EUROPEAN

# POLICY BRIEF

## INTRODUCTION

## European Research: What Role for Civil Society Organizations?

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

Policy Brief 2 – January 2015 Completed Project

Including Civil Society Organisations[1] in research can offer many advantages, including higher acceptance of research outcomes and better quality of research findings. Despite the potential importance of CSOs, little was known until recently about the practice of including them in research projects. The CONSIDER project has addressed this gap through theoretically sound and empirically rich research which included a survey of all FP7 projects and more than 30 in-depth case studies. This policy brief is based on the insights gained in the CONSIDER project.

CONSIDER has produced detailed guidelines to support CSO participation in research

For many policymakers, civil society engagement in research and innovation is about improving public support for research. For many scientists, on the other hand, it's more about improving the research itself. In both cases the reasons for desiring CSO involvement may not be consistent with the mechanisms for promoting, implementing and evaluating it. Relating those motivations and mechanisms to the experiences of collaborative research participants, CONSIDER has identified a set of important obstacles and enablers that could be used in developing a more informed approach for integrating CSOs in European research. Detailed guidelines for policymakers, funders, CSOs and researchers are available on the CONSIDER website (www.consider-project.eu).

CSO participation is not the "one best way" to do research; it is useful in some settings but not in others. But when it is desirable, additional effort will be needed to facilitate effective cooperation among project partners. The most significant barriers to CSO involvement in research are: bureaucracy, lack of funding, and time and human resources constraints.

[1] Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are organisations that represent important aspects of society. Examples are non-governmental organisations, trade unions or patient organisations.

## EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

CONSIDER's comprehensive survey[2] of collaborative research projects in the EU's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) found that just over a quarter (27.7%) involved participation by civil society organizations.

### Can CSO participation make science more democratic?

One reason frequently cited in favour of CSO involvement in research is that it can help "democratize science", giving citizens a voice. In making this argument, however, it is important to be aware that CSO members are generally not lay citizens; they tend to be skilled and educated and may have research experience.

While many research projects involve citizens in specific actions (such as consensus conferences), few include individual citizens not organized in a collective group. (Examples are projects dealing with citizen science, the social sector and the arts). It is very difficult to involve citizens directly in EU projects. CSOs can provide direct access to citizens' views, and in many cases act as a skilled mediator between the research team and citizens' inputs. The majority of EU-funded research projects with CSO participation feature CSOs that address specific interests such as patients, industry, agriculture, fishing, etc. Hence, CSO involvement in research tends to be delegative or representative rather than direct. There is evidence that they contribute to giving citizens a voice, thus deepening democratic involvement; however they can represent relatively narrow interests. Multiple perspectives and further changes to the structure and involvement of CSOs in research are required in order to achieve more general democratic aims.

### A bias towards professionalized CSOs

Moreover, given the high degree of professionalization required to effectively take part in EU policy processes, there is a clear bias towards highly professionalized CSOs. CONSIDER's research shows that the dominant mode of participation in FP7 research projects privileges an institutionalised type of civil society and supports the development of such CSOs. This creates a certain dilemma because professionalization limits the bottom-up character of grass-roots activists, including movements in opposition to public authorities, which are essential features of civil society if it is to fulfil a legitimising and communicative role.

Few FP7 funding schemes were designed for CSO participation. When the European Commission publishes calls anticipating CSO participation, it does not change its routines to accommodate them. CSOs are expected to adapt themselves to unfamiliar legal and financial rules. This favours established, professional CSOs that are well connected at European level, rather than grassroots and collaborative networks that have not reached an advanced stage of development.

[2] Survey conducted in 2012.

Projects involving CSOs need more time

Time and timing are key factors in successfully integrating CSOs into research projects. Establishing trust between partners takes time; and the more diverse those partners are, the more time may be required (e.g. for internal communication).

Additional time may be needed to define project objectives, divide tasks, gather data and discuss results. At the beginning of research projects with CSO participation it is important to clearly articulate normative visions of the research process and to agree on expected outcomes. Assumptions about these matters must be made explicit and properly managed. Failure to do so can lead to major shortcomings. Institutional support for this process may be needed.

Common obstacles

**Frequently reported difficulties:**

- Conflicting perceptions of project objectives (leading to disputes that often go unresolved)
- Low CSO status in consortium hierarchies
- Insufficient coordination and lack of clarity in task division
- Divergent views regarding methodology not only among CSOs and academic researchers but also among academic researchers themselves (interdisciplinarity)
- Clash of commercial and scientific interests
- Language barriers
- Concerns among academic researchers that CSO participation may weaken scientific legitimacy of research projects, jeopardizing potential to enhance academic reputations

It bears repeating that bureaucracy, lack of funding and constraints on time and human resources are the most significant barriers to CSO involvement in research. These barriers hinder participation especially by smaller organizations, which rarely have dedicated staff to deal solely with administrative tasks.

Sources of conflict

The role CSOs play in a given research consortium is a key parameter for understanding potential for conflict. The more negligible their role is (low recognition, non-equal status, little influence on agenda setting, late stage input, etc.) the more likely it is that conflicts will occur. Conflicted projects with CSO participation typically include only one CSO whose involvement is not regarded as strategic. Often the CSO contribution is planned for the end of the project and the CSO "value added" tends not to be recognized. Even in cases where CSOs are involved from the beginning, the structure of the project may exclude them from internal decision-making and limit their capacity to affect outcomes. In typical conflict scenarios academics are generally making decisions and leading the research; face-to-face meetings between academic researchers and CSO participants are infrequent.

## Positive cooperation scenarios

Projects reporting no conflicts or difficulties with CSO involvement typically include at least two CSOs that are not specialized in research but still play an important intermediary role. This intermediary role facilitates the link between the research project on the one hand and some part of society on other. For instance, in the health sector CSOs may recruit patients that test or assess the project outputs (a new treatment or product). CSOs perform a vital role in translating complex research "jargon" into something more accessible and help foster participation in the project. In doing so they may expand their skills, gaining confidence to experiment in a new research role.

In positive cooperation scenarios meetings between CSOs and other project partners are frequent enough to be efficient. Having a clear division of tasks between researchers and CSOs appears to be a key factor in avoiding conflict.

**CONSIDER's empirical findings suggest that two factors (or dimensions) are decisive in determining a CSO's position within collaborative research projects: social interaction and knowledge production.**

## The social interaction factor

Social interaction in this context refers to the extent of CSO engagement in a given research project. In projects "driven" by CSO involvement, CSOs interact intensively with other consortium partners. At the other end of the scale, a CSO's position is "distant" from the core of the project, implying a minimum degree of social interaction. Between these extremes are "balanced" arrangements in which the level of social interaction among CSOs and other project partners is largely equal.

Here are some examples of roles performed by CSOs in research projects according to the social interaction scheme:

**CSO Distant**: A CSO may be a member of an advisory board, a subcontractor or a research object; its input to the project is limited. Typical activities are dissemination and outreach.

**CSO Balanced**: A CSO may be a project member, a work package leader or an initiator of the project. Its influence on the project is balanced compared to the influence of the researchers involved. If this case, besides dissemination, CSOs might be involved in data collection, mediation experiences, the provision of feedback and expertise.

**CSO Driven**: A CSO assumes a dominant position, leading a research project. In addition to the activities mentioned above, it might set the agenda of the project and define the research method.

## Knowledge production schemes

Meanwhile, in terms of knowledge production, CSOs can have either a "focused" or a "transformative" role in a research project, defined as follows:

**Focused:** A CSO's role in the project is to improve the outreach and/or contextualize the project results based on its practical experience.

**Transformative:** A CSO's involvement leads to achieving specific research goals, identifying blind spots or defining the research problem. It may also inform the development of the methodology.

Combining these variables yields a set of six possible project types :

## Project typology

| **Social interaction scheme** | Distant | | Balanced | | Driven | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Knowledge Production** | Focused | Trans-formative | Focused | Trans-formative | Focused | Trans-formative |
| ***Project Type*** | *Peripheral-marginal* | *Peripheral-dominant* | *Cooperative-restrictive* | *Cooperative-inclusive* | *Community-related* | *Community-based* |

## Governance models by project type

Each of the six project types identified in the table above has its own specific governance challenges. The CONSIDER Guidelines[3] describe these challenges and offer detailed suggestions for addressing them. The intention is to provide policymakers with empirically defined project types and corresponding governance models that will be useful in designing future research calls that anticipate CSO participation.

[3] www.consider-project.eu

Headline recommendations:

**Policymakers**
Rethink scientific excellence to accommodate CSO participation.

**Funders**
Give CSOs a voice in shaping the research agenda.

**Researchers**
Get down to earth and involve CSOs.

**CSOs**
Dare to take the initiative and reach out to researchers.

**Research Strategy**

- Rethink the definition of research excellence (recognizing that when research aims to address social goals it needs to be excellent in ways beyond the purely scientific).
- Raise awareness of pros and cons of CSO engagement.
- Recognize contribution CSOs can make to implementation of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) agenda.
- Acknowledge CSO involvement in EU-funded research as supporting Europe 2020's "inclusive" growth priority and bridging the gap between citizens and public authorities.
- Prioritize research initiatives with CSO involvement that aim to achieve targets in critical policy areas within Europe 2020 (e.g. poverty and social exclusion, demographic change, climate change, digital single market, youth unemployment, etc.).
- Reflect on potential of CSOs to enhance capacities of the European Research Area (ERA).
- Allow CSOs to help shape the research agenda by inviting them to participate in dialogue with policymakers and funders.

**Research Design**

- Specify what CSO involvement in research is supposed to achieve (allowing research funders and participants to shape research agendas and implement them accordingly).
- Create "open calls" allowing CSOs to define the research question in order to support socially relevant projects.
- Tailor specific small-scale calls to foster networking and accommodate project planning for CSOs.
- Design instruments to facilitate inclusion of less institutionalized CSOs, particularly those lacking formal “legal entity” status.
- In designing calls with CSO participation, encourage proposals that include mechanisms for bridging common gaps in perception (of goals, outcomes etc.) between civil society and academia.
- Foster collaboration over competition (recognizing that the competitive structure of research funding may discourage participation of civil society even when they may be interested in pursuing research aligned to their interests).

**Research Administration**

- Simplify administrative requirements for CSOs, enabling small associations to be able to engage in research projects. Provide small CSOs with more financial support to participate in research projects.
- Make available specific funding for dissemination and impact, supporting activities that endure beyond the formal completion of the project.

**Research Evaluation and Follow-up**

- Create mechanisms that track and publicise research outcomes in ways that will motivate CSOs to participate in collaborative research and mobilize knowledge as foreseen in the European Research Area.
- Develop new evaluation methods that recognize the unique properties of CSO involvement.
- With the aim of promoting responsible research & innovation: a) incorporate social relevance and civil society engagement in proposal evaluations, and b) seek civil society participation in project evaluations.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

CONSIDER conducted the most thorough investigation to date into practices surrounding CSO participation in European research. Virtually all FP7 research projects (14,217 in total) were contacted and asked to indicate their involvement of CSOs. Projects reporting CSO involvement were contacted a second time and asked for more detailed information concerning organization of their research and mechanisms of CSO inclusion. The CONSIDER partners then conducted 33 case studies of collaborative research projects with CSO involvement, 20 of which were EU-funded.

During the course of the case studies, 107 interviews were carried out with relevant actors, which included project coordinators, CSO representatives, academic researchers and funders. Project outputs (documentation and dissemination) were also rigorously examined. Grounded Theory Methodology (which means that no analytical categories are developed before analysing empirical materials) was employed for the case study analysis. Collected data were shared amongst the project team and initially analysed for key themes using Nvivo software. Further data analysis was performed using Multiple Component Analysis (MCA) applied in two rounds: the first identified different modes of CSO participation in the given research projects; the second round identified difficulties faced by collaborate research efforts involving CSOs.

Additionally, CONSIDER collected highly valuable qualitative input through 10 expert workshops organized with relevant stakeholder communities throughout Europe. The CSOs involved in these workshops represented a variety of interests (patient groups, parents' groups, environmental protection, etc.) and were joined at various stages by policymakers, researchers, funders and policy administrators. The workshops thus provided a rare opportunity for facilitated open dialogue between stakeholders involved collaborative research. The first six workshops focused on best practices and testing CONSIDER's key assumptions. The final workshops contributed to the drafting and revision of CONSIDER's guidelines and recommendations aimed at efficiently and effectively engaging civil society in research and innovation.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

**PROJECT NAME**

Civil Society Organisations in Designing Research Governance (CONSIDER)

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**FUNDING SCHEME**

FP7 Framework Programme for Research of the European Union – Collaborative Project Activity 1 – Involvement of Civil Society Organisations in Research.

**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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