

STAKEHOLDERS' ROLE TO PRODUCE IMPACT FROM SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH: WHAT LESSONS FOR EVALUATION?¹

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the paper is twofold: a) to analyse the ways in which stakeholders are involved in social science research (SS) funded under European research projects, in order to identify elements –organisational characteristics of the project, types of stakeholders, type of involvement, that can increase the likelihood of producing an impact on policy and society; b) to discuss consequences of the empirical evidences for research evaluation both at the ex-ante level (elements characterising the design of the project) and ex-post level (achievements and practices indicating that an impact is produced or signalling that an impact might occur).

The paper deals with social impact, which is mostly defined as an effect that research could produce beyond the academic context in terms of benefits on societal and institutional challenges, including also impact on the political side (Penfield et al., 2014; Reale, Primeri, Fabrizio, 2017). The interest to deepen issues of social impact in SS derives from the limitations of using the traditional approach based on input-output-outcome measurements; SS are characterised by effects that are more difficult to be singled out than those produced in other areas of science, and measurements provide very poor and often biased understanding of the phenomenon (Reale et al., 2017). The paper follows the theoretical approaches focusing on research process (Spaapen and van Drooge, 2011) and contribution to the impact generation (Mayne, 2012), instead of attribution of impact to research activities; in this respect it is of crucial importance to shed light about the generating mechanisms that transform knowledge into actionable goods, and the network of actors involved (Joly et al., 2015).

Social impact could be strengthened by participatory involvement of different social actors through productive interactions (Molas-Gallart, 2012; Weik et al. 2014); the positive effects of these interactions are closely related to the ways in which researchers and stakeholders communicate about research, its goals and societal demand (Molas-Gallart, 2012). Thus, social impact is pointed out as a consequence of a process in which knowledge and expertise circulates to achieve specific objectives that are relevant for the progress of society (Spaapen and Van Drooge, 2011). A participatory approach could deeply affect the sustainability

of research so it must be implemented since the beginning of projects (Talwar, 2011). Under a slightly different conceptualisation, social impact is generated through translation of actors involved in the process (Joly et al., 2015), which co-define their interests along the so-called impact pathway (Walker et al., 2008; Joly et al. 2015). In both cases, the role of stakeholders is at the core of impact production, and understanding features affecting their involvement is still a low explored issue. This paper contributes to demonstrate key determinants of impact in the different types of interactions with stakeholders, discussing what implications this can have on evaluation criteria and methods of research projects.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Participation of stakeholders in research activities gained a momentum from the launch of the actions on science and society and science with society within the “European Framework Programmes” (EUFP); studies developed on this topic figured out the importance of involving non-academic partners in research projects to improve the likelihood to produce an impact from research activities (Lang et al. 2012; Reale et al., 2017). Participation of stakeholders could allow the extension of research results towards a practical path but in a broader perspective they can provide to the project a general insight focused to the problem field. This means that stakeholders invited to collaborate with researchers should be those i) more affected by the challenge faced by the research project, and ii) more stimulated to offer their knowledge to define a range of options for results implementations (Wiek, 2014). The cooperation with the stakeholders includes the possibility to keep in touch with each of the categories, placing as unique point of reference the competences necessary to reach the project's aim in the best possible way. This means that research cooperation is open to actors from public institutions, corporate sector, and not-for-profit organisations (Lang et al., 2012).

Interactions and collaborations between researchers and stakeholders take different forms. The literature outlined several types of stakeholders' involvement, which can be typified around three main categories of contribution, namely: i) co-creation of knowledge between academics and non-academics (Weik et al., 2014; Edelbons et al., 2011; Spaapen and van Drooge, 2011; de Jong et al., 2013); ii) unpacking the research objectives into sub-task that are more manageable for producing usable results (Bell et al., 2012); iii) discussion and dissemination of research results after their production in order to facilitate generating an impact (Spaapen and Van Drooge, 2011; Weik et al., 2014). It is worth to recall also the work of Muhonen et al., (2018), which developed 60 case studies on social sciences and humanities pathways to societal impact by paying attention not only to productive interactions but also to the changes they mediate. Based on the empirical results, the authors developed a typology of four pathways to societal impact, articulated in twelve models, which starts from the classical pipeline model, of results transferring from research to society. The models are presented in hierarchical progression, according to the deviation from the base model: as high are the level of complexity in terms of interaction between research, society and intermediating institutions as high will be the deviation from the pipeline model. The pathway models belong to four general typologies, namely dissemination, co-creation, reacting to social change and driving social change.

Projects can have one or more types of stakeholders' involvement but direct participation indicates the goal of a social effect of research, an element to assess with instruments other than standard academic indexes (Penfield et al., 2014; Weik et al., 2014). In the same line, Talwar et al. (2011) distinguish between two main categories: a) unidirectional approach, when social actors are involved in the final phases of the project, for a weak support in results consolidation and/or a consultation with researchers to implement results in an applicative way; b) interactive approach, when stakeholders are involved also in the early phases of the project and contribute to define the research goal and/or to design the research strategy. While in the first approach, contribution of stakeholders is basically limited to elaborate a tool to use research results, in the second one, stakeholders are invited to provide their expertise to broaden the knowledge base useful to define all aspects of the problem, beyond the scientific analysis, and implementing the usability of results throughout all the phases of the project.

However, the advantage to have a relevant applicative core in a project could expose the research to the risk that pursuing applicative results become prevalent with respect to the achievement of high-quality scientific outputs. In a more general way, several contributions underline that a large involvement of stakeholders in a research project could focus the analysis on solving a single problem (or a restricted range of problems), channelling research efforts to a punctual objective at the expense of results of general application, also relevant for other cases (Talwar et al., 2011; Lang et al., 2012).

We assume a link between the degree and the way of stakeholders' involvement in the project and the emergence of social impact of research. We thus consider that one of the key features for generating impact is the capability of the project to build a common language between the different actors, scholars and non-scholars. Under this condition, exchanges are able to create new knowledge and mutual understanding, which is likely to produce transformative changes. Also, we consider that the mentioned result can be achieved when continuous involvement of stakeholders is at stake, in the different phases of the project, and sta-

keholders show concrete willingness and interest to contribute in a substantial way to the research achievements. We analyse the relevance of role held by stakeholders, respect to the researchers, and how they jointly contribute to the research activity, with the expectation that a more extensive and effective co-participation in research creates the conditions both for dissemination of results in broad and articulated terms, over the original boundaries, and for generating impact pathway.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The paper is based on two in depth case studies of the projects "Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion from education in Europe" – INCLUD-ED and "Making Persons with Disabilities Full Citizens" – DISCIT, funded respectively under the "European Framework Programmes" FP6 and FP7 in social sciences, where a social impact became visible just after the project completion. The case studies selected are two out of 22 top success stories developed under the "Evaluating the impact and outcomes of EU SSH research" project (IMPACT-EV), which are illustrative examples of successful modes for stakeholders' involvement in research actions. Cases follow a standardised structure, developed through triangulation of information from different sources, namely information from documentary analysis (characteristics of the call under which the project has been funded, reports and deliverables produced, other administrative documents), data and indicator on research outputs (bibliometrics and other web-based resources), interviews with researchers, coordinators, and stakeholders involved in the activities. Four aspects of actors' involvement have been considered:

- Modalities and communications – projects' organisational features;
- Timing – timely interactions during the project and after the project completion determining the impact pathway;
- Language – capability to develop mutual understanding between researchers and stakeholders;
- Outcomes – co-creation of results with transformative effects on science and society.

The projects analysed both present a broad involvement of stakeholders in order to maximise the impact in political and social terms.

INCLUD-ED emphasises the role of the dialogic and participative collaboration among researchers and stakeholders (end-users, local institutions) in the development of educational strategies for the social inclusion of vulnerable groups (IMPACT-EV, 2017b). The project focused on strategies that could contribute to social inclusion of vulnerable people, deciding about key elements and actions to improve social and educational policies. "Successful Educational Actions" (SEAs) – thus evidence-based solutions able to achieve good results in many diverse contexts, were identified as examples of positive achievement in the inclusion of vulnerable groups; SEAs were transferred to other communities and contexts to improve social cohesion. INCLUD-ED produced significant achievements on educational practices, decreasing the rates of school failure and improving the families' involvement. The project put forward the hypothesis that social exclusion is more a consequence of actions implemented than an effect deriving from the social characteristics of the context (IMPACT-EV, 2017b). The consortium was composed by an interdisciplinary research team covering anthropology, economics, history, research methods, political sciences, linguistics, sociology and educa-

tion, comprising fifteen academic organisations from fourteen different European countries. The organisational structure includes ten “Working Groups” (WGs), different “Free Task Oriented Groups” (FTOGs), and a “Panel of Experts” (POE), which supported the consortium, and an “Advisory Committee” (AC) composed of representatives of vulnerable groups. The project also included horizontal type of actions and structures, whose aim was to monitoring and harmonising the activities, solving problems that might emerge, and combining the results and progresses made by the different groups.

DISCIT main goals were a) to help definition of a new “European Social Model” of inclusion and cohesion through the analysis of political and institutional instruments existing in the countries involved, and b) to indicate a way to remove and prevent physical, attitudinal, social and organisational barriers to a full and effective participation to the society of persons with disabilities (IMPACT-EV, 2017a). To achieve its goals, DISCIT considered different forms of stakeholders’ engagement. Eight research institutions, from eight different countries, and two international organisations of disabled people’s rights – “The European Disability Forum and The Mental Disability Right Initiative”, composed the consortium. Organisations contributed to the drafting of the project and helped the consortium to set up the analysis in general terms without make the differences between types of disabilities irrelevant. Furthermore, two associations of disabled people helped to identify the space of intervention of the project among the different social areas, contributing decisively to define the change of perspective that characterises DISCIT: the idea that disability is not a particular case of each area of intervention but it is a unique topic with several articulations.

The consortium was supported by one “European Stakeholder Committee” and nine “National Stakeholder Committees”, one for each Country involved in the project. These committees included members of “Disabled people’s organisations” (DPOs) and representatives of general directorates (limited to the “European Committee”), administrative and political institutions at national and local level. Committees contributed in different ways: providing information about social and regulatory peculiarities within countries and commonalities between countries, refining the documentary and empirical survey tools of the project, helping in sample selection for the interviews, and proposing themselves as intermediaries between the researchers and the disabled people interviewed, in order to help the latter to overcome any embarrassment.

Periodical forum at international and national level were organised to facilitate mutual exchanges between researchers and stakeholders, discussing research development and incentivising dissemination of policy briefs based on research results. All in all, these forums produced more results than expected, favouring a harmonisation of language between different groups of stakeholders (representatives of associations and institutions) and facilitating the creation of networks for the exchange of information and best practices at international level between DPOs.

FINDINGS

The case studies highlighted that both projects show significant evidences related to the three dimensions of stakeholders’ involvement investigated in the paper; however, differences emerged from the analysis, which are related to the organisational and structural features of the projects.

INCLUD-ED

Stakeholder involvement was a key objective from the beginning of the project, affecting the methodologic approach, shaping the research questions and the architecture of the whole research activities. The collaboration between researchers and stakeholders concerned both the knowledge-exchange dimension and the concrete implementation in specific social contexts through specific sub-task. However, the most significant evidence was the long-term impact of the model implemented, through a constant dissemination of main results deeply involving also a large network of stakeholders (IMPACT-EV, 2017; Reale et al., 2017b).

MODALITIES AND COMMUNICATIONS

Diverse voices-associations of vulnerable groups, families, teachers, local decision makers enforced the validity and rigorousness of the scientific process thus contributing to the co-production research results.

“I remember that it was very egalitarian collaboration because they were first of all introducing each of us, at each meeting we were the first who were talking in the centered explaining each community we were representing and I remember being very diverse, so people, researchers, but also women, immigrants or people with disabilities, so the meeting was very diverse and there were the researchers were presenting the results or part of the results corresponding to the part we were supposed to discuss, and they were asking maybe questions or maybe very open debate on what do we think or what do we believe that concrete strategies they were presenting may affect our community or not.”

(End User)

“From my point of view is exactly the same methodological structure of the entire project that eases the portability, because it is based on the communicative theory of Habermas, this means that every time we simply did the interviews, as you are doing with me, stakeholders, etc., we are focused on the one hand to receive the information and on the other hand to give ourselves a contribution, support for change precisely”²

(Researcher)

TIMING

Main events occurred over the project life and beyond, documented on the official website³:

- 10 technical meetings with “Advisory Committee” (each meeting consisted of a presentation of the results of different projects/subtasks and a discussion and reflection between representatives of different vulnerable groups), meetings with the panel of experts and members of research team;
- 15 dissemination events around Europe like Conferences, Congresses, public meetings and launch of project website;
- 7 institutional events mainly attended by representatives from the European Commission – Directorate General for Research, representatives of Member State governments, social actors, researchers and scholars;
- 13 training seminars attended by members of the research community, government representatives and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

These events have been scheduled during each year because they had different purposes and involved diverse types of stakeholders in order to discuss steadily short and medium-term achievements of the project, to share different points of view on the methodological approach, and to implement the model through specific training seminars. Thus, the work was basically devoted to follow a path to gain impact on interested communities.

“We were meetings twice a year, at the meetings we were discussing the results of the project, they were making right, so I remember that researchers from INCLUD-ED project were presented us the results or the development of the project and then we were discussing about that.” (End User)

“I remember that we had, a year if I’m not long we meet with the expert group and the advisory committee every year and we were presenting [...] all day presenting the results, they had them in a bag but of course some people might not read report, so we synthesised the main points, and we were discussing with them, the AC, the Advisory Committee, and expert group. The contributions from the expert group were not that different from the one’s that we could come up as research consortium, even they were a lot of policy makers at high level impact.” (Researcher)

Language

INCLUD-ED put into action the critical communicative research methodology (Flecha and Soler, 2014) which was crucial for the project success, because it allows integrating and including knowledge from different disciplines and orientations, using both quantitative and qualitative methods and techniques to analyse data; furthermore, the communicative methodology allowed researchers to apply mixed-methods

approach to pursue impact. *“While the voices of vulnerable groups have traditionally been excluded from research, the communicative methodology depends on the direct and active participation of the individuals observed throughout the research process.” (INCLUD-ED website⁶).*

“I remember that main researcher of INCLUD-ED it was talking and he was very interested on our opinion, we felt that, we felt that we are not attending the meeting because this is part of the project but because they wanted to know what we think what we believe and what we disagree with them. I remember they were asking all the time to criticize them, to disagree with them because this is good for improving and in the way that we felt that they were taking our opinion into account.” (End User)

“[...] I have often also found critical points of view that are not even critical in dialectical sense; in other cases I have found resistance also to the type of interview because being a dialogic interview when the other dialogues must give you his time not only to answer but also to listen to you, and it is not said that everyone wants of this thing because you already put yourself in a very strong relationship, it is more challenging, not just intellectually as time, it is really challenging from a relational point of view.” (Researcher)

Outcomes

The members of the Advisory Committee had access to the INCLUD-ED results and met periodically with the coordination team to discuss the research. More important, they suggested recommendations on how the findings could be used to have a greater social and political impact; those recommendations were problematised with the researchers.

“They were very motivated because they really give importance to our words, and then in further meetings we could see during the years of the project, during the different meetings we have we could see also the improvement they were achieving they were explaining that. [...] I remember a concrete neighbourhood in Spain they were telling us about and that people who never have a job before they are now getting jobs or starting to organise themselves and I remember that for me was important.” (End User)

Stakeholders played a further important role with respect to the political dimension of impact, since policy makers were well attentive to the instance of changing coming from society testifying the goodness of the transformations suggested through evidences of SEAs:

“If we make lobbying with policy makers, we don’t get results. If we get social impact and social actors who are beneficiaries of social impact go to policy makers with us, this has political impact. Even with friends, even with policy makers that are friends of mine...” you are very nice and...” but nothing. We will remain friends. ... Do not ask to policy makers what are thinking, because they think “Well, they are researchers, they are coming here for resources, for applying”. (Researcher)

3 <http://creaub.info/included/> Last access: 20/06/2018

4 <http://creaub.info/included/>

5 English translation from the Italian original: “[...]spesso ho trovato anche punti di vista critici, anche critici in senso dialettico; in altri casi ho trovato in effetti delle resistenze anche alla tipologia di intervista perché essendo un’intervista dialogica nel momento in cui dialoghi devi dare all’altro il suo tempo non solo per risponderti ma anche per ascoltarti, e non è detto che tutti abbiano voglia di questa cosa perché già ti poni in una relazione molto forte, è più impegnativa, non solo intellettualmente come tempo, è proprio impegnativa dal punto di vista relazionale”.

6 English translation from the Italian original: “Mentre il progetto era ancora in itinere, abbiamo organizzato delle presentazioni a livello locale, presso presidi sanitari e amministrazioni locali. Non so dire se abbiamo avuto un impatto politico o se abbiamo avuto un effetto sulle loro pratiche con questi incontri ma posso dire che abbiamo avuto la possibilità di presentare il nostro approccio ad unità di base del servizio sanitario e della pubblica amministrazione, avendo con loro un proficuo scambio di opinioni sulla metodologia e sul linguaggio da utilizzare. Abbiamo avuto la possibilità di esportare un po’ del progetto nei posti dove vorremmo che fosse applicato tutti i giorni”.

The effects in terms of political impact were in fact remarkable. INCLUD-ED findings have been applied on European resolutions, communications and recommendations; the SEAs were transferred through across Europe, producing in most of the cases positive effects. However, in some cases institutional barriers emerged that constrained the possibility of research to produce an impact in specific national contexts. The effects produced at the European political level were very important: three resolutions by European institutions on early school leaving were approved, mentioning results obtained through INCLUD-ED. Furthermore, two resolutions by European Union on the themes of social and educational inclusion of children of migrants and Roma people were also implemented, using evidences from INCLUD-ED. Other evidences related to national context concern: recommendations of the "Education Ministry on Education and Formation Strategy 2020" in which the development of SEAs in the Basque Country 'appears as a practice to follow'; evidences from state and regional legislation, and finally 8 agreements with public administrations for implementing of SEAs in different countries (IMPACT-EV, 2017b).

DISCIT

DISCIT is characterised by collaborative efforts involving researchers and stakeholders associations, representative groups of disabled, decision makers that helped to define the problems related to disability as a common area of intervention, with several articulations. This change of perspective allowed to calibrate as best as possible the instruments of direct investigation and to define the structure of results in order to make it easier to propose their integration in institutional settings. At the same time, the project created a stable forum for the interactions between researchers, institutions and organisations of people with disabilities, to discuss the problems of the disabled people, to encourage the exchange and dissemination of good practices and to create common understandings between institutions and associations (IMPACT-EV, 2017a).

MODALITIES AND COMMUNICATIONS

Stakeholders' involvement was directly related to the theoretical framework used for analysing "Active Citizenship" (EC-EESC, 2012), which was articulated in three steps: a) to review the initial conditions of the disability policy system and their configuration with respect to individuals with disability, their families and their inclusion in local communities, in job market, and social and civil activities; b) to analyse the effective implementation of the measures in daily life of persons with disabilities; c) to figure out how the results of the mentioned analysis interacts with respect to the three pillars of the Active Citizenship action, namely Security, Autonomy and Influence (EC-EESC, 2012).

As to the first point, stakeholders gave relevant feedbacks on the effective application of laws, highlighting the levels of protection for the

various groups of disabled people. This helped the researchers to have a more complete vision of the state of the art. The effects of this approach are reported in the interview to the representative of one of the two DPOs included in the consortium:

"I think that one specific thing that my organisation bring to the consortium was this specific knowledge of the positions of rights of persons with mental disease that we discussed with other partners of the consortium. I have also a background as researcher at the university and I was a legal advisory of the organisation during the project but it was obvious that the project itself, all the other partners, at the very beginning needed this input from this specific area, it is not easily deducible from the official documents, because the attribution of rights for some categories of people is different from the prescriptions of the law." (Stakeholder)

The second part of the DISCIT research concerned the investigation of the conditions of people with disabilities through a data collection based on interviews with a large audience of disabled people. In this phase, the stakeholders involved in the project provided their contribution to the questionnaire on which the interviews were based:

"I had the opportunity to talk with the stakeholders about the questionnaire. Feedback used to correct the methodological part were greater in the qualitative part, but in general it was a useful debate because it allowed me to focus on the types of indicators used subjects other than researchers, giving me a more balanced view of the problem." (Researcher).

Also, stakeholders actively participated in the interviews, proposing themselves as intermediates between researchers and interviewees and helping the latter to overcome the embarrassment of talking to strangers about their condition of a disabled person.

Members of the DISCIT consortium paid particular attention to the organisation of meetings with social, political and research institutions to discuss the new point of view from which the project aimed to address the issue of disability. The effects of these meetings were double: on the one hand, the principles underlying the approach were disseminated independently of the results, laying the foundations for a discussion on disability in discontinuity with respect to the past; on the other hand, the members of the consortium could gather tips to correct some elements of their methodology of analysis. According to the members of the project, DISCIT organised or has been involved in the organisation of more than 60 international initiatives over the three years of the project. In addition, the national groups have taken charge of organising meetings of the same type with local institutions to allow widespread communication:

*"While the project was still in progress, we organised local presentations in hospitals and local administrative offices. I cannot say whether we have had a political impact or if we have had an effect on their practices with these meetings but I can say that we have had the opportunity to present our approach to basic units of health service and public administration, having with them a fruitful exchange of opinions on the framework and the language to be used. We had the opportunity to export some of the project to places where we would like it to be applied every day."*⁷ (Researcher)

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English translation from the Italian original: "Mentre il progetto era ancora in itinere, abbiamo organizzato delle presentazioni a livello locale, presso presidi sanitari e amministrazioni locali. Non so dire se abbiamo avuto un impatto politico o se abbiamo avuto un effetto sulle loro pratiche con questi incontri ma posso dire che abbiamo avuto la possibilità di presentare il nostro approccio ad unità di base del servizio sanitario e della pubblica amministrazione, avendo con loro un proficuo scambio di opinioni sulla metodologia e sul linguaggio da utilizzare. Abbiamo avuto la possibilità di esportare un po' del progetto nei posti dove vorremmo che fosse applicato tutti i giorni".

TIMING

Collaborations between researchers and stakeholders were implemented through several meetings organised over the project duration, open to the network of actors involved. The project calendar included three plenary meetings. All the representatives of the stakeholder committees were invited to participate in order to discuss the progress of the project with the researchers and to propose initiatives to disseminate the results. Plenary meetings were interspersed with national group meetings. In addition, along the project meetings were organised between members of the consortium and representative of institutions and associations external to the project both at European and national level. In addition to the official meetings, the stakeholders have been constantly involved with requests for active collaboration, especially for data collection and discussion of the results. The constant demand for active participation was particularly appreciated by stakeholders:

“The request for participation was perfect, neither too much nor too little. We were asked to give our opinion on several points, but these requests were not concentrated in specific moments of the project development, as happened in previous experiences.”⁸ (Stakeholder)

LANGUAGE

Language harmonisation was one of the most significant and difficult result to achieve, the one that produced the most recognisable social impact.

First the exchange of information between researchers and stakeholders over the project duration was crucial. As reported by several interviews, these two groups started from different definition of “disability” and the difference in definition involved a series of divisions that could generate misunderstandings; the consequence of which would be the failure of research in terms of social and political effects. DISCIT actions helped to disentangle these differences, prompting researchers to assimilate the language of associations in order to increase the likelihood of results to be implemented in other areas than research. Within the project, the interactions between stakeholders and researchers were also useful to overcome the differences in language between different countries.

A second important interaction was with organisations and institutions external to the project. In these occasions, a common language was agreed in order to avoid misunderstanding between researchers, associations and institutions when disability was represented, and this result improved substantially translation of research findings into appropriate goods. In fact, the most interesting element was overcoming cultural gaps between different stakeholders as to the definition of disability, a change that produced effects beyond the aims of DISCIT:

“A problem is what really disability means. There are two understandings of disability. One is the sense of disability as marker of marginalised group of population. But there is another sense of disability which is a

phenomenon that people indeed experience during their life, namely some sort of limitation in functional ability. This second sense of disability is more a universal sense of disability but does not involve marginalisation of groups. People tend to define themselves in one of the two groups on the basis of a sort of self-definition, with respect to the impact that the limitation they experience has on their everyday life. [...] The lack of skills in a particular context does not nullify the person as a whole, so it is necessary to rethink the concept of disability, bringing it closer to the most universal sense to prevent policies to support people with disabilities become a way to marginalise a part of the population and deprive them, in fact if not legally, of some rights as human beings.” (Researcher)

OUTCOMES

DISCIT set out to promote the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in European and national legislation (UNCRPD). Despite translation of research findings into the political processes took longer than the duration of a project, some elements of impact on European and local measures have been observed directly during the activity of DISCIT.

At the European level, the components of the DISCIT research team “Active Citizenship through the use of New Technology” were involved during the drafting of the European Directive “European Accessibility Act”⁹, prepared by the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Furthermore, DISCIT researchers were invited to be part of the High-Level Group on Disability¹⁰, composed by European and national experts chosen from policymakers and stakeholders, in charge of define the strategies for implementation of the UNCRPD. Other political effects were observed at national level, for instance with the involvement of the Italian research group in the preparatory work of the law of the Tuscany Region for support to families of disabled persons and the audition at the National Observatory for Disabilities of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies. The Irish research team participated in a national task force that launched a trial of supportive policies for the disabled on more inclusive bases with respect to current legislation. Finally, the Swedish research group elaborated some guidelines, adopted by institutions like the Swedish Agency for Participation. Interviews demonstrated that a new point of observation was developed precisely through the dialogue between researchers and stakeholders on which the project was based:

“I think that this project has broaden the research community knowledge because it has forced the academics to discuss their approach with organisations and to consider this information.” (Stakeholder)

“During the international meetings I had the opportunity to meet responsible of associations that work in community living sector from other countries, in particular I was positively impressed by the practices used in Sweden [...] I proposed to use some of these ideas, in experimental way, in order to test if they fit with our social context, and some preliminary results seem to be positive.” (Stakeholder)

DISCUSSION

8 English translation from the Italian original: “La richiesta di partecipazione è stata perfetta, né troppo né troppo poco. Ci è stato chiesto di esprimere il nostro parere su diversi punti, ma queste richieste non erano concentrato in momenti specifici dello sviluppo del progetto, come accaduto in precedenti esperienze”.

9 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2015:0615:FIN>

10 <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1137&langId=en>

Both the illustrative case studies on projects carried out under the European Framework Programmes show that stakeholders generate a different approach to the social problem addressed; the main features of the stakeholders' interactions with researchers are summarised in Table 1.

	Modalities and communications	Timing	Language	Outcomes	Model of interactions (Muhonen et al. 2018)
DISCIT	Circular exchange of information Diffusion and discussion of the methods of analysis with external stakeholders	Intense involvement in the review and investigation phases, partial discussion of policy proposals	Harmonisation between countries and areas of interest	Formal involvement in policy making process Exchange of best practices Cultural impact: new idea of disability	Collaboration model Research engagement Knowledge "creeps" into society model
INCLUD-ED	Dedicated events for targeted stakeholders (training for teachers, dissemination for scholars, political meetings for institutional representatives)	Continuous involvement of all stakeholders along the five years of the project	Communicative methodology	Formal stakeholders' involvement in knowledge creation Replicability of the outputs in different national and institutional contexts	Collaboration model Public engagement model Mobility model

Using the Muhonen and colleagues (2018) typology, INCLUD-ED developed interactions with stakeholders that mainly belong to the co-

Table 1. Comparison of projects on typologies of stakeholders involvement.

creation typology, and the activities adopted elements that relate to collaboration, public engagement and mobility models. DISCIT had a more hybrid structure, which belong to the co-creation typology – through collaboration, and driving social change typology – through activities that featured the research engagement and the knowledge "creeps into society" models¹¹. In this respect, typologies aimed at understanding changes produced through the involvement of stakeholders in research actions is a helpful tool for comparing different configurations of the relationships within the network of actors involved, which can also support a more precisely tracing of the translational effects generated.

The co-development of a new language and harmonised wording produced a cultural impact which was extremely important and took a long time. However, it is a type of impact difficult to single out through empirical observations related to measurable items; furthermore, also the impact at policy level took a long time to emerge (beyond the project time limit) and it was in both cases a direct consequence of the cultural transformation. In this respect, stakeholders are key carriers for social impact in SS research.

The transformative effects on society were linked to the co-production of knowledge that is used by societal actors but, in turn, the co-production of knowledge needed the development of an appropriate communication to deconstruct the content, organisational features and knowledge carriers. The formal and informal confrontation between re-

searchers and stakeholders – when it is a recurrent mechanism of networking rather than an endogenous event for them showed enormous potential for producing translational effects. However, the sustainability of the transformations produced through the projects is an element that went beyond the effort of the research teams. The duration of the project and the resources have not been entirely sufficient to have the chance that effects could remain over time, especially when institutional barriers appeared.

How these results are relevant for the evaluation of research projects? Some general advantages of stakeholders' participation can be outlined. On the one hand, it helps to figure out at certain extent problems of attribution of impacts produced by the project, and this is an important support to figure out the presence of causal linkages between project outcomes and effects on society. On the other hand, stakeholders helped to follow effects derived from the project for a longer period after the project completion. It is more difficult to understand how the characteristics of the project organisations and the modes of interactions between researchers and stakeholders can be assessed through specific criteria respectively at ex-ante and ex-post level. Here it is important to highlight two main elements in common of the illustrative case studies analysed.

First, in both cases the scientific quality of the outputs was very good. Bibliometric indicators and web-based indicators show that the scientific

11 According to Muhonen et al. 2018 (pp. 14-16) the "Collaboration model" is characterised by researchers collaborate regularly with stakeholders. Impact is gained through open access ideology and through interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach. In the "Public engagement model" "results of research are taken into action by using society as a laboratory. Publicity is a necessity for impact.". In the "Mobility model" "knowledge and skills of a researcher are taken into use in a new context". Research engagement "increases awareness of the topic at hand. Targets of the study get recognition and sense of empowerment through the research process". In the model, knowledge 'creeps' into society's daily life's and political arena changes are produced "later on in relation to public opinion or legislation".

value of the projects research outputs (papers in international indexed journals, books, book chapters, etc.) were well recognised in the field community. This element produced a positive feeling about the capability of the project to realise sound research results, despite some criticisms emerged in the interviews about the possibility that taking on-board considerations coming from the interactions with stakeholders is likely to decrease the originality of the research effort, impeding very innovative results.

Second, both cases are examples of projects pursuing impact using a theory-based approach: INCLUD-ED used the Habermas' theory of agents of social change and the critical communication methodology; DISCIT used the Active Citizenship approach. The effect was that impact was fully integrated in the theoretical framework of the research projects, driving the subsequent phases of the design and implementations of stakeholders' participation. Also, the interactions between researchers and stakeholders were implemented according to conceptual frameworks that included the stakeholders -either they were partners of the consortium or external to the project – as main actors to achieve the intended objectives. This element reduced some very well-known shortcomings generally linked to stakeholders' interactions due to low commitment and contribution to research activities over the project duration. Finally, building common harmonised languages in different contexts of application emerged as the most important element to generate impact under a co-creation model; however, this result can be achieved through dedicated efforts, and it cannot be considered as a taken for granted element.

In sum, theory-based approaches of stakeholders' involvement, building a common language, in combination with organisational features and careful timing of the interactions are all important elements to be considered in ex-ante evaluation. The presence of them in the design of the project should improve the likelihood that an impact might occur. In the same vein, the mentioned items should be assessed over the project implementation in order to understand whether the research activities were properly developed to achieve the objective of producing an impact. Also, in an ex-post assessment the linkage between scientific outputs and impact is an issue that deserves attention in order to avoid a trade-off between pursuing an impact and the quality of the research outputs.

CONCLUSIONS

Stakeholders' participation to research efforts is definitely an important element to reach social impact. For research in social science, stakeholders are key carriers for translating research results into cultural changes, which are likely to enable transformative effects of society. Furthermore, stakeholders represent the interests of society and this might empower them to mediate research outcomes to policy makers better than researchers themselves.

In this paper we deepened two cases related to a specific context of application, that is the development of research projects under the funding of European Framework Programmes; the analysis shows that organisation and communication, timing and language are key items to realise fruitful interactions that can produce – or contribute to produce – an impact, translating scientific knowledge into appropriable goods.

We also pointed out some items that should be considered in the evaluation of research projects, both at ex-ante and ex-post level, chan-

ging to some extent criteria and methods of impact assessment in SS research. However, how this could be realised in concrete terms is definitely an open question that needs more research effort.

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