EUROPEAN

POLICYBRIEF

INTRODUCTION

Optimising Civil Society Participation in Research

Policy-relevant findings from CONSIDER (Civil Society Organisations in Designing Research Governance), a research project investigating CSO involvement in EU-funded research.

Policy Brief 1 – July 2013 On-going Project

Publicly funded research has an obligation to produce outcomes beneficial to the public who fund it. In the European Union this obligation is reinforced by a complementary trend toward participatory governance. Momentum is growing to deepen democratic engagement through increased participation of civil society, also in the research environment.

Participatory governance is gaining momentum

The research community alone cannot achieve legitimate governance of science. Science governance needs to be sensitive to issues of broad public concern. It should also be reflexive (i.e. regularly reviewing its mechanisms to assure institutional learning). If these characteristics are lacking, institutions can find their legitimacy challenged, as the European Commission discovered through its experience with genetically modified organisms. Engaging CSOs (civil society organisations) in research design and implementation more effectively could help to address these issues.

Little is known about CSO involvement in research

Unfortunately, the knowledge base underpinning CSO involvement in research is extremely thin. This knowledge foundation must be strengthened if Europe is to develop a research governance structure capable of accommodating CSO involvement effectively. We need to deepen our understanding of *how* CSOs are currently participating in EU-funded research – to what extent, in which roles, for what purposes and to what effect.

In a rigorous investigation of unprecedented scope, the CONSIDER project is now mapping these parameters of engagement and analysing their underlying assumptions. The models being identified should allow us to evaluate research outcomes more efficiently and provide contextualized guidelines for CSO participation moving forward.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

What's a CSO?

There is no universally accepted definition of *civil society organisation*. The lack of clarity surrounding the term means that those engaged in discussions about CSOs may not be talking about the same thing. Further complicating matters, CSO is a rather rarefied English term with no equivalent in many other languages. It is helpful, therefore, to begin any earnest discussion about CSOs by first establishing some basic parameters.

A September 2012 Communication[1] from the European Commission states that "**the EU considers CSOs to include all non-State, not-for-profit structures, non-partisan and non-violent, through which people organise to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, social or economic**." That same statement, however, is prefaced with the acknowledgement that "definitions vary over time and across institutions and countries". In other words, the meaning of CSO can be quite different depending on the particular context.

Not for profit

The not-for-profit aspect of the CSO definition appears to be quite important, warranting elaboration. Helpfully, a footnote accompanying the EC's definition offers a brief typology of not-for-profit structures. According to the Commission, not-for-profit structures include:

> membership-based, cause-based and service-oriented CSOs. Among them, community-based organisations, non-governmental organisations, faith-based organisations, foundations, research institutions, Gender and LGBT organisations, cooperatives, professional and business associations, and the not-for-profit media. Trade unions and employers' organisations, the so-called social partners, constitute a specific category of CSOs.

What about commercial interests?

The detailed description above, however, fails to address the question of how we should regard organisations that officially enjoy not-for-profit status yet clearly represent commercial interests. It remains a topic of debate (also within the CONSIDER consortium) as to whether organisations representing commercial interests might also be considered CSOs.

Bearing that in mind, the CONSIDER consortium has constructed the following working definition of CSO, one that is sufficiently compact yet comprehensive enough to accommodate diverse viewpoints and support the project's research mandate:

[1] European Commission, Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions, *The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with Civil Society in external relations.* Brussels, 12.9.2012, COM(2012) 492 final

A working definition

"CSOs are organisations that are non-governmental, generally not-for-profit and that pursue a common purpose for the public interest".

This working definition has proved serviceable, but it does have one inherent weakness: the contested meaning of *public interest*. Even though the term correctly captures CSO emphasis on collective service versus personal gain, *public interest* is ontologically ambiguous, opening the door to multiple and conflicting interpretations. Therefore, in order to assess the suitability of integrating any given CSO into a research undertaking, a process needs to be put in place that will allow the normative assumptions underlying a CSO's understanding of the public interest to be identified. Rather than thinking of public interest as something intrinsically defined, we need to step back and consider the conditions under which the public's normative orientation can be framed.

Surveys results

The findings below are based on the results of two surveys carried out by the CONSIDER project in 2012. The surveys, which covered all FP7 projects, were aimed at gathering essential information about participation of CSO's in EU-funded research. Survey one was sent to 14,000 FP7 project coordinators and generated 2,959 completed responses. Survey two, a follow-up questionnaire, was sent to 414 coordinators acknowledging CSOs participation in their research project; it produced 162 completed responses.

A positivist vision of science

The standard model of science – a traditional top-down approach based on the knowledge of experts – dominates in FP7 research projects; normativity comes from the knowledge and opinions of those involved in the decision-making. CSO involvement in research is still embedded in this classical normative setting of research

FP7 projects have certain characteristics (length, international collaboration, funding scheme, evaluation, etc.) that frame the working and communication context of each research team. CSO roles are perceived as being fundamental when they give their expertise and when they disseminate the project results and guidelines. CSOs are seen as adding value to a research project by making it more context-relevant. They are also seen as enhancing awareness of policy needs and the needs of beneficiaries.

Why are CSOs avoided?

The FP7 funding scheme does not always lend itself to accommodating CSO participation, and some consortia apparently conclude that it is easier to avoid integration of CSOs.

How do project coordinators view CSOs?

Only 30% of project coordinators indicate that CSOs are involved from the start of the project. Project coordinators seem to see CSOs more as "end user representatives" than equal partners. CSOs rarely define the research method and agenda.

Divergent perceptions: A normative framing conflict

The role of CSOs in research projects is perceived very differently by academic institutions and the CSOs themselves. For example, while half the CSOs surveyed describe themselves as initiators of research projects, only 19% of project coordinators ascribe that role to CSOs. CSO members in projects also claim to be advisory board members much more often than project coordinators mention (50% versus 29%). This reflects a tendency among project coordinators to attribute a more passive role to CSO participants. These different perceptions of CSO involvement in research activities may indicate a normative framing conflict about what a CSO's role ought to be inside a research team.

Even though CSOs are routinely invited to academic conferences and project meetings, they are valued primarily for their expertise and their network; academic partners value CSO participation insofar as it facilitates dissemination of results and helps test developments.

Few incentives for CSOs

CSOs are not conceived as central actors in FP7 projects because there are few incentive schemes designed for CSOs participation. The Seventh Framework Programme does not seem to be very appealing for CSOs involvement in research projects.

Both CSOs and research project coordinators expect the outcome of FP7 projects involving CSOs to enhance scientific knowledge and help inform decision makers, with CSOs placing slightly greater emphasis on the latter. CSO members also identify industry as a central beneficiary of research projects they are involved in. They are more inclined than project coordinators to expect that the outcome of their research projects will make a contribution to societal needs.

CSOs doubtful about prospects for research success

CSOs and research project coordinators have radically different expectations regarding whether or not their project is likely to achieve its objectives: only 25% of CSOs (versus 72% of project coordinators) think the objectives of the project have been or are likely to be achieved.

CSO participation in the FP7 research projects privileges an institutionalised professional type of civil society organisation over grass roots activists.

CSO representatives are experienced and educated

Both project coordinators and CSO members tend to be skilled and experienced. Both have an average of 19 years research experience, with 62% of the project coordinators and 50% of CSO members holding PhDs.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the CONSIDER project's research is still in the data collection and analysis phase, our initial findings support the following recommendations that may be of value in policy development related to Horizon 2020.

Clarify definition of CSO

The EU relies heavily on the concept of CSO in some funding calls and policy areas. Yet there is no agreement on the definition of a CSO. Even organisations that could be considered CSOs in research projects are not aware of the term. Researchers and other participants tend not to know the term. If the term is to be useful in research policy, it will need a clear definition. And that definition will need to be disseminated to the relevant stakeholders.

Differentiate CSO roles

Current discourses around CSOs can be read as suggesting that CSO participation in research is an unconditional good. This is not confirmed by the CONSIDER research. In order for CSO involvement to be positive, expected benefits need to be more clearly defined. This can influence the choice and role of CSOs.

Where CSO participation is desired, adapt funding schemes and calls accordingly

In those cases where CSO participation is warranted, research schemes and calls should be designed in such a way that CSO characteristics can be accommodated. Participation procedures should be simplified and administrative obstacles minimized.

Identify and share examples of good practice

While the CONSIDER research has revealed substantial CSO involvement in research, most actors in research projects are not aware of options and models of such involvement. Participants have voiced a desire for mechanisms that allow them to share good practice, exchange experience and communicate about different options.

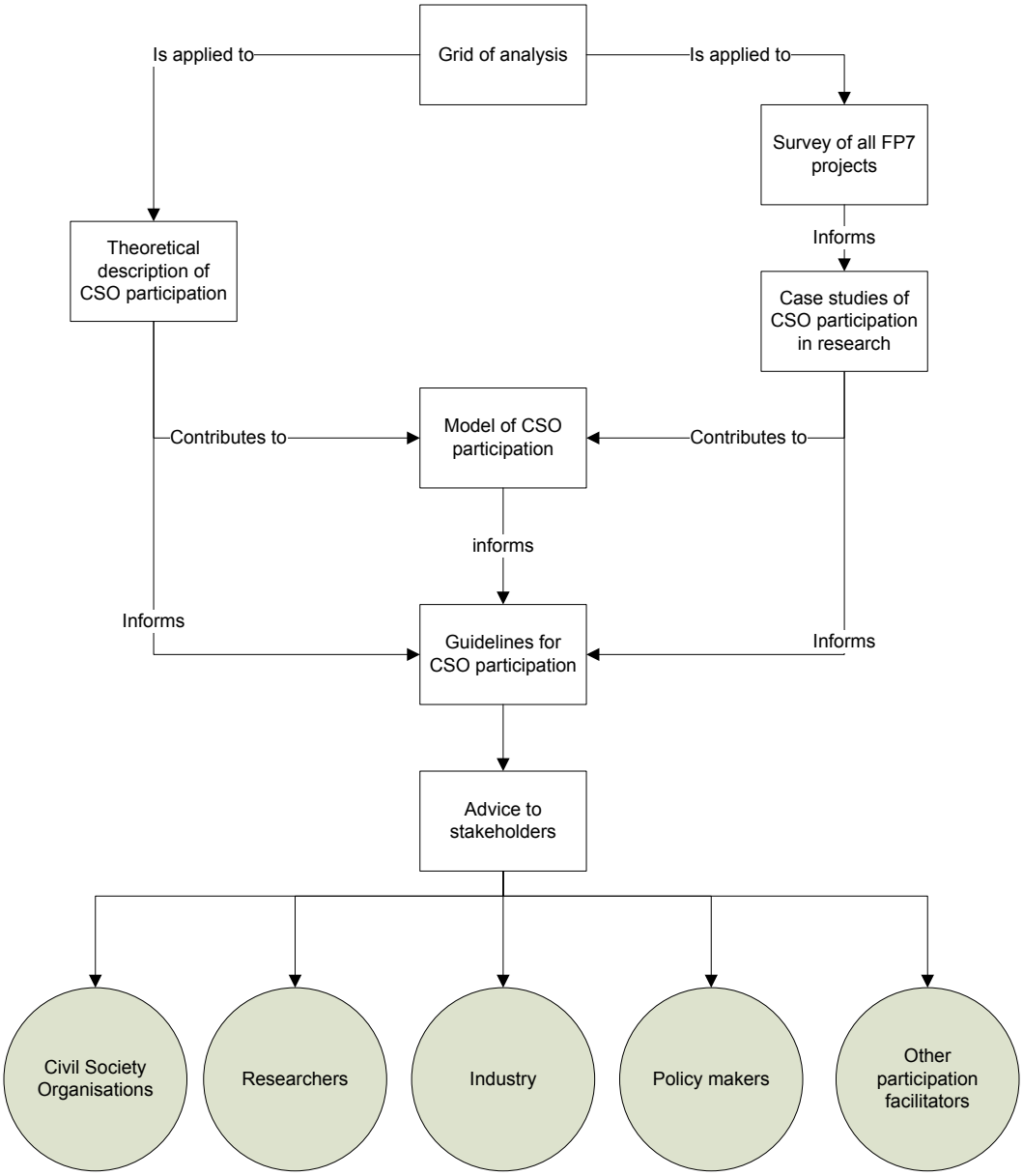
RESEARCH PARAMETERS

CONSIDER uses a conceptually sound, data-driven approach to establish models of CSO participation in research. These models are used to contrast theoretical views on benefits and limitations with empirical findings on the practice of CSO participation. Based on a grid of analysis, the project has surveyed all FP7 research projects to identify those involving CSOs, and analyse all of these to identify and understand the characteristics, influencing factors and best practices of CSO participation. To gain a detailed understanding of these mechanisms, 30 relevant projects are selected and investigated in detail using established case study methods. This provides practical examples and references for researchers and CSO wishing to create research partnerships.

The case studies investigated by the CONSIDER project provide in-depth insights into the practice of CSO participation and into the factors that promote or hinder such participation. The cases are selected on the basis of the responses to the FP7 survey. The survey showed that intensity of the collaboration and leadership of the project are important parameters that allow for a varied selection of relevant cases. For each of these cases a range of data sources including interviews, published documents, deliverables, websites or observations is collected. The data is analysed using a bottom-up grounded approach to ensure sensitivity for novel findings. The grounded analysis is then applied to the theoretical findings as represented in the analytical grid. On the basis of these theoretical and empirical insights, patterns of CSO participation are identified. The patterns are synthesised to models of participation which provide the basis for guidelines. The development of these guidelines for different stakeholder groups is undertaken in collaboration with these stakeholders to ensure the usability and practical relevance of the project's outcomes.

CONSIDER itself aims to be a project employing CSO participation in research. The inclusion in the consortium of Euclid Network, a network with over 300 CSO members from around 31 countries in Europe, is helping to achieve this aim. Nonetheless, there is a huge diversity of CSOs, participation models and experiences, which cannot be represented by a single consortium. Therefore, CONSIDER is developing a network of 100+ CSO actors that can contribute to a richer debate, overcoming potential blind spots and ensuring that the right questions are being asked. This approach serves to promote CONSIDER's goals more widely to CSOs and other relevant stakeholders, facilitating access to the desired knowledge and ensuring the project has practical relevance.

The following figure represents the principles of the research approach of the CONSIDER project:



PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME

Civil Society Organisations in Designing Research Governance (CONSIDER)

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FUNDING SCHEME

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DURATION

February 2012 – January 2015 (36 months)

BUDGET

EU contribution: 1 499 361 €

WEBSITE

http://www.consider-project.eu/

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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