

PROMOTING SOCIETAL ENGAGEMENT IN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

» Moving Towards Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI)



RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH AND INNOVATION – HOW TO FOSTER SOCIETAL ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH?

Policy Brief, December 2017

RRI – A VISION OF INCLUSIVENESS

In the EU policy context, Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) calls for the engagement of societal actors in research and innovation (R&I). The main benefits expected from engagement are that R&I are better targeted at societal needs and enriched by social knowledge. Further, engagement can empower those whose views traditionally have not been taken into account in R&I.

ENGAGING SOCIETY IN RESEARCH – WHAT MAKES ENGAGEMENT ATTRACTIVE?

Societal engagement in publicly funded research requires conditions that support such engagement. We, the [PROSO](#) consortium, think that the views of societal actors should inform supporting policies and activities. What encourages or hinders societal actors to get involved with research itself and with research and innovation policy? How to overcome barriers of engagement?

VIEWS OF CITIZENS AND THIRD SECTOR ACTORS

The PROSO consortium has intensively investigated the views of citizens and third sector actors (such as civil society organizations or campaigning groups) to engage with research-related activities. Preliminary

results of this research were presented and discussed at a multi-actor-conference. The present policy brief provides the key messages of this conference.

HOW CAN WE ENABLE ENGAGEMENT?

Barriers to engagement as well as policies and activities to address these barriers were the subject of lively discussions at the PROSO conference *Engaging Society for Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI): New options to move forward*. The conference was held on 19 June 2017 in Brussels, at the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts. The Academy acted as co-organizer of the event. These are the main messages resulting from the conference discussions:

Following a policy of transparency is essential for trust-building, participant satisfaction and the effective pursuit of the goals of engagement processes.

PROSO work has shown that lack of trust in the organizers, contributors and intentions of engagement processes can act as a barrier to the engagement of both third sector actors and citizens. In this regard conference participants stressed the importance of a policy of transparency. Transparency in all aspects of the engagement process helps participants to develop a shared understanding of the roles and responsibil-

ities of the different actors involved in an engagement process and realistic expectations of what they themselves can help to achieve. Conference participants emphasized that promising too much, for example that the engagement results will shape research policies when this is unrealistic, is not a good strategy. They stressed that there are benefits other than policy impact to be gained from engagement such as extended networks of societal actors or self-enlightenment of society. The types of impact that are intended to be achieved and important prerequisites for achieving them need to be clearly communicated from the outset by those responsible for the engagement process.

An integrated online/offline approach can help broaden the number of participants in an engagement process, increase transparency and build trust.

PROSO research has shown that citizens may see small numbers of participants in research policy related engagement processes as being insufficient to legitimately represent societal perspectives and to achieve impact. In this context, several conference participants pointed to the advantages of combining face-to-face interactions in small groups with internet-based interactions and communications. This can lead to higher numbers of participants in an engagement process and increase transparency for the participants and interested audiences. At the same time they stressed that online resources such as chat, video, conference or webinar tools cannot substitute offline engagement processes. Trust can only be built if people meet face-to-face. Direct contact is the starting point to reconsider pre-conceived ideas and diminish prejudice.

A variety of perspectives should be understood as a valuable resource and conflict as a productive element in an engagement process.

It is a main idea of RRI that stakeholders step away from their interests, take the perspectives of others, and create a common vision. It was noted at the conference that this idea is an ideal to which real-life practices come more or less close. PROSO work has shown that for third sector actors such as civil society organizations it can be more attractive to engage with research, if there is no pressure for consensus. Conference participants underlined that diverse perspectives help develop a broader view in a given case and that conflict should not be regarded as something that engagement organizers need to avoid at all costs. Conflict can help clarify where stakeholders agree and disagree and develop a set of options for creative and workable solutions in regard to a given issue. Conference participants emphasized the importance of being open to conflict and to include mediators in the engagement process.

There is a need to develop a more elaborate culture to acknowledge the contributions that societal actors make in engagement processes.

Participants, who are satisfied with engagement processes, can become ambassadors for societal engagement with research, induce positive media reporting and the dissemination of success stories. Participant satisfaction is influenced by the recognition and acknowledgement of the efforts made. Conference participants stressed that this means, as a basic requirement, providing citizens and third sector actors with the results to which they have contributed in an appealing format. Whether there should be further and more explicit acknowledgements will depend on the particular context and culture in which the engagement takes place. Recognition can be of a financial kind or

not such as personal letters of appreciation or face-to-face expressions of gratitude by the end users of the results of an engagement process.

Engagement should become natural without being a standard requirement.

Within academia, a lot of lip service is paid to the value of engagement with society. PROSO research has confirmed previous findings that nonetheless it appears to be difficult for academic researchers, and in particular early career researchers, to find time and money to take part in activities that do not directly result in academic publications. Many conference participants argued that for this situation to be changed it requires transformations in the research system and culture. This includes a new understanding of scientific excellence, innovative reward and merit structures, and more support for researchers to undertake engagement. However, several conference participants noted that engagement with society may not benefit every research case. Besides structural and cultural changes, we fundamentally need a better understanding of the kinds of research that profit most from societal engagement. This understanding will also help avoid the issue that societal engagement ends up as a box-ticking exercise in the research world.

NEXT STEPS

The conference results are one important input into PROSO's main output, which is a policy and practice guide. This document shall offer information and, hopefully, inspiration on developing policies and practices to encourage the engagement of citizens and third sector actors in European publicly-funded research and research and innovation policy. The next PROSO policy brief will provide an executive summary of the policy guide.

The main purpose of the **PROSO multi-actor conference** was to understand the views, insights and experiences of different actor groups in regard to the forces, structures and ideas that encourage or discourage societal engagement with research. The event was also structured to encourage mutual learning and facilitate networking across actor-groups and countries. The conference brought together around 50 stakeholders from 15 countries including policy makers, research management and funding organizations, science education and communication actors, RRI researchers and third sector organizations. The participants produced in small-group discussions a wealth of inspiring and instructive thoughts on how to promote engagement of citizens and third sector actors in research-related activities. You can find the comprehensive report of the PROSO conference [here](#).

PROSO conducted national citizen panels in five European countries in order to investigate **citizens' views** of engagement with research-related activities. You can find the synthesis report of this research [here](#).

PROSO carried out case studies including **interviews with third sector actors and with other stakeholders** (9 cases, 60 interviews). You can find the synthesis report of this research [here](#).

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