

ENGAGING CITIZENS IN INNOVATION POLICY: WHY, WHEN AND HOW?

What is citizen engagement?

Citizen engagement is the process by which public authorities engage citizens in a dialogue to shape science, technology and innovation (STI) policies. Citizens (or the “public”) engage in their personal capacity rather than in their professional capacity as researchers or business representatives.

This engagement complements traditional representative democracy mechanisms, where elected officials act as representatives of citizens in decision-making processes.

Citizen engagement adds to and builds on three complementary citizen involvement activities:

- Communication activities – such as science festivals, exhibits in public spaces, science documentaries – aimed at informing citizens about STI;
- Consultation activities – such as surveys and online public consultations – aimed at collecting citizen inputs on specific issues or policy proposals; and
- Citizen science activities – such as open challenges, hackathons or living labs – aimed at engaging citizens as contributors, collaborators and co-creators in research and innovation activities.

Citizen engagement in innovation policy can take multiple forms as exemplified by these concrete examples that focus on green transition topics:

- The Climate Assembly UK, organised in 2020, engaged 108 citizens selected in a civil lottery to meet with experts and jointly develop policy recommendations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the United Kingdom.
- The BioKompass project (2017-20) in Germany involved more than 100 citizens to discuss the opportunities and challenges associated with the future bioeconomy and produce a shared vision for 2040.
- The Ideas for Change programme in Colombia relies on citizens’ participation to identify social and environmental challenges in vulnerable communities requiring STI solutions.
- The project “Attitudes to new transport technologies” (2021-2022) launched by the Norwegian Board of Technology involved citizens in discussing future scenarios of transportation technologies, such as self-driving cars and shared mobility.

Key roles of other actors for societal engagement

Innovation policymaking relies on complementary inputs from experts and industry stakeholders to advance the innovation policy agenda. They also play key roles in citizen

engagement processes (e.g. serving as facilitators, experts, etc.), provided that their involvement does not bias those process.

Since citizen engagement is about connecting with the public, it is closely linked to the press and social media. They provide information, act as platforms for public debates, hold policymakers accountable and have the potential to scale societal engagement processes.

However, the media also poses challenges for citizen engagement. In particular, social media can create echo chambers where users are exposed only to those sharing their beliefs, which can reinforce polarization in policy debates.

What are the goals of engaging citizens in innovation policy?

Well-designed citizen engagement processes in innovation policy can bring the following benefits:

1. Increase in the quality of innovation policies;
2. Emphasise on the societal focus and inclusivity of innovation policy;
3. Increase in citizen awareness of and support for innovation and innovation policy aimed at advancing societal goals; and
4. Enhancement of trust in the government and the public administration.

Societal engagement is even more important in today's context of the green and digital transition – defined as the shift towards a sustainable, environmentally-friendly and resource-efficient economy and society that leverages digital technologies to achieve shared socio-economic objectives. Given the far-reaching impacts of these transformations on society, citizens' contributions in designing and implementing innovation policies are essential.

The sub-optimal uptake of STI solutions like warning apps and vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic have illustrated the impacts of limited public engagement and need for trust in STI and government for the deployment of innovation outcomes.

Cases of most value for participatory processes include the following:

- Decisions on long-term policy directions involving choices among a diversity of potential pathways and requiring societal endorsement.
- Policies that rely on local community knowledge and inputs for their successful design and/or implementation.
- Policy topics citizens deeply care about, that possibly create divides between “winners” and “losers” and where trust in public institutions may be at risk.

The feasibility of achieving effective citizen engagement and attaining the intended results needs to be carefully considered. This implies prioritising certain topics and purposes.

When to engage citizens in policymaking?

Citizens can contribute important inputs across all stages of innovation policymaking provided engagement processes are conducted in time for inputs to shape upcoming policy decisions. These include:

- Agenda and strategy setting to define the short- and long-term strategic priorities for STI policy and funding.

- Programme definition to identify priorities for research and innovation programmes or allocate funding across priority areas.
- Technology assessment to identify possible societal, economic and ethical risks of the application of emerging technologies.
- Strategic foresight to develop a shared vision for the future and determine the actions, steps and resources needed to reach it.
- Implementation to support the diffusion of innovations aimed at advancing socioeconomic goals.

Why is engagement challenging?

Engaging citizens in STI policy is challenging as it is often seen as a domain for experts and disconnected from people's everyday lives and concerns, unlike fields such as health or education. Moreover, an increase in consultation requests has led to "consultation fatigue", discouraging citizen engagement in STI policy processes.

How to best design engagement processes?

- Develop and implement a plan to reach out to target groups, including special means to engage underrepresented groups.
- Facilitate inclusive discussions while avoiding polarisation of debates.
- Select the optimal mix of engagement methods and tools and tailor them to best respond to the specific purpose of the engagement process.
- Ensure citizens' expectations are met and communicate the results of the process to the public.
- Have a process in place to integrate inputs into policy processes.

What are important policy implications?

- More and better citizen engagement in innovation policy that builds on robust evidence is needed.
- Quality is more important than quantity: focus on fewer, more impactful processes.
- Organising effective citizen engagement processes requires acquiring expertise or collaborating with supporting institutions.
- Direct involvement of public sector officials in citizen engagement processes should be promoted.
- Citizen engagement needs to be anchored in a wider communication strategy regarding innovation policy.
- The design of citizen engagement processes should be tailored to the specific purpose, target group and context of the exercise.

Find out more:

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