

# Putting citizens at the centre of research and innovation

To meet societal challenges and secure a sustainable and resilient future, large scale innovation and a drive for improvement are needed. Public participation offers important benefits when developing new solutions. Preliminary results from PRO-Ethics emphasises the need for a common ethical foundation when involving citizens and stakeholders in innovation processes.



The EU has recently shifted its approach to research and innovation to focus on ambitious missions that will require more involvement of citizens. This shift recognises that in order to address grand societal challenges and secure a sustainable future, innovation will need to have a large-scale impact on people's lives. To ensure that good ideas brought to life through

innovation have the desired impact on society, those most affected by research and innovation must be involved in processes that develop such ideas in the first place. Public participation gives researchers and innovators a better understanding of diverse social and societal needs when new solutions are being developed.



**proEthics** is a 4 year project funded by the EU H2020 scheme, running from 2020 to 2024. Our aim is to facilitate more relevant, fair and effective research and innovation activities.

*PRO-Ethics brings together a consortium of research and innovation funding organisations (RFOs) from across Europe to test ethical ways of involving citizens in research and innovation activities: Participation in innovation projects, strategy development and evaluation processes.*

*Through real-life experiments in the context of 11 pilots, dialogue with relevant stakeholders, and theoretical assessments, the project will develop an Ethics Framework and guidelines for participation.*

*Our consortium consists of 15 partners from 12 European countries, including RFOs, universities, research and technology organisations, and academic research organisations.*

## The complexity of citizen participation in research and innovation

*“How missions can be opened up to a wide group of stakeholders, from individuals, and civil society organisations, to citizen movements or political parties, is critical to forming missions and to ensuring their longevity.”*  
*Governing Missions in the European Union (Mazzucato, 2019)*

When we involve citizens and stakeholders in research and innovation, we need to consider the ethics of participation: who we engage with and when, and how to achieve rigorous and unbiased results while also taking into consideration the needs of participants. The PRO-Ethics project tackles the challenge of involving citizens in innovation processes by working with research and innovation funding organisations (RFOs) across Europe to test ethical ways to involve citizens and stakeholders – including non-traditional ones.

Our work to date demonstrates the need for a shared ethics foundation for citizen par-

ticipation, due to the complexity and huge variety of participatory practices throughout Europe. It is also evident that there is a lot to be learned in dealing with ethical issues and risks, and closer scrutiny is still required.

The conclusions from PRO-Ethics’ results so far have all pointed in the same direction, whether based on theoretical scientific scrutiny, empirical data collected from different pilots run by consortium partners, or from dialogue with stakeholders outside the project.



*Non-traditional stakeholders, as defined by PRO-Ethics, are stakeholders who are not usually included in RFO activities, such as citizens, affected publics, end-users, NGOs, public sector institutions, enterprises, social entrepreneurs, and lay experts. These stakeholders can be included both as individuals and groups or institutions.*

## Key highlights:

### ***Citizens and end-users are clearly underrepresented in participatory processes.***

The participation of non-traditional stakeholders in research and innovation does not seem to be particularly widespread. In addition, participatory processes often lack institutional support structures to facilitate them. Our results indicate that RFOs are mainly conducting expert-led processes, with citizens and other non-traditional stakeholders being distinctly underrepresented.

This holds true when we look across all types of participatory processes. But while they are underrepresented now, when we ask RFOs about intended future activities, they expect diverse publics and stakeholders to be involved on a much larger scale. This is arguably a sign of a growing consensus on the importance of their inclusion.

### ***There is a large diversity of viewpoints and practices on participation and participatory approaches.***

Our results demonstrate significant structural, legal, and ethical variations between different RFOs and their home countries. The data collected point to more fundamental differences and sometimes conflicting ideas about participatory approaches, as well as with the applied ethics rules and appraisals in innovation programmes. More broadly, they also show a diversity of approaches to the ethics in and of participation. There is large variation in how

challenges and benefits of engaging citizens and other non-traditional stakeholders are perceived, and the same holds true for the prevailing goals of participatory practices. Part of the reason for this variation is structural. Not all RFOs benefit from the same political and financial support from governmental or local authorities in the design of their activities and implementation of their funding programmes.

### ***There is a need to establish a shared language around what participation means.***

Participation is a broad concept with loose interpretation. The PRO-Ethics RFO partners point out that having a shared language to discuss participation would be particularly beneficial for two reasons: First, it would help facilitate conversations about participatory processes and in turn increase interest

in adopting such practices. Second, sharing the same language would help RFOs learn from each other. Given the variety of understandings of and approaches to ethics and participation, PRO-Ethics offers taxonomies as an essential step in the development of a methodology for participatory practices.



***The selection and recruitment of participants is a critical point in participation.***

Enabling and facilitating the participation of non-traditional stakeholders in RFO-initiated activities requires an effort of translating the concept of participation into concrete procedures and measurable outcomes. Sometimes, arm's length consultations are conflated with genuine participation by all parties. In addition, the process of identification and selection of participants differs quite widely between RFOs. Important issues related to the identification of

participants in processes and projects include: choosing the right participants to represent a target group; choosing the right process for participant involvement; adapting participative methods to the context; avoiding biases in citizen selection; protecting personal data; considering the asymmetric access to information for participants; and finally the fact that not all RFOs regard the same ethical considerations as a meaningful component of such processes.

***While citizen engagement has become more important, it is still difficult to secure sufficient buy-in.***

According to RFOs, there is a general agreement that participation can be helpful to build legitimacy and sustainability of innovation outputs, but this argument alone is often not enough to convince sceptics, especially since participatory processes often need additional time, resources and

expertise to implement. For PRO-Ethics, an important task will be to provide a clearer rationale for why citizens and stakeholders should be involved in research and innovation processes and practices, as well as how they can be included in a meaningful way.

***Participation is a time-consuming, complex process.***

Lack of time and other resources are often found to be the biggest barriers when first trying to realise participation processes. Participation is often a 'nice-to-have' that doesn't get off the ground. There is a need for more clarity about when citizen

participation is needed. What kinds of projects should citizens be involved in, at what stages and to what degree? However, one thing is clear from our results so far: There is no standard format that fits all.

*There is a need for more clarity about citizen participation. What kinds of activities should citizens be involved in, when and how should they be included, and to what end? In any case, one thing is clear: There is no standard format that fits all.*



***Ethical reviews in evaluation procedures can boost quality and trust.***

Our analysis of the Eurostars funding programme for collaborative research and innovation projects shows that including an ethical review in the evaluation process has improved the overall project quality. It has also provided greater assurance of the programme and the projects' acceptability both to peer researchers and the public. Finally, decision-makers seemed more confident to invest in a programme that integrates an ethical review in its evaluation procedures.

However, for a shared European approach to ethical reviews to be feasible, there are still important obstacles to be tackled. There are, for one, significant national differences

in ethics standards and legal frameworks, for instance when it comes to reproductive technologies and life sciences. At the same time, there are areas where harmonisation would be considerably easier due to existing legal frameworks, such as in personal data protection and GDPR regulation. Our results also show that ethics are increasingly addressed in the context of legal requirements, and some ethics experts suggest that ethical reviews should focus more on those domains that are still not clearly regulated by law, or where rules governing research are still unclear. This would positively impact the value evaluators add to reviews.

## Concluding remarks

The key to a resilient future depends on large-scale innovation. Policy makers and central stakeholders need to ensure the relevance and sustainability of research and innovation efforts. Involving citizens and relevant stakeholders can give researchers and innovators a better understanding of diverse social and societal needs and improve innovation outcomes. However, such participation processes must be ethically sound and

responsible to ensure research integrity and achieve unbiased, rigorous results. More real-life pilots will be carried out as part of the PRO-Ethics project with the aim of establishing a participation framework. Our ambition is to tackle the diversity of organisational contexts so that RFOs can benefit from concrete tools and methodological guidance on ethics and participatory processes.

### Do you want to learn more?

*Please visit PRO-Ethics' website [pro-ethics.eu](http://pro-ethics.eu) for detailed information about the project, our pilots, our reports and results of the work so far.*

*Sign up for our [newsletter](#), follow us on [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), and find us on [Zenodo](#) to keep in touch.*



<b>Project name</b>	PRO-Ethics – Participatory real life experiments in research and innovation funding organisations on ethics
<b>Coordinator</b>	Centre for Social Innovation, Austria
<b>Consortium</b>	Danish Board of Technology, Denmark Delft University of Technology, Netherlands Sciences Po, France Nesta, United Kingdom EUREKA, Belgium EUREC Office, Germany Innoviris, Belgium Research Council of Norway, Norway Centre for the Development of Industrial Technology, Spain Technology Agency of the Czech Republic, Czechia Austrian Research Promotion Agency, Austria VDI/VDE Innovation + Technology, Germany Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding, Romania Research Council of Lithuania, Lithuania
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<b>Further publications</b>	<a href="https://pro-ethics.eu/pro-ethics-outputs">https://pro-ethics.eu/pro-ethics-outputs</a>
<b>For more information</b>	Website: <a href="https://pro-ethics.eu/">https://pro-ethics.eu/</a> Twitter: <a href="https://twitter.com/pro_ethics">https://twitter.com/pro_ethics</a> - @pro_ethics LinkedIn: <a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/pro-ethics">https://www.linkedin.com/company/pro-ethics</a> Newsletter: <a href="https://pro-ethics.eu/news-events/newsletter">https://pro-ethics.eu/news-events/newsletter</a>

