# Participation as Imposition: Problem assessments and recommendations for enabling participatory research

## 1 Introduction

Participation and engagement, central to democratic processes, can play key roles in overcoming multiple societal crises. Participatory research promotes social participation and inclusion, offers spaces for dialogue with the different perspectives represented in a society, and gives different stakeholder groups a voice and the potential to shape the future. Participatory research thus brings scientific findings and real-life experiences into dialogue and broadens the scope of thinking and action for all those involved.

Participatory research is slowly becoming more established in German-speaking countries: participation projects are now being promoted in many communities in the fields of social sciences, the humanities, the natural sciences, and technology. In research funding, demands for participatory research are seen as an empirically open approach and as legitimisation for socially acceptable technological change.

As a result, participatory research is often seen as a preventive response to the potential risks and uncertainties of multiple socio-political crises. At the same time, it is embedded within the logics and dynamics of third-party funded research. Like other academics, researchers realise participatory projects within the academic system's existing structures. Along with the success and popularity of participatory research, however, there are increasing structural and science policy challenges, some of which embody assumptions that are in clear opposition to the aims of participatory research.

This position paper is about more than problematising the working conditions of science or simply making a plea for better research conditions. It is about informing funding bodies and research organisations about the special requirements of participatory research, highlighting the need for action and bundling recommendations.

## 2. Characteristics of participatory research

1) Participatory research is interdisciplinary, diverse, and open. Consideration of a diversity of perspectives, needs, and interests in the participatory research process is its fundamental principle and contributes to co-creative knowledge production.

2) The aim of participatory research is to include a range of different perspectives. The inclusion of marginalised groups is essential to the strengthening of social justice and

democratic processes. Inclusive participation requires a precise and robust design to ensure its effectiveness in practice.

3) The specific ideas of participatory research and the concepts and values on which it is based, must be transparent for all those involved in the participation process. There must be room for continuous reflection on its basic assumptions.

4) The effectiveness of participatory research cannot always be quantified. The quality criteria for impact measurement must be developed in a context-sensitive manner.

5) Participatory research is particularly dependent on relationships, communication, and care work. Associated efforts must be made visible and taken into account in the resources available.

6) Ambiguities, conflicts, and obstacles should not lead to the abandonment of participatory research. Making conflicts visible is also a valuable result of the participatory research process.

7) There is a need to sensitise ethics committees in particular to the particularities of participatory research, such as the flexibility that is required in the course of the research process. When developing research proposals, an open set of methods appropriate to the subject matter must be taken into account in order to do justice to the flexibility of participation and to allow room for manoeuvre.

# 3. Problem assessments

## Design of funding policies

The majority of funding for participatory research projects is determined by the interests of funding bodies. As a result, the aim of participatory research to take the concerns of all participants sufficiently into account, can often not be realised. This is reflected in a number of factors. For example, research is usually funded on a project basis: all key objectives, tasks, steps and results are defined in an application before the project begins. This approach runs counter to the flexibility and openness of the process and results that are necessary in participatory research. Project funding focusses on certain types of results (e.g. technical product, recommendation for action); ‘productive failures’ or detours are not envisaged. In addition, the time needed for critical reflection on the participatory approach is often lacking. Further, an understanding and appreciation of the required (additional) resources (e.g. money, time, skills) for participatory work is often lacking in research tenders, and thus participatory research often remains underfunded. For example, participatory research has high ethical and legal requirements with regard to the participants and to data management. The necessary institutional support is not often missing, and results in a considerable amount of additional work for the researchers. As a result, participatory research is often formulated as an approach in research proposals but cannot be realised with the limited funding available.

## Lack of diversity in the participation structure

The understanding of how participatory research is done is heterogeneous, as can be seen, among other things, in the selection criteria and methods used to recruit participants. Representativeness is often sought, but often runs counter to the specific problem or concern of the research. Aiming for representativeness has a direct impact on agenda-setting and negotiation processes within participatory research, as important perspectives and experiences can be marginalised. Furthermore, many participatory approaches focus on individuals and consider their contributions in isolation, rather than prioritising existing communities and their collective experiential knowledge and epistemological interests. This lack of community spaces reinforces existing power structures and inequality.

## Relationship work, communication work, and care work in participatory research

Participatory research always requires efforts to build and maintain relationships, as well as communication and care work. The involvement of diverse stakeholder groups requires special communicative, social, and interpersonal skills, e.g. for establishing contacts, moderation, and building trust. In participatory research, this work is mainly carried out by early-career researchers but remains partly invisible, unpaid, and poorly recognised. At the same time, it is crucial if participatory research is to be successfully realised. It is also important to consider that participatory research often takes place in multidisciplinary teams. The resulting interdisciplinary collaboration entails mediation, understanding, and translation work, for example due to the different structures, scientific practices, incentive systems, and unequal distribution of power in the various disciplines and their sub-disciplinary fields. Knowledge transfer and impact generation require work, for example when adequate communication formats for different stakeholder groups, training, or other activities need to be developed to ensure the sustainability of the project results. Currently such work cannot be sufficiently considered in the time, resource, and financial planning of research projects.

## Consensus as a problem

Funders expect to find consensus in a participatory research project, and this is central to the success of such projects. However, this focus on consensus neglects the fact that dissent, conflict, and a plurality of experiences and opinions can create valuable insights. Tensions and irritations arise from the different perspectives, needs, and interests of those involved - and this is precisely where their potential lies. If attempts are made in participatory research to avoid or conceal tensions instead of making them visible and using them, they can hinder co-creative knowledge production and the scientific progress of a project. A productive approach to dissent presupposes that conflicts are seen not as obstacles but as opportunities for critical reflection, change, and improvement.

### Inadequate evaluation of the academic quality and social impact of participatory research

Participatory research is currently evaluated according to research logics that do not capture its unique challenges and potentials. For example, there are the requirements of determining and anticipating research results in the project application phase and of quantifying their impact. Both demands run counter to the openness and flexibility of participatory research. Specific evaluation criteria are required for determining the impact of participatory research. Overarching criteria for scientific evaluation that take into account the context, research object, and research objective of participatory research are still lacking or are poorly defined. Evaluation criteria need to distinguish between the structures and processes of scientific quality from those directed towards the sustainable social impact of the results of participatory research. Such impact criteria cannot be generalised but must be defined according to the problem and situation.

## Experiences from practice

***Case vignette 1***

*A project on the digitalisation of health and ageing identifies 'co-creation', i.e. participatory research, as a central objective. Despite having a budget of EUR 19 million and 50 partner organisations, the resources for implementing the co-creation workshops are nonetheless limited to a team of three people and merely EUR 450,000. Because of this comparatively low level of funding for participatory research, this central part of the project could not be properly organised. For example, 16 co-creation workshops with older people and people from the fields of health, politics, and technology were to be organised together with the European pilot regions. However, funding was lacking for the inclusion of hard-to-reach people, the training of moderation skills in the pilot regions, and the translation of the results.*

***Case vignette 2***

*A research project investigated data-based work in public administration, resulting in an applicable process for evaluating value-sensitive design, translated into six languages and implemented in various European administrations. The success of the dissemination and the use of this guideline for responsible data practices are measurable—unlike the intended impact on the data practices of administrations. The project, therefore, was at odds with the widespread development of abstract value frameworks. Because the need for this practical solution was not known during the application phase, it was a genuine result of the participatory research process.*

***Case vignette 3***

*In a participatory project to develop robotic solutions for nursing care, every member of the nursing staff involved dropped out. Justifying their withdrawal, they stated that their expertise and experience—regarded as conflicting with the ideas behind the technology's development—had been ignored in the design process. The designed robot and the tasks delegated to it were at odds with the needs and work realities of the carers and the people in need of care. The developers of the technology interpreted the withdrawal as a failure of participation. Yet only through this escalation did it become clear that the robot would have to be designed differently if it were to support care work in line with requirements.*

***Case vignette 4***

*In a research project, a functional prototype of a localisation system for people with dementia was tested over several months in a care home. In a process that involved the care staff, the handling of the sensor and a tablet computer was practised and a procedure for use in everyday care was developed. From time to time, technical problems arose that the carers could not solve on their own. For these occasions they were given a telephone number that allowed them to contact the research team at any time. A doctoral student from the team is the 'carer' who takes calls on weekends and in the evenings.*

# 4. Recommendations

1) **It is unrealistic and obstructive to demand that participation take place either completely and consistently or not at all.** Instead, participation should be promoted if it makes sense and is feasible, for example in the identification of relevant questions, the interpretation of data, the application of results, or the evaluation of the process and its impact. Funding formats and projects must precisely demand or specify which participation formats are to be used with which objectives in which project phases. However, flexibility and adaptation to the respective project phases are crucial for the effective organisation of participation suited to the specific context.

*Possible approach:* The call for proposals from a funding organisation includes a module that helps the projects proposed for funding to identify where in the research process participatory work could be carried out before the project starts. In a next step, skills are taught and financial resources provided within the funding line so that the projects can implement these participatory parts in a methodologically appropriate and responsible manner.

2) **We need greater flexibility and openness in funding programmes, as targets are often too narrowly defined.** For example, deliverables are expected in the form of functional prototypes or policy recommendations. Funding bodies and research institutions should have greater trust in the process, in scientific rigour, and in the accountability and coherence of

participatory research. Protected experimental spaces (e.g. workshop formats) are also needed: here actors from science, civil society, and practice can develop new funding formats and research questions in a collaborative and participatory manner.

3) Funding decisions must be sensitive to the quality of structures and processes of participatory research to ensure proper assessment from funders and reviewers. **Criteria for the quality of participatory research structures and processes must be defined** with the involvement of the research community; they must be communicated transparently and taken into account in award decisions.

*Possible approach:* A funding body has an explicit mission statement on the role of participation in its funding programmes: Each call for proposals formulates the form, depth, and breadth of participatory measures envisaged or desired in the funding line. Adequate funding for these tasks is included in the call for proposals. The funding provider has a list of criteria supported by the scientific communities for assessing adequacy and quality, which are operationalised so that reviewers can apply them to their work. During the discussion of the reviews, these criteria are recalled by employees of the funding body and their operationalisation in the reviews is checked. For positive and negative funding decisions alike, the funding body can provide the applicant with detailed feedback on the decision.

4) Research funding organisations should demand in their calls for proposals, and project managers should make it explicit in their applications, that the **internal structure of participatory research projects requires the same moderation and negotiation efforts** as the external process of the project does, for example when interacting with external partners and research participants. This is particularly important when different scientific disciplines come together. This process involves various forms of relationship, communication, and care work.

*Possible approach*: In a call for proposals for participatory research, applicants are not only required to describe their methodology but are also asked to describe the organisation of the internal cooperation between the research partners. This includes all measures that enable the team to empathise with the working methods and limitations of these partners and to discuss their implications for the collaboration and the project context. It is particularly important to describe the methodical moderation and negotiation of directional decisions in the project, for which funding can also be explicitly applied for. These measures and activities must be reflected in the respective reporting formats.

5) **Legal and bureaucratic barriers in the allocation of funds** should not prevent different stakeholders from being appropriately integrated into the project structure. Such integration enables the distribution of responsibilities and resources and prevents the one-sided distribution of decision-making power. Funding objectives must not be undermined by the funding recipients' administrative decisions. For this reason, legal and bureaucratic processes for the allocation of funding must be adapted so that they fulfil the specific requirements of participatory research.

*Possible approach*: In a transdisciplinary research project, the collaborative project can spend a substantial part of the funding amount on a task or cost-basis or through subcontracts for external partners. In this way, the project can enable a non-profit organisation to lease a property that has become a contact point for citizens beyond the time when the project ends or to employ staff beyond the formal end of the project in order to realise the jointly achieved goals.

6) Participatory research undermines the idea that knowledge is generated solely in research institutions and then transferred to society. **Heterogeneous forms of knowledge and ways of knowing** play an important role in participatory research in particular. The processes and results of joint knowledge generation, especially mutually enriching cooperation, should be recognised and valued—through not only adequate funding but the creation of communication mechanisms and the long-term visualisation and documentation of such work's products.

*Possible approach*: In a participatory research project, practical knowledge and situated knowledges for local communities are generated alongside traditional academic research. While the academic research is disseminated through the usual publication channels, other forms of knowledge exchange, such as neighbourhood cafés, are organised, allowing tacit knowledge to be passed on and further developed. This plurality of knowledge generation and dissemination is emphasised in the project report and in the funding body's communications; it is recognised as a criterion of success.

7) **Dissent and conflicts** in participatory research must be understood and communicated as a gain in knowledge. They must be given space in the process. Successful participation is not characterised by complete consensus among all participants.

*Possible approach*: In a citizens' assembly, work is carried out with table groups that discuss individual theses and proposed resolutions and prepare them for the plenary session. Very controversial points of view are exchanged on the topic of 'migration' and no consensus is reached. The moderator grasps the situation, and no draft resolution is prepared. At the same time, dissent is neither concealed nor ignored but is brought to the plenary session. After a break, the moderation team makes an intervention in which the foundations of the cooperation and the agreed-upon quality of the desired resolutions (conformity with the Basic Law, humanistic values) are discussed. The plenary is given the option of recording the dissent on this point or continuing to work on the topic in a joint debate.

8) The assumption that any form of participation automatically strengthens democratic values must be critically scrutinised—must be abandoned, in fact. Participatory processes can be instrumentalised for **anti-democratic or discriminatory purposes**. Instead, legitimate and manipulative approaches must be clearly differentiated, and there should be transparent criteria for assessing the democratic quality of participation. Researchers must negotiate their

values and the basic rules of participatory collaboration in advance and communicate them transparently to all participants.

*Possible approach*: The participants in a research project were offered opportunities from political education work to clarify the prerequisites for their own work and their ability to act within the project's framework and its objectives. The researchers and participants continuously reflect on these values and basic rules in the various phases of the participation process and implement or enforce them. The researchers' central decision-making processes are publicised for the participants so that they can understand whether/how/why their contributions were taken into account.

9) **To ensure the integrity of participatory processes, new structures are needed in which the good practices of participatory research can be safeguarded, reflected upon, and developed.** This should be initiated, for example, through the establishment of method-critical discourses. It is also necessary to have discussion on 'rules of engagement' regarding the scope for action and the role of scientists with regard to collaborations with external organisations. Such processes can prevent scientific integrity from being undermined and the social impact of participatory research from being restricted. In addition, research organisations must develop awareness and institute measures to respond effectively to polarising social debates regarding scientific work and results, and they should also adequately support, and if necessary protect, their employees. For the further development of evaluations, approaches from various disciplines that conduct participatory research need to be processed and brought together to disseminate the findings of research and practice.

10) Dealing with the diversity of perspectives and experiences productively, i.e. in a way that generates knowledge, requires the proper moderation of participatory research. **Participatory process moderation is one competence (among others) that must be recognised, promoted, and strengthened**. To endure dissent and make it fruitful, additional development spaces and further training structures are needed, as well as the possibility of resorting, if necessary, to external moderation.

11) **Research initiatives are needed that begin not with strongly pre-structured problem definitions but rather with open-ended collaboration between stakeholder groups and representatives of scientific fields.** This requires formats that involve various social sectors and groups in proactive problem identification oriented towards uncovering needs relevant to everyday life and developing research questions.

*Possible approach:* A committee of citizens, public administration employees, and urban researchers collectively identify relevant problems, challenges, and priorities for urban transformation, e.g. climate change, migration, demographic change, etc.

12) **Participatory research, in all its diversity, must be organised and promoted on a sustainable long-term basis**. This requires other time horizons beyond the classic limited project cycle in which participatory cooperation is anchored—from the co-formulation of

relevant questions to the joint evaluation of results. Community building, network formation, and maintenance, as well as cooperation, can be organised on a long-term basis through the adoption of other time structures.

*Possible approach*: Research organisations establish reliable contacts with stakeholder groups from their geographical or thematic environment. The necessary relationship and communication work is paid for and carried out by employees who are competent and have sufficient working hours. People are not first approached as participants, e.g. through appeals, but are already part of a communication context. This allows them to get more involved and to develop ideas for participatory research initiatives together with the employees of the research organisations outside the project and its governing logic.

13) **Participatory research needs its special efforts and requirements to be recognised.** These include translation, care, and infrastructure work, which should be established as independent, funded fields of activity that are taken seriously. Stable recognition structures are needed for—sometimes invisible—labour, especially for care work in participatory projects. There must be both the provision and funding of time resources and the recognition of these requirements in the evaluation of academic career paths.

*Possible approach*: As in the example of the Dutch program of Recognition & Rewards, transfer achievements, team management, outreach, care work, etc. should be taken into account in the evaluation and promotion process. University research support will be expanded to include competences and contact persons in the areas of project management, legal advice (e.g. for the processing of contracts with extra-university partners) and the development of new forms of funding beyond traditional funding formats.

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