Stakeholder engagement in EU-funded inter- and trans-disciplinary research and innovation projects

Experiences from the CIRSEAU cluster projects B-WaterSmart, REWAISE, ULTIMATE, WATER-MINING and WIDER UPTAKE

Guiding principles and actions for researchers and practitioners

ANNEX

To contribute to more effective, inclusive, and sustainable stakeholder engagement practices in EU-funded research and innovation projects, guiding principles and actions for researchers and practitioners are derived from the experiences gained and knowledge developed within the CIRSEAU cluster projects B-WaterSmart, REWAISE, ULTIMATE, WATER-MINING and WIDER UPTAKE. Stakeholder engagement (SHE) practices implemented in these projects include

Communities of Practice (CoPs), Focus Groups (FGs), Competency Groups (CGs), Living Labs (LLs), multi-use play spaces, serious games, testbeds, interviews, public demonstration events, cross-cases and cross-projects fertilisation exercises. The guiding principles and actions derived from these experiences are presented in the folowing pages. They organised around three project phases: proposal, implementation, and post-project.

Embedding stakeholder engagement in the project proposal

The pre-project phase guiding principles and actions focus on improving the integration of stakeholder engagement practices in the design of research and innovation projects.

● Promote better integration of technical and social sciences in research and innovation projects

Stimulate better cohesion between technical and social science from the start of projects. This requires the allocation of sufficient budget to social sciences in technology-oriented projects. Co-creation is still new and quite challenging in technology-oriented projects. Structuring projects in the context of ITD research can support jointly framing the problem and building a research team composed of the required competencies needed to co-produce solution-oriented research and innovation and integrate and apply the knowledge in both scientific and societal practice. Actively

stimulate ITD initiatives by identifying questions that necessitate an ITD research approach. For example, consider launching new funding schemes that require ITD approaches to contribute to broader societal impact. Or advocate for increased budgetary provisions specifically allocated for stakeholder engagement in technology-oriented project calls.

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- ### Capacity development in research and innovation projects

  Facilitate the development of capacity and offer training options in ITD approaches and skills. Recognising the evolving nature of co-creation and fostering better integration of social sciences, provide researchers and research and innovation projects with the tools and methods necessary for effective ITD and diversity in stakeholder engagement.

- ### Identify and integrate existing participatory structures

  Encourage the identification and integration of existing participatory structures. Recognise that established structures can be valuable components of stakeholder engagement and should not be overlooked. Foster collaboration with these structures to streamline and enhance engagement efforts.

- ### Extend funding structures beyond project lifecycles

  Recognise the value of meaningful engagement and allocate resources accordingly to ensure the success and impact of stakeholders. This should consider funding structures that look beyond the lifecycle of individual projects. Emphasise the importance of continuity planning and provide a clear framework for how funding is distributed over time (who and when gets financial resources, for what and how). Support initiatives that contribute to sustained stakeholder engagement beyond the immediate project timelines. Funding structures should look beyond the lifecycle of projects but have a clear idea of who gets money, when and how.

- ### Structure research and innovation projects for continuity

  Emphasise the importance of continuity in project design. Encourage forward-looking perspectives

that consider the long-term goals beyond the project. For example, structure projects to contribute to the sustainability of LL operations beyond individual project timelines or strategically allocate funds to ensure sufficient margins for continuity, especially when addressing specific challenges (e.g., water reuse).

- ### Non-rigid criteria for stakeholder engagement

  Encourage non-rigid criteria for stakeholder engagement, recognising the dynamic and non-linear nature of stakeholder engagement. Foster flexibility in how stakeholder engagement is evaluated by reviewers, acknowledging the evolving nature of ITD research. Tailor evaluation criteria and processes to accommodate this dynamic ecosystem of stakeholder engagement.

Establishing and implementing stakeholder engagement practices during the project

The project phase guiding principles and actions focus on strengthening the implementation of stakeholder engagement during research and innovation projects.

- ### Leverage existing participatory structures

  Benefit from existing participatory structures as opportunities for stakeholder engagement. Recognise the inevitability of these existing structures and be aware of the roles and power imbalances that might influence the co-production process. Actively work to integrate dissenting voices to ensure a more inclusive co-production process. Not all participation should exist solely from these existing structures, allowing for a more flexible and diverse engagement approach. Understand that aligning with participatory structures already in place also requires coordination efforts and may require adjustments to the timeline in order to be in harmony.

- ### Position stakeholder engagement in a broader context

  Place stakeholder engagement practices, such as CoPs, CGs, etc., in the context of broader national and international perspectives. Recognise the benefit of existing structures to the project, avoiding competition and ensuring alignment with external and common goals and needs.

- ### Enhance cohesion between technical and social sciences

  Enable better integration between technical and social sciences from the start of the project. Allocate adequate budget to social sciences to support their role in co-creation processes within more technology oriented projects. Recognise that co-creation is a new and challenging concept, requiring a collaborative and integrated approach to bridge the gap between disciplines. Ensure the inclusion of social science reviewers to ensure a comprehensive evaluation that goes beyond technological developments and where qualitative aspects of stakeholder engagement are recognised and valued.

- ### Understand and allocate the required time and resources

Acknowledge that stakeholder engagement is time-intensive and requires dedicated resources. Allocate time for setup, involvement, active listening, and understanding challenges to arrive together at appropriate solutions. Prioritise inclusiveness and recognise the need for different strategies for different stakeholder groups.

- ### Communicate the project objectives and relevance

Clearly communicate the project objectives and relevance to stakeholders. Increase awareness and urgency by ensuring stakeholders understand the project's vision and explore together how the two fit into the narrative. Provide clarity on how stakeholders can engage in project activities, including the required skills and capacities. Clearly communicate how engagement translates into practical contributions and influence within the project.

- ### Implement a dynamic and flexible stakeholder mapping

Implement a flexible stakeholder mapping which recognises and accepts that relevant stakeholders may change over time due, for example, to diversity in interests. Adapt the engagement strategy based on evolving project needs and emerging stakeholders, and tailor engagement approaches accordingly. Collaboratively engage stakeholders that can share the strategic objectives of the project and are well positioned to enable decision making and commitment. Recognise that different groups may require different approaches to effectively involve and collaborate with them. Personal contacts play a crucial role in influencing stakeholders positively.

- ### Avoid over formalisation of stakeholder engagement

Avoid excessive formalisation of stakeholder engagement to prevent stifling stakeholders' freedom to engage and contribute. Maintain flexibility and openness to encourage a dynamic and responsive engagement process.

- ### Promote and prioritise transparency and trust

Ensure transparency to build trust, particularly with stakeholders who may find it difficult to identify themselves within the objectives of the project. Effort and commitment are needed to establish a transparent relationship, demonstrating that stakeholder contributions have a meaningful impact on project outcomes or input on decision-making processes, reinforcing the value of their engagement.

Continuity of stakeholder engagement beyond the project

The post-project phase guiding principles and actions focus on building the foundations for continuity during the project phase, when there is interest and motivation from stakeholders to continue after a research and innovation project ends. Decision could also be made at the proposal phase based on a preliminary assessment conducted with stakeholders.

- ### Enhance stakeholder appreciation, engagement, and buy-in

Social, environmental, and economic benefits should be translated into more tangible and relatable values. Social Return on Investment (SROI) could be utilised to assess and effectively communicate the social, environmental, and economic impact to stimulate long-term collaboration between stakeholders. This facilitates a deeper appreciation of the project's significance in addressing complex societal challenges, supporting stakeholder engagement and buy-in to long-term commitment and engagement.

- ### Identify who is best placed to lead

Consider who will lead the continuation of stakeholder engagement. For example, LLs are often hosted by government/cities or research institutions, which already have a legal entity and a strategic roadmap. Ensure leadership alignment with the engagement's goals for sustained success.

- ### Shift from a project-centric to broader more inclusive perspective

Addressing complex challenges requires engagement beyond project boundaries. Establish new working models that enable collaboration among multiple stakeholders and across boundaries. Stakeholder engagement practices, such as CoPs or CGs should be placed within a broader national and international context, to avoid restricting engagement to project needs and consider the larger ecosystem to enhance continuity and relevance.

- ### Understand the needs and interests of stakeholders

Develop a deep understanding of the needs and interests of stakeholders to determine what can be offered beyond the lifecycle of projects. Emphasise the importance of continuity, aligning project outcomes with stakeholder requirements for sustained engagement. To ensure continuity, the focus needs to be placed on addressing broader societal challenges to maintain relevance and impact. Align the needs and interests of stakeholders with these broader challenges.

- ### Understand and adapt to the participatory culture

Understand the participatory culture and adapt stakeholder engagement strategies accordingly. Connect with existing good practices to build interest among stakeholders.

- ### Leverage and integrate macro-, meso-, and micro-level strategies and activities

Understand and integrate meso- and micro-level activities into the context of macro-level strategies to enable continued engagement of stakeholders. Recognise that a holistic approach enhances the long-term impact.

- ### Promote and prioritise transparency and trust

Recognise trust and transparency as key components for continuity and co-creation. Foster an environment where stakeholders feel confident in sharing their insights and working collaboratively

and see the impact of their engagement. Establish clear communication channels and mechanisms for maintaining transparency throughout the project.

- ### Continue evaluation of stakeholder landscape

Continually evaluate current and potential stakeholders. Understand how their involvement fits into the broader context of continuity. Adapt engagement strategies based on evolving stakeholder dynamics.

- ### Develop a comprehensive business plan

Have a well-structured business plan in place. Clearly outline the financial needs and potential revenue streams. Ensure the plan addresses the long-term sustainability of a LL, including funding requirements for ongoing operations and growth.