▶ **PRO**FEEDBACK ◀

PROFEEDBACK POLICY BRIEF

STRENGTHENING PARTICIPATION FOR BETTER EVALUATION

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Summary

At the heart of this policy brief is a clear message: participation is not just a value—it is a strategy for better evaluation. When stakeholders, especially programme beneficiaries, are actively involved in the evaluation process—from framing questions to interpreting results—evaluations become more relevant, legitimate, and impactful.

Although participatory approaches are increasingly present in evaluation, in practice partnerships often remain a matter of formal compliance. As a result, the knowledge of target groups is not sufficiently incorporated into evaluation questions, criteria, and the use of results. The brief has a dual purpose: (1) to demonstrate why and how participation enhances the quality, legitimacy, and usability of evaluations; and (2) to provide policymakers with practical steps for meaningful, rather than merely symbolic, involvement. While we place particular focus on EU cohesion policy, the principles presented are equally applicable in other policy areas.

Implementing meaningful participation in cohesion policy is often hampered by practical constraints. According to the OECD (2022), these include the complexity of citizen engagement processes, limited political buy-in, rigid timelines, and structural administrative barriers. Such conditions can limit

Key messages

Participation is not a formality—it is a pathway to more relevant, legitimate, and effective evaluations.

When people contribute to how programmes are assessed, they also shape how change happens.

From storytelling to co-analysis, participatory methods turn evaluation into a shared learning process.

Genuine participation requires time, intention, and inclusion—but the return is smarter policy and stronger communities.

Recommendations

Clarify the purpose of participation. Define whether the goal is to improve relevance, support transformation, or empower communities—and align methods accordingly.

Choose the right level of engagement. Use a flexible continuum (inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower) to tailor participation to the policy context and stakeholder capacity.

Integrate participation across all stages. Go beyond consultation—engage stakeholders in problem definition, design, data analysis, and follow-up action to build ownership and usability.

The evaluation of European policy measures is closely connected to citizens, and their meaningful involvement must be strengthened.

the scope and depth of stakeholder involvement, even when there is formal commitment to participatory approaches. Addressing these barriers requires clear objectives, adequate resources, and strong institutional commitment at both national and EU levels.

The brief highlights the added value of participatory evaluation, focusing on EU cohesion policy in particular. It fosters ownership, builds trust, democratises knowledge and encourages innovation in policymaking. These benefits are particularly important in complex policy environments such as EU cohesion policy, where inclusive methods can support more responsive and just governance.

The policy brief concludes with practical recommendations for policy-makers and evaluators. The research was based on a targeted search carried out in June 2025 in the European Commission's Evaluation Database. We included only those evaluations that focused on cohesion policy or related policy areas, applied qualitative and/or explicitly participatory methods, were accessible in English or Hungarian, and were publicly available. All other records were excluded during the screening stage.

Our analytical approach combined desk research and secondary analysis. Desk research involved synthesising information from existing evaluations, reports, articles, and databases without generating new primary data. Secondary analysis referred to revisiting evaluation findings and annexed datasets through the lens of participatory evaluation. To structure the material, we applied thematic coding to identify recurring mechanisms, benefits, and challenges of participation. Insights were triangulated across three sources: the EC database records, relevant academic literature, and discussions from the 7th PROFEEDBACK Conference, which provided valuable practitioner perspectives.

The review is not without limitations. Publication bias may be present, since evaluations with participatory elements are more likely to be published. Furthermore, restricting the search to English and Hungarian may have excluded relevant evidence available in other languages.

Relevance Of Participation in Evaluation

WHY PARTICIPATION MATTERS IN EVALUATION?
To make evaluation meaningful, we must centre those who experience the impact of measures.
Participation brings unique, grounded knowledge into the process—bridging the gap between technical analysis and lived reality. Involving stakeholders from the start builds legitimacy and transforms evaluation into a platform for dialogue and action.

In recent years, there has been growing recognition that meaningful stakeholder involvement is essential for understanding the long-term performance and impact of programmes and policies. Rather than treating evaluation as a purely technical exercise, participatory approaches invite those directly affected—especially programme participants—to actively contribute at every stage of the process. (Guijt, 2014). Community involvement can go beyond qualitative feedback to include participation in the design, implementation, and interpretation of evaluations (Zukoski & Luluquisen, 2002; Rodríguez-Campos & O'Sullivan, 2010).

Participatory methods are applicable across all types of impact evaluations, regardless of methodology. Examples include storytelling, mind mapping, picture-based discussions, the Most Significant Change technique, participatory surveys, mapping, and collaborative group activities (BetterEvaluation,.; Juujärvi & Lund, 2015; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).

In European policy-making—especially in cohesion policy and EU funding—participatory approaches are gaining prominence not only for their ethical and democratic value, but also as tools for more effective, evidence-informed governance. Managing authorities, evaluators, and regional actors can benefit from involving citizens and beneficiaries in structured, meaningful ways, particularly when decisions affect local development priorities, service delivery, or resource allocation (European Commission, 2014; COHESIFY, 2018).

data collection, analysis, co-creation, interpretation, use of results

Local voices   Policy & outcomes

Participation in evaluation processes enhances relevance and credibility, builds legitimacy, and fosters ownership among stakeholders.

Crucially, participation also enhances the uptake and practical use of evaluation results—especially in complex policy environments, like cohesion policy, where institutional trust may be fragile. This happens through several interconnected mechanisms:

- *Refining problem definition*. Early involvement of stakeholders sharpens the relevance of evaluation questions and helps avoid misplaced focus. Evidence from OECD member countries shows that deliberative and participatory

mechanisms, when introduced early, increase the accuracy and legitimacy of agenda setting (OECD, 2025a).

- *Jointly setting evaluation criteria*. Co-created definitions of success and failure clarify expectations, increase transparency, and improve consistency. The OECD's Reinforcing Democracy Initiative stresses that shared rules and feedback loops are crucial for building trust and enhancing the legitimacy of evaluation outcomes (OECD, 2024).

- *Improving data quality and validation.* Local knowledge provides richer, context-sensitive insights and improves data credibility. Recent OECD analysis highlights that structured civil society involvement contributes to more accurate and applicable evidence bases (OECD, 2025b).

- *Strengthening ownership and use of results.* Evaluations co-produced with stakeholders are more likely to be applied in practice. The OECD's Exploring New Frontiers in Citizen Participation report (2025) confirms that inclusive and targeted participation increases the likelihood that results will be taken up and embedded in policy learning.

These mechanisms are particularly relevant when addressing spatial and social inequalities, where conventional evaluation tools often overlook context-specific needs (Smętkowski et al., 2018).

Clarifying Participatory Research vs. Participatory Evaluation:

While both participatory research and participatory evaluation emphasize stakeholder engagement, they differ in purpose. Participatory research primarily aims to co-generate knowledge through collaborative inquiry, often focusing on empowerment and capacity-building within communities (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Participatory evaluation, by contrast, is oriented toward assessing the value or effectiveness of a programme or policy, with the explicit aim of informing decisions and improving practice (Wiggins et al., 2017; Núñez et al., 2021). This brief focuses on evaluation, yet it draws on participatory research tools—such as co-design and community-based data interpretation—to enrich the evaluation cycle, increase legitimacy, and foster ownership (Teodorowski et al., 2023).

Ultimately, participatory approaches can shape policy. When embedded in action research or transformative evaluation models, they support co-creation, critical reflection, and the redistribution of interpretative power. In doing so, they contribute to more just, responsive, and legitimate policy processes (Fetterman et al., 2018; IPOL, 2020).

How to start as a decision-maker?

- *Clarify the evaluation question or decision to be made, and ensure institutional commitment. Effective evaluation systems require clear mandates and aligned capacities (OECD, 2025).*
- *Map out all relevant actors by assessing their interest and influence to identify critical participants for meaningful engagement (EU EXACT framework).*
- *Determine whether you're informing, consulting, or involving in co-decision. Align the participation level with the process's goals and context. OECD emphasizes appropriate depth of involvement.*
- *Select criteria such as relevance, equity, effectiveness, and accessibility. Apply them thoughtfully, considering context specificity as guided by OECD standards.*
- *Plan timeline, resources, inclusive design, feedback loops, and transparency. A stakeholder engagement plan should outline methods, timing, responsibilities, and monitoring mechanisms*
- *Define who will interpret, decide on, and apply the results. Manage stakeholder influence carefully—especially corporate—so knowledge is useful, fair, and not distorted (OECD, 2025).*

Benefits Of Participation in Evaluation

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION IN EVALUATION
Participation doesn't just improve the process— it enhances the outcomes. From trust and ownership to better targeting and sustainability, participatory evaluation delivers both practical and political value. It empowers individuals, strengthens institutions, and supports more adaptive policymaking in complex environments.

Beyond its methodological value, participatory evaluation enhances the legitimacy, credibility, and usefulness of findings. It builds trust, encourages commitment, and supports the real-time adaptation of policies based on direct feedback. Participation also fosters capacity building, enabling individuals to become active contributors to change. Ultimately, inclusive evaluation processes strengthen democratic values and contribute to more equitable and responsive policymaking. The following reflections delve deeper into how and why these benefits matter in practice. Drawing on diverse policy areas and practical experiences, this section highlights the transformative potential of participatory approaches for more resilient, inclusive, and adaptive policymaking.
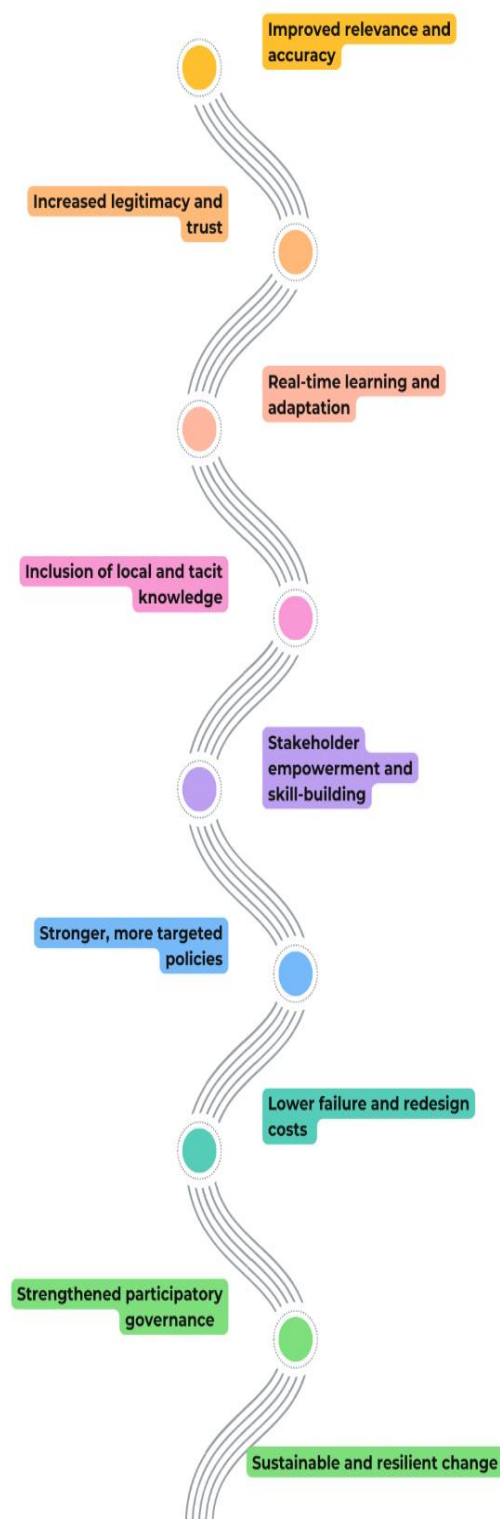
Benefits of Participatory Evaluation

Participatory evaluation offers not only practical and methodological advantages but also contributes to a wider shift in how we understand evidence, ownership, and decision-making in public policy. Below, we further expand on key dimensions of its added value:

- ***Resilience and sustainability of policy outcomes***. When stakeholders are involved from the beginning, they are more likely to identify with the policy goals and remain engaged during implementation. This enhances the sustainability of results and reduces the risks of top-down policy failure (Fetterman et al., 2018).

- ***Bridging formal and informal knowledge systems****.* PE approaches allow for integrating lived, experiential, and often tacit knowledge with formal data and metrics (Guijt, 2014).

- ***Increased cost-efficiency through better targeting****.* While participatory methods may seem resource-intensive initially, they often result in better-aligned interventions that reduce long-term costs through improved targeting and reduced failure rates (Rodríguez-Campos & Rincones-Gómez, 2013).

- ***Improved conflict management and trust-building****.* In contexts of low trust or social division, participatory evaluation can serve as a neutral, dialogue-based platform for shared understanding and collective problem-solving (Sette,.; Zukoski & Luluquisen, 2002).

- ***Youth and community engagement****.* PE opens opportunities for meaningful youth participation in civic life and public programmes. Examples from participatory action research (PAR) show how young people gain agency by evaluating policies that affect them (Juujärvi & Lund, 2015).

- ***Monitoring cross-cutting principles****.* Participatory approaches can also support the evaluation of horizontal themes like gender equality, inclusion, or sustainability.

Benefits of participatory evaluation

- Improved relevance and accuracy
- Increased legitimacy and trust
- Real-time learning and adaptation
- Inclusion of local and tacit knowledge
- Stakeholder empowerment and skill-building
- Stronger, more targeted policies
- Lower failure and redesign costs
- Strengthened participatory governance
- Sustainable and resilient change

For example, participatory gender audits offer valuable insight into institutional dynamics often missed by external assessments (BetterEvaluation).

- *Greater equity in knowledge production*. PE directly challenges traditional hierarchies by enabling a wider array of voices to contribute to the production of evaluative knowledge. This has particular relevance for evaluations involving marginalised populations or contexts marked by historic exclusion (Hall, 1981).

- *Improved institutional responsiveness*. Institutions that adopt participatory evaluation practices are more likely to build feedback mechanisms that are embedded in regular planning and budgeting cycles. This responsiveness strengthens adaptive governance (Fetterman et al., 2018).

- *Policy innovation and experimentation*. By integrating iterative, participatory feedback into policymaking, institutions can become more agile and experimental. New models can be piloted and rapidly improved with continuous input from those directly affected (Guijt & Gaventa, 1998).

- *Strengthening civil society and democratic culture*. Involving civil society actors in the evaluation of policies contributes to more active citizenship and reinforces participatory democracy. Evaluative participation may be an entry point for broader engagement in governance (Rodríguez-Campos & O'Sullivan, 2010).

These benefits are particularly compelling in the context of EU cohesion policy, where diverse regional realities and local development priorities require context-sensitive and inclusive approaches. Participatory evaluation can strengthen both the legitimacy and effectiveness of cohesion-related interventions, particularly when applied by managing authorities or programme evaluators in partnership with communities.

Examples of Use Across Policy Areas

Policy Areas for Participatory Evaluation

- Migration policies
- Health policy
- Education
- Social protection policies
- Urban development
- Environmental programmes
- Youth focused interventions
- Labor market policies

Participatory methods have been successfully applied in numerous fields. In health policy, community mapping and focus groups have been used to understand service access and barriers (Zukoski & Luluquisen, 2002; BetterEvaluation).

In education, timeline workshops and student-led surveys have helped evaluate school climate and learning relevance (Juujärvi & Lund, 2015; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).

Social protection policies have benefited from tools like Most Significant Change (MSC) and participatory ranking to identify needs and priorities (Guijt, 2014; BetterEvaluation,).

In urban development, participatory GIS[1] (Geographic Information Systems) and walking interviews have been used to examine spatial justice and accessibility (Rodríguez-Campos & O'Sullivan, 2010). Environmental programmes apply citizen science and storytelling to document local climate impacts and behavioural change (Fetterman et al., 2018; Guijt & Gaventa, 1998). Youth-focused interventions have used

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[1] **Participatory GIS (Geographic Information Systems)** is a methodology that actively involves community members in the use of geographic information systems. Its aim is to enable local residents and other stakeholders to directly contribute to the collection and analysis of spatial data, facilitating a better understanding of spatial justice, accessibility, and other community-related issues. This method is particularly useful in urban development, environmental projects, and other areas where the knowledge and experience of local communities are essential for making informed decisions.

peer-to-peer evaluations and photovoice methods to ensure that young people's voices inform programme design (Juujärvi & Lund, 2015; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).

In labour market policies, workplace-based evaluation circles help identify skill gaps and training needs (Rodríguez-Campos & Rincones-Gómez, 2013). Migration policy evaluations have used participatory data walks and life history methods to understand displacement drivers and support strategies from the perspective of affected individuals (Sette; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998).

These applications demonstrate that participatory evaluation is widely adaptable across policy sectors and societal levels, but also suggest that its success depends on appropriate policy alignment and institutional integration (IPOL, 2020; Smętkowski et al., 2018). To fully realise the benefits of participatory evaluation, its adoption must go beyond tokenistic inclusion. Meaningful participation requires adequate time, resources, and facilitation. It challenges conventional hierarchies and requires openness to mutual learning. However, the payoff is substantial: more grounded policies, more credible data, and more empowered communities. As Fetterman et al. (2018) argue, collaborative and participatory approaches are not just techniques—they reflect a commitment to democratic practice and shared responsibility in shaping the future.

How Participatory Evaluation Adds Value Across Sectors

The added value of participatory evaluation is most evident when considering its application in real-world settings to evaluate measures supported by EU cohesion policy.

In the field of disability policy, for example, Hungary's deinstitutionalisation efforts under the 2014–2020 development period were accompanied by consultations with persons with disabilities, advocacy groups and service providers. Despite tensions and structural constraints, meaningful involvement helped identify the limits of top-down implementation and drew attention to the importance of personal autonomy, local service accessibility and supported decision-making—issues that were often overlooked in earlier programme cycles (Gábos & Giflo, 2023).

Similarly, in the context of social inclusion, the SICAP programme in Ireland actively engaged target groups such as Roma, Travellers, lone parents and people with disabilities in programme design and evaluation. Community development approaches were embedded in monitoring frameworks, and practitioners were encouraged to tailor actions based on local consultations. This led to more responsive services, increased legitimacy among beneficiaries, and enhanced collaboration between local development companies and marginalised communities (KPMG, 2024).

In England's ERDF programme, participatory principles were incorporated into project development through the involvement of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and sub-committees. While challenges emerged due to the complexity of multi-level governance and rigid thematic allocations, the evaluation found that the programme was more responsive where local stakeholders had genuine strategic input. The process evaluation also emphasised that shared ownership and stakeholder-driven priorities increased programme coherence and effectiveness, particularly in areas related to business innovation and low-carbon initiatives (Hatch Regeneris, 2019).

These examples highlight that participatory evaluation does not only serve as a diagnostic tool but actively shapes the trajectory of interventions of cohesion policy. Where applied with depth and intention, it surfaces contextual knowledge, exposes policy blind spots, and opens pathways for transformative change. What emerges is not just better data or feedback, but an altered relationship between institutions and the people they serve—a shift from consultation to co-creation.

LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT AND PRACTICES

UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATORY DEPTH
Not all forms of participation are equal—and not all are effective. Understanding the levels and timing of engagement helps evaluators design processes that are not only inclusive but also responsive and democratic. This chapter unpacks what it means to move from consultation to co-creation and empowerment.

Participatory approaches to evaluation and research are not monolithic. They vary significantly depending on the depth, scope, and purpose of engagement, as well as on the social and institutional context. Understanding the levels of engagement and the stages of participatory research is essential for designing meaningful and context-appropriate participatory processes.

This is particularly relevant in the context of EU cohesion policy, where inclusive and participatory methods are increasingly recognised as essential for evidence-based and democratically legitimate decision-making. The EU Better Regulation process[2] clearly sets out the need to actively involve stakeholders in drafting legislation, evaluating it and assessing its impact. This can be achieved through open public consultations, targeted interviews, workshops and expert groups, among others. However, the European Commission's Evaluation Handbook (European Commission, 2024) is rather vague on stakeholder involvement.

Levels of Citizen Engagement

Stakeholder or citizen engagement can be conceptualised along a continuum from minimal to transformative involvement. Based on synthesis across Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969), the IAP2 framework, and more recent participatory evaluation models (Guijt, 2014; USAID, 2022; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Fetterman et al., 2018), five key levels can be distinguished:

- *Informing* – The most basic level, where participants receive information but do not influence the process. This can support transparency but offers no decision-making power.
- *Consulting* – Stakeholders are asked for feedback (e.g., on priorities or design options), yet they do not shape the core direction of the evaluation. Their input may or may not be incorporated.
- **Involving** – Participants actively take part in specific stages, such as data collection or interpretation, but are not engaged in strategic decisions. This increases the relevance of the process (Sette.).
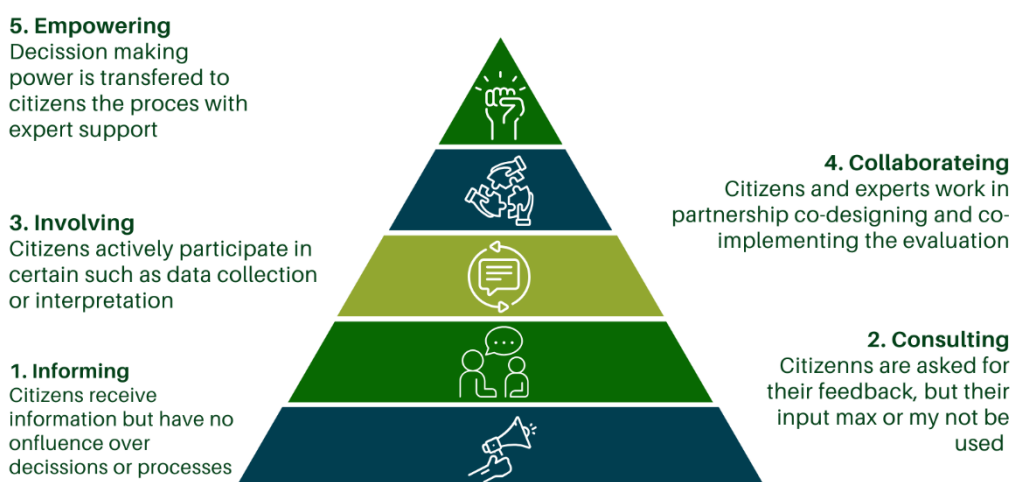
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[2] https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-making-process/better-regulation_en

- **Collaborating** – A partnership approach where stakeholders and evaluators co-design and co-implement the evaluation. This form aligns with practical participatory evaluation (P-PE) and fosters mutual learning (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998).

- **Empowering** – In transformative and empowerment-focused models, power is deliberately transferred to participants, who control the evaluation agenda. External experts act as facilitators or "critical friends" (Fetterman et al., 2018).

Rather than viewing these levels as rigid categories, they can be seen as flexible zones of practice. The choice of engagement level should reflect the evaluation's goals, context, and ethical considerations (Rodríguez-Campos & O'Sullivan, 2010).

In the context of EU cohesion policy and regional development, for example, engaging stakeholders beyond the consultative level can enhance programme responsiveness, help align interventions with local development realities, and strengthen the knowledge base for evidence-based policy design (European Commission, 2020; COHESIFY, 2018).

Levels of stakeholders' involvement

5. Empowering
Decission making power is transfered to citizens the proces with expert support

4. Collaborateing
Citizens and experts work in partnership co-designing and co-implementing the evaluation

3. Involving
Citizens actively participate in certain such as data collection or interpretation

2. Consulting
Citizenns are asked for their feedback, but their input max or my not be used

1. Informing
Citizens receive information but have no onfluence over decissions or processes

Based on: Spectrum of Public Participation at International Association for Public Participation. www.iap2.org

Stages of Engagement in Participatory Research

The participatory research process unfolds through a set of interconnected stages, each offering different opportunities for stakeholder involvement. Drawing on Vaughn & Jacquez (2020), Guijt (2014), and participatory action research traditions (Juujärvi & Lund, 2015), the following stages are commonly recognised:

Stages of Engagement in Participatory Research
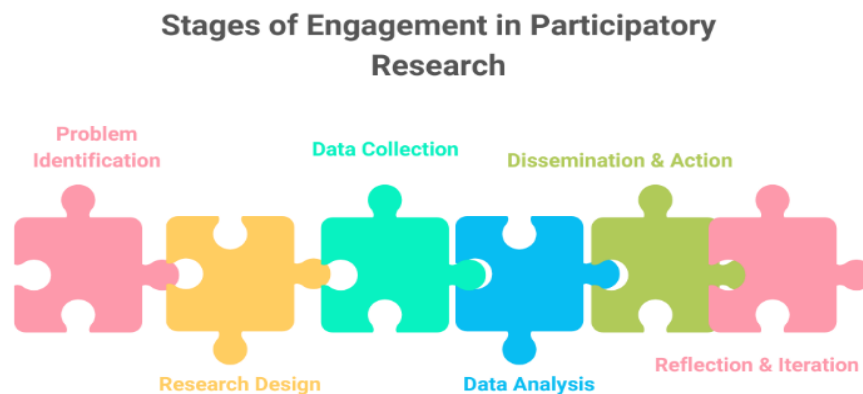
- **Problem Identification** – The initial framing of research questions ideally emerges from collective dialogue. In transformative approaches, the process begins with a shared recognition of injustice or systemic exclusion.
- **Research Design** – This stage involves collaboratively determining appropriate methods, defining roles, and agreeing on timelines. Including participant knowledge ensures cultural and contextual fit (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).
- **Data Collection** – Participants are trained and engaged in collecting data through qualitative or quantitative methods (e.g., interviews, participatory mapping, photo voice). This fosters ownership and builds capacity (Zukoski & Luluquisen, 2002).
- **Data Analysis** – Collective analysis sessions (e.g., storytelling circles, matrix ranking, timeline reviews) ensure that the interpretation reflects local perspectives and lived experiences (Fetterman et al., 2018).

- ***Dissemination and Action*** – Findings are shared in accessible formats, and communities take part in co-designing responses or follow-up actions. This may include visual reports, theatre, exhibitions, or local dialogues (Guijt, 2014).
- ***Reflection and Iteration*** – In cyclical or action-oriented frameworks, such as empowerment evaluation or PAR, ongoing reflection informs adaptation and feeds into further learning loops (Fetterman et al., 2018; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).

What distinguishes genuinely participatory practice is not simply the inclusion of participants at one stage, but sustained, equitable involvement throughout the cycle – especially in shaping what questions are asked and how findings are used. Different approaches emphasise different stages: for example, P-PE tends to engage participants in design and use, while T-PE and PAR models prioritise problem definition and action (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Juujärvi & Lund, 2015).

Moreover, in many participatory research processes, the core value is not always the research itself, but the empowerment it enables. In fact, the logic can be reversed: if the aim is to empower individuals or communities—especially those who have been marginalised or excluded—then participatory research can serve as a tool for awakening awareness, fostering self-advocacy, and initiating change. In this sense, it is not only that participatory research can lead to empowerment, but also that empowerment-driven interventions may deliberately adopt participatory research as their method of action. This reflects a broad spectrum of purposes, ranging from methodologically rigorous inquiry to empowerment as the primary objective—with many variations in between.

In the field of EU cohesion policy, participatory approaches aligned with this full-cycle logic can contribute to more democratic governance of development funding, and can serve as a vehicle for locally grounded experimentation, policy learning, and social innovation (IPOL, 2020; Smętkowski et al., 2018).

Moreover, they can ensure that evaluation processes generate robust, context-sensitive evidence that directly informs the design and implementation of future interventions.

Recommendations

Participatory evaluation and research methods have evolved not only as normative ideals of inclusion but also as evidence-based strategies for improving the relevance, legitimacy, and impact of public interventions. Across disciplines and sectors, research shows that when participation is meaningful and methodologically integrated, it leads to better-designed programmes, more sustainable outcomes, and stronger community ownership (Fetterman et al., 2018; BetterEvaluation; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Drawing on the accumulated evidence and practical insights from the reviewed literature and practice, the following recommendations aim to support policy-makers, programme designers, and evaluators in the effective use of participatory methods:

1. Define the purpose of participation clearly. Participation should not be symbolic or ad hoc. Clearly articulate whether the aim is to improve programme relevance, support structural transformation, or build local capacity (Empowerment Evaluation) (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Fetterman et al., 2018).

2. Adapt the level of engagement to the context. Use the engagement continuum (inform – consult – involve – collaborate – empower) as a flexible tool, aligning the degree of participation with the policy field, institutional readiness, and stakeholder capacities (USAID, 2022; Guijt, 2014). In cohesion policy contexts, this alignment should reflect multi-level governance structures and local development priorities.

3. Integrate participation throughout all stages. Avoid limiting participation to data collection. Include stakeholders in problem definition, design, data analysis, dissemination, and iteration. Evidence shows that multi-stage involvement enhances ownership and the usability of findings (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020; Juujärvi & Lund, 2015). Such holistic integration is particularly

valuable in EU-funded programmes, where results orientation and local responsiveness must go hand in hand.

4. Ensure inclusivity and representation. Be intentional about involving marginalised groups, especially those typically excluded from decision-making. Use culturally appropriate tools (e.g., storytelling, visual methods, participatory ranking) to reach diverse voices (BetterEvaluation; Zukoski & Luluquisen, 2002).

5. Build local capacity for meaningful participation. Allocate time and resources to training, facilitation, and knowledge sharing. Participatory evaluation works best when stakeholders understand the process and feel empowered to shape it (Rodríguez-Campos & O'Sullivan, 2010). This is particularly relevant in cohesion policy implementation, where the administrative burden and capacity gaps may otherwise constrain participation.

6. Use mixed methods to balance rigour and relevance. Combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture lived experiences and measurable outcomes. Evidence indicates that mixed-method participatory designs yield richer insights and greater policy uptake (Fetterman et al., 2018; Sette).

7. Apply participatory approaches in fields where complexity and context matter most. Use participatory methods in areas such as social inclusion, education, health, or youth policy – where local knowledge, power dynamics, and lived experience critically shape outcomes (Hall, 1981). Cohesion policy interventions in these domains particularly benefit from participatory evaluation, as they aim to reduce disparities and enhance territorial cohesion.

8. Institutionalise horizontal partnership. Move beyond vertical consultation and embed systemic cooperation across public authorities, civil society, private actors, and beneficiaries. This multi-actor partnership is critical for cohesive and territorially responsive governance (OECD, 2025a).

9. Make joint definition of evaluation criteria a mandatory element in Terms of Reference. Establish a minimum list of criteria—including relevance, effectiveness, and equality of access—to ensure shared standards of judgement and prevent tokenistic application (OECD DAC, 2021).

10. Develop transparent participant-selection protocols. Establish clear rules and documentation for how stakeholders are chosen, ensuring transparency, representativeness, and accountability. Such protocols mitigate risks of elite capture and build legitimacy of findings (OECD, 2025b).

11. Link recommendations to the 2027+ programming cycle. Participatory methods should be embedded in the design and evaluation requirements of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), and training modules and workshops should be developed to strengthen administrative capacity.

12. Anchor participatory approaches in the legal framework. Explicitly reference the partnership principle as enshrined in the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) and draw on relevant EU guidance documents to ensure compliance and standardisation (European Commission, 2014; 2024).

13. Institutionalise participation, don't isolate it. Embed participatory principles in broader planning, monitoring, and evaluation systems. Develop organisational guidelines and incentives that recognise the added value of engagement (Fetterman et al., 2018; Plottu & Plottu, 2011). In EU cohesion policy, this also aligns with legal requirements for partnership and programming under shared management.

14. Acknowledge and address limitations. Be transparent about the boundaries of participation. Participation does not guarantee consensus or empowerment. Be alert to risks of tokenism, elite capture, or burnout, and design safeguards accordingly (Juujärvi & Lund, 2015).

15. Evaluate the participation itself. Treat stakeholder involvement as both a means and an outcome. Use feedback mechanisms to assess how inclusive, fair, and impactful the participatory process was (BetterEvaluation). Participatory methods are not inherently empowering – they must be strategically designed and contextually grounded to avoid becoming empty gestures.

Participatory methods are not inherently empowering – they must be strategically designed and contextually grounded to avoid becoming empty gestures. Drawing on the work of Hur (2006), it is important to avoid "situation analysis without action," and

to prioritise the integration of reflection, agency, and community-led solutions (Juujärvi & Lund, 2015).

In summary, the recommendations above provide a framework for transforming participation from rhetoric into practice – from an accessory to an essential, evidence-informed strategy for better evaluation and governance.

In the context of EU cohesion policy, this transformation is not only desirable but necessary to ensure that investments are legitimate, adaptive, and rooted in real territorial needs. In EU cohesion policy and other complex policy fields, participatory approaches are increasingly recognised as key enablers of evidence-based and territorially responsive decision-making**.** However, its presence in the European Commission's Evaluation Handbook (European Commission, 2024) is rather vague, limited to stakeholder involvement at the consultation level. The Handbook highlights the role of stakeholders in being consulted through workshops, focus groups, individual interviews, surveys, etc., and in participating in debriefing sessions if relevant. The evaluation methods presented include participatory rural appraisal and participatory action research, as well as participatory learning in action. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the evaluation of *European policy measures is very much in the hands of citizens, and their involvement must be real and meaningful.*

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