Open Agenda-Setting for Responsible Research

The Institute for Technology Assessment has been experimenting with open agenda-setting for research programmes in Austria and at EU level for the last ten years. The standardised CIVISTI method (see dossier 8) has been applied and adapted to a regional, national and international level. Because of the anticipatory, inclusive and discursive nature of the method, results are characterised by high social compatibility, robustness and sustainability.

Photo: cimulact.eu

Open, participatory agenda-setting for responsible research

In brief

- Science, technology and innovation (STI) should increasingly contribute to solving societal problems.
- Orienting STI towards societal needs is necessary.
- Research programmes can therefore benefit greatly from open, participatory agenda-setting in which citizens, experts, policy-makers and other stakeholders co-create objectives.

The latest application and adaptation in the CIMULACT project, led by the Danish Board of Technology involved more than 4500 citizens, experts, decision-makers and other stakeholders in an intensive participatory process across Europe. The aim: to better link EU-funded research and societal needs. The participants of numerous workshops in 30 countries and an online consultation developed tangible research topics based on citizens' visions for a desirable future. These will be taken into account in the forthcoming calls for proposals in Horizon 2020, the European Union's framework programme for research and innovation. However, the co-created research topics as well as the method with which they were conceived are also highly relevant for national STI agendas.

What is it about?

Societies are increasingly confronted with complex challenges that cannot be countered by linear thinking, individual actors, or simple solutions. Ageing societies, climate change or digitization are drivers of these challenges and have broad societal impacts. Science, technology and innovation (STI) can and must contribute to solving challenges, but therefore need to be geared towards diverse societal needs. Research programmes are one of the few political tools to influence STI systems. Formulating tenders of such programmes offers the hitherto mostly neglected opportunity to include the ideas of various actor groups and, above all, citizens, to thus recognise societal needs at an early stage. Such a participatory definition of goals and challenges is a long overdue paradigm shift in the STI area. Social relevance is thus taken into account as a benchmark for science, technical and social innovations, resulting, in the best case, in solutions that are more widely accepted and legitimised by procedures.

Basic data

Project title: CIMULACT
Project team: Gudowsky, N., Peissl, W., Bechtold, U., Sotoudeh, M. (in an international consortium)
Duration: 06/2015 – 03/2018
Funded by: European Commission, Horizon 2020
Website: cimulact.eu

Key results

Citizens, experts and policy-makers collaboratively produced 48 research topics. Here, two examples exemplify abundance and diversity in excerpts. The topics are deliberately formulated as challenges so as to help researchers and innovators to better understand and resolve them.

Health, demographic change and well-being: As a starting point, the research topic 'I am empowered to actively lead my changes' diagnoses that citizens are constantly confronted with more uncertainty because of a rapidly changing living and working environment. At the same time, the state and employers are increasingly shifting risks and responsibilities to unprotected individuals, demonstrated by an increase in precarious employment conditions. In addition, current educational pathways do not provide people with adequate abilities to constantly acquire new knowledge for having a fulfilled life. Citizens need technical, social, individual skills and entrepreneurial thinking in order to remain competitive in the labour market and adapt to a constantly changing environment. This is why new mechanisms are needed to meet the challenges posed by globalisation and the development of new technologies. Today's structures (state, enterprises, families, etc.) no longer ensure that citizens are prepared to deal with the new challenges. The formation and promotion of communities might be a starting point well worth to consider to addressing the needs of individuals so that they are not left behind. Also, there is a need for solutions that help the older generation to adapt to a rapidly changing world.

Another challenge for research, innovation and politics are **sustainable transport solutions for passenger and freight transport, which enable people to live in self-chosen places**. In order to deal with rural depopulation and high urban housing costs, flexible, innovative and sustainable transport should be considered as it can enable more people to live more distributed in local (rural) communities. This could also increase local production and consumption. What could new infrastructures look like? Which virtual tools and what innovative business models are needed to make local communities more attractive? The overarching challenge is to determine the best balance between connectivity and self-sufficiency of local communities, taking requirements of sustainability of transport into account. Regional authorities should promote the development of local economies in order to facilitate living and working in local environments, including rural areas. This requires establishing sustainable, accessible, affordable and effective transport systems at local level as well as good connections with regional centres.

What to do?

A European-wide process has shown that it is possible to involve citizens alongside various actors in the formulation of visionary research topics that reflect societal needs. Because of the anticipatory, inclusive and discursive nature of the method, the results are characterised by high social compatibility, robustness and sustainability.

* Such an approach is a valuable addition to current methods of programme design. National research promoters should also take it into consideration when formulating future tenders.

* The research topics generated through this method can be used for existing research programmes on national level and in Horizon 2020. Furthermore, national actors should take this rich basis of knowledge into account when negotiating the design of the 9th Framework Programme at EU level.

* Public participation needs method and experience. Standardised methods with options for adaptation to local circumstances provide security and reliable results. Research sponsors should work together with experienced and reliable partners.

Further reading

Mission Publiques, Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research, Strategic Design Scenarios, Politecnico de Milano & all the participants of the Pan-European Conference (2017) CIMULACT Deliverable 2.2 – Social needs based research programme scenarios http://www.cimulact.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CIMULACT-Deliverable-2.2-2017_low_res.pdf

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