

Engaging Civil Society in Research and Innovation

Key findings from the **CONSIDER** project
(Civil Society Organisations in Designing Research Governance)





With many thanks to the individuals, research teams and projects who participated in CONSIDER, especially our Network of Associates and those who answered the questionnaires and welcomed us during the case studies.

We gratefully acknowledge the support and input of the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee.

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THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN EU RESEARCH: INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT BUT CURRENTLY OF LIMITED EXTENT

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are increasingly playing a vital role in research. In the context of the EU policy agenda on responsible research and innovation (RRI) and its focus on public engagement, this role is likely to continue to grow in the future. At present however, CSO participation remains limited.

Despite decades of research on public engagement in general and the role of the public in research in particular, there is little insight into the role of CSOs in research, their motivations, the factors that promote or inhibit it and the ways it can be assessed and evaluated.

THE CONSIDER PROJECT

Within the CONSIDER project (Civil Society Organisations in Designing Research Governance) we have focused on collaborative research projects, especially EU-funded multi-stakeholder projects (such as FP7 and Horizon 2020). We focused on current collaboration practices, observing different research teams in a real time context.

CONSIDER has involved a conceptually sound and empirically rich investigation of the role of CSOs in research.

The CONSIDER findings have been informed by:

- A survey of 14 000 EU Framework 7 (FP7) research projects
- An in-depth investigation of 30 cases of research projects including CSOs
- Expert and stakeholder perspectives obtained through a set of workshops and community-related exercises, and the development of a network of associates

WHAT IS A CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATION (CSO)?

Civil society organisation is a term widely used in the European policy context but less widely known elsewhere. The notion is not easy to define as it may vary according to national context and from one policy field to another.

According to the CONSIDER project, the working definition of a CSO is an organisation that is non-governmental, generally not-for-profit, not representing commercial interests, and that pursues a common purpose for the public interest. CSOs are responsible for articulating the opinions of various social spheres, and cover, for example, environmental groups, minority groups, consumer representatives and patient organisations.

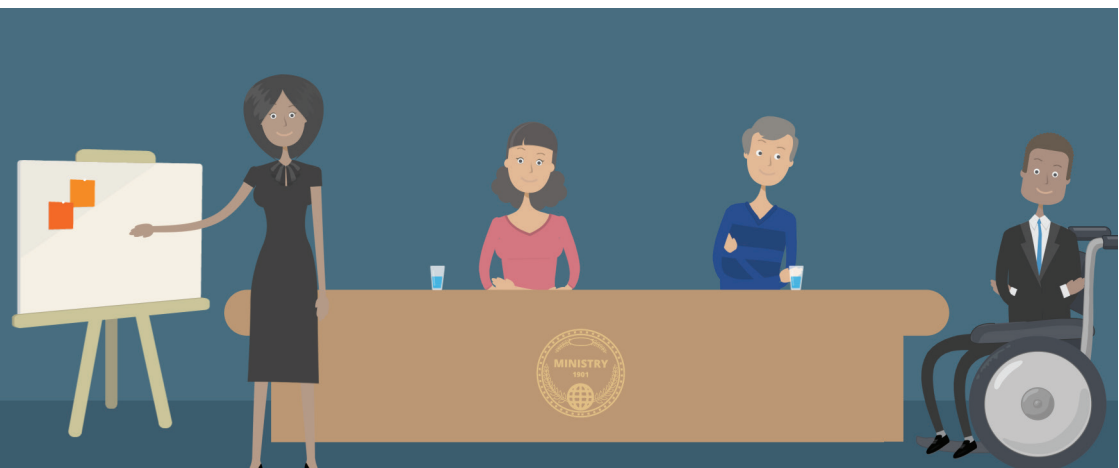
LIMITATIONS

The findings reported here have been developed based on extensive research and analysis. However it is important to acknowledge the following limitations in relation to their application.

- Not all research projects will benefit from civil society involvement, and indeed on occasion it may prove counter-productive. In order to work there must be an identifiable need for societal links as well as a commitment across the project consortium to develop and maintain the collaboration, to build trust between the various different partners, and to ensure the project meets the expectations of all parties.
- The various stakeholders for whom we have developed

recommendations should not be read as suggesting that they are always easily identified and distinguished. We recognise that many CSO-based participants have a research background themselves and often come from, go to or are partly employed by research organisations such as universities. Individuals working for funders tend to have a scientific background and are often employed by research organisations at some stage in their career. Many charities, for example, have boards that include ministry representation, so that a policymaker may at the same time represent a significant civil society organisation and maybe even the public interest.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS



The **CONSIDER** recommendations focus on the following key roles:

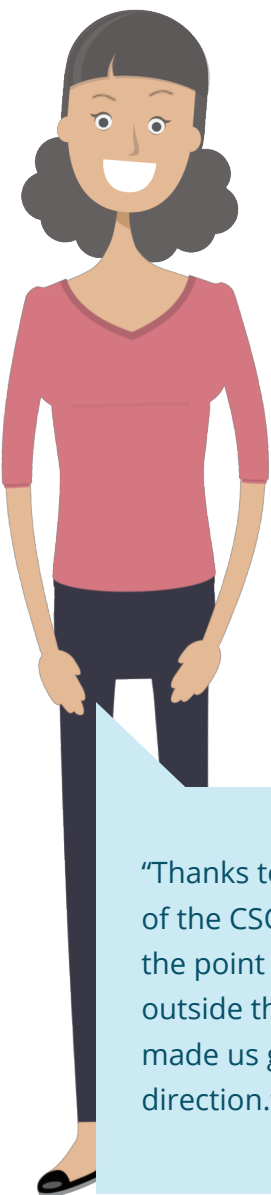
- Researchers
- Civil society representatives
- Policymakers
- Funders

Further information regarding the findings outlined here, including details of all of the recommendations, further specific case studies, quotes and examples, is available online at

www.consider-project.eu/guidelines-landing-page.

RESEARCHERS

Why should researchers engage with civil society organisations?



Our findings show that approximately one in four EU-funded projects (under FP7 in 2012) collaborated with at least one CSO. The added value provided by CSOs was about improving the societal relevance, enhancing policy impact, or representing the interests of a given societal group (such as patient groups, children etc.). However, CSO participation is not on the radar of some researchers.

There are a wide variety of reasons for including CSOs in research:

- To better align research with societal challenges
- To provide an opportunity for participatory research with the relevant communities of interest
- To improve the translation of research results back into society, including through innovation
- To improve the research (and its benefits) through the input of citizens' expertise and context

"Thanks to the involvement of the CSOs we could see the point of view from outside the research. They made us go in a different direction."

“Be clear about your reasons for civil society involvement”

It is important not only that the researchers are clear about why they wish to involve CSOs in the project, but also that such reasons are shared openly and discussed with other project partners.

Within CONSIDER there is evidence that CSOs are just as interested in expanding the boundaries of research knowledge. According to both project coordinators and CSO members, the primary outcome should be knowledge creation (75% and 50% respectively). Both groups are also keen on policy-relevant outcomes.

Example: Engaging a local patient group to prepare a European proposal

A proposal for a European call sought to develop ICT applications for stroke victims. As the project was aimed at a particular patient community, it was clear from the outset that these potential users and beneficiaries would need to be represented. Here, the reason for CSO involvement was the need for an intermediary role, linking scientists and patients and helping to build trust relationships – as well as a prerequisite of the call.


For more recommendations relevant to researchers please visit [*www.consider-project.eu/guidelines-landing-page/researchers*](http://www.consider-project.eu/guidelines-landing-page/researchers)

CIVIL SOCIETY REPRESENTATIVES

Why should CSOs participate in research & innovation?

There are various motivations that encourage CSOs to become engaged in research:

- To ensure that the interests of the group(s) the CSO represents are central to the research undertaken
- To contribute field-based knowledge to research
- To act as a guardian for ethical issues in terms of methodology and outcomes
- To help shape the research and favour more evidence-based policy-making



"I think patient organisations could really take a leading role in research projects more often [...] It is a model that I see really works because you are the one who started the research."

“Dare to take the initiative”

CSOs should dare to take a leading role in the design and implementation of a research & innovation project, not underestimating the knowledge and skills they can bring. Being close to a particular social or environmental issue, a CSO has good familiarity with the knowledge needs and gaps in its area of work: a CSO can work with researchers to see how research could lead to innovation to help their cause. By contributing actively at the development stage of the project, the CSO helps to set the right tone for equal collaboration with research bodies.

Example: CSO as project coordinator

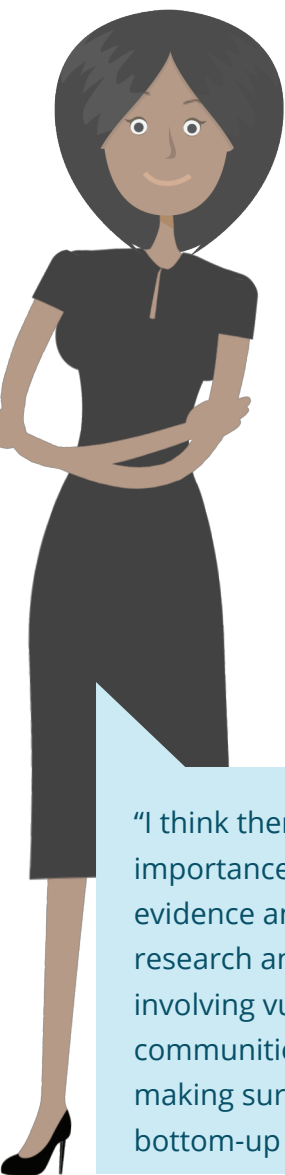
Several CSOs were involved in a project focusing on solar energy, including a membership body for energy efficiency professionals. The CSO took on both the coordination and technical aspects of the project, having the necessary technical expertise to do so. The fact that a CSO was at the helm seems to have been a major success, not least because the CSO took on more than their fair share of workload. They were keen to ensure that the project succeeded in the interests of their members.

For more recommendations relevant to CSO representatives please visit

[*www.consider-project.eu/guidelines-landing-page/csos*](http://www.consider-project.eu/guidelines-landing-page/csos)

POLICYMAKERS

Why should policymakers promote civil society engagement in research & innovation?



There is currently a strong call for and promotion of public participation in research, notably through the EU's research funding programme Horizon 2020. Yet within the previous Framework 7 funding programme in 2012 only 27.7% of collaborative research projects reported involving at least one civil society organisation.

Inclusion of CSOs allows for a broader societal debate on aspects of research that affect society at large. The case for civil society inclusion is most obvious in relation to societal challenges, but can also be applied to research for industrial innovation and scientific excellence.

"I think there is a growing importance of user-led evidence and action research and actually involving vulnerable communities in research – making sure that you have a bottom-up approach."

“Rethink scientific excellence to include societal relevance”

Scientific excellence is a key criterion for evaluating and funding research. Its definition should be widened to incorporate relevance to societal challenges – and the potential of the research to respond to them. In terms of European policy, this wider understanding could be relevant both for industrial leadership and societal challenges.

Example: Excellence in delivering augmented communication for patients with degenerative diseases

A research project investigating how computers can process emotions to improve communication is a good example of how policy makers can rethink scientific excellence. Here, the involvement of CSOs was central to achieving the research outcomes. They contributed to proposal writing and led specific work packages related to end-user testing and dissemination. They were thus involved in addressing patient concerns from the outset, and taking into account how well the technologies would work for patients. The resulting project was excellent not only in terms of its scientific contribution, but also its relevance to users.


For more recommendations relevant to Policymakers please visit [*www.consider-project.eu/guidelines-landing-page/policymakers*](http://www.consider-project.eu/guidelines-landing-page/policymakers)

FUNDERS

Why should funders promote civil society engagement in research?

Funding mechanisms are ways of implementing policy goals. Funders shape their instruments and actions in a way that allows them to achieve the desired research & innovation policy outcomes. Their motivations for CSO inclusion mirrors underlying policy priorities, for example:

- To enhance transparency and accountability to the public
- To bring knowledge that comes from working with a specific societal interest
- To improve links between cutting edge research and societal interests
- To improve commercial viability of any innovative product that may be developed
- To give feedback during the research process



“It is important to reach the practitioners and science on an equal level. You have the scientific data which is important and you have the human.”

Allow civil society to help shape the research agenda

By allowing CSOs to influence the research agenda, funders can ensure a better fit between CSO needs and requirements and the content of the research. Early inclusion of CSOs in determining the direction of the research is furthermore useful to achieve certain policy goals, such as ensuring a strong link between societal needs and EU-funded research.

In order to achieve CSO input into agenda setting funders can:

- Include CSOs when developing the research agenda and calls for proposals
- Ensure CSO representation in the proposal evaluation stage
- Facilitate CSO involvement in your organisation by discussing new rules and work routines with them

Example: Using co-funding as a means of strengthening the CSO position in research

A project investigating the development of supporting technology for children suffering from a life-threatening disease showed one way of ensuring that CSOs had a strong voice in the developing and implementing the research agenda. It was funded under a national funding scheme that required significant co-funding from beneficiaries of the research. While finding funding can often be a problem for CSOs, in this case it proved beneficial because several relevant CSOs with experience in fundraising collaborated to provide the required funding. This made them a crucial partner in preparing the proposal and implementing the research, thus ensuring that the research was tailored to their needs

For more recommendations relevant to Policymakers please visit [*www.consider-project.eu/guidelines-landing-page/funders*](http://www.consider-project.eu/guidelines-landing-page/funders)

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CONSIDER was funded by the European Commission as part of the Seventh Framework Programme, project number 288928.

