

# The Articulated Involvement of Stakeholders in Social Innovation Research. The CHILD-UP approach

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The article focuses on the role of stakeholder involvement in social innovation research, exploring the reasons, strategies and difficulties associated with the dialogue between researchers and stakeholders. More than an original research article, it has the modest ambition of making a contribution to the current debate on the role of stakeholders in social research, based on the approach and results to date of an ongoing research project on the integration of migrant children, CHILD-UP, funded by the EU Horizon 2020 Programme in the period 2019–2022. In contrast to major contributions that focus on the relationship between researchers and policymakers, this article refers

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to many different categories of stakeholders, some of which are only active at the level of grass-roots practice. Rather than focusing on the direct relation between researchers and decision makers, CHILD-UP has adopted a broader, predominantly bottom-up approach to how research results can influence current practices and future policies.

After a general introduction referring to mainstream contributions on the subject, the articulated and decentralised approach of the CHILD-UP Project is described and discussed in the central part of the article. The purpose of this part is not to present the project in itself, but to illustrate how the general approach to stakeholder involvement has been translated into structures and activities that are considered an integral part of the research project.

The final sections report results of interviews with project researchers and build on formative evaluation exercises conducted as the project has concluded its first two years of activity. According to these conclusions, the dialogue between researchers and stakeholders, although recognised as necessary and useful, it still has to overcome a number of difficulties of different nature and requires further efforts to produce all its potential benefits.

**Keywords:** Stakeholders' dialogue, social innovation, responsible research and innovation, collective responsibility.

## 1. The debate on the importance of stakeholders in research: Responsible Research and Innovation made in the EU

How important is the stakeholders' voice in defining research agendas, implementing research, evaluating the impact of research and innovation? This question has been brought into the scope of the research world with great insistence over at least the last twenty years and has always been in every researcher's mind. Allegations of self-reference and abstract curiosity-driven research agendas are part of classic anti-academic movements in society, recently "complemented" by populist movements attributing additional allegations to researchers of having mercenary affiliations to big industry.

In the first decade of this century, the most significant contributions to the debate were addressed to a particular group of stakeholders: politicians and policymakers. That period saw the vigorous emergence of the concept of "evidence-based decision making", but its application principles varied, according to Christine Boswell (Boswell, C. 2009), according to three main models of "knowledge use" by politicians:

1. The "instrumental" approach that actually uses knowledge to adjust or modify existing policies;
2. The "substantiating" function, consisting in picking only the research results that strengthen a certain political position, neglecting those that would not help;
3. The "legitimizing" function, in which politicians establish a pool of experts as a way to legitimize political decisions but do not really make a substantial use of new knowledge to correct or fine-tune existing decisions.

Since migration is a very politicized and intrinsically complex issue, it is not difficult to find examples of the second and third approach to the use of research results by politics. The works gathered within the IMISCOE book “Integrating Immigrants in Europe” published in 2015 and edited by Peter Scholten, Han Entzinger, Rinus Penninx and Stijn Verbeek (Scholten, P. et al. 2015) , provides a valuable conceptual framework to understand Research-Policy dialogues based on the dialogue “structure” (formal to informal, technocratic, bureaucratic, engineering models), knowledge utilization according to Boswell’s classification, and knowledge production (how policy making institutions, by formulating research challenges in a certain way and choosing topics on which research will be funded, may heavily condition which knowledge is produced and with what approach. In the specific field of migration studies, according to Thraenhardt and Bommers (Traenhardt, D. and Bommers, M. 2010), research-policy dialogues at national level “have hampered the theoretical development of migration research”, Favell (Favell, A. 2003: pp. 13–42) attributes to policy-research dialogue the dominance of the “integration paradigm” and Wimmer and Glick Schiller (Wimmer, A. and Glick Schiller, N. 2002: pp. 301–334) introduce the term of “methodological nationalism”, arguing that the view of migration as a problem which needs to be solved within the borders of a nation state has heavily conditioned the social science discourse (and methodology) on immigration and integration. These remarkable contributions are all focused on policymakers as the main interlocutors of researchers. In the conclusive chapter of the quoted volume (P. Scholten et al., 2015) the authors recognize that research-policy dialogues have gradually become more open, as science-society dialogues involving many new categories of stakeholders, for example civil society organizations, media representatives and practitioners of the relevant field.

Having recognized that attention to policy-research dialogue is fully justified in consideration of how much research orientation, relevance and funding depend on politics, in recent years the European Union has also formally adopted an approach, Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), that recognizes the important role for stakeholders in guaranteeing that research – at least the lion’s share of Europe-funded research – is anchored in societal challenges and integrated with participatory processes in society. The Rome Declaration on Responsible Research and Innovation in Europe (signed by European Ministers of Research on 21st November 2014) states that “RRI requires that all stakeholders including civil society are responsible to each other and take shared responsibility for the processes and outcomes of research and innovation. This means...the definition of research agendas, the conduct and research, the access to research results, and the application of new knowledge in society” and that “early and continuous engagement of all stakeholders is essential for sustainable, desirable and acceptable innovation”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/research/swafs/pdf/rome\\_declaration\\_RRI\\_final\\_21\\_November.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/research/swafs/pdf/rome_declaration_RRI_final_21_November.pdf).

According to v. Block, L. Hoffmans and E.F.M. Wubben (Blok, V., Hoffmans L. and Wubben E.F.M. 2015: 147–164) who built on the work of Von Schonberg, (2013), four characteristics of stakeholder involvement can be identified: Transparency, Interaction, Responsiveness, Co-responsibility, and together they help to identify the ethical, social and environmental risks of research and innovation.

Practically all research proposals need to show attention to the involvement of stakeholders if they have to be approved and funded, but this does not automatically lead all researchers to pay attention to stakeholder voices: frequently, stakeholder dialogue is “externalized” to specialized non-research partners who organize stakeholder consultations and other participatory activities in which the majority of researchers are not deeply involved. In fact, social responsibility is well understood as a principle by the majority of researchers, but the regular communication with stakeholders is not considered as a vital and stimulating part of their commitment, reference to generic societal challenges like the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 of the UN is considered enough to guarantee that they are working for the common good. On the other hand, it is certainly true that many stakeholders are totally unaware that they are research stakeholders: local administrators, entrepreneurs, teachers, trade unions, civil society leaders have a clear and committing role in their community and may consider that they have little to do with research, particularly academic research.

## **2. Researchers and stakeholders: is dialogue so difficult? Pride and Prejudice**

Although formally recognized as important by research policymakers, dialogue between stakeholders and researchers is not easy and requires efforts on both sides, sometimes mediated by policy agencies. Stereotypes concerning both communities are quite diffused, specialized language learnt by academics and necessary to be precise and productive in their job is often a barrier to effective dialogue, incentives for young researchers are based on publications, patents and quotations rather than engagement in dialogue with stakeholders. These factors do not encourage a healthy relationship, although accountability to society and to sustainable development goals is a principle that is generally accepted in the research world. Several important research projects and Excellence Networks have been pioneering researchers-stakeholders communication dialogue: in the case of KALEIDOSCOPE, an Excellence Network in the field of Technology-Enhanced Learning, (Balatcheff, N. and Ludvigsen, S. 2009) running in 2004–2009, a Stakeholders Gateway was created (much before the official emergence of the Responsible Research and Innovation Policy at the EU level) as an attempt to encourage a seamless exchange of views between the large researchers community in the network and the even larger community of stakeholders in

industry, education and policy making. Although the project was considered a significant success in many regards, including in this pioneering approach to stakeholders' involvement, several difficulties had to be faced to get the attention of both the stakeholder community and the researchers. It was noted that, at the beginning of the process, the senior researchers showed more interest in stakeholder involvement and dialogue than their younger colleagues, and that a "segmentation approach", establishing first of all separate occasions of dialogue for industry, education and policy making stakeholders brought much better results – (in terms of stakeholder attention and interest) than a general dissemination work. Starting from the "gateway" concept, a Stakeholders Club was established gathering several hundred stakeholder representatives, and these were frequently involved in research activity and debates on the usability and future use of the project results. At the end of the project, segmentation of target groups was much less necessary, and different groups appreciated the opportunity to work together in considering the prospective uses of research results.

### 3. Where is knowledge produced for social innovation?

When we move from *research tout-court* to social research, and particularly to the area of social innovation, the need to involve stakeholders to understand their points of view, needs, expectations and concerns is broadly accepted. This is easy to explain, since everybody understands that social innovation has to be produced with the help of stakeholders, not only for stakeholders. An active role of stakeholders is needed to explore existing good practices, to understand perceptions of gaps and unsatisfactory performance in public action, to propose new solutions already experienced in real life situations. This also means that a role is recognized for stakeholders in the production of knowledge, although filtered by researchers analyzing and evaluating the inputs coming from grassroots practice. This factor should not be underestimated when considering the difference of stakeholders' involvement in this area of research when compared to others' (e.g. technological or biological research), in which stakeholders role is still relevant in ethical and social impact analysis terms, but less fundamental in terms of knowledge production.

An additional set of considerations regarding the involvement of stakeholders is about the costs of "co-production" (Kothari, O. et al. 2019): the administrative burden of organizing meetings and reports, the time and efforts of researchers and stakeholders, the possibility of conflicts and delays: all of these may discourage researchers from engaging a significant part of their time in stakeholder dialogue, if this is not seen as directly contributing to the research effort and results.

## 4. How is research for social innovation producing sustainable results?

Social innovation has been defined in several ways: according to Phills, Deiglmeier and Miller, 2008, in the Stanford Social Innovation Review (Phills, J. et al. 2008: p. 39), social innovation is “any novel and useful solution to a social need or problem that is better than existing approaches (e.g. more effective, efficient, sustainable or just) and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals”.

In order to produce tangible results, social innovation research has to engage with stakeholders throughout its life cycle, from agenda definition to the construction of a progressive adoption process for the proposed innovation. If impact has to be secured by the research results, it is the local community of those who experience good results who may best convince their peers in other contexts to try and appreciate a new approach. Researchers may occasionally convince a policymaker, but even if a new policy is released, it will not have the guarantee of being implemented without the consensus of grassroots stakeholders. This bottom-up approach in the creation of sustainable positive impact is particularly relevant in all cases in which innovation is not “produced” by a company, but collectively generated through experimental practice in which several stakeholders are directly involved.

To some extent, we can compare the functioning of a social innovation research consortium as an ad-hoc laboratory, and then rely on previous studies on public innovation laboratories to understand how and why the involvement of stakeholders is sought:

“Dupont (2009) argued that the key pillars for collaborative environments are the participation of end-users, the involvement of multiple stakeholders and the attitude toward collaboration. [...] As a result of the collaborative approach of the laboratory, there is an implicit objective of facilitating the adoption of the different methods, techniques or technologies used, by involving beneficiaries and stakeholders in the activities.” (Osorio, F. et al. 2020: pp. 69–100).

N. Chochoy (Chochoy, N. 2015: pp. 75–84) even states that “the sooner the end-users (or “beneficiaries”) of the project are involved, the more socially innovative the project would be.” He explained this by two dynamics: first the beneficiaries can act on the form and the content of the project, and secondly, their involvement fosters the active appropriation of the project by them.

## 5. The stakeholder system built around and within the CHILD-UP Project, local SH, international SH, structures and interaction options: the experience of 25 months

Based on the reflections presented above, the CHILD-UP approach to stakeholder involvement has been designed with the following ideas in mind:

1. Stakeholder involvement should be the job of every local research team, although methodologically and practically supported by specialized partners.
2. Stakeholders are not an undefined and undifferentiated community: the segmentation of stakeholder areas and groups (as in the KALEIDOSCOPE Network of Excellence mentioned in section 2 above) is the basis to meet their attention and interest.
3. Understanding the variety of roles and opinions of the stakeholder groups in each local context, and consequently organize specific communication and exchange activities for each of them is a basic principle to gain attention and collaboration in both local contexts and internationally.
4. Organizing stakeholder groups and collaboration structures at the local level allows them to prepare the ground for local impact and scaling up innovative practices, as foreseen by the project proposal and considered a fundamental objective to achieve by its partners.
5. The combination of local, national and international levels of stakeholder dialogue allows the interest of each stakeholder in playing an active role within and around the project to be increased.

The stakeholder involvement system is based on 4 macro-areas: 1. Schools; 2. Protection services and reception centers under the responsibility of local administration services, migrant associations and NGOs; 3. Policymakers, committed to improving performance in a delicate policy field; 4. Research networks, to which the project will refer for previous and parallel research projects and follow-up activities.

To pursue its objectives, therefore, the project envisaged the constitution of a stakeholders' network composed of an International Stakeholder Committee (ISC), representing the international projection of the different categories, and 6 Local Stakeholder Committees (LSCs) operating on a local scale.

Following the approach illustrated above, the whole dissemination system designed by the CHILD-UP project and coordinated by the Communication Dissemination and Impact Working Group (CDI-WG) is based on the assumption that a deep involvement of the different categories of stakeholders constitutes the added-value of every impactful and effective dissemination action. In the CHILD-UP approach, stakeholder representatives are intended as individuals/institutions/organizations that,

sharing a common interest in the activities of the project for various reasons, are able to reflect the comprehensive view of their respective professional categories and/or interest groups.

Considering the importance of establishing multi-stakeholder cooperation around CHILD-UP, the CDI-WG inherited from the original concept of the project, among others, the task of involving the stakeholders at the European and local level by planning medium to long-term impacts, and encouraging them: (a) to act as multipliers of messages and results; (b) to engage in influencing research agendas; (c) to be active contributors in the research work as sources or facilitators in the access to further sources; (d) to contribute to the evaluation of activities; (e) to cooperate in media coverage; (f) to engage in influencing policy agendas.

On this basis, the ISC and the LSCs were established during the first year of the project, in view of a periodic consultation during the whole implementation period of the action. While 4 meetings (and written reports) were foreseen for the ISC during the 3-year CHILD-UP lifecycle, at least 3 meetings per national LSC have to be organized by each research partner. Out of these gatherings (which obviously suffered because of the COVID-19 pandemic), a periodic exchange of views with the members is crucial for the success of the stakeholder involvement process as a whole, and of the Committees in particular. For this reason, the CDI-WG members conducted (and will continue to conduct) interviews with the ISC on a periodical basis, collecting actual input and relevant observations linked to current challenges, opportunities and threats to the activities of the project.

## **International Stakeholder Committee**

The International Stakeholder Committee (ISC) was designed to multiply the project's impact by not only influencing local practices and policies but also national and European networks (Ministries of Education, Children Protection Authorities, NGOs in the fields of children protection and migrants social and cultural inclusion, parents' networks) to broaden the resonance and impact of the project's approach and results.

The ISC was primarily conceived to deliver input and feedback throughout the project life cycle, as well as contributing to the project's qualitative evaluation process, ranging from the setting of dissemination and impact criteria to the evaluation of the project findings and outcome. The Committee should also undertake the task of building a key dialectical "bridge" between the CDI-WG, the project and the different categories of stakeholders represented within the body. ISC members were selected by the CDI-WG on the basis of different characteristics, such as their commitment to activities related to the promotion of children's well-being, their multiplication potential, their experience, and their long-lasting and recognized role within one of the above-mentioned particular categories. By collaborating with the CHILD-UP

consortium, the ISC members have provided the project with a valuable and differentiated in-depth view of the stakeholders' perception of its activities and approach, outlining its potential risks, criticalities, and challenges.

## **Local Stakeholder Committees**

From the national perspective, every research partner was also required to contribute to the CHILD-UP stakeholder involvement strategy by structuring a network of local stakeholders. This network took the form of 6 Local Stakeholder Committees (LSCs), which convene at least three times during the project lifecycle in each territory in which the research activities take place. During the first months of the project, the CDI-WG, acting as action coordinator, took care of delivering a model grid for the involvement of the representatives of stakeholders at the local (and occasionally also at the national) level, requiring the research partners to identify relevant organizations/individuals worthy of being included on the committee, the key messages to be delivered according to their perceived needs and when these contacts should be activated (with reference to the implementation phases of the project). All these aspects were decisive in determining an efficient involvement strategy at the local level, with a strong focus on the real interests of the stakeholders. At the height of this preliminary effort, research partners were able to organize at least one meeting per country, gathering selected representatives of the four different stakeholder categories, taking advantage of a data collection template to register the comments about the outcome of the project, interesting contacts and collaboration opportunities with local projects and/or associations. The local activities of stakeholders are a key factor to maximize the impact of CHILD-UP, not only by disseminating and spreading the outcome of its activities but, much earlier on, by attracting stakeholders to interact, participate and support the implementation of the project.

## **The Policy Uplink and Media Support groups**

In terms of future sustainability and the long-term impact maximization of the CHILD-UP results, the CDI-WG also proposed the creation of two further transnational groups: the Policy Uplink Group and the Media Support Group. With regard to the Policy Uplink Group, partners were asked to report and share contacts of interest and receptive policymakers selected at the national level. These practitioners would form a body aimed at supporting the construction of an effective communication channel between the CHILD-UP partnership and the world of policymaking. As for the Media Support Group, a further effort was requested of the whole consortium to identify close media contacts at the local and international level, who could act as points of reference for any relevant public communication coming from the project. Notwithstanding the complex social media strategy developed by the CDI-WG in an earlier

phase, the group agreed on the necessity of fostering the project's media coverage through the creation of a dedicated network of journalists, bloggers and freelancers.

## **Organization of stakeholder-focused events**

Considering the extensive organizational experience of the CDI-WG members, stakeholder-focused events in the form of conferences, workshops, webinars and virtual meetings were considered key dissemination tools for the project. Being aware of the multiple and differing interests of the various categories of stakeholders, the CDI team integrated the designing of *ad-hoc* events specifically tailored to the needs and interests of school personnel, reception centers and NGOs, policymakers and researchers into its stakeholders' involvement strategy. Adapting the language of the results, mostly technical and adequate for a reader with a research background, the project should be able to improve its attractiveness by better delivering its most relevant messages.

The different categories of stakeholders sometimes show a divergence of interests, and then the researchers have to strike a balance between those interests and needs, as explained in this article by Osorio (Osorio, F. et al. 2020: pp. 69–100).

For instance, the use of the word "integration" generated controversy, as most of the researchers and NGO stakeholders preferred the term "inclusion" which has a different political meaning and could lead to a different orientation of policy implementation. However, the project had to be constructed around the concept of integration because this was the term included within the priorities set by the European Commission in the Horizon 2020 program.

## **6. Results to date: What do researchers think and report? Report from interviews.**

This section of the article is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with one representative of each research partner organization to explore their views and experiences in the relationship with stakeholders. A broader consultation with all the research team and a survey to address involved stakeholders on the same subject are planned for the following phases of the CHILD-UP Project.

In general terms it can be said that researchers in CHILD-UP mainly appreciate the involvement of stakeholders in the project and acknowledge that they have a role to play. Most of the interviewees admitted that they have more regular contact with the local stakeholders (who also play a function of "gatekeepers" guaranteeing access to the people to be interviewed) than with the international stakeholders (who have a broader role in building the vision and impact of the project). This can be explained by the fact that they share very concrete experience on practical topics (such as how to get access to a reception center or how the COVID-19 impacts their

activities) and also because the LSC are managed by them, even though the CDI-WG is providing guidance and tools to play their functions. The ISC, on the contrary, is directly managed by the CDI-WG and researchers only have the opportunity to physically (or virtually, in 2020/21) meet them during plenary meetings. The sanitary crisis and the following travel restrictions also had a negative impact on the possibility to exchange information with international stakeholders. Some of the researchers interviewed observe that more time should be devoted, in general and work package-specific meetings, to discussing how to work with stakeholders and getting the most from the interaction considering the specific contexts. Most researchers recognize the value of managing the relationship with local stakeholders, although they perceive the difficulty of keeping communication and interaction going in a year like 2020, in which meetings were seldom possible. They also express a certain difficulty in keeping connection to relevant stakeholders in certain categories that are less involved in the contexts, especially schools where the core of CHILD-UP research is taking place.

However, even if researchers acknowledge the impact of the involvement of stakeholders, they do not necessarily agree on the type of impact that they produce. The study conducted by Borsta et al. in 2019 in the field of health policy classified the impact of stakeholder involvement into 4 categories:

“The literature suggests that stakeholder engagement affects knowledge translation in different ways. First, stakeholders may add valuable knowledge and skills to the research process. Second, stakeholders possess experiential information about the environment in which the research findings might be used. Third, by being engaged, stakeholders gain a better understanding of the prospective study results and encourage researchers to think about potential use of the results in practice. Finally, engagement can establish a trust-relationship between researchers and potential users and increases the presumed legitimacy of results.” (Borsta, R. A. J. et al. 2019: pp. 917, 918).

In CHILD-UP, the interviews conducted with researchers highlight that the most evident effects are those of the 2<sup>nd</sup> (category (especially regarding local stakeholders) and 3<sup>rd</sup> category (local and international stakeholders), maybe in the long-term effects of the 4<sup>th</sup> category may be seen (even after the project’s ending). The first kind of effect is less recognized by researchers: in fact, stakeholders indeed had a limited and barely tangible impact on the design of the research framework, methodology and analysis, as they were not involved in the early stage of the project but only after the project’s start. It must be noted, however, that the project was designed based on a previous experience conducted by the coordinating partners with substantial involvement of local stakeholders (SHARMED Project in the ERASMUS PLUS Programme). On the contrary, researchers say very clearly that some stakeholders helped them in getting access to the field research (in this case mostly schools or reception centers) and in understanding the potential obstacles for research (for instance fear of children and parents to participate in the study because of previous bad experience with researchers or policymakers).

Another tangible impact of the stakeholders' involvement in terms of translation of knowledge is the way the consortium builds its communication about the scientific core concepts of the project. The same study we referred to earlier also states that “[knowledge] translation is about negotiation, transformation, and the associations between actors through which networks are built and extended [...]” then continuing by stating that the strength of this understanding is its capability of offering an in-depth understanding of the active role played by eventual knowledge users in translation, as well as a specific conceptualisation of the value of context while translating knowledge into action (Borst, R. A. J. et al. 2019: p. 918).

The term “negotiation” is very relevant regarding the CHILD-UP experience because this is what happened when reflecting on how to communicate about the conceptual terms of agency and hybridization: a negotiation between researchers and stakeholders about how to explain or paraphrase this concept in order to be understandable by everyone one (and not only sociologists) but without losing its scientific accuracy.

## **7. The polarization of stakeholder attitudes and consequences for action**

An important element to be considered emerging from some of the interviews with researchers is a certain polarization of stakeholder attitudes, particularly observable during the pandemic crisis. Some stakeholders adhere to the research objectives and feel even more motivated to play a role in the different phases and to help researchers conduct their scheduled activities in problematic conditions of access to schools, children and families; however, many others are discouraged by the difficulty of organizing face-to-face meetings or do not recognize sufficient relevance to the research in these troubled times. Many believe that the improvements they desire (if any) can only be achieved through political pressure/change. In most cases this attitude may be biased by the position of anti-élite or anti-migration movements, but also partially understandable if we consider modest or no impact of previous research projects, unable to produce a visible impact on policy and practice. Such polarization may constitute a temptation for researchers to focus only on the willing side of stakeholder communities, thus forgetting to make efforts to understand the remaining part, who may occasionally be the majority if we include distracted, discouraged and hostile groups. Such a choice of “working with the willing”, however reasonable it may seem, may fail to generate sufficient momentum to support the desired innovation, and raises again a fundamental question to researchers: are we sure that our efforts to find evidence and indicate what we think is good practice will meet the interest of the community that is supposed to adopt it?

To address the issue of practical impact, several stakeholders reported that they are waiting for training opportunities, learning resources and examples of practical learning experiences coherent with the project approach, transferring the concepts

into suggestions for education and inclusion practice. In fact, these measures are foreseen by the CHILD-UP Project in its final year and hopefully will be implemented, at least partially, in face-to-face mode.

## **8. What can be learnt from the CHILD-UP experience?**

Social science researchers do not need to be convinced about the importance of stakeholder dialogue and are ready to set up a consultation and collaboration infrastructure.

Although researchers are convinced about the significance of stakeholder dialogue, they have difficulty devoting time to it and organizing appropriate exchanges beyond the opportunities immediately offered by the research project needs to access certain target groups as informants/knowledge sources and co-producers. Communication with stakeholders, media, and policymakers requires a set of competences for which most researchers have not been trained: creating and implementing the local capacity to gather, listen and interact with different stakeholder groups in order to maximize their contribution to the research agenda is a significant challenge for social researchers.

The relationship between the local and the international levels of stakeholder involvement is not easy to establish, perhaps because there is a lack of emphasis on the natural intermediate level, the national one, in the Project Stakeholders system, and this has contributed to this difficulty. The project is now exploring the possibility of addressing this gap by organizing national opportunities to present the research approach and results at the national level, also considering the opportunity to establish Policy Labs at the national level, involving representatives of the target groups and of all stakeholders' categories together with decision makers from different policy areas.

The pandemic crisis has accentuated an already existing polarization in stakeholder attitudes toward research, creating the risk of researchers only working with the most motivated representatives of stakeholder groups.

Research language and concepts may constitute a significant barrier to stakeholder involvement, and attention should be paid by researchers and communication partners to the actual reaching-out phase of stakeholder involvement, with the risk, if this is not done in time, to have just a few "followers" in the stakeholder groups. Web-based communication and social media strategies require a substantial simplification of the language, but the project concepts and approach cannot be oversimplified without losing their specificity: this tension has accompanied the project in its first half and has been consistently addressed by proposing videos, webinars and short articles that are aimed at bridging the communication gap between researchers and stakeholders.

In conclusion, although the CHILD-UP project has introduced an articulated and distributed stakeholder system at the local and international level, some capacity building needs have emerged and still need to be addressed in view of maximizing stakeholder involvement in the final part of project development and impact achievement.

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