

POLICY BRIEF

ON OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES
OF CITIZEN SOCIAL SCIENCE

Deliverable 2.5

CITIZEN SOCIAL SCIENCE: A PROMISING APPROACH FOR MORE PARTICIPATION IN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND DECISION MAKING

Experiences from three years of Co-designing
Citizen Social Science for Collective Action (CoAct)

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Responsible Partner: ZSI

Authors: Mayer, Katja (ZSI), Schürz, Stefanie (ZSI)

Author credits:

Mayer, Katja (ZSI): writing original draft, conceptualization, investigation

Schürz, Stefanie (ZSI): writing original draft, language editing

Reviewers: Arza, Valeria (UNSAM), Bonhoure, Isabelle (UB),

Perelló, Josep (UB), Wintersteller, Teresa (UNIVIE)

Layout: Klauser, Veronika (nikagestaltet e.U.)

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List of Abbreviations

CSO:	Civil Society Organisation
CSS:	Citizen Social Science
KC:	Knowledge Coalition
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organisation
R&I:	Research and Innovation
STI:	Science, Technology and Innovation

This policy brief provides policymakers, civil society organisations and research performing institutions with recommendations on how to use Citizen Social Science to support and shape social change. It offers an introduction to the approach and lays out the benefits and challenges experienced. It is based on the outcomes of the international research project CoAct funded by the European Union that implements and reflects participatory research methods and their impacts in different settings and regions.

1. Introduction: Co-Designing Citizen Social Science for Collective Action (CoAct)

European Science and Innovation policy is increasingly pushing for more citizen participation to develop workable as well as accepted solutions to tackle societal challenges (European Commission 2018). Expectations towards more involvement of civil society in the agenda setting and decision making of policy bodies are high, yet the methods for effective participation are often missing. Citizen Social Science (CSS) provides methods and instruments to organise this involvement while resting on scientific ethics and quality control (Albert et al. 2022).

Citizen Social Science (CSS) is participatory research co-designed and directly driven by citizen groups sharing a social concern. CoAct – an international research project funded by the European Commission from 2020-2022 – has brought together and further developed methods to give citizen groups an equal ‘seat at the table’ through active participation in research, from the design to the interpretation of the results and their transformation into concrete actions. Citizens act as Co-Researchers and are recognised as local experts, while multi-stakeholder collaborations support this process through Knowledge Coalitions, to enable the provision of socially robust scientific knowledge to promote social change.

2. Evidence and Analysis

Employing participatory research approaches, CoAct addresses four societal challenges: Mental health, youth employment, environmental justice, and gender and equality.

COACT RESEARCH AND INNOVATION ACTIONS

Mental Health Care SPAIN

Co-designed digital conversations, based on the Co-Researchers' personal experiences, let us understand how social support networks in mental health work. We proposed actions to promote, expand and strengthen them.

In Spain, our community consisted of adults with an experience of mental disorders and their families. They formed a research team jointly with representatives from care institutions and scientists to co-define measures for strengthening social support networks of persons with mental disorders. The pilot sought to make visible the broad community of people and institutions involved in the field of mental health, and to place at the centre of the research the voices and knowledge of individuals with an experience of mental disorders and their families.

Youth Employment AUSTRIA

Participatory research with young people who are currently in educational and training measures let us identify topics that are important to enhance accessibility and improve measures. We developed recommendations to policy makers.

In Austria, young people mainly aged 15-18 who are not in regular employment, education, or training, critically examined social policy measures currently in place to enable young people to continue their education after compulsory school. The research team further included educators, social welfare agencies, and policymakers. The aim was to restructure these measures to better address the needs of the young people mandated to take part in them.

Environmental Justice ARGENTINA

We collectively mapped and identified the social and environmental problems that people living in the contaminated Matanza Riachuelo basin are exposed to and built a public access digital platform to document the findings.

In Argentina, social activists, residents, and multidisciplinary researchers co-created a community platform to counteract socio-environmental risks in a highly polluted residential area. The citizen community was composed of inhabitants and workers in the area who as socially disadvantaged citizen groups carry the main burden of pollution. The aim of the research process was to identify socio-environmental problems and social practices to tackle them using Citizen Social Science tools.

ACTIONS ON GENDER EQUALITY:

Single Step BULGARIA

Single Step's project "Better Visibility of Trans and Non-Binary People in Research Work and on the Labour Market" strived to find out about the wellbeing of LGBTQ people in Bulgaria and make visible their challenges in labour markets, to improve access to both the labour market and the health care system - especially surrounding the transition phase.

Founderland GERMANY

Founderland's project on "Gender Equality, Decent Work, and Economic Growth" focused on supporting women of colour (WoC) entrepreneurs in the larger Berlin area to impact funding streams and heighten diversity in the German start-up scene.

Women on Top GREECE

Women On Top's mission is the economic empowerment of women. In their project "Digital Effects: The Impact of the Accelerated Digitization of Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Professional Lives of Women in Greece & Cyprus," they co-created a study to gain insights into how women in Greece were impacted by remote work and the digitalisation of their professional lives during the pandemic.

TABLE 1

Overview of CoAct R&I Actions

The CoAct consortium consisted of higher education institutions, research performing organisations, civil society organisations and global networks of international cooperation, open science and data activism – all pivotal actors in the development of evidence-based decision-making in social policy fields. From 2020 to 2022, the project explored how participation of affected people leads to knowledge about, but also strategies and solutions for the respective social issues. In the project, Citizen Social Science was also further developed to stimulate change and create better understanding of the benefits and challenges for scientists, citizens, civil society organisations and policy makers. Research was co-designed and directly driven by groups sharing a social concern, becoming Co-Researchers in processes commonly reserved for academic research.

2.1. Project results

In CoAct, more than 1000 citizen scientists engaged in the research process and participated in a multitude of events, like co-design, co-analysis and evaluation workshops, hackathons, roundtables, public assemblies, and many more. More than 240 members of public bodies and CSOs effectively participated in the project’s Knowledge Coalitions. More than 160 Co-Researchers were trained in topics like research methods and data literacy. The project teams made their inclusive research tools and their documentation openly accessible on the Internet, and developed two new open source platforms for collaborative Citizen Social Science. They produced various scientific papers, conference presentations, webinars, as well as whitepapers for the respective communities. Furthermore, outcomes include 4 policy briefs on project results for evidence based policy making. These results show the rich potential of CSS to create policy relevant and actionable knowledge from co-creative, participatory research settings. The connection of social communities and policy makers based on CSS enables multiple forms of interaction between knowledge production and social action.



FIGURE 1

Citizen Social Science interactions. Adapted from Actis G., Arza V. and Cané S. (2022). D5.4 Policy Brief on Environmental Justice. P.11. Arrows represent policies – including regulations and resources – as well as political and knowledge interactions among community and policy.

The CoAct project demonstrates that Citizen Social Science can successfully contribute to social and scientific innovation. At the same time, for Citizen Social Science to realise this potential, certain challenges have to be overcome, because successful collaboration of diverse groups with distinct interests that aims to achieve social change or even more fundamental social transformation requires not only robust methodology, but also strong commitment, flexibility and trust building.

In turn, Citizen Social Science provides us with the opportunity

- » ■ to support the making of important decisions with inclusively produced knowledge,
- to give affected people tools for social empowerment, and
- to anchor social participation in the production of knowledge in line with a reform of research assessment.

Citizen Social Science has the means to make policy more attentive and responsive to people's concerns and expertise, therefore increasing citizen empowerment as well as policy uptake of social scientific knowledge for evidence-based decision making.

2.2. Benefits of Citizen Social Science

- » ■ Systematically addresses complex social problems with the involvement of local expertise and thus promotes sustainable social change.
- Builds on local knowledge and creates awareness for marginalised perspectives as well as volunteer activities and in turn supports community building.
- Increases both scientific literacy among participants and supports a greater understanding of social problems among decision makers.
- Counteracts increasing individualisation and social isolation and empowers individuals or groups by creating topical ownership and scope for participation in policy and decision making, enabling a better understanding of contexts, and allowing for positive changes.
- Broadens the scope and resources while improving the reliability of social scientific research.
- Triggers the development of new inclusive and transparent methodology and knowledge sharing instruments.
- Enriches evidence-informed actions and decision making by policy makers on the basis of inclusive knowledge production.

2.3. Challenges of Citizen Social Science

- » ■ Must manage not to overwhelm participants and scientists despite high demands for flexibility and quality.
- Should have a strong focus on moderation and facilitation, as the management of expectations and often differing interests is of central importance (also in regard to scientific quality and assessment of research interests).
- Must preserve the rights and safety of participants.
- Should act inclusively and also guarantee safe spaces of exchange and feedback for all participants.
- Can only realise sustainability if local knowledge is appropriately taken up, while the independence of communities is strengthened.

- Must decentralise risks while transferring responsibility and ownership of the research process to the participants, without passing burden from authorities to the public.
- Should not concentrate financial and decision-making power only with academic organisations but establish new forms of funding and accountability.
- Should translate results and outcomes to all relevant actors in an appropriate and accessible format, as well as encourage co-authorship in all possible (academic and non-academic) knowledge dissemination formats.

With all benefits and challenges aligned, the most important opportunity Citizen Social Science creates for policy, science and society is its potential to scale knowledge production from local to global and vice versa.

Citizen Social Science supports the bridging of impacts across social worlds and geo-political dimensions, and therefore is suited to accompany and inform local and international social change.

3. Policy Recommendations to Foster Citizen Social Science in Knowledge Production and Decision Making

The following recommendations are based on the challenges and benefits of implementing Citizen Social Science as experienced in the project CoAct. They address both the possibilities of making CSS useful for policy making and the necessary measures that policy makers should provide for this purpose.

DECISION MAKING

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

1. DEMOCRATISATION OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE: the institutions and administrations involved are committed to supporting participatory and deliberative approaches and Open Science in all its facets. The challenge here is precisely in the design of governance structures regarding openness for participation in decision-making and communication to enhance diversity and inclusion in the research process and accessibility to research results. To implement and support Citizen Social Science it is therefore recommended to

- Use CSS to make sense of complex societal challenges. Understand that more diverse types of knowledge have to be gathered towards a common goal, so that input for policy formulation can come from many different sources. CSS helps to generate this knowledge in high quality.
- Consider citizens a reliable source of information and strive for inclusive knowledge production to counter biased or partial information and to enrich perspectives on the same issues. Citizen Social Science has the right tools to address asymmetries.

- Articulate the research agenda across many different positions to help harvest diverse solutions to complex problems and facilitate their future implementation. Marginalised citizens' groups need to be specifically addressed and their participation incentivised.
- Foster inclusivity and equal representation of positions in the solution-oriented research process. Enable collaboration for decision making on the basis of social scientific evidence.
- Enable transparent project documentation, openly accessible and reusable tools and data, build on insights from participatory evaluation approaches, adhere to ethical and legal standards and principles of scientific integrity.

2. REFORM OF SCIENTIFIC INCENTIVE AND EVALUATION CULTURES

requires work on local policies in line with international efforts to reform evaluation of scientific performance based on open and participatory methods, as well as capacity building activities in teaching and social impact. Funding structures must also adequately integrate this new way of producing knowledge.

- Advocate for research assessment reform to improve recognition of all types of participatory science in the academic system and assess impact beyond scientific publications.

- Recognise CSS as a valid research approach and include it into common science and education funding programmes. Encourage funders to train reviewers to evaluate the specificities of participatory knowledge production and the importance of transdisciplinary approaches.

3. SUPPORTING INFRASTRUCTURES AND ESTABLISHING QUALITATIVE STANDARDS:

To secure CSS activities and their knowledge production in the long term and to make them accessible, certain infrastructures are necessary: funding tracks, staff, spaces, international conferences, publications, databases, and more. The development and evaluation of guiding principles and quality standards for participatory knowledge production are also a priority.

- Support participatory knowledge production and open spaces for knowledge exchange and transfer.

- Improve access to public sector information and policy relevant data by opening data sources for research purposes so that information sources can be combined with citizen generated data.

- Commit to innovation in data management and access: support open digital infrastructures, as well as collaborative data practices like knowledge platforms or hackathons to generate data for decision making.

4. EXPANDING TEACHING AND TRAINING ACTIVITIES:

CSS adds many skills to the list of requirements that are not taught in academic training, such as managing expectations, broad social communication, and iterative, feedback-driven planning and implementation.

- Highlight the educational potential of Citizen Social Science, integrating CSS into the development of curricula for secondary and higher education as well as for continuing professional training in transdisciplinary settings.

- Invest in training for co-creative project and community management, collective data generation and interpretation, as well as evaluation skills to generate high quality information for decision making.

- Create training materials for social scientists not yet familiar with Citizen Social Science, civil society organisations and policy makers.

5. UNDERSTANDING AND IMPROVING LEGAL AND ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS: CSS connects social domains and complex contexts based on research integrity practices. The challenge is to productively connect the scientific set of values with the relevant cultural, ethical, and legal norms.

- Create new forms of funding, including the possibility of disbursing research funds also to civil society organisations should they carry out research responsibilities. Funding programs for Citizen Social Science should also take appropriate account of community building and management efforts, as well as training needs of civil society organisations.
- Foster communities of practice and exchange of experiences with public participation and Citizen Social Science inside public administration and among civil society organisations.
- Use CSS to enable social learning across governance levels, from local to global scale by establishing knowledge transfer across public participation activities in different geopolitical contexts, with disparate regulatory frameworks, along different previous experiences and levels of readiness.

- Identify opportunities when policymaking processes are still flexible to intervene with CSS insights. Offer CSS based instruments to monitor compliance

6. PROVIDING CONTACT POINTS AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS for feedback, systematic monitoring and verification of compliance with political mandate: motivation for participation increases when it becomes clear that social change is possible through CSS. Therefore, it is necessary to design research in such a way that knowledge can make its way into policy. This is possible through already existing mandates for citizen participation, as well as the involvement of political actors already in the planning of the projects.

- Support citizen driven monitoring to support not only regulatory compliance but also the alignment with the genuine needs of citizens.
- Create formal mechanisms for citizen participation in decision-making and the co-creation of policies. Use CSS in synergy with existing regulations and mandates for public participation in policy, for example in domains where citizen juries, deliberative assemblies, participatory budgeting or public forums are already established or need to be initiated.

- Create community portals with accessible information materials for all target groups.
- Bridge activities from citizen science organisations with citizen communities and civil society organisations and invest in capacity building for community creation and management.
- Join the existing CSS community of practice to share successes, reflect challenges, and exchange knowledge on a global scale.
- Create visibility and implement easy to access contact points for CSS for citizens, CSOs or policy makers who wish to initiate or reflect social change or further reaching social transformation.
- Connect to other existing initiatives advocating deliberation and citizen participation and create new formats of collaboration as well as citizen driven policy support and monitoring for sustainable social transformation.

DECISION MAKING

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

**POLICY
RECOMMENDATIONS**

4. Sustainability and Legacy

CoAct was – by design – very much integrated into processes already underway, so especially for many of the CSOs, but also for the representatives of public administration and policy involved it was a welcome effort parallel and in addition to the work they had been accomplishing for years. This ensured that the results of CoAct can feed directly into this long-standing work at the interface of civil society and politics, supporting sustainable change. CoAct has produced a broad range of outputs and received a lot of positive feedback so far:

- 
- Peer reviewed, scientific publications, all available open access
 - Papers and reports co-authored with Co-Researchers
 - Education, training and knowledge transfer events, such as workshops and a summer school, packaged with open educational materials
 - Public events with CSOs and policy makers, outreach activities and (cross-) media appearances
 - Policy briefs and white papers
 - Open source tools and infrastructure, like a chatbot, or a citizen-driven data platform, both to collect data

CoAct's deliverables and other outputs listed above are publicly available on the project website and via the open access platform Zenodo or via the open source platform Github. These resources will be curated until 2027 and will be syndicated with other platforms such as EU-citizen.science to provide for long-term preservation. Tools and infrastructures, as well as policy briefs and whitepapers are targeted to public administration, social enterprises and civil society organisations. They are easily transferable and adaptable for the study of other social phenomena and use in other social domains.

The feedback from the Knowledge Coalitions, external collaborators, as well as the results of the project evaluation, show that CoAct has been successful in contributing to:

- 
- Creating or fostering self-sustained communities of practice.
 - Broadening and fostering networking and visibility activities for follow-up research and exploitation activities
 - Developing and maintaining new exchange opportunities for stakeholders
 - Initiating new policy measures based on insights from citizen participation
 - Embedding CSS into successor research projects and educational activities, e.g. for working with children in schools and public libraries on problems of environmental justice

CoAct team members have been in close conversation with other Citizen Science projects from the EU-SwafS programme of Horizon 2020 and managed to initiate a broader conversation among European-level Citizen Science research stakeholders. Representatives from the community expressed deep interest to continue further developing Citizen Social Science in future collaborations.

4.1. CoAct for Mental Health, Spain

On November 18th 2022, more than 80 people gathered at the Royal Academy of Medicine of Catalonia (Spain) in the first Mental Health Community Assembly of the CoAct for Mental Health project, in which the results of this 3-years collaborative process were presented. For the University of Barcelona's Principal Investigator, Josep Perelló, this initiative emphasizes a more participatory way of doing science.



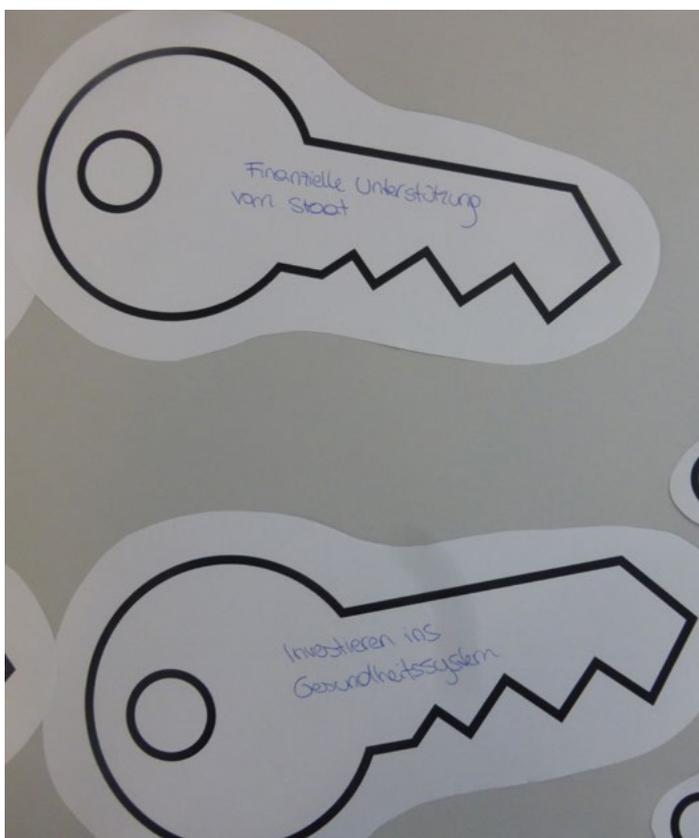
"In this journey that we are taking together in the framework of citizen science, we wanted to transform our scientific knowledge, that is to say, to do science that can be transformed into initiatives to improve the well-being of society."

FIGURE 2

Mental health community assembly, 18 November 2022: Co-Researcher, Imma Fornaguera, presenting a policy recommendation during the CoAct for Mental Health final assembly

4.2. CoAct for Youth Employment, Austria

The CoAct Youth Employment team achieved impact i.e. by engaging policy stakeholders in moderated discussions together with young people about the demands developed in the co-research regarding identified challenges and barriers when looking for education or employment.



The roundtables provided a rare opportunity for affected young people to work together with those in charge of problem-solving strategies. The network meetings not only created a cross-hierarchical space of exchange by bringing together responsible persons from all levels of the 'Education and Training up to 18' structure, but also encouraged the responsible parties to address the demands of the young people in terms of their potential for implementation. There was high motivation for improving target-group oriented communication and expanding offers related to mental health. We witnessed the willingness to expand participation activities and foster the right of young people to have a say in the design of measures." (Teresa Wintersteller, CoAct researcher, University of Vienna)

FIGURE 3

CoAct Austria, roundtable preparation, 2022

4.3. CoAct for Environmental Justice, Argentina

“In October 2022 the first National Programme to promote Citizen Science was launched by the Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) of Argentina. CoAct Environmental Justice was chosen to showcase the potential of citizen social science for transformation during this event, where researchers from three citizen science initiatives participated in live interviews. We have been advocating for this uptake of citizen social science in the milieu of (STI) policies since the very beginning of our action; so we are happy to have been invited to reveal the social aspects of citizen science in this launch event.”
(Guillermina Actis, CoAct researcher, National University of General San Martin)



FIGURE 4

Valeria Arza presenting CoAct / Launch of National Citizen Science Programme at the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, Argentina, 26 September 2022

5. Project Objectives and Methodology

The premise of the CoAct case studies was to work together with communities or groups that had already existed for a long time and were in part organised to address a complex of issues with a high degree of urgency in the everyday lives of those affected. In this cooperation with local expertise, we brought together different interests while productively maintaining differences and multiple perspectives and evaluated the scientific and societal impact in close coordination with local Co-Researchers and Knowledge Coalitions.

The CoAct Knowledge Coalitions were carefully created at the beginning of the project to assemble a balanced multitude of positions, to initiate cooperation and networking, and to identify Co-Researchers. The diversity of social actors – young people, patients, caregivers, residents, librarians, trainers, policy makers, and many more – guaranteed the production of socially robust knowledge.

CITIZEN SOCIAL SCIENCE ACTORS

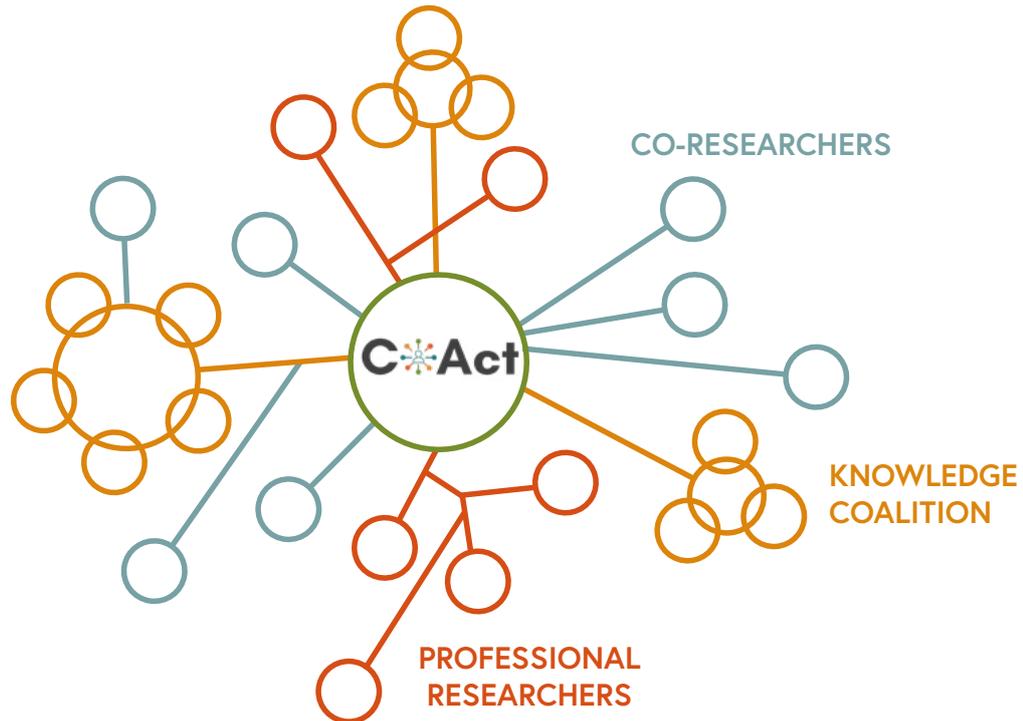


FIGURE 5

Citizen Social Science actors in CoAct

Co-Researchers are persons who participate in the research activities, but do not work professionally in the respective scientific field. Participation was designed to allow for Co-Researchers to involve themselves according to their preferences with regards to formats, continuity, intensity, and thematic focus.

The CoAct research design was developed based on strong values that governed all activities and defined a set of ethical principles for Citizen Social Science. In addition, all research design and questions were developed closely with organisations already long active in the respective field. This means that a solid knowledge base could be drawn upon, which helped to critically reflect blind spots and normative foundations.

Each research team provided a large transdisciplinary spectrum of methods and then jointly selected, applied, and adapted the appropriate methods during the collaborative research design, data collection, and analysis. This included traditional scientific methods such as surveys, focus groups or interviews, but also collaborative mapping processes, mobile phone-based crowd-sourced photo documentation and chatbots, as well as playful experimentation with research processes in the form of mobile app-based scavenger hunts. Whenever possible, participants were also involved in data interpretation and co-evaluation of the research process and results. This allowed for more effective and richer contextualisation of the knowledge produced, enhanced the transparency of power dynamics and the diversity of knowledge. Because participant ownership was a core tenet of the process, this also provided them with instruments for sustainable social change.

The most effective approach to plan and implement interfaces between Citizen Social Science and Policy Making was in the Knowledge Coalition meetings. Here, the people, who knew how agenda setting works and what needs, and priorities could best be served, were represented. In addition, other formats like roundtables, policy workshops, or public assemblies were applied or developed that further promoted constructive dialogue with policymakers.

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6. CoAct Project Identity

Project Name	Co-designing Citizen Social Science for Collective Action
Coordinator	Universitat de Barcelona, Spain
Consortium	Zentrum für Soziale Innovation GmbH, Austria Universität Wien, Austria Fachhochschule Potsdam, Germany Universidad Nacional de General San Martín, Argentina Open Knowledge Foundation LBG, United Kingdom Global Innovation Gathering EV, Germany Federació Salut Mental Catalunya, Spain Fundación Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, Argentina
Funding Scheme	Horizon 2020: SwafS-15-2018-2019: Exploring and supporting citizen science
Duration	01/2020-12/2022
Grant agreement	873048
Budget	EU contribution: 2 047 226,25 €
For more information	Website: https://coactproject.eu/ Twitter: @CoActeu

