00:14:25] We started collecting signatures on the 26th of May, but I can say we are very happy, and it's encouraging to see that people have an interest, that people agree and say, yes, it's a great idea, indeed, cities could be greener. With climate change and global warming, it could be a great environmental benefit, and what we are learning in this process is that in order to make a change – even in this case, to make a regulation in the EU, to create a greener Europe – we need to work together.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:15:02] OK, let's look a little bit more into the details of the ECI itself. So, what exactly are you asking for?

**Almog Sade** [00:15:08] We want to authorise unused space on existing rooftops around cities – we are talking specifically about corporations' rooftops – and to convert the empty space into a green area environment. The factors that play a role here are the government, the social aspect, and the corporation itself. The government can support this initiative to make a city greener with aid; they can give support and tax credits to the corporation that creates a green area on their rooftop. If we look at the social aspect, our idea was that the employees of that corporation are going to be key here. And our suggestion is that the employees of the corporation volunteer in creating this green garden. By doing so, they're contributing to the community and their own mental well-being because when staff are motivated, productivity is higher. When we thought about creating greenery on rooftops, we thought that the corporation would need to see some benefits. They would need to have something to encourage them to participate in this project. The motivation of the employees will affect the company positively, and expenses will be reduced because they're going to be consuming less energy. So, our proposition for the EU is to introduce a regulation into EU law that would be applied to all Member States around the EU to encourage cooperation in building green gardens on their rooftops.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:17:01] Well, everything seems impossible until it's done. I'm sure you'll manage. Best of luck and thank you so much for being with us on CitizenCentral.

**Almog Sade** [00:17:08] Thank you very much.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:17:11] Now, green rooftops are extremely popular, but there's much more to them than just putting a couple of plants on your roof. That's why we're off now to the Czech Republic to meet Pavel Dostal, the vice president of the European Federation of Green Rooftops. Pavel, thank you so much for joining us.

**Pavel Dostal** [00:17:27] It's my pleasure.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:17:28] First, tell us how you ended up being a specialist in rooftop gardens.

**Pavel Dostal** [00:17:33] It was originally my mum's expertise because she used to represent a German company in the Czech Republic, focusing on greener systems. I was kind of peeking over her shoulder and looking at what she was doing. It seemed like something that makes a positive difference so I was interested in what she was doing. Some years later, we thought of continuing and founded our family business, Greenville. That's how I ended up doing green roofs. I am trying to connect the Czech environment with the foreign trends and foreign knowledge and bring something in the Czech Republic.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:18:11] That is such a nice story. Garden rooftops bring a lot of benefits to people. What are the most important ones for you?

**Pavel Dostal** [00:18:19] The benefits are mostly manifested in the summer, when you need to cool down the environment under the roof. And that's what the green roof does by evaporating water. Therefore, the building structure does not overheat so much, and in the winter it can also help you with thermal insulation as well. But for our well-being, it has been proven by studies that we focus better when we spend some time in the greenery or look at it. We're beginning to realise that nature has more meaning and more value for ourselves than we thought.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:18:55] But I imagine gardening a roof is very different when it's in a new-build or an existing roof.

**Pavel Dostal** [00:19:00] So, with new builds, it's generally easier. With existing buildings, it's more complicated, and you have to dig a little bit deeper. First of all, you have to find out more about the building structure, if the structure is strong enough, if it has enough load-bearing capacity to hold the green roof. The second thing would be the quality of the waterproofing; sometimes the waterproofing on existing buildings is already behind its lifespan and needs to be replaced, and that's the perfect moment to install a green roof.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:19:28] What do you think Europe could look like if this ECI was successful?

**Pavel Dostal** [00:19:32] Europe with all company rooftops green would be a nice place to work in. It would be really attractive. So, it's a good idea. Life-changing for a lot of people.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:19:46] Shall we link you up then with Almog and her brother?

**Pavel Dostal** [00:19:48] Absolutely do. I think it's a good approach to start at a grassroots level, start where the demand is and then get in touch with people who understand what

it's all about, landscapers, structural engineers... If you put together a group which is diverse and fills in all the expert fields needed, then it's the best; it seldom happens.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:20:12] If you were given the choice anywhere in Europe, where would you like to set up a green garden rooftop?

**Pavel Dostal** [00:20:18] Certainly, I wish we could do something on the rooftop of the Commission. Yes, they should be the ones to lead the way.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:20:32] Thank you so much for your time and your insights.

**Pavel Dostal** [00:20:34] Thank you so much as well. It was my pleasure to talk with you.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:20:41] Sometimes an ECI can be a success, even if it doesn't reach the one million signatures. It's about putting a topic out there; that can feel like a success. And that's where Martina Helmlinger comes in. Martina, lovely to have you here on CitizenCentral.

**Martina Helmlinger** [00:20:56] Thanks so much.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:20:57] First of all, Martina, would you like to tell our listeners a bit about yourself and your ECI 'Grow Scientific Progress: Crops Matter'?

**Martina Helmlinger** [00:21:04] I started this initiative together with six other students from university two years ago. Our group included students in the fields of biotechnology, food safety, agroecology, economics, etc. The initiative focused on an issue that was very dear to our hearts. To give you a bit of context, our initiative focuses on the legislation on genetically modified organisms in the European Union. And this legislation is already 20 years old. Three years ago, there was a question that was brought in front of the European Court of Justice that concerned itself with some new technologies of genetic modification that resemble very natural processes. And it became very clear from this ruling that the legislation was not up to date or it was not allowing progress that has a lot of potential to solve some of the main issues in agriculture sustainability.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:22:08] Remind our listeners about these newer technologies that you're promoting, the CRISPR method or 'genetic scissors'; how do you think they could change agriculture?

**Martina Helmlinger** [00:22:18] These methodologies have been developed in the past 10 years. They have been promoted as one of the breakthroughs of the past century because what these tools do, especially CRISPR-Cas9, is alter the genetic material in a way that resembles natural processes in the plant. Nowadays, we understand these changes and the so-called phenotype very well. So, now we also understand how the genetic code and the traits are connected. The discovery of a tool that can cut the genetic material in the genome has certain effects, which can help a lot in improving the traits and the characteristics of the plant. This is extremely important, especially now that we are facing climate change, with so many rapidly changing climatic conditions that plants need to be adapted to; and to meet the nutritional needs of a growing population, we are convinced that genome editing in agriculture is one of the tools that will help make crops more resilient and also more sustainable. I think there is enormous potential here that should be regulated in a very smart way. If the EU misses out on making these tools available to farmers, then there is huge potential that will go to waste if this is not exploited.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:23:56] And how did you find out about the ECI?

**Martina Helmlinger** [00:23:58] Some of our courses at the university included European politics. So that's how we heard about it. Quite a nice tool to participate in policy-making as just a regular EU citizen.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:24:11] And what's the journey been like being involved in this process, this ECI?

**Martina Helmlinger** [00:24:16] Definitely a very interesting journey. It has, I think, helped us learn quite a lot. You know, from the very beginning, we received a lot of support from the Commission. And I guess what we underestimated a bit was that it would probably take quite a lot of people working full time on an initiative and promoting it, actually creating the outreach. But, of course, we did what we could. We participated in a lot of events that focused on science communication for the general public, but also in other events where policymakers were present. One of the most rewarding experiences is, of course, ensuring that this topic is not left unheard or is not depicted in a very unbalanced way, I guess. But I think the most important point was that we now see that our citizens' initiative has also contributed to the debate. Some of our arguments have been taken up by more recent developments.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:25:12] OK, Martina, thank you so much. It's been fascinating talking to you today on CitizenCentral and hearing all about your ECI.

**Martina Helmlinger** [00:25:19] Thank you so much for the opportunity, and it was a wonderful conversation.

**Méabh Mc Mahon** [00:25:27] That brings this edition of CitizenCentral to an end. Thank you so much to all our guests and of course to you for listening. And if you fancy finding out a little bit more about any of these ECIs, check out our show notes. You can also take a look at the ECI website or follow the ECIs' individual social media channels. And of course, if you want to propose a brand new ECI, you can head over to the ECI forum to learn more about how to get started. I'm Méabh Mc Mahon, and you've been listening to CitizenCentral.