

Engagement? Yes, if we are heard!

In brief

- Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) calls for continuous societal engagement.
- Up until now, citizens and third sector actors are not routinely involved in the governance of research and innovation.
- Citizens and third sector actors face specific barriers to engagement in research and innovation.
- Policies and practices in support of societal engagement should address questions of relevance, impact, trust, knowledge and skills, time and financial resources, and legitimacy.

What is it about?

The governance concept “Responsible Research and Innovation” (RRI) (see ITA dossier 13) calls for the continuous engagement of societal actors. Researchers, funding organisations, businesses, policymakers, third sector organisations, citizens and others are to reflect and discuss current and future developments in research and innovation processes. The main goal is to better align research and innovation and its outcomes with the values, needs and expectations of society.

Since the turn of the millennium, an ongoing increase in societal engagement can be observed. Engagement may take the form of citizen dialogues, consultations with interest groups, participatory agenda-setting, research collaborations with third sector actors, or citizen science. Within the RRI framework, engagement goes beyond unilateral communication of research findings and allows societal actors

to contribute their views, values and knowledge to research and innovation and to enter into a mutual dialogue.

Governments, parliaments, businesses and funding organisations have already been regularly involved in the governance of research and innovation, with bigger companies and businesses also taking part in publicly funded research. By contrast, citizens and third sector actors such as environmental organisations or campaigning networks are two groups that have, so far, not been routinely involved in such activities. What encourages or hinders citizens and third sector actors to engage with research or with research and innovation policy? How can barriers to engagement be lowered for these societal groups?



Discussing barriers and incentives for societal engagement in research and innovation

Addressing these questions, the research project PROSO has focussed on the investigation of citizens’ and third sector actors’ willingness and reservations to engage with research and innovation policies and processes. PROSO asked 90 citizens in five European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Portugal, and the UK) on their views on engagement with research-related activities. Citizens are willing to take part in research and innovation decision-making and have expressed a preference towards forms of public participation which assign citizens a more active role. While science communication efforts are appreciated as a learning experience and acknowledged as essential for strengthening the relationship between science and society, many citizens demand a more substantial say. Nine case studies in the areas of nanotechnology, synthetic biology, and food & health showed that third sector actors are involved in research and innovation activities in quite different roles, i.e. as advisors and consultants, partners, invited discussants, but also as watchdogs and critics.

Basic data

Project title:	Promoting Societal Engagement in Research and Innovation (PROSO)
Project team:	A. Bogner, A. Bauer, D. Fuchs (in an international consortium)
Duration:	01/2016 – 02/2018
Funded by:	EU Commission, Horizon 2020
Website:	proso-project.eu

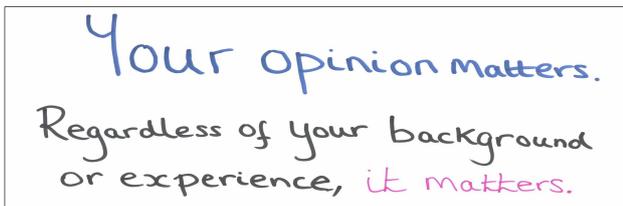
Key results

Engagement of citizens and third sector actors in research and innovation is closely related to the following factors:

Relevance: Engagement with research and innovation is usually not part of citizens' everyday lives or the normal business of third sector actors. Therefore, they may perceive an engagement process as not relevant to their own interests, concerns or goals.

Impact: Citizens and third sector actors may perceive engagement processes as purely academic exercises with little impact on political or societal processes and decisions. Impact is considered low if goals are not clear and when there are no visible links to ongoing policy processes or to those actors with decision-making power.

Trust: Citizens and third sector actors may mistrust the intentions and agendas of sponsors and organisers of societal engagement and fear that they may be exploited. Mistrust may result from deep scepticism of political and other elites and a general division between science and society. The willingness to engage may be further negatively impacted by beliefs on other participating actor groups, their motivations and values.



What citizens think about engagement in research and innovation

Knowledge and skills: Citizens may not feel confident to discuss with other citizens or to exchange with experts because they lack a basic understanding of science, scientific working methods or knowledge about a given topic. Citizens may also think that they lack relevant communication skills for participating in discussions. Similarly, little topic-related knowledge, lack of knowledge of funding systems and a lack of competent personnel can deter third sector actors from getting involved.

Time and resources: Societal engagement requires considerable resources in terms of time and money. In particular, citizens experience barriers regarding childcare or when engagement processes collide with working hours. Many third sector actors, too, have difficulty in raising and justifying time and money for participation.

Legitimacy: Citizens and third sector actors may have doubts about the legitimacy of the engagement process and their own involvement. Citizens sometimes feel that the only legitimate participants in research debates are scientifically trained professionals.

What to do?

An increasing engagement of citizens and third sector actors in research and innovation requires the creation of supportive conditions by innovating research funding policies, changing structures of research organisations, and adapting the scientific and educational systems.

- In the short-term, engagement practices may be improved by a) ensuring full transparency in regard to the roles and responsibilities of all actors involved and the purpose and impacts of engagement initiatives, b) exploring novel compensation schemes, and c) assuring the openness of the outcomes of engagement processes.
- In the medium-term, EU and national research funding policies and programmes may be created or adapted to systematically account for societal engagement. Such shifts in funding may include a) recognising third sector organisations as eligible recipients and providing funds for support staff for engagement, b) supporting research projects and programmes that engage with citizens and third sector actors, and c) opening up advisory committees or boards of funding agencies to third sector actors.
- In the long-term, more fundamental changes in European research systems and cultures are necessary to normalise societal engagement with research and innovation. Respective strategies may include a) providing engagement competence and support in research organisations to make societal engagement an integral part of research, b) embedding engagement more widely into the education system, and c) adapting the scientific reputation system and providing organisational rewards.

Further reading

PROSO Consortium (2018): PROSO Support Tool for Promoting Societal Engagement
proso-project.eu/prososupporttool/

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