# Participatory Design
# Negotiations in Project Funding Regimes

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss two emerging controversies in the meeting between participatory design (PD) ideals and the funding regime in an EU-funded cross-sector partnership project with seven partners. We argue that this discussion is much needed within the PD community, as more and more research is funded through outlets that challenge current design practices in PD that emphasize bottom-up and open-ended processes. We argue for a continued need for reflexive PD practices that take implications of publicly funded cross-sector partnerships into account.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centred computing → Participatory design.**

## KEYWORDS

Participatory Design; partnership; funding regimes; co-design; citizen involvement.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Openness and incompleteness—two driving forces of PD—contrast starkly with the increasing number of funding regimes

in which diverse sets of project partners, including civil society as end-users, are formalized and contractualized in cross-sector partnerships. The objective of this paper is to initiate a discussion about emerging dilemmas relevant to the PD community as it deals with prefunded PD projects. Through partner articulations, we aim to nuance the idealized cross-sector partnership narrative in PD, which is mainly concerned with reporting and confirming the success of radical co-creative design processes leading to more inclusive and democratic design solutions. Building on previous work [6, 12, 19, 33], we discuss emerging controversies between project funding regimes and the PD ideals of open-ended and long-term processes in cross-sector partnerships. We argue that there is too little research on the challenges of cross-sector partnerships, such as the tensions between, and competing values and logics of the partners. Dachtera et al. [12] confirm this, arguing that research that reports on challenges in publicly-funded, cross-sector partnerships is much-needed, but still scarce. Our discussion contributes to the varied work in the field of PD, where projects embrace controversy and conflicts as productive and essential means and driving forces of the design process [2, 17].

## 2 PD, PARTNERSHIPS, AND PREFUNDED PROJECTS

Partnerships are not new, but not until the 1990s did the concept start to include cross-sector collaborations between universities, businesses, and government institutions, where the PPP model was introduced to meet the conjunction of political, economic, and social pressures [29]. Today, cross-sector partnerships are increasingly considered essential and necessary as a strategy and means for solving global problems and stimulating innovation and economic growth. This has led to an increase in funding calls, in which cross-sector partnerships are assumed to drive innovation, and presented as a replicable model and method to generate innovation. Here, partnerships are usually defined as formal collaborations, where the terms and conditions are made explicit with regard to investments, as well as economic benefits and risks. However, in broader terms, they are also linked to qualities such as equality, commonality, and shared win-win situations [21].

### 2.1 PD positions: Openness and Incompleteness

Cross-sector partnerships have always been an integral part of PD. In the 1970s, they focused mainly on democracy at work. Since then, there has been a reorientation towards democratic innovation, which means moving towards solving broader

societal or global challenges, or engaging with everyday life, instead of focusing on specific needs, IT systems, or groups of workers [5]. According to Björgvinsson et al. [5], this reorientation has been the result of the effects of new technologies, and inspiration from related fields.

Today, engaging diverse stakeholders from multiple sectors in the design process is considered imperative [2, 5, 14, 18]. Bannon and Ehn assert this, and conclude: "design today is rather heterogeneous, partly open and public, engaging users and other stakeholders across organizational and community borders" [2]. This statement aligns with Halse et al.'s [18] design approach, in which all stakeholders take part in the entire design process from the very early phase of exploring the field, thereby collapsing the front and back ends of the design process. This is completely different from the design phases of traditional technology development (waterfall model), as this is about rehearsing (future) relationships and practices that follow from new design solutions. The argument for open-ended, long-term, bottom-up explorations where involved partners and stakeholders are invited to participate in the innovation process, expressing and exercising their opinions and rights, has become present-day PD's raison d'être [5, 18, 24]. This PD version, proposed by Ehn and his colleagues [4, 14], insists that the design challenge is also about designing for design (modifications, adjustments, etc.) beyond the design project, and for future stakeholders—"'design' after design" [27].

In their approach, the end-users and end-design solutions are not the main design objective; instead, designing for further design explorations, modifications, and negotiations has become central to PD practices. As a result, incompleteness and openness are the norm [3, 5, 14]. In this turn towards democratic innovation, open-ended design methods such as living labs have been developed. Living labs, understood as experimental design spaces, practices, and methods, where "what is" and "what could be" are explored over a longer period [34], illustrate this PD approach. Consequently, end-users and end-design solutions are not predetermined, but are developed continually throughout the entire design process. This is part of a turn where the primary focus of the design process is not on "who the users are", but rather what they do in the design process, and with the design object in use. Redström relates "design after design" [27] to design scholars who work with ideas of "unfinished things" [30] and "continuous design" [22]. As a result, PD has strongly emphasized concepts such as "fuzzy frontend," which describes the uncontrollable and chaotic process of co-designing and co-creating the "why" (problem), "what" (end-design object), and "who" (end-users/partners/designers) [28, 34].

## 2.2 Projecting: Closedness and Alignment

According to Morris, Pinto, and Söderlund [25], projects have existed since the dawn of time. However, organizational project structures were not formalized until the 1920s, and specific project management tools were not developed until the 1950s. The Latin root of "project" is "projectum," derived from the verb "proicere," which means "to throw forward," suggesting movement, a trajectory through space and time. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the noun "project" as: "an individual or collaborative enterprise that is carefully planned to achieve a particular aim." In the project management research, a project also includes a temporary series of aligned efforts or tasks motivated by perceived outcomes to a problem [23].

In a funding regime (e.g. H2020 in an EU-context, but also many other funding channels; for other examples see Dachtera et al. [12]), projects are mainly defined and delimited by a funding body, funding call, and funding proposal. All three elements determine and regulate the problem to be addressed by the project and the overall project outcomes; for H2020, these concern securing Europe's global competitiveness [32]. Most funding proposals have a rather rigid structure that often includes (i.e. H2020 standard proposal templates):

- A detailed analysis of the challenges and problems the project will address;
- Methods and solution for addressing the challenges and problems, including its societal impact;
- Project management plan, including task, deliverables, milestones, communication plan, and business plan for commercializing the solution

According to PD researchers [4, 14] a design project aligns resources (i.e. project reports, prototypes, ethnographies, buildings, devices, users, engineers, architects, designer, researchers, and other stakeholders). The top-down and conformal structure of such a project has a number of limitations that impede the ability to meet changing conditions and participation on equal terms. Consequently, researchers such as Ehn and his colleagues [4, 14] suggest to leave this style of "projecting" in PD with focus on "what" and concrete solutions, and instead to favor open-ended approaches that focus on "how," "design after design," and a bottom-up process [27].

## 3   THE DESIGN PARTNERSHIP

The cross-sector and cross-national partnership discussed in this paper was a three year-long partnership project, modelled on the ideal quadruple helix and the accompanying expectations [11]. The consortium—seven formal partners—consisted of technology drivers and developers (business), public administration and civil service (government), and universities (academia) from three EU countries. The partnership was formalized through an EU funding scheme focused on social innovation [1].

The overall objective of abovementioned the partnership was to develop a novel ICT solution that addressed changing attitudes towards the European welfare systems, using a co-design process involving groups of citizens, to co-create new opportunities and a solution. The main design devices were dialogue tools, design games [8, 9] scenario formats [18], and living labs [16, 20, 26, 34]. Both authors were employed by the project-coordinating institution, and one was directly involved in planning and executing the design work in the project. The empirical material supporting this paper consists of field notes from project meetings, co-design workshops and other engagements with project partners and citizens, collected by this author.

We use pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of all participants and institutions. Names of the partners involved are also not disclosed, owing to ethical considerations and their irrelevance to the conclusions presented. This paper's focus is not individual partners' motivations or reasoning, nor is it the design object or "design in use". Instead, we wish to focus on the mechanisms that create tensions between the PD ideals and the funding regimes.

## 4  WHAT ARE WE CREATING TOGETHER, WHEN, HOW, AND WHY?

Although a project proposal—including sections on a proposed solution, approach, timeline, and project management—was carefully formulated and agreed upon by all project partners (research, industry, and end-user representatives, except for the actual end-users), the project solution and design process and approach were discussed throughout the many partnership meetings. Existing research about cross-sector collaborations in Research through Design and HCI projects identify points of conflicts similar to those we encountered, owing mainly to competing logics, differing perspectives and objectives, and temporal dynamics [12, 13].

From the very beginning of the project in question, the open-ended PD approach to developing the design solution conflicted with the industry partners' straightforward timeline for developing a digital solution (the formulated outcome of the project, in the funding application). This was presented at the kickoff meeting after project funding was granted with all consortium partners (no end-users), when the industry partner gave a clear description of each step, including the development of design requirements, and with user tests at the end. The researchers responsible for the co-design and user-involvement aspects of the project presented an explorative and iterative process with a fuzzy starting point [25], where the design solution was still undetermined, allowing open exploration through collaboration and co-creation between citizens and other stakeholders. To emphasize this openness, one of the researchers asserted, "We may well end up with a non-digital solution?"

Although the project proposal focused on open collaborative design processes, the project solution was by no means as open-ended as the design researcher polemically articulated. In the proposal, the project solution was not non-digital, but was presented as "a novel ICT platform." This aligns with the overall objective of the funding call, "to enhance the quality of life of older people and strengthen the industrial base in Europe through the use of Information and Communication Technologies." A specific aim was the development of "innovative ICT-based products, services and systems" [1]. The consortium also included two technology partners and a work package for developing a software infrastructure, user interface, and web application. Thus, co-designing "only" an analogue service was never an actual option. Similarly, the industry partner's suggestion for downscaled end-user involvement was unfeasible, as end-user involvement throughout the project

period was a funding framework requirement, hence, end-user contribution to the project was not restricted to final product evaluation. Yet, the industry partner's fixation on a process resembling a classic waterfall model for software development, with a strict timeline, detailed design specifications, and a digital platform as final project outcome, was an expected result of the funding framework's insistence on close-to-market commercial solutions.

An exploratory process where multiple low-fi solutions to "what is" and "what could be" were probed, enacted, and rehearsed [18, 34] was incompatible with the industry partner's goal of developing close-to-market products. Bannon and Ehn [2] argue that despite all good intensions of involving users in innovation projects, these projects still carry on a product-centric view very similar to traditional models. In our case, the project partners' diverse motifs and approaches were continuously manifested over the course of the project, as described by Dachtera [12]. For example, at a consortium meeting, when both industry partners indicated that they could not fulfill the objectives of their work package, as the researchers' co-exploring and co-designing problems and solutions with citizen groups were still ongoing, and had not generated distinct user requirements on which the industry partners could base their development. The researchers did not formulate co-design activity outcomes as clear user specifications, but had reformulated the overall user needs in accordance with standard PD practices [3, 5, 14]. This led one of the industry partners to ask, "but is there at all a need for this solution?"

It is challenging to enter a PD design endeavor based on a detailed and rigid project proposal that describes the problem, the solution to the problem, and the path to commercialization and job creation, particularly when the PD approach includes open-ended, bottom-up processes, and the problem and problem solving are co-produced through a collaborative partnering process. As previous research has shown [12], project proposals must have a certain scope with respect to problem definition and solution, in order to be successful, which conflicts with the open PD approach.

Unsurprisingly, the design researchers and the industry partners, represented the two main factions in the partnership. The partners' different objectives and logics, belonging to different social–material worlds, were constantly competing with each other. The industry partners were eager to develop a solution they could commercialize, whereas the design researchers were interested in investigating ideas and techniques with various citizen groups. The partners' collective idea dissolved during the first phase, and at this point, the written funding proposal no longer functioned as a shared reference point for the partnership (if that was the case from outset of the project).

During the design partnership, the funding proposal functioned almost as a (non-human)-partner, driving decision-making on behalf of the other partners—both those who were comfortable with, and supported design work based on linear design, and development models with predefined requirements

for a predetermined design solution, and those deeply engaged in co-design approaches.

In funding regimes such as that under discussion, a pressing question is, "What happens to PD's exploratory processes, where 'thinging', bottom-up, openness and incompleteness are guiding principles, because is it possible to Gantt-chart open-ended processes?" Another intricate, and equally thought-provoking question is, "Can a project still be defined as PD when the funding regime and other partners' work approach marginalizes the PD agenda?" These questions and controversies may not be completely new to PD, but they become more pressing in the current research and innovation climate, where the project-funding machine—meaning the entire set-up of project proposal, including plans and concepts, project milestones and deliverables, and the various agendas of design researchers, and public and private partners [33]—challenges PD's methodological praxis.

## 5  TO BE OR NOT TO BE A PARTNER?

In the funding scheme, "Proactive end-user involvement throughout the life of the project" [1] was a main framework objective. This goal aligned with the "traditional" PD of citizen involvement [4, 27] where the citizens are positioned as co-designers, and they are involved in all phases of the design process. Since PD's beginnings, the degree of citizen involvement with respect to participation has been discussed, and there are many PD studies that address participative methods and tools. However, much of this work focuses primarily on the overall processes, and less on the design practices concerning the end-users' actual power over, and their influence on the design process and decision-making [10].

In the cross-sector partnership in question, the design project started with a project proposal initiated and managed by the formal partners, who also managed and organized citizen recruitment, workshops, and living labs. This top-down process, building on and reproducing preexisting structures and logics, may complicate designing for change, and complicate open, inviting, and equal co-design with citizens, making it almost impossible [10, 31, 33]. Also, this early "projecting" in funding proposals is in direct contrast to Ehn and his colleagues' ideal of "thinging" [4, 14], where the end-users and stakeholders (private and public partners) are not a fixed group, but negotiated along the way.

In our case, the public-sector and design partners structured the inclusion of citizens in the design process, and the citizens' design participation was not formalized, as was the other project partners', but relied on voluntary participation based on the citizens' time and interests. There was no formal commitment from or to the citizens. "Whoever comes, comes," as one of the research partners declared in a discussion about the citizens' engagement and commitment to the design project. The formal partners'—industry, public sector, and research—project commitment was described and defined in the project proposal, and, in contrast to that of the citizens, this partner constellation was constant throughout the project period, despite changes in level of interest and/or effort. The citizens did have some impact on the decision-making, as they informed the design researchers' understanding of ideas of community, and needs and wishes; however, they did not have actual power over the direction of the design process, nor could they decide who, when, and how to be involved and participate. For their part, the citizens were on their side not organized around the subject of the project. As a result, the citizens arrived unprepared for the project activities, which, to some extent, created misaligned expectation. Ultimately, the citizens' participation and involvement became a "take it or leave it" [7] matter, in relation to the project objectives promised by the project proposal and the other formal partners.

The invitation for citizens to participate in the partnership changed several times during the project period. To go from broader dialogue meetings and "idea generation," which had taken place from the beginning of the project, to a more focused design idea relevant to everyday practices in living lab set-ups, the researchers invited specific citizen groups to participate in an ongoing process. This was due mainly to the researchers' resources, but also because some of the citizens had been less interested in the proposed focused design solution. When all the citizens who had been involved in the design process were later introduced to the living labs activities, they expressed a feeling of being excluded: "Why haven't we heard anything in the last year? I thought nothing had happened, and the project had shut down" Another participant exclaimed, "When I see all that has been going on, I feel a bit disappointed, we also want that!" To some extent, the feeling of exclusion was due to the citizens' idea of involvement in a project, which to them was not an open-ended process, but seemed to be aligned with a traditional understanding of "project."

Although not all citizens expressed an interest in the focused design solution, they were very engaged, and interested in participating in the process of exploring the current situation and new possibilities for the future to help other citizens who may need the solution. The structure of the publicly-funded project created a situation where some partners were formally committed and prepared for "the project," while the citizen partners' participation were unprepared and uncommitted—and could be tuned up and down as it suited the project. In such a partnership, the question is, what kind of partners are the citizens? Are they—can they be—partners on equal terms with the other project partners?

## 6  CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this paper, our objective has been to move beyond the usual narrative about the benefits of cross-sector collaboration, and to describe the intricacies of such collaborations and the actual treatment of end-user participants. It is a challenge to enter a PD design endeavor in a project based on a rigid project proposal that describes the problem, the solution to the problem, the end-users, and the pathway to commercialization and job creation. This is particularly true when the PD approach aims at an open-ended, bottom-up process where both problem and problem solving are co-produced. It raises questions of who among the actors included (also the funding body) decides "what, when, and

how" to design? We argue for a continued need for reflexive PD practices that consider and discuss the diverse partner articulations and positions in relation to this question – as well as the position of the citizens involved in the (formal) partnerships in publicly funded cross-sector collaborations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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