



WHITE PAPER

ON CITIZEN SOCIAL SCIENCE APPLIED
TO CIVIC ORGANISATION PROJECTS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The CoAct project aims to support the United Nations' fifth Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality by supporting civic organisations making use of Citizen Social Science (CSS) methods for gender-based projects. CoAct defines CSS as participatory research co-designed and directly driven by citizen groups sharing a social concern. In this document, we report on the process for the Open Call "Gender Equality", whose application process opened in July 2021 and concluded in September of the same year. The promised grant was attributed to three European organisations with the goal of supporting 10-month long civic projects experimenting the use of CSS methods.

Research-centric CSS projects are typically led by a research team which builds around itself a 'Knowledge Coalition' whose members include the various stakeholders relevant to the research project. This means that although a close collaboration is established between the researchers and the society members part of the coalition, the project is still an academic initiative. The CoAct project devoted a part of its resources to explore the possibility of putting civic organisations in the driver seat of a CSS project. This model raises new challenges, related to the fact that:

- Most civic organisations do not have experience in making use of research methods in a rigorous manner, and
- The resources and focus of an academic research team are very different from an advocacy-focused organisation.

Yet CSS methods, applied to civic projects, have the potential to increase the value of those projects for society. Faulty evidence gathering processes, disconnect from target communities, lack of replicability, limited reach of dissemination activities and low adoption of data-driven advocacy best practices: many of those challenges, common to most civic organisations, can be partially addressed through the adoption of CSS methods. The work done by the CoAct consortium in partnership with three gender-focused European civic organisations allowed us to confirm that civic organisations working with marginalised or at-risk communities were a good starting point to explore the impact of CSS methods on the civic sector. But any meaningful progress on the dissemination of research best practices in the civic sector will have to rely on commitments by funding organisations to understand and encourage those best practices through guidelines, proposal selection design, and grantee mentoring.



RECOMMENDATIONS

More participative community engagement activities, aligned with CoAct’s knowledge coalition method¹²³, should be encouraged in the civic sector: for civic organisations adopting CSS methods, the most immediately impactful change was the adoption of processes to meaningfully engage with their co-researchers. Unlike other aspects of CoAct’s CSS project cycle, understanding and applying the concept of a knowledge coalition to a project does not require much guidance or mentoring for a civic organisation. Encouraging the use of this method, through recommendation or selection criteria, would be the easiest change to recommend in the practice of organisation funding or supporting civic work.

CSS methods should be developed further as a resource to support the work of civic organisations: our work shows that, beyond their use in research projects, CSS methods would have an impact on civic projects tackling social change issues, and civic organisations working with marginalised communities, allowing them to deliver more rigorously-designed projects which in turn facilitate the dissemination and reuse of the knowledge created. This is only possible if more funding opportunities, such as the Horizon 2020 programme funding CoAct, are extended to the civic and academic communities.

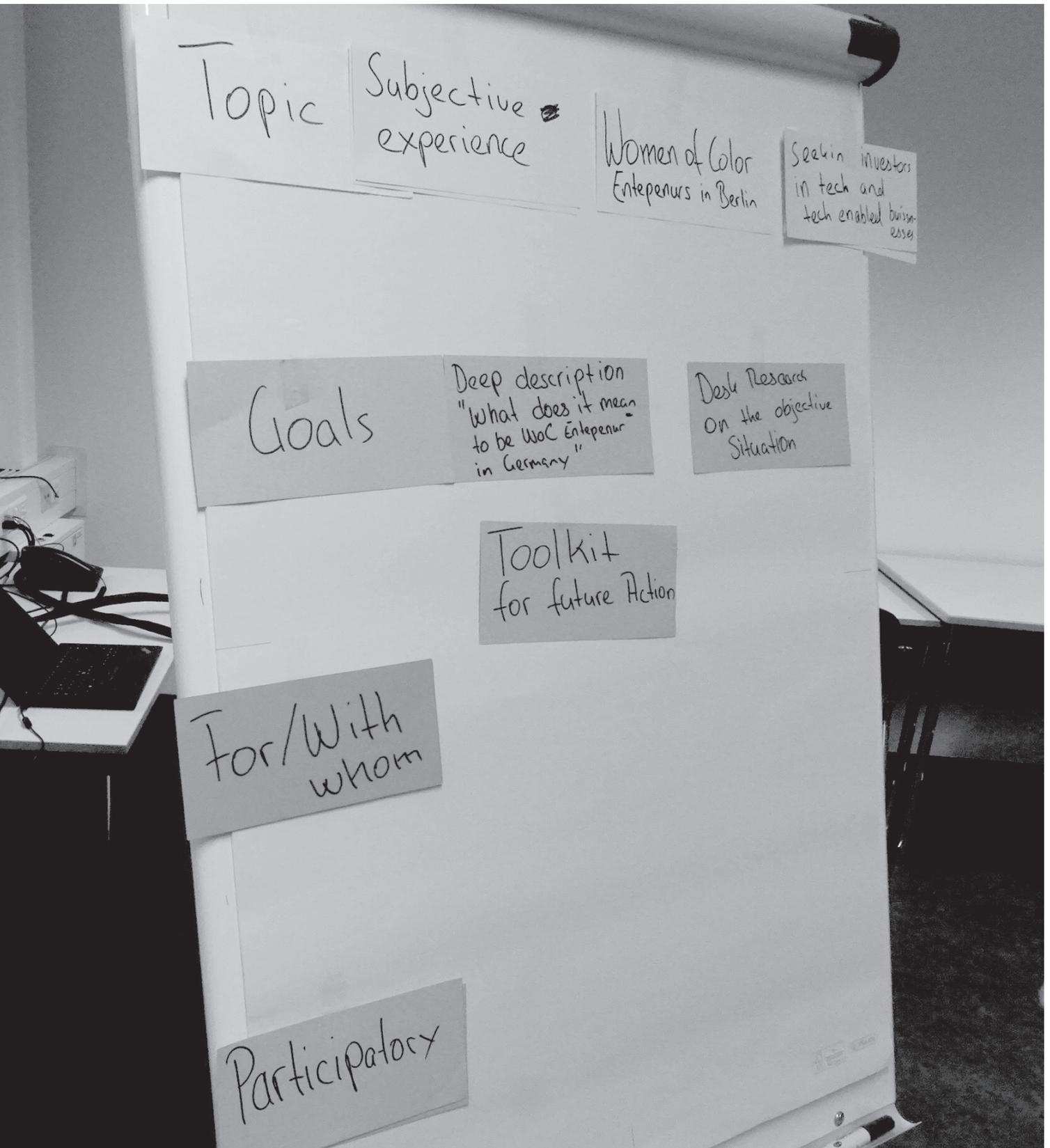
Organisations funding civic projects should embed grantee mentoring in their processes: capacity building is already part of the strategy of large funding programmes, but often takes place at the beginning of a project. Our work with CoAct grantees shows that supporting civic organisations with mentors—people with knowledge of CSS methods— throughout their project cycle improves the quality of the outcomes and facilitates the adoption of new approaches such as CSS methods.

1 Mitats Carmona, Bàrbara, San Pío Tendero, Maria Jesús, Cigarini, Anna, González Virós, Itziar, Bonhoure, Isabelle, & Perelló, Josep. (2020). CoActD3.1: Report on Knowledge Coalition Building. Mental Health Care. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6075796>

2 Wintersteller, Teresa, Malik, Mariam, & Wöhrer, Veronika. (2020). CoActD4.1: Knowledge Coalition Building. Youth Employment. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6075916>

3 Arza, Valeria, Actis, Guillermina, Marchegiani, Pia, Velarde, Malena, Cane, Santiago, Buchsbaum, Malena, & Swistun, Débora. (2020). CoActD5.1: Knowledge Coalition Building. Environmental Justice. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6076007>

More CSS research projects are needed to investigate the criteria for a successful adoption of CSS methods by civic organisations: our work was limited to a sample of three organisations, focused on gender issues. More research should be done with a broader range of civic organisations to identify the strengths and weaknesses of CSS methods and better target the civic organisations which could make the best use of them.



CoAct's GENDER EQUALITY open calls: Introduction



1. CoAct and Citizen Social Science

CSS combines equal collaboration between citizens that are sharing a social concern and academic researchers, enabling these groups to address pressing social issues from the perspective of their own contexts while counting on robust research methods.

The CoAct project, a three year enterprise funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, proposes a new understanding of the application of CSS in participatory research projects. The main objective is for citizen groups to co-design research actions and become co-researchers in processes commonly dominated by academics, acting throughout the entire process and being recognized as in-the-field competent experts. This way, CoAct developed CSS actions as a research approach based in the following main principles:

- **Thematic and local integration:** simultaneously work with civil society organisations across a broad geographic scale addressing four social issues: Mental Health Care, Youth Employment, Environmental Justice, and Gender Equality.

- **Citizens as equal stakeholders:** citizens act as co-researchers that have lived the experiences in relation to the social concerns motivating the collective Research and Innovation Actions.

- **Bottom-up collaboration for socially robust knowledge production:** involvement and collaboration between the multiple stakeholders may vary according to the specific R&I Actions, but always creates a network based on constant and open dialogue between the different actors, promoting exchange between them.

Throughout the duration of CoAct, citizen groups across Spain, Austria, Germany, Eastern and pan-European countries and Argentina engaged in different projects to address global social concerns related to the aforementioned main topics. The research groups developed locally embedded strategies to handle regional problems with active citizen participation in research, from the design to the interpretation of the results and their transformation into concrete actions. These groups participated in the research data collection and analysis, as well as the analysis of the process and results, with two main outcomes: the delivery of conclusions to a Knowledge Coalition, multi-stakeholder group composed by public administrations, CSOs, educational organisations and policy makers, to name a few, and the autonomous performing of specific collective actions.



ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Buenos Aires

Inhabitants in a highly polluted and crowded shanty town.



Environmental Justice is not guaranteed because inhabitants do not participate on the concrete definition of the problem nor on the socio-environmental risks.

Bottom up socio-environmental risk indicators

Information assessment through collective mapping and citizen generated data.

- Social Scientist
- NAO ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE
- Artist and political activist
- Policy body related with justice

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

Vienna

Young early school leavers who are in precarious socio-economic position and with difficulties of finding a job.



Young people in most need of help and assistance do not use 'youth coaching' and do not find any place of training and education.

Conceptualisation and improvement of new (maybe different) measures.

- Social Scientist
- Educator
- SpaceLab
- AMS Public Employment service

MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Barcelona

Adult citizens with experience of mental disorders and their families.



Life experience and self-perception of adult citizens with experience of mental disorders are not placed at the center of mental health care provision.

ACTION PLAN

Recommendations and Action plan to improve healthcare policies.

Mental health care self-management (digital) tools for citizens with mental health disorders and their families.

- Data Scientist
- Association
- City Council
- Social Innovator

GENDER EQUALITY

Europe

Gender Equality is a concern globally shared.



Three Open Calls for Citizen-led Research in various EU locations

CO-RESEARCHERS NEEDED

EUROPE

- Social Scientist
- Computer Scientist
- Open Data Scientist
- Civil Society Organization

2. The Gender Equality Open Call

In 2021, CoAct launched three Open Calls to foster the application of CSS methods and tools in projects dealing with gender equality in Berlin and the Brandenburg area, Eastern Europe and Pan-Europe. Each call had different gender perspectives, focusing on Sustainable Cities and Communities, Decent Work and Economic Growth and Gender Equality & Opportunities and Risks of Digitalization.

In the Open Calls resolution report⁴, we explained that the Gender Equality Open Calls seek to move the boundaries of research initiated by academic scientists towards citizen-led research. Taking into consideration a wider and inclusive approach to gender equality, CoAct's Open Calls adopted an approach towards the diversity of identities and collectives, in particular the LGBTQ+ communities, as well as different perspectives related to any perceived gender identity, including non-binary ones.

Recently, a wide variety of social actors with very different intentions have been playing a relevant role in the gender equality movements. Especially after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, claims for equality increased and comprised a broad range of demands, from a women's quota in decision making positions, to human rights movements against discrimination and violence, up to more radical transformative approaches that criticize the basic exclusionary foundations of capitalism reproducing gender inequality.

Using CSS methods to support these powerful grassroots approaches, where citizens in vulnerable situations need to be at the centre of the research cycle and involved in defining the social issues which they are affected from, CoAct embraced the Open Call model to address the Gender Equality thematic. This way, the objective was to select civil society organisations for a short-term grant over a funding period of 10 months to investigate gender related issues with a CSS approach. By collecting new scientific data on gender inequalities, the selected projects could inform new collective actions with evidence and advise future policy-making to reduce gender inequality.

4 Heinz, Daniel, Thomas, Stefan, Scheller, David, Lombion, Cédric (2021). CoActD6.1: OpenCalls resolution report <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6107181>

Organisations legally registered and operating in an EU member state or associated country were encouraged to apply with projects between July 1st and September 30th of 2021. CoAct's Open Calls invited:

- Ongoing CSS projects looking for support, funding and other resources to grow and become sustainable
- Affected communities interested in codesigning research to generate new knowledge about gender equality topics
- Non-profit organisations (in the third sectors) focusing on community building, increasing their visibility, strengthening civic participation or the exploration of application scenarios and the usability of CSS in their work.

Three organisations from Berlin, Bulgaria and Greece were selected, forming with the CoAct consortium team a trans-disciplinary collective that brought together experts from different disciplines and fields of practice.



3. Selected projects

As mentioned above, three projects were chosen to receive funding through the Open Call on Gender Equality. The selected⁵ civil organisations were:

Founderland

<https://www.founderland.org/>

**FOUNDER
LAND**

Founderland is a Berlin based organisation that supports women founders who have faced obstacles tied to their gender and ethnicity by building a new inclusive, intersectional standard for entrepreneurs. Their work supports women of colour founders navigating the entrepreneurial ecosystem by providing them with a safe space to network, share knowledge, and build their ventures.

Founderland responded to the call on Gender Equality & Sustainable Cities and Communities for CSOs in the Berlin & Brandenburg area. The partnership with CoAct allowed the organisation to gather insights directly from the founders they support, laying the groundwork for research on this demographic group through a new and innovative approach that can be built upon by other organisations and researchers. It also enabled the team to engage their other stakeholders, such as policy makers and startup investors, onboarding them in critical conversations.

“It is difficult to get a firm commitment from our co-researchers who have full-time jobs, caretaking responsibilities and so on, however we do see the value in having the very women in our community who are struggling with the same issues as the interviewers.”

Outcome of the project: Through the project Founderland captured a diverse array of reasons explaining why the data shows that women of colour are significantly underfunded, which is the reason for their organisation’s existence. It allowed them to build a solid evidence-based foundation for their advocacy upon which they plan to build more research projects on the issue, still using CSS methodology.

⁵ The proposals were selected against six criteria: relevance to the open call; quality of the project design; benefit for the organisation’s broader agenda; quality of the proposed documentation and dissemination strategies; capacity of the project to live on after the end of the programme; ethical considerations.

The Single Step Foundation was established in 2016 in Sofia, Bulgaria, with the mission to support, motivate and empower LGBTIQ+ young people and their families, friends and allies through the process of recognizing, coming out and affirming their sexual orientation and gender identity. The organisation's comprehensive support programme is one of the key services they offer to the community, consisting of psychological and career support, as well as access to healthcare and legal consultations. Their team is also a member of TGEU - a member-based network that works for trans rights across Europe.

Single Step responded to the Gender Equality & Decent Work and Economic Growth call for CSOs in Eastern Europe. Working with CoAct allowed them to fill a void of trans and non-binary people data in the conservative Bulgarian society. Bulgaria does not have any legislative process or established healthcare procedures to aid trans people and support professionals during their transition process. In the last five years, Single Step's experts have become aware of the extreme marginalisation and difficulties this community faces and have worked to address the urgent need for viable and comprehensive data on topics such as education and the labour market.

"Having run all of the questions and answer options by the co-researchers before starting data collection gave us a certainty that we were approaching all of our topics of interest with the necessary sensitivity and respect. For their part, the co-researchers reported feeling validated and heard by being included in the research process."

Outcome of the project: Single Step being a civic organisation with strong expertise in social science research, the main benefit of using CSS was to improve their processes, by identifying oversights in their questionnaire thanks to their co-researchers, and enrich their advocacy actions, by layering the data that they usually collect about the Bulgarian LGBTIQ+ community with stories drawn from the multiple workshops organised with co-researchers.

Women on Top



<https://www.womenontop.com.br/>

Women On Top is a non-profit organisation from Greece advocating for the economic empowerment of women and gender equality in the workplace. Their goal is to eliminate the obstacles to equal participation in the economy, contributing to a change in the social, labour and political environment around them. Since 2012, they have created and monitored over 1500 mentoring partnerships and have trained over 2300 women in skills camps for the benefit of unemployed women. They have also developed a communication and research platform in order to build powerful networks around the goal of gender equality and understand the obstacles that women face in their participation in public life.

The organisation responded to the Gender Equality & Opportunities and Risks of Digitalization call for International CSOs in the EU. Through their association with CoAct, they generated unprecedented data and insights from a collaborative process with 20 active co-researchers, allowing the team to further strengthen their capacity to work for gender equality and inclusion locally. By complementing their previous efforts with a critical understanding of the new digitised reality that is affecting women's lives, they also managed to mobilise women citizens to share experiences and reflect on threats and opportunities as well as on ways to mitigate the negative impact of digital transformation.

"we have also realised how much of our work over the last 10 years has been based on those same [CSS] principles, even without us fully knowing it. Thanks to the work we've been doing with you, these principles now have names, processes and timelines attached to them, which means that they are not only easier to access but also easier to use and transfer to other members of our organisation and of the ecosystem."

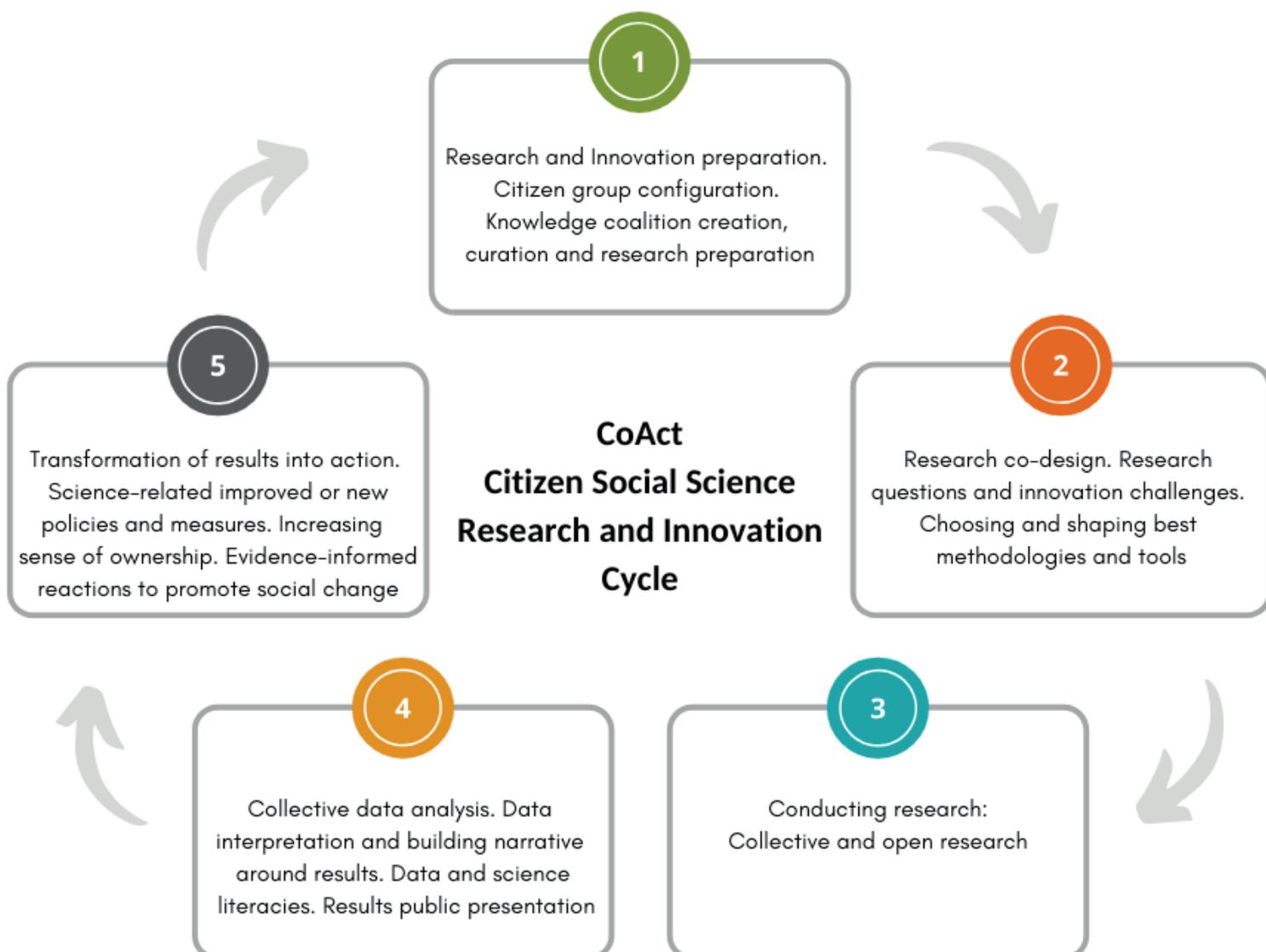
Outcome of the project: Women On Top plans to leverage the knowledge coalition they have started to build as part of their CoAct-funded project to support their future research projects. The first one will be on assessing the state of professional and educational opportunities of Greek women living in the countryside: instead of delegating the project design to a third party and relying on them to assemble a sample of their target group, they plan to follow the CoAct CSS project cycle and will make use of their existing knowledge coalition to reach out to this new target audience. This allows them to have more ownership of their project, and to deliver them using a more rigorous methodology than they would have done otherwise.



Supporting CIVIC ORGANISATIONS in adopting CSS methods: key issues

1. The importance of the collective data analysis

The five phases of a CSS project as defined by CoAct are the following:



Co-evaluation activities⁶ are facilitated in parallel with the different cycle phases.

Of all those phases, the phase 4, collective data analysis, was the one which grantees found the most difficult. Specifically, they struggled with:

- choosing between **collective data analysis**, in which co-researchers are involved in all aspects of the data processing (cleaning, sorting, statistics...) and **collective data interpretation**, which leaves the technical data work to researchers and focuses on working with co-researchers to make sense of what the data seems to say.

- **planning the flow of the workshops**, to ensure that no co-researcher got left behind because of a lower data or statistical literacy.

- **exploring all the potential insights** of the dataset in the limited time that they had for the workshops.

The challenges posed by this phase appear to us as key to the understanding of what differentiates a CSS project from finding the balance between simplifying the interpretation process and a typical research project: it is commonplace to involve stakeholders in social science research, from pre-survey interviews to inductive research process to participant observation methods. But collective data analysis or interpretation forces the researcher to ensure that their co-researchers are properly trained on both the topic and the research methods. This leads to a qualitative jump in the engagement with stakeholders: instead of just being asked to provide feedback, they acquire knowledge enabling them to autonomously mobilise some of the research methods and findings.

Additionally, two out of three teams brought in external help, in the form of hired junior or an external agency, to support their data analysis. Unlike academic research, civic organisations cannot be expected to already have staff with the required data or statistical literacy to produce a rigorous analysis of the data. This reinforces the need to provide guidance and support, financial or otherwise, when encouraging civic organisations to adopt CSS methods.

6 <https://coactproject.eu/blog/grantee-workshop-documentation/>

A particular focus should consequently be put on improving the guidance and mentoring related to collective data analysis in order to ensure that the adoption of CSS methods produce a meaningful change in the relationship between civic organisations and their stakeholders as part of their project delivery. Additional research would also be needed to explore the various research methods relevant to this phase in order to identify which ones match best with different civic organisations or communities.



2. Mentoring and support

The mentoring support from CoAct Consortium partners was part of the grant benefits that the selected grantees were entitled to. During the programme, the teams went through a series of mentoring sessions, check-in meetings and workshops, both managed by the Open Knowledge Foundation (OKF) and the University of Applied Science (FHP) in Potsdam.

The mentoring process aimed to provide direct and regular guidance on working with data and adopting CSS methods. It also encouraged grantees to properly document their progress and learnings as well as ask for help for any issue that might come up.

Mentoring actions:

- 1. Regular check-ins**
- 2. Documentation and monitoring through a notes document and a dashboard**
- 3. Tailored workshops for initial capacity building**
- 4. On-demand meetings to address various issues**
- 5. Mid-project and end-of-project reporting**

1. Check-ins: by carrying out regular check-ins with the grantees, the CoAct consortium was able to provide regular guidance by directing the grantees' requests to the relevant experts within the consortium.

2. Notes and dashboard: during the check-in meetings, project progress was documented in a written shared document in order to flag challenges and register solutions and outcomes. A dashboard, maintained using a software Trello, was used as a management tool to track progress.

3. Tailored workshops: to ensure that each team had the guidance needed to design and deliver their project on time, a series of workshops were organised on the key aspects of CSS project delivery:

- **Project Roadmap Design workshop:** a roadmap for the 5-step cycle program was designed by each civic organisation during this workshop, allowing them to clarify their goals and plan their activities.

- **Co-evaluation workshop:** this workshop focused on providing grantees the guidance needed to properly evaluate the outcomes of their project together with their participants.

- **Collective Data Analysis workshop:** these workshops focused on helping the team design their collective data analysis workshop based on the specifics of the knowledge coalition.

4. On-demand meetings: each grantee had specific needs which, due to the nature of CSS projects, could not be fully anticipated. On-demand meetings allowed us to support grantees in a responsive manner, by making our mentoring flexible enough to address issues as they came up.

5. Reporting: both a mid-term and a final report were part of the grantee's deliveries. Grantees were encouraged to properly document their work and learnings as part of this process.

The mentoring proved essential to support the grantees and address the specific challenges that each team faced. This process made clear that encouraging civic organisations to pick up CSS methods could not be done without investing in some form of mentoring: even after planning their project roadmap at the beginning of the programme, the grantees faced challenges and uncertainties at each step of their project delivery, requiring constant support. Some of that support could be formalised into public guides and other written documents, while other issues can only be addressed through direct guidance from mentors with knowledge of CSS project management.

3. The gender element

The United Nations highlights Gender Equality not only as a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. The organisation's fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) states that gender equality means the end of all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere and the elimination of all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres.

Gender as a category of difference permeates many spheres of daily social life, including digital spaces, and gender inequalities have even more extensive impact in the pandemic world. The Open Call on Gender Equality main objective was to support the mitigation of gender bias in the European communities. Taking into account the context-specific variations of power relations, the main targets for this Open Call was divided between the following gender-based perspectives and localizations:

- The gender gap in affordable housing and urban planning SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities, Berlin
- The gender wage gap SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth, Eastern Europe
- Opportunities and risks of digitalisation SDG 5 – Gender Equality and & Opportunities and Risks of Digitalization, Pan-Europe

At the selection, civil society organizations working with feminist and other gender rights movements, were chosen according to the relevance of their proposal to advance gender equality and to contribute to shaping CSS.

Founderland: a Berlin based non-profit organisation focused on collecting data on women entrepreneurs using an intersectional lens. Their project aimed to mobilise CSS methods to research this demographic group while engaging their community throughout the process.

Single Step: based in Bulgaria, the organisation focuses on supporting the local LGBTQ+ community with research and advocacy. The CoAct project allowed them to conduct the first Bulgarian study on the experiences of trans and non-binary individuals in the job market, as well as the level of readiness of Bulgarian employers in addressing the issues specific to their community.

Women on Top: a Greek community-based organisation focused on gender equality in the workplace. The team aimed to gather data about the difficulties that working women in Greece and Cyprus faced as the pandemic pushed many employees to work remotely and shift to online collaboration platforms. CSS methods were used to provide them clear processes to ensure the quality of their actions and outputs.

All three grantees worked on different aspects of gender, and their difficulties varied. While Founderland and Women on Top had little difficulty collecting data on their co-researchers and communities, Single Step had to spend more time reinforcing their data protection measures and convincing their community that participating in the research would not put them at risk. Women on Top struggled with attracting co-researchers from countryside areas due to their reliance on online communication to reach out to their community. Founderland, working with women entrepreneurs, faced planning challenges for their workshops as their co-researchers did not have a lot of available time once their professional and personal obligations were taken into account.

Gender equality is a multifaceted topic, which was reflected in the variety of difficulties faced by each team. This reinforces our previous observations that a mentoring element should be included in future attempts to disseminate CSS methods in the civic sphere as standard guidance is not enough even within a specific theme such as gender equality projects.

Adopting CoAct's CSS methodology led to different outcomes across the three civic organisations involved in the project. But each of them found value in adopting CSS methods, whether to strengthen the scientific foundation of their advocacy, or to enrich the data they collect with stories from their co-researchers or to improve the quality of future projects thanks to the existing investment in a knowledge coalition. Those results show that, in the context of gender equality advocacy, CSS methods can play a positive role—although more research is needed to identify the effects specific to the field of gender equality. For an organisation aiming to enable positive social change, CSS appears to be a powerful resource to add to civic organisations' toolkit. Beyond specific organisations, the collaborative nature of CSS ensures that its effects can be felt across the broader communities those organisations operate in, which is a crucial asset for any project aiming to create impact.





<https://coactproject.eu/>



**Open Knowledge
Foundation**

<https://okfn.org/>

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