

SOCIETAL ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH – EMPOWERING BY ENGAGING?

Policy Brief, March 2018

ENGAGEMENT SUPPORT TOOL

The main outcome of the EU project [PROSO](#) is a “Support Tool for promoting engagement of citizens and third sector actors in research and in research and innovation policy”. The Support Tool offers information and inspiration to develop policies and practices that encourage the engagement of citizens and third sector actors in publicly-funded research and in research and innovation policy in the European Union (EU). In the EU policy context, Responsible Research and innovation (RRI) calls for the engagement of societal actors in research and innovation (R&I). Hence PROSO’s main outcome is also a support tool for putting RRI into practice.

TARGET GROUPS

The policies and practices set out in the Engagement Support Tool are options to address six central barriers to societal engagement that PROSO research has identified. These barriers are lack of relevance, lack of impact, lack of trust and critical views of others, lack of knowledge and skills, lack of time and finances, and lack of legitimacy. Policies and practices are differentiated by the societal actor target group (citizens or third sector actors) for which they are most suited. Further, they are sorted by the types of actors that appear most relevant for taking action. Four main groups of actors were identified by PROSO: policy makers and governmental agencies; research funding

organizations and research councils; research organizations, and other engagement performing organizations; and third sector actors, all at national and European Union levels. These actors can make valuable contributions to promoting societal engagement in R&I.

At its final conference, PROSO intensively exchanged with these and other actors, such as science journalists and researchers, on the topics of making societal engagement second nature for research and innovation and of empowering societal actors through RRI. The conference *Empowering Societal Actors Through Responsible Research and Innovation* was held on 19 February 2018, in Brussels. These are some of the key messages resulting from the conference discussions.

We need strong policies to maintain the efforts at fostering societal engagement.

“Are we at the end or at the end of the beginning” on the journey towards mainstreaming societal engagement was a question raised by one of the panels at the PROSO conference. Societal engagement with research and innovation is a highly active and dynamic field, and concepts and approaches have been developing for some time. Some examples that were highlighted are citizen science, gaming exercises, crowd-sourcing, science

parliament, and participatory budgeting. That we do not start from scratch was underlined by several conference participants. It was also emphasized by some speakers that societal engagement is an unfinished project and that it requires strong policies to maintain efforts and move forward on the journey. Amongst others, supporting infrastructures and training need to be built up, and innovative ideas and examples of practising and promoting societal engagement need to be shared in the European research and innovation systems.

Using an online audience interaction tool the conference participants were asked the following question: “Where do you think we are on the journey towards promoting societal engagement with research and research and innovation policy?”. This is what they responded (response rate: approximately 50%, 36 participants):

Where are we on the journey?	Responses
At the beginning	8 %
Some progress – much to do	56%
Good progress in some areas	30%
Good progress in most areas	6%
We’re there – no more needs to be done	0%

Policy development needs to be informed by improved understanding of the relations between engagement and empowerment and possible effects on power-relations in the research and innovation systems.

It is a widely shared view in academic and practitioner circles that engagement can also work as a way of empowering those whose views traditionally have not been taken into account in research and innovation. We still need, however, a better understanding of what ‘empowerment’ may imply and how to use the notion in a non-discriminatory manner. At the conference it was

pointed out in this context that there are third sector actors which have not only profound knowledge but also a certain degree of power. Environmental organizations, for instance, had a formative role in the development of environmental policies and related research in the 1970s in several European countries. It is important to have institutions that regularly bring the power (for instance in terms of national and European networks) and knowledge (also) of these societal actors into the research and innovation processes. Policy development for promoting societal engagement also needs to acknowledge and account for potential conflicts: Providing power to non-established research actors, for instance through co-design of research projects, means sharing of power for established research actors.

Policies for promoting societal engagement need to be inclusive in terms of addressing all social groups.

Like political participation societal engagement in research and innovation tends to be dominated by people of higher socio-economic status. It was noted at the conference that it is a big challenge for research organizations or other engagement performing organizations to recruit citizens beyond the middle classes. Peer-to-peer learning, citizen science (for instance, reporting weather data or providing health information about pets), and use of arts in societal engagement processes are potential ways to counter the social class bias and include new publics and open new arenas for exchange around research and innovation.

The most important task in terms of inclusiveness, it was stressed at the conference, is to address people principally and indiscriminately with respect. It is a basic requirement for successful recruitment, fruitful engagement, and individual empowerment that people are respected and feel respected and

have reason to valid themselves. The invited speaker on the Well Now initiative (one of PROSO's engagement case studies in the food and health domain) emphasized that this respect is lacking, when research and engagement are framed through shame and stigma, like in the field of weight correction [see the presentation of the Well Now initiative [here](#)].

Funding of support staff to sustain engagement between research organizations and societal actors during funded research projects is one possible option to deal with challenges regarding diversity and trust.

Diversity and trust were identified as key issues for making societal engagement second nature for research and innovation. Conference participants reported experiences about deep trenches between actor groups involved (or planned to involve) in engagement processes which had been difficult to deal with or impossible to overcome. Mainstreaming societal engagement requires that the diversity between and within actors is acknowledged, and that trust between societal actors and mutual trust between societal actors and the research community are enhanced. Some participants stressed that conducting multi-actor engagement processes requires special communication and facilitation skills which are often underdeveloped within the researcher community. In this case, it can be important to include professionals such as knowledge brokers, boundary spanners or mediators in the engagement process. These can complement the lack of skill in properly translating scientific results to lay people or between different disciplines, or help a group of actors with different perspectives and interests to carry out research or innovation activities in a cooperative manner and resolve conflicts.

Importantly, the inclusion of communication and interaction professionals needs to foster researchers' engagement in the dialogue and not hinder it. Research funding organizations can support dealing with the issues of diversity and trust by funding programs that allow the funding of such intermediaries.

MORE INFORMATION

Please find the **presentations and some visual impressions** of PROSO's final conference [here](#). The conference offered a space for discussion, reflection, and networking on the question of how to move forward with societal engagement with research and innovation through keynote speeches, case study presentations, panel discussions, and a highly interactive Round Robin session, in which invited guests from different backgrounds presented and discussed their experiences and views on societal engagement in research and innovation. The Round Robin topic presentations were provided from the perspective of a business organization; an environmental non-governmental organization; a science journalists' association; a funding organization; and a trade union institute.

The **PROSO Engagement Support Tool** can be downloaded [here](#).

The results of **PROSO's empirical research** feeding into the Support Tool can be found [here](#).

A brief **animated video** on the six barriers to societal engagement that the PROSO project has identified and example policy options to overcome/lower these barriers can be watched [here](#).

>> Proso Partners



Dialogik Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft für
Kommunikations- und Kooperationsforschung
mbH, Germany

Marion Dreyer: dreyer@dialogik-expert.de
Hannah Kosow: kosow@dialogik-expert.de



Applied Research and Communications
Fund, Bulgaria

Zoya Damianova:
zoya.damianova@online.bg
Ventseslav Kozarev:
ventseslav.kozarev@online.bg
Blagovesta Chonkova:
blagovesta.chonkova@online.bg



University of Surrey, United Kingdom
Lada Timotijevic: l.timotijevic@surrey.ac.uk
Emily Porth: e.porth@surrey.ac.uk
Monique Raats: m.raats@surrey.ac.uk



Sociedade Portuguesa de Inovação,
Portugal
Susana Seabra: susanaseabra@spi.pt
João Gonçalves: joaogoncalves@spi.pt

Institute of Technology Assessment
of the Austrian Academy of Sciences

Alexander Bogner:
alexander.bogner@oeaw.ac.at
Anja Bauer: anja.bauer@oeaw.ac.at
Daniela Fustier: daniela.fustier@oeaw.ac.at
FoodDrinkEurope, Belgium

Beate Kettlitz: b.kettlitz@fooddrinkeurope.eu
Rebecca Fernandez:
r.fernandez@fooddrinkeurope.eu

Universität Stuttgart, Germany
Jürgen Hampel:
juergen.hampel@sowi.uni-stuttgart.de
Christian Hofmaier:
christian.hofmaier@sowi.uni-stuttgart.de

Optimat Limited, United Kingdom
Mark Morrison:
mark.morrison@optimat.co.uk



www.proso-project.eu contact@proso-project.eu



PROSO is financed by the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, under Grant Agreement no 665947 and runs from January 2016 to February 2018.