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REPORT

INSPIRING ERA EXCHANGE in-person event on ERA ACTION 14

Closer to citizens: European Research Area Action 14 - Impact assessment

Evaluation of the Public Engagement and a tour into good practices of how to measure and enhance impact

Berlin, 3rd December 2024

Introduction: INSPIRING ERA consortium in collaboration with the European Commission and other stakeholders held an event on ERA Action 14 “Bring science closer to citizens”. The topic was the impact assessment of different public engagement (PE) policy measures - R&I related in the first place - and possible ways of improvement. The INSPIRING ERA Exchange (IEE) took place on December 3, 2024, at the DLR Projektträger headquarters in Berlin.

Objectives of the event: The main objective was to address the problematics of how to assess if different policy measures, instruments and tools are efficient and to what extent. By bringing different stakeholders, both during the panel session and the breakout session the IEE was targeted at confronting diverse perspectives and approach the topic from different angles, which was most noticeable in the selection of speakers.

Attendees: The event brought together nearly 30 attendees, mainly researchers (including early-career res.), research and policy advisors, research and project managers, public administration officials, cultural institutions representatives, non-governmental organisations and think tanks from international community. Being held in the international city of Berlin, the event attracted primarily local inhabitants, but that also included a portion of local foreigners, moreover some attendants arrived from external countries like Sweden, Malta or Poland.

Methodology: An overview of the INSPIRING ERA project, including the concept of INSPIRING ERA EXCHANGE was provided by Maciej Woszczyk and Maciej Zdanowicz from the National Centre for Research and Development (NCBR), who also moderated the event. During the plenary session presentation were delivered by the EC representative, public engagement experts and the national government official, thus the deliberately diverse group. The breakout session carried out in 3 groups was preceded by the Mentimeter poll helping to pick the guiding questions and followed by a wrap-up block.

Content: The keynote speech on public engagement, delivered by the EC representative was an overview of the R&I public engagement policy at the European level (e.g. EUCYS, EU TalentOn), aiming at answering questions why and how should we bring science closer to citizens and showcasing the previous achievements - with the conclusion of necessity of building societal capacity to response to actual needs and challenges. Mecenero also highlighted the need to strengthen the links between science and society and build broad-reaching initiatives like "Science Comes to Town." She also pointed out the need to measure impact and engage younger generations.

Several lessons learnt from the so far completed projects are: to develop concept and brand, to experiment with format making them challenging and interactive, to reach out to external events and communities - with the purpose of increasing scientific literacy to raise trust in science.

Mhairi Stewart from Berlin School of Public Engagement/Museum für Naturkunde, having given a brief presentation of different, but classical toolboxes and hints on the impact evaluation, gave a very unique perspective on the mutual exchange and benefit - which tend to be often disregarded. Posing the question how does the undertaken actions affect its authors (the identified missing part of the reciprocal dependency) Stewart emphasized persistent ignoring a critical stakeholders, i.e. academia, the bottom line being the necessity of measuring the impact on academia if we want to fully understand the public engagement/citizen science impact and enhance the quality of PE and open innovation. She noted the educational benefits

of public engagement activities, such as career development, trust, and reputation. That would also help overcome researchers' ignorance of their own evaluations value and utility.

Next speaker, Julia Panzer from Impact Unit of Wissenschaft in Dialog delineated an overview of logical and methodological structure of evaluation in the public engagement or science communication actions, underlining the fact it stems from the research's increase of quantity and professionalisation combined with its increased relevance and demand for PE and scicomm. Panzer stressed there is no one-size-fits-all evaluation and further elaborated on the guiding motives of the evaluation, design, information holder, survey methods, preferred outcome and manners they could be presented - as these all constitute a framework of the evaluation process. She emphasized the need for clearly defined goals, integrating evaluation from the beginning of projects, and using tools such as online platforms and information cards to facilitate the assessment process.

Last speaker, Cordula Kleidt from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, highlighted the societal science's anchorage and showcased several initiatives particularly worthwhile. She emphasized the importance of integrating society with scientific processes and the significance of public engagement and participatory approaches in the modern world, with its irreducible geopolitical instability.

In the mentimeter poll main challenges of the impact measurement were identified:

1. Defining and measuring impact
2. Diverse stakeholder expectation
3. Attributing impact
4. Resource and methodological constraints

Summary of Breakout Groups

Apart from the poll result several guiding questions were formulated to spur and structure the exchange:

- Do the menti challenges match your experience?
- Do you see other challenges on ERA action 14: bringing science closer to citizens in terms of the impact assessment?
- What actions could be taken to face up and overcome the identified challenges?

Summary of the group 1:

Group 1 focused on indicators of good practices and key challenges related to evaluating and implementing social engagement activities. The discussion included:

Indicators of Good Practices:

- Effectiveness: Achieving set goals using project management tools.
- Impact Evaluation involves collecting comparative data (two points in time) and analysing the scope and quality of activities.
- Diversity and Inclusion: The necessity of demographic and qualitative analysis.
- Transparency and Ethics: Using tools such as sentiment analysis and managing relationships with participants.
- Long-term Planning: Creating structures that ensure the sustainability and legacy of activities.

Challenges:

- Low awareness of evaluation tools and methods and the need for their practical use.
- Recruitment of researchers: Difficulties in engaging scientists who do not see added value for their careers.
- Attribution of impact: The problem of assigning specific results to one activity rather than other parallel actions.
- Engagement of respondents: The challenge of obtaining reliable responses and avoiding research errors.

Solutions:

- Creating a professional community focused on social engagement, with international support for professional development and funding.
- Introducing accountability mechanisms for researchers and institutions using public funds.
- Promoting both top-down and grassroots actions and creating visible examples of good practices.
- Developing communication training targeted at internal stakeholders.
- Breaking down reputational barriers by proving that social engagement is integral to science.

In summary, the key message was to create a sustainable system supporting social engagement, emphasising evaluation tools, visibility of good practices, and changing the perception of the value of public engagement as an integral part of scientific work.

Summary of the group 2:

Group 2 focused on challenges related to the impact assessment of social engagement activities and the need for common definitions and standards. The main points include:

Lack of Common Understanding of Impact:

- Different stakeholder groups, including scientists, citizens and institutions, define "impact" differently (social, scientific).
- For scientists, scientific impact often boils down to publications and citations, making it difficult to recognise the value of public engagement.

Complexity of Goals and Measuring Impact:

- Uncertainty about who sets impact goals and what effects should be considered significant.
- The problem of lack of evidence and standard evaluation reports makes it difficult to convince scientists to engage in science communication.

Challenges with Trust in Science:

- Building public trust in science as an impact goal is complicated because the problem is multidimensional and challenging to capture.

- Researchers are concerned about the negative impact of communication activities on their reputation and scientific career.

Solutions:

- Common standards and definitions: We need to create a common language and realistic expectations for social engagement.
- Development of education and training: Beyond theoretical workshops, there is a need for practical learning, e.g., through scientists' participation in ongoing projects involving society.
- Openness and listening to different voices: It is essential to consider various forms of social knowledge and experiences of those involved in science communication.

The group 2 emphasised the need for systematic support, creating common standards, and increasing practical learning and collaboration opportunities to measure and implement social engagement activities more effectively.

Summary of the group 3:

Group 3 focused on challenges related to resources and logistical constraints in science communication and ways to close this gap. Several key points were highlighted:

Insufficient Science Communication:

- In many projects funded at the national or European level, science communication is not fully integrated with research activities.
- The short duration of projects (24-36 months) prevents proper impact evaluation, which often reveals itself after the project ends.

Need for Top-down and Bottom-up Actions:

- Support must come from both European and national institutions, which can introduce science communication criteria in grants, and from social and organisational levels so that scientists and institutions see the value of these activities.
- An example is the role of the EU in including communication plans in grant evaluation criteria.

Lack of Resources for Young Scientists:

- Early-career researchers often want to engage in science communication but lack support from universities and organisations.
- Diverse competencies, combining research management, science communication, and technical skills, are needed in project teams.

The distinction between Outcome, Result, and Impact:

- There is a need for precise differentiation of these concepts and long-term impact assessment of public engagement activities.

Evidence and Measurability of Impact:

- Solid evidence of its effectiveness is needed to convince national and European institutions to invest in science communication.
- An evidence-based evaluation approach was suggested to show the impact of communication on project success.

Group 3 emphasised that closing the gap in science communication requires long-term planning, actions at both political and organisational levels, and building support systems for scientists. Precise measurement and documentation of impact will be crucial to prove the value of public engagement activities.

To sum it up, participants identified key challenges and proposed solutions. **Key Challenges:**

- Definition and measurement of impact: The multidimensionality of impact (social, scientific, economic) and the lack of standard assessment methods or a common language and values.
- Stakeholder expectations: Different groups define success in different ways.
- Attribution of impact: Difficulties in attributing effects to specific activities, engaging people outside already interested groups or traditional target groups, which are usually the focus of communication activities.
- Lack of resources and structural support: Time, financial, and competency limitations in project teams.
- Lack of synergy between countries: A platform that facilitates collaboration between different European countries is needed. The lack of synergy translates into minimal integration of knowledge from projects on a larger scale.

Proposed Solutions:

- Standardization of methods: Introducing common assessment frameworks and realistic success indicators.
- Structural support: Creating communities that support scientists in science communication and developing mentoring and training.
- Long-term funding: Ensuring sustainable financial support for communication activities.
- Visibility of good practices: Promoting successful projects as inspiration for others.

The event highlighted the need to integrate communication activities with scientific research more effectively. Building support systems, educating scientists, and developing impact assessment tools are crucial to increasing public trust in science and engaging new audience groups.