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26 November 2026

ATELIER

innovATive Education for SociaL Inclusion via Co-dEsign pRactices

Co-design for social impact and inclusion

25 competencies by the ATELIER Project

Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi, Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Tiziana Ciampolini, Gabriel Dima, Antonio Fantasia, Maria Koimisoglou, Isabella Lalli, José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira, Lari Pitkäkangas, Elena Tornariti, Theodoros Tsanakas, Agnieszka Zarzyńska

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1. Introduction

Co-design for social impact and inclusion. 25 competencies by the ATELIER Project is the **handbook** derived from/ that gives tangible form to the Learning Programme released as the main result of the European project **ATELIER** (*innovATive Education for socia*L *Inclusion via co-dEsign pRactices*). It is a set of 25 chapters corresponding to 25 competencies on how **co-design** can be applied to support impactful projects and initiatives aimed at the **social inclusion** of people in conditions of marginalisation and vulnerability.

ATELIER stems from the belief that such challenging objectives could be achieved only by merging the competence and expertise of professionals in both the worlds of education and practice of social inclusion — a collaborative stance which is itself the foundation of social inclusion that works. The approach and content that this book offers are, indeed, the result of the joint work of an **international partnership** bringing together eight organisations, including **Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)**, convinced that design can be a powerful driver of effective social change: Politecnico di Torino (from Italy, in the role of coordinator), S-NODI (Italy), Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas OLAE - Lusofona University (Portugal), National University of Science and Technology Politehnica of Bucharest (Romania), Caritas Europa (Belgium), KC Kompetencenter (Sweden), Akadimos (Greece), and Synthesis Center for Research and Education (Cyprus).

By adopting a trans-disciplinary take on social inclusion practices, the ATELIER Learning Programme combines the analytical and critical perspective of Social Sciences with the transformative approach of Design. It tries to redefine learning for future practitioners in the field of social inclusion and design for impact, towards participatory and reflective processes that engage people and communities as active agents of impactful initiatives, fulfilling their needs and desires. Moreover, it is intended for an international target audience, including university students (in Design, but also in other fields, such as Educational Sciences) as well as early-career professionals — interested in or already engaged in practices and projects for social inclusion — offering them an **introductory grounding** in the principles, methods and practices of co-design for social inclusion.

The structure of this book is based on the **ATELIER Competence Framework**, which identifies the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to design and manage co-design processes for social inclusion and served as the foundation for the **ATELIER MOOC – *Co-design for Social Impact and Inclusion***. This framework was co-created by the ATELIER partners with the support of the project's Advisory Board — composed of experts and practitioners in design for social inclusion — to ensure its applicability to real contexts of social inclusion and community empowerment.

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino)

This book aims to:

- Provide learners with the **conceptual tools and practical methods** to plan and manage co-design processes in contexts of vulnerability or marginalisation.
- Promote a **transdisciplinary approach** that combines design thinking, social research, and participatory action.
- Contribute to the **professional development** of students, young professionals, and practitioners working in education, design, or community development.
- Foster **civic engagement and collective responsibility** through co-designed and context-sensitive innovation.
- Encourage professionals from **Higher Education Institutions and Civil Society Organisations to collaborate** in designing socially inclusive initiatives.

This is intended to **introduce people to a wide range of concepts** related to co-design for social inclusion. For this reason, it covers a broad spectrum of topics, rather than providing in-depth training on fewer subjects.

1.1 Learning outcomes

By studying this handbook, learners will be able to:

1. Embrace a **transformative perspective** on change and social impact through co-design;
2. Become familiar with the **culture, principles and values** of co-design for social inclusion and sustainability;
3. Learn to reflect **critically** on your **positionality** and your professional **role** in promoting inclusion and empowerment;
4. Understand how to apply **participatory research and problem-framing methods** to define and approach design challenges collaboratively;
5. Critically analyse the project **contexts** from the perspective of the **social, cultural, and institutional factors** influencing inclusion processes, and in terms of available and available **resources**;
6. Set off and facilitate **collaborative design and decision-making processes** involving diverse stakeholders;
7. Be able to support co-design projects **consciously and effectively**, balancing the **scales and efforts** of intervention, as well as the **forms of collaboration**;
8. Learn to manage **relationships** between different actors for cooperation, moving across levels of governance, institutional boundaries, and community settings, throughout the entire transformative process;
9. Understand the potential of **prototyping** and **feedback gathering** for adaptive and sustainable projects;
10. Integrate **transdisciplinary knowledge** and develop a **mindful attitude** towards the challenges of collaborative processes for social inclusion.

2. Methodology

The handbook is the result of a **collaborative writing process** that involved all partners of the ATELIER consortium, following the co-design principles promoted by the project itself.

Building on the ATELIER Competence Framework, **the book is organised into 25 Competencies (chapters) grouped within 9 Areas of Competence (units)**, ensuring alignment between the framework and the proposed learning pathway.

To ensure consistency throughout the handbook, a **shared editorial framework** was established for all 25 Competencies. Each chapter follows a common structure, **combining theoretical and practice-oriented sections** that bring together **complementary learning resources**. This **integrated pedagogical approach** responds to the diverse learning needs of readers with different backgrounds and levels of experience, and reflects the project's understanding of competence development as a process that combines conceptual knowledge with situated learning. While theoretical foundations provide the language and frameworks needed to understand co-design for social inclusion, engagement with real practices allows learners to recognise and navigate its complexity, contextual nature and transformative potential.

This approach also enabled the handbook to benefit from the **diverse expertise of the project partners**. Indeed, the writing responsibilities were allocated according to each partner's expertise: HEIs primarily contributed to the development of the theoretical foundations, while CSOs enriched the content with practice-based insights, field experience and recommendations for reflective and effective action.

The editorial process involved continuous **coordination, peer review and content harmonisation** to ensure consistency in terminology, style and pedagogical approach. Throughout its development, both the structure and the content of the handbook were progressively refined through iterative internal reviews and subsequently **validated by the project's Advisory Board**.

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3. How to use the handbook

As mentioned before, this book mirrors the structure of the ATELIER Competence Framework, being organised into **9 units** (corresponding to the Areas of Competence) and **25 chapters** (corresponding to the individual Competencies) developed by the ATELIER project.

The book has not been designed for a linear reading experience, but as a flexible resource allowing learners to **build personalised learning pathways** according to their specific background, interests, professional needs, and learning objectives. It is then possible to **explore the book freely**: the 9 units and the 25 chapters can be read in order or independently via the hyperlinks embedded in the document, allowing you to return to the start from any page (via the "Index" button).

Enjoy your reading!

Each Competency is addressed through a set of different categories of content:

- ***Overview of the Competency***;
- ***Definitions & discussion*** — in some cases with a Focus box presenting in-depth content;
- ***Tips & thoughts*** for practice;
- ***Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue*** — with direct links to the websites of the mentioned projects and the page number to find them in the Catalogue;
- ***Stories from ATELIER's partners*** — only textual versions;
- ***References*** — with link to the open access resources;
- ***Links to other Competencies*** — with hyperlinks to the mentioned Competencies.

AREA OF COMPETENCE 1
Social impact orientation

This Area of Competence invites us to explore how design and management of co-design processes can be framed with the aim of generating lasting positive change for individuals, communities, companies, and other bodies, as well as society as a whole. The Competencies you will encounter within this Area position impact as the starting point and guiding principle of every intervention.

The first Competency focuses on promoting a ***social impact culture and mindset***. This means recognising that complex social issues — such as poverty, migration, climate change… — cannot be solved through isolated or short-term actions. They are "wicked problems": multi-dimensional challenges that require systemic thinking, collaboration, and adaptability. Designing with an impact mindset involves shifting attention away from outputs alone and instead anticipating the long-term transformation that a project can support. Frameworks such as the Theory of Change are pivotal here: by mapping backwards from the impact, designers clarify the outcomes, outputs, and activities that are needed, and they also highlight the roles and responsibilities of different actors in the change process.

The second Competency clarifies the ***lexicon of purpose and impact***. It is not enough to have good intentions; one must be able to articulate them precisely and link them to concrete processes. Terms like purpose, intentionality, input, activity, output, outcome, and impact create a shared language for aligning values with actions. Developing accuracy in this vocabulary helps avoid confusion, ensures accountability, and keeps the focus on long-term transformation. Moreover, this Competency encourages us to design not only for immediate improvements but for the systemic reconfiguration of structures that perpetuate inequality. A future-oriented mindset, supported by foresight and scenario planning, helps ensure that projects remain resilient, adaptable, and sustainable.

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino)

The third Competency addresses the ***language and sensitivity of project management***. Terms such as partners, stakeholders, targets, baseline, KPIs, budget, or dissemination are common in professional practice, yet they can feel technical or exclusionary to those unfamiliar with them. Here, the challenge is to re-interpret this vocabulary through the lens of co-design and social inclusion. Used with sensitivity, project management language can become a bridge between technical procedures and human experience. For example, defining KPIs collaboratively with partners and beneficiaries ensures that they reflect lived realities, while reframing "budget" to include time, care, or social capital makes visible also the intangible resources that sustain collective projects. In this sense, even highly formal project tools — GANTT charts, reports, evaluation frameworks — can be re-designed as opportunities for dialogue, empowerment, and participation.

Together, these three Competencies present a coherent orientation: to:

- ***Mindset*** ensures that projects are rooted in the ambition to create real transformation;
- ***Lexicon*** ensures that this ambition is articulated and shared with precision and intentionality;
- ***Project management sensitivity*** ensures that the practices and processes of design are inclusive, transparent, and aligned with impact goals.

By integrating these perspectives, you can learn to navigate the complexity of contemporary challenges, designing interventions that are socially relevant, contextually appropriate, and sustainable over time.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- **Explain what social impact means** in different contexts and why it requires a shift from action-centred to impact-oriented design;
- **Apply the Theory of Change** as a framework for planning, monitoring, and evaluating social impact initiatives;
- **Distinguish clearly between purpose, input, activity, output, outcome, and impact**, and use these terms to frame and communicate project goals;
- **Employ foresight and scenario planning** to design interventions that are resilient and sustainable;
- **Demonstrate familiarity with project management vocabulary** and adapt it to inclusive and participatory contexts;
- **Re-interpret technical project tools** — such as KPIs, budgets, or GANTT charts — as opportunities to engage stakeholders and strengthen collaboration;
- **Integrate mindset, lexicon, and project management sensitivity** into a coherent approach to socially impactful design.

Area of Competence 1:

Social Impact Orientation

1 SOCIAL IMPACT CULTURE AND MINDSET

Overview

Understanding what is meant by "impact" and how it is defined as "social".
Knowledge of the Theory of Change (ToC) and its use as a tool to conceive change as the core and guide of design action, supporting project reasoning around transformative processes involving new behaviours, interactions, and relationships among people, communities, and organisations.

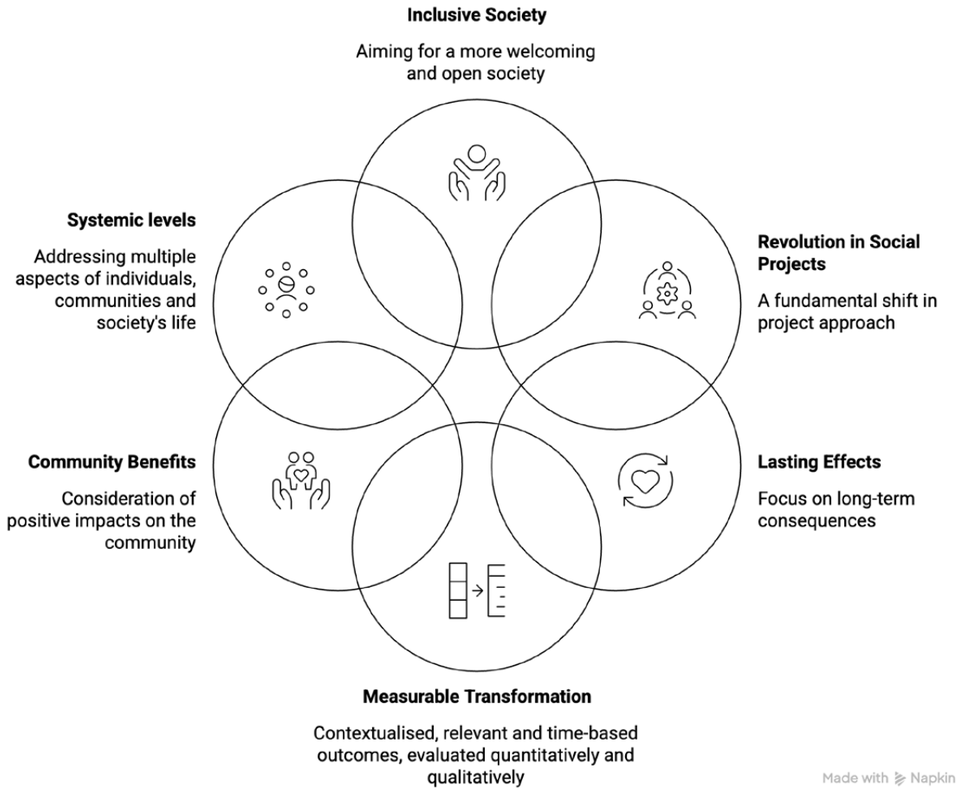
Texts by Tiziana Ciampolini, Isabella Lalli, Antonio Fantasia (Associazione S-NODI GROUP E.T.S.); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Agnieszka Zarzyńska (Caritas Europa); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Definitions and Discussion

Designing for social impact requires a **fundamental shift in how social projects are conceived and developed**: traditionally, when we design, at first, we think about which actions we want to achieve; instead, designing according to a social impact logic means **anticipating the lasting effects a project aims to achieve a proper design, and the contributions of the project to specific, measurable, relevant, time-based positive transformation in a given context** to address certain problems.

Social impact represents the totality of consequences on people and communities that result from an activity, project, programme, or public policy. For example, designing a social inclusion intervention for migrant women, with a social impact approach in place, means being capable of focusing on the real and lasting **benefits** that the given intervention **generates for women** (as project targets) and **for the community** (where women are included). This implies understanding the intervention's effects in a local community, in terms of quality of relationships, social cohesion, quality of life, health, and economy, after the project (intervention) is completed. Therefore, the goal is not only to provide services to women, but also to transform the community by making it more inclusive, resilient, proactive and open to implementing new inclusive measures.

Focusing on the definition of social impact can vary depending on the context and the involved academic disciplines. **It refers to the positive or negative, direct, or indirect changes that an intervention seeks to bring about in individuals, communities, or society as a whole**. Thus, the focus becomes the lasting changes that remain – after the initiative ends – on people, communities, or entire society.



Focusing on impact

It is also essential to recognise that, while all impact-oriented initiatives aim for success, **not all successful initiatives necessarily have an impact.** A clear example of this is one-off events: they can be well executed and engaging, but due to their limited duration, they cannot generate lasting change in the context in which they are carried out. Designing interventions with a focus on social impact enables us to address **complex and persistent issues — often referred to as "wicked problems"** — by exploring possible scenarios that reconcile conflicting needs and aspirations. In the 1970s, two scholars, Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, coined the term **wicked problem** to describe social issues that never have a single, definitive solution. These are not "bad" problems, but questions so complex that every possible answer is only partial or temporary. They involve many interconnected dimensions — economic, social, cultural, and environmental — and acting on one aspect can trigger unexpected consequences on others.

Moreover, each situation is unique: what works in one context may not work in another. **Poverty**, for example, cannot be solved simply by raising wages; education, healthcare, and access to services must also be considered. **Climate change** requires coordinated action at global, local, political, economic, and individual levels. **Migration** is another clear case, influenced by wars, human rights, economics, social integration, and international policies. To make matters more challenging, wicked problems involve many different actors — institutions, communities, citizens — with conflicting perspectives, and they cannot be broken down into smaller, independent parts.

For those working in **social impact, wicked problems are the everyday field of action:** they cannot be tackled with simple or linear solutions, but demand systemic thinking, collaboration among diverse stakeholders, and a constant capacity to adapt.

Precisely because the transformation process is based on complex problems that we can define as wicked problems, the design of interventions must pay close attention to two conditions:

1. The individuals involved in the community process must be **diverse and complementary so that each can make a specific contribution** to solving the problems.

2. Their choices must be **intentional and open to convergence** in order to build a collective intentionality that is effective for the type of context and the type of problem the community is facing. These are the foundations for creating lasting innovation.

Those who design for social impact work toward a transformation that is **contextualised, measurable, relevant, and achievable within a defined timeframe**. Social impact projects differ from traditional ones, as they require professionals capable of **facilitating collaboration**, **guiding sustainable decisions**, and **mediating in complex environments**.

Social impact is not designed in isolation: the design process is always collective, with the awareness that each actor takes on specific responsibilities regarding the result, the task, the time, and the resources to invest in achieving the shared objective. To achieve this concrete convergence, adopting concrete methodologies is essential. In social impact design, the most widely used methodology is the **Theory of Change (ToC), which represents an approach to strategic planning and analysis of change**.

The Theory of Change (ToC) is a strategic design methodology used to plan change in a clear and structured way. Its main goal is to define how an intervention or project will lead to tangible change.

ToC starts with the desired final result (impact) and works backward to identify the necessary conditions to achieve it, through a process called **backwards mapping**. This approach helps visualise the causal relationships between the various stages of the project, **linking activities to tangible products (outputs), changes in behaviours (outcomes)**, and ultimately, the long-term social impact.

ToC is useful for clarifying the responsibilities of the involved stakeholders, identifying the key actors, and monitoring and evaluating the project's progress. Moreover, **it is a tool that facilitates local stakeholder participation**, ensuring that everyone shares a common vision of the change to be achieved. In essence, the Theory of Change provides a logical roadmap to reach the objectives, allowing for monitoring the process and correcting any deviations.

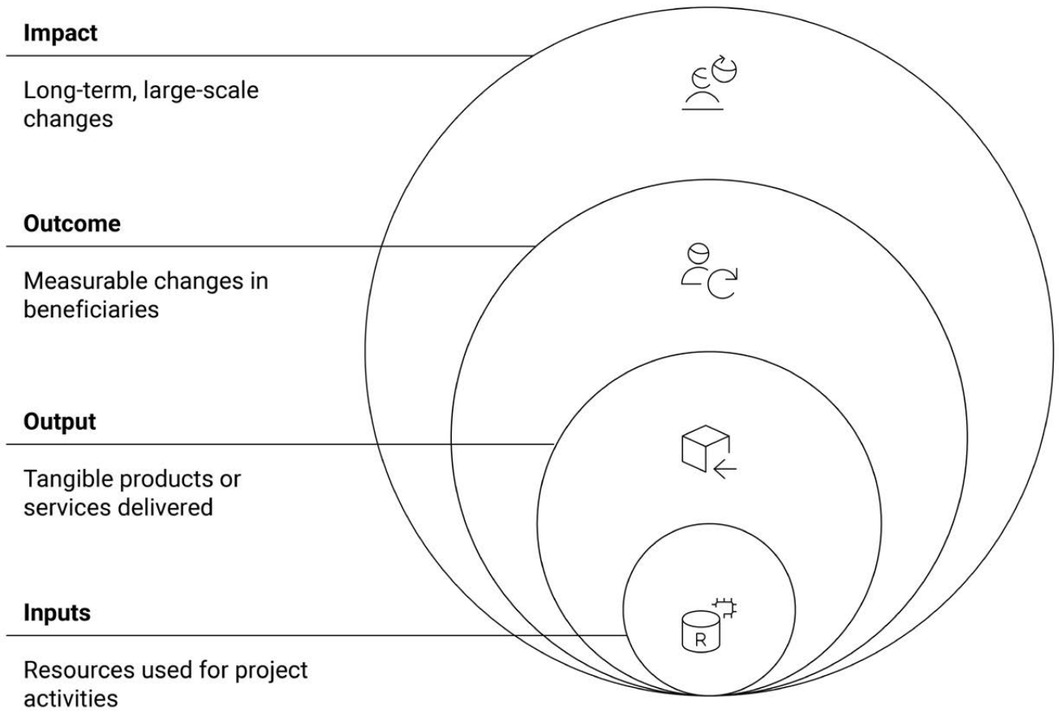
Theory of Change definitions

ToC, is defined through key terms:

IMPACT
The long-term, large-scale changes at the social, economic, environmental, or civil society level that occur after the project ends. Impact refers to changes that are both significant and measurable in the social structure, leading to sustained, transformative outcomes. The impact results from the combined influence of various actors, not just one organisation.

OUTCOME
The measurable, medium- to long-term changes that result from the outputs. These may include shifts in behaviour, awareness, living conditions, or social dynamics. Outcomes show the real effect of a project on the environment and people involved.

OUTPUT
The immediate and tangible results of the activities, such as the products or services delivered (e.g., training, schools, microloans), the number of people trained, materials produced, or events held. Outputs derive from inputs and lead to outcomes. They represent what has been done, but do not yet indicate lasting change.



IMPACT INDICATORS (KPIs - Key Performance Indicators)
These must be quantifiable, practical, directional, and operational. To implement the ToC, a team defines impact indicators using both quantitative and qualitative data. A participatory workshop, led by an expert with staff and stakeholders, defines the desired impact, maps backward, tests assumptions, and identifies metrics for evaluation.

Focus

Inputs **Resources** *"What we invest in the project"*	**Outputs** **Services and products** *"What we do or offer in our project, and the people we reach"*	**Outcomes** **Results at the target-group level** *"What we want our project to achieve within our target groups"*	**Impact** **Results at the societal level** *"The contribution we want to make with our project at the societal level"*
• Personnel • Volunteers • Time • Money • Materials/Equipment • Premises, facilities • Project partners	**1. Outputs:** Offerings/products produced Workshops Services Products (e.g., printed matter, manuals) Training programs Consulting services	**4.** The people have **new knowledge or new skills**, have developed or **expanded their capabilities**, have **formed opinions**, have **changed attitudes**, and their **awareness** (of certain issues) has been raised, etc.	**7.** There are desirable **social and economic changes** for the **society as a whole** or for the **population of a certain region or specific city district**.
	2. Use of outputs by target groups	**5.** There are **desirable changes in the actions** of the people who have been reached.	
	3. Participants' satisfaction with the outputs	**6.** The **living conditions** of the people who have been reached have been changed in a desirable way (financial situation, a more secure societal position, etc.).	
	What we do	What we want to achieve	

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Social design is the foundational asset for building co-design workshops, as it ensures that the design process is **inclusive, participatory, and focused on the community's needs**. Unlike traditional design methods, which often prioritise aesthetics or functionality, **social design emphasises collaboration and empowerment of all stakeholders** involved, particularly those from marginalised or underserved communities. By focusing on **social outcomes**, social design provides a framework for addressing complex social issues through collective problem-solving. This approach allows participants to bring their diverse perspectives, experiences, and expertise to the table**, ensuring that solutions are contextually relevant and sustainable.**

Steps for organising a participatory co-design workshop with collaborative design

Social design is the backbone of co-design workshops, ensuring that the process is not only collaborative, but also rooted in the real needs and experiences of the community. **The use of visualisation tools throughout the process, from mapping the Theory of Change to defining outcomes and indicators, is a key component of social design**. It enhances understanding, aligns stakeholders, and provides a clear framework for action. The combination of participatory design and visual mapping ensures that the project's outcomes are meaningful, measurable, and achievable.

Preparation and stakeholder engagement

Social design emphasises the importance of involving diverse stakeholders early on. A successful co-design workshop starts with identifying and inviting key community members, beneficiaries, local organisations, and experts who have a stake in the project. Social design ensures that marginalised voices are not only heard but actively involved in the decision-making process.

Clarify objectives and build trust

At the beginning of the workshop, **social design emphasises creating a trusting environment where all participants feel valued.** Clarifying the objectives of the workshop, explaining the collaborative nature of the process, and ensuring everyone understands their role is key. **Social design helps establish the shared vision for the project.**

Facilitate group discussions and ideation

Social design encourages active collaboration in generating ideas. Break participants into smaller groups to tackle specific aspects of the project. Each group discusses potential solutions and collectively brainstorms ideas. **The focus is on listening**, **respecting diverse viewpoints**, and **fostering creative problem-solving**.

Visualisation and mapping the path to change

a critical aspect of social design is the visual representation of ideas and processes. Throughout the workshop, use visual tools (e.g., Flowcharts, diagrams, post-it notes) to map the Theory of Change or visualise the steps and relationships between activities, outcomes, and impact. **Visualising the process helps participants see the connections between their input and the long-term goals, fostering clarity and shared understanding.** Visual tools also make abstract concepts more accessible and help participants collaborate effectively, ensuring that the change process is not only discussed but can also be seen and understood by all stakeholders.

Create a collective ToC (Theory of Change)

Using social design principles, participants work together to develop or refine the Theory of Change (ToC). **This involves mapping out the activities, outputs, outcomes, and the ultimate impact.** By involving everyone in this process, social design ensures that the ToC reflects the diverse needs and realities of the community. Visualisation of the ToC, through diagrams or flowcharts, helps participants understand how their contributions fit into the broader picture of change.

Defining indicators and metrics

As a key part of the social design approach, **participants also define measurable indicators that will track progress. These indicators should be quantifiable, practical,** and aligned with the community's context. Visualisation tools such as scorecards, dashboards, or progress trackers can help stakeholders understand how success will be measured and make the monitoring process more transparent.

Testing assumptions and evaluating feasibility

Social design encourages a reflective process where participants test the assumptions underpinning the ToC. In this phase, **visualisations can be used to map out risks, barriers, and potential challenges**. This collaborative evaluation process helps identify areas that may need adaptation or further exploration.

Finalising and validating the co-design process

At the end of the workshop, participants come together to review and validate the finalised Theory of Change and action plans. Social design ensures that the final outputs are a collective effort, with each stakeholder contributing to the shared understanding of the change process.

Action plan and follow-up

To conclude, **social design facilitates the creation of a clear action plan with specific roles, timelines, and resources.** The visualised roadmap (ToC diagram) is used as a reference point to keep track of progress and ensure accountability. Regular follow-ups ensure that the community stays engaged and that the project remains aligned with the long-term goals.

Key points to consider

Here are some attention points to keep in mind when organising and facilitating a participatory Theory of Change (ToC) workshop with a focus on **social design.**

Diverse stakeholder representation

Ensure that the workshop includes a diverse group of stakeholders, especially marginalised or less vocal groups. Social design relies on inclusive participation, so it is important that all relevant voices, including those who are usually underrepresented, are heard and considered in the decision-making process.

Creating a safe and trusting environment

Establish an open, trusting environment where participants feel comfortable sharing their opinions and ideas. People may have different cultural, social, or professional backgrounds, and creating a space for respectful dialogue and constructive criticism is crucial for a productive workshop.

Clear communication of objectives

Clearly explain the purpose of the workshop and the goals of the Theory of Change. Participants should understand what the final outcome should be, and how their contributions will help shape the project. Providing context on the broader vision and the impact the project seeks to achieve will help them stay aligned with the process.

Balancing group dynamics

manage group dynamics carefully to ensure that all participants have equal opportunities to contribute. Some participants may dominate discussions while others may be hesitant to speak. Facilitators should ensure everyone has a chance to share their input, possibly by using techniques such as **round-robin discussions or small-group brainstorming.**

Complexity of the problem

Acknowledge the complexity of the social issues at hand. Social design addresses multifaceted problems, so participants should be prepared for discussions that span across different areas like social, economic, cultural, and environmental factors. Make sure everyone understands the interconnectedness of the problems.

Realistic and achievable goals

While it is important to be ambitious**, ensure the proposed outcomes and impacts are achievable within the given resources and timeline.** Consider the **capacity** of the stakeholders and the **feasibility** of the interventions and be prepared to adjust goals if necessary.

Visualising the path to change

Visual tools like diagrams, charts, and flow maps are essential for ensuring that the Theory of Change is clear and understandable. **Keep the visuals simple, but comprehensive, ensuring they accurately reflect the process and can be easily followed by all participants.** Consider using interactive tools (e.g., Sticky notes, digital platforms) to keep everyone engaged.

Defining measurable indicators

Clearly define impact indicators and kpis (key performance indicators) that will allow for monitoring progress and measuring success. It is important to choose indicators that are quantifiable and aligned with the community's context, ensuring they reflect real-world change.

Testing assumptions

During the workshop, participants must critically assess the **assumptions** behind the ToC. **These assumptions may relate to things like community engagement**, **external factors**, or **resource availability**. Discuss potential risks and barriers and ensure the ToC accounts for these uncertainties.

Flexibility and adaptability

Recognise that the Theory of Change is a living document that may need to be revised over time as the project progresses. **Ensure there's flexibility built into the design process for continuous feedback and adaptation based on real-world experiences.**

Documentation and follow-up

After the workshop, ensure that the **final ToC** and action plan are well documented. Share the results with all stakeholders and schedule follow-up meetings to monitor the implementation of the ToC. **Revisit the ToC regularly to assess its effectiveness and adjust as necessary.**

Reflective questions for your practice

Define the objectives and expected results

What is the social problem that the project wants to address?

What are the specific objectives of the project?

What concrete and measurable results should the project achieve?

What positive changes is the project expected to bring to the recipients (direct and indirect beneficiaries and the territory)?

Identify the beneficiaries and the context

Who are the direct and indirect beneficiaries of the project?

What is the social, economic, and cultural context in which the project is inserted?

What are the specific needs and requirements of the beneficiaries?

How can the project contribute to improving the quality of life of people and the territory?

Plan the measurement of the impact

How will we measure the success of the project?

What are the social impact indicators that we will use?

How will we collect and analyse the data relating to the impact?

Who will use the data and for what purposes?

How will we certify the continuity of the project over time?

Evaluate long-term impact

What is the long-term impact of the project on the community?

How can the project contribute to sustainable development?

What are the lessons learned during the project and how can we improve it?

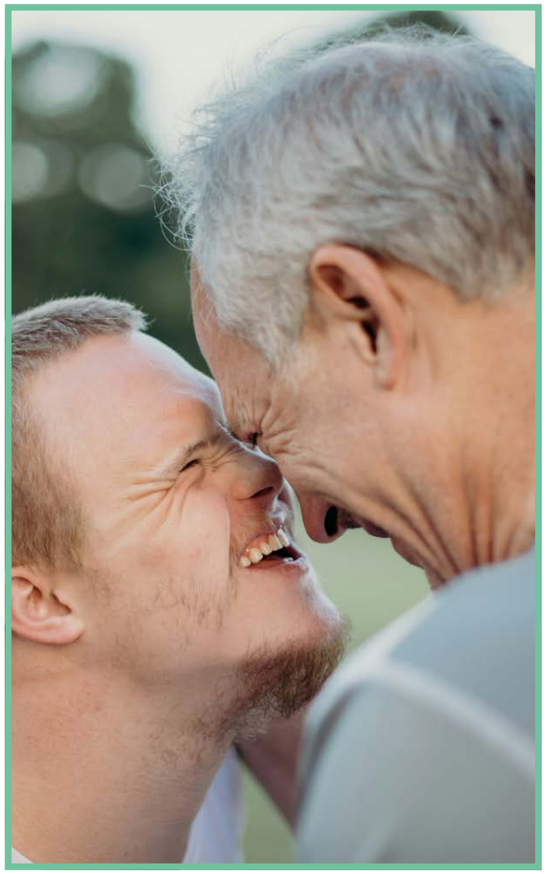
Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Brindisi Smart Guide

Project link

Catalogue page: 110

The Brindisi Smart Guide generates **social impact by addressing systemic barriers to accessibility and inclusion for persons with Down syndrome.** By actively involving them in the co-design and delivery of accessible tourist services, t**he project shifts perceptions, promotes autonomy, and creates real pathways to social and professional participation.** It transforms a cultural and economic asset — the city's tourism — into a driver of equity, fostering community awareness and long-term inclusion beyond the project itself.



Costruiamo Saperi

Project link

Catalogue page: 114

Costruiamo Saperi generates social impact by **fostering long-term socio-professional inclusion of migrants through territorial regeneration and hands-on vocational training.** The project addresses systemic labor inequalities by enabling the creation of worker cooperatives in agriculture and carpentry. By revitalising abandoned assets like Contrada Magnì and promoting fair employment, it strengthens community cohesion, restores dignity through work, and supports **an inclusive and sustainable local development model.**



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB...

At first, students at Industrial Design specialization tended to focus on physical design, but once we integrated Theory of Change, everything changed. The **community's input may help to create a space that is not just functional but also built connections and empowered people**. It became clear that social impact should always be the core of our projects, not just an afterthought.

Initially, students in the Industrial Design specialization were primarily focused on the aesthetics, usability, and functionality of physical products, such as furniture, devices, tools, and other tangible solutions. Their design process often centred on solving practical problems through form and function. However, a significant shift occurred once we introduced the Theory of Change framework into the curriculum of some courses. **This methodology encouraged students to think beyond the object and ask deeper questions**: Who benefits from this design? How does it create positive change? What long-term impact does it have on the community?

Engaging with communities became central to the design process. Students began to actively seek out the voices and lived experiences of the people they were designing for. This input did not just shape the outcome; it transformed the entire approach of their work. The spaces and products designed started to reflect shared values and needs, fostering a sense of ownership and belonging among community members.

Through this process, it became evident that **social impact should not be an optional component of design, it must be its foundation.** Rather than treating community engagement as a box to check, students now see it as the driving force behind meaningful, sustainable innovation.

A story from S-NODI...

Top Metro Fa Bene acts as a driver of social transformation in the first belt of the Turin metropolitan area, promoting a fairer, more inclusive, and participatory local economy. **The program generates systemic social impact by strengthening the social and solidarity economy, revitalising neighbourhood markets, and fostering the inclusion of vulnerable individuals.** By engaging public institutions, third-sector organisations, universities, and citizens, it creates a collaborative ecosystem centred on community needs.

Through active engagement with local stakeholders, including schools and associations, the project fosters social cohesion and civic participation, enhancing existing social capital. Its c**omprehensive capacity-building efforts have strengthened the skills of over 20 nonprofit organisations**, offering training, mentorship, digital education, and collaborative policy design, thus encouraging distributed leadership and innovative local initiatives.

The use of transparent and accessible tools — such as a dedicated website, newsletter, and social media — has ensured widespread access to opportunities, helping to reduce informational inequalities.

The project's impact is tangible: **the funded proposals and personalised support for each reality have led to the launch of concrete local initiatives that integrate circular economy principles, mutual aid, and the inclusion of marginalised people.** Results include civic crowdfunding campaigns (421 donors, over €21,000 raised), educational materials for schools, and the reactivation of local markets — clear signs of real change in the territories.

Top Metro Fa Bene not only responds to local needs but also builds a replicable model of proximity-based welfare, capable of fostering trust, solidarity, and long-term social sustainability across the metropolitan area.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 10 – *Navigating wicked problems and complexity*
Having a clear impact mindset can be a strong feature to understand wicked problems and build solutions which transcend the single action but that can create a transformative change.

Competency n°14 – *Stakeholder engagement and negotiation*
To pursue impact, it is important that each member of the society provide its own contribution with a common goal. Engaging and working side by side with all the different stakeholders is crucial.

Competency n°20 – *Co-design and its nuances*
Having an impact mindset is what can help in building solutions which are shared and aiming to create a transformative change in the context.

Area of Competence 1:

Social impact orientation

2 PURPOSE AND IMPACT PROCESSES AWARENESS AND LEXICON

Texts by Tiziana Ciampolini, Isabella Lalli, Antonio Fantasia (Associazione S-NODI GROUP E.T.S.); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Agnieszka Zarzyńska (Caritas Europa); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

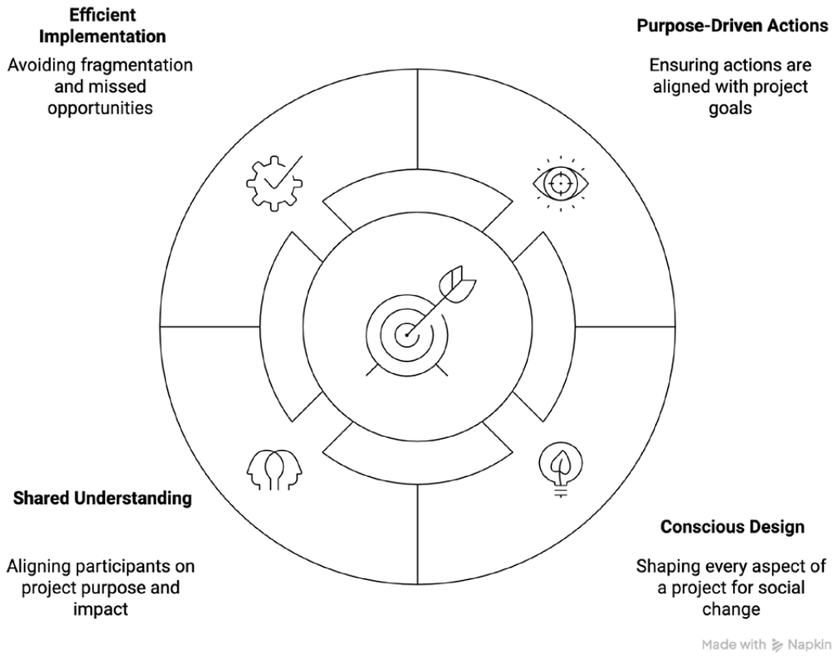
Understanding terms like "purpose", "impact", "goal-orientation", and "intentionality", while recognising their differences. Becoming familiar with key change-related and impact-related terms such as input, activities, output, outcome and using them with awareness of their correlation and value for achieving change. Practicing these concepts in relation to the different levels at which the project may intervene.

Definitions and Discussion

A future-oriented mindset is essential for addressing global challenges and designing transformative and sustainable solutions. By investing in agency, resilience, and the use of data, **we can design effective interventions that align with a shared vision and address both immediate and long-term needs.** The ATELIER project, with its focus on co-design, exemplifies how a future-oriented mindset can translate into sustainable and collaborative solutions for social inclusion.

Through **foresight methodologies**, **systems thinking**, **and collaborative design**, this competency not only aims to tackle current challenges but also prepares the groundwork for solutions that will remain relevant and impactful in the years to come. These practices ensure that the work done today is resilient, inclusive, and sustainable, paving the way for a more inclusive, just, and sustainable future.

Understanding and applying concepts like purpose, impact, intentionality, and goal-orientation is crucial in the design of social impact initiatives. These concepts form the backbone of effective social change and provide the language needed to discuss, measure, and create lasting transformations.



Intentionality: the core of social impact design

At the heart of every successful social initiative is intentionality. Intentionality refers to the deliberate choice to pursue specific social outcomes through a defined process. It ensures that the actions taken are not random or reactive, but are **purpose-driven** and aligned with the broader goals of the project.

In the context of social impact design, **intentionality means consciously shaping every aspect of a project** — from the initial idea to the final implementation — so that it **contributes directly to positive social change. This is particularly important for co-design projects, where all participants must have a shared understanding of the project's purpose and its desired impact.** Without this clarity, efforts can become fragmented or misaligned, leading to inefficiencies or missed opportunities for creating meaningful change.

Intentionality in design is about aligning values, goals, and actions. In ATELIER context, it means guiding all partners through a clear, collective vision, ensuring that each decision made throughout the project moves towards the agreed-upon social outcomes.

From *change agent* to *transformation agent*

Being a *change agent* means taking actions to address problems and introduce adjustments in response to challenges. However, to make a more profound impact, one must go beyond being a *change agent* and evolve into an *agent of transformation*.

This shift is fundamental. Moving from change to transformation means not only addressing immediate issues but also rethinking the systems that underpin social exclusion, inequality, and marginalization. **Transformation in this context refers to the systemic reconfiguration of social structures to create long-lasting, equitable changes.**

As *agents of transformation* – according to the perspective promoted by ATELIER – participants are encouraged to consider how their work can reshape not just individual behaviours but also the systems that sustain inequality, through collective actions, foresight, and innovation. **This transformation mindset requires a long-term view** — not just solving today's problems but ensuring that the solutions are adaptable to future challenges.

The Capacity to See, predict, and imagine the future

The ability to see, predict, and imagine future scenarios is a core skill in designing impactful and sustainable solutions. A future-oriented mindset enables participants in ATELIER to move beyond the immediate needs of a project and consider the long-term implications of their actions.

Strategic foresight is the key tool in this process. It allows participants to anticipate potential challenges, explore alternative futures, and plan for uncertainty. In the co-design process, this foresight empowers stakeholders to consider a range of possible outcomes and to design interventions that can adapt to changing conditions.

In project combining co-design and social inclusion, foresight is applied through tools like scenario planning, which helps to envision different futures based on current trends. This allows the project to plan and adjust interventions as new challenges emerge, creating solutions that are both innovative and resilient.

Building sustainable processes

Designing for sustainability goes hand-in-hand with the foresight mindset. It means creating processes that not only respond to current needs but can also evolve and thrive over time. A sustainable project must be able to maintain its impact and continue to provide value long after it has been implemented.

To build sustainability, it is important to involve communities in the design and implementation process, **ensuring that they have the agency to manage, adapt, and own the changes. T**his approach aligns with the core values of **social inclusion**, as it ensures that the solutions are empowering, scalable, and adaptable to future needs.

Building sustainable processes involves creating a framework where long-term impact is prioritised, and where the community is engaged in the ongoing development and adjustment of the solutions. **Sustainability in this context means focusing on capacity-building, community ownership, and ongoing reflection to ensure that the work continues to have a meaningful, lasting effect.**

Key concepts of impact

To effectively measure and communicate the impact of a project, it is essential to understand key terms like input, activities, output, and outcome. **These terms provide a common language for planning, monitoring, and evaluating social interventions.**

INPUT
The resources mobilised to carry out a project, including funding, personnel, skills, materials, time, information, or tools. Without inputs, no activities can be initiated.

ACTIVITIES
The concrete actions carried out using the inputs. These might include workshops, training sessions, awareness campaigns, services provided, or other direct interventions within the project.

OUTPUTS
The immediate and tangible results of the activities, such as the products or services delivered (e.g., training, schools, microloans), the number of people trained, materials produced, or events held. Outputs derive from inputs and lead to outcomes. They represent what has been done, but do not yet indicate lasting change.

OUTCOMES
The measurable, medium- to long-term changes that result from the outputs. These may include shifts in behaviour, awareness, living conditions, or social dynamics. Outcomes show the real effect of a project on the environment and people involved.

IMPACTS
The long-term, large-scale changes at the social, economic, environmental, or civil society level that occur after the project ends. Impact refers to changes that are both significant and measurable in the social structure, leading to sustained, transformative outcomes. The impact results from the combined influence of various actors, not just one organisation.

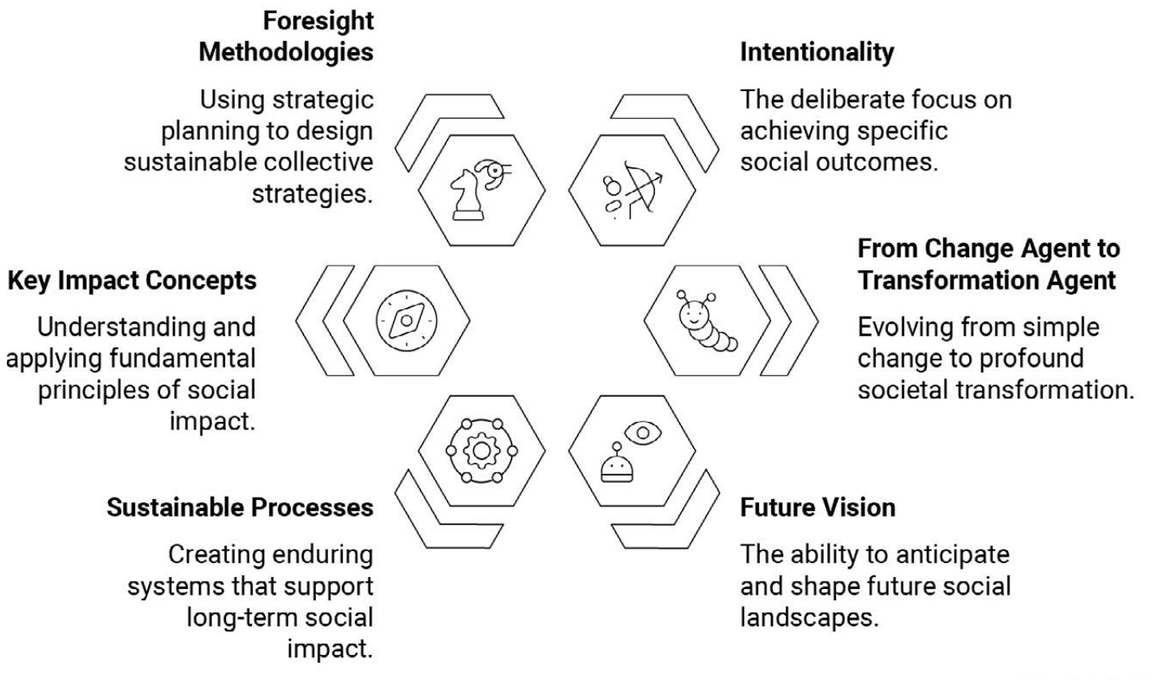
Understanding these concepts allows social designers to not only deliver outputs but also to ensure that the activities they carry out are strategically aligned with the **desired outcomes** and **long-term impact**.

Foresight and foreseen methodologies for designing sustainable collective strategies

Foresight methodologies are crucial for designing sustainable collective strategies. By using tools like scenario planning, systems thinking, and impact mapping, participants can design interventions that are resilient and future-proof.

These methodologies enable the identification of possible futures and help participants prepare for a range of unpredictable scenarios. For example, scenario planning helps to create and compare different future scenarios, allowing the project team to adapt and plan for uncertainty.

By engaging in collaborative processes, participants can design collective strategies that integrate different perspectives, challenges, and opportunities, making the project sustainable and adaptable to future needs.



Focus

Levels of innovation

When we talk about measuring innovation, it's important to understand what level we're talking about: ***Individuals, Teams, Projects, Portfolios, Ecosystems***.

Inspired by the *Business Model Canvas*, working through each element of this canvas will ensure your bases are covered for a solid campaign: click here

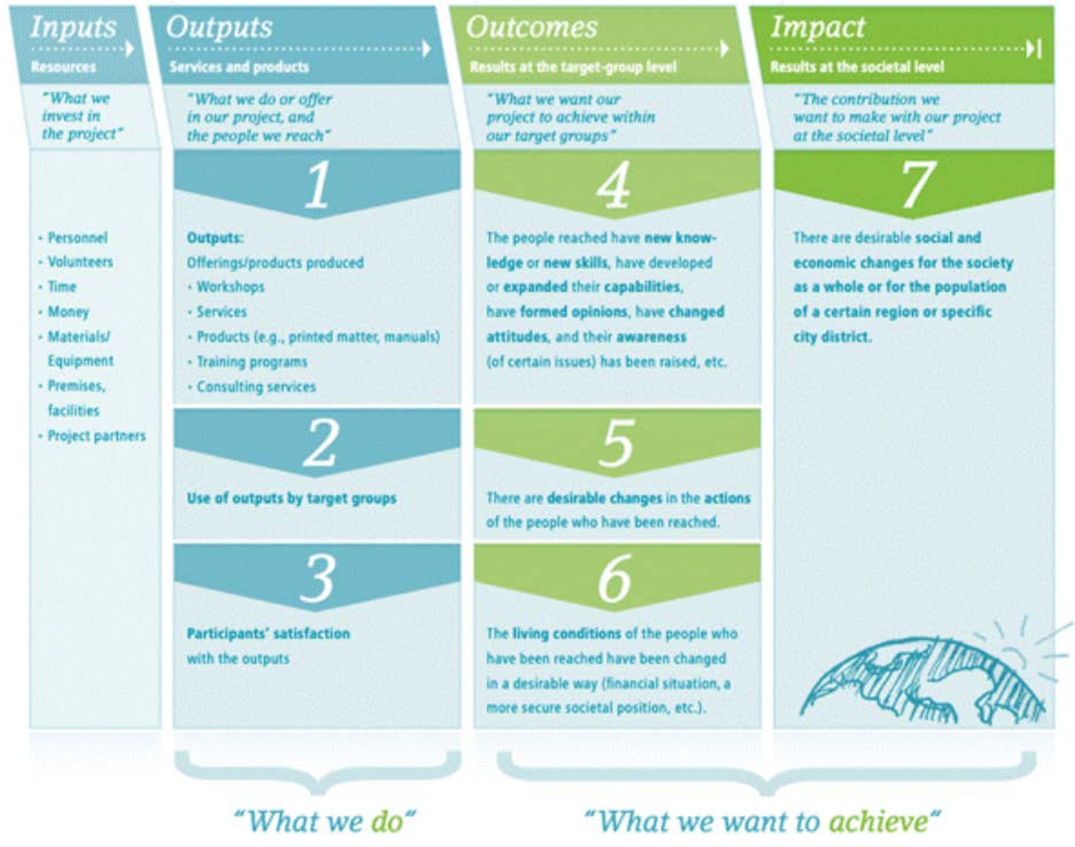


Fig. 1, *Social Impact Navigator*. Image reproduced with permission from Phineo, 2023.

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Start by defining the **purpose** of the project clearly and aligning it with community needs;

Use the **ToC** to map out how inputs and activities are expected to generate outputs and outcomes;

Create a **common glossary** of terms to ensure consistent understanding across all stakeholders;

Encourage **regular reflection sessions** where project participants can discuss whether activities are aligned with desired outcomes;

Define a clear **MEAL** (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning) approach to your project.

Key points to consider

Future-oriented mindset

Ensure that the work group is clearly defined and heterogenous, and that problems and needs are clearly identified. Reflect on how the necessary actions can be distinguished in short, medium, and long term.

Intentionality

Every initiative and action must be guided by clear and declared intentionality, making sure that values, goals, and actions align and that there is a shared understanding of the purpose and of the impact of the interventions.

From *change agent* to *transformation agent*

Actions should be adaptable to future changes and adoptable by the whole community. Also, it is important that the project promotes a transformative mindset oriented towards systemic reconfiguration, and that the intervention is sustainable – in a social, economic, and environmental way. Providing context on the broader vision and the impact the project seeks to achieve will help them stay aligned with the process.

Strategic foresight

Choose the right tools to involve all the stakeholders (e.g.,Scenario workshop). Be prepared to tackle different and uncertain scenarios and rapid changes, and also to integrate long-term perspectives into project design and monitoring.

Building

Make sure the communities are engaged and heard, and that the ownership of the interventions is promoted in the communities. Processes must be scalable, inclusive, and capable of evolving over time. Integrate capacity-building, continuous monitoring, and reflective practices.

Key concepts of impact

Concepts such as input, outcome, impact and so on as a common language should be integrated in planning, evaluation, and communication.

Foresight methodologies for collective strategies

Encourage collaborative processes that integrate multiple perspectives. Design collective strategies that are resilient, adaptable, and future-proof.

Reflective questions for your practice

*Is the **difference** between output, outcome, and impact clear?*

*Which is the **purpose** of my intervention, and which elements do define it?*

*Which **tools** can I use to map the connections between inputs, activities, and results?*

*How can I ensure that an initiative does not simply provide services (outputs) but leads to **real change** (outcomes and impact)?*

*How can an impact and outcome-oriented approach **improve my ability to design effective interventions**?*

*How can I ensure that **each partner perceives the project as accountable**?*

*Are our stakeholders adequately included in our **MEAL plans**? Is it planned when and how our target groups will learn about our KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) and will have an opportunity to provide feedback or come up with their own KPIs?*

*Are we measuring both **short-term and long-term impacts** of our work? If not, how can we ensure we have KPIs that look at both?*

*Do our **KPIs** cover both activity and results/ outputs and outcomes?*

*Do all of our **goals** link back to our **purpose**?*

*Is our MEAL plan realistic and does it follow the **SMART principles**? Are our target groups aware of the SMART principles? Did we consider providing them with training on these matters?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Fashion Truck

Project link

Catalogue page: 32



In the **Fashion Truck** case, Competency 2 *– Purpose and impact processes awareness and lexicon –* is clearly reflected in the project's focus on intentional change and impact-oriented design. **The initiative aims to raise awareness around sustainable fashion and promote behavioural change in clothing consumption.** By clearly defining its *purpose* (fostering environmental and social responsibility), and aligning its *outputs* (a mobile platform for sharing and reusing clothes) with desired *outcomes* (reducing textile waste and encouraging community engagement), the project exemplifies an understanding of how design actions can be guided by intentionality. **This approach shows a conscious use of impact-related terms and demonstrates the ability to design with change as a core objective.**

Cantieri di Dialogo

Catalogue page: 290

The **Cantieri di Dialogo** case strongly reflects Competency 2 – *Purpose and impact processes awareness and lexicon*. **The project is intentionally designed to foster intercultural and intergenerational dialogue in socially fragmented urban contexts.** Its *purpose* is to create spaces for mutual understanding and civic engagement. The *outputs* include co-designed public events and participatory artefacts, while the intended *outcomes* involve increased social cohesion, reduced conflict, and greater community awareness. **The project clearly articulates its goals and links activities to long-term social change, showing an informed use of impact-related concepts and a structured approach to designing with purpose and intentionality.**



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB...

In the course "Technical Drawing and Infographics", aimed at students specialising in Industrial Robotics, we observed that many teams tended to dive straight into creating technical drawings without first considering *why* they were designing a particular system or what kind of change it was meant to achieve.

To encourage greater design awareness, we introduced key impact-related concepts at the start of a group assignment: purpose, goal, output, and outcome.

The aim was to help students link their visual communication choices to the real-world effects they intended to produce. One team, for instance, working on a robotic welding station, reframed their project accordingly: their *purpose* was to enhance operator safety awareness; their *output* was an infographic depicting the robot's workflow and associated risk zones; and their *outcome* was to reduce human error through improved understanding of the system.

This shift in perspective led to more focused and coherent design work, and it also strengthened teamwork, as each member could refer to clearly defined shared objectives. Integrating these concepts made both the technical communication and the collaborative process more effective, helping students adopt a more impact-oriented design approach.

A story from S-NODI…

The Fa Bene Mercato project can be seen as an example of social innovation which, while **starting from a concrete and immediate need** — reducing food waste and supporting families in difficulty in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis — is projected **towards a long-term perspective of social transformation.** By collecting surplus of quality food from local street markets and actively involving beneficiaries in community return activities, the project builds a model of neighbourhood-based welfare rooted in reciprocity, agency, and resilience.

Intentionality is at the core: every action, from the recovery of unsold goods and their quality to their redistribution, is conceived not as passive assistance, but as an opportunity to foster inclusion and strengthen the social fabric and to tackle the implicit link between economic difficulties and poor quality. This avoids fragmentation and ensures that the project remains focused on clear goals of social justice and territorial cohesion.

Fa Bene Mercato goes beyond **the role of a simple *change agent*, turning beneficiaries into true *agents of transformation*: families not only receive basic goods but also become active contributors to community processes by offering their time and skills.** In this way, the project does not merely respond to immediate needs, but also triggers systemic changes in social relations, local markets, and practices of active citizenship. The approach also incorporates the capacity to imagine the future: local markets become experimental platforms where alternative scenarios of urban welfare, more inclusive and resilient, can be tested.

Building sustainable processes is another key element: the model is replicable in other markets and neighbourhoods and aims to ensure continuity over time through the engagement of communities, institutions, and local operators. Sustainability here means not only guaranteeing fresh and healthy food to those in need, but also activating processes of capacity-building and community ownership.

Finally, Fa Bene Mercato provides fertile ground for applying the key concepts of impact:

Inputs: surplus food, volunteers' time, spaces within the community itself.

Activities: collection, redistribution, community return activities.

Outputs: food parcels distributed, hours of volunteering activated.

Outcomes: strengthened social bonds, improved access to fresh food, reduced welfare stigma.

Impact: transformation of local welfare systems, with markets and communities becoming key nodes in a new social model based on reciprocity and inclusion.

In this sense, Fa Bene Mercato shows how a local initiative can translate a future-oriented mindset into daily practices that combine present and future, immediate needs and transformative vision.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 1 – *Social impact culture and mindset*
This competency is directly linked to fostering a collective understanding of impact as a guiding principle; Understanding what is meant by "impact" and how it is defined as "social". Knowledge of the Theory of Change (ToC) and its use as a tool to conceive change as the core/guide of design action, supporting project reasoning around transformative processes involving new behaviours, interactions, and relationships among people, communities, and organisations.

Competency n° 3 – *Project management lexicon and sensitivity*
Complements Competency 2 by translating purpose and impact concepts into practical tools like KPIs, timelines, and reports. It supports intentional planning aligned with desired outcomes.

Competency n° 10 – *Navigating wicked problems and complexity*
Expands Competency 2 by situating impact thinking within complex, multi-level challenges. It helps frame outcomes as part of dynamic systems, reinforcing the need for adaptive and holistic approaches.

Competency n° 18 – *Project development management*
It provides the practical framework to apply concepts like input, output, outcome, and impact within an iterative project cycle.

Area of Competence 1:

Social impact orientation

3 PROJECT MANAGEMENT LEXICON AND SENSITIVITY

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest); Elena Tornariti (SYNTHESIS Center for Research and Education)

Overview

Project management relies on a set of specific terms — some widely used — such as partners, target, assessment & evaluation, baseline, KPI, GANTT, budget, report, communication, dissemination and so on.
This Competency aims, on the one hand, to build familiarity with key project management vocabulary for those who are not yet acquainted with it; on the other hand, it also suggests practical interpretations and applications of these terms by drawing on the concepts and practices of co-design.
When interpreted and enacted through a co-design perspective, in fact, many traditional elements of project management can be reframed as opportunities to strengthen collaboration with project actors — particularly beneficiaries and stakeholders — and foster shared understandings, practices, and meanings. Through this collaborative dimension, projects — especially those oriented toward social inclusion — can achieve greater depth and attain more meaningful outcomes.

Definitions and Discussion

Project management lexicon and sensitivity refer to the ability to understand and apply the terminology, tools, and structures used to plan, monitor, and report on projects. Terms such as partners, target groups, baseline, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), GANTT charts, budgeting, and dissemination are widely used in the design and implementation of projects, including those focused on social inclusion. Mastering this language enhances clarity and facilitates **effective communication among stakeholders,** enabling more efficient teamwork and ultimately leading to more successful projects.

Language and glossaries act as bridges between values, methodology, and training, making them strategic resources for shaping the project environments as desired.

In this context, project **language** can serve as a bridge **between technical processes and social inclusion goals,** which are often connected to qualitative aspects such as people's emotional and psychological experiences, as well as the accessibility and usability of the context. Sensitivity to project terms helps align objectives with the needs of marginalised groups and supports inclusive practices. Because co-design projects often involve diverse stakeholders — including non-experts — using accessible language is essential.

A shared vocabulary supports transparent decision-making, encourages equal participation, and helps reduce power imbalances by ensuring that everyone's voice can be heard and understood. [1]

Given these premises, **this competency encourages a reflexive approach to project management language, tools, and practices** through the lens of co-design for social inclusion. The aim is to explore how traditional project terms can be reinterpreted to support inclusive practices, without completely replacing conventional meanings, but rather acquiring integrative and complementary ones. The goal is not to train expert project managers, but to build a common ground for collaborative design, planning, and implementation.



[1] Boland, R., & Collopy, F. (Eds.) (2004). *Managing as designing*. Stanford Business Books.

Key terms within co-design for a social inclusion perspective

PARTNERS
Organisations collaborating to achieve project goals, **sharing responsibilities and resources as allies for social inclusion.** Even without formal involvement in the project, they ensure long-term collaboration and project sustainability.

STAKEHOLDERS
Individuals or groups with an interest in the project's outcomes — including donors, beneficiaries, researchers and team members. Beneficiaries are often primary stakeholders and partners.
In social inclusion processes, **stakeholders vary and should become active agents — sharing resources, supporting change, or facilitating social relationships.** At the same time, stakeholders may sometimes resist change for several reasons, which can also serve as barriers to a project's success. In such cases, they need to be carefully managed to prevent resistance from undermining the process.

TARGET
The specific group of beneficiaries towards whom the project actions are directed, identified based on their needs and the expected outcomes. In co-design, however, **all actors are considered both agents and beneficiaries, as they all experience some level of change — including the operators who promote the project.** This notion is further clarified by recognising different levels of involvement: primary targets are directly engaged, while secondary ones are involved indirectly.

EVALUATION
Evaluating means to measure project performance, outcomes, or impacts against objectives and criteria. Evaluation processes encompass both measurable outcomes and lived experiences, as well as qualitative change. When performed within a participatory and social inclusion perspective, **evaluation can become a process of recognition, using context-specific and tailor-made collaborative tools that empower participants and support data collection and shared reflection.**

BASELINE
A reference point for scope, schedule, or budget used to track progress.
Defined collaboratively through context analysis and shared understanding. It is the result of context analysis, problem-framing, and a shared sense of needs, all framed within an outcome-led perspective.
Making starting points explicit supports clarity and reflection on project boundaries and direction — fostering both external and internal reflection.

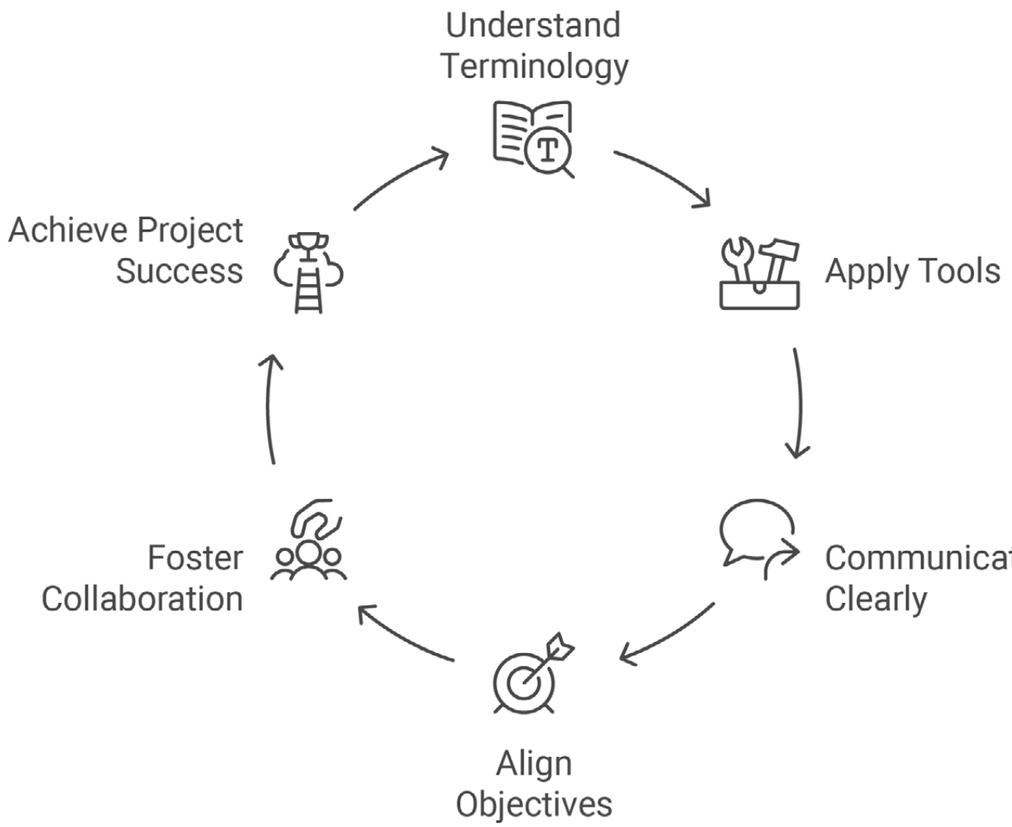
KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIS)
Specific, measurable metrics to assess success in meeting objectives.
KPIs can be participatory and use a Theory of Change approach (see Competency 1) to monitor outputs, outcomes, and impact. **Beneficiaries can help define what matters and how to measure it, ensuring that indicators are meaningful and grounded in real life.** This ensures that indicators are based on actionable changes and raises awareness of project evolution among participants.

GANTT
A visual chart for tracking tasks, timelines, and dependencies. Visual timelines improve accessibility and foster shared understanding. **They help recognise contributions and relationships among actors, build trust, and support collective ownership**.

BUDGET
Generally speaking, it is a financial resource plan. **Beyond money, the budget can highlight intangible contributions (time, care, networks), capturing shared knowledge, symbolic and social capital, and linking finance with social value.**

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION
The process of checking project progress against goals. **Regular opportunities for dialogue with stakeholders.** Beneficiaries, adequately involved, help identify what works and adapt plans according to their perspective of effectiveness and gaps, also reinforcing inclusion as a method and outcome.

REPORTING AND OUTREACH
Reporting in project management refers to the systematic collection and communication of information on progress, performance, and results to stakeholders, ensuring transparency and accountability. Outreach involves the activities and strategies used to engage, inform, and connect with external audiences, building awareness, participation, and support for the project.
Reporting and outreach are also opportunities for shared reflection, inclusive storytelling, and co-creation: they should involve not just institutions or funders, but also communities in how and where results are shared, becoming part of the participatory process — as **they open new public spaces for recognition, continuity, and transformation.** They also serve to highlight among partners what is being done and achieved along the way in terms of KPIs, outcomes, and outputs, thereby **reinforcing alliances and strengthening collaboration.**



Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Check the basic vocabulary and develop a project **glossary to ensure consistent use of terms across teams**: use real project examples to explain each term; **organise introductory workshops to familiarise with it; and integrate it into project meetings, co-design sessions, and documentation to build routine**.

Adapt your communication to the needs of the interlocutor and avoid using technical, metaphorical, or slang terms. Use translation to make concepts more accessible (reflecting the real-world experiences of participants) and adapted to local realities. **Clarify intent and encourage dialogue around how these words are understood**.

Ensure accessibility across languages and literacy levels, also checking for cultural interpretations.

Depending on the project, its context, and objectives, **enrich this basic vocabulary with terms that can enhance your understanding and that of your partners**. Invite all participants to contribute definitions or ask for clarification, fostering a culture of inclusivity and accessibility. Encourage them to connect each term with their own project experience or community needs. For instance, discuss what “baseline” data could look like in their neighbourhood or group.

Use simple and accessible visual tools (like charts or diagrams) alongside terminology to help explain technical terms to non-specialist audiences, especially in social inclusion contexts. This also reduces confusion and makes planning more participatory.

Implement regular check-ins to ensure the project's progress aligns with its initial KPIs and objectives.

Key points to consider

Avoid assuming everyone understands the terms

Ensure that learning about terminology does not become an isolated exercise; always **tie terms back to practical applications in your project.**

Do not take the meanings of the concepts accompanying the project as stable and definitive: **welcome new definitions and points of view from the partners alongside the project's evolution.**

Reflective questions for your practice

Who is directly involved in the project? *Who is benefiting and directly or indirectly supporting the project, and must be informed of its results?*

Are there any ***opponents or entities that will be negatively affected*** *by the project and its results?*

Am I confident in using key project management terms and able to explain them in simple, clear language? ***Are the other participants equally comfortable with them?***

How do we translate technical terms into plain language *for external communication or community engagement?*

Did everyone understand *the key project terms we used?*

Were the terms explained in a ***clear and accessible*** *way?*

Did we ***adapt the vocabulary to our participants' context****?*

Were all voices included *in planning and evaluation?*

How did our use of ***language support or hinder inclusion****?*

Did we ***check for understanding*** *throughout the project?*

How can we improve ***shared understanding*** *next time?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Salus Space

Project link

Catalogue page: 68



Salus Space is a European project promoting inclusion through co-housing, training, arts and culture, and social enterprise. Although formally structured, it integrates collaborative methods: residents and organisations co-manage spaces and share responsibilities, turning *partners* into *co-producers*. The project includes shared planning moments and the use of participatory tools to adapt activities over time. **Even within a rigid framework, *evaluation*, *budget*, and *reporting* are treated as spaces for dialogue and learning**. Salus Space demonstrates how project management terms can be reinterpreted through co-design to support long-term engagement and capacity building.

Active

Project link

Catalogue page: 87

ACTIVE is an Erasmus+ project designed to empower NEET youth through artistic expression, peer dialogue, and community engagement. Although supported by a European framework, the project is designed with high flexibility, using creative tools to adapt to participants' needs. **Stakeholders — including youth, artists, and educators — are involved in shaping the programme, reframing targets as active contributors.** Assessment moments include group reflection and emotional check-ins, supporting continuous learning. ACTIVE demonstrates how structured projects can integrate inclusive, participatory practices into planning, evaluation, and communication.



EDL - Emotional Distance Learning

Project link

Catalogue page: 256

EDL – Emotional Distance Learning (Erasmus+) is a European project that integrates emotional well-being into adult online education through co-designed tools. Beneficiaries actively participate in needs analysis, resource development, and evaluation — reshaping the roles of partners and beneficiaries. **The project uses GANTT charts and KPIs adapted to emotional needs, updates the baseline iteratively, and involves participants in regular assessment sessions.** EDL shows how project management competencies can be translated into flexible, inclusive tools through co-design.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB...

In our research and education context at POLITEHNICA Bucharest, we experienced firsthand how a clear project management lexicon supports better collaboration — even in highly technical projects. For example, during the implementation of the project "*The Influence of Additive Manufactured Surface Textures on the Tribocharging Process*", we involved engineering students and research collaborators from multiple disciplines. **Early in the project, we introduced key management terms — baseline, milestones, GANTT chart, KPIs, and budget lines — through short sessions and visual tools**.

This helped us clarify roles, expectations, and timelines with both technical teams and industrial partners. Using simplified visual timelines (adapted GANTT charts) made the project stages more tangible even for those unfamiliar with research processes. **We also organised collaborative workshops for budget planning and resource tracking, which opened space for questions and strengthened transparency**.

Though the topic was highly specialised, the **use of a shared and inclusive vocabulary** ensured that everyone — whether coming from robotics, materials science, or project coordination — was aligned. **This reinforced accountability, reduced miscommunication, and contributed to a stronger collective sense of ownership**.

A story from OLAE...

Getting familiar with project management terms has made our work smoother, keeping everyone aligned. It helps us communicate better with partners, funders, and communities, ensuring that our social inclusion goals stay visible and measurable throughout the project.

In one of our recent programmes supporting adults facing social and economic vulnerability, we ran a series of workshops focused on preparing for job interviews and developing small business ideas. As part of the process, we made a deliberate choice: **we did not avoid the vocabulary of project management. We explored it. But we did so with care, curiosity, and flexibility**.

From the start, we introduced project management terms like objectives, timeline, resources, indicators, and evaluation. **We did not present them as fixed or formal definitions, but instead as concepts to explore together.**

For example, **we co-created a vocabulary board at the front of the room.** Each time a new term came up, we would pause and break it down. Then we would ask participants to rephrase it in their own words or relate it to their project ideas. This not only helped demystify the terms but also gave participants the chance to own the language.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n°2 – *Purpose and impact processes awareness and lexicon*
Understanding change-related terms enhances the meaningful use of project management vocabulary in social inclusion initiatives. Vice versa, familiarity with project management vocabulary supports clear communication about the project's purpose and impact processes, enabling stakeholders to track better, evaluate, and contribute to achieving meaningful social inclusion outcomes.

Competency n° 12 – *Resources assessment and management*
"Resources" is a key concept when dealing with co-design projects for social inclusion and deserves a dedicated discussion to enlighten its scope and possible interpretations.

Competency n° 15 – *Adapting communication for cultural diversity*
Project management lexicon supports clear and shared understanding, but adapting this language for different cultural groups is essential to ensure terms are meaningful, avoid misunderstandings, and foster inclusive communication in co-design projects.

Competency n° 18 – *Project development management*
This competency relies on a clear project lexicon to plan, monitor, and adapt actions across iterative project phases. A solid grasp of project management terminology enables efficient coordination of resources. It is essential for planning, monitoring progress, and communicating clearly during all stages of project development, especially in co-design contexts.

AREA OF COMPETENCE 2

Social inclusion and sustainability project orientation

This unit explores how values, culture, and sustainability can guide the way we design, implement, and evaluate projects aimed at social transformation. It connects two essential dimensions of change: the ethical foundations of inclusion and social responsibility, and the integrated vision of sustainability that embraces social, environmental, and economic balance.

At its core, social inclusion is about freedom, recognition, participation, and shared responsibility. From the perspective fostered by the ATELIER project, building inclusive societies means ensuring (by removing barriers and obstacles) that every individual has the freedom and capability to take part in shaping the systems that affect their lives and to contribute to society. This approach moves beyond a traditional welfare model — where citizens are recipients — towards a relational and social model, where people become active agents and co-creators of public value.

Competency 4 addresses ***knowledge of values, culture, and the fundamentals of welfare, inclusion and social responsibility***. It encourages us to rethink welfare as a network of relationships built on trust, agency, and cooperation. It evokes concepts such as redistribution, recognition, and representation, consistent with a social justice perspective of society; it also advocates cultural inclusion and political voice. Likewise, according to Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, it reminds us that real development occurs when people have the freedom to live the lives they value — and this freedom can only emerge when social, cultural, and economic barriers are collectively dismantled.

Competency 5 places ***sustainability*** at the heart of inclusion. In a world marked by intertwined crises — environmental degradation, inequality, and economic instability — social projects must be designed with an integrated and long-term vision. In this sense, sustainability is a *condition* for real impact.

This means that every project must balance the three pillars of sustainability:

- ***Social***, ensuring equity, participation, and empowerment;
- ***Environmental***, respecting ecological boundaries and fostering stewardship;
- ***Economic***, promoting fairness and viability over time.

When these dimensions are woven together through co-design, sustainability becomes a transformative force and communities active partners who share ownership and responsibility. In this sense, sustainability and inclusion converge: both require participation, dialogue, and collective care for the common good.

Designing for social inclusion and sustainability demands a shift from short-term results to long-term capacity building. It asks us to see each intervention as part of a wider system — economic, cultural, and ecological — and to design for its continuity beyond project boundaries. A project that ends when funding finishes has not achieved sustainability; a project that empowers communities to keep evolving has.

Across this unit, you will be invited to reflect on how your work can integrate ethical values with practical methods, translating concepts such as equity, justice, and participation into design choices and measurable actions. Through examples like *Águeda Living Lab*, *Salus Space*, and *Gardens of the Future*, you will see how inclusion and sustainability can reinforce each other: empowering individuals, regenerating environments, and reshaping local economies.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- **Promote the ethical and cultural foundations** of social inclusion, welfare, and social responsibility;
- **Identify and apply key principles** of relational welfare and participatory governance in project design;
- **Recognise the role of culture and values** in shaping inclusive and equitable social systems;
- **Integrate the three pillars of sustainability** — social, environmental, and economic — into design and impact strategies;
- **Apply a systemic and long-term perspective** to ensure that social impact initiatives are durable and resource-efficient;
- **Reflect on** how **redistribution, recognition, and representation** contribute to social justice and sustainable development;
- **Design participatory and co-creative processes** that empower communities and foster shared ownership of results;
- **Evaluate how project choices align with sustainability goals** and contribute to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- **Communicate the interconnectedness of inclusion and sustainability** within the broader framework of social innovation and impact design.

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino)

Area of Competence 2:

Social inclusion and sustainability project orientation

4 KNOWLEDGE OF VALUES, CULTURE AND THE FUNDAMENTALS OF WELFARE, INCLUSION AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Texts by Tiziana Ciampolini, Isabella Lalli, Antonio Fantasia (Associazione S-NODI GROUP E.T.S.); Maria Koimisoglou, Theodoros Tsanakas (AKADIMOS KDVM EPE); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Agnieszka Zarzyńska (Caritas Europa); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

When discussing social inclusion and social sustainability, reference is made to core concepts like democracy, capability, welfare, participation, justice, agency, redistribution, recognition, and representation (the latter three corresponding to the dimensions of social justice according to Fraser). This competency introduces fundamental terms and perspectives to approach these topics.

Definitions and Discussion

When addressing themes such as welfare, social inclusion, and social responsibility, the focus is not only on the provision of services or the redistribution of resources, but also on the deeper values and cultural principles that guide these processes. At the heart of this competency lies the u**nderstanding that social justice, equity, and participation are not merely abstract ideals, but integral components in the creation of effective and meaningful social policies and welfare systems.**

This competency highlights the need for transformative frameworks that challenge traditional notions of welfare, concentrating instead on relational welfare, co-creation, and the capabilities approach, while ensuring that no one is left behind.

By **adopting a relational welfare framework, we emphasise the importance of human relationships in the process of co-creating public value**. This approach is based on the conviction that social justice can only be achieved through active participation, recognition, and the fair redistribution of resources. The concepts of social solidarity and democratic governance underpin the ATELIER project. By adopting the co-creation approach as a central method, we aim to empower citizens and communities, making them active agents of their own welfare rather than mere recipients of welfare services.

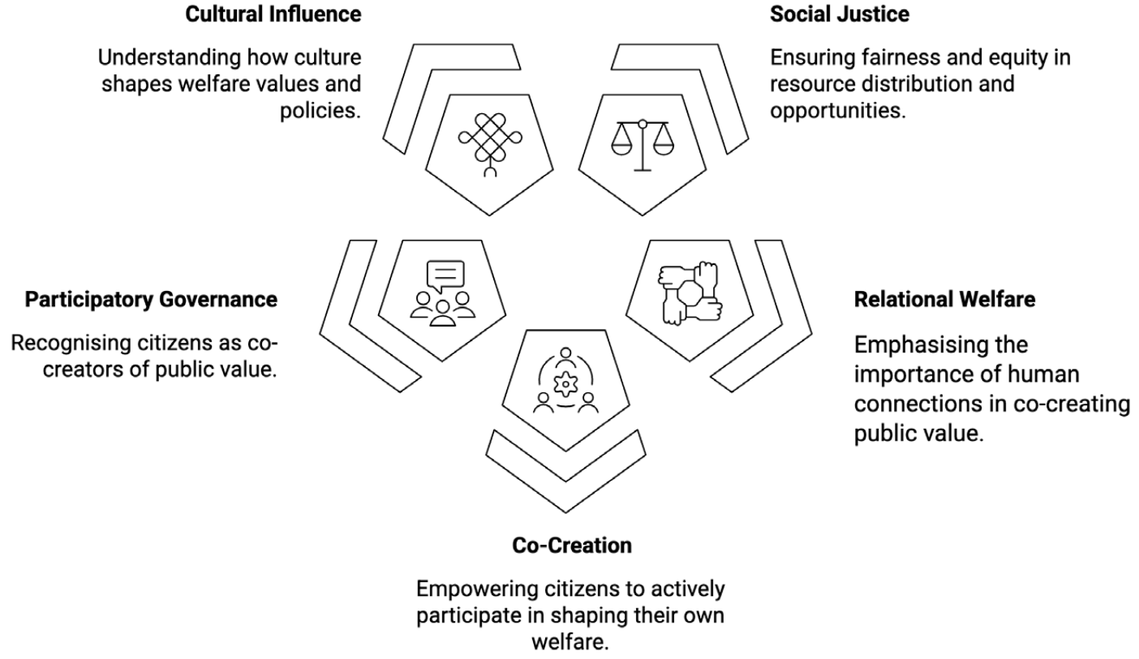
This participatory approach ensures that social responsibility is shared among all stakeholders, fostering a more inclusive society.

The competency of understanding the values, culture, and foundations of welfare, inclusion, and social responsibility requires an awareness of the wider social and cultural dynamics that shape welfare systems and social policies.

Traditionally, welfare has been viewed as the responsibility of the state to provide support to its citizens, particularly in times of need. However, this view is increasingly challenged by contemporary approaches that focus on welfare systems prioritising human flourishing and sustainable development.

In the context of social inclusion, culture plays a fundamental role in shaping the values that underpin welfare and social policies. For example, the social determinants of health are increasingly understood as being influenced by cultural norms, social structures, and economic conditions. Participation in social, cultural, and economic life is therefore essential for inclusion. According to Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, individuals must have the freedom to access the social, cultural, and economic resources available within a given context.

This competency also draws on the concept of participatory governance, in which citizens are regarded as co-creators of public value, rather than mere recipients. As co-creation becomes the central method in contemporary welfare and health promotion, this competency seeks to redefine the role of both citizens and institutions, ensuring that all stakeholders are involved in the design and implementation of policies that affect their lives.



Understanding and applying the key concepts

The first step in applying this competency is to ensure a shared understanding of key concepts such as welfare, inclusion, redistribution, recognition, and social responsibility. This can be achieved by creating a common glossary of terms to which all project participants – educators, policymakers, community members – can refer. A shared language will guarantee clarity in communicating ideas and objectives, reducing the risk of misunderstandings and misalignment.

Promoting participatory approaches

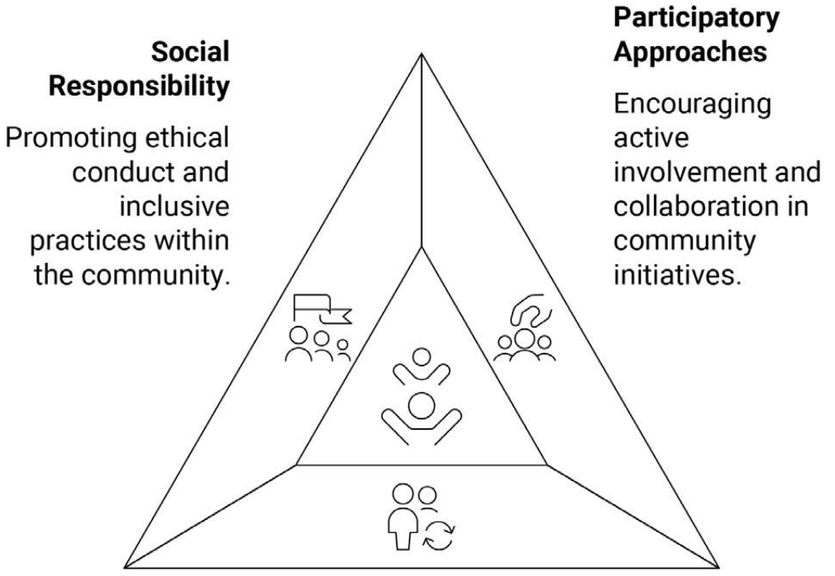
To effectively implement welfare and inclusion strategies, it is essential to involve citizens as active participants in the process. This can be achieved through co-design processes, where all stakeholders, including marginalised communities, are engaged in decision-making. **Co-creation helps to ensure that policies and initiatives are aligned with the needs of those intended to benefit, leading to more sustainable and impactful outcomes.**

Ensuring access to resources and capabilities

Policies should aim to redistribute resources equitably across society, ensuring that all citizens have access to the resources and capabilities needed for social participation. This includes not only material resources such as income and housing, but also social capital, educational opportunities, and participatory rights in governance. **A capabilities-oriented approach ensures that individuals have the freedom to pursue lives they value** – a freedom that can only be realised through the provision of both material and social resources.

Promoting social responsibility and inclusion

Social responsibility should be seen as a shared value within society, where everyone, regardless of position, feels responsible for the wellbeing of others. This can be promoted through collaborative governance models that emphasise community participation and social solidarity. By creating inclusive spaces where diverse voices are heard and valued, we can foster a sense of collective responsibility for the wellbeing of all members of society.



Made with Napkin

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

First of all, identify which **factors for social inclusion** your project is referring to:

- Health and well-being
- Housing
- Education
- Work and employment
- Participation in society
- Legal status and residence rights
- Family background
- Financial resources
- Social network
- Self-esteem and emotional well-being
- Cultural identity and belonging
- Personal beliefs and values
- Sense of meaning or purpose in life

If the project does not address any of these, see how you could include them. Are there other factors that you are addressing? Draw on the **European Social Model**. Tools such as the Problem Tree (see Competency 10) can support this activity.

Ask people you are designing for to **share their perspective**s on how to a**ddress their well-being and the challenges** they face.

Involve people at an early stage and define a clear mapping of aspects that can influence the intervention.

Use **mapping tools** to identify marginalised groups and assess their needs, but take time to listen and talk to them.

Build **listening and sharing opportunities** that are perceived as safe and where people feel safe enough to share.

Organise **participatory community workshops** with practical exercises that can help to identify and address social inequalities in their communities leading to micro-credentials certification in non-typical education.

Choose a **participatory process** to involve everyone in the activities.

Key points to consider

Engage members of your target group **from the very beginning**

Identify the **values or cultural aspects** that are a must for my interlocutor

Pay attention to the **underrepresented groups** in the decision-making process to understand how you can support and develop their position.

Reflective questions for your practice

*Are you **engaging the stakeholders** in the participatory process?*

*Are you allowing everyone to **express** his/her own **culture** and **values**?*

*Are you building **trust** with the group or following the schedule?*

*Do you recognise the **roles** and the **power** in the target group?*

*Are you encouraging **reflective exercises** where participants assess how their projects align with social sustainability principles?*

*Am I considering the **cultural values and social norms that shape the welfare system** in my context?*

*How can I ensure that the **voices of marginalised communities** are included in the design of **welfare policies**?*

*What steps can I take to guarantee that the policies I implement focus not only on **material redistribution** but also on **social recognition** and **political representation**?*

*How can I encourage greater **social responsibility** among citizens and stakeholders in the **co-creation of public value**?*

*Am I adopting a **relational approach** to understand and address the challenges faced by marginalised communities?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Águeda Living Lab

Project link

Catalogue page: 9

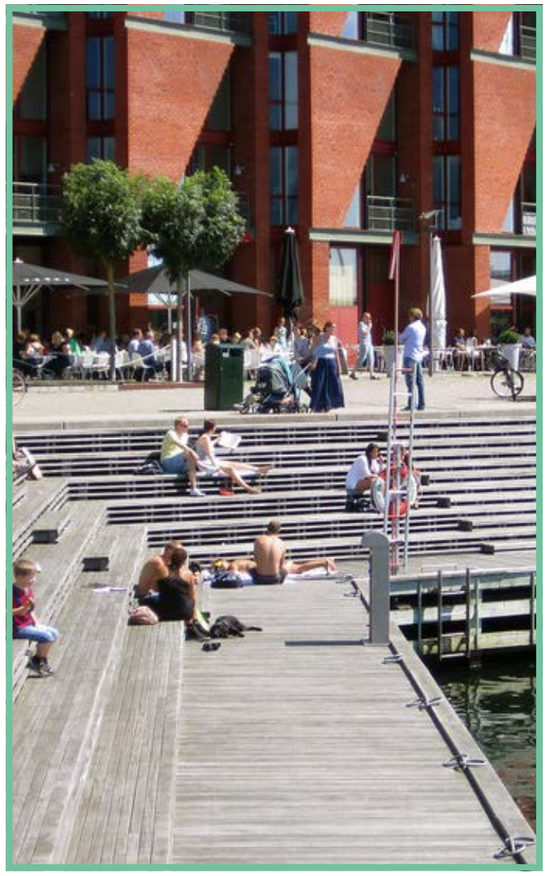


Águeda Living Lab embodies the values of inclusion, education, and innovation. Created by the municipality with local stakeholders, it provides free access to digital tools and workshops for youth and entrepreneurs. The project fosters a culture of sharing, experimentation, and self-production. **Project choices emphasised access to resources and community engagement, making technology a driver of empowerment and a tool to activate the community itself**. Activities include robotics, 3D modelling, and participatory events. The project links welfare and culture by offering people the skills and spaces to innovate, collaborate, and develop creative, local solutions to social and economic challenges.

Area Programs for a Socially Sustainable Malmö

Project link

Catalogue page: 14



This project was driven by values of equity, shared responsibility, and inclusive welfare. Set in marginalised neighbourhoods of Malmö, it aimed to reduce unemployment, segregation, and social distrust. **The project choices reflected a cultural emphasis on citizen participation and public–private cooperation, and fostered a global involvement of different actors (public and private) pushing them in taking their responsibility**. Actions included urban gardening, women-led cooperatives, youth mentoring, and co-managed civic spaces led to the activation of the citizens themselves. These practices helped rebuild trust, strengthen local agency, and promote sustainable development. Welfare was understood not just as service delivery, but as enabling people and communities to become active in shaping their own futures.

Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB...

As part of an internal initiative, POLITEHNICA Bucharest launched a co-design project involving students in the creation of signage and visual communication systems for the university campus. **Developed as an educational assignment, the project aimed to design accessible, intuitive, and inclusive wayfinding tools to support the orientation of all campus users**—particularly individuals with mobility, sensory, or cognitive challenges. Students collaborated in interdisciplinary teams, conducting field observations, user interviews, and prototype testing. Beyond enhancing their practical design and problem-solving skills, the experience promoted a deep understanding of inclusive design as a social responsibility. **The process encouraged empathy and reflection on how environments can either facilitate or hinder participation**. Student testimonials highlighted how co-design increased their sensitivity to diversity and equity, helping them recognise the value of designing with—not just for—users from different backgrounds and abilities.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 1 – *Social impact culture and mindset*
It establishes the link between social sustainability and social impact evaluation.

Competency n° 2 – *Purpose and impact processes awareness and lexicon*
It provides the necessary vocabulary to articulate the goals of social inclusion projects.

Competency n° 10 – *Navigating wicked problems and complexity*
Because this competency aims to investigate wicked problems with an integrate perspective and approach hearing all the involved actors.

Area of Competence 2:

Social inclusion and sustainability project orientation

5 KNOWLEDGE OF VALUES, CULTURE AND THE FUNDAMENTALS OF SOCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

Texts by Tiziana Ciampolini, Isabella Lalli, Antonio Fantasia (Associazione S-NODI GROUP E.T.S.); Maria Koimisoglou, Theodoros Tsanakas (AKADIMOS KDVM EPE); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

Based on the concepts of economic, social, and environmental sustainability, this competency ties sustainability to co-design for social inclusion. It introduces ways to practice sustainability within project dimensions like time (duration, persistence, evolution, release, scaling) and impact, emphasising sustainability as a project condition.

Definitions and Discussion

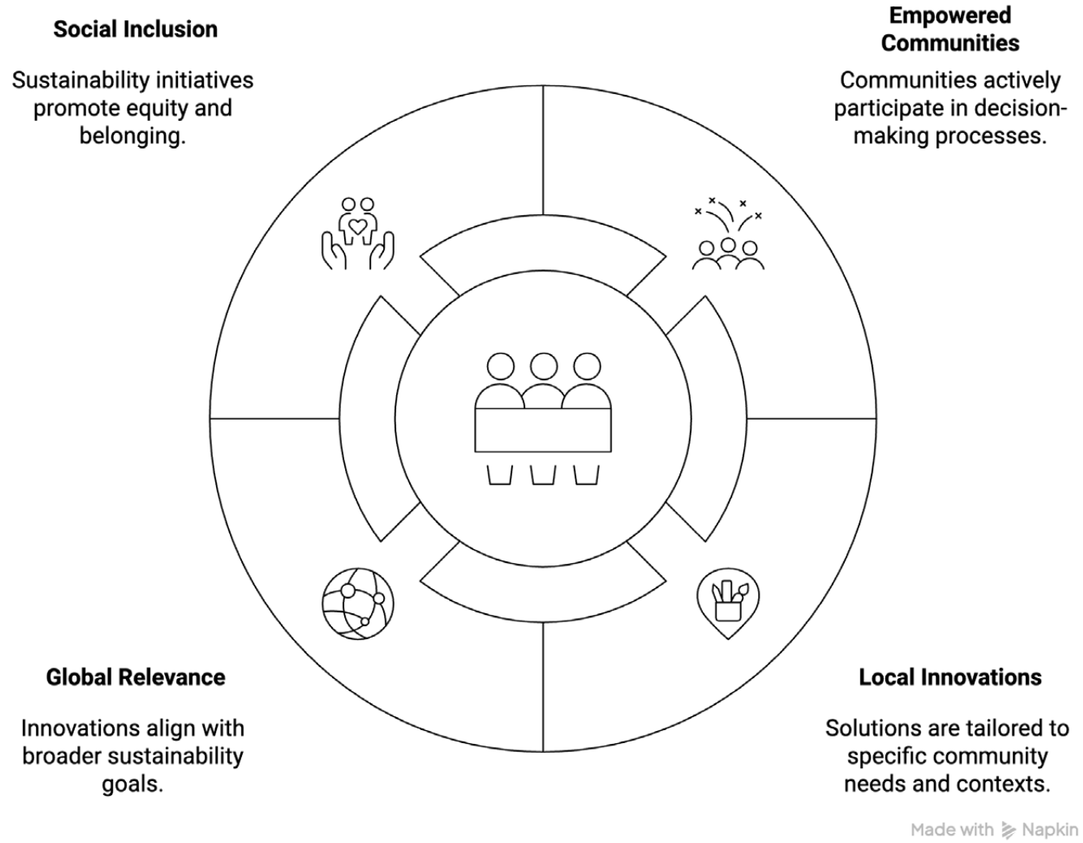
Sustainability is an inherently multidimensional concept that integrates social, environmental, and economic considerations into decision-making processes and project design.

It calls for a holistic approach that balances the needs of current populations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This foundational idea, most notably articulated in the 1987 Brundtland Report, underscores the imperative of responsible stewardship and long-term thinking in development efforts. In the context of today's increasingly complex and interrelated global challenges, this principle takes on renewed urgency and relevance.

The Brundtland Report's definition of sustainable development has become a guiding framework for policymakers, organisations, and communities seeking to foster positive change. It emphasises that **development cannot be pursued at the expense of environmental health or social equity, but rather must be conceived through an integrated lens that recognises the interdependence of these dimensions.** This integration is particularly vital when considering co-design projects, which have the potential to promote sustainability by fostering inclusivity, resource efficiency, and long-lasting social impact.

In the contemporary era, marked by escalating global complexity and interwoven crises — including climate change, social inequality, and economic instability — it is increasingly apparent that isolated or sector-specific approaches to development and sustainability are insufficient. **The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development clearly articulates this, calling for a comprehensive, integrated framework that transcends traditional boundaries.**

It recognises that development must be viewed as a multifaceted and interconnected endeavour, where social, economic, and environmental goals are pursued simultaneously and synergistically.

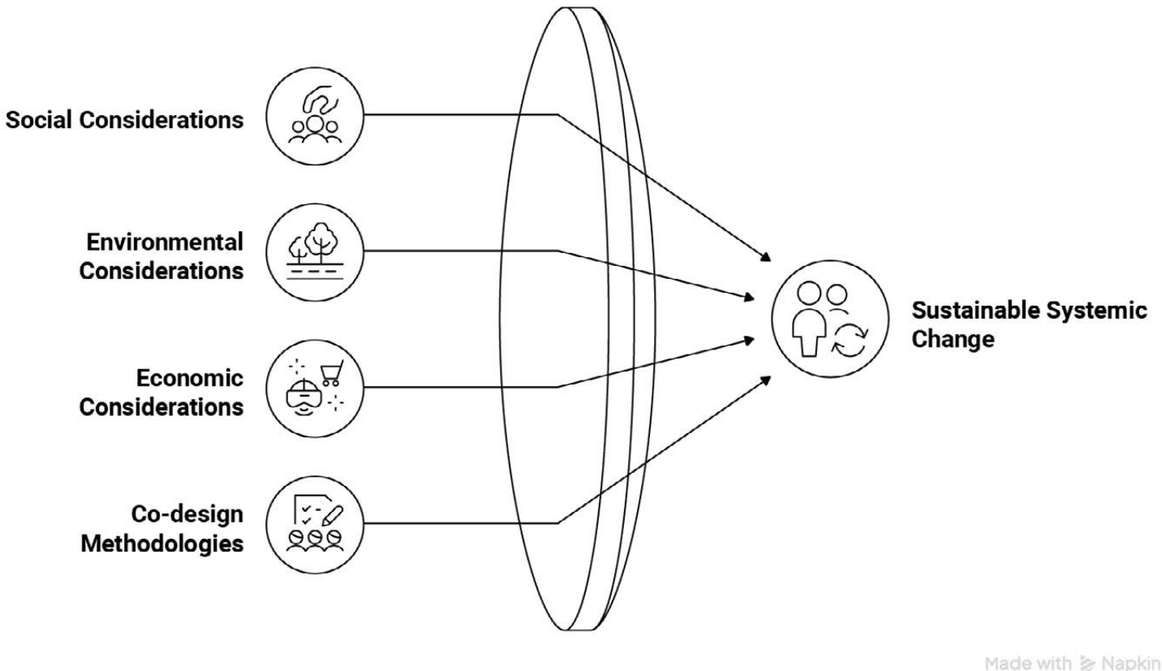


A systemic view of sustainability

Consequently, organisations working within this context cannot operate in siloed fashions or focus solely on addressing individual or immediate needs. Rather, they must adopt **systemic perspectives and collaborative practices that acknowledge the complex relationships between different sectors and communities.** This is where the insights of prominent thinkers such as Jeffrey Sachs become highly relevant[1]. Sachs identifies **sustainable development as the key to understanding the intricate linkages between three major systems: the global economy, society, and the physical environment.** According to his vision, achieving true sustainability requires a shift away from individualistic and fragmented approaches towards collective responsibility and effective governance.

This entails challenging entrenched socio-economic models and embracing cooperative, participatory frameworks that empower diverse stakeholders.

Working within communities to cultivate **an integrated vision of sustainability is one of the foremost challenges for those striving to drive transformative social change.** It is not sufficient merely to generate isolated impacts; instead, efforts must aim to produce durable actions capable of reverberating across multiple sectors and enduring through time. This requires a deep commitment to processes that embed sustainability principles at every stage, from initial planning and design to implementation and evaluation.



Sustainability and co-design

Within this landscape, the ATELIER aims to outline **how sustainability can be placed at the very heart of co-design for social inclusion.** ATELIER aims to support shaping the promotion of participatory processes that enhance community ownership, thereby ensuring that interventions produce lasting social impact. The project consciously recognises that social, economic, and environmental dimensions are interwoven and must be addressed simultaneously rather than in isolation.

This competency acquires particular relevance within ATELIER because it shows that solutions are not only designed to be inclusive—ensuring that marginalised or vulnerable groups have a voice and stake—but are also durable and resource-efficient[2].

By integrating these principles into the co-design process, we will be able to empower communities and develop innovations deeply rooted in local realities while maintaining relevance within broader, global sustainability agendas.

Within the ATELIER framework, it becomes evident that sustainability is not merely an aspirational goal but a fundamental condition for projects aiming to foster social inclusion. The project exemplifies how embedding sustainability within participatory frameworks can produce meaningful social transformation that respects ecological boundaries and promotes equitable economic participation.

Over time, **sustainability has shifted from being seen as a desirable attribute to becoming an essential foundation for effective social inclusion initiatives.** This evolution reflects a growing recognition within the professional and academic fields that sustainable development principles must underpin the design and delivery of programmes targeting social inclusion. As a result, sustainability has become a crucial element of educational and training curricula for professionals engaged in community development, social innovation, and related sectors.

In summary, sustainability demands a comprehensive, integrated approach that balances social, environmental, and economic considerations in ways that promote inclusivity, equity, and resilience. **Co-design methodologies can effectively embody these principles by fostering community participation, co-responsibility, and resource efficiency.**

By doing so, they contribute not only to immediate social inclusion outcomes but also to the creation of durable, systemic change aligned with the broader goals of the 2030 Agenda and beyond.

[1] Sachs, J. D., *The age of sustainable development*. Columbia University Press (2017) United Nations, Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

[2] Sen, A. (1999). *Introduction: Development as freedom*. In Sen, A., *Development as freedom*: 3-11. Oxford University Press.

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Define **what sustainability means in the context** in which you are operating.

Promote an approach that leads to **collaboration** between communities, organisations and institutions.

Build models that allow for interventions that, although focused on a single theme, can also have **effects in other areas**.

Activate **bottom-up involvement techniques** that guarantee greater ownership of the projects and their continuation.

Identify those problems, which often seem isolated, but which in reality **involve many more contexts and many more people**.

Foster social inclusion by engaging **marginalised communities** in co-design processes.

Develop partnerships with **local stakeholders** to enhance project sustainability.

Ensure financial sustainability by **exploring diverse funding sources**.

Key points to consider

Avoid short-term or welfare-oriented approaches: aim to generate real empowerment and long-term capacity.

Ensure a balance between the three pillars of sustainability: a project that is only "green" but not inclusive or economically viable is incomplete.

Monitor the depth of participation: ensure participation is active and transformative, not merely symbolic.

Consider contextual scalability: what works in one context may need adaptation elsewhere.

Reflect on the lifecycle of the project: is it designed to remain useful, relevant, and alive after formal funding ends?

Ensure **vulnerable groups** are not just recipients but **active co-creators**.

Be aware of the ecological footprint of your activities: from materials and transport to energy use and waste.

Reflective questions for your practice

*How does my project **integrate** environmental, economic, and social sustainability?*

*Who is genuinely involved in the design and management process? **Is participation truly transformative?***

*Does the project generate n**ew capabilities, relationships, or resources** for the beneficiaries over time?*

*What happens after the project ends? Is it designed to **continue, evolve, or adapt sustainably**?*

*What is the intended impact? Are there any **unintended consequences**? How am I **monitoring** both?*

*Am I giving space to **underrepresented voices** in the co-design process?*

*Can the project be **replicated or scaled** while maintaining its integrity and impact?*

*How does the project contribute to **strengthening the resilience of the system** it operates in?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Fashion Truck

Project link

Catalogue page: 32



The Fashion Truck combines environmental, social, and economic sustainability through a mobile clothing distribution service for people in vulnerable situations. It reduces waste by promoting reuse and avoids stigmatisation with **a dignified and mobile approach.** The project is co-designed with beneficiaries and volunteers, who actively participate in sorting, distribution, and feedback. **It is designed to evolve and scale across urban contexts, demonstrating how sustainability becomes a precondition for delivering an ethical, resilient, and replicable service over time.**

Salus Space

Project link

Catalogue page: 68

Salus Space is a prime example of integrated sustainability applied to urban regeneration. It transforms a former health facility into a living, working, and cultural ecosystem co-designed with refugees, artists, and citizens. **The project integrates environmental sustainability (eco-construction), economic (local micro-enterprises), and social (inclusive cohabitation).** Participation is ongoing, from design to management. **The impact is seen in the creation of new relationships, autonomy, and well-being**. Its duration and continuity are ensured by shared governance and a long-term vision.



Gardens of the Future

Project link

Catalogue page: 36

This project turns sustainability into a collective, educational, and transformative experience. Centred on a shared urban garden, it promotes environmental sustainability (regenerative agriculture), social (inclusion of NEETs, migrants, and the vulnerable), and economic (training in agro-entrepreneurship). Co-design involves residents, experts, activists, and policymakers. **The project is structured to be scalable, adaptable, and long-lasting, acting over time as an agent of urban transformation.** Its impact is visible in the creation of resilient communities and the reimagining of public space through an ecological and inclusive lens.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from AKADIMOS...

In adult education programs throughout Greece, we have discovered that **fostering impact culture is most effective when sustainability values are directly integrated into practical vocational training.** Working a lot with farming professionals and employees locally, we observed that abstract discussions about environmental or social sustainability rarely resonated with adult learners facing immediate economic challenges.

We delivered the accredited nationally Occupational Health and Safety training programme, also appropriate for farmers that illustrated this integrated approach perfectly. Instead of presenting workplace safety as merely regulatory compliance, we framed it within the broader context of sustainability. Participants learned how proper equipment handling and chemical management not only prevented injuries and health problems (social sustainability) but also reduced waste and environmental contamination (environmental sustainability) while minimising productivity losses and healthcare costs (economic sustainability).

This integrated approach transformed learners' perception of sustainability from an imposed external value to a practical framework for community development. We found that when sustainability concepts are presented as tools for economic opportunity and wellbeing rather than abstract ideals, they naturally align with learners' existing values and priorities.

This experience reinforces our commitment to teaching sustainability not as isolated theory but as a multidimensional approach to creating lasting positive change in communities through practical skill development and economic empowerment.

A story from S-NODI...

The "Fa bene." project has proven to be a key driver in building a true path of social inclusion while **promoting a 360-degree model of sustainability that engages the entire community**. Born in the local markets of Turin to fight food waste and to support people in fragility, it has evolved into **a complex and virtuous system of social and environmental regeneration.**

At the heart of the project is the principle of reciprocity: people who benefit from the recovered food are not passive recipients but are actively involved in community life, offering some hours of volunteer work each month. **This exchange has a transformative impact—participants are recognised for their skills, build confidence, and create meaningful relationships.** Through their involvement in activities such as helping others or participating in neighborhood events, they reduce isolation, combat inequality, and regain a sense of belonging.

"Fa bene." also promotes environmental sustainability by recovering thousands of kilos of fresh food each year that would otherwise be wasted. This not only reduces the ecological footprint associated with organic waste, but also enables a smarter and fairer distribution of resources, aligning with circular economy principles. The initiative relies on a broad network—institutions, markets, associations, and citizens—showing that true sustainability is collective, participatory, and rooted in the territory.

Moreover, **the project fosters cultural and relational sustainability, encouraging a new narrative around solidarity, care, and community.** In public markets—symbolic places of urban life—"Fa bene." creates real connections among people of different ages, backgrounds, and circumstances. These shared experiences generate trust, cohesion, and a renewed sense of community, turning markets into spaces not only of exchange, but also of dignity, inclusion, and hope.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 1 – *Social impact culture and mindset*
Competency 1 supports Competency 5 by fostering a mindset oriented towards social impact and long-term change. It promotes a design culture focused on purpose and outcomes, which is essential for embedding sustainability in inclusive and transformative projects.

Competency n° 2 – *Purpose and impact processes awareness and lexicon:*
It provides the key terminology and conceptual tools to frame sustainability effectively. Understanding terms like input, output, and outcome helps structure projects that address environmental, social, and economic dimensions with clarity and intention.

Competency n° 4 – *Knowledge of values, culture, and the fundamentals of welfare, inclusion and social responsibility*
Competency 4 aligns with Competency 5 through its ethical approach to inclusion and by addressing welfare, participation, and social justice, it reinforces the cultural and value-based foundations needed for truly sustainable and inclusive design.

AREA OF COMPETENCE 3

Ethical and inclusive design

Design has the power to shape not only products and services, but also the social realities in which we live. For professionals and students, engaging in *ethical and inclusive design* means moving beyond technical problem-solving to embrace responsibility for the cultural, political, and relational implications of their work.

This unit draws together three interconnected competencies — *Inclusion & Accessibility Principles*, *Transparency and Critical Self-Awareness in Professional Practice*, and *Critical Thinking on Design Processes and the Power of Collaborative Transformation*. Together, they form a framework for (co-)designing in ways that are equitable, reflective, and transformative.

Competency 6 — ***Inclusion & Accessibility Principles*** — provides the foundation. Accessibility ensures that barriers to participation are minimised or removed, whether they are physical, sensory, cognitive, social, or economic. Inclusion extends this, alluding to conditions for meaningful engagement and participation, recognising diversity as a resource, and fostering a sense of belonging. In practice, this means embedding accessibility and inclusion from the outset, co-creating solutions with those affected, and challenging norms that exclude marginalised voices.

Yet inclusion cannot be achieved without trust — and trust depends on ***Transparency and Critical Self-Awareness***. Competency 7 will invite you to reflect on your positionality, privilege, and partiality, as well as on accountability, acknowledging that who we are and what we belong to shapes how we see, how we act, and how others see us. Critical self-awareness helps dismantle assumptions, resist paternalistic attitudes, ensure that decision-making power is shared rather than imposed. It also safeguards practitioners' own well-being by setting realistic boundaries and fostering a culture of mutual respect.

Building on these foundations, Competency 8 — ***Critical thinking on design processes and collaborative transformation*** — focuses on decision-making and responsibility. Ethical (co-) design requires anticipating the consequences of our choices, including unintended ones, and considering their impact on all stakeholders, particularly those most affected. It demands an openness to being challenged and changed through collaboration, shifting from a designer-centred approach to one where ownership of the process and outcomes are shared among all the participants.

Taken together, these competencies encourage a shift in mindset: from designing *for* people to designing *with* them; from delivering predefined solutions to cultivating processes that are flexible, responsive, and inclusive; from assuming neutrality to recognising that design is always political and relational. Ethical and inclusive design implies navigating tensions — between individual needs and collective goals, between efficiency and participation, between existing power structures and aspirations for change. It also requires an ongoing commitment to learning, humility, and adaptation.

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino)

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- **Distinguish between inclusion and accessibility**, and **apply both concepts** to create equitable, meaningful participation in design processes;
- **Communicate motivations, values, beliefs and goals transparently**, while critically reflecting on their own positionality, privilege, and partiality;
- **Anticipate and evaluate the ethical implications** of (co-)design decisions, including unintended consequences, and address them collaboratively;
- **Facilitate co-design processes** that distribute decision-making power, foster trust, and enable shared ownership of outcomes;
- **Adapt design approaches responsively** to the evolving needs, identities, and aspirations of diverse stakeholders;
- **Integrate ethical and inclusive principles** into professional practice across contexts, contributing to more just, accessible, and sustainable futures.

Area of Competence 3:

Ethical and inclusive design

6 INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY PRINCIPLES

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); Maria Koimisoglou, Theodoros Tsanakas (AKADIMOS KDVM EPE); Agnieszka Zarzyńska (Caritas Europa); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest); Elena Tornariti (SYNTHESIS Center for Research and Education)

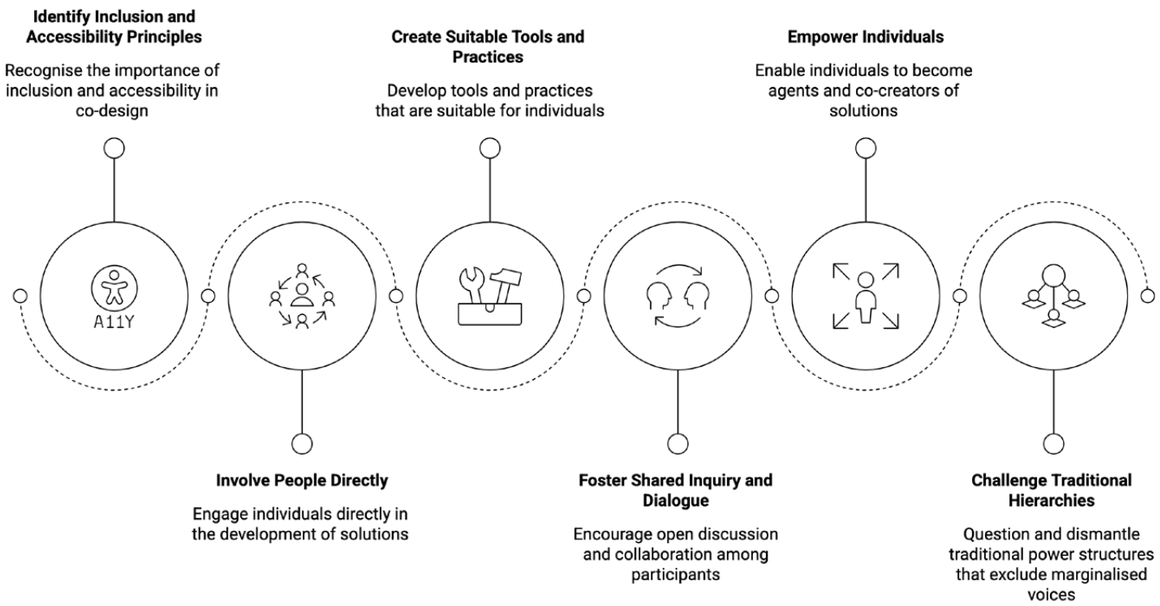
Overview

This competency explores the distinction and relationship between inclusion and accessibility. It focuses on inclusion from the perspective of user experience, considering physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects, and examines the different levels at which inclusion can be pursued.
It also addresses accessibility, both at a primary level — understood as enabling free and equal access to spaces, content, and services — and from a broader perspective that takes into account users' well-being and comfort, especially when they are involved in processes of change.

Definitions and Discussion

Inclusion and *accessibility* are interconnected but distinct concepts, as the former can contribute to the latter. In the context of ATELIER's project, **accessibility is deemed a foundational prerequisite for inclusion**, as it allows participants from diverse backgrounds to engage with the process and the tools being used.

This competency encourages the embedding of inclusion and accessibility principles in co-design practices by **involving people directly in the development of solutions** that impact and benefit them. It also creates opportunities for individuals to participate in community life through tools and practices that they find suitable for themselves and their specific context. Also, the project rejects the notion that designers or authorities alone should determine what is best for others. Instead, it fosters **shared inquiry, dialogue, and collective decision-making to empower those who face barriers to become agents and co-creators of solutions**, shaping and transforming the spaces and the processes they encounter. In doing so, this process challenges traditional hierarchies that frequently exclude marginalised voices from shaping their environments.



Made with Napkin

Accessibility

Accessibility refers to the conditions of contexts, places, services, products, resources, or contents — whether physical or digital, material or immaterial — **that do not have or minimise barriers hindering access, use and fruition**. Accessibility entails physical, motor, sensory, cognitive, communicative, environmental, social, cultural, and economic dimensions.

Accessibility is not a static concept; it changes based on the individual's characteristics and needs, over time and from one context to another. It deals with the **individual, society, and environment**, but most of all, it is determined by how these domains interact with each other. Designing for accessibility means **supporting meaningful experiences and participation through the integration and adaptation of aids or the removal of obstacles**. Thus, accessibility can be deemed a functional and instrumental precondition for inclusion, but it is not sufficient on its own.

Inclusion

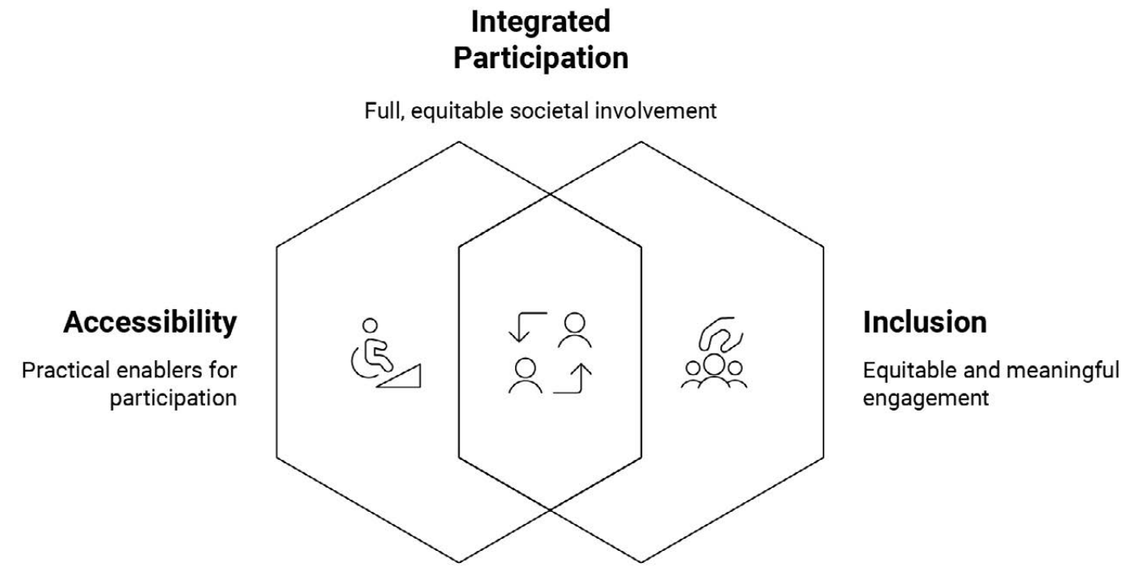
Inclusion refers to the **possibility and freedom of people from all walks of life to participate in and contribute to the country's political, economic, and social organisation, as well as to develop themselves fully, meaningfully, and equitably**. It is a key condition, especially for those from groups in a state of marginalisation and of fragility because of the presence of some form of disabilities (permanent or temporary, visible or invisible), diverse cultural or socio-economic backgrounds, identities exceeding the so-called mainstream, or any other socio-economic fragilities.

It entails the responsibility of society to **remove not only physical and technical barriers, but also the social, cultural, organisational, relational, and psychological barriers** that prevent people from contributing and benefiting equally. It involves shaping systems, attitudes, and processes that enable participation and **foster a sense of belonging for all individuals, ensuring they are involved in decision-making processes and their voices are heard**. Indeed, while accessibility mainly refers to *tangible* elements, inclusion also embraces *intangible* factors.

Inclusion recognises diversity as a resource and promotes environments, both physical and non-physical, in which everyone feels **welcome, respected, and empowered**. In this sense, **a reflection on over-representation and under-representation is crucial and implies the concept of diversity**. This involves recognising and respecting the differences between and within groups of people, including diverse intellectual and physical abilities, age, anthropometric and physiological characteristics, health status, ethnic, socio-cultural, and religious backgrounds, education, economic status gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Inclusion and accessibility (interaction) – from a co-design perspective

The relationship between inclusion and accessibility is complementary: **accessibility ensures the participation of all, while inclusion ensures meaningful and equitable engagement and participation in society.** Also, accessibility complements inclusion by emphasising the practical aspects that enable participation. Understanding the two concepts as integrated emphasises that they are not static features to be achieved once, but rather ongoing processes that must adapt to changing contexts and needs.



Focus

These take on accessibility and inclusion can benefit from the incorporation of principles from **alternative pedagogies — approaches that reject hierarchical education models in favour of participatory and emancipatory learning.** These approaches offer valuable frameworks for designing inclusive environments and processes that enable all participants to contribute meaningfully, thereby enriching diverse experiences and fostering continuous questioning of power dynamics.

In this sense, among the many contributions, some stand out. For example, it is worth mentioning the **critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire[1],** which opposes the passive "banking model" and instead encourages dialogue, reflection, and co-construction of knowledge; **feminist pedagogies,** which highlight the importance of emotional safety, intersectionality, and lived experience; **disability studies and decolonial pedagogies,** that further challenge normative assumptions about ability and culture, promoting adaptive environments and recognising that many barriers are socially constructed; ultimately, **peace education,** which provides essential relational tools — such as empathy, active listening, and dialogue — that are crucial for navigating diversity and fostering trust.

[1] Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum.

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

It is not enough to say your project is ‘open to everyone’. Here are some practical steps to ensure you are promoting diversity and inclusion.

Start by **sharing the ground rules**: To ensure your project fosters inclusion and accessibility, take the time at the beginning to agree on the **use of non-discriminatory language and to foster an environment that supports diverse forms of sensitivity, intelligence, and expression**. Ensure that conversations and activities are designed to allow everyone to **participate in their own way and at their own pace**. **Create a sense of safety and trust**, ensuring that each person has the autonomy to decide whether, when, and how they wish to participate.

Use images and language that **avoid gender-based expressions and stereotyped representations, and that are easy for non-expert users to understand**. Using **diverse communication channels and media** can also improve the accessibility of your communication.

Use participatory **techniques that accommodate various forms of communication**, such as visual aids, sign language interpreters, or text-to-speech technology, to ensure accessibility.

Offer a variety of engagement opportunities that require **different skill levels and commitments**, with a focus on specific, underrepresented groups.

Collect data and information to understand who engages with the process or project and why, and commit to improving in areas where barriers emerge.

Assess the physical and digital environment for barriers that might hinder or prevent full participation.

Ensure that you create conditions to **facilitate participation by underrepresented or often-excluded communities** in the project (for instance, by offering services such as transportation or childcare where necessary).

Ensure feedback loops that allow all participants, especially those from diverse backgrounds, to share their experiences and provide input, refining the design to meet the needs of all users better and enhancing the accessibility and inclusivity of the process itself.

Provide staff and participants with appropriate training and support on inclusion and accessibility principles and techniques to ensure a common understanding and a shared, up-to-date glossary of terms.

Key points to consider

Becoming familiar with the notions of “normativity” and “ableism” can be very insightful:

- **Normativity refers to the set of social norms and expectations that define what is considered "normal" or acceptable in a given context**, such as behaviour, appearance, identity, or lifestyle. It often reflects dominant cultural values and can marginalise or exclude those who do not conform, reinforcing systems of privilege and inequality;

- **Ableism is a form of discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities.** It is based on the belief that certain bodies or minds — typically those considered "able" — are normal, superior, or more valuable. Ableism can manifest in attitudes, language, policies, or environments that exclude, marginalise, or devalue people with physical, cognitive, or emotional disabilities.

Intend accessibility and inclusion as something that concerns the well-being not only of the beneficiaries/users, but **also of all the staff working in the context**.

Ensure that the processes you promote are designed in **a way that enables the people you aim to engage**. This means, for example, planning activities of an appropriate duration, scheduling them at times compatible with participants' everyday lives, and offering flexible forms of collaboration that can adapt to different abilities. Scheduling appropriate breaks and rhythms that respond to participants' needs can also make a difference! In this way, **roles can be built around individuals** — rather than expecting individuals to fit into predefined roles — helping to remove barriers to participation.

Challenge resistance to change and prejudiced attitudes by **educating and training your staff and the project's participants** on the value and importance of accessibility and inclusion.

Reflective questions for your practice

Improving diversity and inclusion can be challenging, as it may lead to discomfort, misunderstandings, or hesitation due to cultural differences or a lack of trust. Therefore, it is essential to reflect thoughtfully at every stage of engagement.

Here are some helpful questions to guide your practice.

*How are we ensuring that the **contexts, spaces, tools, and processes** we are using are **physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially accessible** to all participants, not just in theory, but in practice?*

*What barriers (visible or invisible) might be **preventing some individuals or groups from participating fully and meaningfully**, and how can we remove or adapt to them together?*

*Are we **creating opportunities for people to shape and transform the process according to their own needs, rhythms, and capacities** — or are we expecting them to adapt to a predefined structure?*

*In what ways are we **recognising and valuing the diverse forms of knowledge, lived experience, and intelligences** that participants bring into the process?*

*How are we taking care of the **emotional well-being and accessibility needs** of those who are facilitating or working within the project — ensuring that they, too, have the space, time, and support to participate in healthy, sustainable, and meaningful ways?*

*How can I **gather information** about who is already involved and who is missing?*

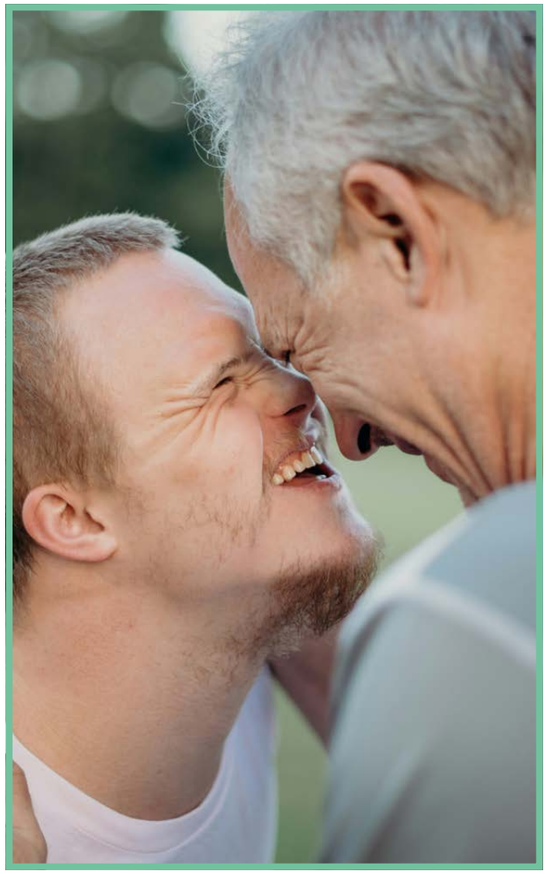
*How can I **reach out to underrepresented parts** of the community to identify the barriers they face?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Brindisi Smart Guide

Project link

Catalogue page: 110



In the case of the Brindisi Smart Guide, the participatory design process focused on creating a tourism product that is **inclusive from two key perspectives**: firstly, **from the point of view of the visitor's experience**, offering a guide shaped by the interests, needs, and lived experiences of people with disabilities; and secondly, **from the perspective of those designing the tourist experience**, who—beyond collaborating with professionals—were actively involved in the implementation of the project as guides, thereby acquiring new skills or strengthening existing ones. It is particularly noteworthy how **the design collaboration also engaged cultural institutions and local administrations, opening up opportunities to rethink tourism experiences and services** in a sector that is often resistant to embracing accessibility and inclusion as central values.

Rassegna Singolare e Plurale

Project link

Catalogue page: 302

The *Rassegna Singolare Plurale* project embodies an inclusive approach to artistic and cultural production by placing the individuality and sensitivity of each artist with disabilities or mental distress at the centre of the process. Rather than expecting artists to adapt to predefined techniques, the tools and materials are shaped around their gestures and ways of working, enabling genuine self-expression. **This flexibility allows each person to participate fully, regardless of physical or cognitive differences, and often leads to the creation of entirely new artistic methods**. Collaboration — whether in pairs or in groups, among artists or with educators — is key to this inclusivity, as it creates **mutual support, shared learning, and collective authorship**. By offering roles in mediation, public engagement, and workshop support, the project also opens up concrete opportunities for social and professional inclusion. Importantly, ***Rassegna Singolare Plurale* challenges traditional curatorial models by valuing diverse forms of expression and recognising the cultural contributions of individuals often marginalised by mainstream art institutions**. In doing so, it redefines who has the right to create, curate, and be visible in the cultural sphere.



Active

Project link

Catalogue page: 87

The ACTIVE project offers a compelling example of co-design for accessibility and inclusion, as it reframes exclusion not as a limitation of the individual but as a failure of those who communicate and design services to ensure clarity and openness. Rather than treating accessibility as an add-on, **the project recognises that communication must be built from the ground up to be understandable to all, across age, ability, and background**. Within the ACTIVE project, **disadvantaged individuals are both recipients of accessible information and active contributors to its creation**. Through their involvement in the development and proofreading of easy-to-read materials, participants develop skills, gain confidence, and gain control over the information they need to make autonomous decisions. The project demonstrates that inclusion is a spectrum of experiences that depends on whether people are empowered to understand, participate in, and advocate for themselves. In this context, **co-design becomes a transformative practice that shifts power, enhances agency, and makes space for a more just and responsive communication system**.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from SYNTHESIS...

At SYNTHESIS, we have seen how co-design can promote meaningful inclusion, particularly when working with people whose needs are frequently overlooked in traditional design processes. In a recent project, **we worked with neurodivergent individuals to co-create a manual to assist employers and employees in creating more inclusive workplaces**. Participants discussed their personal experiences navigating employment and identified barriers such as communication difficulties, sensory environments, and workplace culture. Instead of applying generic solutions, we used a co-design process based on empathy, dialogue, and shared responsibility. **We provided flexible participation formats, acknowledging that group discussions, written contributions, and one-on-one sessions allowed participants to engage in ways that were appropriate for their preferences and comfort levels**.

A story from AKADIMOS...

We started our inclusion journey with a simple realisation: **our physical spaces were not working for everyone.** Walking through our learning areas, we could see how some learners thrived while others struggled, and this was likely due to the environment. So, we decided to reimagine our spaces. We created cozy corners where quieter students could focus without distraction, alongside lively spaces where collaborative learners could exchange ideas. **It was not easy, and we ran plenty of trial and error along the way, but the reflection and metrics proved every challenge worthwhile**.

Our next step tackled learning materials. We had noticed some students struggling with traditional text-based resources, while others found video explanations confusing. Rather than forcing everyone into the same pathway, we embraced variety. Sometimes this meant recording audio versions of written materials or creating visual guides for complex concepts. The extra effort paid off when we saw learners engaging with content in ways that actually worked for them. We are fortunate to have team members with diverse backgrounds, from school psychology to special needs counselling.

Instead of working in isolation, we brought these perspectives together. Overheated discussions, we crafted learning pathways that could bend and flex to meet different needs. We did not always agree on approaches, but these tensions often led to our most creative, democratically led solutions.

Our work with refugee communities taught us powerful lessons about language barriers. We had witnessed brilliant ideas go unheard simply because they couldn't be expressed in the dominant language. This pushed us to develop multilingual support within our learning platform. **It was not just about translation — it was about creating spaces where everyone's voice could be heard, regardless of their native tongue.** We stumbled many times on this journey. Some technological solutions we thought would be game-changers turned out to be complicated and inaccessible. Some carefully designed spaces required a complete rethink after real-world use. But each setback taught us something valuable about what true inclusion means.

We are still learning every day, still adapting our approaches as we listen to our diverse community. The path to inclusion isn't a destination we will ever fully reach, but it is a journey we are committed to continuing together.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency 4 – ***Knowledge of values, culture, and the fundamentals of welfare, inclusion and social responsibility***

This Competency lays the ethical and cultural groundwork for viewing inclusion as a right and a social responsibility, rather than merely a design choice. It emphasises the value of agency, participation, and recognition in accessibility and inclusion initiatives.

Competency 8 – ***Critical thinking on design processes and the power of collaborative transformation***

The principles of inclusion and accessibility are linked to this competency insofar as the collectivity enacting the transformation is diverse. This requires reflection on the extent of decision-making power each participant holds, as well as the type of engagement put into place, concerning any existing barriers.

Competency 10 – ***Navigating wicked problems and complexity***

Iinclusion and accessibility challenges are frequently complex and multifaceted, with intersecting social, cultural, and structural barriers. A systemic perspective enables co-design teams to address these "wicked problems" by considering interconnected factors and developing long-term solutions.

Competency 13 – ***User and stakeholders mapping***

This competency is linked to the present one as identifying the diverse needs of users is essential for applying inclusive design.

Competency 15 – ***Adapting communication for cultural diversity***

Since language is one of the means that must be questioned and adapted in terms of accessibility (comprehensibility for everyone) and inclusion (representation of diversity), this competency is undoubtedly linked to the topic discussed in this section.

Area of Competence 3:

Ethical and inclusive design

7 TRANSPARENCY AND CRITICAL SELF-AWARENESS IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); Maria Koimisoglou, Theodoros Tsanakas (AKADIMOS KDVM EPE); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

This competency explores the importance of transparency and honesty in all projects and in the resulting interactions among those directly and indirectly involved in the processes. It reflects the various roles that people assume in the project, regardless of whether they are beneficiaries, designers, partners, or stakeholders, and how these roles impact both personal and collective well-being. It emphasises the importance of clearly communicating expectations, motivations, beliefs, values, mandates, and project ambitions to support informed participation. It also encourages reflexivity and critical awareness, explaining how personal subjectivity and lived experience influence design processes and inspire openness to others. Key terms include "positionality", "partiality", "privilege", and "reflexivity".

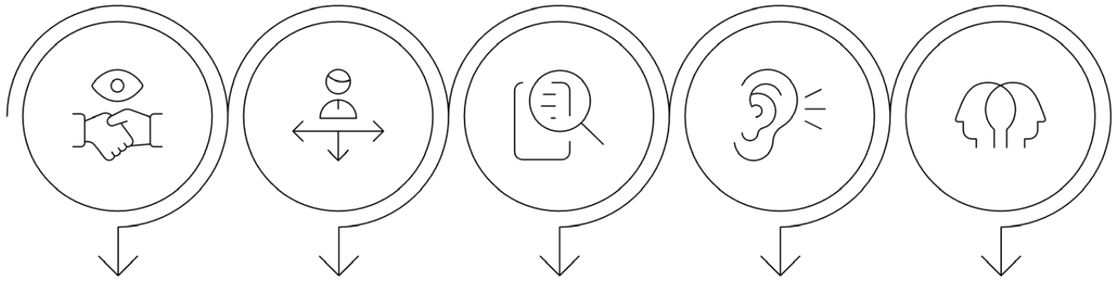
Definitions and Discussion

This competency revolves around understanding how transparency, honesty and self-awareness directly contribute to ethical and inclusive design processes.

Being honest and transparent is, of course, always good practice — but, according to our experience, it becomes particularly crucial in projects that aim to foster collaboration and inclusion. **Honesty and transparency are indeed essential for promoting trust and cooperation, as they enable people to make informed decisions about whether, how, and on what terms they wish to participate, while preserving their agency**. These principles are also key to the participatory definition of problems and their possible solutions: those who get involved in an initiative have the right to understand the mandate, who commissioned the work, and what goals we are aiming to achieve. This speaks to the importance of **clearly communicating motivations, beliefs, values, making explicit institutional frameworks, underlying power structures, mandates, and project ambitions** to support meaningful and informed engagement and participation in design. Additionally, this involves being **open to feedback, questioning one's own assumptions, and continually reflecting on how personal and cultural biases may impact the process and the well-being of both individuals and groups**.

Cultivating critical self-awareness contributes to creating more transparent co-design processes, laying the groundwork for increased inclusivity and fairness. Adopting a critical self-aware approach means **understanding how one's background** (e.g., cultural, socio-economic, and personal experiences, including biases) **influences interactions, decisions, and the project as a whole**. This is key to encouraging project leaders, foremost, as well as partners and other participants, to reflect on their positionality, allowing them to navigate the complexities of working with diverse individuals, groups, and backgrounds. However, there is more: reflectiveness can prevent boundary violations and burnout for practitioners, as well as address asymmetry between participants, making the process open and understandable for everyone.

The topic can be explored from many angles. Some key concepts — such as reflexivity, positionality, privilege, and partiality — seem particularly helpful in unpacking its complexity, as we explore them below.



Reflexivity

When we speak of reflexivity, we refer to the practice of paying close attention to **how knowledge, as well as the change, is produced, by whom, and in what context**. It means looking not only at what we do, but also at how and what it generates — the assumptions we bring in, the methods we choose, and the environments in which we operate. For those of us working in socially engaged or collaborative ways, reflexivity often means stepping back, turning inwards, and questioning our positions and practices. It is about being honest about **how our presence, values, and expectations shape what emerges from a process**. Rather than aiming for a neutral or detached stance, reflexivity encourages us to remain present, embracing complexity without attempting to control it.

Positionality

Positionality is about **recognising that who we are** — in terms of our identities, backgrounds, and experiences — **shapes how we see things and how we are seen**. It encompasses aspects such as gender, race, class, education, nationality, and more. But it is not just about listing identity markers. It is about understanding how they interact with power and history, and how they affect our access to spaces, voices, and resources. **This way of thinking can help us work more ethically**. It reminds us that no one speaks from a neutral place, and that **all perspectives are shaped by the social, cultural, and political landscapes we move through**. Being aware of our positionality helps us notice the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and invites us to make space for voices and stories that are often left out.

Privilege

Privilege refers to the unearned advantages that some of us may hold simply because of the groups, roles, and organisations we belong to — whether that is due to race, gender, class, ability, or other social categories. These advantages often go unnoticed by those who benefit from them, but they shape the conditions under which others are heard, valued, or included. Becoming aware of privilege does not mean feeling guilty. It means **recognising the existing imbalances** and thinking carefully about how we might be reproducing them, even unintentionally. In our experience, **looking at privilege through an intersectional lens can help us understand that it is never just about one trait**: different forms of advantage and disadvantage overlap and interact in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

Partiality

Partiality reminds us that no one sees the whole picture. We all speak and act from particular positions, shaped by our experiences, relationships, and the stories we have inherited. In our work, embracing partiality has helped us **move away from the pressure to be "objective" or "right"**. Instead, we try to hold space for multiple perspectives and to remain open to being challenged or changed. **Partiality also brings a sense of responsibility** — to be honest about where we are coming from, and to listen with care to others whose views differ from our own.

1

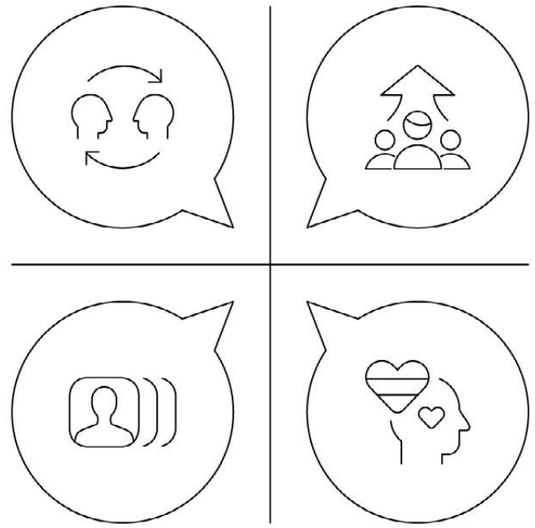
Reflexivity in Practice

Questioning assumptions to enhance collaborative processes.

2

Recognizing Privilege

Acknowledging unearned advantages within group dynamics.



3

Personal Positionality

Understanding how identity shapes individual viewpoints.

4

Embracing Partiality

Accepting diverse perspectives to enrich individual understanding.

Made with Napkin

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Foster **open dialogue and communication**: ensure all participants have access to the same information and understand the goals, values, and expectations of the project, as well as share experiences.

Practice **reflexivity**: continuously reflect on your own background, experiences, and biases, and consider how they affect your interactions and decisions.

Create **inclusive environments**: encourage marginalised voices to share their perspectives and ensure they are part of the decision-making process,

Establish **mechanisms for feedback**: allow for ongoing evaluation and input from all stakeholders to ensure transparency throughout the project.

Key points to consider

Reflect on cultural, professional, and personal **differences** among the project's partners, to adjust the narrative you would use to accompany the project.

Consider your and your team's possible **biases**, to be aware of the limits they could represent.

Try to detect elements in the project that may generate **discomfort** or **disappointment** when shared with participants.

Reflective questions for your practice

Who am I *in this process, and how might my background, identity, or role be shaping what I see and how I act?*

What ***forms of privilege*** *might I hold in this context, and how could they be influencing the way others experience the project?*

Am I being ***transparent*** *and* ***open*** *about why I'm here, who I represent, and what I hope to achieve?*

What aspects of this work do I find ***hard to express or talk about*** *— and why?*

Whose ***voices*** *am I listening to most, and whose might be missing or harder to hear?*

What ***kinds of knowledge or working methods*** *do I tend to trust or prioritise? Where do those preferences come from?*

How might others see me in this space? What ***power*** *do I carry, even if I do not always feel it?*

In what ways am I acknowledging that ***my perspective is partial****, shaped by my own story and position?*

Do I make space for ***disagreement or discomfort****, or do I try to keep things under control?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Sintra City Council Plan for Migrant Integration

Catalogue page: 24



The project puts into practice key competencies such as reflecting on privilege, goal transparency, and reflexivity. **A decolonial reflection on privilege is crucial to acknowledge global inequalities between the Global North and South and how they impact people's life chances.** Transparency about the project's goals helps align expectations and clarify its transformative potential and limits. Reflexivity and partiality mean **recognising migrant participants' right to express desires and needs, even when unexpected.** Validating their experiences and aspirations is essential to foster distributed agency and truly collaborative processes.

MinD - Mad in Design

Project link

Catalogue page: 262



The MinD project is a powerful example of how transparency and critical self-awareness are essential in professional practices. Working side by side with young people experiencing mental distress asks participants to acknowledge their own partiality and reflect on how their values, assumptions, and positionalities shape the way they relate to others. **Co-design, in this context, becomes a space for questioning normalised categories and actively working against stigma.** MinD invites participants to be open about their motivations and ambitions, and to reconsider traditional roles and hierarchies. This requires an honest and ongoing process of reflexivity, where everyone's knowledge, lived experiences, and vulnerabilities are seen as valuable resources. **The project challenges the idea of the "expert" and promotes more horizontal, situated forms of collaboration, where mutual learning is possible and desired.** In this sense, MinD is not only about inclusion, but about reimagining what it means to design together.

Caritas Hellas Social Spots

Project link

Catalogue page: 174

Similarly to what happens in the project City Council Plan for Migrant Integration in Sintra Municipality, in this case too, awareness of one's own partiality, recognition of privilege, and the ability to listen to life stories different from one's own are crucial. **When working with migrant groups welcomed by the project, tailoring initiatives to their needs and lived experiences — often marked by trauma — is a central aspect of supporting inclusion.** In the context of painful biographical experiences such as those linked to migration, positionality also means being open to the possibility that **some people may choose *not* to participate in the proposed initiatives, and respecting that choice.** It also requires **actively dismantling the assumption of "I know what is best for you" and avoiding making promises that cannot be kept,** which risks reproducing harm instead of fostering trust.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from AKADIMOS...

At AKADIMOS Career and Integration Centre, we recognised **transparency and reflexivity as essential to our intermediary role in the employment landscape**.

This was evident in the "Integrated Training and Employment Action for Unemployed Individuals Aged 25-45" Recovery Fund, a program that mandated a centralised platform with standardised CVs that failed to capture participants' true capabilities following their specialised training. SMEs struggled to identify genuine skills matches beyond formal qualifications in these digital profiles. **Examining our positionality revealed how the system's bias toward quantifiable skills created barriers to meaningful connection, prompting us to question our position within this process.**

We transformed our methodology by hosting one-to-one session meetings between program participants and SMEs. These encounters enabled transparent communication of competencies in interpersonal contexts, allowing participants to demonstrate capabilities beyond standardised criteria.

This shift demanded deeper reflexivity about institutional frameworks and how they shaped our understanding of "qualified candidates". Post-program evaluations revealed high satisfaction rates among alumni and SMEs compared to previous cohorts. Participants reported feeling "truly seen for their abilities" rather than just their paper qualifications, while businesses noted higher retention rates and workplace integration among interns placed through this liaised transparent face-to-face methodology.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency 5 – *Knowledge of values, culture, and the fundamentals of social, environmental and economic sustainability*

In addressing issues of inclusion and sustainability, a co-design project for social inclusion requires deep engagement with communities through participatory methods to understand their needs, challenges, and resources. This process naturally ties into Ethical and Inclusive Design by ensuring that the voices of marginalised groups are included in the design process.

Competency 11 – *Analytical thinking on power, politics and policy*

Transparency and critical self-awareness are essential when navigating the power dynamics, policies, and politics that shape socially inclusive projects. By embracing reflexivity and recognising our own positionality, we can better understand how power operates within relationships and systems. This awareness strengthens our ability to act responsibly and think critically in complex contexts.

Competency 14 – *Stakeholder engagement and negotiation*

Being transparent about our own values, goals, and limitations is key to building trust in co-design processes. Recognising our partiality — that we never see the whole picture — helps us stay open, avoid imposing our views, and make space for others to speak and shape the process. This awareness supports fairer engagement and more inclusive negotiation with all stakeholders.

Area of Competence 3:

Ethical and inclusive design

8 CRITICAL THINKING ON DESIGN PROCESSES AND THE POWER OF COLLABORATIVE TRANSFORMATION

Texts by Tiziana Ciampolini, Isabella Lalli, Antonio Fantasia (Associazione S-NODI GROUP E.T.S.); Maria Koimisoglou, Theodoros Tsanakas (AKADIMOS KDVM EPE); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

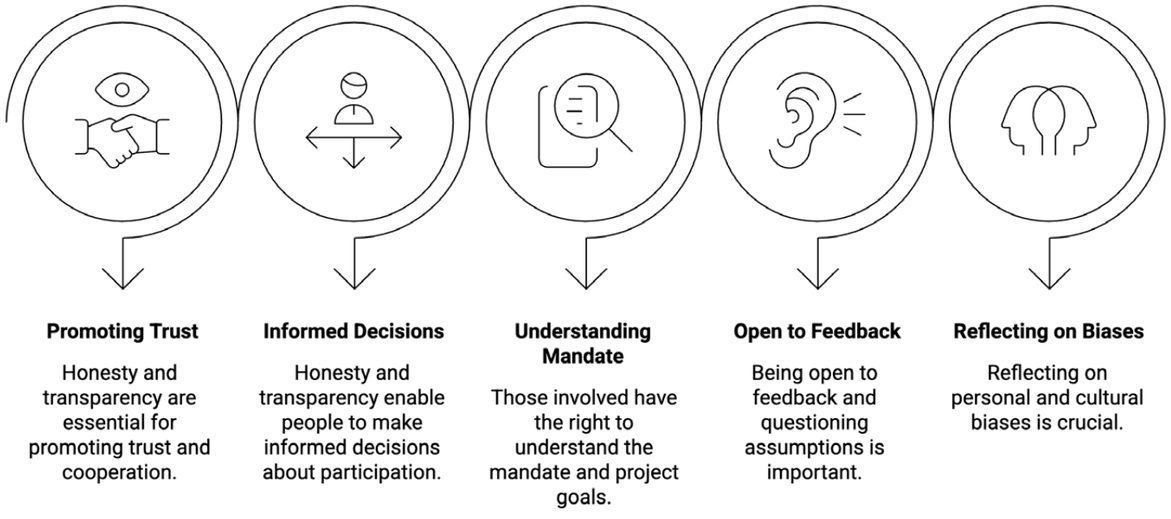
Overview

Critical thinking is a key competency in social design: it does not only analyze problems but also questions underlying assumptions, recognises biases, and guides responsible decisions. Integrated into design processes, it becomes a driver of collective reflection and ethical transformation. Together with caring thinking, which brings empathy and attention to others, and hopeful thinking, which fuels motivation and visions of the future, critical thinking enables tackling complexity collaboratively. This interplay creates collective ownership, strengthens communities, and opens the way to possible futures.

Definitions and Discussion

Critical thinking is one of the fundamental competencies for those engaged in design processes, especially when these are socially oriented and aim at fostering inclusion and collective transformation**. It is not only about mastering logical abilities or problem-solving techniques, but about developing a genuine mental habit that allows us to question assumptions, recognise distortions and biases** in decision-making, open spaces for dialogue, and take responsibility for the consequences of our choices.

Working critically means building design pathways that do not settle for quick or superficial solutions but instead address the so-called *wicked problems* of contemporary societies with awareness that integrates cognitive, ethical, social, and political dimensions.

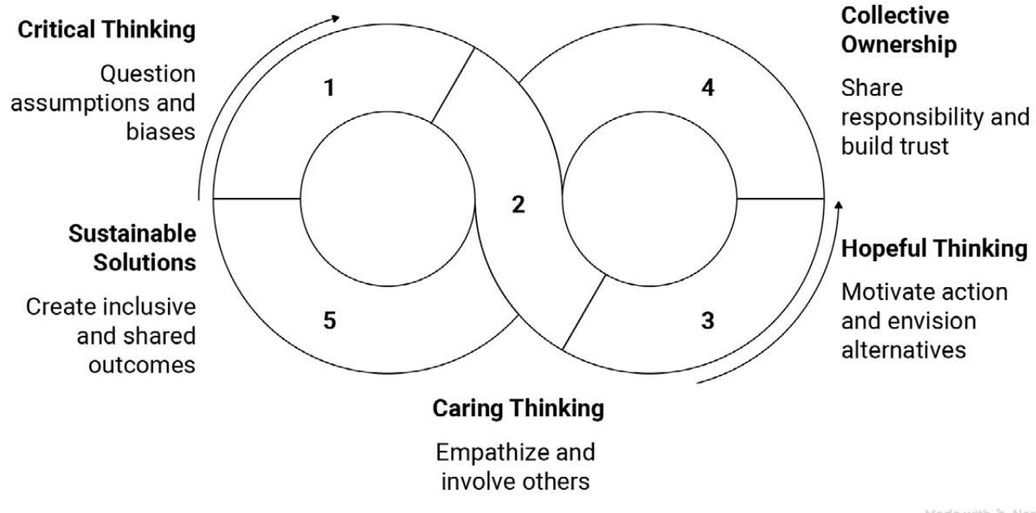


Co-designing solutions with critical thinking

Critical thinking has long been valued as an essential educational competency, not only as knowledge or application but above all as an attitude that shapes autonomy and independent decision-making. It also has a transversal dimension: it connects different forms of thought—creative, metacognitive, contemplative, caring, and hopeful—and allows fluid transitions between them, fostering continuity in cognitive and social processes.

Caring thinking

Caring thinking is a key expression of this perspective. One cannot truly care for someone or something without critical ability: discerning favourable or harmful actions, evaluating priorities and consequences, requires reflection. **Care adds an indispensable element: affective and empathic involvement**. It translates feelings into choices, decisions, and judgments, turning critical reflection into responsibility toward others. In co-design processes, caring thinking is expressed in the will to create safe and inclusive spaces, oriented toward collective well-being, where the most vulnerable voices are not only heard but placed at the centre of defining solutions. Care, therefore, acts as the glue that transforms critical analysis into relational and collaborative practice



Hopeful thinking

Alongside it, **hopeful thinking plays a complementary role**. While critical thinking assesses possibilities and limits, hope provides motivation to act. It is the force that enables communities to imagine alternatives and embark on transformative pathways even when chances of success appear slim. **Hope is not an illusion but a projective form of thought:** it starts from a critical evaluation of possibilities, acknowledges them as real—even if minimal—and generates the motivational energy to pursue them. In collaborative design, hope becomes a driver of cohesion: it fosters trust in the possibility of change, strengthens communities' sense of agency, and turns individual energy into collective commitment.

When critical, caring, and hopeful thinking intertwine, design gains the capacity to open possible futures. Critical thinking interrogates the present and unveils contradictions; care orients processes toward others and the context; hope mobilises the energy required for transformation. Together, they make co-design processes and spaces where sustainable, inclusive, and shared alternatives can be imagined and built. The integration of these dimensions is what distinguishes merely functional design from transformative design. In community-based projects, the lesson of Elinor Ostrom[1] is illuminating: **when people are given the right conditions, they show a natural propensity for cooperation and can collectively manage resources and processes.** When this is combined with critical, caring, and hopeful thinking, the result is the creation of collective ownership, meaning shared responsibility for processes and outcomes.

This shared belonging generates stability and rooting, because solutions are not perceived as external or imposed, but as the result of common, future-oriented effort.

Integrating critical, caring, and hopeful thinking in design means recognising that design processes are never neutral but always embedded in values, emotions, and conflicts. It also means accepting that social transformation does not arise from the application of standardised methods, but from the interplay of reflection, responsibility, and collective motivation. **In this sense, design becomes not only a tool to solve problems but an opportunity to generate culture, strengthen communities, and open pathways to the future.**

[1] Ostrom, E. (2007). *Institutional rational choice: An assessment of the institutional analysis and development framework*. In P. A. Sabatier (Ed.), *Theories of the policy process* (2nd ed., pp. 21–64). Westview Press

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Conduct thorough stakeholder analysis: **identify and understand the diverse groups affected by the design, especially marginalised or vulnerable groups**. This ensures that their needs and perspectives are integrated into the design process from the outset.

Engage in collaborative decision-making: instead of designing solutions in isolation, **involve stakeholders in every step of the process**, from ideation to implementation. This ensures that ethical considerations are addressed collectively, and that all voices are included in shaping outcomes.

Anticipate unintended consequences: before making decisions, **critically reflect on the possible long-term impacts of the design**. What might be the unintended negative effects on particular groups, and how can they be mitigated?

Commit to transparency: **be open about the design process, the decisions being made, and the rationale behind them.** This helps build trust with stakeholders and ensures that ethical considerations are not just theoretical but practiced transparently.

Encourage reflection and critique: ethical design requires ongoing reflection. Encourage continuous feedback and critique from all involved to ensure that the design remains responsive to ethical concerns.

Integrate ethical reflection at key stages of the design process: **build in checkpoints where ethical implications of decisions are openly discussed by all the involved stakeholders**

Apply the principle of "**designing with, not for**": Actively involve communities from the outset. Avoid top-down approaches and build safe space for dialogue and confrontation.

Foster ownership and shared responsibility: Design pathways that enable participants to feel co-ownership of the solutions created.

Key points to consider

Deciders and legitimacy
Avoid situations where decisions are made by a few on behalf of many.

Unintended consequences
Always consider what could go wrong or have unforeseen negative impacts.

Power dynamics
Be mindful of who holds resources, visibility, and voice. Inclusion is not just about invitation, but about redistributing decision-making power.

Timelines of the process
Inclusive pathways require time. Rushing may compromise relational quality and outcomes.

The role of institutions
Ensure institutions act as enablers, not barriers. They can either support or stifle transformative processes.

Local context and culture
Each community has its own values and ways of acting. Approaches should be adapted, not replicated mechanically.

Plan B
Things can change fast, be prepared to tackle them and adjust.

Reflective questions for your practice

*How can I involve communities and stakeholders in moments that lead to the **shared construction of a context profile and intervention points**?*

*How can I work on the **breakdown** of those elements that often characterise a context, and that therefore guide the planning and interventions, to **understand how many of these are "causes" and how many are "symptoms"**?*

*Have the decisions taken considered **long-term impacts**?*

*Who might be **harmed** (even unintentionally) by our project, or **excluded** from the conversation?*

What are we really trying to transform?

*Are the proposed solutions **context-sensitive or imposed**?*

*Is our design responding to a **collective vision** or just internal objectives?*

*Have we explored **systemic alternatives**, not just isolated solutions?*

*What **implicit assumptions and biases** influence my design process?*

*How can **caring thinking** guide decisions toward people's needs and collective well-being?*

*How can **hopeful thinking** be cultivated as a driver to sustain transformation even under challenging conditions?*

*How do care and hope intertwine with critical reflection to **open possible futures**?*

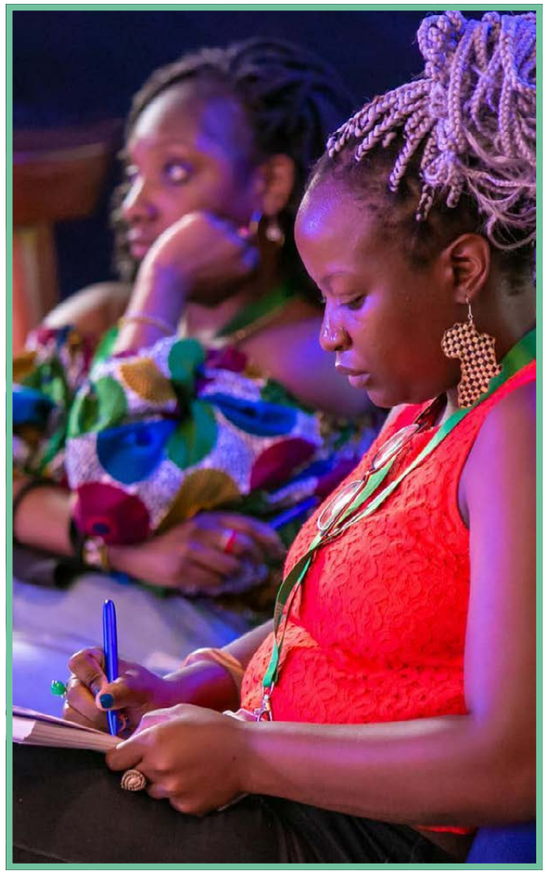
*How can **communities and stakeholders become co-owners** of the process through an approach that combines critique, care, and hope?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Buffer Fringe Performing Arts Festival

Project link

Catalogue page: 281



The Buffer Fringe Performing Arts Festival exemplifies critical thinking on design processes and the power of collaborative transformation by actively questioning dominant narratives and exploring new forms of cultural expression through collective creation. Operating in the divided context of Cyprus, **it uses artistic co-design to challenge physical and social borders, fostering dialogue between communities.** The festival becomes a living platform where collaboration is not only artistic but also political and civic. By engaging diverse voices in curatorial and performative decisions, it demonstrates how shared creative processes can generate critical awareness and catalyse inclusive, systemic change.

Les Petites Cantines

Project link

Catalogue page: 55



Les Petites Cantines embodies critical thinking by challenging traditional charity models and reframing community meals as spaces of mutual respect and shared ownership. Instead of positioning beneficiaries as passive recipients, it invites all participants to question social norms around food, hospitality, and inclusion. This reflective approach encourages dialogue about sustainable consumption, waste reduction, and local food systems. **Its transformative process lies in creating new, equitable relationships across social boundaries,** where the act of cooking and eating together becomes a catalyst for long-term change in community cohesion and environmental responsibility.

Costruiamo Saperi

Project link

Catalogue page: 114

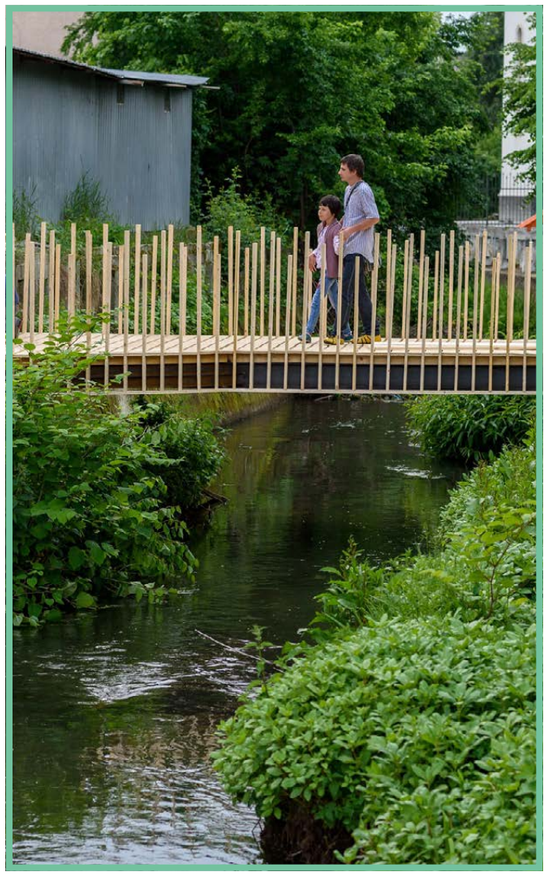


Costruiamo Saperi applies critical thinking by co-designing educational pathways that question standardised curricula and instead tailor learning to the lived realities of communities. It invites teachers, students, and local actors to reflect on whose knowledge counts, challenging hierarchies between formal and experiential learning. **This approach sparks transformation by empowering participants to actively shape the educational process, embedding it in local needs and values.** The resulting shift is not only pedagogical but social, fostering networks of shared responsibility that can adapt to change while promoting inclusive, collaborative, and resilient learning environments.

Green on the Morii Canal

Project link

Catalogue page: 110



Green on the Morii Canal uses critical thinking to address environmental and social neglect, encouraging residents to reflect on how urban spaces are valued and by whom. By questioning existing power structures and planning priorities, the project opens up new possibilities for community-led regeneration. **Its transformative nature lies in turning an overlooked canal into a shared green resource, where environmental restoration goes hand in hand with social renewal.** Through active participation, residents develop the capacity to imagine and implement alternative futures for their neighbourhood, embedding sustainable practices and collective stewardship in everyday life.

Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from S-NODI...

Fa bene mamme is Fa bene's project dedicated to women and mothers with migrant backgrounds who find themselves overwhelmed by the burdens of caring for children and household chores during the summer. For about four years, Fa bene has been organising summer activities for these women and their children. The core of this work is to create a program that allows these women, often placed in reception programs lacking gender perspectives and almost "ghettoised" in their communities, **to experience moments of autonomy and independence, in safe spaces where they can challenge themselves, rediscover themselves, and develop themselves.**

Meanwhile, the children are entrusted to educators who create activities for them aimed at healthy psychological and physical development.

The initiative challenges traditional models of welcoming for migrants that often overlook gender dimensions and consequently put migrant women in a grey zone or entrust their management to their own communities.

Fa bene provides safe and autonomous spaces, thanks to the different meetings, the project encourages participants to critically reflect on their roles, their potential, and the power dynamics that restrict their access to resources, relationships, and opportunities within the urban environment. **This reflection fosters a deeper awareness of the structural and cultural barriers that perpetuate marginalisation, prompting women to question and rethink their position within both their communities and the wider society.**

In terms of transformative processes, *Fa Bene Mamme* operates simultaneously at both the individual and community levels. For the women involved, it creates pathways towards independence, self-esteem, and the recognition of their own skills and capabilities. By expanding social networks and broadening their understanding of the urban context, participants are empowered to navigate and influence their environments more effectively. The project also pays particular attention to the children, ensuring they receive high-quality educational stimuli tailored to their psycho-physical development, thus supporting holistic family wellbeing.

Moreover, the project adopts a multi-stakeholder approach, actively involving cooperatives, educators, and local communities. T**his collaborative framework fosters systemic change by presenting a concrete alternative to conventional reception programmes.** It facilitates the creation of inclusive networks that work in synergy to address complex social issues from multiple angles, thus enhancing the potential for sustainable impact.

In summary, *Fa Bene Mamme* utilises critical reflection to dismantle cultural and structural barriers, activating a transformative process that significantly improves the living conditions, future prospects, and active participation of the women involved. **The project not only challenges existing norms but also builds a foundation for lasting social change.**

A story from NUSTPB...

In recent years, the Faculty of Industrial and Mechanical Engineering and Mechatronics (FIMM) and the Faculty of Medical Engineering (FIM) at POLITEHNICA Bucharest have introduced bachelor's thesis topics that encourage students to **approach technological development through an ethical and inclusive lens.** One case involved a team of students designing a smart wearable device intended to improve mobility for people with lower-limb disabilities.

From the outset, students were guided not only by technical feasibility, but also by ethical considerations—particularly the importance of user participation and inclusion. Throughout the project, they collaborated with individuals living with disabilities to identify real needs, barriers, and desired features. **Their decisions, from material selection to interface design, were based on constant feedback loops, reflecting critically on accessibility, dignity, and the users' lived experiences.** This collaborative, ethically guided process helped students understand that design is not just a matter of functionality, but also of values, responsibility, and impact.

A story from AKADIMOS...

At AKADIMOS, we transformed our approach to AI skills training through critical examination of our design process. Initially, we focused solely on technical AI competencies demanded by major employers, but soon recognised this approach was reinforcing existing digital divides rather than addressing them.

We critically questioned whose voices were defining "valuable" AI skills and who was being excluded from these determinations. This reflection led us to create a collaborative design framework bringing together diverse stakeholders alongside adult learners from varied backgrounds, and small businesses.

This collaborative process revealed crucial insights: technical skills alone reinforced inequalities, while many communities prioritised critical AI literacy i.e., understanding AI's societal impacts, and making informed decisions about technology use.

Our updated curriculum balanced technical competencies with ethical awareness, incorporating short modules on using AI for social impact. Throughout the program, we facilitate critical discussions about power dynamics in technology development.

This approach embodied ethical design by recognising that AI education should empower learners to critically engage with technology's role in society. By examining whose knowledge counts in determining "valuable skills," we created pathways that prepared people for existing tech jobs as well as to shape how AI technologies are developed and implemented in their communities.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 7 – *Transparency and critical self-awareness in professional practice*
Supports ethical reflection and personal responsibility in design processes, complementing the critical thinking focus of Competency n° 8.

Competency n° 13 – *User and stakeholder mapping*
This competency involves identifying and understanding the users and stakeholders involved by the problem to address and relevant to a project, including their roles, needs, interests, and potential contributions. It emphasises the importance of mapping relationships, networks, and influence dynamics to design interventions that are inclusive and impactful.

Competency n°15 – *Adapting communication for cultural diversity*
The ability to recognise, understand, and adapt to stakeholders' languages, codes, and perspectives, adjusting design and communication approaches to foster dialogue, inclusion, and effective co-creation.

Competency n°16 – *Shared ownership models and principles*
The ability to understand and promote shared ownership models and principles based on active participation and equitable distribution of responsibilities and benefits. This competency fosters collective ownership of the project, sustainability, and long-term engagement among stakeholders. It also connects collaborative transformation to concrete practices of co-ownership, essential for achieving ethical and sustainable impact.

AREA OF COMPETENCE 4

Participatory problem-framing

Every design process begins with a question: *What exactly is the problem we are trying to solve?* But in the context of social inclusion, this question rarely has a simple answer. Problems here are complex, interconnected, and shaped by the diverse perspectives of the people involved. That is where *Participatory Problem-Framing* comes in — the foundation of any meaningful co-design process.

This unit explores two essential Competencies that together build the capacity to understand, define, and navigate complexity through participation.

Competency 9 focuses on ***desk and field research for problem-framing***. Before thinking of solutions, designers must take time to explore the landscape of a problem. Desk and field research allow us to investigate its boundaries, causes, and effects — the visible and invisible forces that shape it.

Through literature reviews, data collection, interviews, mapping, and ethnographic observation, we begin to uncover how different actors perceive challenges and problems. Each perspective — whether from institutions, citizens, or communities — brings its own "frame", its own understanding of what the problem is and why it matters. The challenge is to hold all frames together, compare them, and make sense of their overlaps and contradictions.

In this process, participation becomes essential and requires that those affected by the problem — especially those often unheard — are directly involved in defining it, since their stories, experiences, and priorities shape a more complete and grounded understanding.
In this way, research becomes a shared space of discovery and co-creation of meanings.

Competency 10 takes us deeper into the nature of the problems we face: ***wicked problems***. Coined by Rittel and Webber in the 1970s, the term describes those issues so complex that they cannot be solved once and for all — such as poverty, migration, or inequality. Wicked problems have no clear boundaries, no definitive answers, and no single owner. Every attempt to "solve" them produces new consequences, new questions, new challenges.

So, what do we do? We learn to navigate them. Rather than chasing final solutions, we work iteratively — exploring, defining, and reframing them as we go. We recognise that understanding and action evolve together: each experiment teaches us more about the system we are trying to change. Approaches like Doughnut Economics or Problem Trees help understand these systems, showing how social foundations and environmental boundaries interact — and how our interventions can remain balanced between people's needs and the planet's limits.

When the concept of wicked problems meets participatory methods, something powerful happens. Participation does not eliminate complexity — it makes it visible, understandable, and manageable. Through dialogue, mapping, and reflection, communities and designers can co-create shared understanding and collective ownership of both problems and possible pathways forward. This mindset helps shift from the role of problem-solver to that of facilitator — someone who helps others articulate and navigate issues, problems, and challenges. Ultimately, Participatory Problem-Framing is about embracing uncertainty and managing it. It means replacing the search for a perfect answer with a process of continuous learning. It is about turning confusion into insight, disagreement into dialogue, and complexity into opportunity for collaboration. And, above all, it is about ensuring that the people who live with a problem are the ones helping to define and transform it.

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino)

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- **Explain the principles and importance of participatory problem-framing** in co-design for social inclusion;
- **Conduct both desk and field research** to explore and define complex social problems;
- **Identify** how **different stakeholders' perspectives** shape the understanding of a problem;
- **Apply mixed methods** — qualitative, quantitative, and ethnographic — to investigate social issues;
- **Recognise the characteristics of wicked problems** and their implications for design processes;
- **Use systemic and visual tools** such as mapping, problem trees, or the Doughnut model **to explore complexity**;
- **Collaboratively frame and reframe problems** through inclusive, iterative, and reflective practices;
- **Navigate uncertainty and ambiguity with flexibility**, fostering shared ownership of insights and actions;
- **Integrate analytical research with participatory sensemaking** to design for real, sustainable social change.

Area of Competence 4:

Participatory problem-framing

9 DESK AND FIELD RESEARCH FOR PROBLEM-FRAMING

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest); Elena Tornariti (SYNTHESIS Center for Research and Education)

Overview

(Re)Defining the problem to be addressed — clarifying its boundaries, causes, effects, systemic interconnections with other issues, contexts, stakeholders, and people involved… — is a necessary step for mindful and impactful design. This activity is particularly crucial in complex scenarios, where designers often face wicked problems. In co-design processes, this competency becomes fundamental: values, beliefs, meanings, interpretations, expectations, backgrounds, life experiences, and perspectives; these all shape how a problem is perceived, framed, and ultimately guide decision-making processes. Such decisions need to be informed, collectively shared, and genuinely effective. This competency, therefore, introduces approaches and techniques (such as qualitative and quantitative research, case study analysis, mapping, and visualisation) that enable participatory and collaborative actions in problem-framing.

Definitions and Discussion

Scholars such as Herbert Simon [1] and Peter Checkland [2] have respectively highlighted the importance of **clearly defining a problem before solving it,** as well as the influence of actors' perceptions in shaping that understanding. The quality of any solution is indeed closely linked to how the problem is initially framed, including its **boundaries, causes, effects, systemic relations with other issues, stakeholders involved, and the people affected, as well as any context that is impacted.**

The concept of "frames" (as explored by Gareth Morgan) refers to the **mental models** by which people interpret reality and approach it, as well as its problems.

Likewise, according to Nigel Cross [3], understanding a problem means constructing a mental model of its structure, determinants, and constraints. So, **framing is influenced by the agendas and viewpoints of stakeholders** — users, institutions, media, decision-makers — each bringing a distinct idea of what the problem is and why it matters. **Such a process also depends on the nature of the problem:** well-structured issues may often be addressed by a specific solution, while complex or wicked problems (see Competency no. 10) resist easy, straightforward and definite resolution.

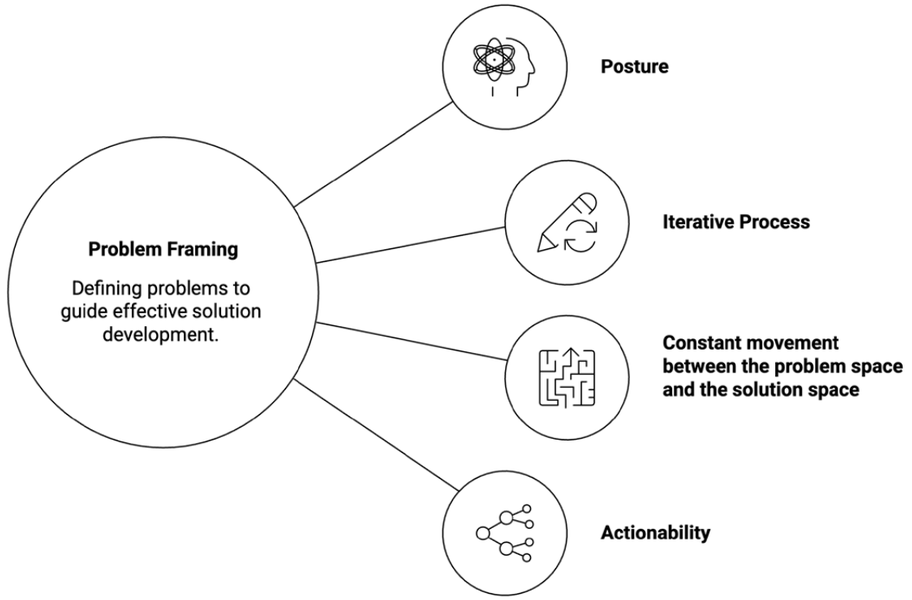
In such cases, understanding and defining the problem with clarity is not just a preliminary step in designing: is a posture that leads away from simplifying phenomena and guides through complexity **toward solutions that emerge from an ongoing circular interaction between understanding and exploration,** reflection and action, and that resonate deeply with individuals and communities, their worldviews and solutions that are put in place when faced with a problem. Searching for the solution (or, better yet, solutions) then requires navigating the models adopted to interpret the problem by experimenting, testing, and refining those models. Indeed, as suggested by Donald Schön [4], **problem-framing is about iteratively** developing and refining both the definition of a problem and the ideas for its possible resolution, through **constant movement between the problem space and the solution space.** Problem-framing goes beyond identifying the elements, conditions, and variables surrounding an issue. It also provides a clear and detailed definition of the problem itself. As such, it is an analytical and specific process through which the problem is not only outlined but also structured in a way that makes it actionable.

[1] Simon, H. A. (1996). *The sciences of the artificial* (3. ed.). MIT Press.

[2] Checkland, P. (2000). Soft Systems Methodology: A Thirty Year Retrospective. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 17:S11–S58.

[3] Cross, N. (1982). Designerly ways of knowing. *Design Studies*, 3(4):221-227.

[4] Schön, D. A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner*. Basic Books.



Unpacking the problem: which frames to explore?

Problem-framing can be seen as a process, made up of a **set of non-hierarchical intersecting "frames",** meant as topics that allow problems to be analysed based on their meanings, the communities they affect, their features, and the implications.

UNDERLYING PROJECT DEMANDS, EXPECTED AND DESIRED IMPACTS

Analysing the requests that drive the project — what they imply, and the results expected (outputs, outcomes, and impacts) — helps to reveal how the problem is interpreted by those who initiated it. This process can also uncover potential biases, uncertainties, or contradictory elements within the project's demands that should be addressed, examined, or resolved before the design phase begins.

BENEFICIARIES, COMMUNITY, AND STAKEHOLDERS

Mapping the groups affected by the problem and understanding the meanings, values, and interpretations each group assigns to it, while also fostering agency and voice—especially for those who are often excluded or whose contributions are typically overlooked. This type of frame is also beneficial for identifying the different levels of agency that individuals involved can exercise, as well as the degree of engagement that is possible and desired by each individual.

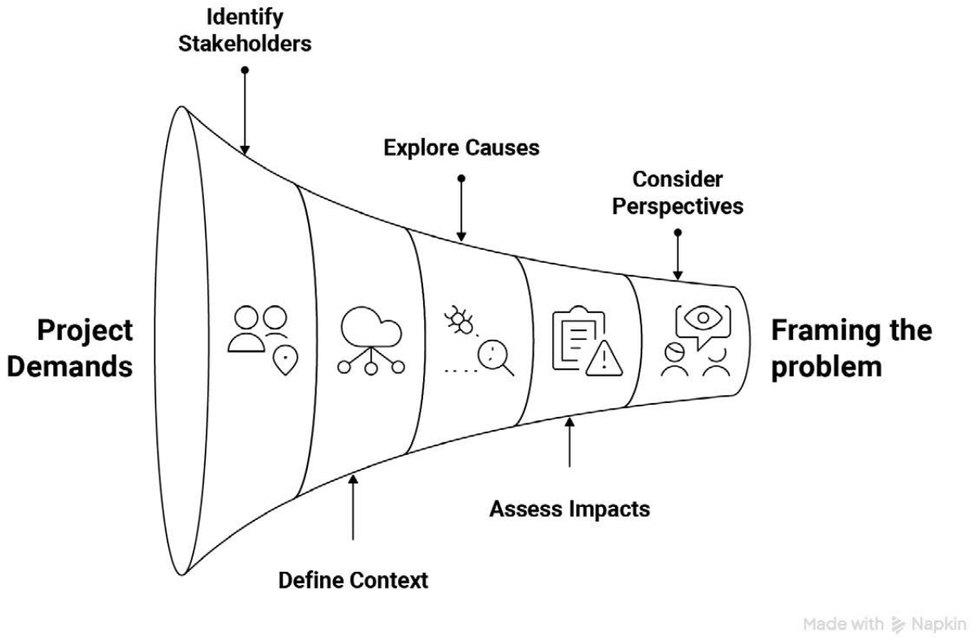
CONTEXT AND BOUNDARIES
Identifying the problem's context and boundaries helps avoid either an overly broad or, conversely, excessively narrow—and too simplified—exploration of the issue at hand.

SURFACE-LEVEL AND ROOT CAUSES
Exploring the immediate (surface) and underlying (deep) causes, often multidimensional and intersectional, provoking the problem.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EFFECTS
Examining the intended and unintended impacts that a problem may generate on people, stakeholders, and the territory in the short, medium, and long term, while ensuring that proposed solutions remain sustainable and attentive to possible unforeseen consequences.

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES
Considering the beliefs, backgrounds, views, and needs of the communities involved or affected, to grasp the social, economic, and cultural dynamics fully.

KEY FACTORS
Identifying the variables that most significantly impact the situation, and concentrate efforts accordingly.
From the perspective fostered by a co-design approach, problem-framing plays a crucial role in ensuring that design solutions are grounded in the real needs and sustainable challenges of the communities involved. Rather than imposing predefined solutions, this competency encourages designers and stakeholders to **jointly redefine the problem,** ensuring that solutions are aligned with the actual challenges of the community.



Multiple sources for problem-framing

From a social inclusion perspective, this entails the active involvement of marginalised or underserved groups in the problem-definition process. Additionally, the process of problem-framing can draw on a **combination of mixed methods, including quantitative data and qualitative insights**. The goal is to deeply immerse ourselves in the problem's ecosystem, achieving a rich, multi-layered understanding of its complexities and nuances from multiple perspectives.

Generally speaking, some methods are particularly valuable to **investigate issues from the perspective of stakeholders**.

These include:

- In-depth interviews;
- Card-sorting exercises;
- Surveys;
- Prototypes as means for confrontation, discussion, and change triggers;
- Metaphors and analogies for facilitating collective thought, understanding and reflection;
- System maps, image maps, and conceptual maps, to reflect on the systemic elements of the problem.
- Case studies research, mapping, analysis, and benchmark;
- Both deep and rapid ethnography through observant participation and participant observation, shadowing during immersive field experiences among/with all the users (final, providers and management, production) of a product/service/process;
- Analysis of the problem and its solutions elsewhere, and its comparison with our case;
- Collection of personal stories;
- Consultation of both experts and experts by experience;
- Literature reviews (including contributions from grey literature such as reports, policy documents, national and international regulations…);

Focus

Among others, **Anthropology** has been helpful in recognising and resisting ethnocentric perspectives — those that assume one's own cultural norms and values are universal or superior. It helps adopt other viewpoints, creating space for more just, inclusive, and contextually grounded forms of engagement.
Anthropology — and its application at the intersection with design practices, namely **Design Anthropology** — offers practical tools to cultivate this sensitivity. It fosters a **reflexive, action-oriented approach** that encourages designers to go beyond surface-level engagement and develop a deeper understanding of people's lived realities.
Among the techniques that can be most we have found most useful are:

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

This method involves immersing oneself in the daily routines of the community or individuals involved. By observing interactions and participating in everyday practices, practitioners can uncover tacit knowledge and subtle cultural dynamics that shape people's choices and behaviours.

OBSERVANT PARTICIPATION

It can be, for instance, also via **co-crafting/creation processes:** collaborative actions with different actors can become a driver for problem-framing by bringing people closer together and enabling them to express needs and perspectives through practical and embodied modes — often surfacing voices and concerns that would remain unspoken in purely verbal exchanges.

COLLABORATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

Frequently in the form of *rapid* ethnography, it is time-sensitive, but participatory method that combines focused observation, interviews, and co-analysis in short cycles. It enables teams to develop a shared understanding of local perspectives and power structures while actively involving participants in interpreting their own contexts.

EXOLORATORY WALKS

Also known as “go-alongs”, these are guided walks where participants lead practitioners through spaces that hold meaning for them. This method helps reveal spatial relationships, emotional geographies, and the situated knowledge embedded in places.

PHOTO ELICITATION

Photo elicitation: Participants are invited to take or respond to photographs that represent aspects of their lives or environments. These images then serve as prompts for dialogue, allowing for richer discussions that may not emerge through verbal questions alone.

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Engage stakeholders early and often

Ensure all relevant groups — especially those who are marginalised or underrepresented — are involved in framing the problem. Use interviews, surveys, or workshops to gather input and build ownership from the outset.

Utilise both qualitative and quantitative research methods

They allow to gain a comprehensive understanding. Qualitative tools (interviews, focus groups) offer in-depth perspectives, while quantitative data (surveys, stats) validate findings and reveal patterns.

Visualise data and systems

Use diagrams, maps, and other visual tools to make complex issues easier to understand and communicate, thereby making them more accessible and engaging. Stakeholder maps, process flows, and mind maps help teams and communities build a shared understanding of relationships and dynamics.

Encourage sensemaking

Facilitate group discussions that allow diverse perspectives to interact with each other. This collaborative reflection supports collective insight, enabling the team to navigate ambiguity with a shared frame of reference.

SYNTHESISe insights

Combine data, findings from experiences and case studies, and stakeholder contributions into a clear, actionable, and holistic problem statement. This enables the identification of critical areas for intervention, ensuring that no important aspect is overlooked. It also provides a direct and unambiguous roadmap for the design process, facilitating focused ideation and solution development.

Key points to consider

Central to the philosophy of design thinking is the **focus on human experiences and needs**. It is crucial that problems are framed through a lens that closely aligns with the human context, taking into account the real-world impact on individuals and communities. This approach ensures that solutions are not only technologically feasible and business-savvy but also deeply resonant and empathetic to the end-user's experience.

Time constraints can pressure teams to skip deep research, but shallow problem understanding can undermine the entire project.

Desk research may overlook the lived realities of people facing the problem; therefore, a **balance of both sources of knowledge** — *desk* and from the *field* — should be sought.

Bias can significantly influence how a problem is framed, potentially leading to solutions that are not in the best interest of all users. To mitigate bias, try to **incorporate diverse perspectives**.

Reflective questions for your practice

*Have we **involved people with lived experience of the problem** in shaping how we define it?*

*Have we involved all the **direct and indirect stakeholders**, as well as those who hold **power and influence**?*

*Are we drawing from a sufficiently **broad range of sources** to understand this problem from diverse angles?*

*Can we define the problem's boundaries **together**?*

*Can we clearly delimit these **boundaries**?*

*Can we clearly define the **economic, cultural, personal, and social constraints** that may affect our actions on the problem?*

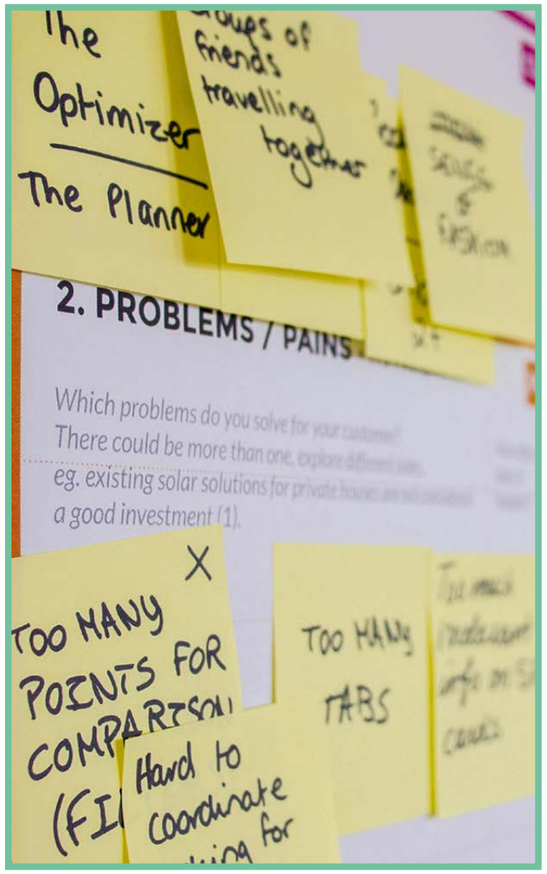
*What **assumptions** might we be making that could limit how I frame the problem?*

*Given the current framing, can we **check together** whether "everything is there"?*

What causes can we define as deep?** Which ones are **surface-level?

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Design Thinking for Social Inclusion



Project link

Catalogue page: 121

This EU project used **surveys, interviews, empathy mapping and participatory workshops to define the challenges of social inclusion collaboratively.** Through these tools, both beneficiaries and stakeholders contributed to **identifying root problems and shared priorities**. These activities did not just inform the project — they became a core part of the intervention itself, **enabling the team to adapt iteratively**. It is a clear example of participatory problem-framing in action, crucial in contexts of complex and evolving vulnerabilities.

Our Creek at La Terenuri

Project link

Catalogue page: 59

This urban regeneration project begins with deep context analysis, involving residents through **door-to-door surveys, mapping, storytelling, and visioning workshops**. Beneficiaries play an active role in framing the problem — identifying issues and imagining solutions for their neighbourhood. By co-designing public space interventions and setting shared priorities, the project serves as a living example of how collaborative problem-framing shapes inclusive urban transformation.



Mobile Library BookTruck

Project link

Catalogue page: 209

Mobile Library BookTruck tackles educational exclusion in rural Romania through a co-designed mobile literacy service. The project begins with **participatory mapping, interviews, and focus groups** that involve children, parents, teachers, and community members. These activities help **uncover hidden needs and redefine the problem of literacy beyond access** — touching on cultural relevance and emotional connection to reading. **Beneficiaries co-create activities and provide feedback throughout, shaping the direction of the intervention.** This makes the project a strong example of participatory problem-framing in action.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB...

As part of an applied research effort within a broader health and inclusion perspective, our team focused on **developing implementation strategies for customised prostheses aimed at underserved and marginalised populations** — particularly those living in rural or resource-limited areas.

While we did not directly interact with individual users, we conducted **desk research and literature analysis on clinical and technical requirements, access barriers, and the social implications of prosthesis use**. A key reference was a doctoral thesis on optimising prosthetic fit using 3D modelling and customisation techniques (*P.I. Braileanu, Research on optimising customised prostheses, 2021*). This helped us understand how individualised biomechanical needs could be addressed through adaptable and modular design strategies. We complemented this with **thematic analysis of case studies in similar contexts, identifying common issues**: poor fit, discomfort, rejection of the device, lack of training, and cultural stigma.

Using mapping techniques and visual synthesis, we structured the problem into layers — technical, social, and logistical — and explored potential intervention paths, ranging from local fabrication networks to simplified fitting proToCols.

This approach supported a participatory mindset even without direct engagement, by framing the problem through evidence-based empathy: imagining design solutions grounded in real challenges documented across literature, public health reports, and prior field studies.

A story from POLITO...

The project ***Vivere Insieme l'Accoglienza* (V.I.A.)** is a collaboration between our action-research group Polito Social Design Lab and the P.G. Frassati cooperative, aiming to **co-design and self-build solutions to improve living conditions in two shelters for unhoused people in Turin**. Initially, the cooperative staff requested the creation of structures to provide bedroom privacy, as rooms were shared by three or four guests. However, as the project evolved, new needs emerged concerning the layout and atmosphere of other areas within the shelters.

To explore these latent and evolving needs, the research team structured the design process through direct engagement with both staff and guests. This approach helped uncover qualitative elements — such as daily routines, internal rules, conflicts, and cognitive or practical difficulties — that revealed the deeper issues behind the initial request.

By employing participatory research techniques — such as focus groups, semi-structured interviews, exploratory walks, and case study analysis — the team collaboratively reframed the original design problem. What started as a vague proposal for a "partition" evolved into a much richer system of spatial requirements. These included suitable bedroom furniture, secure storage solutions, methods to define and protect personal space, and strategies to use one's space at night without disturbing others.

The project team was composed of shelter guests, a social worker overseeing educational aspects, two design interns, and three senior design facilitators (including a lab coordinator). **Together, they transformed this complex framework of needs into a tangible, co-designed solution**: a modular furniture element for each of the 23 guests. This unit integrated privacy screens, personal storage, a table-chair system for private activities, and individual lighting.

The V.I.A. project clearly illustrates how participatory design requires designers to **renegotiate and transform the initial brief continually**. **Observant participation and deep listening enabled the team to address not just expressed needs, but also unspoken, systemic issues.** In this case, the request for a "partition" proved to be an entry point into a broader reflection on spatial dignity, autonomy, and the right to a personal, livable space in a shared environment.

A story from SYNTHESIS…

In a quiet room in Nicosia, a group of young people (Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots, and migrants) sat in a circle. They were strangers at first, united by a shared sense of curiosity and the willingness to talk about difficult things: identity, conflict, and the possibility of peace.

SYNTHESIS had invited them to participate in a **co-creation peace design workshop — a space where design thinking meets storytelling and memory work.** The goal was not to solve Cyprus' decades-long division overnight, but to *reimagine coexistence*, and let young voices be heard.

The session began with a soundwalk through the city's fragmented heart, the Buffer Zone. Participants recorded ambient sounds: church bells, the muezzin's call, laughter from a café, and the creaking of abandoned gates. Back in the workshop, **they created a shared soundscape**, blending their recordings into an audio collage titled *"Voices Between Walls."* It was a subtle act of reclamation: **creating something whole from pieces that had long been separated**.

Using participatory design tools, they mapped personal experiences of division and togetherness on large sheets of paper. One young migrant woman traced the places where she had felt safe. Another participant drew a bridge over the Buffer Zone, with benches in the middle for shared storytelling.

By the end of the workshop, **the group co-designed a "Peace Box", a mobile toolkit filled with ideas, stories, and activities for facilitating dialogue in schools and youth centres.** It was more than a box. It was a statement: peace isn't abstract; it is something we build, piece by piece, when we listen, imagine, and design it together.

A story from OLAE…

Often, what seems like a clear problem at first changes once we start talking to people, listening to their stories, and exploring the context in more depth. **We have found that combining data from reports with direct insights from communities helps us frame problems in ways that feel more accurate, human, and meaningful.**

We look at existing **reports, statistics, and studies** to gather a broad view. **At the same time, we speak directly with people who live or work in the contexts we are designing for**. We listen to different voices, sometimes using interviews, workshops, or even informal conversations to make sense of the patterns we discover.

Gradually, **we piece together a clearer picture.** Sometimes confirming our initial thoughts, while, at other times, it reveals new layers we had not considered., it reveals new layers we had not considered.

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RECOMMENDED READING

[Available in ATELIER's Repository of Literature]

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 3 – *Project management lexicon and sensitivity*
Effective problem-framing relies on shared language and concepts to communicate findings and decisions. Without this common vocabulary, it is harder to align diverse partners around the same problem definition.

Competency n° 10 – *Navigating wicked problems and complexity*
Many social issues are complex and require framing the problem through multiple lenses. Problem-framing benefits from Competency n° 10 as this one supports a systemic view, helping to uncover deep causes and interdependencies.
Vice versa, problem-framing is particularly crucial when dealing with wicked problems, as it supports the shift from ambiguity to clarity by helping transform wicked problems into more structured ones that can be addressed through co-design. Setting different, complementary problem-framing drivers helps "decompose" the multiple layers of complexity these orders of issues are marked by.

Competency n° 13 – *User and stakeholders mapping*
Understanding who is affected by the problem and how individuals and stakeholders relate to one another is a key foundation for framing the problem accurately and inclusively.

Area of Competence 4:

Participatory problem-framing

10 NAVIGATING WICKED PROBLEMS AND COMPLEXITY

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Agnieszka Zarzyńska (Caritas Europa); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

The challenge of social inclusion often entails addressing systemic, multidomain problems requiring attention as they are "wicked", meaning that they are complex, ambiguous, interrelated, multiscalar, contextual, as well as multidisciplinary; just because of these characteristics, they often have not a single solution that always and everywhere works, neither a medium-term nor definitive one.
This competency explores the concept of wickedness, its attributes, and helps in recognising, understanding, navigating, and addressing problems in this realm with awareness and the appropriate expectations.

Definitions and Discussion

Wicked problems are **complex, unpredictable, and ambiguous;** they cannot easily be broken down into constituent parts and components, traced to specific causes, nor to expected outcomes. They also have a **multi-scalar and interconnected nature** across social, political, and environmental systems, and **lack definitive, medium-term, or standardised solutions; instead, they require a holistic approach and flexible, integrated solutions, adaptable to changing conditions over time and across various contexts.**

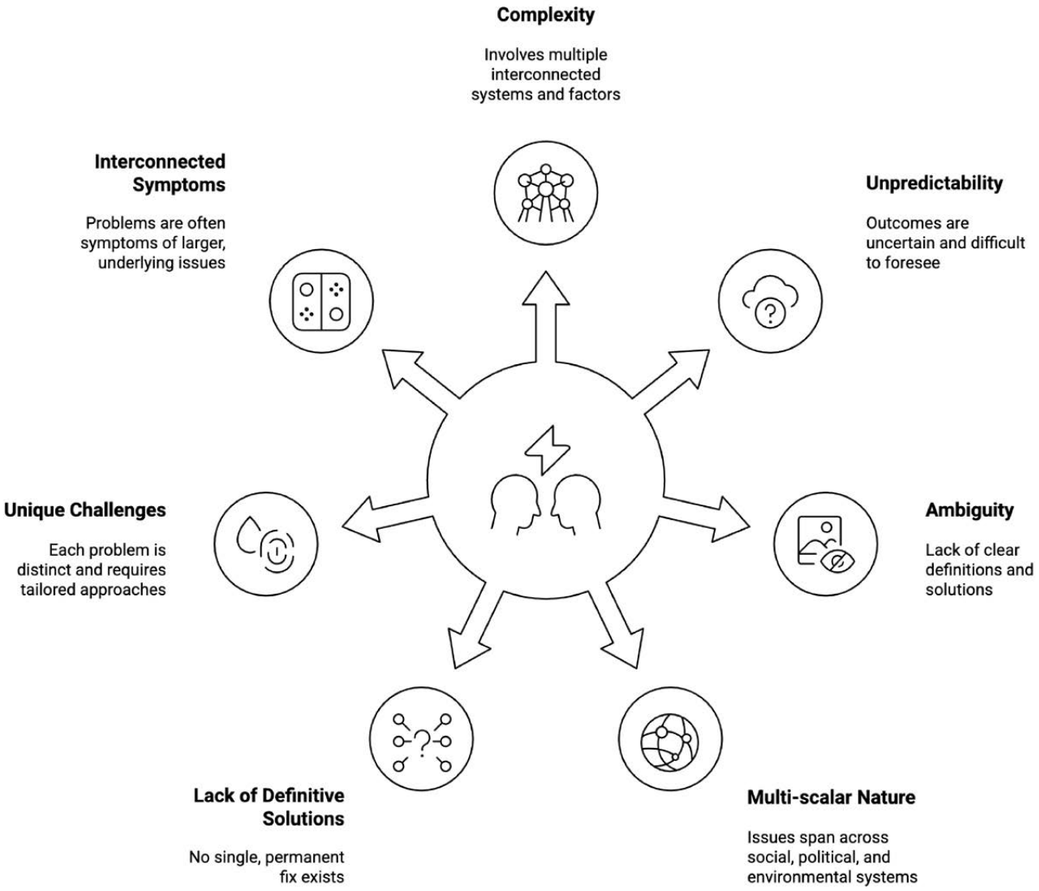
Design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber [1] coined the term in 1973 to describe a class of (social) problems that they considered **'unsolvable' due to their high degree of complexity** – such as poverty, climate change, or social inclusion – as opposed to so-called tame problems, that are predictable, with causes and consequences which can be identified and addressed, that have a clear end state linked to a specific implemented solution. Wicked problems involve **multiple stakeholders and are characterised by multiple perspectives and conflicting interests, and cannot be 'solved' in the traditional sense, but only managed over time,** as each attempt at a solution generates new challenges in addressing the change that has been generated. For these reasons, **wicked problems need a deep framing and a collective interpretation and understanding.**

[1] Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning. *Policy Sciences*, 8(2):155–169.

So, how to recognise a wicked problem?

According to the main literature, and particularly to the aforementioned authors — Rittel and Webber — the following aspects have to be taken into account:

- There is **no definitive formulation** of a wicked problem.
- Wicked problems have **no stopping rule**.
- Solutions to wicked problems are **not true/false, but good/bad**.
- There is **no immediate and no ultimate test** of a solution to a wicked problem.
- Every solution to a wicked problem is a **"one-shot operation"**; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial-and-error, every attempt counts significantly.
- Wicked problems **do not have an enumerable** (or exhaustively describable) **set of potential solutions**, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan.
- Every wicked problem is essentially **unique**.
- Every wicked problem can be considered a **symptom of another** wicked problem.
- The existence of a **discrepancy** representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of **explanation** determines the nature of the problem's solution.
- The designer has **no right to be wrong**.

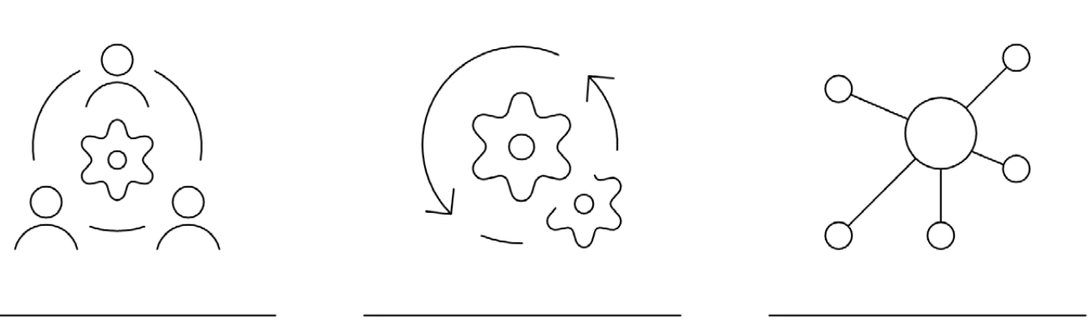


Made with Napkin

Complexity calls for a systemic perspective

The wicked problems perspective is also valuable as it **requires collaborative and multidisciplinary approaches** – hence the importance of co-design – as such challenges are best addressed by (and because of their) involving stakeholders with diverse backgrounds, expertise, values, beliefs and expectations. Furthermore, addressing wicked problems requires **a systemic perspective that considers different and contemporary scalar dimensions and domains, as well as potential unintended consequences**.

According to the perspective promoted by the ATELIER project, it is important to look at wicked problems – and the processes that address them – from the perspective of co-design. Co-design, indeed, seems to be arising and developing in addressing wicked problems, as it proves particularly helpful to **bring together different views, understandings, and potential responses, as well as balance local and systemic perspectives**, providing constructive perspectives to frame and tackle such complex issues.



Focus n. 1

The Problem Tree

A helpful tool when dealing with wicked problems is the Problem Tree.
It can be used to analyse wicked problems through a visual tool exploring the causes and effects of a specific problem. It breaks down complex issues into three parts:

- The **trunk** represents the main problem;
- The **roots** show the underlying causes of that problem;
- The **branches** illustrate the consequences or effects of the problem.

This tool helps groups **reflect on what is really driving a problem and what impact it has**, making it easier to identify where to act and what to prioritise. It can be combined with the approach proposed by the Doughnut Economics (see Focus n. 2): you can zoom in on why the problem of interest occurs and explore targeted solutions — while also ensuring that actions stay within the planet's ecological limits (the outer ring of the doughnut).

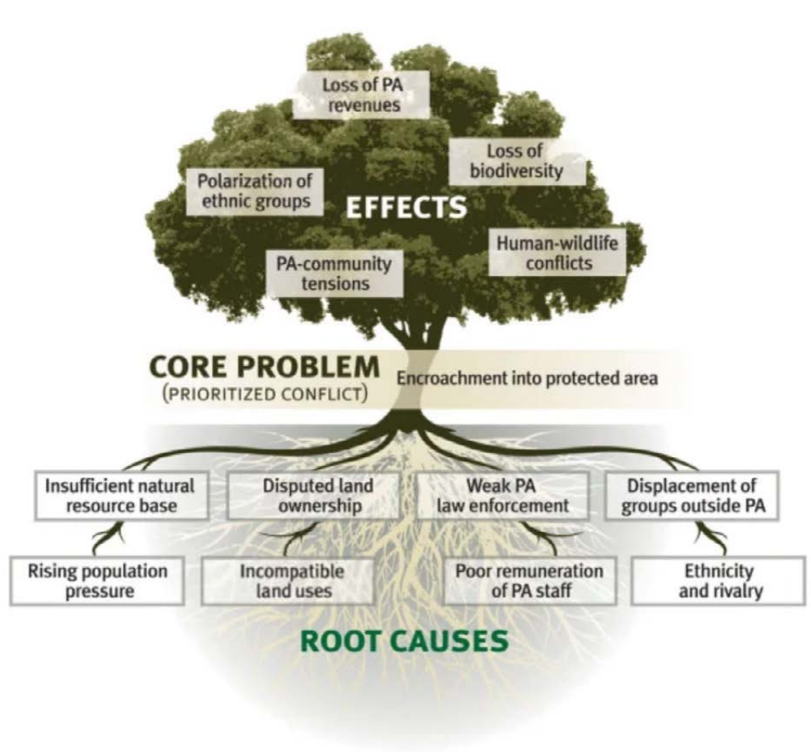


Fig. 1, *Problem Tree*, MSP Guide. Image reproduced with permission from Wageningen University & Research, 2022. Source: https://mspguide.org/2022/03/18/problem-tree/

Focus n. 2

The Doughnut Economics

As wicked problems' complexity and interconnectedness demand holistic and systemic responses, novel approaches to tackle them according to this logic have arisen in the last decades. One of these is Doughnut Economics, which offers a valuable framing tool.

Developed by the British economist Kate Raworth, Doughnut Economics is built around a simple, but powerful visual: a doughnut-shaped diagram with two rings. The outer ring represents the **"ecological ceiling"** — the limits of our planet's resources and environmental boundaries (illustrated in the table below). The inner ring stands for the **social foundation** — the basic things people need to live well, like food, water, health, education, and housing.

The space between these two rings is the "safe and just space for humanity". It is the ideal zone where everyone's basic needs are met without putting too much pressure on Earth. If we go above the "ecological ceiling", we damage the planet. If we fall below the social foundation, we fail to meet people's essential needs. The goal of Doughnut Economics is to **keep humanity within this balanced space** — where people and the planet can thrive together. While designing for social inclusion, take into consideration how your intervention, product, or service is contributing to building a social foundation and if it is not overshooting the environmental boundaries.

SOCIAL FOUNDATION

Food security
Health
Education
Income and work (the latter is not limited to compensated employment but also includes things such as housekeeping)
Peace and justice
Political voice
Social equity
Gender equality
Housing
Networks (the latter includes both networks of communities, but also networks of information like the internet)
Energy
Water

ENVIRONMENTAL BOUNDARIES

Climate change
Ocean acidification
Chemical pollution
Nitrogen and phosphorus loading
Freshwater withdrawals
Land conversion
Biodiversity loss
Air pollution
Ozone layer depletion

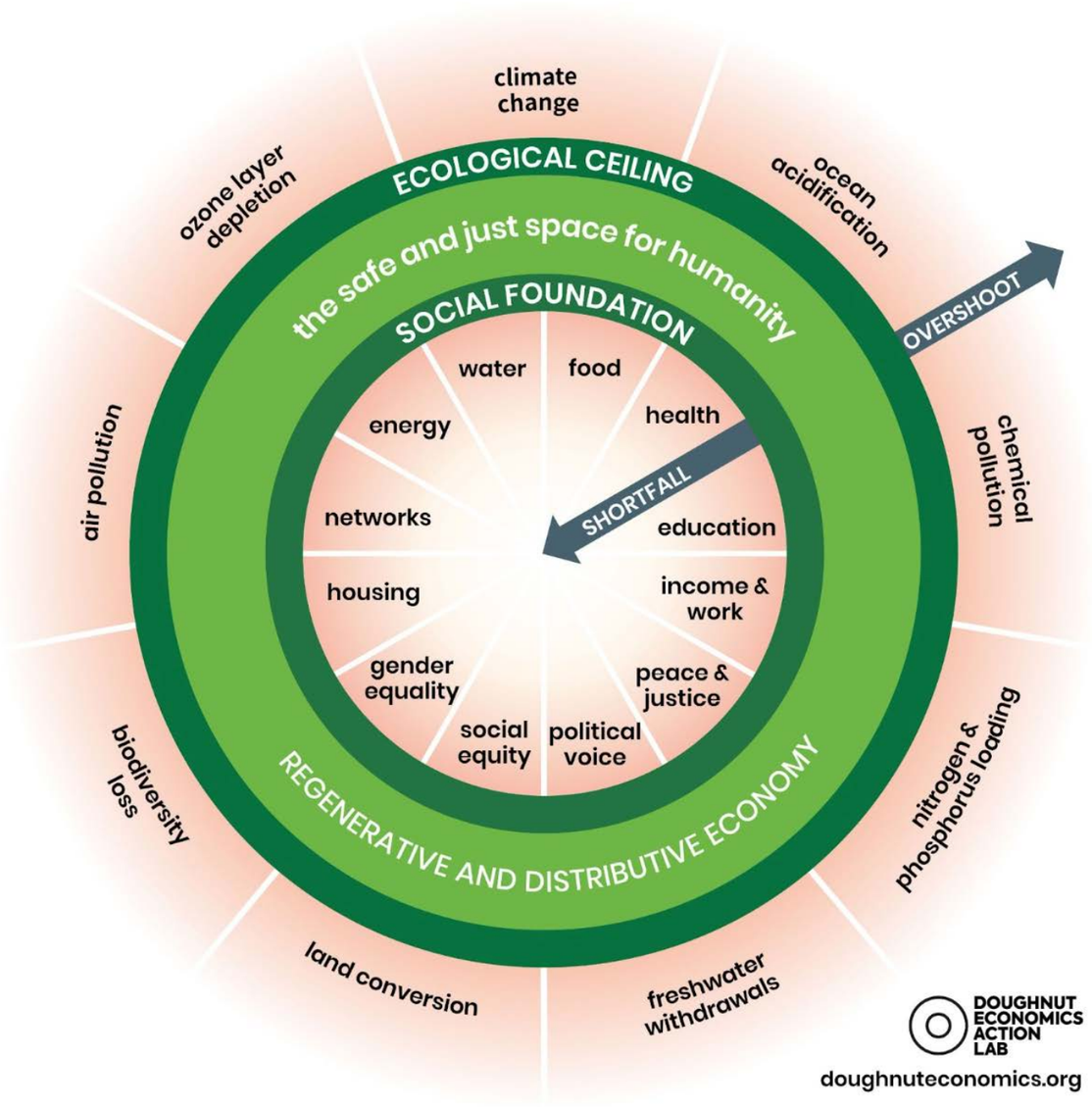


Fig. 2, *Doughnut diagram*. Image by Doughnut Economics Action Lab, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0). Source: https://doughnuteconomics.org/tools/doughnut-diagrams-for-printing-and-presentations.

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Engage a diverse range of stakeholders from the early stages and throughout the process, ensuring that multiple perspectives (particularly those of marginalised groups) are meaningfully included, with the aim of exploring ambiguities, differing priorities, and potential conflicts, as well as monitoring the evolution of the project.

Encourage **multidisciplinary collaborations** to address different aspects of the problem, its causes, and the consequences it generates, as well as those that the designed solutions will produce.

Involve stakeholders in all stages of the process to ensure active participation from all relevant parties, including end users, experts, and institutions. Multidisciplinary groups can offer an "external" perspective and help question ideas and assumptions.

Take nothing for granted: neither the causes that generate the problem, nor its consequences, and least of all the persistence of the problem when challenged by the proposed solutions.

Use **mapping and visualisation techniques** (such as system maps, problem trees, stakeholder grids, and journey mapping) to identify and understand the systemic interconnections that characterise the problem.

Prioritise **iterative and adaptive processes** rather than fixed solutions; use prototypical solutions to explore the problem and the intertwined connection between it and its solution.

Foster **critical reflection and dialogue** to navigate the ambiguity and complexity of wicked problems.

Allocate time for **regular collective reflection sessions** to identify changes, unintended effects, blind spots, and emerging tensions.

Adapt decision-making to complexity: avoid linear and non-participatory approaches; instead, use flexible, non-linear processes that remain open to revisiting decisions in light of new information or emerging perspectives.

Key points to consider

Consider that the understanding of the problem also comes from the **attempt to tackle it**.

Take care **not to oversimplify or isolate the problem**, underlying problems and solutions — what is visible is often just the tip of a deeper, systemic issue.

Recognise that **discomfort, disagreement, and contradiction** are part of working with complexity, not signs of failure.

Try exercising **different temporal perspectives** when evaluating the problem and the designed solutions, to grasp the possible shifts between what appears appropriate now and how it might evolve over time.

Reflective questions for your practice

*What **other** problems is the wicked problem I am trying to tackle connected to?*

*What **consequences** does it generate?*

*What **assumptions** am I making about what the problem is and who it affects?*

*Am I leaving space for the problem-framing to **evolve** as I learn more?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Costruiamo Saperi

Project link

Catalogue page: 114



Costruiamo Saperi addresses wicked problems such as migration, labour exploitation, and social exclusion by combining professional training, territorial regeneration, and cooperative entrepreneurship. I**t adopts a systemic approach by involving diverse actors — migrants, designers, farmers, institutions — through long-term co-design processes.** Rather than offering linear solutions, the project manages complexity by fostering **mutual support, flexible learning paths, and adaptive strategies that evolve over time, acknowledging how social, economic, and cultural dynamics are deeply interlinked**.

Social Entrepreneurship as a Tool for Fighting Social Exclusion and Poverty

Project link

Catalogue page: 226



This project tackles the wicked problem of employment for people with disabilities by integrating welfare and economic models. **Rather than focusing on predefined outcomes, it embraces complexity through the creation of social enterprises, policy advocacy, and awareness-raising.** It acknowledges that **exclusion is rooted in systemic issues** — such as stigma, access, lack of representation, or misrepresentation — and addresses these through collaborative training and legislative change.

Caritas Hellas Social Spots

Project link

Catalogue page: 174

Social Spots are community hubs that respond to the wicked and evolving challenges of refugee inclusion and social inequality. The project addresses complex issues — legal barriers, language, employment, and psychosocial distress — by **providing interconnected services**. **It continually adapts to context-specific needs, involving users in feedback and decision-making.** This flexibility is key to addressing wicked problems, which lack fixed solutions and require iterative, systemic interventions across personal, institutional, and policy levels.



Active

Project link

Catalogue page: 87

Working through art, performance, and peer dialogue, the project reveals the relational and systemic roots of exclusion. **It addresses not just symptoms but also interrelated causes** — such as a lack of opportunity, lack of meaningful contacts, and identity issues — through co-designed interventions that build trust, resilience, and agency over time. By recognising that youth exclusion cannot be solved with standardised measures, ACTIVE adopts a **flexible and holistic approach**. It embraces uncertainty, co-defines problems with participants, and evolves together with the communities involved. **This iterative and participatory strategy is essential for navigating the complexity and ambiguity of wicked problems**.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from OLAE...

In our work with communities, we often start with what seems like a simple problem. **But as we listen, map, and discuss, we realise that what appears to be a local surfaced problem is connected to a much wider root of causes and effects.** This is what literature calls a wicked problem: a situation that cannot be neatly defined or solved because every attempt to change one part shifts something else. **We learned that co-design, rather than offering clear answers, gives us tools to stay with this complexity.**

When working with migrant and low-income communities, for instance, we noticed that challenges around employment or housing were deeply intertwined with issues of trust, representation, and access to decision-making spaces. Co-design allowed us to reframe the role of "designer" as one of facilitation, not control. **We used participatory mapping, storytelling, and reflective sessions to reveal hidden relationships between systems and people.**

Through these practices, **we discovered that understanding wicked problems means working both within and around them, balancing immediate needs with longer-term, systemic change. The process is never linear or conclusive.** It asks us to move slowly, question our assumptions, and co-create meaning with others. What matters is not finding a single solution, but cultivating shared understanding and collective capacity to navigate complexity together.

A story from POLITO...

"Alimenta" is a systemic initiative we launched in 2014 to tackle the wicked problem of food poverty among people experiencing homelessness in Turin. The project addresses food access issues within a local system through an **integrated, multidimensional approach**, concretised in three different actions:

- ensuring daily access to adequate food in municipal shelters by establishing a collaborative supply network;
- fostering food literacy through capability-building workshops that empower individuals to gain greater food autonomy;
- generating shared knowledge through participatory research and co-design processes involving shelter residents, social workers from the cooperatives managing the reception services, and institutions.

These actions were not foreseen at the outset of the project: given the *wickedness* of food poverty, neither we as researchers nor the actors directly affected by the phenomenon initially knew how to approach the problem. **By identifying its different dimensions** — through field research and a literature review — and working collaboratively at a local level, **we were gradually able to articulate and give shape to this intervention**.

It was then crucial to recognise the wicked nature of food poverty, a phenomenon affecting both material and immaterial dimensions, and defined by economic access, the quantity and quality of food, as well as knowledge and capabilities related to purchasing, cooking, and eating food, including education. Moreover, a pivotal role was determined by the collaborative process we triggered and sustained. **Through co-design and engagement with local stakeholders, we supported inclusive decision-making, prioritised users' dignity, and helped connect diverse stakeholders in a shared intervention system**.

This experience demonstrates that wicked problems like food poverty cannot be "solved" through linear approaches. **What we have done is devise a systemic response that adapts to emerging insights, builds cross-sector collaboration, and acts at both micro and macro levels.** Fostering a **networking approach** — one that enhances each party's needs and resources — and adopting an iterative approach to gradually adapt and improve interventions have been crucial for us and our partners in **surfacing hidden needs, testing solutions, and laying the foundation for broader, sustainable impact**.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency 7 – *Transparency and critical self-awareness in professional practice*
Wicked problems affect people differently: hence, acknowledging our positionality helps ensure inclusive, grounded approaches.

Competency 9 – *Desk and field research for problem-framing*
Joint field and desk research can better sustain the understanding and framing of wicked problems and support the iterative, exploratory work essential for understanding the multiple dimensions and shifting boundaries of wicked problems.

Competency 14 – *Stakeholder engagement and negotiation*
Working on complex, systemic issues often surfaces tensions and contradictions. Deep listening and conflict resolution are key capacities here.

Competency 20 – *Co-design and its nuances*
These insights into collaborative processes that respect diverse voices and local contexts.

Competency 22 – *Multi-level collaboration management*
Multi-level, multi-actor collaboration are key to effectively understanding and tackling the systemic and complex nature of wicked problems.

AREA OF COMPETENCE 5

Project context analysis

Context is what defines a project since its beginning. It can be a web of people, rules, resources, and relationships that shape what can be imagined and what can actually be done. But understanding that context is not just a preliminary step; it is a continuous act of reflection that allows design to become both effective and transformative.

This unit, *Project Context Analysis*, focuses on two essential dimensions of that understanding. The first deals with power, politics, and policy — the invisible structures that influence how inclusion comes about, or does not happen. The second looks at resources — the tangible and intangible assets that make co-design possible, from people's time and trust to spaces, skills, and funding. Together, these two Competencies remind us that design is never neutral. It always takes place within systems of influence, and it always depends on the resources we mobilise — ethically, fairly, and creatively.

Competency 11, ***Analytical thinking on power, politics and policy***, illustrates how power is implicated in every social inclusion project and operates in decisions, language, and everyday interactions. Sometimes it is visible, like a formal rule or a government regulation. Sometimes it is hidden — in who gets invited to meetings, who feels confident to speak, and whose needs are quietly ignored. Learning to read these dynamics helps us design more consciously.

In this sense, politics refers to the ongoing negotiation of interests and values, paying out in communities, institutions, and even in our own design teams. Policies, meanwhile, are laws, plans, and procedures that govern public life. They can enable or constrain innovation, depending on how we understand and engage with them.

When co-designing, the analysis of these layers helps move through systems — identifying barriers, recognising allies, and creating spaces where marginalised voices can influence decision-making. It means seeking fairness and visibility for those who are excluded.

In Competency 12, ***Resources assessment and management***, resources are the core of the discussion. If power and politics define the field of action, resources determine how we can act within it. In social inclusion projects, resources are not only financial — they are human, relational, cultural, and spatial. They include trust, knowledge, spaces to meet, and the time people can dedicate. Understanding and organising these resources allows us to turn constraints into opportunities.

Resource assessment begins with mapping: identifying what already exists, what is missing, and how to connect assets in meaningful ways. Through participatory methods such as community mapping or focus groups, we make visible what is often overlooked — such as networks, alliances, and skills. When managed transparently and inclusively, resources become the foundation for trust and cooperation. Good resource management is not about doing *more* with *less*; it is about doing better with what is concrete and real. It ensures that interventions are sustainable, that participants are not overburdened, and that the benefits of co-design are shared fairly.

By bringing the two Competencies together, *Project Context Analysis* teaches us to see context as a network of possibilities. When we read policies critically and manage resources wisely, design becomes a tool for empowerment. It allows us to align intentions with realities and make inclusion a practice grounded in everyday life. Such a way of thinking and acting ensures that our projects are *situated*, *equitable*, and *sustainable*.

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino)

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- **Recognise the importance of context analysis** in designing for social inclusion;
- **Identify and interpret** the (visible and invisible) **power dynamics, political factors, and policy frameworks** that shape project environments or the projects themselves could influence that;
- **Conduct participatory resource mapping** to identify assets, capacities, and constraints within a context;
- **Organise and manage tangible and intangible resources** ethically and efficiently;
- **Ensure** that resource use supports **fairness, sustainability, and co-ownership**;
- **Balance project goals with real-world limitations** to design achievable and resilient interventions;
- **Integrate systemic, political, and material dimensions** into context-aware participatory design strategies.

Area of Competence 5:

Project context analysis

11 ANALYTICAL THINKING ON POWER, POLITICS AND POLICY

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

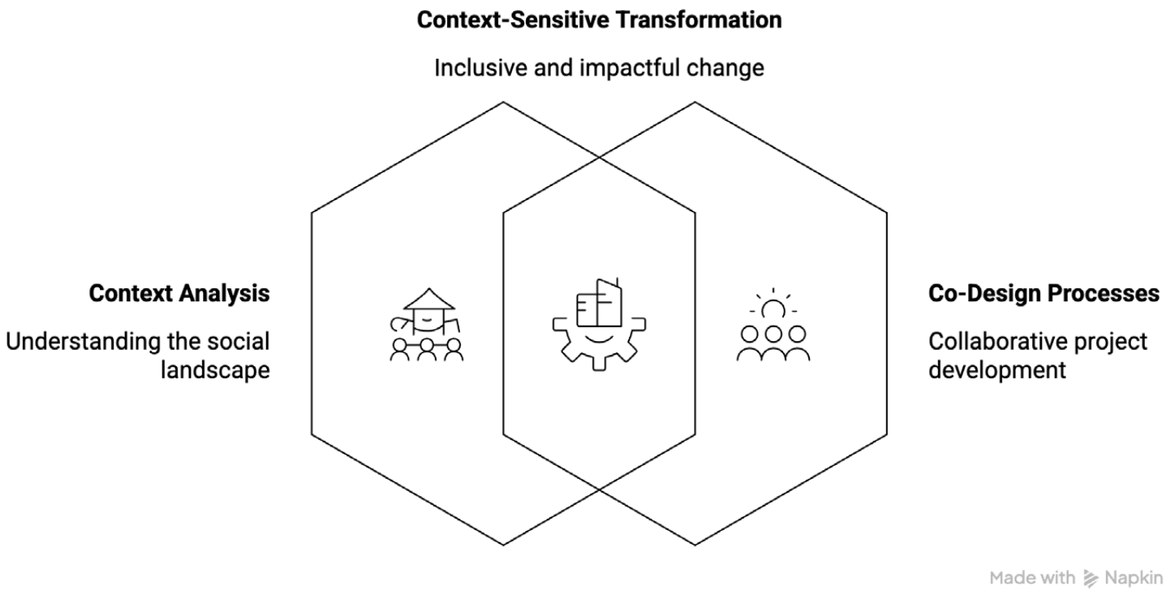
Understanding the contexts, power structures, and policies is essential for projects that aim to address social inclusion. Even when the aim is not to transform deeply rooted systems, analysing these dimensions can significantly influence — and often enhance — the effectiveness of any intervention. In this regard, this competency suggests several valuable insights for a reflective and action-oriented practice, capable of surfacing barriers, enablers, and unheard voices, and to shape designs that remain sensitive to power dynamics and policies.

Definitions and Discussion

For initiatives committed to social inclusion, it is essential to understand the contexts in which they operate. **These contexts are never neutral: they are shaped by complex hierarchies, networks of power dynamics, politics and policies** — whose definitions and differences will be discussed in more detail below. It is precisely through careful reading of such contexts that collaboration and change, which we design for, can become conscious and intentional. This involves **assessing the social, political, cultural, and economic dimensions** of the contexts we engage in, as well as **investigating how relationships are developed, how people relate to forces beyond their control, how the system supports or hinders specific changes, and how meanings surface**.

Building on that, this competency fosters context analysis to ensure that co-design processes consider the broader systems impacting social inclusion, and it is intended to help co-design teams develop **projects that are both context-sensitive and transformative**.

A Power, Politics and Policies framework is helpful for **reflection-in-action** when promoting collaborative processes for social inclusion, as it focuses on enabling conditions, constraints, or targets for our actions.



Power

As theorised by Max Weber[1], *power* refers to the **capacity or ability of individuals, groups, or institutions to influence, shape, or control actions, thoughts, or behaviours** — both their own and those of others. It can be exercised through authority, coercion, persuasion, knowledge, norms, or even by designing systems, environments and services. Power is not limited to formal leadership positions; it operates in **everyday practices, language, and structures**, often invisibly. It can be found in the way rules are set, in who gets to speak or be heard, and in the subtle norms that shape interactions. Because of this, power is not always obvious, but it still **influences relationships, opportunities, and decision-making**.

Politics

Politics, with scholars like Lowi [2] and Lasswell, was coined to indicate the **processes, conflicts, negotiations, and strategies through which power is distributed, used and questioned** within a society. It encompasses formal arenas, such as parliaments, elections, and political parties, and is deeply intertwined with the *polity* dimension, concerning informal spaces like community organising, activism, and public discourse. Following Lasswell's words, politics can be defined as **'who gets what, when, and how'**. This means that politics is about the distribution of resources and opportunities (who gets what), the timing and prioritisation of that distribution (when), and the processes or mechanisms through which decisions are made (how). It involves **interests, ideologies, values, and the competition between different actors** seeking to influence decision-making.

Policy

The Palgrave Macmillan dictionary of political thought and *Collins English Dictionary* refer to **Policy as decisions, rules, plans, or actions adopted by governments, institutions, or organisations to address particular public issues**. It usually means introducing rules or measures — sometimes more, sometimes less coercive — designed to influence citizens' behaviour to address the current situation and achieve the desired change. Policies can be the result of **top-down or bottom-up processes**, and the power relationships between stakeholders, pressure from interest groups, and political processes shape their outcomes. Laws, regulations, programs, information campaigns, service and strategic frameworks are some examples of policy outcomes. The way they are thought and established reflects the **vision, values and priorities** of decision-makers and **influences the future of social realities**.

[1] Weber, M. (1947). The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation, Part III. Economy and Society. Oxford University Press.

[2] Lowi, T. J. (1972). Four Systems of Policy, Politics, and Choice. Public Administration Review, 32(4), 298–310.

[3] VeneKlasen, L., & Miller, V. (2002). A New Weave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation. Bourton on Dunsmore: Practical Action Publishing.



Power

The capacity to influence actions and thoughts through various means.



Politics

The processes of distributing and questioning power within society.



Policy

The decisions and actions taken to address public issues.

Social inclusion interventions that adopt a co-design approach can benefit from acknowledging these underlying (or overlaying) structures; recognising power structures and dynamics helps **prevent the reinforcement of inequalities,** while knowledge and a systematic examination of political frameworks, laws, regulations, and governance help design **interventions aware of and aligned with policy landscapes.**

Since it reveals not only the formal rules of politics, but also the **informal norms and practices** that can either enable or obstruct meaningful participation, understanding power in its visible, hidden, and invisible forms is **essential for effective advocacy** — a principle deeply interconnected with the social justice perspective at the core of the ATELIER project. In advocacy and citizen participation, politics is then the arena where power is negotiated and contested, shaping who has voice, whose interests are heard, and how resources and opportunities are distributed.

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Start with mapping stakeholders, beneficiaries, and actors involved, to identify persons and groups, both influential and marginalised; then, you should define the **power structures** that may or may not support the project/initiative and consider if envisioning a "desired **power map"** could help make progress into the project.

Use **participatory workshops** to surface community perspectives on existing power structures.

Regularly update **context analysis** to reflect shifting policies and social conditions, while designing and implementing.

Immerse yourself in the **everyday routines** of those involved — observe without an agenda to notice what usually goes unseen.

Key points to consider

Focus on the **perception of power** within the contexts in which all partners of the project operate, and define how they affect the contexts of each partner.

Treat these findings as starting points for deeper questioning, rather than final answers.

Reflective questions for your practice

Am I aware of the power structures — visible and invisible — that shape this context and/or could influence the project?

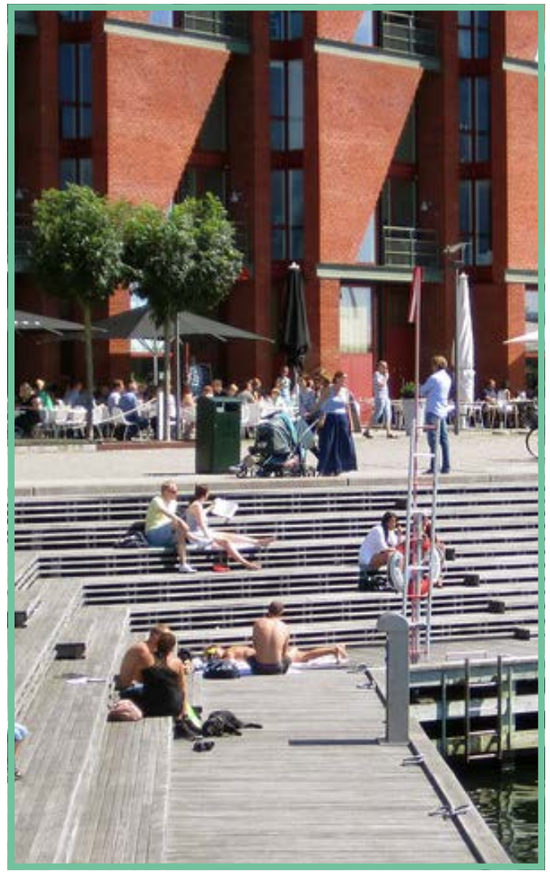
Are our design choices unintentionally reinforcing dominant norms or power hierarchies?

How can our project contribute — even in a small way — to changing the rules, rather than just playing within them?

Whose voice is missing? How do existing policies enable or hinder inclusion?

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Area Programs For A Socially Sustainable Malmö



Project link

Catalogue page: 14

This case examines how local governments can address deep-seated inequalities through targeted area-based interventions. **By bringing together public agencies, civil society, and residents, it shifts *power* toward collaborative forms of governance**. The ***political* dimension is central**: diverse actors co-design solutions to unemployment, segregation, and marginalisation. **The program also informs *policy***, becoming a model for inclusive urban development. It shows how reading the local context — socially, spatially, institutionally — enables systemic change through shared responsibility and continuous dialogue.

Les Petites Cantines

Project link

Catalogue page: 55



This project is compelling in terms of social inclusion because it reframes vulnerability not as a weakness, but as a starting point for building trust and reciprocity. It **redistributes *power* in everyday life**: guests become hosts, people previously isolated become co-creators of community spaces, and the lines between giver and receiver are blurred. **On a *political* level, Les Petites Cantines creates a space for daily micro-politics** — spaces of encounter where people of different backgrounds share food, stories, and responsibilities. It does not aim to replace institutions, but rather to reshape how people relate to one another and to social norms. While the network started from a grassroots initiative, it is now recognised by various public entities. I**t contributes to *broader policy debates*** on food justice, urban inclusion, and new economies of care.

Salus Space

Project link

Catalogue page: 68



Salus Space is a striking example of a community-led experiment in collaborative housing and co-management, featuring a diverse mix of residents, including migrants, students, and young families. ***Power* is intentionally redistributed through shared rules of living, participatory governance, and engagement in the economic life of the space** (through activities such as the restaurant, urban garden, or hostel). **On the *political* level, the project proposes an alternative to charity or assistance-based models by promoting intercultural welfare and active citizenship**. It creates a space where residents are not passive recipients but rather agents of social change, collectively shaping their shared environment.
Salus Space also **reflects how local *policy* frameworks** — in this case, under the Urban Innovative Actions programme — **can support bold and experimental solutions to pressing issues such as housing, integration, and sustainability**. By combining urban regeneration, co-production, and inclusive design, Salus Space demonstrates how co-design can operate within and against traditional systems, embodying a culturally grounded and socially just practice.

Spirit of Malmö

Project link

Catalogue page: 73

The “Spirit of Malmö” is not a project with fixed outputs, but rather a platform for civic dialogue and cooperation between the municipality and the local civil society. It is particularly relevant when considering the ***political* dimensions of inclusion**, as it aims to create equal spaces for discussion and joint action among public officials, associations, and citizens.
In terms of *power*, Spirit of Malmö seeks to rebalance the relationship between civil society and government institutions. It supports the creation of knowledge alliances and facilitates dialogue that could otherwise be blocked by bureaucratic inertia or institutional hierarchies.
From a *policy* perspective, it is grounded in the city's efforts to implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals, while also challenging the limits of traditional governance. Notably, when the municipality withdrew its financial support in 2024, the platform continued, driven by civil society — a powerful example of resilience and distributed agency.



Stories from ATELIER’s partners

A story from OLAE…

Official policies do not always match what people need on the ground. **By listening closely to immigrants’ daily challenges, we adapted our activities to address what really matters.** This keeps our projects connected to real-life power struggles and makes them more effective.

In our projects with migrant and refugee communities, **we often face a gap between what public policies offer and what people actually need**. At first, we used to see this as a matter of implementation where **perhaps services were not being properly delivered**. But as we listened more closely and mapped everyday experiences, we realised that **the issue was also about how policies are designed and who gets to influence them**. Many people we work with are directly affected by local or national policies, yet they have little or no space to participate in shaping them.

This awareness changed the way we approach co-design. Instead of focusing only on improving access to existing services, we began creating spaces where people could share how those systems work, or fail from their perspective. Through **storytelling, policy mapping, and small collective actions**, we uncovered how power operates not just in institutions but also in daily routines, language, and assumptions about who needs help.

Recognising these dynamics is already a form of change. It helps us design with greater sensitivity and fairness, and sometimes it even leads to a small policy shift, for example, when local actors adjust their procedures after seeing how they exclude certain groups. Working in this way reminds us that **co-design is political, not because it seeks confrontation, but because it opens space for voices and experiences that are usually unheard in policy conversations.**

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Links to other Competencies

Competency 7 - *Transparency and critical self-awareness in professional practice*
It ensures that our own biases and positions are accounted for when analysing power and policy.

Competency 9 – *Problem-framing drivers through field and desk research*
It influences how we frame and understand power dynamics in problem settings, but also the way politics and policies affect the context and the problem. Also, Design Anthropology promotes immersive and participatory methods that facilitate genuine community involvement.

Competency 13 – *User and stakeholder mapping*
It helps to map and reveal hierarchies and power structures among stakeholders.

Area of Competence 5:

Project context analysis

12 RESOURCES ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT

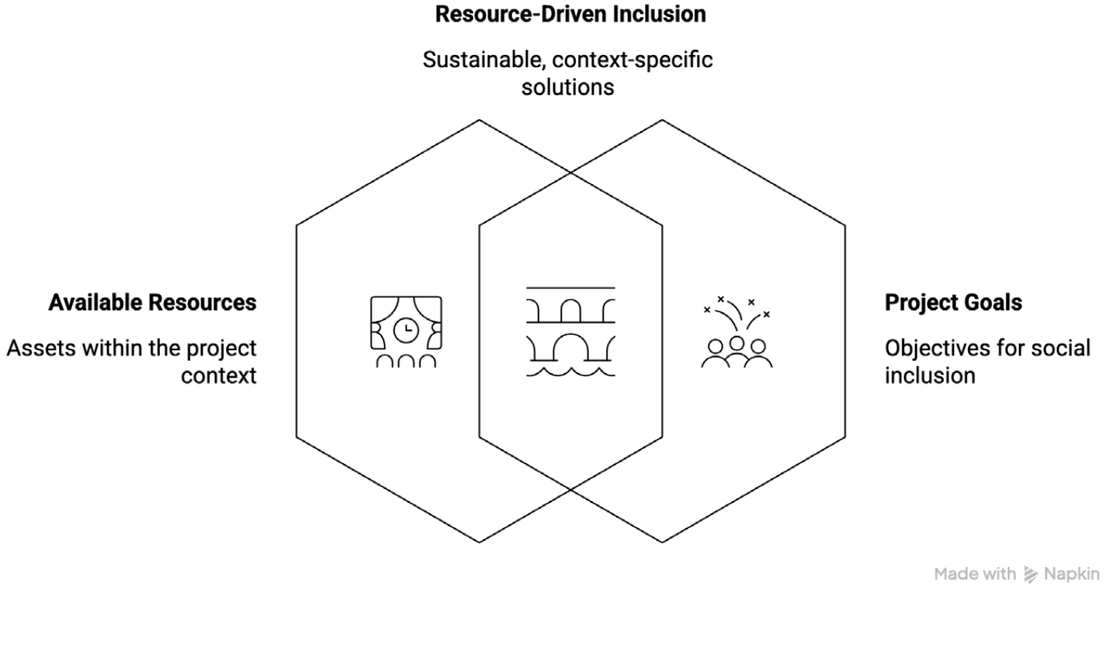
Texts by Tiziana Ciampolini, Isabella Lalli, Antonio Fantasia (Associazione S-NODI GROUP E.T.S.); Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

Focusing on resources within project contexts highlights the value of specific circumstances (e.g., relationships, spaces, knowledge) and allows their organisation to support transformative design interventions. This approach enables sustainable, participatory, and resource-sensitive projects, avoiding unachievable demands.

Definitions and Discussion

In designing interventions aimed at fostering social inclusion, it is extremely important to assess the resources available. **This means identifying, understanding, and organising what is at hand within a project context**: local knowledge, social networks, spaces, time, economic and environmental means. It is a practical skill that allows constraints and opportunities to be turned into levers for design. It is not merely a matter of "counting" resources, but of understanding how to enhance them and connect them to the project's goals.



Basic features of resources

Within a context such as ATELIER, which seeks to use co-design to shape social inclusion initiatives, this becomes the starting point for developing co-design practices that are:

- Realistic, because they are based on what communities and partners can truly contribute;
- Participatory, because they avoid overburdening people and organisations already fragile or under pressure;
- Sustainable, because they aim at solutions that can last over time without depending on external resources that are difficult to maintain;
- Inclusive, because they acknowledge and value often invisible resources, such as local knowledge, bonds of trust, and informal spaces.

Effective co-design ties each project idea to the assets that are actually available. This creates strategic pathways in which real availability meets project aspirations – promoting equity, accessibility, and long-term sustainability.

Resources to build trust and participation

Clearly defining the resources of an intervention prevents excessive pressure being placed on participants – in terms of commitment, time, or financial resources – and helps to build trust and active participation. In ATELIER, by relying on local resources, communities remain at the centre without being overshadowed.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, **the definition of resources also includes relationships of trust, collective memory, shared or physical space**s. Organising these resources means activating participatory dynamics that reinvent the context, making it inclusive and resilient.

This is why, when we speak of resource assessment, we are not referring to a passive inventory, but to an understanding of what can be done, how, and within what limits: identifying time constraints, missing resources, logistical or cultural obstacles, and activating creative solutions – such as flexible schedules, lighter participatory methods, or gradual involvement of people.

Assessment is not only about cataloguing resources, but also about understanding what is lacking, what temporal, social, or structural obstacles may exist, and the need to find creative or synergistic solutions. Only in this way is it possible to work with realism.

Aligning resources and objectives

On this basis, it becomes possible to link resources to project objectives by creating interconnections, so that each intervention builds on what is truly available. This produces fairer, more accessible and sustainable interventions, capable of taking root in communities and enduring over time. Attributing resources, however, also means monitoring and managing them as consciously as possible, through work tools such as:

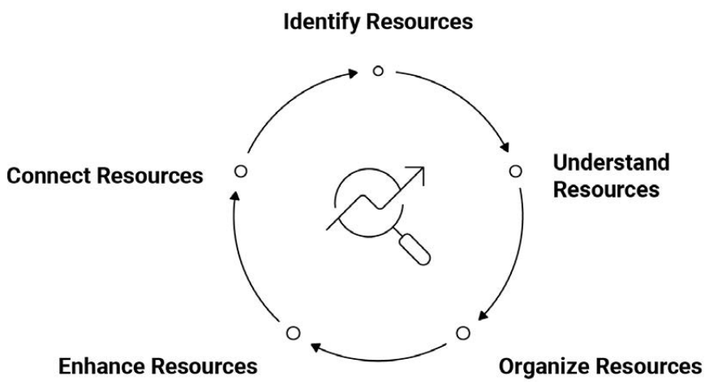
- **Resource mapping / asset mapping:** visually mapping spaces, actors, knowledge, and networks available in a community.
- **Social network mapping:** representing relationships and flows between people and organisations.
- **Community mapping, focus groups**, and other participatory tools that can help participants to visualise the intervention – and its impact.

The work to be undertaken at this stage also aims to enhance the social capital underpinning an intervention built in a synergistic and participatory way.

This means highlighting how the intervention is carried out on an equal and horizontal basis, and how everyone has a crucial role in shaping it – as pieces in the construction of a truly transformative approach. To achieve this, the crucial element is dialogue and exchange among stakeholders, aimed not only at co-ownership of the project, but also at building networks and collaborations that continue to sustain the intervention sites.

In this context, **co-design becomes a concrete tool for social inclusion**: not a theoretical exercise, but **a method that transforms contexts because it can value people's capabilities, promote cooperation, and create shared common goods.**

In short, it is advisable always to begin with resource mapping, bringing to light their different natures (networks, shared knowledge, spaces, etc.), then proceed to assess the scope and ways of contributing to the project, and at that point organise them in a targeted and structured manner. Accounting for and valuing them remain crucial steps to show progress, collective commitment, and the change being built together. Only in this way is it possible to build shared, participatory, and sustainable interventions that transform communities and remain as their legacy.



Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Co-create a **resource inventory** with community members (skills, spaces, tools, time, budget, networks, data).

Classify resources: owned/borrowed/shared; cash vs in-kind; fixed vs variable; constraints and dependencies.

Set a simple **baseline and tracker** (e.g., burn-up chart, shared spreadsheet) to monitor use over time.

Apply **participatory budgeting** to prioritise allocations and make trade-offs explicit.

Assign **stewardship roles and access rules** for shared assets (who can use what, when, and how).

Plan lean pilots, reserve a small contingency, and reallocate based on evidence from tests.

Schedule regular (e.g., fortnightly) **resource reviews** to adjust plans transparently with partners.

Key points to consider

Avoid over-reliance on unpaid community labour; **compensate and credit contributions fairly**.

Check **equity**: who benefits and who bears the cost or risk of using resources?

Do not overlook tacit/social resources; handle sensitive information with care.

Mind **legal/ethical issues** (IP/licensing, data protection, health & safety).

Keep **flexibility** — over-specifying resources too early can lock you in.

Consider **environmental footprint** (materials, travel, energy) when choosing options.

Reflective questions for your practice

*Have we mapped **all asset types** (financial, human, spatial, digital, social, environmental)?*

***Whose** resources are we assuming are "available"? Do we have informed consent?*

*Are **in-kind contributions recognised** appropriately?*

*What is our **contingency plan** — and what gets de-scoped first if resources tighten?*

*Who will steward key assets **after the project ends** (ownership, maintenance, licences)?*

*Are our budgeting choices and reallocations **transparent** to partners?*

*What indicators show **over/under-utilisation or waste**, and what will we change next cycle?*

*Which resource is the current **bottleneck**, and what low-cost **alternatives** exist?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Fashion Truck

Project link

Catalogue page: 32



The Fashion Truck shows how mapping and enhancing resources can translate into concrete inclusion. Clothing donations, volunteer networks and a mobile van are organised and linked with the project's goals: dignity, accessibility and sustainability. Volunteers' time and tailoring knowledge are turned into levers of empowerment. **The project connects constraints (poverty, reduced mobility, stigma) with creative solutions (mobile distribution, upcycling, personalised advice), avoiding extra burdens on beneficiaries and building trust.** Thus, available resources are interwoven with inclusion objectives, generating a participatory and ecological model.

Inclusive Editorial Team

Project link

Catalogue page: 204

The Inclusive Editorial Team highlights how intangible resources – knowledge, life experiences, bonds of trust – can be identified, organised and enhanced. **The inclusive newsroom transforms these often invisible assets into co-design tools: participants produce content that challenges stereotypes and gives voice to those usually excluded.** The project links constraints (lack of representation, marginalisation) with opportunities (journalistic training, shared storytelling spaces), balancing realism and aspiration. Relational resources become the cornerstone for building participatory and sustainable processes, where editorial production also means producing social capital.

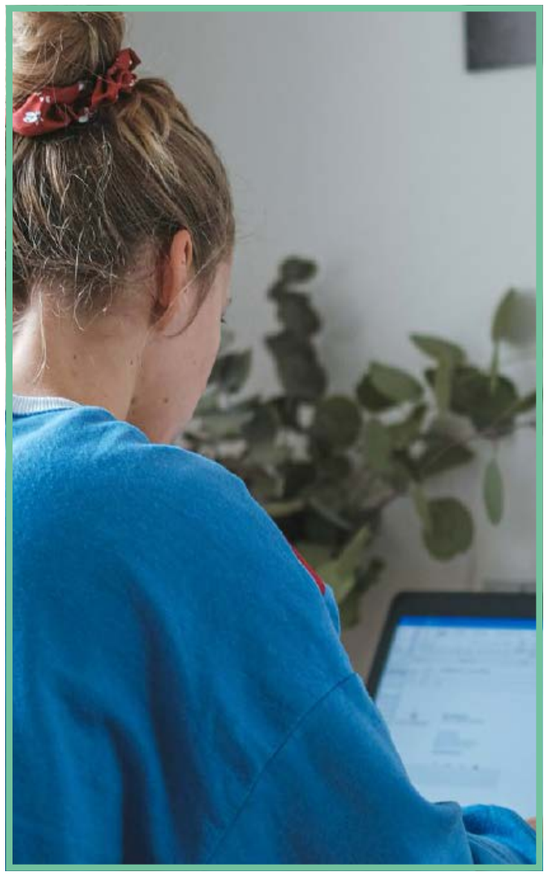


Blossom

Project link

Catalogue page: 104

Blossom demonstrates how resource assessment enables the design of realistic and inclusive empowerment pathways. The project builds on the existing skills of vulnerable women, their available time and local networks, organising and strengthening them in connection with concrete professional goals. Limitations (logistical, cultural, social) are not ignored but turned into design levers through gradual and flexible solutions. **Co-design makes visible and values resources often overlooked, such as resilience and personal experiences, connecting them with training tools and enterprise opportunities**. In this way, individual and collective resources become the foundation of a sustainable growth pathway.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB...

We ran an EPS project where students had to deliver a small, functional module under tight time and budget limits. **From day one we treated resources as part of the brief: what tools we actually had, who could help, where we could test, and how much time people could spare.** We sketched fast, built cardboard mock-ups, then moved to simple 3D-printed samples for the parts most likely to fail (clips, hinges, joints).

To avoid guessing, we arranged a short testing slot at INCAS-National Institute for Aerospace Research "Elie Carafoli" [https://www.incas.ro/]. With a clear checklist and only a handful of specimens, we checked fit, flex and basic strength, and noted where parts cracked or warped. Back on campus the team adjusted wall thicknesses, changed a joint geometry, and reprinted only what was needed. Because we planned the visit around specific questions, the lab time stayed brief and productive.

The biggest gain was not a perfect prototype, but a clear way of working: map assets and limits, line up the right partners, test just enough, and show how each result changes the design. It kept costs low, decisions grounded, and the final build convincing at the defence—proof that smart resource management is a design skill, not an afterthought.

A story from POLITO...

VIP 22 could be seen as a small-scale yet high-density design action, developed in collaboration with the Italian Association of Homeless People (AIPSD) to redesign their new premises in Via Pinelli 22, Turin. **It was carried out with a very limited budget, yet embedded in a broader public policy context aimed at rethinking traditional day centres for homeless people as open, community-oriented spaces.**

The project unfolded through multiple phases. After an initial exploratory workshop with members of AIPSD, fio.PSD and our research group, we translated emerging themes—such as the association's identity—into a concrete operational plan. We then co-developed a system of expected outputs that would express AIPSD's social value through spatial, communicative, and relational devices. Design concepts were shared and refined using moodboards, 3D models, and mock-ups, guiding decisions about spatial layout, colours, wall treatments and furnishings.

Realisation took place through self-build and co-design methods, involving the association's members, potential users, one future staff member, design interns, and our team. Activities were designed to be inclusive, using simple, non-specialised tools and short work cycles.

The spatial identity was shaped to convey values of openness, dignity, and community, while avoiding reductive references to homelessness. Colour was used to distinguish formal from informal zones, and features such as noticeboards and entrance markers helped connect the space to the wider neighbourhood.

VIP 22 exemplifies how, in constrained contexts, co-production across design domains (space, service, communication) becomes not just a way to "do more with less", but a conscious strategy: selecting what truly matters, negotiating priorities with stakeholders, and making room for essential, transformative interventions. Even a lamp, a bench, a splash of paint can have profound effects—when grounded in context and care. The project shows how design can enable meaningful experiences of citizenship, affirm rights, and foster stronger relationships between people and the spaces they inhabit.

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RECOMMENDED READING

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 3 – *Project management lexicon and sensitivity*
Having a clear understanding of the various phases and actors of the project management can clearly help us in assessing, managing and setting resources

Competency n° 14 – *Stakeholders engagement and negotiation*
Resource allocation is a negotiation: who contributes what, when, and under which conditions. Good engagement aligns expectations and prevents overload;

Competency n° 16 – *Shared ownership models and principles*
Resources (tools, data, spaces, IP) need stewardship. Clear ownership, roles and licences ensure fair access, maintenance, and sustainability after the project.

AREA OF COMPETENCE 6

Users and stakeholders identification and engagement

Co-design processes are grounded in relationships. They depend on the ability to recognise who participates, who is affected, and who remains unseen and unspoken within a context and during a project. The *Users & Stakeholders Identification and Engagement* unit explores this dimension of participatory design as both ethical and practical: understanding, involving, and sustaining collaboration among diverse actors—individuals, communities, institutions, and organisations—towards shared goals.

In social inclusion-driven projects, stakeholder identification and engagement are fundamental to the process, rather than mere preliminary steps. This involves a continuous cycle of mapping, communication, negotiation, and fostering shared responsibility, all built on listening and mutual transformation. This unit aims to equip you with the skills to navigate this cycle, from recognising key actors and their contexts to forming lasting alliances and establishing co-managed accountability frameworks.

Competency 13, ***User and stakeholders mapping***, is introduced as a practice of visibility and care. It reveals the diversity of forces surrounding a project—formal institutions, informal networks, marginalised groups, and even non-human entities (such as water resources, air quality, fauna, …) shaping social and ecological systems. Through mapping, we learn to observe how relationships, resources, and power circulate, and how these dynamics might be rebalanced through design.

Once this landscape becomes visible, attention shifts to Competency 14, ***stakeholder engagement and negotiation***. Working with multiple actors demands authenticity and the capacity to hold both relationships and tensions productively. Differences in perspective or interest are not obstacles but generative moments that make dialogue meaningful. Facilitation supports groups in moving through divergence toward shared understanding, ensuring that each individual retains dignity and influence. This capacity transforms co-design into a democratic process where conflicts can generate more inclusive outcomes.

Communication underpins all these exchanges. Competency 15, ***Adapting communication for cultural diversity***, shows how, in culturally diverse contexts, design depends on flexible and responsive communication. Co-design processes for social inclusion require us to adapt language, tone of voice, and media to varied cultural codes and preferences. Words, gestures, and silences carry meanings that can either enable or block participation. Developing a shared vocabulary allows participants of a project to express values and experiences on equal terms. Co-design thus becomes a space where language itself is co-created and redefined.

As relationships deepen, the focus turns to ***Shared ownership models and principles***. Competency 16 explains how projects committed to inclusion must grow beyond temporary interventions, establishing forms of co-responsibility and governance that endure. Shared ownership enables communities and partners to manage decisions, risks, and benefits collectively. When people see themselves as co-owners rather than beneficiaries, projects gain legitimacy, adaptability, and long-term impact.

Throughout this unit, stakeholder engagement is framed not as a linear method but as an evolving ecosystem of relationships. Mapping and engaging stakeholders, adapting communication and sustaining co-ownership together form the conditions for trust and continuity in a co-design process. You will be encouraged to develop sensitivity to the political, emotional, and ethical dimensions of collaboration, recognising how histories of exclusion and inequality can affect the possibility to engage in a project and should be addressed to enable participation. Design becomes a practice of mediation and redistribution—a way of cultivating shared agency and imagining inclusive futures through collective care and collaboration.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- **Recognise and map the full spectrum of users and stakeholders** relevant to a project, including underrepresented actors;
- **Analyse power relations, interests, and dependencies** to design equitable strategies of engagement;
- **Facilitate negotiation and dialogue** in situations of conflict or asymmetry of power, supporting convergence without suppressing diversity;
- **Communicate effectively** across linguistic, cultural, and accessibility boundaries, developing shared vocabularies and inclusive interaction formats;
- **Build and sustain trust** through transparent, reflexive, and adaptive processes of collaboration;
- **Develop frameworks for shared ownership** that enable communities and partners to take collective responsibility for outcomes;
- **Reflect critically on the ethical, cultural, and political dimensions** of stakeholder engagement, understanding participation as a transformative social practice.

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino)

Area of Competence 6:

Users & stakeholders identification and engagement

13 USER AND STAKEHOLDERS MAPPING

Texts by Tiziana Ciampolini, Isabella Lalli, Antonio Fantasia (Associazione S-NODI GROUP E.T.S.); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Agnieszka Zarzyńska (Caritas Europa); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest); Elena Tornariti (SYNTHESIS Center for Research and Education)

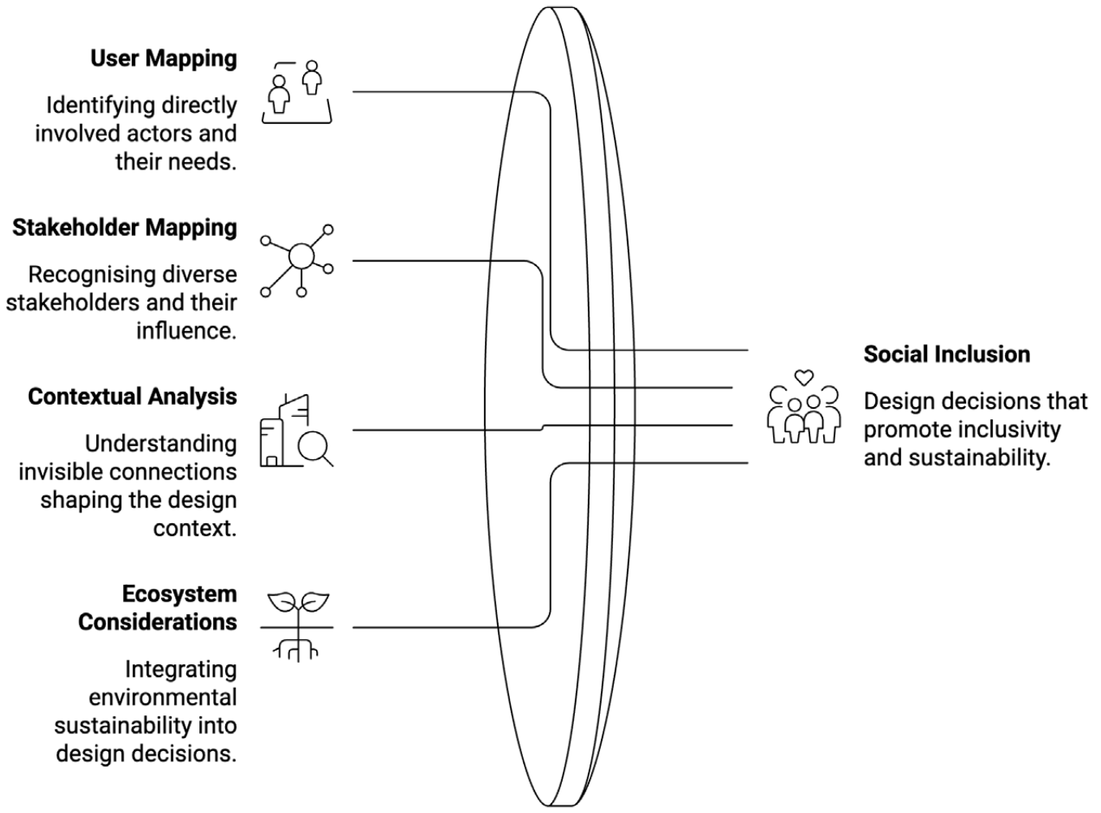
Overview

User and stakeholder mapping is a central competency of collaborative design and of the ATELIER approach. It means understanding who is involved in or affected by a project, what interests and resources they bring, and how they are connected to others. It is not just a technical exercise, but a relational and ethical practice that gives visibility to those usually left at the margins.

This process prevents conflicts, builds trust, strengthens participation, and opens spaces for shared ownership. When updated over time, the map becomes the foundation for inclusive, fair, and sustainable interventions.

Definitions and Discussion

Within collaborative design, user and stakeholder mapping is a foundational step. It is not an accessory preliminary activity but the basis for truly participatory processes. In the ATELIER project, which aims to develop social inclusion practices through co-design, mapping serves to identify not only the directly involved actors but also those at risk of exclusion, as well as the often-invisible connections that shape the context.**Stakeholders are not limited to institutional actors or established organisations; they include a wide range of subjects**: citizens, community groups, informal networks, local businesses, associations, young people, migrants, and people with disabilities. From a broader perspective, ecosystems, natural resources, and environmental spaces can also be considered as stakeholders, since design decisions directly affect social and ecological sustainability.



Set up your stakeholder map

The main objective is to understand interests, power, and interconnections, in order to build collaborative processes that do not reproduce existing imbalances but instead open up new forms of equity. A well-structured map helps to:

- give voice to marginalised groups;
- prevent conflicts and resistance;
- identify strategic alliances;
- distribute responsibilities and resources more fairly;
- strengthen trust and transparency.

In the ATELIER framework, mapping is not just an inventory of actors but a dynamic process of listening and dialogue. It evolves throughout the project, updating roles, interests, and relationships shift. **Its effectiveness lies in its ability to make interconnections visible and accessible to all participants, encouraging shared ownership and a sense of belonging.**

Mapping process: four phases

The mapping process can usually be broken down into four main phases:

1. **Identify**: participatively gather all relevant actors, both visible and invisible, internal and external to the project.
2. **Analyse**: clarify expectations, roles, needs, potential influence, and possible areas of conflict.
3. **Prioritise**: define levels of involvement and types of relationships, deciding which groups to engage more intensively.
4. **Engage**: activate workshops, focus groups, or participatory mapping sessions where stakeholders contribute directly to building the map.

Stakeholder mapping: a visual representation

The visual representation can take different forms:

Proximity or Venn maps: concentric circles showing central and peripheral actors.

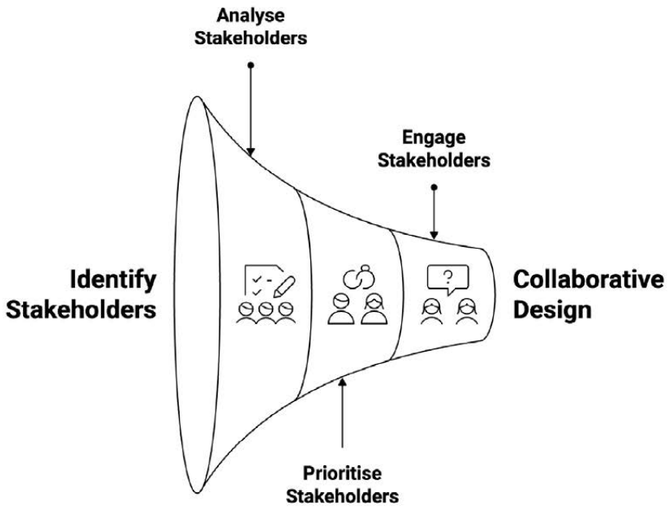
Matrix maps: crossing power, interest, or expertise to highlight different levels of influence.

Hub & spoke models: with the project or key community at the centre and surrounding actors connected by lines, colours, or sizes to indicate types of relationships.
Beyond the model chosen, what matters most is the collaborative dimension: **the map becomes the place where stakeholders themselves contribute to shaping the context and its dynamics.** This is the real added value—transforming mapping from a descriptive tool into a transformative practice[1].

A concrete example illustrates its value: imagine the design of a community space. If mapping were limited to institutional actors, the result might be a space that looks good on paper but does not reflect residents' real needs. A participatory mapping process, by contrast, it would involve families, young people, older residents, cultural associations, environmental groups, and local businesses. Their diverse perspectives—accessibility needs, preferences for green areas, ideas for community activities—would inform the design. The outcome would not only be more inclusive, but also more resilient, as it would be rooted in shared ownership and collective commitment.

In this sense, **user and stakeholder mapping is the entry point to collaborative design.** It answers a crucial question: *who needs to be at the table for change to be meaningful and lasting?* For ATELIER, it ensures that processes are not imposed from above, but built together with communities, transforming design into an exercise of social and environmental justice, empathy, and local democracy.

[1] Scharmer, O. (2018). *The essentials of Theory U: Core principles and applications*. Berrett-Koehler.



Focus

Visual models for stakeholder mapping

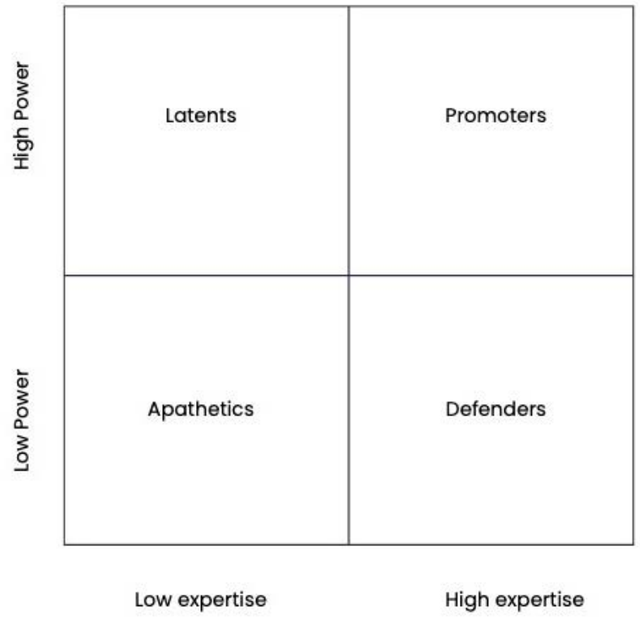
There is no single way to visualise stakeholders. Several models are commonly used, depending on project needs:

VENN DIAGRAM MODEL

Stakeholders are placed in concentric circles: internal stakeholders at the centre, external ones further out. This is widely used in participatory workshops, where post-its are clustered into circles and later formalised into a final map.

MATRIX MODEL (2 × 2)

Stakeholders are positioned according to two dimensions—for example, power (decision-making, influence) and expertise (knowledge of the product/service/context). This produces four types of actors:



Each type requires a different engagement strategy, from active involvement of promoters to careful evaluation of whether and how to engage apathetics.

Focus

HUB & SPOKE MODEL

At the centre is the project or key user, surrounded by the broader ecosystem of actors. Relationships are indicated by:

- Lines (continuous, dashed, or bold depending on type of relationship);
- Colours (distinguishing different categories of actors);
- Sizes (reflecting importance or influence).

Activities for stakeholder mapping

1) List your stakeholders & compile a basic stakeholder profile

Bring together a small group of people who will be involved in your project, and ask them to brainstorm. Name as many different people and organisations as you can think of, who will have an interest in your project.

Consider a wide variety of stakeholders – a framework like the one below can help you think from different angles.

Be as specific as possible. Name the organisations/departments/individuals you mean, so that you can come back to the list in future and understand it (or pass it on when you leave).

2) Think about the interests and impact of your stakeholder list

After you have listed as many stakeholders as your group can name, complete the table below with a row for each one. Do this with the group to gather different perspectives and suggestions.

You may find that for some stakeholders, you do not know their interest or position – this might give you a good excuse to get to know them better and ask them.

Example:

Stakeholder	Interest in the project? (Agenda)	What do we need from them?	Impact on the project	Positions towards project/outcome	Alliances (relationships between stakeholders)
National Government	Donor	Money and support	High	Interested & supportive	Allied to local government
University	Concerned about the change	Access to research facilities	Medium	Interested & opposed	Allied to local government
Local Business	Will support if it is successful	Money and Awareness raising	Low	Not currency interested	No alliances

3) Create a stakeholder map

Use the stakeholders as listed above, and put them into the matrix, based on interest and power/influence. Include only those stakeholders with the biggest (potential) impact.

Colour the names according to their position: supportive (black), opposed (red);. Stakeholders that are not interested (but which would have a potential big impact and need to be included in the analysis) can be coloured (green).

4) Create a stakeholder management strategy

Stakeholder management is not a one-off process. Ideally, it would be continuous throughout the project, with regular cycling through all the stages to identify new stakeholders and changes to known ones. The stakeholder management strategy should address questions such as:

- *How can we keep stakeholders with high influence/power but little interest satisfied?*
- *How do we engage stakeholders with high influence/power and high interest (both supporters and opponents)?*
- *Can we use stakeholders with high interest but little power to influence high power stakeholders?*

Focus

Example:

Stakeholder	Proposed strategy	Activities	Timing
National government	Actively manage	Monthly reports. Consult on project planning.	End of each month
University	Keep on your side	Discuss concerns and then keep up to date	Immediate meeting and then quarterly
Local business	General communication	Send project updates	Quarterly

Questions to ask yourself when reflecting on this tool

- *Do I know who the stakeholders are in my project and what their interests and positions are?*
- *Am I spending time with the most important stakeholders?*
- *How am I managing my stakeholders, especially those who may be opposed to the project?*
- *Is my stakeholder management working to help me achieve my goals?*

Tools for environment-centred designers: actant mapping canvas

The *Actant Mapping Canvas* is a tool designed to help environment-centred designers identify and empathise with both human and non-human stakeholders — referred to as actants — in the design process. Unlike traditional stakeholder maps, which are anthropocentric and typically exclude environmental elements, this canvas encourages a broader, more inclusive view.

The term "actant" is preferred over "stakeholder" because it includes any entity — human or non-human — that can affect or be affected by a product or service. This shift in language and perspective is essential for designing sustainable solutions in the 21st century.

Getting started with environment-centred design: step-by-step

1. Identify a Challenge or Problem - Begin with a real issue your product or service is facing — e.g., sustainability concerns, supply chain disruptions, or environmental impact. This grounds your design process in a meaningful context.

2. Map Direct Actants - Identify direct human and non-human actants affected by or influencing the problem.
    - Human actants: users, designers, engineers, NGOs, etc.
    - Non-human actants: ecosystems, water sources, air quality, local fauna, etc.

3. Map Indirect Actants - Expand your view to include indirect actants by adopting a systems-thinking mindset. Use scientific resources to understand the broader ecological and social interconnections.

4. Explore Cause-Effect Relationships - Analyse how these actants influence one another and your business. Ask how environmental disruptions (e.g., droughts, pollution) might affect your users, operations, or long-term viability.

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Identify

The first step is to identify stakeholders: all individuals, groups, or organisations with an interest in the outcomes of a project. **These can be people who contribute to the project (e.g.,designers, funders, managers) and those who are affected by it (e.g.,local residents, service users).** For instance, a high-rise building project involves both the construction companies (contributors) and nearby residents (those affected by environmental, social, or cultural impacts such as loss of privacy, shading, or changes in air circulation).

Stakeholders may sometimes belong to both categories

For example, a client financing a digital platform has decision-making power but is also a direct user. Without this analysis, projects are more exposed to misunderstandings, conflicts, or delays. Stakeholder identification becomes more effective when carried out through participatory workshops. These may involve 3 to 10 participants, working in person or remotely, facilitated with post-its and dedicated canvases. **Workshops typically alternate between individual contributions and collective clustering** to build a shared picture.

Analyse

Once identified, stakeholders should be analysed to define their roles, expectations, and needs. **Not all stakeholders are equal: some can generate greater impact than others.** This step makes it possible to cluster and organise profiles, roles, and information needs in a participatory way, preparing the ground for prioritisation.

Prioritise

After listing and analysing stakeholders, priorities must be established. This involves mapping their level of power, support, influence, and emotional connection to the project. **Stakeholders can then be classified according to high, medium, or low relevance, helping the team to decide who to engage more closely and how.**

Engage

Finally, stakeholders should be engaged to validate, refine, and enrich the map. Engagement can take different forms: collective creation of the map or sharing and discussing a pre-prepared draft. Either way, **involvement strengthens relationships, builds trust, and allows for early corrections to strategies before entering phases of research and solution design.**

Key points to consider

Hidden stakeholders (informal leaders, gatekeepers, front-line staff) are easy to miss.

Power asymmetries and tokenism: avoid extractive consultation; ensure benefits and voice are shared.

Language, accessibility and cultural barriers can silence key groups — plan **adaptations**.

Data sensitivity: gain consent; decide who can see the map and how people are represented.

Loud voices and institutional hierarchies can distort priorities; balance with those most affected.

Scope creep: mapping can sprawl—prioritise by potential impact on outcomes.

Doing a stakeholder analysis can be time-consuming, but it can also save you time in the long run. **After completing a stakeholder analysis, you might gain a new perspective about where to place your energy.** Some stakeholders will require time and focus, while others are less/not important to your project. This allows you to reduce the time you spend with less important stakeholders.

It is important to remember that the **stakeholder analysis is not a goal in itself**. It should be done in order to see how we can use stakeholder relationships to better achieve our goals.

Sometimes, undertaking a stakeholder analysis with a group of your colleagues can show you different perspectives of the same stakeholders. This can be **challenging to manage within discussions**, but it is helpful, nonetheless.

Reflective questions for your practice

Identifying and including stakeholders

Who is missing from our map, and why have they not engaged yet?

Have we identified all relevant stakeholders, including those typically left out, hard to reach, or at risk of remaining invisible?

Who are the direct and indirect users and stakeholders influencing or affected by the project?

In this context, should non-human or environmental actants be included, and how would that shift our strategy?

Understanding stakeholders

Do we understand their needs, motivations, fears, capacities and emotional connection to the project?

Which actors have high influence, and which are most affected by the problem—how do we centre both?

How can decision-making power be balanced with the needs of the most vulnerable communities?

Relationships and Dynamics

Have we captured alliances, tensions and dependencies between stakeholders?

What potential conflicts may arise, and how can they be anticipated or managed?

Participation and Engagement

What barriers (language, mobility, trust, timing) limit participation — and what adjustments will we make?

What tools or methods are we using to ensure inclusive and meaningful participation?

Are we creating safe, accessible spaces for dialogue and co-creation?

How are we integrating the knowledge and input of stakeholders into the design process?

How can mapping reinforce trust, shared ownership, and both social and ecological sustainability?

Mapping as a Living Process

Which mapping models (Venn, matrix, hub & spoke) are most suited to the context?

How will this map guide decisions on engagement and resource allocation?

How can the map be periodically updated to reflect changes in the project and community?

Who is responsible for maintaining and revisiting the map?

Are we continuously learning from our engagement practices and documenting them?

Assessing Stakeholder Roles

What level of decision-making power do they hold?

How committed are they to supporting the project?

What influence can they exert?

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Talking Hands

Project link

Catalogue page: 234

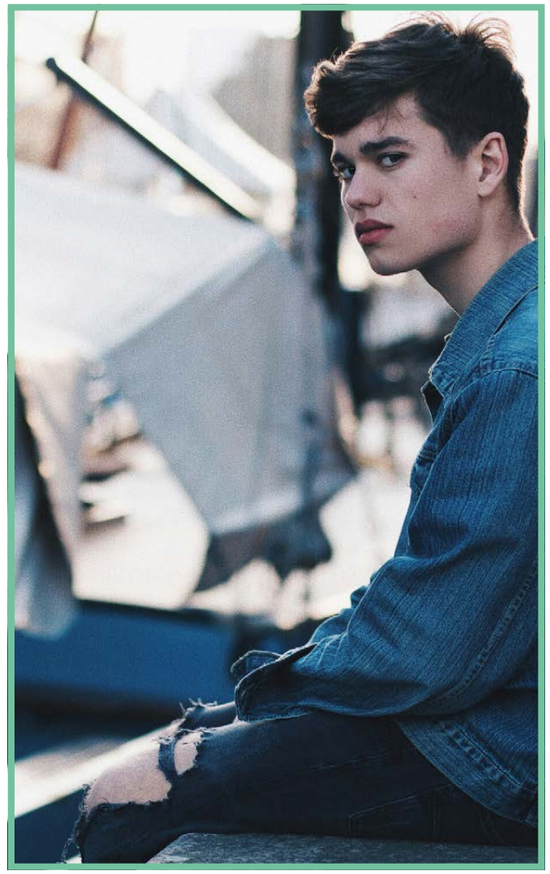


In *Talking Hands*, **stakeholder mapping connects young migrants in reception centres with lawyers, unions, universities and local manufacturers, highlighting both their needs and the political tensions around migration**. *Xtra MENA* (Belgium) maps unaccompanied minors across formal services (Guardianship, Fedasil, Red Cross), informal street networks and NGOs, exposing exclusions and building trust to influence policy.

Xtra MENA

Project link

Catalogue page: 238



This project places unaccompanied minors in transit at the centre of a complex ecosystem. Mapping involves formal services such as Guardianship, Fedasil and the Red Cross, but also informal street networks, family links abroad, NGOs and even traffickers as actors shaping reality. By exposing exclusions (children who avoid registration), addressing mistrust of authorities, and mobilising trusted partners like SOS Jeunes or Caritas International, **the mapping becomes a tool for dialogue, trust-building and political change, including the creation of pre-reception spaces.**

Community for socially excluded people and people with mental health conditions

Project link

Catalogue page: 243

In Malmö, mapping recognises individuals facing mental illness or social exclusion as active stakeholders. They co-govern alongside municipal authorities, regional health services, and civic organisations. **Stakeholder analysis guides shared decisions, peer support groups, and negotiations with institutions to reshape local rules**. It also accounts for environmental factors in the city that influence isolation. By situating members within a broader web of services and alliances, the project transforms vulnerability into agency, trust and new community connections.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB...

Within the European Project Semester, international mixed teams (Industrial Design + Mechanical Engineering + Erasmus students) partnered with a research institute, a civic association, and an SME. Each team had its own brief, but we began together with a shared stakeholder-mapping sprint.

In the first week, students listed everyone who could use, influence, fund, approve, maintain, or be affected by their project. **We built simple power/interest grids, quick empathy snapshots for primary users, and rough network maps showing who talks to whom.** That exercise surfaced "quiet" but critical actors: lab technicians who would operate a device daily, association volunteers who controlled access to community spaces, an SME's sales reps who shaped feature priorities, plus less obvious stakeholders like procurement, legal, and maintenance.

Teams turned the maps into engagement plans: who to consult, how often, in what format (short demos, photo logs, plain-language notes). They added inclusive tactics—language support, short sessions at shift changes, and opt-in feedback boards. As projects evolved, maps were updated to reflect new allies, blockers, and dependencies.

The result was practical: **faster access to the right users, earlier identification of constraints, fewer late surprises, and prototypes that partners were ready to adopt.** Most importantly, mapping made participation fairer—voices with low formal power, but high day-to-day impact were brought into the room. This aligns directly with Competency #13: user and stakeholder mapping as a living, ethical practice that underpins inclusive, context-sensitive co-design.

A story from SYNTHESIS…

“During a community integration project for migrant women in Nicosia, we initially engaged the usual stakeholders—NGOs, local authorities, and training providers. But the real breakthrough came when we decided to hold informal focus groups at our social café.

That is where we met Irene, a migrant single mother, who had never participated in any formal programs before. **She shared that she did not feel ‘seen' in official spaces and did not trust institutions. We realised how much our stakeholder map had missed**. With her help, we connected to a whole network of invisible women — home-based workers, informal caregivers, survivors of violence — who were affected by our work but had been completely left out.

Thanks to Irene, **we co-designed small, safe-space workshops that fit their realities: flexible schedules, childcare on site, and cultural mediation**. What we thought would be a standard stakeholder consultation turned into a lesson in humility. We now always ask: ‘Who is missing from the table, and why?'"

— Project Manager, SYNTHESIS Centre for Research and Education

A story from S-NODI…

Within the Savona è Capitale Sociale initiative, user and stakeholder mapping is not treated as a preliminary accessory but as the very foundation of its **collaborative governance model**. The project recognises that understanding who is involved or affected, what **interests and resources they bring**, and how they are connected is essential to ensure that social innovation processes are both inclusive and sustainable.

Mapping in Savona is conceived as a **permanent and dynamic practice of territorial listening**. Through continuous updates, it gives visibility not only to institutional actors and organised stakeholders but also to families, young people, migrants, informal networks, community groups, local businesses, schools, and universities. Even **environmental resources and public spaces are considered “stakeholders”**, as design decisions directly affect social and ecological sustainability.

The process has both technical and ethical value: it prevents conflicts, builds trust, and opens spaces for shared ownership. **By systematically identifying actors and clarifying their roles, interests, and expectations, the project avoids reproducing existing imbalances and instead fosters new forms of equity and reciprocity.**

Practically, the mapping exercise feeds into the work of the Promoting Committee and the Policy Labs, where priorities are negotiated and monitored. It also underpins the School of Sustainable Community Practices, which strengthens the collaborative skills needed to **transform maps into living platforms for co-design**.

Different representational models are used — proximity maps, matrices, hub-and-spoke diagrams — but the real added value lies in the participatory dimension: stakeholders themselves contribute to building and updating the map. In this way, mapping becomes a transformative practice, **turning abstract networks into concrete alliances and ensuring that the project is rooted in the everyday life of the city**.

Ultimately, stakeholder mapping in Savona è Capitale Sociale answers a crucial question: who needs to be at the table for change to be meaningful and lasting? By embracing this approach, the project strengthens **transparency, participation, and collective capacity**, reinforcing its ambition to create an inclusive, just, and future-oriented model of local governance.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 11 – *Analytical thinking on power, politics and policy*
Mapping surfaces who holds influence, who is marginalised, and which policies shape the context—insights you need to navigate power dynamics responsibly.

Competency n°12 – *Resources assessment and management*
Mapping stakeholders turn into action: they inform who to engage, how, and when, and they guide negotiation strategies to align diverse interests.

Competency n° 14 – *Stakeholder engagement and negotiation*
Stakeholder maps reveal available assets (people, spaces, knowledge) and gaps, enabling realistic resource planning and fair distribution.

Area of Competence 6:

Users & stakeholders identification and engagement

14 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND NEGOTIATION

Texts by Tiziana Ciampolini, Isabella Lalli, Antonio Fantasia (Associazione S-NODI GROUP E.T.S.); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Agnieszka Zarzyńska (Caritas Europa); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

Managing stakeholders in collaborative design requires three key pillars: authenticity, negotiation, and power balancing. Authenticity means building relationships based on trust and coherence between words and actions. Negotiation provides a creative space where conflicts and divergences are acknowledged and legitimised. Power balancing ensures that strong decision-makers do not overshadow vulnerable groups. The crucial competency lies in guiding the process from divergence to convergence, transforming differences and conflicts into shared and sustainable solutions.

Definitions and Discussion

Stakeholder management is one of the most delicate and transformative competencies in collaborative design. It is not enough to involve or inform: it requires governing relationships, interests, and conflicts with an authentic approach that can transform tensions and asymmetries into durable alliances. Within ATELIER, this competency is fundamental for turning potential conflits into generative energy and ensuring that change is both shared and lasting.



Authenticity as the foundation of trust

The starting point is authenticity in relationships. In collaborative processes, formal transparency is not enough: what matters is coherence between promises and actions, openness in acknowledging limits and difficulties, and the willingness to revise decisions in light of stakeholders' contributions. **Authenticity is built through genuine listening, mutual recognition, and clarity of intent.** Only when relationships are authentic can stakeholders feel like real participants in the process, rather than tokens in a staged form of participation.

From divergence to convergence

The crucial competency lies in guiding the process from divergence to convergence. This does not mean erasing differences or seeking minimal compromises that leave everyone dissatisfied. Instead, it means accompanying stakeholders toward common ground and shared visions. **Convergence does not arise spontaneously: it requires time, facilitation, mediation, and tools that reveal connections and possible alliances**. In this passage, conflict becomes a resource: differences generate new solutions, richer and more sustainable because they emerge from authentic dialogue.

Negotiation as a space for divergence

Every complex project generates divergences: conflicting economic interests, different visions of land use, tensions between environmental and social priorities. **Negotiation should not be seen as an obstacle to overcome quickly, but as a necessary passage**. The divergent phase is where hidden differences and latent conflicts emerge. Acknowledging these divergences means legitimising them, giving dignity to all voices, and making them the substance of dialogue.

Power balancing as a condition of fairness

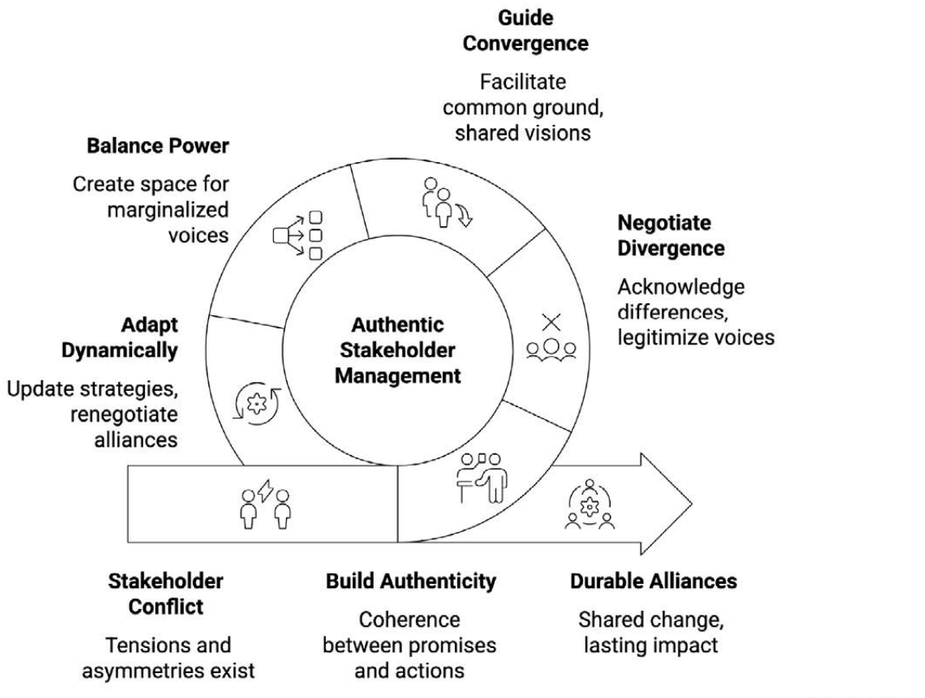
Moving from divergence to convergence is only possible when power is balanced. In every ecosystem, institutional or economic actors often hold far greater influence than vulnerable communities. Without balance, they risk monopolising decisions. **Managing stakeholders means actively working to rebalance power:** recognising the role of strong actors, while also creating space, tools, and conditions for marginalised voices—migrants, people with disabilities, precarious youth, low-income groups—to express themselves and have real impact. **Power balancing is not just technical; it is political, as it determines how agency is distributed and how democracy is built within design processes.**

A dynamic and transformative process

Stakeholder management is never static: it must be adaptive and dynamic. Actors evolve, as do their roles, priorities, and contexts. **Effective management requires periodic updates of maps and strategies, renegotiating alliances, and adapting forms of engagement.** Guided by authenticity, negotiation, and balance, stakeholder management not only prevents destructive conflict but turns projects into laboratories of local democracy and social innovation.

ATELIER: from management to systemic change

In the framework of ATELIER, stakeholder management goes beyond coordinating interests around a single project. **The goal is broader: building long-term alliances that sustain systemic change**. When relationships are authentic, negotiations are inclusive, and power is balanced, projects do more than generate temporary solutions—they become drivers of collective ownership, stronger community ties, and more just and resilient futures. **Stakeholder mapping is the foundation for defining the Theory of Change and for developing an effective engagement strategy.** Building a correct engagement process aims to support the achievement of shared goals and ensure transparency and accountability throughout the implementation process.



Focus

The Flower of Participation

If you are looking for more ideas on how to talk with your stakeholders, you can check the Participants' Journey tool worked out by Caritas Europa members: https://grassroots.caritas.eu/participants-journey/

If you wonder how to make sure that especially vulnerable groups can be engaged in your project meaningfully, you can find some inspiration in the tool called "Participation flower". It talks mainly about youth engagement, but can be used in the context of any other group.

This graphic shows how youth participation can grow and flourish under the right conditions.

THE FLOWER (TOP) – *FORMS OF PARTICIPATION*

- Youth-led, shared decisions with adults (ideal form)
- Youth-adult partnership
- Adult-led, shared decisions with youth
- Youth-led, no adult decision-making

THE STEM – *PARTIAL PARTICIPATION*

- Young people are appointed a role and informed
- Young people are consulted and informed

CATERPILLARS – *NON-MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION*

- Decoration
- Tokenism
- Manipulation

THE ROOTS – *WHAT YOUTH NEED (A commitment from young people)*

- Freedom of choice
- Information
- Responsibility
- Voice
- Decision-making power

THE ENVIRONMENT – *WHAT SUPPORTS GROWTH*

- Sun (Enabling environment): commitment from adults, policies, funding, safe spaces, youth-friendliness, flexibility
- Rain (Capacity strengthening): skills and support for youth

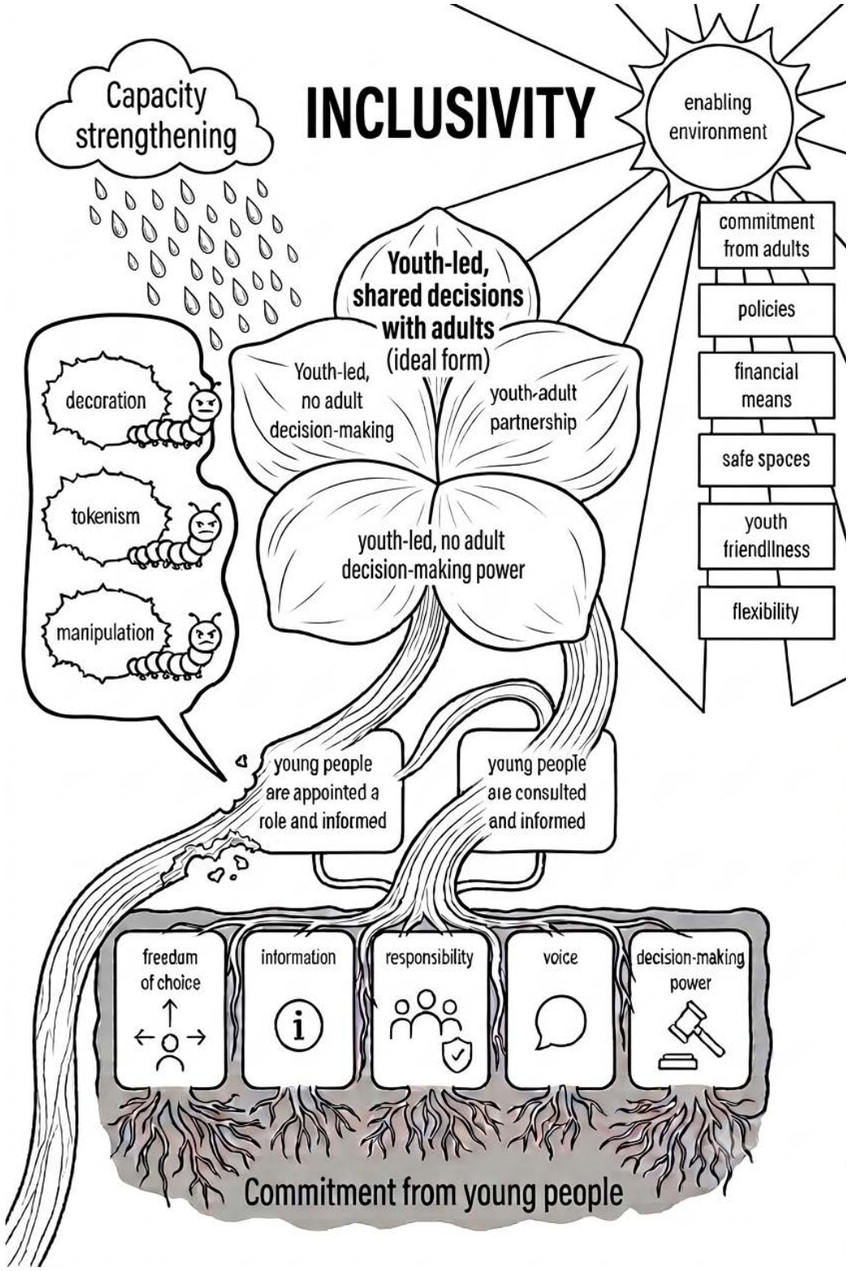


Fig. 1, *Flower of Participation*. Adapted from Growing Up Safe Sint Maarten, 2023 by the authors.

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Perform effective mapping that highlights the **roles, interests, and power of each entity**.

Establish **clear communication channels** from the outset.

Identify key stakeholders and their interests through **mapping exercises**.

Try to outline **what each stakeholder will do**.

Involve the actors as much as possible by working with a view to **listening and sharing stories**.

Build "spaces" – physical or emotional space – **and "moments"** – dedicated time during a specific session or far from the rest of the job – **for effective listening** that puts your interlocutor at ease.

Facilitate r**egular feedback loops** to ensure all voices are heard.

Periodically define shared objectives with deadlines, in this sense, share the objectives achieved and the methodologies.

Acknowledge and address **power imbalances** to ensure everyone has a voice.

Foster long-term relationships by valuing each stakeholder's contributions beyond the project's end.

Recognise the effort and commitment of each stakeholder and the role they have had both privately and publicly.

Learn to understand who you have in front of you, especially if the partnership is very diverse, to make the experience effective and with concrete results: **different groups will need different inputs and attention.**

Sometimes, not everything goes as we imagine, so it is always useful to have a **"plan B"**.

Key points to consider

Some people will need **extra support** to participate, and this can be resource-intensive, especially in the early days of a project.

More diverse groups of participants can find it harder to gel as a **team** and may need more input from staff or volunteer leaders.

There may be **safeguarding concerns**, particularly for people in vulnerable situations.

If you are inviting a wider group of participants to join existing volunteers, this can sometimes be challenging for both groups. **Careful preparation and good facilitation** are needed, for everyone to see the value of the change both for themselves and for the group.

Some people will have **complex lives or difficult home situations** and may not always be able to commit to what you think the project needs, particularly over the long term.

It can be hard to **plan and predict what will happen** with your projects; you will need to be willing to adapt and to have a "plan B" as you learn what people need or want.

In general, we find that most **risks** can be managed with careful planning and listening, and that the rewards outweigh the risks.

Reflective questions for your practice

*How do I feel about **widening participation** in my project? What are the risks I worry about? What are the benefits I can imagine?*

What do I know about the beneficiaries** of my project and whether they could participate more actively in delivery and design? **How do I know this – have I asked them?

*What are the **first steps** I could take to widen participation?*

Who do I need to speak to first?

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Águeda Living Lab

Project link

Catalogue page: 9



The Águeda Living Lab demonstrates strong stakeholder engagement by actively involving beneficiaries at all stages of the project—design, implementation, and evaluation. Through public consultations, surveys and workshops, community members shape educational and technological initiatives. Beneficiaries, including young people and entrepreneurs, participate in hands-on activities, use lab resources, and contribute feedback to refine offerings. Their involvement in management and monitoring processes ensured the alignment with community needs. **This inclusive, participatory model fosters a sense of ownership, enhances relevance, and strengthens the impact of its innovation-driven programs.**

Sintra City Council Plan for Migrant Integration

Catalogue page: 24

The Sintra City Council Plan for Migrant Integration demonstrates robust stakeholder engagement by actively involving migrants and local communities in every phase of the project. Beneficiaries co-design policies through participatory budgeting, consultations, and community forums, ensuring their specific needs are addressed. **Their participation extends to implementation, feedback, and evaluation processes. Collaboration with NGOs, academics, and public institutions enriches the project's inclusivity.** This inclusive approach strengthens community ownership, builds trust, and aligns integration strategies with real-life experiences and local policy goals.



Our Creek at La Terenuri

Project link

Catalogue page: 59

The “Our Creek at La Terenuri" project successfully engaged a broad range of stakeholders, including local communities, civil society groups, and academic institutions. Through workshops, public consultations, and collaborative efforts with authorities, the project fostered shared ownership and active participation. **This engagement facilitated the creation of a community-led approach that ensured the project's relevance to local needs and environmental concerns.** It also provided continuous feedback loops, helping to refine the project and strengthen its impact.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB...

In Bucharest's Urban Playgrounds Project, residents and youth organisations co-designed public play spaces, navigating differing opinions through facilitated negotiation sessions.

At Politehnica Bucharest, we often seek inspiration from civic initiatives that demonstrate how public participation can be integrated into urban development. One such example that stood out to us is "La Firul Ierbii" — a community space in Bucharest that has become a model for participatory urbanism. Although we were not directly involved, observing their approach to designing public spaces through dialogue with local residents, youth groups, and NGOs offered valuable insight into what inclusive urban planning can look like. **Through open workshops and facilitated discussions, the project showed how negotiation and collective decision-making can lead to designs that are both functional and deeply rooted in community values.**

For us, "La Firul Ierbii" (https://www.anuala.ro/en/projects/2017/120/) reinforced the idea that technical expertise alone is not enough. The process of creating urban spaces must also prioritise empathy, flexibility, and a willingness to embrace diverse perspectives. This external example has influenced how we approach teaching and research in engineering and urban studies—prompting us to integrate more participatory methods into our own academic projects. It reminded us that sometimes the best lessons come not from our own direct work, but from watching how others successfully navigate complexity in real-world contexts.

A story from S-NODI...

The Savona è Capitale Sociale initiative represents an advanced example of institutional innovation, where stakeholder engagement is not a secondary activity but the guiding principle of a new model of public governance — one that generates social value, drives policy transformation, and hybridises existing systems to increase their impact.

The project operates on three levels of legitimacy — political, administrative, and multi-level — enabling structured dialogue among a wide range of actors: public administrations, third-sector organisations, businesses, schools, universities, and citizens. Engagement is translated into concrete actions such as:

the permanent mapping of community actors and places, serving as an active and ongoing form of territorial listening;

the creation of a Promoting Committee, **a multi-stakeholder table functioning as a permanent negotiation space through Policy Labs,** where priorities are set, actions monitored, and consensus built;

the School of Sustainable Community Practices, which **strengthens collaborative skills and facilitates participatory planning** between public administration, civil society, and private entities.

The process is supported by an integrated project governance framework that blends ideation, facilitation, technical assistance, and financial engineering, always aligned with the municipality's strategic planning. This systemic approach not only mobilises resources (PNRR, EU funds, philanthropy) but also builds strategic partnerships and a facilitative infrastructure capable of sustaining medium-term, adaptive negotiation processes.

Its place-based logic and the co-designed Strategic Plan reinforce the role of local government as both facilitator and guarantor of shared public processes. The aim is not just to meet needs, but to build trust, mutual learning, and collective capacity for transformation.

In summary, Savona è Capitale Sociale enacts an evolved model of stakeholder engagement: stable, structured, and oriented toward continuous negotiation among actors, visions, and resources — strengthening both social cohesion and territorial project capacity.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 10 – *Navigating wicked problems and complexity*
Building strong relationships supports addressing complex problems through active stakeholder engagement. Trust and shared goals enable dialogue, understanding of interdependencies, and co-creation of effective, inclusive solutions.

Competency n° 11 – *Analytical thinking on power, politics and policy*
Analysing context and power dynamics is key to building genuine relationships. Understanding interests and influence helps manage negotiations, foster trust, and align diverse perspectives in collaborative processes.

Competency n° 13 – *User and stakeholder mapping*
Meaningful relationships rely on accurate mapping of users and stakeholders. Knowing roles, needs, and influence enables targeted engagement, strengthening inclusiveness and impact in project design and delivery.

Competency n° 16 – *Shared ownership models and principles*
Relationships based on trust and mutual respect promote fair participation and responsibility-sharing. This strengthens ownership, supports sustained engagement, and enables the implementation of shared ownership models.

Area of Competence 6:

Users & stakeholders identification and engagement

15 ADAPTING COMMUNICATION FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Texts by Tiziana Ciampolini, Isabella Lalli, Antonio Fantasia (Associazione S-NODI GROUP E.T.S.); Maria Koimisoglou, Theodoros Tsanakas (AKADIMOS KDVM EPE); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Agnieszka Zarzyńska (Caritas Europa); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

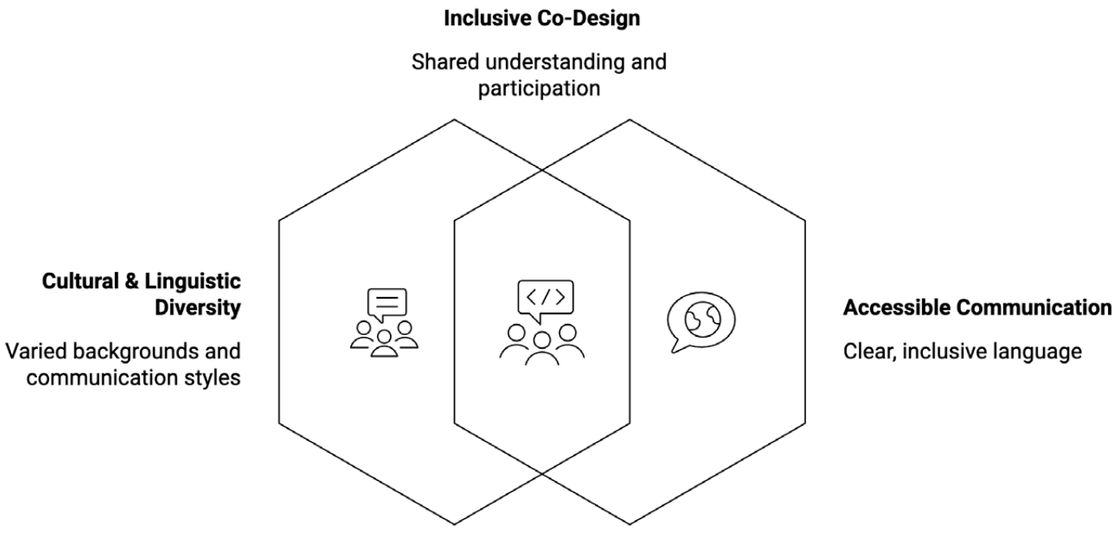
Overview

The ability to recognise, understand, and adapt to stakeholders' languages, codes, and perspectives, adjusting design and communication approaches to foster dialogue, inclusion, and effective co-creation.

Definitions and Discussion

Effective co-design for social inclusion hinges on creating a space where diverse groups can not only contribute, but also feel heard and understood. This process begins with establishing a shared understanding of the issues at hand. Such understanding is only possible when communication is adapted to accommodate the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of participants. The ability to adjust and make one's communication style accessible is crucial, particularly when engaging with communities that have historically been marginalised or excluded from decision-making processes.

A key aspect of adapting communication is the development of a common language that transcends cultural barriers and aligns vocabulary. This does not simply mean translating words from one language to another; it involves fostering a deeper understanding of how language reflects culture and values. A word that seems neutral in one context may carry very different connotations or emotional weight in another.



Different kinds of communication

However, communication extends far beyond words. There is a huge universe of signals, habits, and gestures soaked in meaning and values within different social contexts. For example, the concept of proxemics — the study of personal space — is particularly relevant in intercultural communication. **In some cultures, physical proximity is an important aspect of interaction, while in others, personal space is more highly valued**. These norms can shape how people perceive collaboration, trust, and authority in co-design settings. Acknowledging such differences and adapting strategies accordingly helps bridge potential gaps between stakeholders.

When pursuing social inclusion through co-design, **facilitators must actively work to ensure all participants feel included.** This can be achieved through the use of culturally appropriate language, visual aids, gestures, and recognition of different communication preferences. For instance, facilitators might ask participants to share their preferred communication styles or use interactive workshops where stakeholders collectively explore the terminology they use to describe key concepts. These methods can serve as a starting point for building a shared vocabulary that reflects both individual perspectives and collective goals.

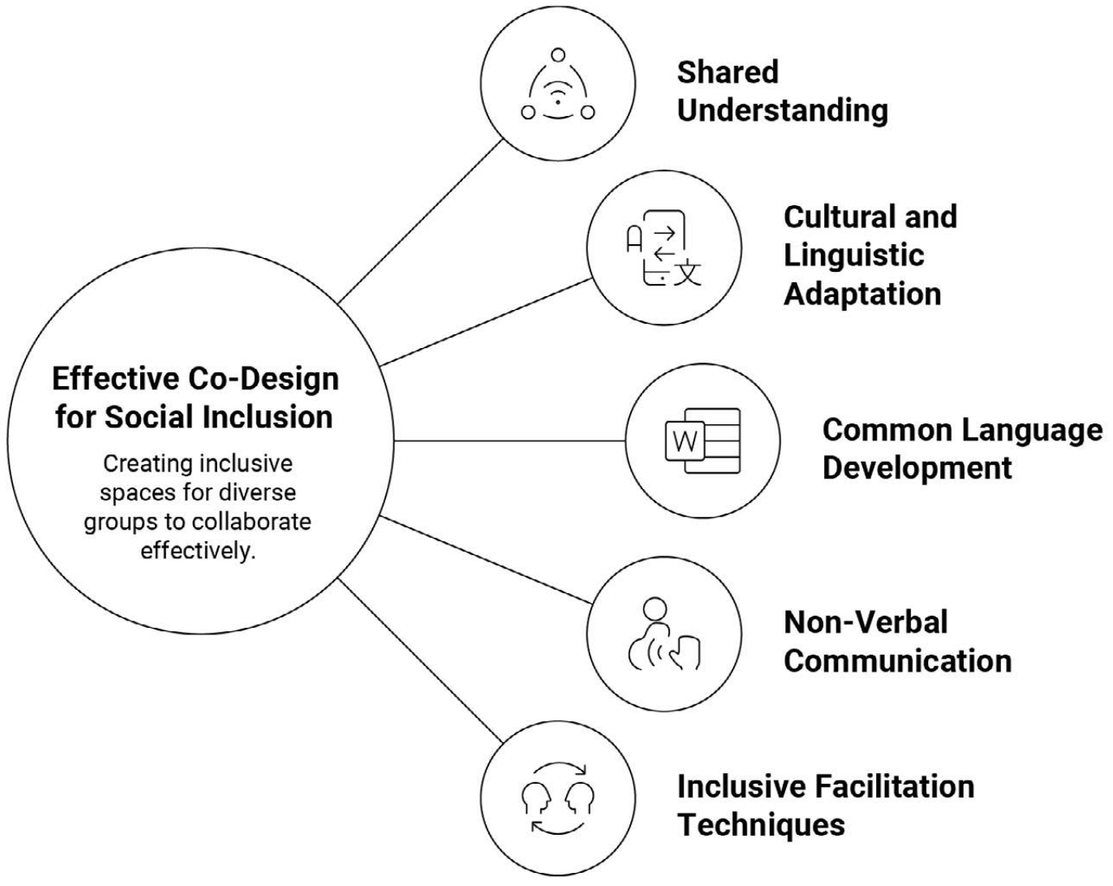
Yet even when communication styles are adapted, trust remains a fundamental challenge. Groups that have been historically excluded may carry negative experiences with authorities or institutions, leading to reluctance or resistance. Overcoming this requires communication strategies that foster trust from the outset. **Respectful and open dialogue is the starting point for building a participative approach that brings diverse actors together.** Workshops, focus groups, and community meetings should be designed to allow participants to express themselves freely and to feel that their voices matter. This sense of psychological safety is crucial: when people can speak their truth without fear of judgment or exclusion, trust begins to grow and collaboration becomes possible.

Co-design to craft a language

Beyond fostering trust and inclusion, co-design itself can become a catalyst for redefining language within a given context. In projects where stakeholders come from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds, co-design offers an opportunity to co-create language — to develop a shared vocabulary that reflects collective insights and priorities. This process might begin with something as simple as agreeing on definitions for core concepts such as “inclusion,” “community,” or “empowerment.” **By engaging in this collaboratively, stakeholders can craft language that is both meaningful and relevant to their lived experiences.**

For example, in social housing projects, community members may initially describe themselves with terms like “poor” or “marginalised.” Through co-design, these terms can evolve into more nuanced expressions that highlight strengths, resilience, and potential, reframing the narrative around social exclusion. Such shifts in language profoundly impact how participants view themselves and each other, fostering a sense of agency and ownership over solutions.

The ability to adapt communication styles, foster inclusive dialogue, and co-create shared language is essential in co-design projects that aim for social inclusion. By aligning strategies to respect and accommodate cultural differences, co-designed projects can bridge divides and create environments where collaboration is both possible and productive. Facilitating this alignment through trust-building, open dialogue, and shared vocabulary is not just a technique, but a fundamental aspect of ensuring that all voices are heard and valued. Ultimately**, this communicative approach forms the basis for social change, enabling marginalised communities to contribute to and benefit from solutions**. In this way, the co-creation of language becomes the first tangible sign of genuine transformation within a community.



Made with Napkin

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Map **stakeholders' communication preferences** (languages, direct/indirect style, formality, preferred channels, pace).

Co-create **simple "communication agreements"** (turn-taking, translation/ interpretation norms, inclusive meeting rules).

Prepare **accessible, multilingual materials: plain-language** summaries, visuals, captions/ subtitles, alt text, easy-read versions.

Keep things **short and simple**, remembering that participants have busy lives

Offer **multiple channels** (in-person + online + messaging) and allow asynchronous input for those with limited availability.

Structure **inclusive sessions**: small groups, round-robin speaking, anonymous input options, and time for reflection.

Check understanding regularly (teach-back, quick polls, paraphrasing) and adjust your approach in real time.

Make reasoning transparent: explain decisions, trade-offs, and next steps; follow up with concise recap notes.

Nominate **cultural/community liaisons** to bridge expectations and signal emerging issues early.

Document what **adaptations** you used and gather short feedback after each interaction; **iterate**.

Reserve time for communication in advance. It can be time-consuming, so make sure there will be enough space for it.

Encourage feedback from participants. Make sure they can react, comment, give their suggestions, or express objections.

Create an **easily accessible pool of resources** with basic information about the project, which participants can always use if needed.

Key points to consider

Power dynamics and gatekeeping — ensure marginalised voices are not overshadowed.

Language hierarchies — avoid defaulting to the dominant language without support.

Non-verbal differences — eye contact, silence, gestures, and tone vary across cultures.

Risk of stereotyping — treat preferences as individual, not fixed "cultural traits."

Accessibility and neurodiversity — screen-reader compatibility, clear layouts, predictable structure.

Time zones, religious/cultural calendars, caring responsibilities, and digital access constraints.

Psychological safety, consent, and privacy — especially on public or third-party platforms.

Conflict and feedback styles — account for "saving face" and indirect critique norms.

When communicating with participants, be transparent and clear. In order to recognise their dignity and important role in the project, it is important to be open and **honest**, to present **different perspectives and reasons behind decisions or changes**.

Give participants time and resources to get fully informed. Share materials before meetings, provide necessary resources.

After informing participants about changes, upcoming processes, etc., remember to **follow up** with them and share developments of the change.

Reflective questions for your practice

*Whose **voices** were **missing or least audible**, and why?*

*Did any group have to **adapt** more than others to participate?*

***Which channels and formats worked for whom?** What evidence do we have?*

*Were materials **understandable without additional explanation** (how do we know)?*

*Did we provide **adequate translation/ interpretation** and budget/time for it?*

*How did we **signal transparency** around decisions, and could participants explain them back?*

*How did we **respond to disagreement** across cultural styles — what worked, what did not?*

*What **non-verbal cues** might we have misread?*

***What will we change next time** (one concrete adjustment)?*

*How did my own assumptions show up, and **what did I learn?***

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Mutfluencer *innen

Project link

Catalogue page: 217

The Mutfluencer*innen project empowers young people from diverse cultural backgrounds to share their experiences and ideas through social media platforms. **The focus is on creating a common language that transcends cultural barriers**, allowing participants to express themselves in a way that resonates with their personal experiences. This project exemplifies **the competency of adapting language by co-creating a shared vocabulary that reflects the lived realities** of marginalised youth, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment.



My Human Kit

Project link

Catalogue page: 268

My Human Kit focuses on the co-creation of assistive devices with people with disabilities, where language adaptation is key. The project prioritises accessible and inclusive communication, ensuring that participants' needs and preferences are respected in the development of solutions. This includes adjusting the language to be both technically accurate and personally meaningful, helping to foster trust and collaboration. **The ability to adapt language to meet diverse needs is central to ensuring that all voices are heard and valued in the design process.**



Cantieri di Dialogo

Catalogue page: 290

Cantieri di Dialogo facilitates intercultural dialogue between diverse community groups, with a strong emphasis on adapting language to promote inclusion. Participants engage in collaborative discussions to develop a shared vocabulary that reflects both individual experiences and collective goals. The project's focus on **fostering communication across cultural divides showcases the competency of adapting language to create spaces where all participants can contribute meaningfully,** enhancing mutual understanding and promoting social cohesion through language.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB...

In the European Project Semester, our teams bring together students from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds (e.g., Romania, Spain, France, Morocco, The Netherlands). In one cohort, the group was tasked with co-designing a service prototype for a local community centre. During the first week, participation was uneven: some students were very direct in their feedback, while others avoided open disagreement; long pauses were read as disinterest by some and as respectful thinking time by others. Email threads felt too formal for a few, while others found the class WhatsApp group too fast and colloquial. As a result, **ideas clustered around the most confident voices and two quieter members barely spoke in meetings.**

We paused to co-create a simple "communication canvas." Each student listed preferred name/pronouns, working languages, comfort with synchronous vs. asynchronous discussion, and feedback style (direct/indirect). Together we set a few rules: round-robin turns before open debate; visible agendas with timing; a "one-minute reflection" after big questions; and multiple input modes (voice, sticky notes, and an anonymous board for sensitive topics). We paired students as language buddies to summarise key points in short bilingual notes, introduced quick "teach-back" checks for understanding, and alternated facilitation so no single style dominated.

For those who processed information more slowly, we added a 24-hour window for written follow-ups after meetings. Mid-project, a conflict flared over which features to prioritise. A very direct critique from one member landed as personal to another. We used a simple script—name the observation, share impact, ask a clarifying question—and switched to a "yes-and" reframing exercise. **Re-centreing on stakeholder stories gathered from interviews, the team realised they were arguing past each other due to style, not substance.** By translating concerns into shared criteria (accessibility, cost, cultural fit) and voting privately, they reached alignment without anyone losing face.

By the final sprint, participation had balanced out: the two initially quiet members led a usability test with older community participants, and the most outspoken member became the timekeeper, making space for others. The prototype integrated multilingual micro-copy and clear iconography—direct outcomes of our adaptive communication approach. In reflections, students reported greater trust, clearer decision-making, and a stronger sense of inclusion. Our main takeaway: **designing the collaboration—especially communication norms, languages, and feedback channels—is as important as designing the product**, and it is what made diverse perspectives show up in the work.

A story from AKADIMOS...

Drawing from AKADIMOS's experience in Intercultural Education and Training, a notable case study emerged from our annual learning program. It brought together trainers and participants from various cultural backgrounds, including local Greek residents, refugees, and international students, all seeking to enhance their professional skills.

The initial challenge became apparent when traditional communication approaches created barriers to engagement. Through the application in intercultural education and multilingual support online systems, a transformative approach was implemented.

The teaching methodology was adapted to incorporate cultural sensitivity training for instructors, multilingual support materials, and culturally responsive teaching methods.

The results demonstrated the power of adaptive communication where cross-cultural collaboration was enhanced, and learning outcomes improved across cultural groups.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 5 – *Knowledge of values, culture, and the fundamental drivers of inclusion and sustainability*
Understanding cultural values and social drivers enables facilitators to adapt communication, bridge differences, and foster sustainable, trust-based collaboration in co-design processes.

Competency n° 6 – *Inclusion and accessibility principles*
Adapting communication styles ensures inclusion and accessibility by valuing diverse voices, creating equitable participation, and enabling all stakeholders to feel heard and respected.

Competency n° 9 – *Desk and field research for problem-framing*
By co-creating a shared language, participants can redefine problems inclusively, ensuring challenges are framed with diverse perspectives and rooted in real community experiences.

Area of Competence 6:

Users & stakeholders identification and engagement

16 SHARED OWNERSHIP MODELS AND PRINCIPLES

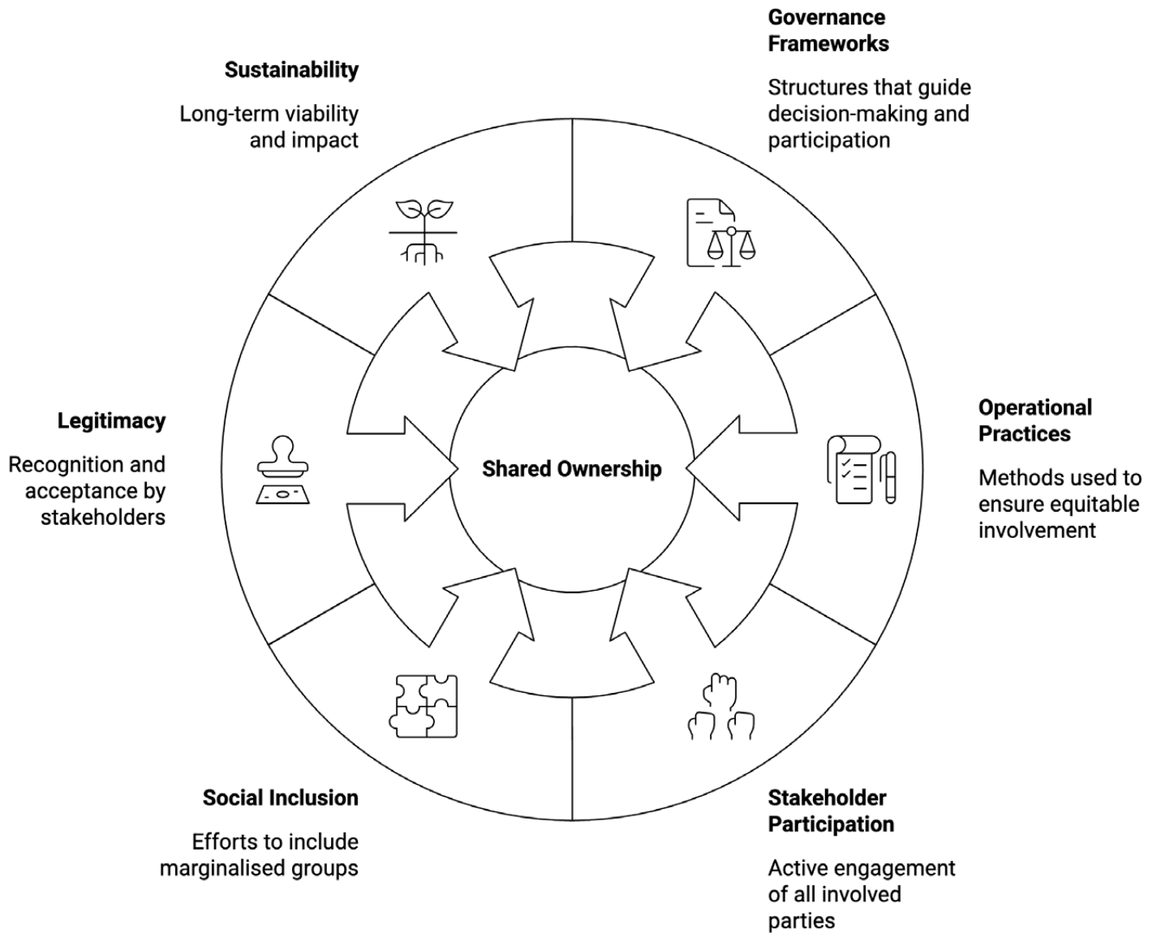
Texts by Tiziana Ciampolini, Isabella Lalli, Antonio Fantasia (Associazione S-NODI GROUP E.T.S.); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

Shared ownership models do not only refer to the distribution of resources, but to the co-responsibility for decisions, governance, and outcomes. Shared ownership means that communities, institutions, and organisations are not mere beneficiaries but co-owners of processes.
This competency is grounded in equity, authenticity, and mutual responsibility, fostering trust and legitimacy. It is what enables projects to move beyond temporary initiatives and to become long-term, rooted commons that generate sustainability and systemic change.

Definitions and Discussion

Shared ownership models refer to governance frameworks and operational practices designed to ensure the active, equitable, and authentic participation of all stakeholders in design processes. Within ATELIER, this competency is fundamental, particularly in projects aimed at social inclusion. Here, **involvement is not only a matter of effectiveness, but the very condition that defines legitimacy and sustainability.**



From hierarchy to shared responsibility

Shared ownership challenges traditional hierarchical models where a few actors dominate decision-making. Instead, it introduces collaboration, co-responsibility, and mutual benefit as guiding principles. **Being a "co-owner" is not limited to contributing resources or funding: it means having a real say in defining objectives, taking responsibility for outcomes, and sharing risks and benefits.**

This perspective resonates with Elinor Ostrom's[1] insights on the governance of commons: communities, when enabled, are capable of collectively managing resources in ways that balance individual and collective interests, ensuring durability and sustainability. Similarly, in social projects, shared ownership fosters belonging, stewardship, and long-term adaptability.

Giving voice to marginalised communities

Shared ownership is essential to address entrenched power imbalances. Too often, marginalised groups are subjects of design rather than participants in it. By ensuring co-decision and co-creation, **shared ownership allows them to shape both process and outcomes.** This produces interventions more attuned to lived realities and restores dignity, agency, and long-term stewardship.

Equity as a core principle

Equity lies at the heart of effective shared ownership. Equity does not mean treating everyone identically, but recognising differences in roles, resources, and capabilities, and creating conditions for meaningful participation. This may require adapting communication, providing safe and inclusive spaces, or offering technical and logistical support. **Equity enables all stakeholders to contribute their knowledge—whether academic, professional, experiential, or cultural.**

Authenticity beyond transparency

Many participatory processes emphasise transparency: sharing documents, goals, or materials. Yet, shared ownership requires something deeper: **authenticity**. Authentic relationships mean coherence between promises and actions, a willingness to open decision-making to others' input, and the capacity to embrace differences without diluting them. Authenticity generates the trust needed for stakeholders to feel true co-owners.

[1] Ostrom, E. (2007). *Institutional rational choice: An assessment of the institutional analysis and development framework*. In P. A. Sabatier (Ed.), *Theories of the policy process* (2nd ed., pp. 21–64). Westview Press

Models and practices

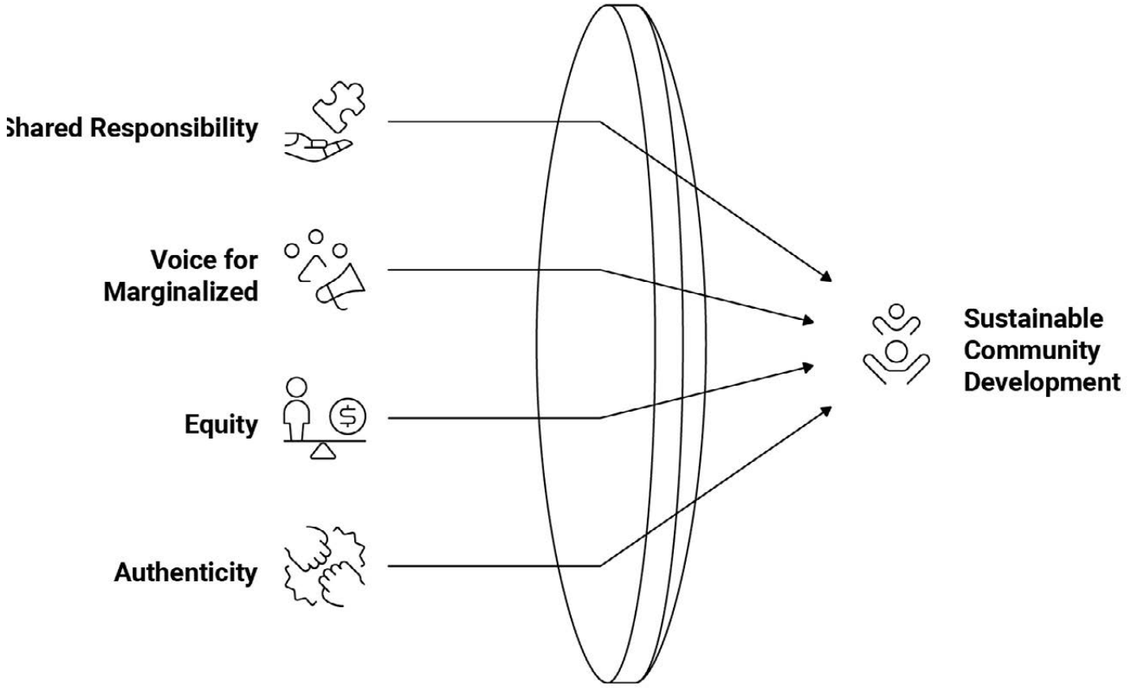
Shared ownership can take many forms:

- **Collaboration pacts** between citizens and institutions for the management of commons (e.g.,public spaces, community services);
- **Community cooperatives**, where citizens become members and co-managers of services or infrastructures;
- **Community trusts**, collectively managing assets or resources for long-term community benefit;
- **Multi-stakeholder governance bodies**, distributing decisions and responsibilities among institutions, associations, and citizens.

What matters most is not the legal form but the ability to build an **ecosystem of authentic co-responsibility** that ensures continuity and rootedness.

Building Infrastructures Of Ownership

For ATELIER, shared ownership is not an abstract idea but a concrete aim: to generate social infrastructures in which co-designed solutions can be maintained, adapted, and evolved by communities over time. Shared ownership means building not only results but also relationships, alliances, and governance models that survive beyond the project, fostering collective innovation and care.



Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Organise **moment of interaction** to share information both formal and informal

Be open and transparent when discussions start around available funds. Ensure that all stakeholders involved can bring to the table their contribution and needs based on equity and equality.

Engage stakeholders from the outset in defining the **project's goals, processes, and evaluation metrics**.

Define **clear and shared goals**.

Maintain **open, clear communication** about expectations, resources, and decision-making processes.

Ensure that tasks and roles are shared fairly, considering the **strengths, needs, and capacities** of different stakeholders.

Ensure that stakeholders are not only involved at the beginning but remain **engaged throughout the project's lifecycle**, contributing to its evolution and sustainability.

Acknowledge that all parties should **share not only the rewards but also the challenges and risks** associated with the project.

Recognise contributions and efforts.

Key points to consider

Ensure that all decision making is based on the principle of **consensus**, **or an agreed version of consensus**, to ensure that no single partner dominates the decision-making process.

Ensure **follow-through on decisions** made resulting in more inclusive and effective decision-making.

Be **aware of power dynamics** and how the different roles can affect participation.

Be sure to keep all the parties involved and have **real influences** in the project outcomes.

Coordinating multiple actors can lengthen the time, **plan and structure** it effectively.

Be aware of language, cultural and tool **barriers**.

Mediate conflicts: conflicts cannot always be avoided but be sure to have managed and mediated them in the best way without leaving anything unresolved.

Trust: building trust is a long process, be sure to pursue it day-by-day.

Reflective questions for your practice

__Who__ is involved in shaping the project — and who is not? Why?

Are all participants __equally informed and empowered__ to contribute?

How are decisions made, and by whom?

Have I created the conditions for __all voices to be heard and respected__?

Which __barriers__ (practical, emotional, structural) might be limiting ownership?

Have I __recognised and credited everyone's contributions__ appropriately?

What __principles__ make shared ownership authentic in collaborative design processes?

How can shared ownership __rebalance power relations__ and give voice to marginalised groups?

Which concrete __instruments__ (collaboration pacts, cooperatives, trusts, multi-stakeholder governance) best support __shared ownership__?

How can __equity__ be __practiced__, not just declared?

In what ways does shared ownership contribute to __sustainability and rootedness__ beyond the project's duration?

What __inspiring examples__ of shared ownership can inform transformative processes as laboratories of co-responsibility?

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Biovilla

Project link

Catalogue page: 20

Biovilla is a sustainability cooperative in the Arrábida Natural Park that embodies shared ownership through its collaborative governance model. Community members, NGOs, experts, and international volunteers all take part in decision-making, planning, and daily operations. **Responsibilities, risks, and benefits are openly distributed, fostering long-term commitment and collective accountability.** This model strengthens community bonds and ensures that the project remains deeply rooted in local needs and aspirations, making social and environmental impact a shared mission.



Be Able

Project link

Catalogue page: 98

Be Able is a collaborative platform where socially excluded individuals co-design projects alongside institutions, designers, and other stakeholders. **Roles and contributions are fluid and negotiated, ensuring all participants have agency and a voice in shaping outcomes.** From healthcare device hacks to intercultural cooking, Be Able applies shared ownership by building mutual trust, distributing responsibility, and valuing lived experience. This inclusive approach enables long-term engagement and empowers marginalised voices within the design process.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from OLAE...

In our co-design projects, we begin by establishing shared ownership from the very first workshop. All stakeholders collectively define the goals, roles, and decision-making processes. For instance, during a recent local inclusion initiative, **each partner could propose solutions and highlight local knowledge** that informed practical choices, from site selection to engagement strategies. By embedding transparency, equity, and mutual accountability into every stage of the project, we strengthened participants' commitment and investment.

Decisions about project activities were then made through facilitated consensus, ensuring that no single perspective dominated. This approach allowed us to balance different capacities and insights while fostering a sense of responsibility across all participants. By embedding **shared ownership into every stage of the project, we observed stronger engagement, more innovative solutions, and outcomes that reflected the community's actual needs.**

Co-design became not just a method but a lived principle, where every voice was active and valued in shaping the project's direction.

A story from NUSTPB...

In the European Project Semester, working alongside international students on co-design projects has demonstrated the value of shared ownership in enhancing engagement and commitment.

When all participants were actively involved in setting goals, defining roles, and distributing responsibilities, we observed a significant increase in motivation and creative input. Students felt a stronger connection to the project outcomes and contributed ideas that would not have emerged in a more hierarchical setting.

This collaborative process not only fostered mutual respect and accountability, but also improved the quality and relevance of the solutions developed.

Balancing diverse perspectives required careful facilitation, but ultimately ensured that the final results were more inclusive, grounded, and meaningful to the contexts they aimed to address.

Shared ownership thus proved essential in turning a multidisciplinary team into a truly co-creative and cohesive unit.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 6 – *Inclusion and Accessibility Principles*
By promoting shared ownership, projects ensure that diverse groups are not just participants but co-creators, enhancing the inclusivity and accessibility of the process.

Competency n° 14 – *Stakeholder engagement and negotiation*
Without active involvement and open dialogue with stakeholders, shared ownership remains just theory. This competency directly supports the real implementation of co-ownership in projects.

Competency n° 18 – *Project development management*
An iterative project approach supports shared ownership by allowing responsibilities and decisions to evolve collectively. This flexibility helps sustain engagement and ensures the project remains relevant to stakeholders' needs.

Competency n° 20 – *Co-design and its nuances*
Understanding the different forms of collaboration in co-design is essential to building shared ownership. Recognising how and when stakeholders contribute helps distribute responsibilities more equitably and ensures that ownership aligns with local capacities, needs, and power dynamics.

Competency n° 22 – *Multi-level collaboration management*
Shared ownership requires collaboration across all levels — from local to systemic — and this competency ensures the integration and support of these complex connections.

AREA OF COMPETENCE 7

Design process

The design process, particularly when addressing issues of social inclusion, is not a straight path from problem to solution. Instead, it is an evolving and iterative journey, requiring different forms of knowledge, creativity, and collaboration to come into play at the right moments. The four competencies presented in this unit — related to the knowledge and management of design domains, project development, lateral thinking, and co-design — are best understood as they support each other. Each offers specific guidance at different stages of the process, while together they provide a robust framework for navigating complexity and shaping meaningful outcomes.

The journey often begins with Competency 17 ***Knowledge and management of design domains***. This competency helps to *clarify the scale and scope of the challenge*. Are we dealing with an object, a service, an organisational change, or a systemic transformation? By mapping the issues across their domains, practitioners can avoid simplistic responses and instead align interventions with the real level – or *levels* – of complexity. This competency therefore *comes to the aid at the very start*, orienting teams towards the right frame of action and identifying the collaborations, resources, and skills that will be needed.

Understanding the scope of the transformation to pursue support and is supported by consciously ***Project development management***. This Competency – number 18 – provides the tools to guide design processes. These latter are rarely linear and plans often need to adapt to shifting contexts and emerging insights. This competency supports practitioners by structuring the work into *iterative cycles*, where research, ideation, prototyping, and implementation inform each other continuously. It proves most valuable *during the organisation and evolution of the project*, ensuring that interventions remain responsive, inclusive, and aligned with shared goals.

At key moments in these cycles, new ideas are required — and this is where, Competency 19, ***Lateral thinking for ideation,*** becomes essential. When established patterns risk limiting creativity and the possibility of identifying new approaches to complexity, lateral thinking offers methods to *unlock alternative perspectives and challenge assumptions*. It enables teams to move beyond the obvious, generating fresh possibilities that are especially critical for wicked problems. This Competency is particularly helpful *during ideation and reframing phases*, but its influence extends throughout the process by reminding teams to stay flexible, inventive, and open to surprise.

All these efforts would remain incomplete without ***Co-design and its nuances***, Competency 20, which give the process its relational foundation. Co-design ensures that *beneficiaries and stakeholders are not passive recipients but active shapers of the project*. It comes into play *across all stages* — in framing the problem together, in *co-creating* ideas with the support of lateral thinking, in *co-crafting* prototypes within project development, and in *co-producing* services or systems at scale. This Competency also highlights how to manage power dynamics, balance diverse contributions, and sustain engagement, which are vital for legitimacy and long-term impact.

Each competency contributes at different but interconnected stages, ensuring that design is systemic, adaptive, inventive, and inclusive. Recognising these interdependencies is key to working effectively with complexity and transforming challenges into opportunities for meaningful social change.

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino)

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- **Frame problems across different design domains**: identify whether challenges are object-based, service-oriented, organisational, or systemic, and select strategies and responses to be implemented accordingly;
- **Structure adaptive project cycles**: apply iterative and cyclical approaches to manage evolving needs, integrating research, ideation, experimentation and implementation;
- **Generate innovative solutions**: employ lateral thinking tools to challenge assumptions, broaden perspectives, and support inclusive ideation;
- **Foster collaborative practices**: apply the appropriate “co-approach” (co-creation, co-crafting, co-production, etc.) in relation to project stages and contexts;
- **Navigate power dynamics**: recognise how participation and decision-making are distributed, ensuring equitable and meaningful involvement;
- **Integrate the four competencies**: demonstrate how each supports the others within the design process, creating a holistic approach to social inclusion.

Area of Competence 7:

Design process

17 KNOWLEDGE AND MANAGEMENT OF DESIGN DOMAINS

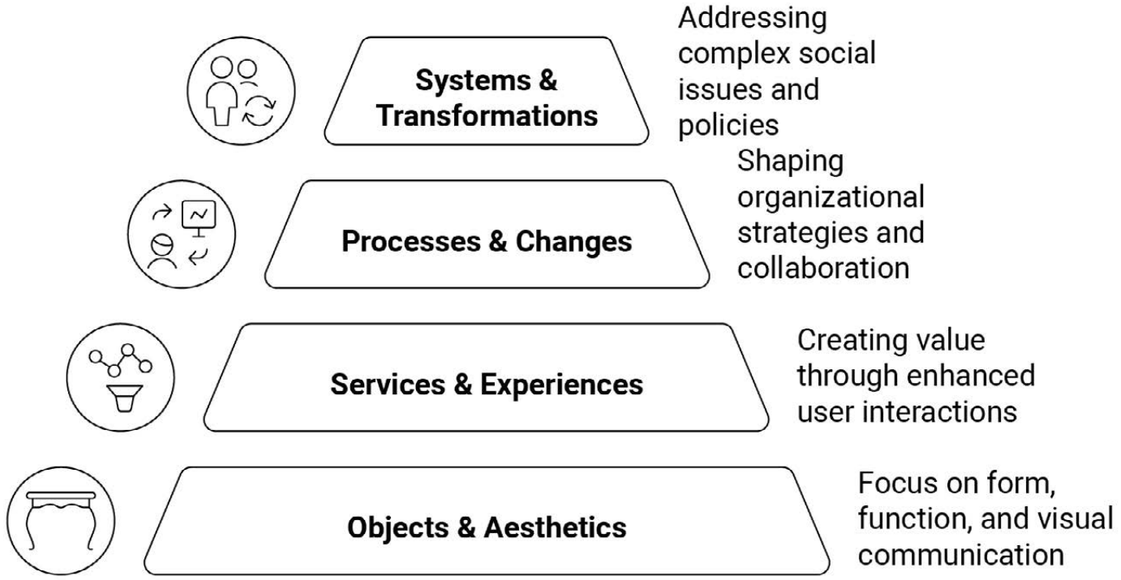
Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

Understanding the categorisation of design domains proposed by Jones and Van Patter helps grasp the different scales and complexities that design for social inclusion can address — from product and service solutions to broader and more articulated systemic interventions — and their interconnection, integration and mutual influence. This categorisation helps map and differentiate the needs, skills, collaborations, knowledge, or alliances required in various contexts (referencing the multi-domain competency), as well as the barriers and enablers. Within the broader area of problem addressing, it helps understand how complex the problems are and to scale collaborations according to the problem's level of complexity.

Definitions and Discussion

Design Domains, theorised by Jones and Van Patter in 2009, **categorise design into different scales** — *domains* — each of which differs in terms of **needs, knowledge, processes, tools, and collaborations required**, both in terms of barriers and enablers. This framework helps in understanding the various layers of design, from the tangible to the abstract, and how they can be effectively integrated to tackle complex challenges. Furthermore, by understanding these categories, designers can **match the right approach and integration of solutions** to the complexity of the problem they are addressing.



Interpreting Jones and Van Patter, design domains can be understood as four levels of intervention:

Domain 1 – Objects, artefacts and spaces

This is the most classic idea of design, centred on making things. It includes the creation of artefacts, graphics, and visual communication, with a focus mainly on form, function, and aesthetics.

Domain 2 – Services and experiences

Here, design extends beyond objects to create value through services and enhanced user experiences. It is about integrating different elements to improve interactions and generate innovations that address people's needs.

Domain 3 – Processes and organisational changes

At this level, design becomes a tool for shaping how organisations work. It involves rethinking strategies, processes, and structures to enable change, as well as redesigning the way people collaborate and make decisions within organisations.

Domain 4 – Systems and social transformations

This is the broadest level, where design addresses complex social issues. Instead of focusing on single objects or organisations, it engages with systems, policies, and communities, supporting processes of social transformation and collective development.

Within the perspective promoted by the ATELIER project, recognising the different design domains — and knowing how to **combine them strategically** depending on the challenge, especially with wicked problems — is a valuable resource for managing projects and identifying the necessary skills and resources.

Also, it is helpful to keep in mind that domains can act as **starting points, outcomes, or intersecting dimensions of a project**.

Can design domains coexist?

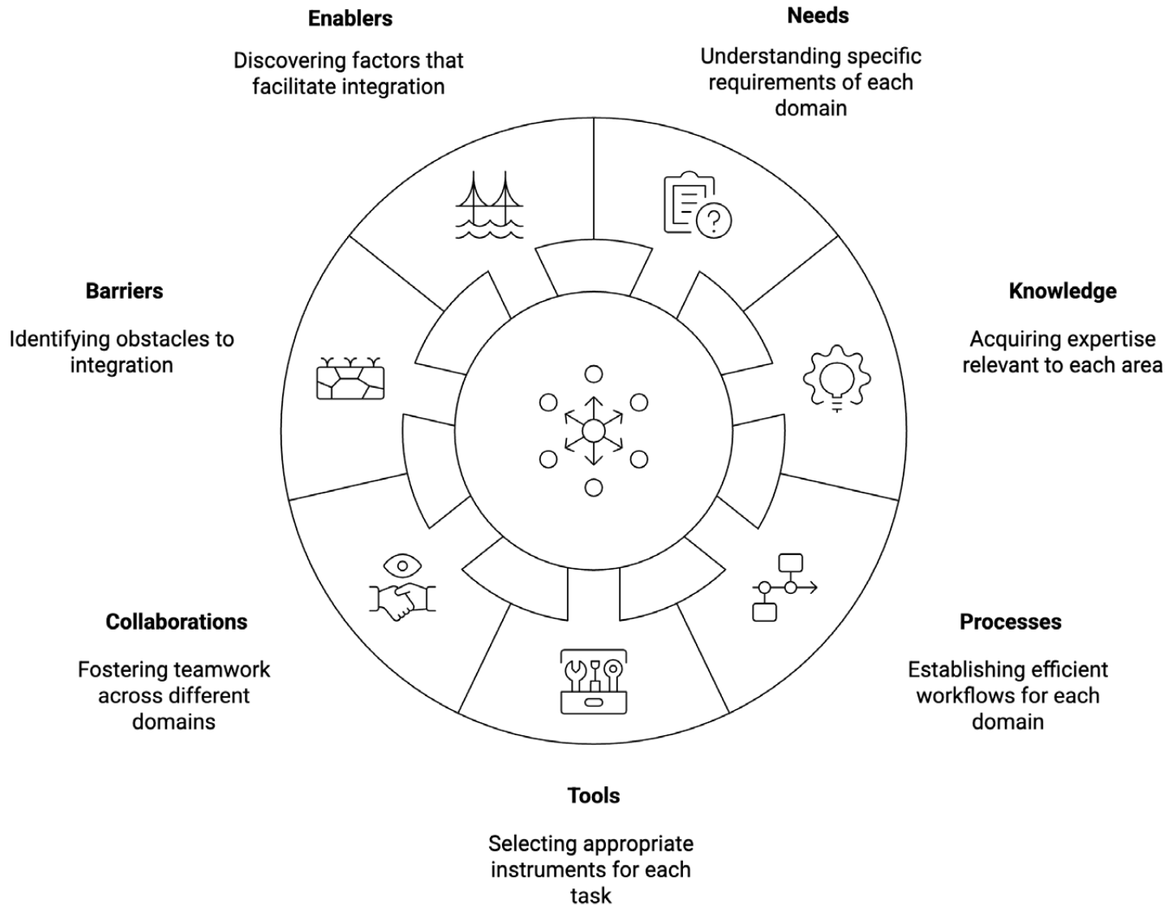
In social inclusion projects, the multi-domain nature is a crucial aspect to consider. Some domains enable or constrain processes, while others reveal expected or unexpected effects that are useful for monitoring progress and assessing impact.

Let's try to make an example: a simple element, such as a piece of furniture or a spatial setting, can facilitate higher-order processes like service organisation; yet, without enabling conditions at the organisational level, the object-based improvements risk remaining largely cosmetic.

The multi-level view of design domains can also be shared through dialogue with project partners, helping them to understand the complexity of the transformative process and the nature of the interventions involved. This knowledge enables teams to determine whether the issue at hand requires a product, service, or systemic design solution, ensuring that each domain is addressed with the **appropriate expertise and collaborative processes**.

This perspective is crucial in co-design as it allows practitioners to **adapt their strategies based on the needs of diverse groups and communities**, ensuring inclusive and effective solutions that address both individual and collective needs. For social inclusion, it is essential to recognise when challenges are specific and local (product design), when they extend into service delivery (service design), or when they involve broader systemic change (systemic design).

ATELIER's partners foster an approach to co-design that integrates these different design domains to ensure that complex social problems are addressed holistically, engaging various stakeholders in the process and offering opportunities for shared ownership and collaborative solutions.



Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Map the challenge across domains
Start by identifying whether the challenge requires an intervention at the level of product, service, organisation, or system. Map stakeholders' needs and try to understand which domain (or combination of scales) is most effective for action.

Looking at the problem from a different perspective
Sometimes a beneficiary, client, or partner may present a challenge or project question that seems to belong to a specific domain. However, when examined through a multi-domain lens, it may become clear that the underlying issue actually relates to other design domains or depends on constraints and conditions that lie elsewhere.

Explain your perspective
If you recognise that the domains actually involved differ from the one/s suggested by partners or clients, share your insight with them — but do not assume that everyone will be comfortable shifting domains right away.

Work in phases
If the challenge spans multiple domains, try structuring the intervention in steps. Begin with the easier aspects, then gradually move to tackling the more complex ones. This helps build the trust needed to face the most challenging domain — if your collaborators are willing to go there.

Observe changes at different levels
Use design domains to question how the project generates outcomes at varying levels of complexity and notice how results belonging to various domains jointly produce changes in the context and situation of interest.

Key points to consider

Recognise that many problems require a **multi-domain approach**. Encourage collaboration between individuals from various fields (product, service, and systems).

Ensure that the chosen design domain(s) **align with the long-term goals** of the project, whether it is creating a tangible product or influencing larger systemic changes.

Design domains are not hermetic to one another, and they can **overlap** and **coexist** within the same project.

Working in **Domains 3 and 4** takes **time, trust, and the ability to let go of control**. Still, they may be the key domains for an inclusion project, even if the entrance design question deals with communication, artefacts, or services.

A project's effectiveness isn't only in its outputs, but in the transformation it brings to systems and relationships. For this reason, the perspective of design domains — and the different levels it helps to explain — helps keep design sensitive to these **layers of transformation**.

Reflective questions for your practice

Which domain(s) *does my intervention primarily engage with? – Is the problem local (product design), contextual (service design), or systemic (systemic design)?*

How does ***my role shift*** *across the different domains (1 - 4)?*

How am I ***documenting*** *the process in order to reflect on its impact?*

Are there domains I'm ***overlooking*** *that could actually strengthen the intervention?*

What processes or actions *enable those I'm working with to shape the change actively?*

How do I ensure ***people are meaningfully involved*** *— and able to see where their contribution went — even when working in Domains 3 and 4?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Gardens of the Future

Project link

Catalogue page: 36



The Gardens of the Future project in Nicosia exemplifies a multidomain design approach. It begins with **Domain 1, as the community co-designs and constructs the physical garden**. It evolves into **Domain 2 by offering workshops** on sustainable farming and food production, generating value and skills. Through vocational training and entrepreneurial support for disadvantaged groups, it enters **Domain 3, reshaping local socio-economic structures**. Ultimately, the project impacts **Domain 4, advocating for public policies** that support urban agriculture and green spaces. It shows how co-design can activate multiple domains simultaneously, integrating artefacts, services, systems, and governance.

Heartwarming Food

Project link

Catalogue page: 200



The Heartwarming Food project also embodies a multidomain design approach. Starting with **Domain 2, shared cooking workshops** help create enjoyable, culturally relevant experiences. Yet the actual impact unfolds in **Domain 3, as the project builds strong support networks among elderly ethnic minorities, fostering peer leadership and social agency**. Its systemic engagement with municipal institutions to reduce cultural and informational barriers reveals a clear move into **Domain 4, aiming for policy influence**. The project shifts from food preparation to designing inclusive structures, promoting wellbeing, autonomy and dignity through collaborative, culturally sensitive processes.

Stories from ATELIER's partners

Mobile Library BookTruck

Project link

Catalogue page: 209

The Mobile Library BookTruck project shows a multidomain design trajectory. It begins with **Domain 2**, providing children in rural Romania with access to books, learning materials, and engaging workshops, all rooted in **service and experience design**. It enters **Domain 3 by strengthening school-community relations, empowering volunteers, and promoting new educational practices**. Finally, it reaches **Domain 4 by building alliances with public authorities, NGOs, and schools, advocating for inclusive literacy policies and cultural rights**. The project demonstrates how design can scale from service delivery to systemic social transformation by reshaping educational ecosystems.



A story from NUSTPB...

During a **master's course on *Design and Visual Impact*** (FIMM), we had in-depth discussions about how identifying the right design domain is essential for an effective and relevant process. **The course covered various domains** — from advertising and product design to fashion design and service design — **which helped us understand how each requires different approaches, processes, and collaborations**.

Through examples and practical exercises, we learned that choosing the wrong domain can lead to solutions that do not truly address the beneficiaries' needs or fail to create the desired impact. This experience was a valuable opportunity to realise how important it is to always ask ourselves: **"At what level of complexity are we working, and how do we adapt our methods to include all relevant stakeholders?"**.

Understanding and managing the design domains helped students to position themselves better within the process and contribute more consciously to the social impact and inclusion goals we aim to achieve through design.

A story from POLITO…

Our research group was invited to engage with this context and **support the staff of the North-West Inclusion Hub in defining the necessary interventions to establish a shared identity** — at the time still lacking — and to **orient the flows of people and activities within the space**. We structured the entire project, named **"Open P.I.N.O."** (where "P.I.N.O." stands for *Polo di Inclusione Nord-Ovest*), following a co-design approach grounded in the active involvement of the service staff and its coordinators.

This case is particularly relevant for illustrating the competency of navigating across different *design domains*. The **initial request** we received was essentially about signage for the visitors of the hub — an intervention clearly situated within **Domain 1** of the framework from Jones and Van Patter. However, through extensive participatory work with public service staff and coordinators, **it became clear that the real challenge lay in Domain 3** — organisational transformation. The issue at stake was not just "how to find the right room," but how to foster a shared identity among a multidisciplinary team and encourage collaboration to develop more integrated and effective pathways of care and support for citizens.

Moreover, the experimental nature of the interventions — in terms of both replicability and scalability — led us to treat the hub as a living lab. We prototyped the product-service system on site and designated the space as a "laboratory-place" where representatives from other service districts for social inclusion in the city could directly experience the developed solutions and reflect, starting from this concrete case, on how to adapt the project to their own contexts. This process supported further development and iteration of the intervention within a broader, city-wide perspective, moving toward Domain 4: social and systemic transformation.

A second story from POLITO…

Benches and Welfare Systems could be the title of the project developed by our research group for *Opera Barolo*, a local philanthropic organisation, as this phrase encapsulates a design process in which outputs across different design domains — systems, services, and products — were intentionally interlinked in a cumulative and evolving sequence. In this experience, each phase of the project built upon the previous one, creating a chain of design actions that progressively revealed deeper needs and generated increasingly situated responses.

The project began with a seemingly simple brief: to strengthen collaboration among the 13 social organisations housed in the *Distretto Sociale Barolo*, a complex of buildings and courtyards in central Turin. Through participatory and iterative design practices, however, the process unfolded into a multi-layered exploration.

The systemic domain was first addressed through workshops and mapping exercises involving all stakeholders, which revealed how spatial fragmentation mirrored organisational disconnection. A strong desire emerged to operate as a cohesive ecosystem.

The project then moved into the service design domain through a residential workshop with design students, resulting in a proposal to furnish the courtyards to encourage everyday interactions and foster collaboration.

Finally, **the product design phase** was tackled through the *BAC – Best Architecture Competition*, **which led to the co-construction of the winning outdoor furniture project in a hands-on building workshop with students, designers, and service users.**

Participatory techniques made it possible to surface unspoken needs and enabled the design brief to evolve. Each phase enriched the next, demonstrating how **even modest, tangible interventions can drive wider systemic and relational transformations** when designed as part of a strategic, cross-domain sequence.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency 1 – *Social impact culture and mindset*
Reflection on design domains helps understanding how social impact can be pursued through different types of intervention. Also, this competency shares links with Theory of Change, as a key contribution from Competency 1.

Competency n° 6 – *nclusion and accessibility Principles*
Understanding design domains supports the application of inclusive practices across various design levels, from product to system design.

Competency n° 10 – *Navigating wicked problems and complexity*
As discussed in Competency 10, wicked problems may require interventions crossing different levels of complexity, thus different design domains.

Competency n° 20 – *- Co-design and its nuances*
Knowledge of design domains helps map the appropriate scale and approach for co-creation, ensuring collaboration is efficient and relevant to the issue's complexity.

Competency n° 22 – *Multi-level collaboration management*
Since projects may integrate different design domains, such an integration may require collaborations between actors at various levels.

Area of Competence 7:

Design process

18 PROJECT DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); Maria Koimisoglou, Theodoros Tsanakas (AKADIMOS KDVM EPE); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

From a co-design and social impact perspective, project phases are strengthened when organised in an iterative, cyclical path that integrates research, project framing, implementation, feedback collection, new research, and refinement.
Such an iterative design approach is particularly valuable for addressing wicked problems, such as social inclusion, as it allows project phases to acquire specific attributes and be adapted as needs evolve, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of the intervention.

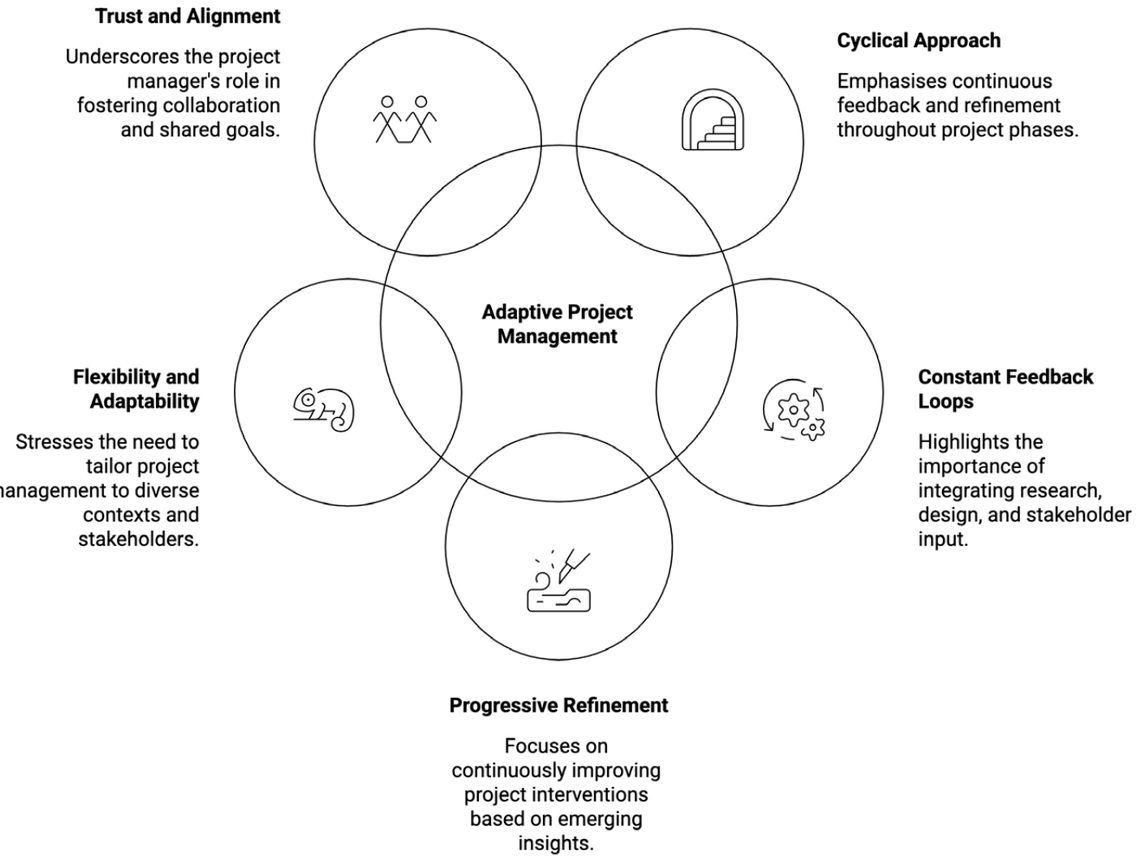
Definitions and Discussion

The management of transformative projects tackling complex and dynamic problems, such as social inclusion, requires an **adaptable and cyclical approach** to satisfy the needs and data emerging throughout the process (see *Competency n° 9, "problem-framing drivers through field and desk research"*). The project phases, although structured, should allow for **constant feedback loops** where insights from research, design initiatives, and stakeholder inputs shape each other continuously, enabling a **progressive refinement of the envisaged interventions**.

This iterative nature of the design process is what makes it particularly suitable for co-designing and addressing the challenges of social impact. Indeed, **a flexible and adaptable method of project management is needed to face the heterogeneity of the issues we cope with, the actors we encounter, and the contexts in which we operate**. When developing projects for social inclusion, these initiatives can differ significantly from one another in terms of these aspects. It follows that it is essential to **adapt project management to the beneficiaries, stakeholders, and contextual conditions**, and to make the **project cycle streamlined, easy to manage, widely shareable** with our co-design partners, and fit for a range of very different domains and courses of action.

However, this need for flexibility emerges within an increasingly complex and constrained operational environment. The **role of project manager then extends beyond operational efficiency** to include cultivating trust, aligning diverse interests, and maintaining a focus on shared goals and social impact.

Within this framework, this competency emphasises the importance of a cyclical approach that is both reflective and transformative, and therefore open, throughout its phases, to being inclusive and participatory. Such a cyclical and flexible approach ensures that **insights are continuously collected and integrated, leading to more adaptable, inclusive, and impactful solutions**.



Made with Napkin

An adaptive and cyclical path

Let us now take a quick look at the main phases of the project design cycle. We will present them in sequence, but it may be helpful to keep two things in mind:

In co-design, the idea is to work with **iterative cycles** — that is, phases that repeat themselves, whether in smaller parts of the process, in portions of the cycle, or across the whole cycle. This iterative nature means that the phases are revisited until the solution takes shape in a way that feels valid, effective, and truly responsive to the initial needs and to the way the problem has been framed.
At the same time, it is the project cycle itself — with its rhythm, iterations, and adjustments — that should **adapt to the context and its needs**, not the other way around. This means any suggested sequence should be regarded as a reference to reflect upon and adjust, rather than a fixed dynamic to be followed rigidly. Adaptation should always be made in relation to the specific problem, the community, and the environment you are working with, to make the best use of their resources and to carefully address aspects that may require greater sensitivity.

STAGE 1 – Scenario Design

The cycle that project development can follow to respond to the concerns just presented starts with a stage of **scenario design**, which is characterised by an extended timeframe and heightened intensity. Here, **stakeholder and beneficiary analysis** — including both direct and indirect ones — and the identification of **available resources** (human, financial, material, and technological) are interwoven with an understanding of the **project demand and problem-framing** (see Competency 9 - *problem-framing drivers through field and desk research*). This occurs through **diverse forms of engagement**: direct and indirect, structured and open, maieutic and spontaneous, all guided by the principle of co-creation and co-design (see *Competency n° 20 - Co-creation and co-design nuances and derivatives*). By doing so, the participatory vocation inherent in the process is more likely to be guaranteed and performed. **Proximity to people** in this phase fosters recognition and initiates a redistribution of roles and power that typically accompany formal project engagements. Scenario design research thus becomes the first and most essential moment of stakeholder engagement. It plays a **pivotal role in ensuring a collective and inclusive approach throughout the subsequent design phases** (*see also Competency 17 - Understanding design domains knowledge and management)*, facilitating the discussions and, eventually, the agreement on the project outcomes by all stakeholders.

STAGE 2 – Meta-project

The next phase focuses on preliminary design activities in which needs are translated into **requirements** and sets of **expected outcomes** (see Competency 1 - *Social impact culture and mindset*). According to these, potential design directions are imagined and articulated into multiple "low-definition" scenarios. This stage can also involve beneficiaries and, again, take the form of co-creation (see *Competency n° 20 - Co-creation and co-design nuances and derivatives)*. Indeed, collective discussions should take place around these scenarios in a generative manner, helping clarify the context or demand and fostering alignment between stakeholders and beneficiaries regarding the overall intervention. As a result, **ideas are consolidated into more concrete, rich, and targeted scenarios**.

STAGE 3 – Concept generation

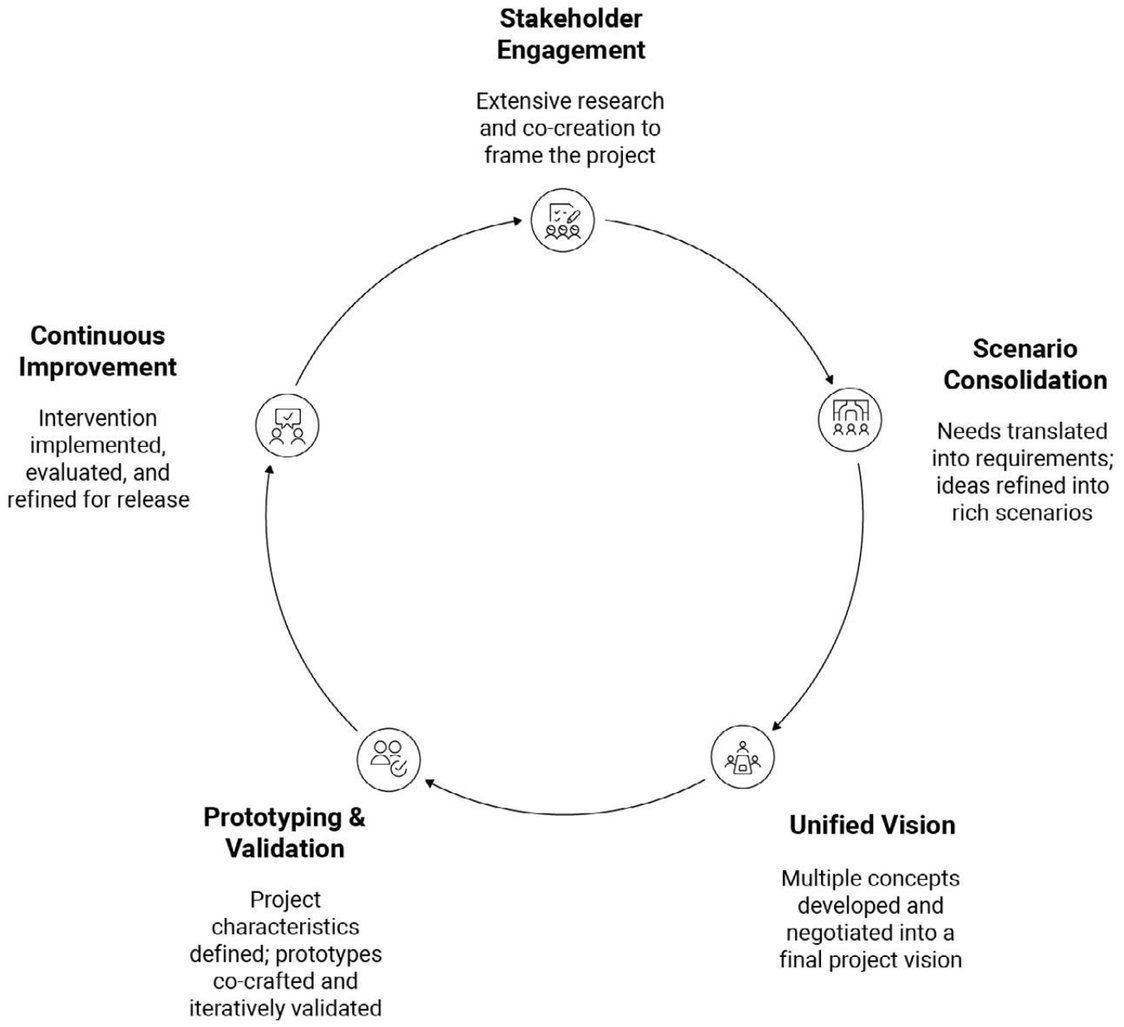
At this point, scenarios evolve into **multiple concepts** that are not mutually exclusive alternatives, but rather varied interpretations of the same design rationale. All are coherent yet unique, driven by specific strategies, differing in content and offering various perspectives on prevention, treatment, and mitigation of the problem, according to both an incremental and a radical innovation approach. For scenario generation, presenting multiple concepts helps facilitate dialogue with stakeholders, especially when they hold differing views. **Often, the final concept emerges from this discussion and negotiation, allowing for the integration of multiple perspectives into a unified, participatory project vision**.

STAGE 4 – Design and experimentation

The design phase follows, **defining all the project's characteristics**. Mock-ups, prototypes, and experimental artefacts can be used, developed through co-crafting (for product and communication projects) or co-production (for service and system projects), and monitored in real-time, **iteratively validating the design to ensure its appropriateness and effectiveness**.

STAGE 5 – Implementation and evaluation

The implementation phase is participatory and **values the practical contribution of every actor**, including beneficiaries. The **intervention is implemented through experiments that are more demanding and concrete than the previous ones**, and its duration can vary depending on the situation. At this stage, the project undergoes **continuous evaluation** to verify whether the output — process, product, or service — effectively responds to the needs of beneficiaries and other stakeholders. It also checks if the design is **consistent with the concept**, aligned with the **project brief and problem-framing**, and therefore ready for **release**.



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Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Create **phases** for research, systematisation, ideation, and testing, but remain open to revisiting and **adapting** earlier phases as new insights emerge.

Constantly **evaluate the progress and outcomes** of each phase and be willing to pivot or adjust based on feedback and findings.

Ensure **stakeholders** are **involved in feedback loops** at every stage, from research and meta-design to implementation.

Rapid prototyping and **iterative design methods** allow you to test, receive feedback, and refine solutions in real time.

Establish clear **milestones** to help track progress and keep the team aligned, but also define how and when those milestones can be revised if circumstances change.

Key points to consider

While we often establish direct contact with the beneficiaries of our initiatives, we sometimes must engage with more closed or “silent” contexts. Here, participant **observation** and **field experiences** (see Competency 9) provide insights that might otherwise go unnoticed and omitted from the project. This approach helps us better understand the context, distinguish between genuine intent and wishful thinking in change efforts, and reach the primary beneficiaries whose needs are often filtered — or oversimplified — by intermediate actors in management and delivery roles.

Consider that funding bodies and institutions may expect linear progress, so prepare ways to **explain the value of an adaptive approach**.

Reflective questions for your practice

*Am I keeping **project steps and milestones** sufficiently **flexible** and open to change and contingencies?*

*Am I noticing signs of **declining engagement**, and if so, what might this indicate about the alignment between my program and participants’ needs?*

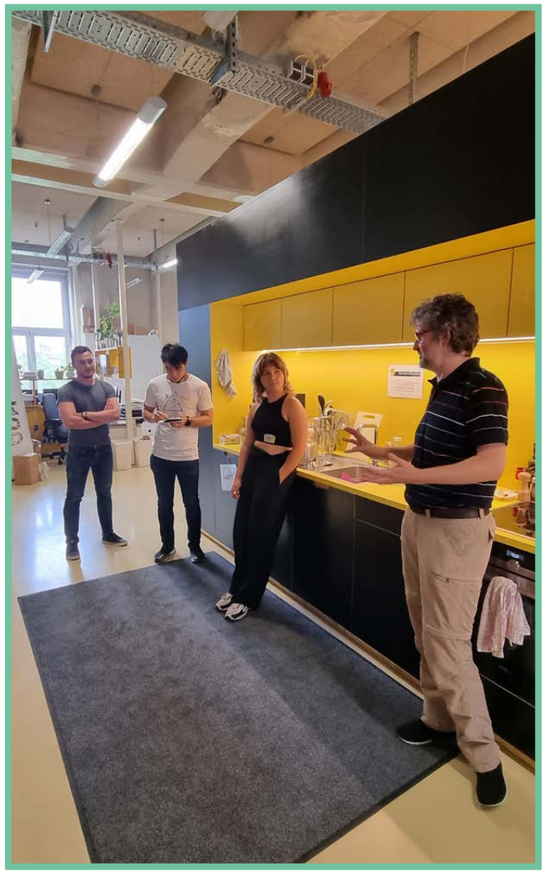
*Have I created sufficient **opportunities for participants to apply concepts to their specific contexts**?*

Cases from ATELIER’s Catalogue

Energie-Hilfe

Catalogue page: 134

Energie-Hilfe applies a design thinking approach to support low-income households in managing energy needs. The project is structured into **iterative phases, beginning with interviews and target group analysis, followed by the development and refinement of services**. Feedback from volunteers and households is regularly collected and used to improve tools and processes. **Personas, user journeys, and business model canvases** are created and adjusted as the project evolves. This **dynamic loop of testing, learning and redesign** makes Energie-Hilfe a clear example of cyclical project management for social impact.

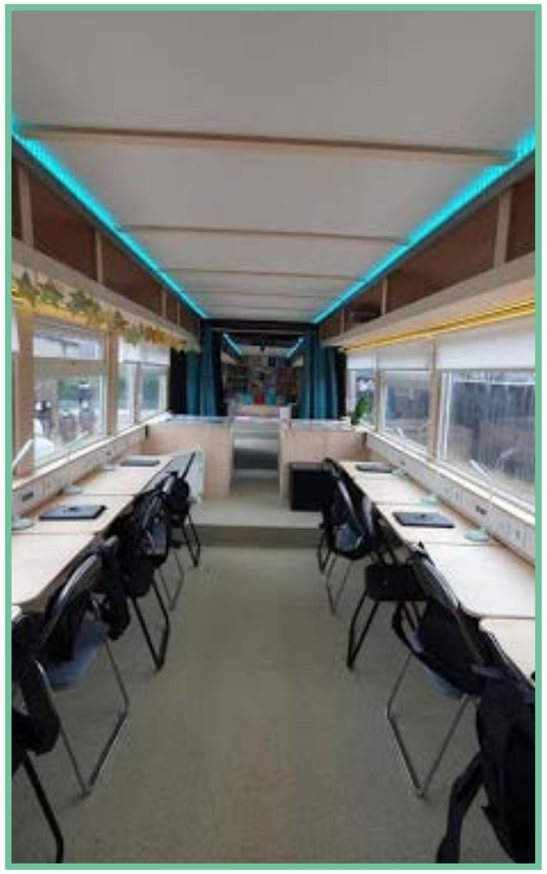


Think Outside the Bus

Project link

Catalogue page: 165

This mobile education project engages young people in rural areas through a **cycle of co-designed workshops, prototyping, testing, and refinement**. **Project phases are clearly structured and participatory**: the development phase includes context analysis with youth input; implementation involves hands-on activities using the “Game Room” platform; evaluation is carried out with direct feedback from participants. Their **insights inform adjustments to content and tools, reinforcing a flexible, user-centred process**. The project exemplifies how managing development as an evolving cycle supports social inclusion and community empowerment.



Stories from ATELIER’s partners

A story from NUSTPB…

In one of our applied student projects, we explored a case which focuses on **developing intelligent systems for neuro-controlled prosthetics**. Our aim was to understand how such complex innovation processes unfold and how existing methodologies could be adapted in lower-cost educational contexts.

The student worked on designing accessible, modular assistive tools for individuals with paraplegia. He **began with a structured, linear plan — starting from case study analysis and system mapping, then moving to ideation and prototyping**.

User feedback and professional input revealed critical usability issues and contextual challenges were also considered. As a result, the student had to **return to earlier phases, adapt the research focus, and revise the design direction** — mirroring the cyclical, feedback-driven development seen in other known models. Therefore, it refined the prototypes, simplified interaction pathways, and virtually co-validated the solution.

This experience taught him that managing project development in complex contexts isn't just about following a plan, but about adapting continuously.

[*Harmon, F. A., & Brăileanu, P. I. (2021, July). Rapid Prototyping of a Lower-Body Exoskeleton for Paraplegia Patients. In International Conference on Reliable Systems Engineering (pp. 107-118). Cham: Springer International Publishing.*]

A story from AKADIMOS...

In 2019 we first developed what we believed was a complete **Sales and Marketing educational program** with carefully structured modules and predefined outcomes. When enrollment reached capacity, we initially saw this as a validation of our approach. However, despite consistent attendance, engagement declined as sessions progressed. Participants completed required tasks but struggled to connect standardised content with their diverse business contexts.

During a mid-program feedback session, we discovered a significant gap between our standardised curriculum and the varied needs of participants from different business sectors. This insight prompted us to completely reimagine our approach.

We introduced what we now call our **"learning spiral" methodology**, treating each training component as a prototype to be tested and refined based on participants' actual businesses. Weekly sessions turned into collaborative workshops where marketing concepts were applied to real challenges.

We shifted our documentation focus from completion metrics to learning portfolios, with participants building personalised collections of strategies tailored to their specific contexts. **This meant abandoning some planned modules while expanding others based on emerging needs.**

The project ultimately delivered fewer formal "deliverables" than outlined in our initial project plan, but post-program evaluation revealed significantly higher impact. Follow-up assessments showed measurable business improvements compared to previous cohorts who completed our traditional program.

This experience fundamentally changed our approach to managing project development. **We learned that effective design requires balancing structure with adaptability, treating project phases as evolving cycles rather than fixed sequences.** Now we build deliberate feedback loops into all our programs, creating space for continuous refinement based on participant experiences.

By embracing this iterative process, where research, systematisation, and operational translation continuously inform each other, we have found that **project management becomes less about controlling predetermined outcomes and more about facilitating meaningful learning and adaptation that better serves diverse participant needs**.

A second story from OLAE...

Managing project development taught us that **creating real social impact isn't about rigidly following a fixed plan but rather about embracing change as a constant**. Early on, we approached one of our social inclusion projects with a detailed roadmap, expecting to move linearly from research to design, then implementation. However, the realities on the ground quickly challenged our assumptions. Community needs shifted as new voices joined the conversation, and unexpected obstacles – like limited resources and local political dynamics – required us to rethink our approach.

By staying open to feedback loops and adaptation, we kept the project aligned with real needs rather than predetermined goals. **This ongoing flexibility often means negotiating tensions—between funders' expectations for concrete deliverables and the messy, evolving nature of social inclusion work.** Managing project development became less about ticking boxes and more about **cultivating trust, building partnerships, and co-creating with communities**.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 3 – *Project management lexicon and sensitivity*
Managing project development relies on shared terminology and tools. Knowing key project management terms and how they apply in social inclusion and co-design contexts ensures clarity, coordination, and effective communication.

Competency n° 10 – *Navigating wicked problems and complexity*
Managing development requires navigating complex, evolving challenges typical of wicked problems.

Competency n° 20 – *Co-design and its nuances*
Managing project development requires adapting co-design methods to different contexts and stages, helping choose the right level and type of collaboration for each phase.

Competency n° 22 – *Multi-level collaboration management*
Managing project development requires coordinating actions across scales, aligning local, regional, and systemic efforts, and defining roles and governance at each level to achieve impactful social change.

Competency n° 25 – *Feedback and replanning in participation*
Project development depends on continuous feedback and the ability to adapt plans accordingly.

Area of Competence 7:
Design process

19 LATERAL THINKING FOR IDEATION

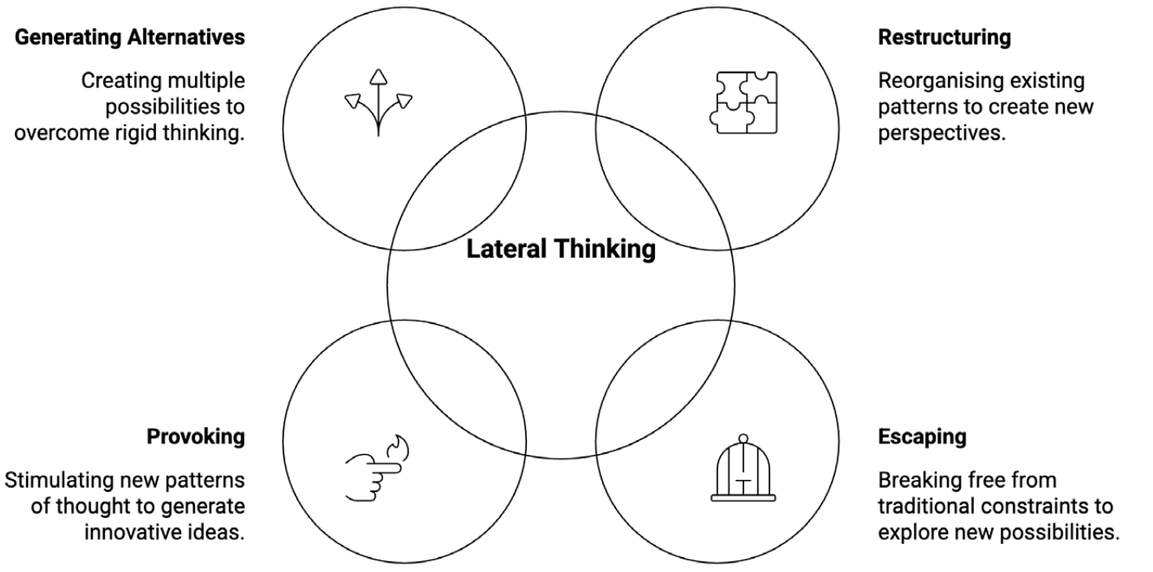
Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); Agnieszka Zarzyńska (Caritas Europa); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

This competency explores creative methods and tools for generating ideas and concepts, ranging from simple, actionable tips to more structured techniques. It highlights the importance of fostering lateral thinking to approach problems from new perspectives and unlock innovative solutions. The focus is on equipping teams with adaptable ideation strategies that align with partners skills, languages and contributions' types.

Definitions and Discussion

Ideation is the process of generating, developing, and communicating new ideas. It is an essential part of the creative and problem-solving processes, particularly in co-design initiatives. Lateral thinking, a concept introduced by Edward de Bono [1], involves **looking at a problem from a fresh angle, allowing individuals to move beyond traditional solutions and explore unexpected possibilities.** It can then be defined as a mindset that resists polarisation and prevents problems born of mental rigidity. It is an insight tool distinguished from creativity and humour, for it is a deliberate process that can be learned.



[1] de Bono, E. (1990). *Lateral Thinking. A Textbook of Creativity*. Penguin Books.

From ideas to collaborative, inclusive solutions

Lateral thinking involves **restructuring, escaping and provoking new patterns** to generate new ideas helpful in finding a solution or a perspective to tackle a problem. Such restructuring and change are the key to overcoming the limits in traditional — "vertical" — thinking, which tends to rely on fixed patterns, refining and validating them. Lateral thinking, conversely, challenges and reshapes existing patterns, providing a **generative approach that is complementary to the selective one offered by vertical thinking.** While vertical thinking moves only within a direction and is sequential, lateral thinking moves to generate a direction and can make jumps. Where vertical thinking advances step by step, each linked to the last, lateral thinking can leap to a new point and connect the steps afterwards.

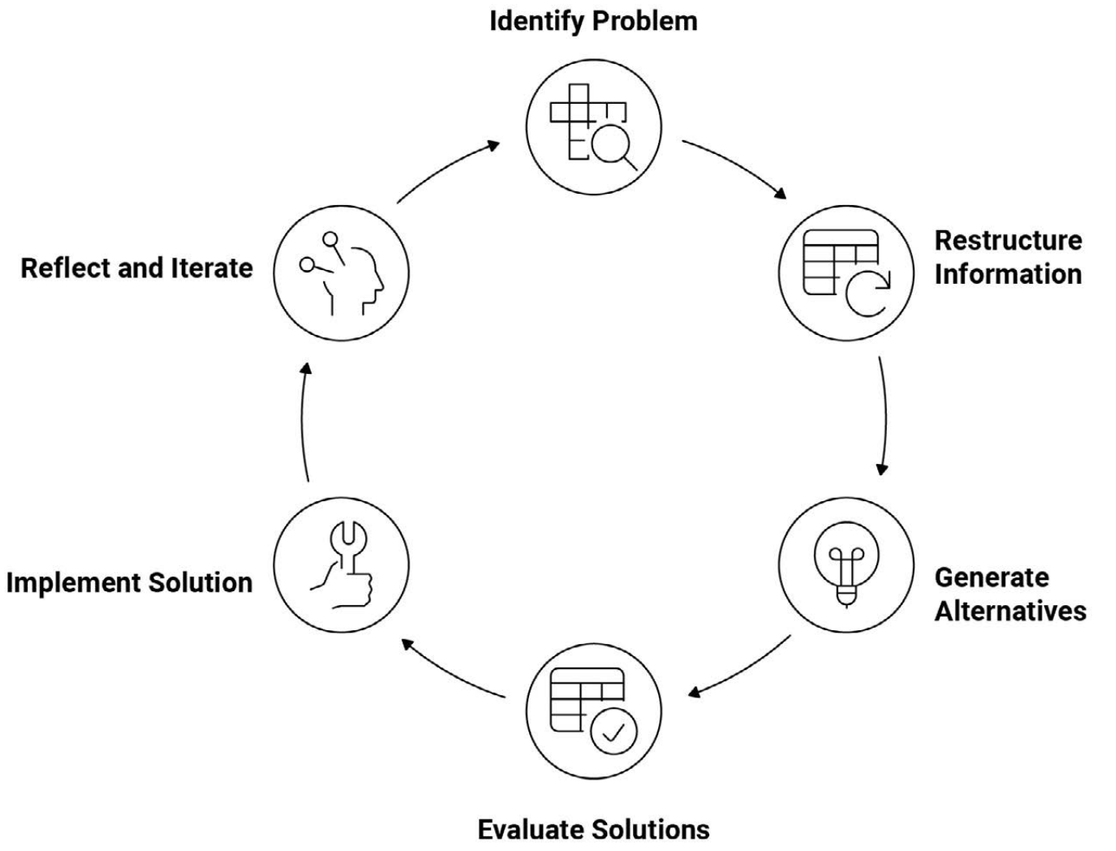
Indeed, **the key principle of lateral thinking is the generation of alternatives**: the aim is not to find the best approach straight away, but to keep creating possibilities in order to break rigid patterns of thought, uncover hidden assumptions, and explore multiple perspectives. This challenges the authority of assumptions and *clichés* without rejecting their usefulness.

Lateral thinking encourages **flexibility, variation, and the exploration of alternatives**. Once internalised, lateral thinking blends naturally with vertical thinking, so that both modes can be used jointly. Still, lateral thinking may be more constructive in some situations, especially when fresh ideas are required or when the problem to be faced cannot be solved through conventional approaches, such as complex problems. More specifically, lateral thinking is needed to address problems requiring shifts in perspective and the ability to see beyond what appears sufficient. Those kinds of problems do not require the search for more information but rather a restructuring of existing information. Sometimes, it is necessary to recognise that no problem is visible because current arrangements seem adequate, but actually block access to better solutions.

Lateral thinking entails a variety of techniques, some of which are addressed by the current competency (see the dedicated ***Focus*** section). Practising lateral thinking requires **periodic reassessment of long-held assumptions**, even when no immediate need arises, to refresh perspectives. By balancing the stability of patterns with the flexibility of restructuring them creatively, lateral thinking opens pathways to innovation, problem-solving, and **more adaptive approaches to complex challenges**.

Since co-design involves multiple stakeholders with varying perspectives and experiences, it can benefit from lateral thinking. The premises presented above suggest the possibility of using lateral thinking to ensure that all voices are heard, and the **diversity of perspectives** is harnessed to develop solutions that are relevant and effective. The **iterative nature** of lateral thinking techniques fits well with the co-design ethos of continuous feedback and collaboration.

By **integrating different ideation methods**, this competency – together with the others presented – fosters a **culture of creativity that helps break down barriers and generate inclusive solutions** that address the root causes of exclusion. Also, such an approach can **help participants step outside of their usual modes of thinking**, encouraging more creative, inclusive, and innovative solutions to social problems.



Focus

Below, you can find several techniques of lateral thinking for ideation that are participative:

RANDOM WORD ASSOCIATION

How to use it: Select random words from dictionaries, magazines, or word generators. Connect these arbitrary words to your challenge by asking "How is this word like our problem?" or "What if our solution had to incorporate this word?" Generate multiple connections before judging feasibility.

What it is used for: Breaking mental blocks, finding unexpected solution angles, generating fresh metaphors for familiar problems, stimulating creative thinking when groups are stuck in conventional approaches.

WHAT IF SCENARIOS

How to use it: Create hypothetical scenarios that challenge normal constraints. Start with "What if..." followed by impossible, extreme, or altered conditions. Explore how solutions might work in these imaginary contexts, then adapt insights back to reality.

What it is used for: Challenging assumptions about limitations, exploring radical possibilities, preparing for unexpected circumstances, inspiring innovative approaches by temporarily removing real-world constraints.

REVERSE BRAINSTORMING

How to use it: Instead of asking "How do we solve this?" ask "How could we make this problem worse?" or "How could we guarantee failure?" Generate many ways to create the opposite of what you want, then reverse those ideas to find positive solutions.

What it is used for: Identifying hidden obstacles, uncovering assumptions about what won't work, approaching sensitive problems indirectly, generating ideas when positive brainstorming feels blocked or overwhelming.

ASSUMPTION REVERSAL

How to use it: List all assumptions about your problem, target users, available resources, and required solutions. Take each assumption and write its complete opposite. Explore what solutions would be possible if these reversals were true.

What it is used for: Uncovering hidden biases in problem definition, discovering unconventional solution paths, questioning "the way things are always done," revealing new opportunities by challenging fundamental beliefs.

Focus

SIX THINKING HATS

How to use it: Systematically explore ideas through six different perspectives: White (facts/information), Red (emotions/feelings), Black (caution/criticism), Yellow (optimism/benefits), Green (creativity/alternatives), Blue (process/control). Spend focused time in each "hat" mode.

What it is used for: Comprehensive idea evaluation, managing group dynamics in creative sessions, ensuring all aspects of ideas are considered, and helping people step outside their natural thinking preferences.

ROLE STORMING

How to use it: Have participants adopt the personas of specific people (celebrities, historical figures, professionals, community members) and generate ideas from those perspectives. Fully embody the role and ask "How would [person] approach this problem?

What it is used for: Breaking out of personal thinking patterns, accessing different expertise perspectives, understanding diverse user viewpoints, adding playfulness to serious problem-solving sessions.

TIME TRAVEL BRAINSTORMING

How to use it: Imagine how people from different time periods would solve your current problem. Consider medieval villagers, 1950s housewives, future space colonists, or ancient philosophers. What resources, values, and methods would they bring?

What it is used for: Accessing different values and priorities, finding low-tech or high-tech solution alternatives, understanding how context shapes problem-solving approaches, and inspiring creative resource use.

SCALE SHIFTING

How to use it: Imagine your problem or solution at dramatically different scales - microscopic, gigantic, or applied to varying numbers of people. How would you solve this for one person versus one million? What if it was tiny versus massive?

What it is used for: Finding scalable solutions, understanding core versus peripheral elements of problems, discovering minimum viable approaches, exploring network effects and system-level thinking.

METAPHOR MAPPING

How to use it: Compare your challenge to completely different domains (cooking, gardening, sports, animals, weather). Create detailed parallels and ask what solutions work in those domains. Map the metaphor thoroughly before translating back.

What it is used for: Accessing solution knowledge from other fields, making abstract problems concrete, communicating complex ideas simply, and finding natural patterns that apply to human challenges.

FORCED RELATIONSHIPS

How to use it: Take two completely unrelated concepts, objects, or ideas and force connections between them. Ask "What do these have in common?" "How could these work together?" Generate multiple combinations before evaluating practicality.

What it is used for: Creating hybrid solutions, inspiring innovative combinations, breaking linear thinking patterns, and discovering unexpected synergies between different approaches or resources.

ANALOGY THINKING

How to use it: Study how other systems (natural, technological, social) handle similar challenges. Look at how ant colonies organise, how immune systems respond to threats, or how successful organisations manage growth. Adapt these patterns to your context.

What it is used for: Learning from proven systems, finding time-tested solution patterns, inspiring biomimicry approaches, and understanding universal principles that apply across domains.

CROSS-POLLINATION

How to use it: Systematically study solutions from different industries, cultures, or fields that face analogous challenges. Research how they approach problems, then adapt their methods to your specific context and constraints.

What it is used for: Importing successful innovations, avoiding reinventing solutions, learning from diverse problem-solving cultures, and finding proven approaches from unexpected sources.

RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

How to use it: Artificially limit available resources (budget, time, materials, people) to force creative problem-solving. Ask "How would we solve this with only $10?" or "What if we had to complete this in one day?"

What it is used for: Forcing focus on essential elements, inspiring resourceful solutions, preparing for real-world limitations, and discovering minimum viable approaches that can be scaled up later.

Focus

WORST POSSIBLE IDEA

How to use it: Deliberately generate the worst, most inappropriate, or most ridiculous solutions you can imagine. Make them as terrible as possible, then examine what makes them bad and explore if any elements could be flipped into good solutions.

What it is used for: Breaking perfectionism blocks, reducing pressure in creative sessions, discovering hidden insights about what not to do, freeing people to take creative risks by starting with "safe" failure.

IDEA MULTIPLICATION

How to use it: Take one basic idea and generate 20+ variations by changing different aspects: target users, implementation methods, contexts, scales, timelines, or resources. Push beyond obvious variations to explore wild adaptations.

What it is used for: Fully exploring solution potential, finding implementation approaches that fit different contexts, understanding core versus variable elements of ideas, and developing flexible solutions.

ALTERNATIVE USES

How to use it: Take existing solutions, tools, or resources and brainstorm completely different applications. Ask "What else could this be used for?" Focus on uses that are totally unrelated to the original purpose.

What it is used for: What it's used for: Maximising resource efficiency, finding creative applications for available assets, discovering unexpected solution tools, and developing innovative approaches using familiar elements.

SCAMPER
(Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify, Put to other use, Eliminate, Reverse)

How to use it: Take an existing idea and push it systematically through each of the seven prompts—e.g., what if we combined this with another service? or what if we eliminated a step?

What it is used for: Stretching and multiplying existing ideas, making sure teams don't settle too soon. Scenario-building broadens perspective, surfacing hidden risks and opportunities by forcing participants to think across different contexts.

Sources:

- de Bono, E. (1990). *Lateral Thinking. A Textbook of Creativity*. Penguin Books.
- https://www.sessionlab.com/
- https://thinkjarcollective.com/

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Create diverse groups **mixing** different ages, backgrounds, disciplines, and lived experiences. **Rotate participants** across small groups or stations so ideas cross-pollinate, using “idea ambassadors” or “speed dating” to move concepts around.

Dominant voices can shrink creativity: use **turn-taking** and **small groups** to balance airtime.

Create **space for divergent thinking** before deciding anything: run short, high-energy rounds of brainstorming or mind-mapping with no judgement.

Ensure **psychological safety**: set “yes-and” rules, celebrate bold and unusual proposals, and separate divergence (generate) from convergence (select).

Capture ideas through **visible recording** (sticky notes, drawings, shared boards, mind maps). Cluster and label themes quickly so nothing gets lost.

Close with **immediate sharing**, followed by selection (dot-voting + criteria such as inclusion, feasibility, and impact), and outline next tests for top ideas.

Key points to consider

Some participants may need explicit **encouragement** to think "outside the box" or may feel intimidated by creativity. Provide reassurance.

Ensure that **different types of intelligence and creativity are valued equally**. Consider that not everyone processes creativity in the same way (visual, verbal, kinesthetic). Moreover, be mindful that some cultures may emphasise collective harmony over individual wild ideas.

"Wild" ideas often signal unmet needs: **translate intent before discarding**. At the same time, notice that ideas that seem "small" may have profound local impact.

Accessibility matters: allow multiple ways to contribute (writing, drawing, speaking), support different processing styles (visual, verbal, kinesthetic), and offer quiet time when needed. Be mindful of cultural factors: some groups value collective harmony over individual expression.

Jargon excludes: paraphrase in plain language and use visuals. Credit people fairly, recording who contributed and how.

Energy management is key: use short sprints, clear breaks, and adjust when methods feel forced. Beware of premature feasibility checks; keep critique for convergence. Anticipate that lateral thinking sessions may feel messy: normalise this as part of the process.

Know when to abandon a method that isn't clicking with a particular group.

Reflective questions for your practice

*Am I **clarifying the meaning and goal of divergence**, so that people feel aware and free to explore?*

*Have I brought in **diverse voices**, including those most affected by the problem?*

*Are the methods **accessible** to different abilities, languages, and comfort levels?*

*Were **different types of creativity** represented equally, or did I favour some styles?*

*How did **local knowledge and experience** enhance the creative process? Which ideas emerged from community-specific insights outsiders might miss?*

*Was there a **balance** between honouring existing solutions and generating new possibilities?*

*Whose ideas received **attention** and whose were overlooked — and why?*

*Are the concepts inclusive, realistic within community resources, and easy to **prototype next**?*

*Did everyone see their **contributions captured and credited**?*

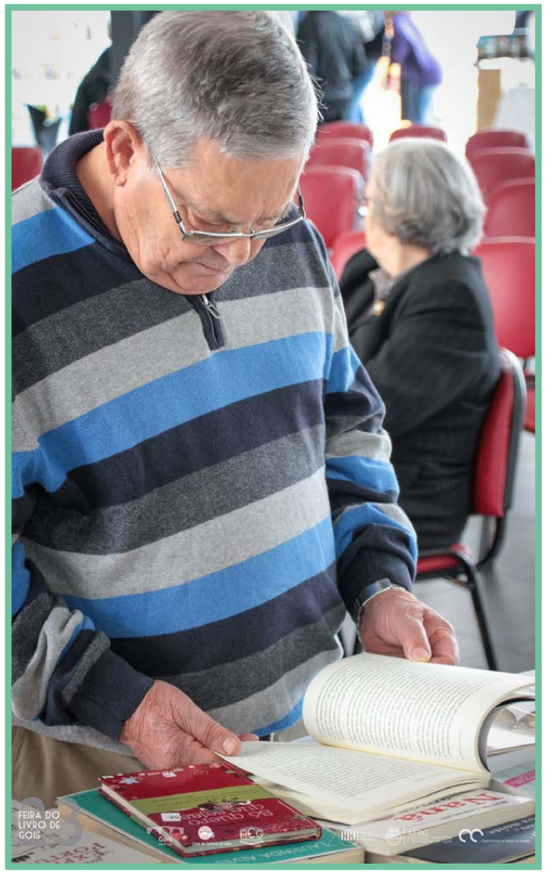
*How do the solutions connect to **community strengths**, and can they be owned and adapted independently?*

*What will I do differently in the next ideation to **improve equity and outcomes**?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Pharaon: Pilots for Healthy and Active Ageing

Catalogue page: 222

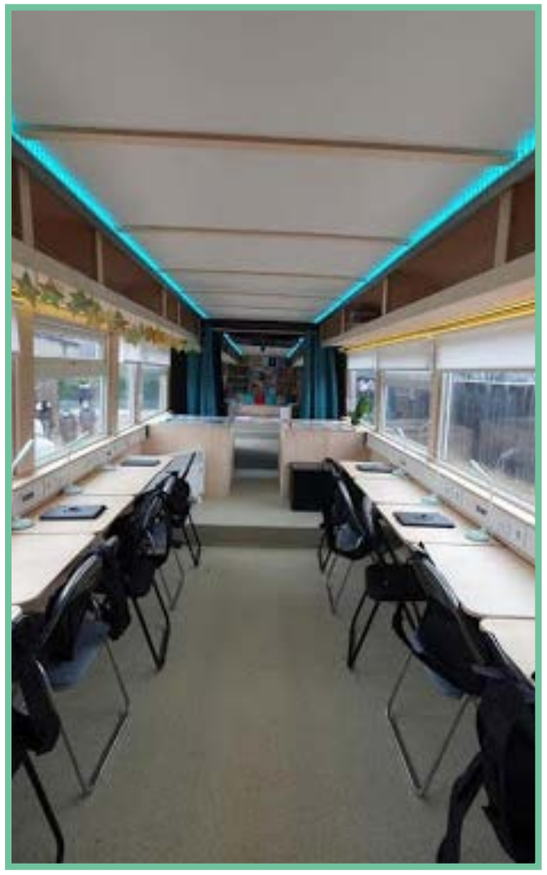


The Pharaon project aims to improve the lives of older adults by integrating digital tools, community participation, and age-friendly environments across Europe. It is a clear example of lateral thinking as **it combines digital tools, community engagement, and integrated care in unexpected ways to address the complex challenge of ageing**. Rather than focusing only on healthcare or technology, it rethinks assumptions by linking social inclusion, environmental awareness, and digital innovation. Through solutions like social networks, geo-referenced apps, and smart sensors, **it creates new patterns of interaction and support, empowering older adults while strengthening community cohesion and policy innovation**.

Think Outside the Bus

Project link

Catalogue page: 165



The EduBuzz project tackles educational inequalities in rural and disadvantaged communities, especially those worsened by crises like COVID-19, by combining creativity, technology, and community action. It exemplifies lateral thinking by **reimagining how education can be delivered when traditional structures fail**. Instead of relying solely on schools, it uses innovative solutions such as a refurbished bus turned into a mobile classroom, online classes, digital mentoring, and community-driven initiatives. **By merging environmental education, digital literacy, and civic engagement, EduBuzz challenges assumptions about where and how learning should take place, opening up new possibilities for inclusive and resilient education.**

Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB...

We partnered with the **Ivan Patzaichin – Mila 23 Association during the European Project Semester to encourage slow tourism in the Danube Delta**. Our mixed student team worked with boat craftsmen to understand what "slow" should mean here: low noise, low waste, and time to meet people rather than rush through places.

Before fixing solutions, we ran a short **Lateral Thinking Lab**. **Reverse-brainstorming** surfaced what harms to avoid (noise, litter, crowded nesting areas). A "what-if" round asked: *What if engines were off-limits? What if visitors had only offline tools?* Using SCAMPER, the team reframed "promote more trips" into "design calmer, longer stays".

We prototyped three micro-itineraries (2–4 hours) that combine rowing or paddling with short village walks. **Lateral thinking moved us from "bring more visitors" to "make each visit gentler and deeper".**

A second story from POLITO...

In many of our co-design workshops focused on **transforming spaces for social use** — shelters, day centres, community hubs — we often begin by asking participants a simple question: **"How would you like to transform this place?"**

And more often than one might expect, **someone responds: "I'd like there to be a swimming pool".**

At first, it might sound unrealistic, even ironic. Clearly, we are not in a position to build pools in underfunded public buildings with urgent needs and limited resources. But rather than dismissing the idea, **we have learned to pay close attention — because these kinds of responses are precisely where lateral thinking becomes essential**.

The "pool" is never just a pool. Depending on the context, it has meant many things: a safe and playful space, a place for rest and detachment from daily struggles, a symbol of beauty or luxury, or simply a welcoming outdoor area. **What emerges here is not a literal request, but a symbolic one — an aspiration, a wish, a fragment of imagination.**

Participatory design does not only unlock practical knowledge; it also activates desires, emotions, and dreams. In this sense, **lateral thinking becomes a crucial tool in our work: it allows designers to interpret seemingly off-topic contributions and uncover the deeper meanings they carry**. The goal is not to force these aspirations back into the narrow confines of feasibility, but to ask: ***What does this idea really represent? What need, value, or vision is being expressed through it?***

From there, **it is about translating that vision into something achievable** — an object, a process, or a space — that resonates with the original meaning and fits within the real constraints of the project.

So no, we never built a swimming pool. But we did co-design spaces that offered comfort, play, sociality, and dignity — answers that were faithful to what the pool stood for in the first place.

References

RECOMMENDED READING

[Available in ATELIER's Repository of Literature]

de Bono, E. (1990). *Lateral Thinking. A Textbook of Creativity*. Penguin Books. https://ia802901.us.archive.org/10/items/teachyourchildhowtothink.byedwarddebono/Lateral%20Thinking%20A%20Textbook%20of%20Creativity%20by%20Edward%20de%20Bono%281990%29.pdf

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Kalansooriya, J. (2023). Exploring innovation: Connecting the dots across creative thinking, lateral approaches, and conceptual synthesis. *International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies*, 3(5):274-280. https://www.multiresearchjournal.com/admin/uploads/archives/archive-1694682217.pdf

Links to other Competencies

Competency 9 – *Desk and field research for problem-framing*
Lateral thinking can serve the process of framing problems, as it provides valuable approach and techniques to differently look at situations, contexts and phenomena.

Competency 10 – *Navigating wicked problems and complexity*
Wicked problems need reframing, not just optimisation. Lateral tools (assumption reversal, "what-if" scenarios, forced connections) help us see the system from new angles, surface unintended effects, and explore multiple pathways. This supports system-aware options rather than one "perfect" fix.

Competency 15 – *Adapting communication for cultural diversity*
Lateral thinking relies on metaphors, sketches, props, and quick prototypes. Adapting language and media (plain words, pictograms, bilingual notes, visuals) lets more people join the creative leap. Inclusive communication widens the idea pool and prevents good ideas from being lost in translation.

Competency 18 – *Project development management*
Lateral thinking can be a source throughout the whole design process, allowing for new perspectives and meanings while the project evolves. Indeed, this approach requires a recurring reassessment that well combines with the cyclical process a project follows.

Competency 21 – *Group dynamics facilitation*
Lateral thinking only thrives when the group feels safe to diverge. Good facilitation (clear rules, turn-taking, small breakouts, silent rounds) balances voices, reduces dominance, and keeps divergence and convergence distinct. In short: facilitation creates the social conditions for creative risk-taking.

Area of Competence 7:
Design process

20 CO-DESIGN AND ITS NUANCES

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

Collaboration can take various forms, depending on the mindset, ability, and will of different actors, the methods implemented, and the barriers encountered. It also depends on the stages of the design process in which involvement and collaboration occur, as well as the object and aim of this collaboration.
Understanding these various forms, their determinants, and their implementation allows for reflection on aspects such as: how to enable actors to express their needs and potential, as well as contribute at their best; how to accompany the project best and facilitate collaboration appropriately to the context of intervention and the expected outcomes and impact.
This competency addresses the various 'co-approaches' that can be adopted, the relationship between collaboration and participation, while also considering the reflection on power dynamics underlying these collaborative dynamics.

Definitions and Discussion

The starting point for discussing this competency is to **recognise the value and positive impact that collaborative initiatives can generate to foster or facilitate social inclusion**. Thinking together, designing together, deciding together, experimenting together, doing and crafting together, and maintaining together… Each of these approaches, in its way, deals with various forms of collaboration that are the common thread running through these types of initiatives. In the field of Design, when we **combine the collaborative mechanism with the transformative, strategic, and design-oriented approach**, we can speak of co-design.

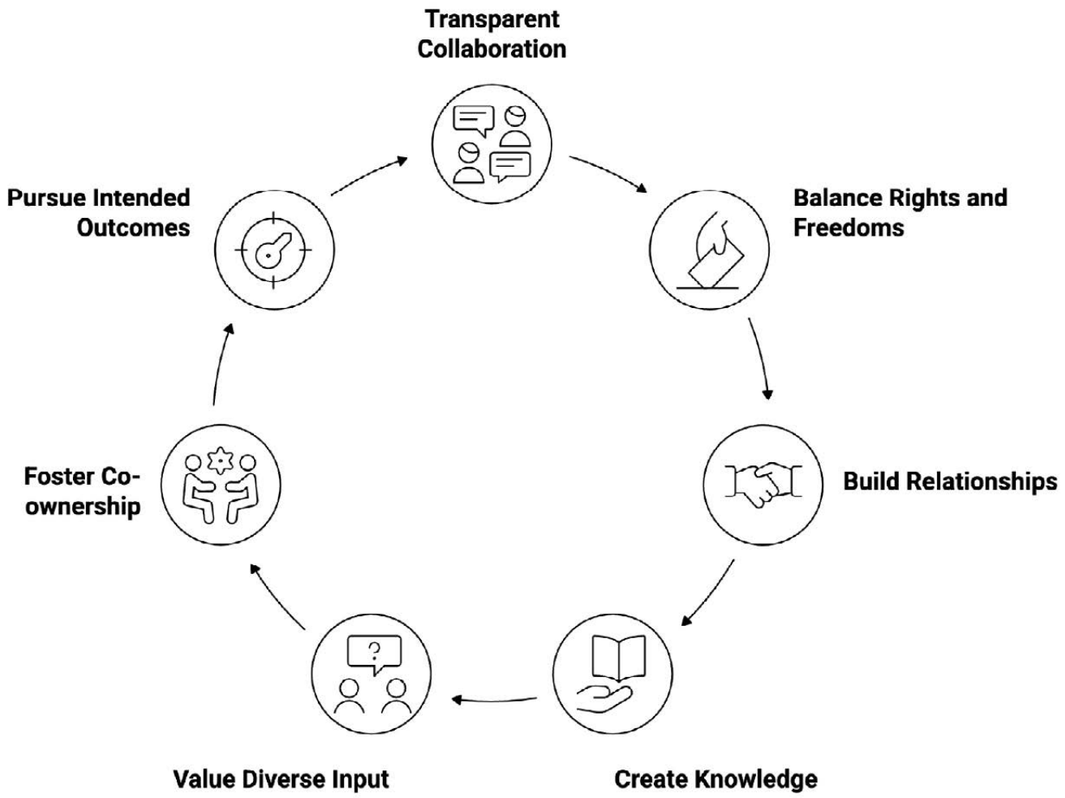
Co-design, as an umbrella term, refers to a collaborative approach that **involves all relevant stakeholders and beneficiaries throughout the design process**, from problem definition to solution implementation and beyond. Furthermore, when addressing issues of vulnerability and social inclusion, co-design enables working alongside individuals who experience marginalisation or hardship and developing interventions with them that are grounded in their daily lives and shaped by their values and goals. This also has a lot to do with the idea that people can choose or be helped to choose between different alternative functionings and possibilities.

Co-design can be **declined and applied in different ways and intensities of collaboration**, which can vary depending on the project's goals, context, participants, and the stage at which they are involved. By understanding the goals and effects of each 'co-' approach, we can better adapt the level of involvement to support people in choosing how to participate in the transformative process. Being aware of different co-design approaches also helps manage power dynamics and ensures that everyone can not only be heard but also speak for themselves.

What holds co-design nuances all together?

Also, these approaches are not entirely separate from one another; we can observe that they share certain **common pillars** from which their specific characteristics develop. These include:

- Co-design should aim at **transparent** collaboration and participation.
- Co-design necessitates a delicate **balance of rights and freedoms** among participants, challenging traditional notions of ownership and power.
- **Continuous participation** and the broad contributions of all parties help build relationships and alliances that strengthen the design process, enabling a diverse range of perspectives to be considered.
- Co-design is also a process of **knowledge creation** and mutual learning. It involves exchanging information, points of view, and skills related to the object of the design process and the process itself.
- Co-design typically involves diverse individuals with **varying backgrounds, roles, and interests**.
- It is crucial that each person's input is equally legitimate and valued, to create a shared and collective sense of ownership in which everyone can recognise themselves, their own and others' contributions, and feel motivated. Indeed, the resulting ***co-ownership*** — seen as a shared commitment to the effects of the collaborative process — can guarantee meaningful engagement and long-term support for the initiatives.
- Although the outputs may have unpredictable features due to the collaborative nature of the process, co-design tends to be based on **pursuing intended outcomes and moving towards a clear direction that all participants should share**.



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Co-what, exactly?

While **the various 'co-' approaches** are not entirely separate from one another, we can still observe **some differences in the process, method, or outcomes**.

We now explore the 'nuances' of co-design, reminding that other working groups or researchers may have drawn the boundaries between these terms differently, depending on the themes, challenges, and practices specific to each application context!

CO-CREATION refers to a collective experience of creativity, idea generation, or content development. It can occur in the early stages of a project or during its implementation, and it may not entail a whole participatory process.

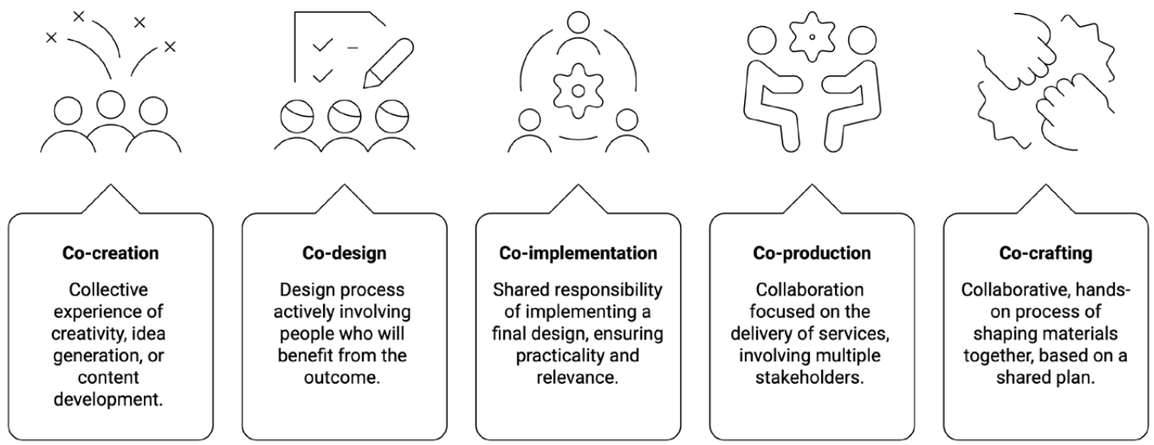
CO-DESIGN — meant as one of the nuances within the spectrum addressed here — describes a design process that actively involves the people who will benefit from the outcome, whether a product, service or system. The focus here is on the collaborative nature of the process and the more intangible aspects of the experience of designing *with* rather than *for*. Co-design has a narrower meaning than co-creation, as, in our view, it refers specifically to the dynamic in which designers and non — designers work together throughout the design process, by mutually benefiting from it in terms of results, understanding, and knowledge.

It is an approach, led by experts, for intentionally engaging people who are directly affected by or involved in an issue, a service, a place, or a process — including users and providers — to understand, explore, and ultimately transform them together.

CO-IMPLEMENTATION refers to the shared responsibility of implementing a final design, ensuring that the solution is practical, relevant, and beneficial for all stakeholders involved. A co-design process usually precedes it, involving the execution of a project while sustaining the collaborative spirit that shaped it, ensuring that those who contributed to the design process remain actively involved in bringing it to life.

CO-PRODUCTION is a specific form of co-design and co-implementation focused on the delivery of services. It involves extended collaboration across different stages of the service design. The concept suggests that both the design and delivery of services — whether prototypical or operational — rely on equitable, reciprocal relationships among professionals, experts, policymakers, service users, and the wider community, including families, neighbours, and local organisations. Co-production usually implies shared responsibility and values everyone's knowledge and experience, helping to build trust and enhancing the relevance and sustainability of (public) services.

CO-CRAFTING refers to the collaborative, hands-on process of shaping materials, regardless of their origin or type, together, based on a shared plan. By *making* together, two or more people interact, care for one another, and engage in dialogue, fostering both mutual understanding and collaboration. Often linked to prototyping or co-implementation, co-crafting values inclusive techniques that ensure access and meaningful participation for all, regardless of skill or experience.



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Focus n. 1

The Tree of Participation

In an article published in Animazione Sociale, Ripamonti and Boniforti discuss the "Tree of Participation" model and the Spectrum of Public Participation.

The Tree of Participation seeks to maximise inclusivity and empowerment in participatory processes. It can be used by both organisers and stakeholders as an operational guide, offering concepts, principles, and procedural steps.

The metaphor of the tree symbolises an integrated, living system where roots, branches, and leaves represent the different temporal dimensions of participation — before, during, and after the process.

The model also aims to reduce the risk of manipulative or tokenistic participation, especially with vulnerable or marginalised groups.

- **Roots (Before):** Participation requires certain preconditions. These include creating a safe and trust-based environment, ensuring the broadest inclusivity to avoid dominance by the "usual suspects", and removing barriers through resources that make participation accessible.

- **Branches (During):** The process develops through several key factors. These include valuing different types of knowledge (scientific and experiential), ensuring equality among participants (sometimes with corrective measures), maintaining the authenticity of intentions, guaranteeing transparency, fostering agency (the capacity to act and bring about change), recognising legitimate representation, and enabling deliberation as a dialogical and collective decision-making practice.

- **Leaves (After):** The outcomes and longer-term effects are represented by the leaves. Here the focus is on accountability — ensuring that decisions are faithfully implemented and actors remain answerable — as well as feedback, keeping participants informed on how their contributions have been used.

Overall, the model stresses that participation is a complex, interconnected process, both diachronic (developing over time) and synchronic (unfolding simultaneously across different dimensions). It highlights participation not as a one-off event, but as a living system where each stage supports empowerment, recognition, and continuity.

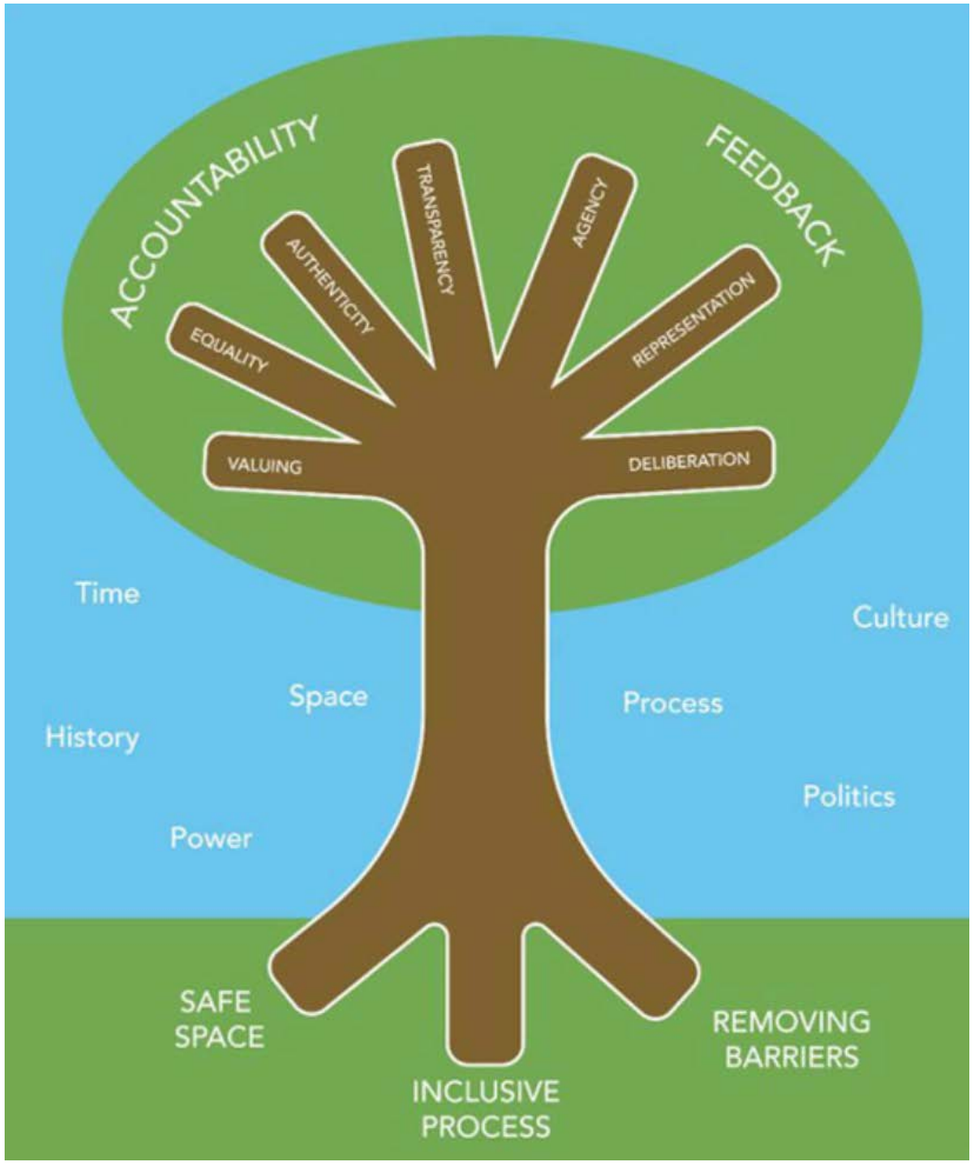

Fig. 1, *Tree of participation*. Image adapted from Ripamonti & Boniforti (2019), "Come attivare percorsi di partecipazione: Tecniche di collaborazione/1 – Participation Framework", Animazione Sociale no. 377, pp. 32–42; translated and adapted from Bell & Reed (2021), Community Development Journal 57(4): 595–614, licensed under CC BY 4.0. Used with permission of Ripamonti & Boniforti.

Focus n. 2

The Spectrum of Public Participationn

In public participation practice, the Spectrum of Participation (IAP2, International Association for Public Participation) provides a framework to clarify the type and intensity of involvement that a project intends to activate and to communicate it transparently.

The central principle is that the level of participation corresponds to the potential degree of public influence on decisions or actions, ranging from none (Inform) to full empowerment (Empower). The model identifies five incremental levels:

- **Inform** – ensuring people are well informed about decisions and processes, with clear and accessible information;
- **Consult** – collecting public input and opinions, with a promise to consider them and provide feedback;
- **Involve** – engaging participants more actively throughout the process, offering multiple opportunities to contribute, though final decisions remain with the institution;
- **Collaborate** – working directly with participants to co-develop solutions, seeking consensus and explicitly sharing decision-making power;
- **Empower** – transferring decision-making authority to the public, for example, through voting or deliberative assemblies.

The two extremes (Inform and Empower) serve as reference points, but in practice, most participation occurs at intermediate levels (Consult, Involve, Collaborate).

The model also emphasises the importance of the "promise to the public": citizens should clearly understand what they can expect in terms of access, influence, and feedback. Ambiguity or broken promises can undermine trust and damage future relationships with communities. Ultimately, the Spectrum is not about persuasion or public relations, but about clarity, legitimacy, and transparency.

It reminds practitioners that different stakeholders may wish to engage at varying levels, and that participation processes often involve multiple layers of involvement simultaneously.

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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Fig. 2, *IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation* - © Federation of International Association for Public Participation 2024. All rights reserved. This work was created with contributions from Lewis Michaelson, Martha Rozelle, and Doug Sarno. Source: www.iap2.org.

Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Before starting a project, **assess which nuance of co-design** is most appropriate for the context, rules and actors as well as for the goals in terms of impact (Theory of Change, described in Competency 1, Social Impact Culture and Mindset) and participation from information to empowerment and collective decision.

Clearly **define the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder** to manage expectations and ensure that everyone understands the level and nature of their involvement.

Key points to consider

Be mindful of **how power is distributed** among participants. Ensure that everyone feels entitled to express their ideas, opinions, and needs, particularly when involving groups that are marginalised or vulnerable.

Co-design processes should remain **flexible and adaptable** to the evolving nature of the problem and the changing needs of those involved.

Encourage and ensure an **environment** where stakeholders can **freely share knowledge, experiences, and insights, fostering mutual learning.**

Use some caution: the underlying assumption of collaboration is that people are willing or able to cooperate. However, complete collaboration rarely occurs. For some, collaboration can be a challenging and demanding process that they might want to end, give up on, or shy away from. It is vital to anticipate these circumstances in designing the collaborative process, arranging **flexible forms of participation, and ensuring each person has the opportunity to choose at every stage of the process.** In this sense, developing a risk map at the beginning of the project or initiative can be beneficial, as it enables the anticipation of potential critical issues and alternative solutions.

Reflective questions for your practice

*Has the process been clearly **structured**, with transparent collaborative and non-collaborative phases?*

***Who is involved** in the co-creation process, and who has been excluded — intentionally or otherwise?*

*What **roles and responsibilities** are assigned during implementation, and how are they shared?*

*What are the **consequences** if a participant **withdraws** or can no longer be involved?*

*What **value** does the collaborative dimension bring to the ideation and decision-making process?*

*Are clear **expectations** set regarding the outcomes and commitments of the co-creation process?*

*What **tools or activities** are used to support convergence and navigate diverse perspectives?*

*Do all participants have genuine **opportunities to express** their needs, expectations, and experiences?*

*What mechanisms are in place to ensure that **implementation reflects the collaborative groundwork**?*

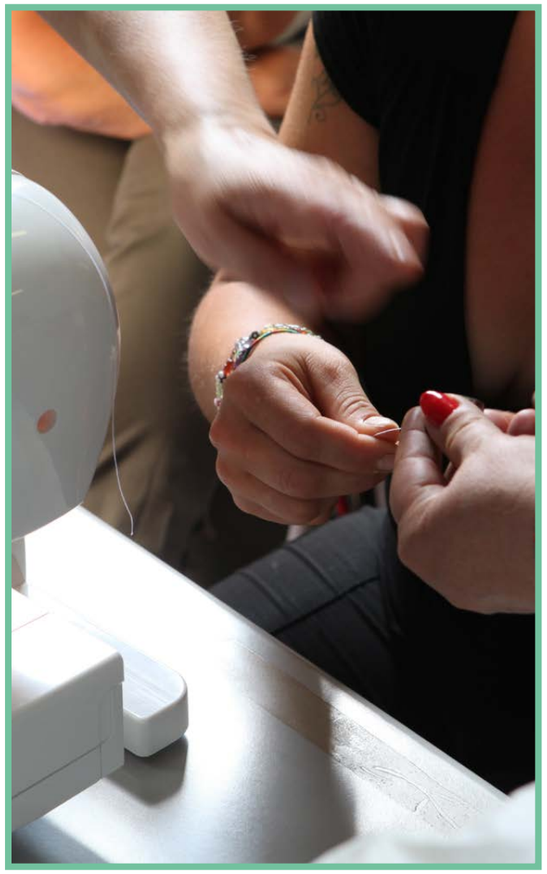
*Are the **techniques** used **inclusive, accessible, and suitable** for participants with varying levels of experience?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Costruire Bellezza

Catalogue page: 189

This case is particularly valuable for recognising this competency and understanding how to put it into practice. As a long-term and highly complex project, it has, over time, been able to **draw on the full range of 'co-' approaches as needed**.
It is fascinating to observe how **co-production, co-design, co-crafting, and co-implementation are all present and complementary** within the project. Its ability to evolve has been made possible by an approach that pays close attention to the needs of the participants.

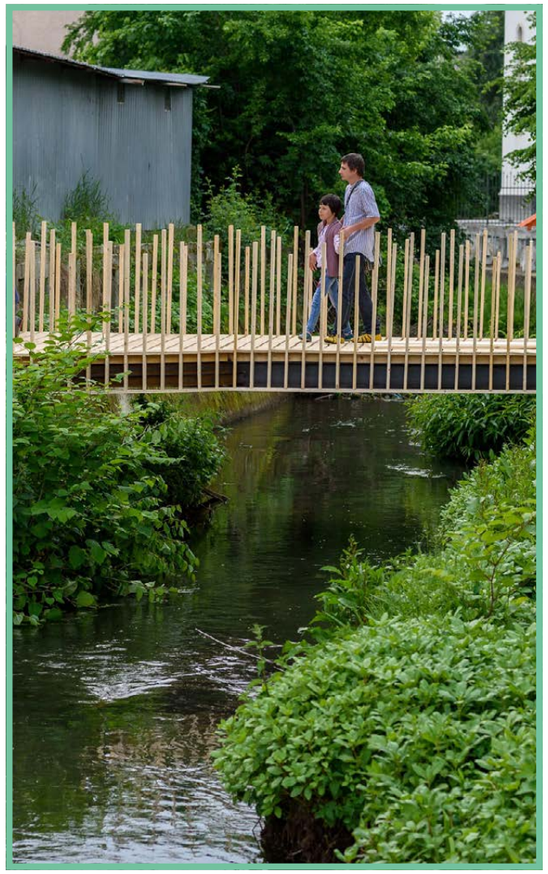


Green on the Morii Canal

Project link

Catalogue page: 110

The project serves as a powerful example of the nuance of **co-creation, where local community residents are active contributors in defining temporary urban interventions** to reduce car dependency and foster neighbourhood engagement. Collaboration among citizens, local authorities, and academic institutions fosters innovative, context-sensitive solutions that can inform and influence national policy. This participatory approach fosters social capital, strengthens community bonds, and empowers individuals with the skills necessary for advocacy and collective action. This case also offers interesting references for **collaborative participatory activities and tools employed, such as *Door-to-Door Surveys, Community Workshops and Meetings, Design Charrettes***.



Spirit of Malmö

Project link

Catalogue page: 73

Spirit of Malmö is an interesting example of the nuances of **co-design and co-production**. It was built through a structured collaboration between the City of Malmö and local civil society organisations. It reflects a shared commitment to designing an inclusive and democratic city by **involving diverse stakeholders in shaping both the vision and the actions**. The platform promotes continuous dialogue, mutual learning, and collaborative problem-solving, enabling citizens, politicians, and civil servants to co-create practical solutions. Spirit of Malmö **involves people in planning and implementing activities, services and policies**. Its adaptability and long-term orientation embody a deep form of co-ownership and collective responsibility.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB...

At POLITEHNICA of Bucharest, co-design has become a core part of how we **approach interdisciplinary collaboration through the European Project Semester** (EPS). Within this programme, **international teams of students work on real-world challenges in direct cooperation with local stakeholders** — from NGOs to public institutions and community representatives.

One of the most meaningful experiences of co-design at NUSTPB took shape during our collaboration with Ivan Patzaichin — Mila 23 Association, an organisation dedicated to promoting slow, sustainable tourism and environmental education in the Danube Delta. Together with Mila 23, the **students co-developed a concept and prototype** for a traditional-inspired canoe, aiming to offer an alternative to mass tourism — one that respects the fragile ecosystem of the Delta and reconnects people with the natural rhythm of the place.

The process started with co-creation, where students, local artisans, community representatives, and environmental advocates shared knowledge, stories, and aspirations. This phase was not only about collecting ideas — it was about understanding the cultural and ecological identity of the region.

We have seen that when **co-design is practised not just as a method, but as a mindset**, it fosters mutual trust, learning, and solutions that resonate more deeply with the people they are meant to serve. In EPS, the challenge is not just technical — it is relational, and this is where the real learning happens.

A story from POLITO...

As part of the ***European Social Fund – National Operational Programme for Inclusion*** and the *Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived* – ***FEAD Operational Programme (2014–2020)***, the City of Turin entrusted us – in collaboration with sociologists and anthropologists from the University of Turin – with supporting a **reorientation process of the city's service system for people experiencing homelessness**. The aim was to promote agency, dignity, and well-being through a participatory and collective process involving all relevant stakeholders. The project, carried out between 2018 and 2024, **engaged over 50 professionals from both the public and third sectors**, working together to redesign the service system with a focus on prevention and social inclusion. The process unfolded across four key phases:

Critical analysis of the system using tools from social research and design, conducted with a dialogic and reflective take by engaging policymakers, civil servants, social workers from the cooperatives managing the services, and service final users;

Co-creation of innovative and shared scenarios, developed in response to identified criticalities and summarised in a series of 'transformative axes';

Co-design of interventions, notably two new pilot services that embodied the vision set out by the transformative axes;

Co-implementation and co-production, where we supported the experimentation of these new service models – collaboratively delivered by third-sector organisations and the Municipality – and monitored their development. We also facilitated a collaborative evaluation process with the public and private actors involved to assess impact, replicability, and areas requiring adaptation.

This journey enabled diverse stakeholders to build bridges between them, overcoming traditional divisions within public welfare. It fostered innovative dynamics for social inclusion, triggering transformations in the local service system and within its relationships. **It demonstrates how a single process, comprising distinct phases and goals, can incorporate various *nuances* of co-design.**

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Links to other Competencies

Competency 4 – ***Knowledge of values, culture, and the fundamentals of welfare, inclusion and social responsibility***

Embedding knowledge of these elements supports all collaborative activities and helps to enhance the value of co-design

Competency 14 – ***Stakeholder engagement and negotiation***

Understanding which stakeholders should be involved and how they can contribute to the process is essential to co-design success.

Competency 24 – ***Real-time, low-fidelity prototyping***

As in co-design projects, prototypes are strategically used as tangible tools to facilitate understanding and design dialogue. This approach is efficient in complex contexts where non-verbal language and concrete interaction provide valuable insights.

Competency 25 – ***Feedback and replanning in participation***

Effective facilitation ensures that co-design processes are structured and inclusive, facilitating the navigation of the complexities of collaborative decision-making.

AREA OF COMPETENCE 8

Co-creation: from consultation to co-production

Co-creation is at the heart of participatory design and social innovation. It marks the transition from consultation—where people are asked for opinions—to co-production and empowerment, where they actively shape and own the process and its outcomes. This unit explores how collaborative design processes evolve through the management of relationships, groups, and systems (of people, organisations, or processes), highlighting the skills required to guide diverse actors from the first stages of cooperation to the completion and handover of shared results.

In socially oriented design, collaboration rarely happens at a single scale or through a single method. It moves across levels of governance, institutional boundaries, and community settings. Managing this complexity demands both strategic and relational capabilities. To do so, it becomes crucial to nurture group dynamics, align multi-level collaborations, and close projects responsibly, ensuring that collective work can continue to generate value beyond the project's formal end.

The unit brings together three interlinked Competencies. Competency 21 concerns ***group dynamics and facilitation***, the everyday human texture of co-design. Collaborative processes rely on creating safe, inclusive, and empowering environments where participants feel seen, respected, and empowered to contribute. Facilitation requires emotional intelligence, active listening, and the capacity to manage conflict as a generative force rather than a disruption. Understanding moods, power relations, and communication patterns allows facilitators to guide groups toward shared decisions while preserving each participant's sense of agency. Effective facilitation transforms a group of individuals into a collaborative community capable of creative and ethical action.

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino)

Competency 22 addresses ***multi-level collaboration management***. Co-design for social inclusion often involves multiple actors—local communities, NGOs, municipalities, universities, and policy institutions—each operating with its own logic, resources, and pace. The ability to connect the different levels at which these actors are located is what ensures that grassroots initiatives can influence broader policies and that institutional frameworks remain grounded in real needs. Managing collaboration across scales means balancing governance models, redistributing power, and creating horizontal accountability structures where leadership is shared and legitimacy grows through participation.

Competency 23 addresses ***project release management***. In co-production, the end of a project is never simply an administrative moment—it is a transition that can either strengthen or dissolve the relationships built throughout the process. “Closing” well a project, involves recognising all contributions, ensuring that results are accessible and meaningful, as well as clarifying who will advocate for them and ensure they work in the future. When treated with attention and transparency, this phase creates a space for reflection, learning, and care, and reinforces inclusion, ownership, and mutual respect, ensuring that communities and institutions remain connected and empowered beyond the lifespan of a funded initiative.

Together, these three Competencies form a comprehensive understanding of co-creation as a dynamic, multi-scalar, and iterative practice. The unit moves beyond viewing participation as a sequence of activities, proposing instead a vision of design as a living ecosystem of relationships—where facilitation nurtures dialogue, multi-level collaboration ensures systemic coherence, and project release secures the sustainability and ethical integrity of shared outcomes. Learners are encouraged to approach co-creation as a continuous process of negotiation and reflection, where managing power and processes are interdependent acts of care and creativity.

In this perspective, the management of inclusion projects becomes more than the coordination of tasks: it is the stewardship of human and institutional relationships that sustain inclusion and transformation. Co-designers and facilitators are called to hold space for uncertainty, cultivate trust, and recognise closure not as an end, but as a threshold toward new cycles of collaboration.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- **Facilitate collaborative groups** with awareness of emotional, relational, and cultural dynamics, fostering safe, inclusive, and enabling environments;
- **Manage conflicts constructively**, turning tensions into opportunities for dialogue, mutual learning, and innovation;
- **Coordinate multi-level collaborations**, aligning diverse actors, institutions, and governance layers toward shared social inclusion goals;
- **Design participatory governance structures** that distribute leadership, share responsibility, enhance accountability, and support long-term sustainability;
- **Plan and manage project closure** as a reflective and participatory phase, ensuring recognition, accessibility, and continuity of outcomes;
- **Communicate results effectively** across audiences and scales, promoting transparency and shared ownership;
- **Reflect critically** on the ethical and political implications of facilitation, collaboration, and closure in co-design processes.

Area of Competence 8:

Co-creation: from consultation to co-production

21 GROUP DYNAMICS FACILITATION

Overview

To promote effective collaboration experiences, it is essential to develop sensitivity to group dynamics, honing one's "antennas" to detect participants' moods, emotions, and sensitivities and to create conditions that make everyone feel comfortable and contribute proactively to the process. While in-depth knowledge of team building and management is not mandatory (although useful in this field), co-design requires mastering key elements of facilitation, mediation, and conflict management. This competency offers practical resources to support these aspects and suggests a series of reflections to examine one's stance toward collaborators.

Texts by Tiziana Ciampolini, Isabella Lalli, Antonio Fantasia (Associazione S-NODI GROUP E.T.S.); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest); Elena Tornariti (SYNTHESIS Center for Research and Education)

Definitions and Discussion

Group dynamics management refers to understanding and guiding the interactions between group members to ensure effective collaboration skills become essential to ensure an effective and inclusive collaborative process.

In the context of ATELIER, managing group dynamics, facilitating and resolving conflicts are not just an added value, but a **fundamental skill that supports the effectiveness of co-design interventions aimed at promoting social inclusion.** When working with different stakeholders, including marginalised communities, local authorities, NGOs and institutional actors, the ability to manage the emotional, relational, and practical dimensions of group collaboration becomes essential.

Co-design is based on collaboration, which must be cultivated and built day by day to be effective. This involves developing a refined sensitivity to group dynamics, to the definition of responsibilities and roles to arrive at the construction of alliances. In these contexts, understanding moods, emotions and power dynamics is fundamental to structuring relationships in the work group. Safe and inclusive spaces must therefore be developed, which represent not only dedicated places, whether physical or not, where participants feel seen and recognised and where they can work on their empowerment.

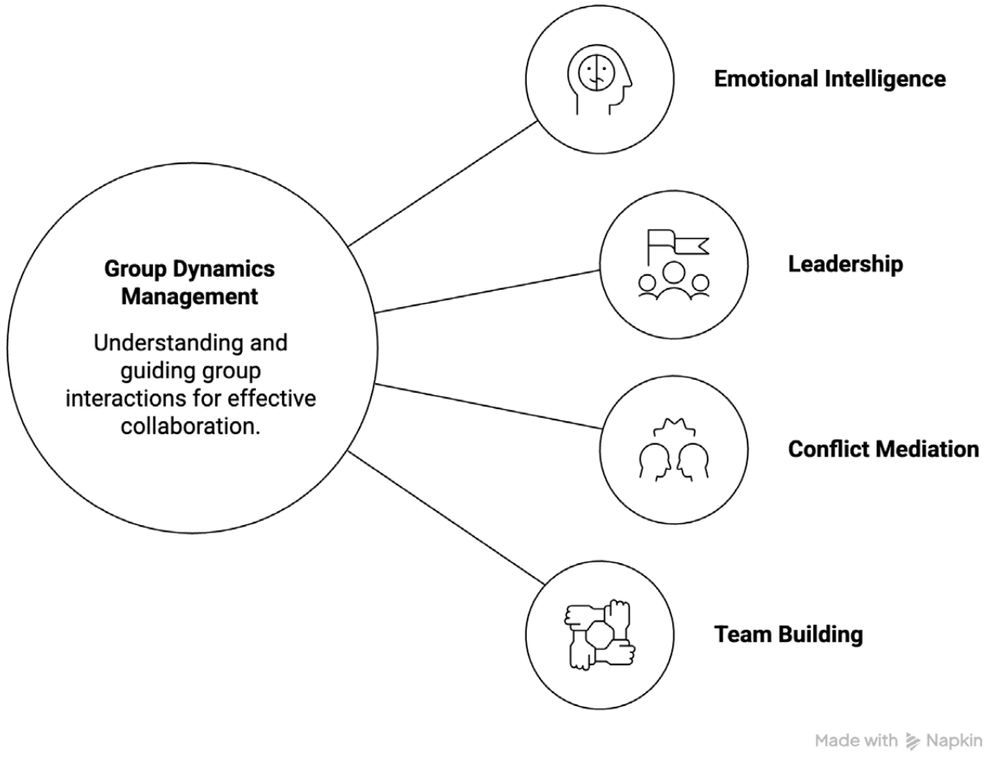
To build effective co-design processes, skills in **team building, leadership, conflict mediation and emotional intelligence are key elements.** These are the key elements to ensure that collaborative design leads to fair, shared and sustainable results.

Managing group dynamics to manage co-design process?

Together with understanding the reference contexts of the different stakeholders, managing group dynamics involves understanding interactions, decision-making and generative processes. At ATELIER, facilitating group dynamics is a key element to build truly shared processes that use co-design to build bottom-up, sustainable and impactful solutions.

Group dynamics are based on building trust and continuously engaging all parties involved: whether it is interacting with migrant communities, displaced people or disadvantaged youth, understanding group behaviour allows us to adapt our approach to the realities experienced by participants, creating more relevant and respectful interventions. Enabling facilitation and engagement dynamics is not just about managing time and moving forward with planning.

Facilitation is about governing group processes in a fair, purposeful and emotionally attuned way. Effective facilitation requires ensuring that all voices are heard and valued, that conflicts are addressed constructively, and that participants feel that their contributions truly influence the outcome. Facilitation that is attentive to non-verbal communication, emotional climate and implicit hierarchies can help participants move from hesitation or resistance to active involvement and ownership of the process. There are many facilitation tools: small group work, role rotation, embodied practices and collective reflections are essential to break down barriers, encourage collaboration and foster a sense of shared purpose. These methods also provide early indicators of conflict or tension, which can then be addressed constructively.



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Conflict as a driver of change

Conflict, if recognised and managed skillfully, **can be a powerful catalyst for growth and innovation within co-design processes.** In socially inclusive work, conflicts can arise from differences in perspective, cultural misunderstandings, or from deeper traumas and systemic inequalities. The key is not to avoid conflict, but to **adopt conflict management as a proactive and constructive tool.**

Conflict management involves recognising emerging tensions, facilitating open dialogue, and guiding participants toward mutual understanding and problem-solving.

Mediation and restorative dialogue techniques enable disagreements to be addressed in ways that strengthen group cohesion rather than erode it.

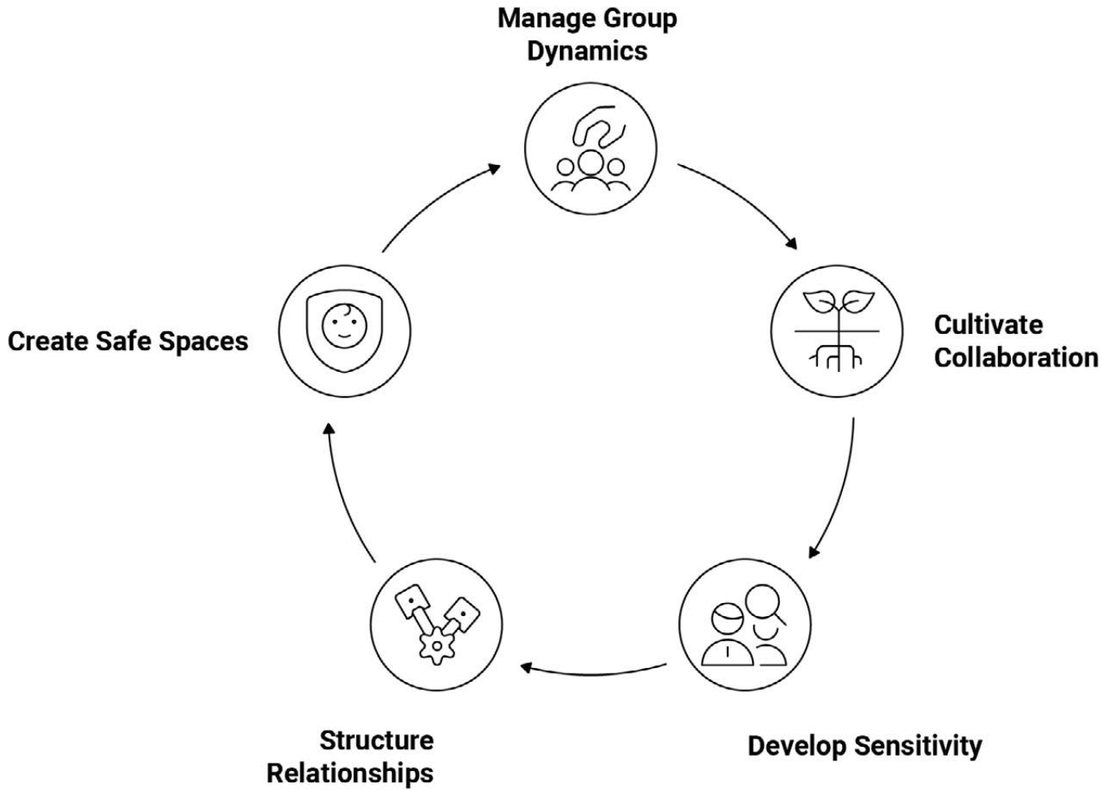
Especially in communities affected by trauma – such as forced migration, poverty, or systemic exclusion – facilitation must be trauma-informed and rooted in the principles of peace education. This requires deep empathy, emotional safety, and a commitment to rebuilding trust, both between individuals and within the community as a whole.

Group facilitation to empower and engage

This not only improves the quality of the process, but also brings operational benefits. **Well-managed groups are more cohesive, make decisions more efficiently and are better equipped to deal with challenges.** This translates into savings in time and effort, reduces the risk of failure of projects and significantly improves the sustainability and relevance of interventions.

For ATELIER, the ability to manage group dynamics, facilitate inclusively and deal with conflicts constructively is essential to achieve co-design that has a truly generative and community-building power. The codification of these skills, which often belong to practice, is therefore essential for them to become increasingly common and for there to be trained personnel in the matter.

The facilitation of group dynamics is what can truly empower stakeholders, build discussion and co-create solutions that are informed and reflect the needs and aspirations of all the actors involved.



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Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Create a culture of openness and mutual respect by setting **clear expectations around communication, listening, and participation**.

When **conflicts** arise, approach them **as opportunities for growth and collaboration rather than as obstacles**. Use conflict resolution techniques like mediation, active listening, and reframing to find common ground.

Make sure participants feel safe to express their opinions, particularly in sensitive or contentious topics. This may involve establishing trust-building exercises at the beginning of a project or session.

Use **careful observation and active listening** to proactively identify potential tensions within the group.

Maintain a **neutral stance as a facilitator during conflicts** and guide the group toward shared goals.

Reframe disagreements as learning opportunities to keep focus on collective educational objectives.

Adapt mediation techniques to respect and **integrate participants' professional expertise in conflict resolution**.

Schedule regular team-building activities to foster relationships beyond task-focused interactions.

Establish **consistent communication channels** to ensure ongoing engagement and clarity.

Celebrate group achievements regularly to build motivation and reinforce positive collaboration.

Design the learning environment to **support self-direction and autonomy**.

Begin each group process by **co-creating ground rules and shared values** with participants to establish a culture of mutual respect and inclusion.

Introduce **low-threshold icebreakers or creative exercises early in the process** to build trust and reduce social distance between participants.

Use inclusive **facilitation tools that cater to different communication styles**, such as drawing, symbols, and movement-based methods, especially when working with groups with limited language proficiency or trauma histories.

Switch between plenary and small-group formats to allow quieter voices to emerge.

Assign roles (e.g., timekeeper, listener, note-taker) **to small groups** to encourage shared responsibility and reduce dominance by outspoken individuals.

Make **time for structured debriefing following emotionally intense sessions**, and use grounding or relaxation techniques as needed to support the group's emotional well-being.

Key points to consider

Pay attention to **non-verbal cues, power imbalances, and interpersonal dynamics**. This will help you identify potential issues early on and intervene before they escalate.

Adult learners bring diverse life and professional experiences — these must be acknowledged and integrated into the learning process.

Conflict can often stem from misaligned expectations or communication styles — **awareness and early detection** are key.

Trust and understanding between diverse stakeholders take **time** and **structured opportunities** to develop.

Facilitators are not the boss; they are guides or collaborators

Be careful in **balancing individual growth and group cohesion** — both are crucial for success.

Be real: content must link directly to their **real-world** contexts.

Group dynamics are constantly changing — what works in the beginning may need to be adjusted later. Maintain **flexibility and responsiveness**.

Trauma-sensitive facilitation necessitates awareness of potential triggers (for example, loud voices, being put on the spot) as well as the ability to reframe or pause the process when signs of distress emerge.

Power dynamics are frequently invisible. Pay attention to who speaks, who remains silent, and how decisions are reached.

Cultural norms and expectations for leadership, communication, and participation vary. Facilitators must **avoid assumptions and be willing to change their style.**

Emotional safety must come before productivity. A process may slow down to allow for healing, reflection, or repair — this is not a failure, but rather an indication of group maturity.

Reflective questions for your practice

*Which **strategies** can I use to create an inclusive environment where everyone feels comfortable contributing?*

*How can I **constructively manage any conflicts or disagreements** between participants?*

*What is **my attitude towards collaborators** and how does it influence the co-design process?*

*How can I **balance the need for structure and organisation with the flexibility** needed to foster creativity in group work?*

*What **practical tools** can I develop to facilitate productive discussions and promote shared decisions?*

*What strategies can I use to **transform a conflict into an opportunity for growth** for the group?*

*How can I **recognise and manage different types of conflict** without compromising the cohesion of the group?*

*Am I **allowing all voices to be heard**, including those who may be hesitant or marginalised?*

*Have I established a **safe and welcoming environment** that recognises and respects participants' diverse backgrounds and emotional needs?*

*Am I aware of the **power dynamics in the room**, including my own role as a facilitator?*

*Have I allowed enough flexibility in the process to **address emerging group needs or unexpected tensions**?*

***How do I deal with conflict**: do I avoid it, suppress it, or see it as an opportunity for growth and dialogue?*

*Have I **checked in with participants individually or anonymously** to learn how they are feeling about the group process?*

What do I need to work on myself (patience) to become a better facilitator?

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Gardens of the Future

Project link

Catalogue page: 36

In *Gardens of the Future*, group dynamics are nurtured through shared practices of urban gardening, fostering bonds across cultural, generational and social differences. **The facilitation here is rooted in creating a safe, inclusive space where everyone—from migrants to NEET youth—can contribute meaningfully.** Activities are designed to promote a circular economy and ecological awareness while building trust and collaboration. Facilitators play a key role in ensuring equitable participation, encouraging dialogue, and transforming the communal garden into a space of co-learning, mutual care and civic engagement. **Group cohesion emerges through doing, sharing and co-owning responsibilities.**



Emergency Room for Association

Project link

Catalogue page: 28



The *Emergency Room for Associations* project emerged in response to the COVID-19 crisis, offering peer-to-peer support to civil society organisations in vulnerable areas of Malmö. Here, **group dynamics were crucial: associations with different backgrounds and capacities came together to share experiences, resources and strategies**. Facilitation focused on listening, problem-solving and collective resilience-building. By hosting digital meetings, collaborative training and open dialogue, the project helped reduce isolation and fostered a culture of mutual aid. **The facilitator's role was to connect, empower and mediate across organisational boundarie**s, strengthening the entire social fabric.

Sintra City Council Plan for Migrant Integration

Catalogue page: 24



The City Council Plan for Migrant Integration in Sintra exemplifies facilitation in complex institutional group settings. **By involving migrants, NGOs and public authorities in participatory budgeting and co-designed services, the project fosters inclusive dialogue and collaborative policymaking**. Facilitation ensures that marginalised voices are heard and that different interests are balanced through trust-building and transparent processes. Group dynamics are managed through structured consultations, community meetings and ongoing feedback. This inclusive approach strengthens both individual agency and institutional responsiveness, showing how **well-facilitated collaboration can transform governance and promote real social integration.**

Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB...

Facilitation played a crucial role in our engagement with marginalised communities, serving as the foundation for inclusive and meaningful collaboration. By employing structured techniques such as small group discussions and creative exercises, we ensured that every participant had the space to express their voice and contribute actively.

These methods not only supported the emergence of diverse perspectives but also fostered trust, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging. Similar to the approach adopted in the European Project Semester — where students work in focused groups of no more than six — **this format promotes deeper interaction, collective ownership, and more equitable group dynamics.**

A story from SYNTHESIS...

During SYNTHESIS community-building workshops with refugee women in Nicosia, we encountered an unexpected challenge. Despite the welcoming environment, the group remained silent, hesitant, and visibly fragmented. **We discovered that past traumas and cultural dynamics were influencing trust and participation.** Rather than pushing forward with our pre-planned content, we chose to pause and adapt.

We implemented a circle-based check-in system using simple image cards. Each participant chose an image that represented their feelings about being in the group. For many, it was the first time they shared something personal in that environment. This simple, nonverbal method enabled a deeper connection.

We changed our facilitation approach in subsequent sessions, incorporating longer unstructured moments, allowing participants to move at their own pace, and utilising co-facilitation with a trusted cultural mediator. Slowly, trust grew. Women who were previously disengaged began to take the initiative, lead small activities, and help others.

This experience reminded us that f**acilitation is more than just managing discussions; it is also about reading the group's emotional state and adapting accordingly.** It emphasised the importance of slowing down, listening deeply, and allowing for vulnerability. What appeared to be a barrier evolved into an opportunity to strengthen and authenticate the group dynamic. This approach now guides how we work with any group that has invisible wounds or experiences of exclusion.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 6 – ***Inclusion and accessibility principles***
Facilitating group dynamics involves creating an environment where everyone feels safe and included, this competency directly supports the work of inclusive facilitation.

Competency n° 14 – ***Stakeholder engagement and negotiation***
Engaging stakeholders and negotiating between different perspectives is often part of facilitating group dynamics, especially in co-design settings where everyone's input needs to be respected and balanced.

Competency n° 20 – ***Co-design and its nuances***
Facilitating group dynamics is a core part of successful co-creation processes — ensuring that collaboration flows well and everyone's contributions are heard and valued.

Area of Competence 8:

Co-creation: from consultation to co-production

22 MULTI-LEVEL COLLABORATION MANAGEMENT

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); Maria Koimisoglou, Theodoros Tsanakas (AKADIMOS KDVM EPE); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest); Elena Tornariti (SYNTHESIS Center for Research and Education)

Overview

According to the "wicked" and systemic characteristics of the complex problems and the multi-domain logic of the social impact (or social inclusion) projects, designing with a co-design perspective and supporting effective change may require a multi-level approach to collaboration.
Developing competencies to understand and manage the multi-layered nature of collaboration is crucial, as it requires identifying which actors to involve, and defining participation and governance modalities specific to each actor/partner and to each level of the intervention scale.

Definitions and Discussion

Professionals involved in co-design for social inclusion must navigate complex dynamics of power, trust, accountability, and communication, as diverse actors can be involved, with consequent different roles, interests, and power dynamics. In addition, they often have to deal with multiple levels of intervention and change.

We can speak of “levels” in two primary senses.

First, multi-level collaboration can be understood as an approach that recognises the **interconnectedness of processes and actors** operating simultaneously **at different spatial, institutional, and political scales**, and that addresses how decisions and practices at one level both influence and are influenced by those at others.

Second, we can speak of multi-level collaboration when referring to **interactions among different groups, sectors, or systems, even when they are not organised in a hierarchical order of scale**. In this sense, multi-level collaboration refers to the capacity to **bridge across diverse domains** (for example, between institutions, communities, civil society organisations, and private actors), and to **coordinate efforts across layers of governance or spheres of practice** that operate in parallel rather than in a vertical hierarchy.

Multi-level collaboration management can support the challenge of tackling such layered complexity. It refers to the **strategic coordination and management of stakeholders and processes**, which helps establish an inclusive and collaborative governance and for unlocking collective intelligence. It helps leverage the diverse knowledge, lived experiences, and insights of the different actors involved, fostering **inclusive cultures, equitable decision-making processes, meaningful engagement, and "peer accountability"** — a mutual responsibility of peers to uphold shared commitments through trust, support, and reciprocal oversight.



Bridging levels, from grassroots to policy

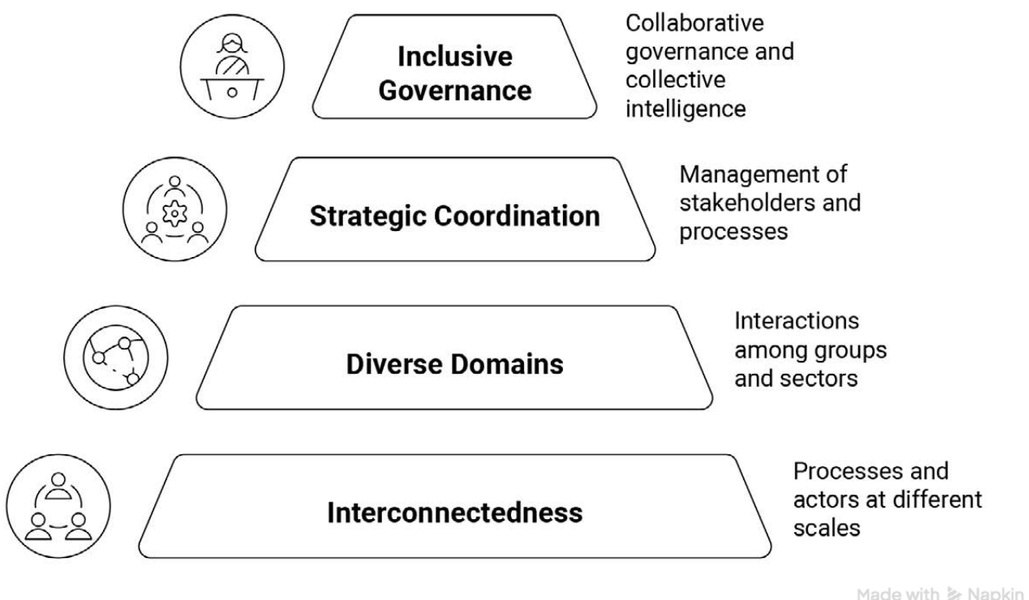
This competency seems particularly valuable when addressing the challenge of promoting collaboration for collective impact while aligning the often divergent priorities among different actors and agendas, across various levels of influence. It is essential, in fact, to emphasise that phenomena of social exclusion can involve social services, local governments, community-based organisations, regional institutions, national policies, and even international frameworks. For this reason, promoting multi-level collaboration is a necessary process to **ensure that social inclusion efforts are not only participatory at the grassroots level but also effectively connected to larger governance structures and decision-making processes**. This involves **aligning efforts between grassroots initiatives and top-down institutions**, ensuring that every level of participation is considered and strategically involved in creating effective and lasting solutions.

How to ensure enduring cooperation?

Building adequate and sustainable multi-level collaboration resides in multiple aspects. Firstly, it involves understanding **who the relevant stakeholders are at each level**, **how decisions are made**, and **what mechanisms enable cooperation or cause friction**. It also requires recognising that issues are interconnected and that **decisions or actions at one level often influence or depend on actions at others**. Moreover, it demands a **balance of governance models**: while hierarchy ensures rule of law and legitimacy, network dynamics provide innovation and responsiveness. Another requirement is the **redistribution of power** among empowered stakeholders, along with a strong emphasis on legitimacy and appropriateness — beyond mere results. Also, leadership should be distributed, encouraging responsibility at all levels while maintaining formal leadership of the project. This **horizontal accountability** fosters ownership and sustainability of co-designed processes.

One common impediment to the effectiveness of managing multi-level collaboration is the general lack of understanding of what constitutes collaboration, both conceptually and practically. Furthermore, **active listening and learning** — internally and externally to the project partners — are vital. This means creating feedback loops and fostering shared learning among project partners, communities, and institutions. **Communication** plays a transformative role as a practice of acting together. It must be **multi-layered, targeted, and iterative**. Communicating tangible outcomes — especially when they are intangible, such as trust or legitimacy — is critical to involving diverse participants. Making and telling must go hand in hand: collaborative governance becomes visible and credible through transparent, participatory action.

There are different ways to foster and manage multi-level collaboration, some of which are suggested in the 'Tips and thoughts' section of this Competency.



Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Map stakeholders across different levels (e.g., community members, local governments, NGOs, national bodies) and understand the role each group plays and their level of influence.

Establish **clear governance structures** for collaboration, ensuring each level has a say in the decision-making process. Different governance models can be used for various levels, but ensure they all contribute to the overarching goals of the project.

Foster horizontal accountability through **distributed leadership** while ensuring visible formal leadership with ethical authority.

Address power imbalances by ensuring that marginalised voices are included at all levels of collaboration, from grassroots to institutional. Design inclusive processes that avoid exclusionary practices.

Create mechanisms that allow for the **exchange** of ideas, feedback, and progress updates **between different levels** of collaboration. This could involve engagement activities targeting different levels (e.g.,community workshops, policy dialogues, regional stakeholder meetings).

Monitor the effectiveness of collaboration at each relevant level involved in the intervention. Be prepared to **adjust strategies** in response to the evolving needs and dynamics of each actor involved.

Practise **active listening and mutual learning**, creating feedback loops that not only improve results but can also reshape goals and strategies.

Tailor communication to different targets and purposes, seeking feedback to adapt content and tone.

Integrate telling and co-creating: actions and shared experiences are the most authentic form of communication and mutual understanding.

Make intangibles visible: demonstrate how values like trust or legitimacy lead to concrete changes that encourage broader participation.

Key points to consider

An **excessive focus on institutional frameworks** may result in rigid programs that are **disconnected from community needs**.

Power dynamics need constant monitoring to **prevent overshadowing voices**.

Prioritise inclusive values, respect for diversity, transparency, fairness, and trust over output-based efficiency alone.

Multi-level collaboration can be **time-consuming**: allocate adequate time for dialogue and trust-building.

Also, be prepared for **misalignments** between different levels' timelines, priorities, or resources.

Reflective questions for your practice

*Am I ensuring that local **voices are heard and meaningfully integrated** into higher-level discussions?*

*How am I supporting stakeholders to **feel confident in participating outside their usual role**?*

*Have I established **mechanisms** that genuinely enable **community needs to influence project development** and its outputs?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Águeda Living Lab

Project link

Catalogue page: 9

Led by the Municipality of Águeda, this project brings together youth, educators, entrepreneurs, and public institutions in a shared innovation space. The municipality plays a central role in fostering cross-sector alliances between education, technology, business, and local development. **Multi-level collaboration is embedded in the project's governance, enabling public services, private actors, and citizens to collectively address access to digital tools and knowledge through co-created interventions.**



Social Entrepreneurship as a Tool for Fighting Social Exclusion and Poverty



Project link

Catalogue page: 226

This transnational initiative involves the Municipality of Bogatić (Serbia), Caritas Šabac, and the Italian partner Consorzio Operativo Salute Mentale. **Governance is formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding and regular coordination among institutions.** While rooted in local implementation, the project benefits from the **exchange of institutional practices and strategies across national contexts**, showing how **multi-level governance can enable policy learning and contextual adaptation**.

Biovilla

Project link

Catalogue page: 20

Biovilla operates within a protected natural park and addresses environmental sustainability and community development through a networked governance model. It collaborates with local NGOs, educational institutions, international networks and integrates municipal policies on sustainability and inclusion. **The project involves diverse disciplines — from environmental science to community engagement — and fosters alliances between multiple municipal departments and community stakeholders.** This layered governance structure makes Biovilla a compelling example of multi-scalar collaboration supporting systemic social-ecological transformation.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from OLAE...

Multi-level collaboration, which demanded constant navigation between different actors and scales, made it clear that **social inclusion is not just about local needs but about aligning community voices with broader systems of power and policy**.

If working only at the neighbourhood level, we leave important gaps, because many issues are influenced by decisions far beyond local borders. However, focusing only on higher levels can create solutions disconnected from everyday realities.

It is a difficult task to balance, but one that strengthens the possibility of real change.

In a specific project about media literacy for vulnerable communities, we are learning firsthand how complex multi-level collaboration can be. We are bringing together residents, educators, municipal cultural services, and regional communication authorities. All have their own perspectives and priorities.

We are experimenting with different ways to manage this diversity: holding regular stakeholder meetings, co-designing workshop content, and creating spaces for open dialogue across levels.

One challenge is translating policy and technical language into terms that make sense for community participants so that they can engage meaningfully. At the same time, we want to ensure their feedback shapes the project in ways that influence higher-level strategies.

We are still figuring out how to keep communication flowing in both directions, so community voices do not get lost, and policy frameworks remain relevant to local realities.

At OLAE, managing multi-level collaboration in media literacy is an evolving process. **It requires patience, flexibility, and ongoing dialogue to balance diverse needs and perspectives.** While we haven't found all the answers yet, this approach strengthens our hope for meaningful, sustainable change.

A story from NUSTPB...

In our research on how 3D-printed surface textures affect the tribocharging process, we had to **collaborate with multiple institutions**. While the design and modelling phase was developed in-house, the experimental testing required working with partners who had specific equipment and expertise in surface analysis and materials characterisation.

Managing this collaboration meant **aligning different lab proToCols, research timelines, and institutional requirements**. It helped us understand that even highly technical work depends on clear coordination across levels — between universities, labs, and researchers. This experience taught us that multi-level collaboration is not only about managing tasks, but also about **building mutual understanding to make innovation possible**.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency n° 10 – *Navigating wicked problems and complexity*
Multi-level collaboration is essential when dealing with wicked problems, which are complex, interdependent, and span across sectors and governance levels. Understanding these systemic dynamics helps to coordinate actions at different levels and ensures that solutions are context-sensitive and aligned across actors.

Competency n° 11 – *Analytical thinking on power, politics and policy*
Reflection and awareness on power structures and dynamics play a crucial role in the management of multi-level collaborations. Revealing existing power relationships is vital to understanding whether they comply with the different "levels" of collaboration and if they should be modified to pursue a collaborative setting.

Competency n° 14 – *Stakeholder engagement and negotiation*
Effectively managing collaboration across multiple levels requires strong stakeholder engagement and negotiation skills. Since stakeholders operate at different scales (local, regional, institutional) and may have competing interests or unequal power, this competency is crucial for building trust, aligning objectives, and sustaining meaningful participation across levels.

Competency n° 15 – *Adapting communication for cultural diversity*
Communication is a crucial part in managing multi-level collaboration, requiring awareness and sensitivity to promote dialogue and view the actors involved as active interlocutors.

Competency n° 17 – Knowledge and management of design domains
By understanding which design domains the project or transformative process falls within, it becomes possible to more consciously define which and how many actors to involve, at what scales, and in which roles.

Competency n° 20 – Co-design and its nuances
Multi-level collaboration requires choosing the right approach for each scale and stakeholder group. Understanding different co-design methods helps tailor participation strategies and manage power dynamics across levels.

Competency n° 21 – *Group dynamics facilitation*
Multi-level collaboration depends on skilful management of group dynamics to foster trust, address conflicts, and sustain engagement among diverse actors operating at different scales.

Area of Competence 8:

Co-creation: from consultation to co-production

23 MANAGING PROJECT CLOSURE AND RELEASE

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); José Paulo Oliveira, Margarida Oliveira (Associação de Investigação Observatório Lusófono de Atividades Económicas); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

The management of project closure and release requires particular attention to recognition of all participants' contributions, to communication of results, and learning from the project experience. This process not only consolidates the value of the work done, but also strengthens the sense of ownership, belonging and collaboration. However, the challenge of the final phase lies in concluding the collaboration exercised so far, both in practical-operational and reflective aspects, to support the interventions. This competency promotes awareness of practices and tools for an effective closure, a fair recognition to all actors, to maintain (or not) collaboration over time and all those transformative tensions and interactions that have sustained the change hitherto.

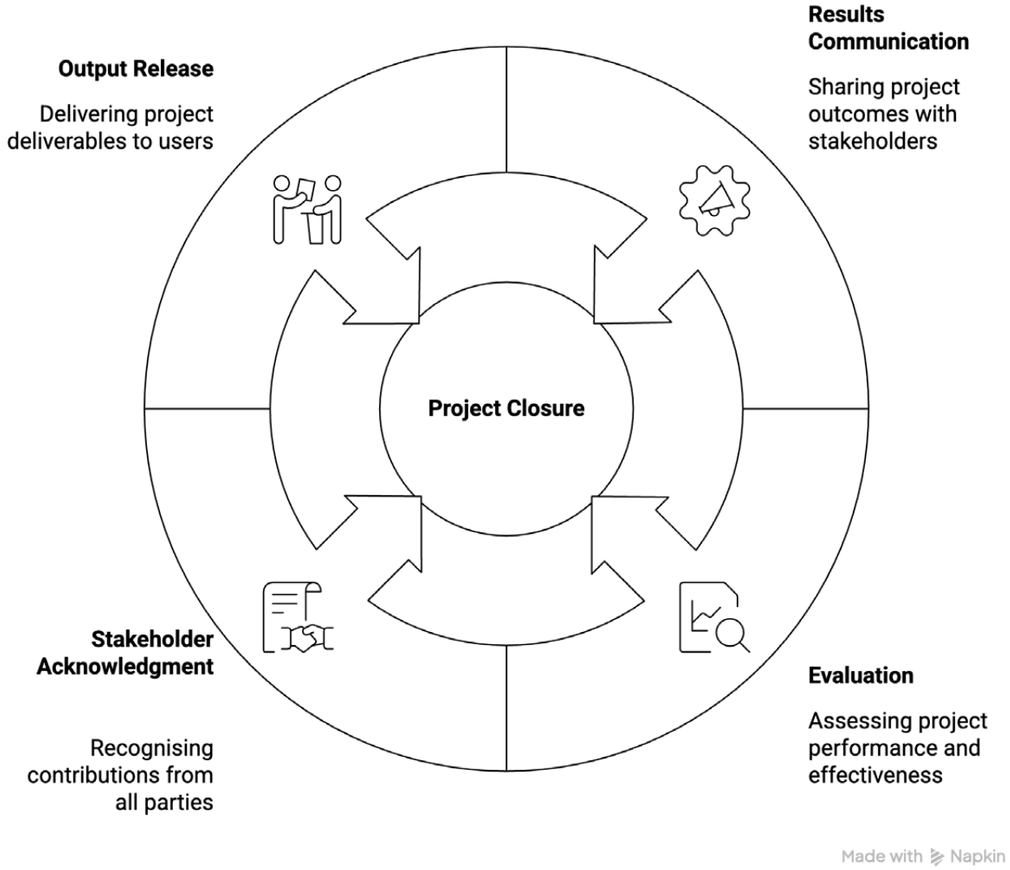
Definitions and Discussion

When all the work has been completed, project closure sets the formal conclusion of a project: **results are communicated, evaluated, and stakeholders' contributions are acknowledged, and outputs are released to users**. This process ensures that the project is wrapped up and that all deliverables are handed over to the parties involved.

Being each project unique, this phase can vary in terms of flexibility and the kind of activities from one case to another. For example, some projects may require the completion of specific work packages, the fulfillment of indicators and the final reporting on the tasks carried out by all partners.

In projects bound by funding requirements, closure often involves mandatory activities to ensure accountability and prevent legal complications. If a project is not closed properly, the project management team may be seen in a negative light, even for issues beyond their control. Similarly, the efforts and time spent can be unfairly questioned. While these activities are crucial for organisational purposes and helpful to avoid adverse scenarios, they do not on their own address **the care and reflection that should be nurtured to ensure resilient and enduring transformations**.

From this perspective arises the proposal at the core of the present competency: the importance of paying particular attention to project closure as **a *release* of multiple outputs and outcomes — tangible and intangible — at multiple levels, towards the people, communities, and contexts** that have been involved, that benefit from the results generated, and that often carry the responsibility of ensuring their continuity. In collaborative projects, this **strongly relational dimension is the foundation of a closure that is both positive and genuinely transformative**.



Closing with care: towards lasting impact

Beyond the formality, the project closure is indeed an essential part of co-design. It is not just about saying the project is done, but also about **how it was made and how it ended, who was part of that journey, and what the work meant**. If that part is skipped, it can feel like people and communities were only involved temporarily, without acknowledgement or care for the longer-term impact. When done with care, closing a project can strengthen inclusion because **it invites everyone, regardless of their role or title, to be (and feel to be) part of the final reflection**. It helps **transition responsibly, release what is no longer needed, and honour the relationships, outputs, and outcomes** that were built and developed. It also provides an opportunity to **reflect on what was left undone, what was missing, or where mistakes were made, supporting learning and future improvements.**

Crediting the contributions of others ensures that everyone involved in the project, from grassroots participants to institutional collaborators, receives proper recognition.

This practice not only acknowledges the value of each actor's contributions to the project but also fosters continued engagement and respect within the community, as well as the community's commitment to the project. In this sense, it encourages the shared ownership of the project outcomes.

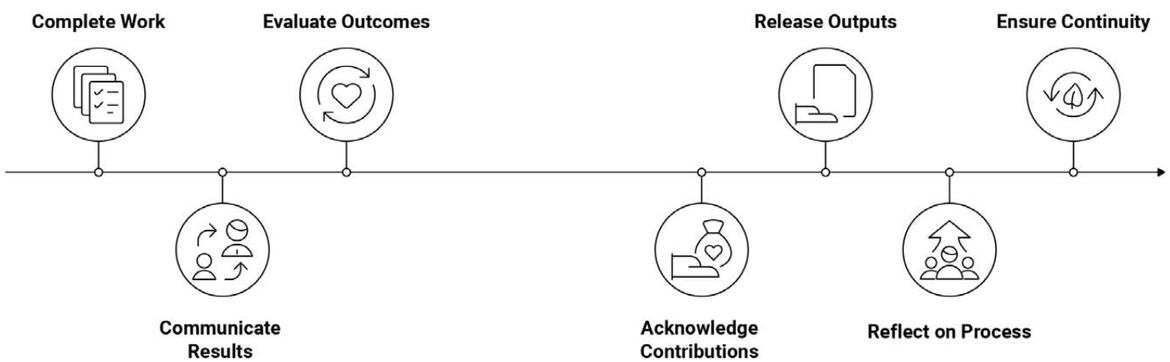
Social inclusion projects often involve vulnerable or marginalised groups, and a well-managed project closure provides an **opportunity for these groups to reflect on their role in the process, in the transformation towards a positive impact for themselves**. It is also a moment to guarantee that the insights and contributions from these groups are preserved, ensuring that they are not forgotten once the project ends. Given these conditions, and considering the specific nature of participatory social innovation projects — strongly process-oriented and aimed at fostering change, whether immediate or long-term — the release phase requires particular attention.

In the framework proposed by the ATELIER project, the idea of project closure and release management is intertwined with the principles of social inclusion and co-design. Closing a project effectively is particularly important when the goal is to foster long-term social change or create sustainable systems of collaboration. By ensuring — through a participatory approach — that the contributions of each participant are properly credited, it is possible to promote a culture of respect, inclusivity, and shared ownership that supports lasting relationships.

Not really a closure

The perspective fostered by the ATELIER project also clashes with the idea of considering release as a one-off act. It is then recommended to **design an end that can uphold transformation over time, being gradual and, above all, open to revisiting progress and, if necessary, to redirecting activities and actions** towards more desirable and attainable outcomes. It must also be recognised that closing a project is particularly delicate, as it is the moment when the ability and capacity of the organisations entrusted with long-term management of the results are truly "tested" — without the support of the designers and other figures who have accompanied the project throughout its implementation.

Adopting an **observant and reflective stance** is once again essential — just as in the other phases of the transformative process — to identify conditions and critical issues surrounding the release, and to adapt its timing and modalities accordingly. For example, it may prove valuable to maintain **regular communication for a certain ex-post period** in order to monitor the situation until the autonomy of the stakeholders or the stability of the project outcomes can be ensured. This allows the efforts towards social inclusion not to dissipate, but instead to evolve into ongoing community-driven action.



Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Plan closure from the start
Agree what "done" means, who signs off, and a realistic timeline and budget for closing activities.

Document clearly
Keep an updated record of outcomes, decisions, and deliverables; prepare a handover pack (manuals, links, contacts, maintenance steps) and ensure it is actively used and integrated into ongoing practices rather than simply being filed away.

Involve all partners in the closure process
Include community members, partners, and stakeholders in discussions about how to conclude and what to communicate.

Communicate results accessibly
Share a short, plain-language summary (and translations if needed) with all participants and stakeholders.

Credit fairly
Decide how to acknowledge every contribution (names in reports, certificates, public thanks, authorship notes…), and obtain consent for names/images.

Agree on what comes next
Clarify what will continue, what will end, and what needs to be taken care of after the project finishes — especially when relationships or expectations have been built.

Key points to consider

Avoid treating project closure exclusively as an administrative phase. It is a **moment of transition**, with the power to strengthen or weaken trust. Rushing it erodes trust.

Power imbalances may emerge in recognition. It is crucial to address this inequality by reflecting on the true role of each party and actively involving quieter voices.

Accessibility matters: multiple formats, simple language, and offline copies where relevant.

Avoid gatekeeping: prefer open repositories, clear versioning, and portable file types.

Mind the **emotional dimension** of endings: recognition helps people feel seen.

Do not over-promise post-project support: be precise about what continues and what stops.

Closure is not always final. Some partnerships or ideas may continue beyond the formal end. Stay open to that possibility.

Reflective questions for your practice

*Were the results shared in formats and languages people can actually **use autonomously** (clear, complete, accessible)?*

*Were time and resources **budgeted enough** to close well?*

*Were **"closure" and "success" — but also "failure" — meanings co-defined** with stakeholders?*

*Is the project being closed in a way that feels **respectful, inclusive, and transparent**?*

*What did we **learn**, and when will we **check back** to see what stuck?*

*Is our closure process **reinforcing the values** that guided the project in the first place?*

*Are **contributions acknowledged fairly** — and who is missing from the credits?*

*If work continues, who is the **steward** and what **support window** is agreed?*

*If work stops, have we **minimised harm** and offered **alternatives or signposting**?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Emergency Room for Association

Project link

Catalogue page: 28

The project ER for Associations was launched in Malmö to help local associations navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis through free tailored advice, training, and community collaboration. **The project's closure was treated not as an abrupt end, but as a moment to consolidate learning, deliver lasting outputs such as a policy-shaping report, and ensure continuity by embedding results in structures** like the Nobel21 Association Centre. This approach secured ownership, sustainability, and stronger collaboration beyond the emergency phase.

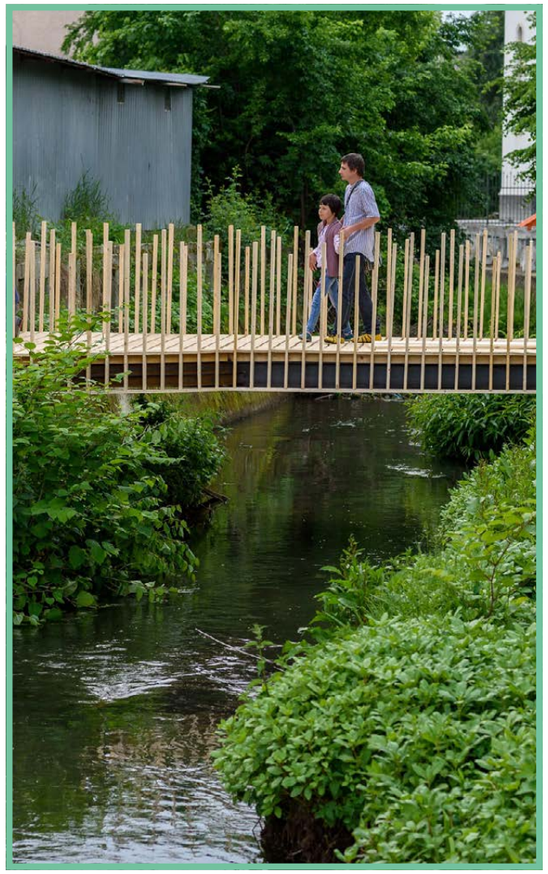


Green on the Morii Canal

Project link

Catalogue page: 110

This case study concerns the Green on the Morii Canal in Cluj-Napoca, which tested temporary urban interventions, such as a bridge and recreational spaces, to foster sustainable mobility and community engagement. It illustrates the current competency as the trial phase at the end of the project as an opportunity to consolidate results: **reports, educational materials, and online platforms ensured that community input informed future redevelopment**. Although temporary structures were removed, **the project secured local ownership and influenced municipal planning, embedding its outcomes beyond the pilot**.



EDL - Emotional Distance Learning

Project link

Catalogue page: 256

The project addresses the emotional and social challenges of online adult learning by developing tools and training for both educators and learners. It exemplifies how project closure can be released through its careful transition from project outputs to long-term use: **self-assessment systems, training modules, and toolkits were designed for continued integration into institutional programmes and learning platforms**. By ensuring accessibility through workshops, newsletters, and a dedicated website, **the project secured sustainability and relevance well beyond its formal end**.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB…

We run the European Project Semester (EPS) at UPB — a five-month, 30-ECTS spring programme where teams of 4–6 international students tackle a real-life brief for a Romanian or international company under academic supervision. The focus on project management, communication and intercultural skills gives our teams the tools to co-design responsibly with partners.

At the end, after the project defences, we do not just file reports. **We host a simple closing celebration that brings everyone back into the same room** — students, company mentors, community stakeholders, tutors, lab technicians and admin colleagues. **We set up an "Open Studio"**: each team has a table with their prototype, a one-page summary and a clear handover pack (links to the repository, usage notes, contacts, and next-step options agreed with the partner).

Before the refreshments, we hold a short circle. Each team thanks the people who made their progress possible, from grassroots participants to company engineers and we read a "credit roll" so every name is heard.

Two small rituals help us close well. First, a **"lessons postcard"**: everyone writes one thing to keep, one to change, and one to stop; we scan and share the set with all participants and include it in the final report. Second, a **"passing the baton"** moment: together with the partner we confirm who will host the prototype after EPS, who has edit rights, and the date for an optional follow-up check-in.

We make space for quieter voices — support staff, interpreters, residents who joined testing and adjust our language, so that every contribution is visible. Finally, we publish a short **closing note on our website listing all contributors and send personalised thank-you emails** within the week. Ending this way keeps dignity, ownership and relationships intact. It reminds us that **closure is not a goodbye to people, only to this phase of the work**.

A story from OLAE…

In our co-design projects, we approach closure not as a simple administrative act but as a crucial step to consolidate learning, celebrate contributions, and ensure the continuity of collaboration. From the outset, we plan for this phase by **involving all stakeholders** — community members, partners, and institutional collaborators — **in defining what "closure" means and how it will be enacted**. This includes agreeing on how results will be communicated, what outputs will be handed over, and what support or follow-up might be needed.

For example, in a recent community design project, we organised a structured closing workshop that brought together all participants. **Each group presented their contributions, reflecting on challenges and achievements.** We provided accessible summaries of project results, prototypes, and educational materials, making sure they were understandable to all participants, including those with varying language skills or accessibility needs. A collective reflection session allowed everyone to voice their experiences, insights, and suggestions for future initiatives.

We also implemented a **clear handover process**: responsibilities for maintaining outputs, continuing activities, or monitoring impacts were jointly agreed upon. This ensured that even after the formal project ended, ownership and accountability were preserved, and the collaborative spirit remained active. **Simple rituals, such as reading aloud a "credit roll" of all contributors and creating reflective postcards** capturing what to keep, change, or stop, reinforced inclusion, recognition, and mutual respect.

By closing the project this way, we not only formalised results but also strengthened relationships and trust. **Stakeholders left with a sense of belonging and clarity about next steps.** Importantly, **closure became a reflective process that honours contributions, embeds lessons learned, and sustains social impact beyond the project lifecycle**.

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Links to other Competencies

Competency 8 – ***Critical thinking on design processes and collaborative transformation***
Closure offers a key moment to reflect critically on how design choices supported or limited inclusion, helping consolidate learning and highlight the transformative potential of the process.

Competency 14 – ***Stakeholder engagement and negotiation***
Closing well means aligning expectations on what continues/stops, and negotiating concrete follow-ups. Strong engagement at this stage prevents drop-off and keeps collaboration alive beyond the project.

Competency 16 – Shared ownership models and principles
Closure is a handover; shared ownership clarifies who maintains, governs, and uses the outputs (roles, rights, licences, stewardship). This secures continuity, fair recognition, and long-term engagement after release.

Competency n° 21 – ***Group dynamics facilitation***
Group energy, expectations, and transitions. Understanding group dynamics helps make the end of a project feel supportive rather than abrupt.

Competency 25 – ***Feedback and replanning in participation***
The closure of the project can benefit from feedback and a participatory monitoring to enable a sense of ownership and belonging of its outputs by the actors involved.

AREA OF COMPETENCE 9

Collaborative prototyping and participative testing

Prototyping is where ideas become tangible and collective imagination meets reality. It turns abstract discussions into shared experiences that can be seen, touched, and tested, allowing people to understand, question, and transform what is being designed together. In participatory design, prototyping is not just a technical step, but a relational and reflective practice that helps groups learn through making, testing, and adjusting. This unit explores how collaborative prototyping and participative testing can be used to build understanding, collect feedback, and continuously improve ideas and decisions within co-design processes.

In co-design, especially in community-based projects, prototypes act as mediators between diverse participants — designers, users, institutions, and citizens — who may not share the same language or expertise. Competency 24, ***Real-time, low-fidelity prototyping***, makes it possible to include everyone by creating simple, accessible models, both tangible and not, and settings that invite participation. This Competency suggests how cardboard mock-ups, sketches, and simulations enable people to test the change they cooperate for, express preferences and ideas without the need for specialised skills. These forms of basic prototyping promote openness and experimentation, give voice to users, reduce fear of failure, and encourage collaboration through trial and error.

Prototypes also reveal unspoken knowledge. When participants interact with a mock-up or enact a process, they often express needs and emotions that otherwise would remain hidden in conversation. These gestures and reactions — sometimes more eloquent than words — help designers and facilitators capture tacit insights that inform design decisions. Prototyping thus becomes a space of shared exploration, where differences in language, culture, or technical literacy become assets rather than barriers.

Prototyping and testing are iterative processes driven by continuous ***feedback and re-planning***, addressed by Competency 25. Co-designers in complex contexts need to be flexible, listen to feedback, and adapt, especially in projects for social inclusion or for systemic change. Feedback is a collective learning opportunity, fostering participant ownership and belonging.

Participative testing extends this learning process. By engaging communities, users, and partners in evaluating prototypes in contexts, we can observe how interventions perform, where they fail, and where they succeed. Testing does not simply measure functionality—it assesses relevance and accessibility. Insights from this process feed back into design, refining not only the product or service, but also the relationships that deal with it. In this way, testing becomes an act of care and accountability, ensuring that what is designed responds authentically to lived realities.

Participative prototyping and testing emphasise experimentation, responsiveness. They encourage hands-on thinking, reflection through action, and making change visible and negotiable. You should view prototyping as an ongoing dialogue between ideas and experience, building understanding, trust, and shared capacity for action.

For projects that aim to foster social inclusion, this approach holds transformative potential: it bridges social and institutional divides, builds mutual learning among actors, and creates artefacts and experiences that travel across contexts. Most importantly, it sustains a culture of iteration, where every prototype is an opportunity to question assumptions, strengthen collaboration, and bring the future into reach through collective experimentation.

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino)

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- **Use prototyping as a participatory tool**, enabling diverse stakeholders to visualise, explore, and co-create ideas;
- **Design and facilitate low-fidelity and real-time prototyping sessions** that promote inclusion and immediate feedback;
- **Collect, interpret, and act upon feedback** from different groups, recognising its value as a driver for learning and adaptation;
- **Manage iterative design cycles** that incorporate feedback and re-planning as continuous and collaborative processes;
- **Develop resilience and flexibility** when prototypes or interventions fail, using these moments as opportunities for reflection and innovation;
- **Foster shared ownership and transparency** by closing feedback loops — communicating what has changed, why, and thanks to whom.

Area of Competence 9:

Collaborative prototyping and participative testing

24 REAL-TIME, LOW-FIDELITY PROTOTYPING

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); Agnieszka Zarzyńska (Caritas Europa); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

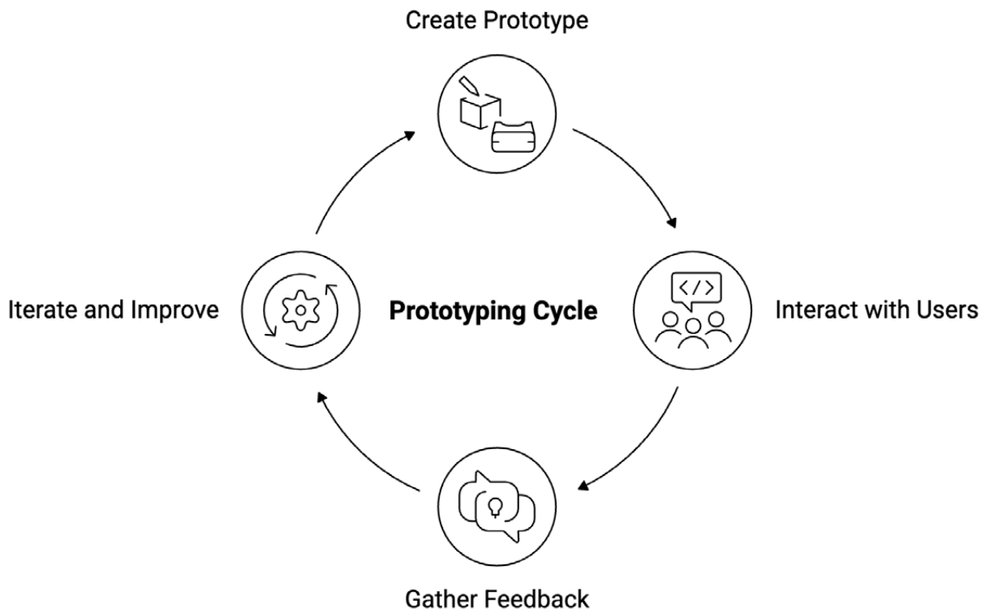
In co-design projects, prototypes are strategically used as tangible tools to facilitate understanding and design dialogue. This approach is particularly effective in complex contexts where non-verbal language and concrete interaction provide valuable insights, or where they are the only possible way to communicate due to linguistic diversity or physical and cognitive limitations. Using prototyping, especially low-fidelity prototyping, makes it possible to introduce objects, services or processes into an environment, a place, or a community, so that their reactions to the prototypes can be observed. Prototyping also stimulates imagination, leaving room for adding features or expressing preferences that might struggle to emerge with a "finished" product. Furthermore, these approaches and techniques enable interaction with a "beta" transformative intervention and reduce realisation time and costs by allowing for forecasting consequences and fine-tuning methods and resources before full-scale implementation.

Advice will be given to embrace the flexible and risk-prevention potential of prototyping — leaving the following competency to express the relational and participatory value of prototyping.

Definitions and Discussion

Prototyping indicates a design process based on **real models (at product, service, process, and system level) that mediate interaction between designers, users, and stakeholders**. The feedback generated from this interaction can come as direct responses, observed behaviour, or insights, making it. Prototyping is highly employed in usability testing, but it can serve any phase of the project. It is an exploratory, transformative, and reflective process: it evolves through **tangible objects, demonstrators, and testers, providing participants with something to interact with, react to, improve, and develop collectively**. In this sense, prototypes make dialogue concrete in the space between what the world is and what it could become.

Prototypes can take many forms — from simple sketches, cardboard models, and role-playing simulations to low-tech digital mockups. The key is that they can be **created and adjusted in real-time**, often during collaborative sessions, allowing for **immediate feedback and iteration** — with fidelity increasing at each cycle, if needed.



Making sense through making

What is valuable about prototyping is that it encourages **spontaneity and informality**, which makes it easier for participants — especially non-design experts, those unfamiliar with abstract thinking, and people whose voices often go unheard — to express preferences, comments, and critiques, even without speaking.

Prototypes make it possible to **verify whether a project truly responds to user needs and fits its context**, while also **revealing "hidden" information about the desires and expectations** of the beneficiaries and the other stakeholders. They operate as "Trojan horses" — with Boyer et al. — because of their ability to **demonstrate that other options exist and open space for dialogue around the failures of the status quo**.

Prototypes are indeed, whether concrete or intangible, artefacts that quietly introduce the potential for systemic change, embedding questions of scale and growth from the very start, possibly influencing broader systems, cultures, and institutions.

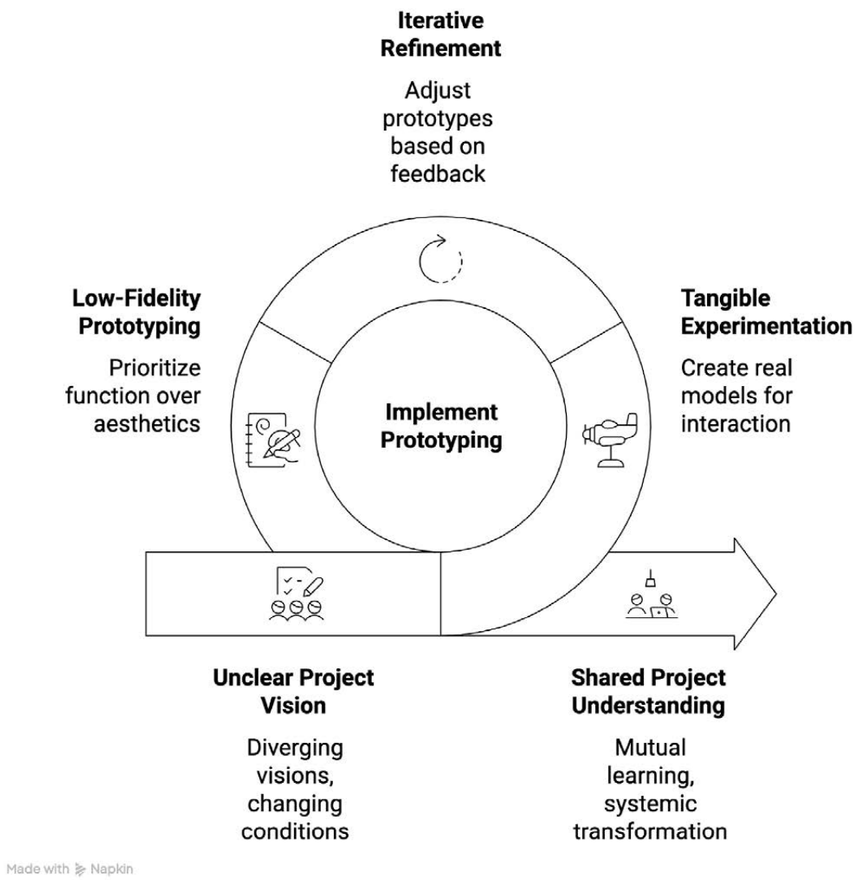
Finally, **prototypes generate evidence and can create feedback loops while also telling a persuasive story**: they facilitate small, well-documented experiments, validate ideas and reduce risk and can even attract future partners or funding by showing how the future might work.

These premises help understanding how prototyping is not only about testing form or function, but rather a **powerful method for participation, mutual learning, and systemic transformation**. By combining tangible experimentation with iterative refinement, it allows projects to **move from idea to reality, from needs to impact**, while keeping people, contexts, and stakeholders at the centre of the design process. Given these features, prototyping appears to be particularly useful in complex and dynamic environments where there are not converging visions, where changing conditions demand adaptability, and where high-tech solutions may not yet be immediately feasible.

Sustainable ways of prototyping

In these scenarios, the use of ***slow prototyping*** allows for the development of an idea gradually, refining it through extended user testing before a final version is produced. This approach supports scaling up in ways that remain sensitive to specific communities or local contexts. Similarly, ***low-fidelity prototypes*** — simple, early-stage models prioritising function over aesthetics — enable rapid iteration before resources are invested in higher-fidelity development. Paper prototypes are a classic example, helping visualise basic functions and flows with minimal investment.

According to the perspective promoted by the ATELIER project, the use of low-fidelity prototyping is considered pivotal for fostering social inclusion through co-design: when working with diverse, marginalised groups who may not be familiar with sophisticated technological tools, the use of simple, real-time prototypes ensure that these **participants can more easily engage in the design process, contribute to and influence the expected and needed outcomes**. Moreover, low-fidelity prototyping creates opportunities for **real-time co-creation, empowering users to see their ideas take shape quickly**. The emphasis on simplicity and flexibility helps **bridge gaps in technical knowledge, allowing for greater involvement and ownership** across all participant levels.



Focus

Below you can find several modelling and prototyping tools or methods that are participative:

PAPER PROTOTYPING

How to use it: Create mockups using paper, scissors, and markers. Draw interface screens, cut out interactive elements, and create foldable models. Use different paper sizes to represent various devices or components. Modify by drawing over, cutting, or adding new paper pieces.

What it is used for: Testing user interfaces before digital development, creating quick architectural models, designing printed materials, validating information hierarchy, and exploring interaction flows with immediate tactile feedback.

CLAY OR PLAY-DOH

How to use it: Mold and shape clay by hand to create forms. Build up from basic shapes, add details gradually. Use tools – like pencils, brushes, or plastic utensils – for texture and fine details. Keeping clay moist for along the workshop allows for continuing modification.

What it is used for: Ergonomic product testing, organic form development, character design, therapeutic workshops, tactile learning experiences, and exploring concepts that need to feel natural in human hands.

FOAM CORE AND CARDBOARD

How to use it: Cut foam core boards or cardboard with craft knives to create 3D structures. Use tape, glue, or pins to assemble pieces. Build at different scales depending on your needs. Paint or cover with paper for finishing touches.

What it is used for: Architectural space planning, product form exploration, exhibition design, furniture concepts, packaging prototypes, and any physical structure that needs dimensional accuracy and durability.

LEGO OR BUILDING BLOCKS

How to use it: Construct models using interlocking blocks. Build structures, create modular systems, or use different colored blocks to represent different elements or user types. Easily reconfigure by adding, removing, or rearranging pieces.

What it is used for: System architecture visualisation, user journey mapping, organisational structures, process flows, modular product concepts, and collaborative team-building exercises where participants build together.

Focus

WHITEBOARD SKETCHING

How to use it: Draw concepts, diagrams, and ideas directly on whiteboards using markers. Erase and redraw as needed. Use different colours to categorise information. Take photos to capture iterations before erasing.

What it is used for: Real-time collaborative brainstorming, system diagrams, user flows, mathematical modelling, teaching and workshops, agile project planning, and any situation requiring immediate visual communication.

RAPID SKETCHING

How to use it: Draw quickly with pen and paper, focusing on capturing core concepts rather than details. Use simple lines, basic shapes, and minimal shading. Time-box sketching sessions to maintain speed and spontaneity.

What it is used for: Initial concept exploration, design thinking sessions, meeting note-taking, quick communication of complex ideas, ideation exercises, and situations where speed of iteration is more important than visual polish.

ROLE-PLAYING AND ACTING

How to use it: Assign participants different roles (users, service providers, stakeholders) and act out scenarios. Use simple props if needed. Encourage improvisation and natural responses to discover pain points and opportunities.

What it is used for: Service design testing, user empathy building, training simulations, social intervention planning, accessibility testing, and understanding complex interpersonal dynamics in systems.

BODY STORMING

How to use it: Use physical movement, gestures, and spatial positioning to explore concepts. Walk through spaces, simulate physical interactions, and use your body to understand scale, ergonomics, and movement patterns.

What it is used for: Physical space design, accessibility testing, ergonomic evaluation, understanding user movement patterns, exploring gestural interfaces, and situations where physical comfort and natural movement are critical factors.

STICKY NOTE MAPPING

How to use it: Write ideas, tasks, or concepts on individual sticky notes. Arrange them on walls or large surfaces to create maps, flows, or categories. Move notes around to explore different arrangements and relationships.

What it is used for: User journey mapping, service blueprints, information architecture, affinity mapping, prioritisation exercises, Kanban boards, and collaborative workshops where multiple people contribute ideas simultaneously.

STORYBOARDING

How to use it: Create sequential panels showing a story or process over time. Draw simple scenes in boxes, add brief text descriptions, and use arrows to show progression. Focus on key moments and transitions.

What it is used for: User experience scenarios, service interactions, marketing campaigns, training materials, process documentation, and any situation where understanding sequence and user emotions over time is crucial.

WIZARD OF OZ PROTOTYPING

How to use it: Create a simple interface or front-end experience while manually providing the "system" responses behind the scenes. One person operates as the "wizard," responding to user inputs as if the system were fully functiona.

What it is used for: Testing complex system concepts before technical development, validating user interactions with AI or automated services, exploring voice interfaces, and understanding user expectations without building full functionality.

STRING AND PINS

How to use it: Use a cork board, foam board, or wall as a base. Place pins or thumbtacks to represent different elements, then connect them with colored string or yarn to show relationships, flows, or dependencies.

What it is used for: System mapping, network analysis, relationship modelling, dependency visualisation, family trees, organisational charts, and any complex system where understanding connections between elements is essential..

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Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Guarantee accessibility by offering multiple ways to contribute (drawing, writing, speaking), with large-print options, good contrast, language support, and seating. Ensure spaces and materials are usable for people with different physical abilities, learning styles, and comfort levels.

Test at realistic times and conditions (noise, light, offline constraints). Also, start simple with easy materials (cardboard, paper, tape, LEGO) and avoid tools that require training.

Make prototypes editable (Post-its, Velcro, erasable pens) and focus on core actions or experiences rather than polish.

Ensure safety by **briefing participants** on cutting tools, glue, or sharp objects, and setting up safe work areas.

Create **turn-taking** so quieter voices are heard and avoid over-weighting staff or expert opinions. Rotate leadership: let different community members guide different exercises.

Watch for **jargon** that might generate exclusion. Provide opt-out options for activities that might feel uncomfortable.

Designate **community members as co-facilitators**, not just participants

While facilitating, **position yourself as a learner**, not just a facilitator, and ensure multiple ways of engagement in each activity.

Script simple tasks and learning goals ("we are checking clarity of step 1", "we are testing reach and readability"), not preferences in general. Start each method with a brief "everyone tries it" moment before diving deeper. Use the "yes, and..." principle: build on every contribution rather than evaluating. Use the "I like, I wish, I wonder" feedback structure to keep responses constructive.

Key points to consider

Involve end-users from the start and test in real contexts with realistic constraints. Script simple tasks ("we are checking clarity of step 1") to keep learning focused.

Consider how **age, gender, race, and class dynamics** shape participation; recognise that social issues may be personal or triggering.

Be mindful of c**ultural differences in expression and participation styles**. Be aware that some cultures may be more comfortable with certain types of physical expression than others.

Reflective questions for your practice

*Were the **people most affected involved** from the beginning?*

*Did everyone have **accessible ways to contribute and be heard**?*

***Could someone outside the team rebuild** this from our notes and templates?*

*Were prototypes tested in **real contexts** with realistic constraints (time, space, connectivity)?*

*Was the **prototype easy to modify on the spot**, and what did each cycle teach us?*

*Did we keep **costs low and materials sustainable**?*

*Were **consent and data handling** clear and transparent?*

*Which **voices** were heard, which were overlooked, and how did people from different backgrounds interact?*

*Are we building **local capacity**, or just extracting information?*

*What **assumptions** shaped our process, and what did we learn about the community's preferred ways of problem-solving?*

*What systems ensure **community input** influences final outcomes?*

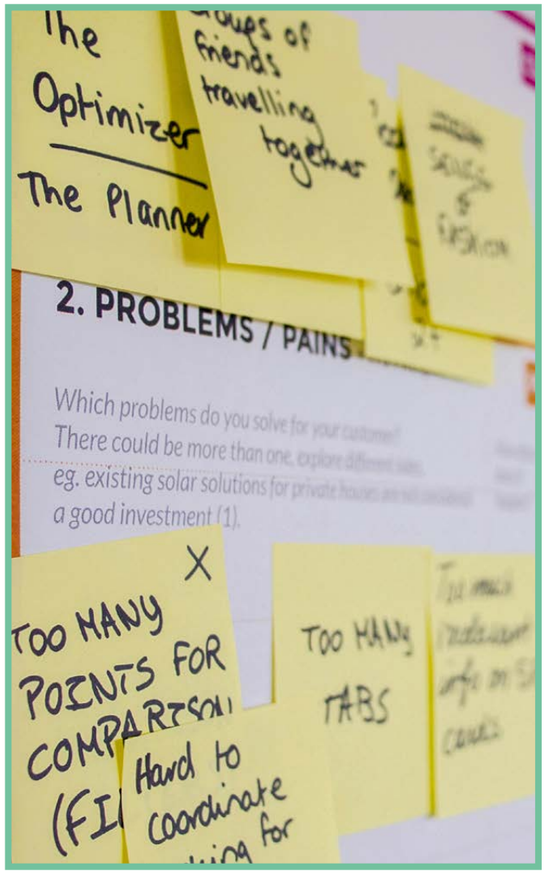
Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Design Thinking for Social Inclusion

Project link

Catalogue page: 121

This project applied design thinking methods to three areas key to social inclusion: social entrepreneurship, community work, and sustainability management. Teachers, learners, and community members engaged in workshops, empathy exercises, and co-creation sessions to identify needs and prototype solutions. The project's interactive learning platform, with toolkits and video tutorials, supports real-time experimentation and iterative refinement. **By working directly with communities, participants turned abstract challenges into tangible models, adapting and improving them step by step within real contexts.** Prototyping allowed participants to **test ideas quickly**, simulating services, community activities, or learning tools, and **gathering immediate feedback on usability and relevance**. This made it possible to adjust and refine solutions in ways that were both practical and inclusive.



Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from NUSTPB...

We teach Industrial Design at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Mechatronics (UNSTPB), and every diploma project must end with a functional prototype at the defence. To make that realistic, we scaffold the whole journey with **low-tech first, high-tech later**. Early on, students build **quick mock-ups from cardboard, foam and off-the-shelf parts, and run short "build – test – tweak" loops with peers and potential users**. Only once the core interaction works on the table do we move to higher fidelity.

We back this up with practical support: access to our 3D-printing labs, a small materials bank (sheet sToCk, fasteners, basic electronics) and consultancy from tutors and technicians. **Weekly drop-in clinics focus on unblocking one issue at a time** — fit, grip, balance, reach — **so progress is steady and visible**. Where needed, we pair students with an assistant for a short sprint to translate a paper mechanism into a printable joint, or to tune tolerances for assembly.

This approach keeps prototyping inclusive and affordable, while raising the bar for functionality at the end. Students arrive at the defence with something that works — not just a rendering — along with clear notes on iterations and what they learned from each test.

A story from POLITO…

In our work in social design, we have really come to see how important it is to take a hands-on, experimental approach, benefiting from the use of prototypes. **Building and testing low-fidelity prototypes** — that can be rough, unfinished, and flexible — **helps make a project tangible**. It gives us the possibility to verify better if we are doing well, and the people we interact with a way to understand what we are doing together and to share their thoughts openly.

For us, prototyping is about getting our hands dirty, trying things out, and learning together. Whether it is a product, a service, or a process, creating prototypes in a participatory way, through co-crafting, is the best way to explore change. The beauty of this approach is that **it allows for mistakes, for adjustments, for rethinking**. When everyone is gathered around something concrete, we can experiment, refine, and improve it together — designers, participants, stakeholders — all contributing to shaping the project.

Prototypes also help highlight what works and what does not, even when people cannot quite put it into words. Whether they are rough sketches or almost-ready products, prototypes act as tools — and as a kind of action strategy. **They are beneficial when we work with people who aren't used to imagining new things or expressing personal preferences.** When someone might hold back to avoid conflict, their body language, their gestures, and the way they interact with the prototype often tell us more than words ever could.

So, for us, **prototyping is less about creating the perfect solution and more about creating a shared space to explore, discuss, and co-create**. It is about embracing change, learning as we go, and making sure that everyone involved has a real chance to shape the outcome.

Design for Each(One) is probably the best case to tell about our experience with prototypes and their value in our work tackling complexity and social marginalisation phenomena. The project — still ongoing — began in 2015 to bring **designers and people with Multiple Sclerosis together to create personalised assistive devices** — objects that cannot be mass-produced in healthcare. The project involves service users, caregivers, design students, and researchers working side by side.

Prototyping is at the heart of everything we do. We start with simple, **low-fidelity models to test ideas and see what really works in daily life**. These early versions make ideas tangible and give users a safe space to explore, comment, and experiment. Each prototype is more than just a model—it is a conversation starter. **Through hands-on, iterative work, devices evolve step by step to fit the user's needs.** In the end, they help restore autonomy in everyday actions, while keeping the process collaborative, creative, and flexible.

References

RECOMMENDED READING

[Available in ATELIER's Repository of Literature]

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Links to other Competencies

Competency 6 – *Inclusion and accessibility principles*
Paper, cardboard and simple mock-ups lower barriers of language, literacy and digital access, enabling more people to understand, critique and co-create.

Competency 18 – *Project development management*
Prototypes can support any and every stage of the project cycle, allowing the collection of insights and feedback to inform the next step and refine the status of what has been envisaged. They structure iterative delivery (build - test - learn - refine), de-risk decisions, and align milestones with evidence from real contexts.

Competency 25 – *Feedback and replanning in participation*
Serving as a way to validate or adjusting ideas and interventions, prototypes play a crucial role in gathering feedback throughout the project development process. Teams can visibly turn comments into changes, keeping the participation loop short and accountable.

Area of Competence 9:

Collaborative prototyping and participative testing

25 FEEDBACK AND REPLANNING IN PARTICIPATION

Texts by Cristian Campagnaro, Sara Ceraolo, Giorgia Curtabbi (Politecnico di Torino); Agnieszka Zarzyńska (Caritas Europa); Patricia Isabela Brăileanu, Gabriel Dima (National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest)

Overview

Prototyping allows the collection of insights even from individuals less inclined to direct and active participation. Starting from the prototype, it is possible to identify aspects of acceptance, those for improvement, and those at risk of failure, even when it is difficult or not possible to express them clearly. Prototyping is a co-design tool because it enables even non-expert participants to agree or disagree on solutions and outcomes, and allows designers to better plan the processes of change which they aim for with their project.

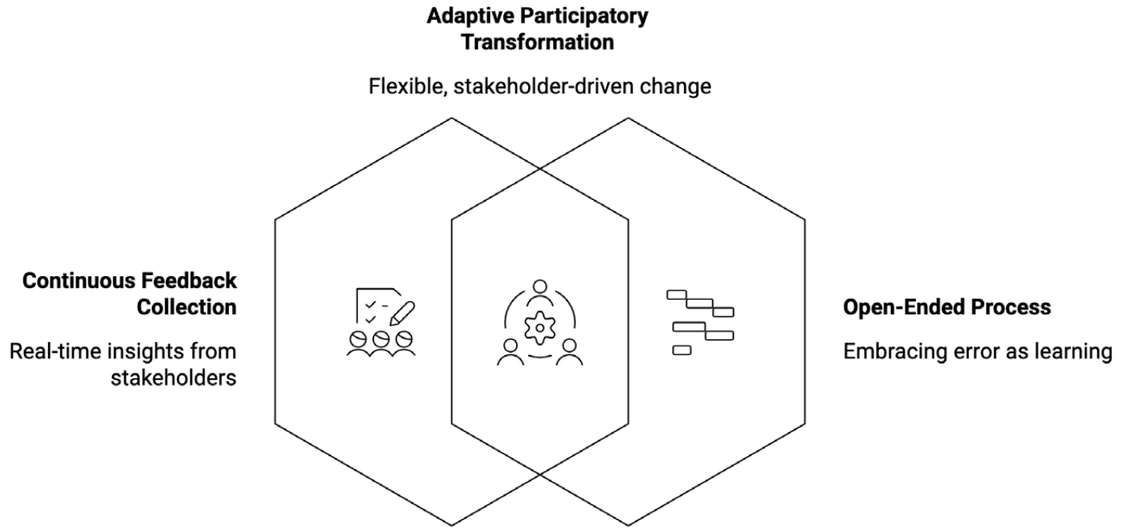
This competency helps develop familiarity with iterative testing experiences and, above all, with the fact that something does not work in your project and you need to reimagine it based on feedback, responses, and acknowledgements. It also fosters a flexible design mindset to accept, without discouragement, significant revisions prompted by feedback and failure. Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of valuing the comments received and giving a response back to those who offered them, recognising the value of participation.

Definitions and Discussion

This competency builds on the use of prototypes (further detailed in Competency 24) — to show how **testing and interaction, both among people and with ideas or artefacts, generate feedback**. It informs design improvements and adjustments, and it is **crucial to pursue an iterative project development** (illustrated through Competency 18) and to address complex, or even wicked, problems (as discussed in Competency 10).

The ATELIER project focuses on processes addressing complex phenomena (see Competency 10), where unforeseen circumstances inevitably arise, and collaborative dynamics are challenging (see Competency 20). Moreover, such projects often face the need to constantly revisit and reinterpret the initial problems, rarely allowing for a stable or fully predictable trajectory. These conditions require **flexibility and openness to change** — already emphasised in previous Competencies — which form the basis of co-design processes for social inclusion and underpin the notion of re-planning presented here.It is important to acknowledge that co-design is demanding, and things often do not go as expected. For this reason, **the capacity to reprogramme and try again becomes essential, supported by continuous feedback collection** throughout the project journey. It is vital to **accept error** or, more precisely, to **embrace an open-ended process** in which every revision or restart represents a learning opportunity and a possibility to **strengthen the desired transformation and impact**.

This perspective relieves the burden of too ambitious expectations and instead nurtures **awareness and attentiveness to the process** itself and to what it reveals in its progress. This Competency appears to connect the previous ones, establishing **renegotiation and iteration as core principles of participatory design for projects**, even those addressing social challenges and wicked problems. Along the way, and together with the actors involved, it is often necessary to revise activities and timelines, but also the configuration of alliances, stakeholders — e.g.,due to changing availability or energy —, as well as political support, which is normally everchanging. At times, even results and objectives must be reconsidered, particularly when new or unexpected insights emerge during the process. Therefore, it is helpful to plan feedback processes and ensure that **dedicated activities** are in place to incorporate them, always within a participatory logic.

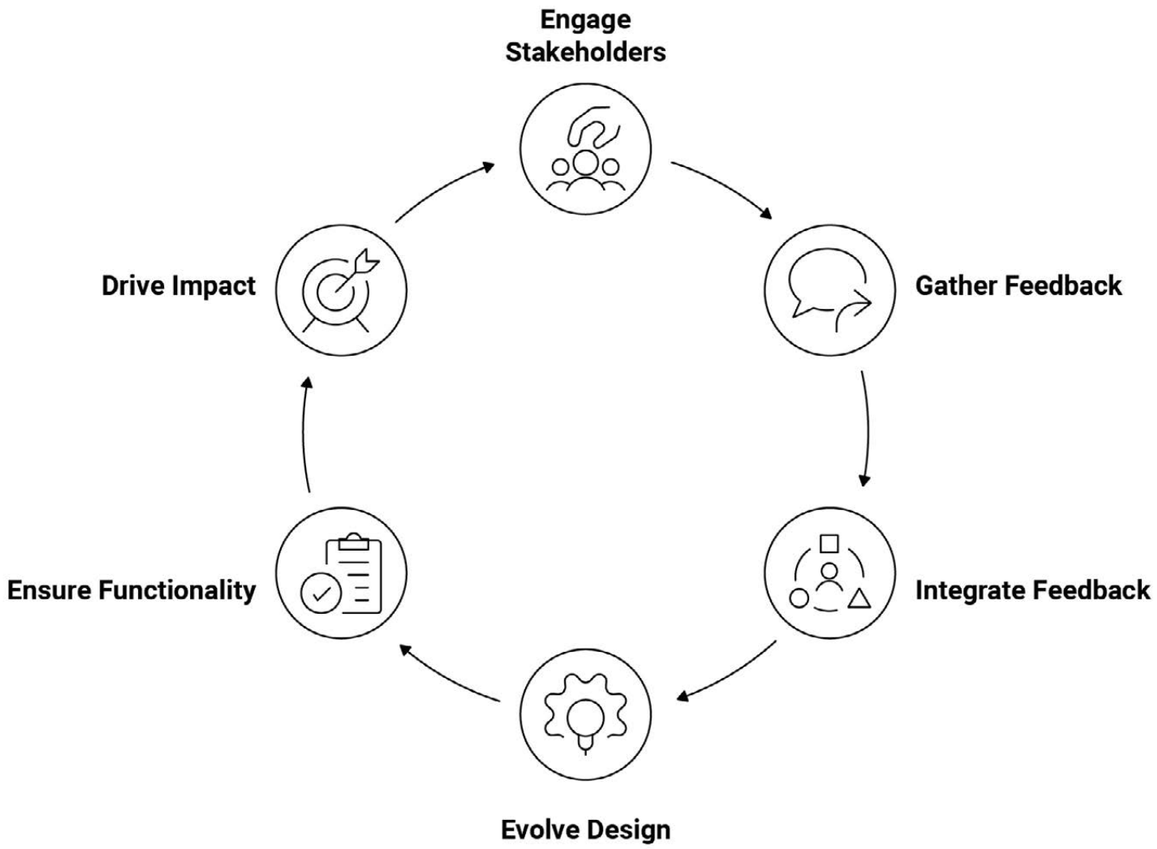


Feedback as a driver for learning and adaptation

Incorporating feedback from participatory processes means **actively engaging stakeholders in the design process**, including users, community members, and other relevant groups. By integrating their feedback, the design evolves to better meet their needs and expectations, ensuring that the intervention remains faithful to the principles of the concept, the project outputs are both functional and user-centred, and the outcomes meaningfully drive impact.

This Competency stresses these considerations encouraging to collect feedback from all participants — especially marginalised or underrepresented groups — **ensuring that the design process is democratic and responsive to the feedback received, adapting to it when it proves valid and useful**. This is why it is particularly important that feedback is collected from the stakeholders involved and that all of them can express themselves and can do so in the most suitable and accessible ways. Integrating feedback into the project evolution can thus be regarded as a reflective process, helping project participants listen, learn and improve their actions. It is a fundamental part of grassroots participation projects from beginning to end, proposed here from a participatory perspective.

Feedback captures immediate reactions and guides iterative refinements during the design process. **When collected at multiple stages, it also supports broader monitoring and evaluation** (see Competencies 1, 18, and 23), making it possible to verify whether interventions remain aligned with needs, principles, and intended impact over time. The systematic collection of observations and feedback accompanies the project — especially during experimental and implementation phases — allowing the refinement of interventions and ensuring that progress is aligned with the intended change and social impact.



Tips and Thoughts

Practical steps

Co-define questions about learning goals for each round of feedback gathering.

Map who to involve — especially under-represented users — and set a regular cadence for sessions.

Mix methods — observation + think-aloud + quick intercepts/diaries — to capture different kinds of feedback.

Use **multiple ways** to receive feedback — speaking, writing, and sketching.

Record inputs in a simple template: Issue - Evidence - Implication - Idea (with photos/ quotes).

Keep **generative** (idea-making) and **evaluative** (judging) sessions distinct.

Close the loop: tell participants what changed, credit contributions, and invite back if relevant.

Key points to consider

Separate critique of the idea from critique of the person.

Gather **stories**, not just numbers.

Test **edge cases and unintended effects,** not only the happy path.

Try avoiding frequent mistakes in evaluation such as not **involving the people** who have the most to share (participants, project workers).

Reflective questions for your practice

*What were our **must-learn questions** this round — and did we answer them?*

*Which **feedback** is to be acted **first**, even immediately, and why? Could such a fix create a new problem or exclusion?*

*Are **returns diminishing** — is it time to stop testing or change methods?*

*Do I need to **re-scope** timeline, budget, or partners based on findings? What is the smallest next test that can be run to reduce risk further?*

*What **strengths** and **weaknesses** does my organisation have in the key steps of evaluation?*

*How do I **involve** project participants in designing the evaluation and agreeing on what information to collect?*

*How do I **explain** to colleagues **why** we need this information and ask for their support? What will influence them?*

Cases from ATELIER's Catalogue

Fashion Truck

Project link

Catalogue page: 32



The Fashion Truck project is a mobile clothing store that collects donated clothes and distributes them directly to people in need across Munich, reducing stigma and increasing accessibility. Incorporating feedback and replanning were pursued by **actively engaging beneficiaries throughout the process**. Their feedback was regularly collected and evaluated, **shaping both service delivery and project adjustments**. Moreover, by allowing beneficiaries to donate clothes or take part in small tasks, the project fostered ownership, participation, and continuous improvement.

Preventing Violence

Catalogue page: 150



Led by Altro Abitare (Italy) and AKADIMOS (Greece), this project delivers training, campaigns, and community interventions to raise awareness and prevent abuse and violence. The integration of feedback at multiple stages and through diverse tools characterised the development of the project. **Questionnaires and Google Forms** gathered participants' evaluations after courses, while **reflective surveys** allowed volunteers and team members to share experiences and suggestions. **Collaborative meetings between partners** enabled cross-national adjustments, and feedback inspired the creation of infographics and awareness materials tailored to local needs. **Co-designed experimentation with volunteers** further adapted interventions to specific contexts. Finally, **reflective questionnaires assessed outcomes and informed sustainability**. By combining structured tools, creative co-design, and iterative reflection, the project shows how feedback can drive both content refinement and long-term impact.

Social Entrepreneurship as a Tool for Fighting Social Exclusion and Poverty

Project link

Catalogue page: 226



The initiative delivers training for people with disabilities, combining employment creation with social awareness and policy advocacy. **Beneficiaries were engaged in implementation, to co-create personalised vocational plans**, contribute to laboratory activities, and influence service design through their input. **In management and delivery, they gained skills by directly engaging in enterprise tasks**, ensuring interventions remained practical and empowering. **In evaluation, their experiences were collected through questionnaires**, shaping the refinement of future activities. This structured feedback loop—ranging from planning to monitoring—ensured that the project adapted continuously to participants' evolving needs while strengthening their empowerment.

Stories from ATELIER's partners

A story from POLITO…

In Turin, a remarkable part of our work on reorienting the system of housing-led public services for people experiencing homelessness was dedicated to **monitoring and co-evaluation of new experimental services**. From the very beginning, monitoring was not treated as a technical step at the end of the testing of the pilot services, but **as a continuous, shared practice**.

Regular focus groups, surveys, and coordination meetings became moments where we – as design researchers – could come together with municipal staff and social workers from third sector organisations, exchanging and learning from what was happening on the ground.

What made the difference was the co-evaluative dimension: instead of being passive recipients of results, **all actors were directly engaged with our guidance in interpreting data, questioning assumptions, and identifying both critical issues and emerging opportunities**.

By comparing everyday practices with the theoretical models that had inspired the pilot services, participants gained a clearer view of how innovations were taking shape and where adjustments were needed to comply with the starting objectives or even revise them. This ongoing dialogue created spaces of collective reflexivity, where different perspectives could meet without losing their uniqueness, and gradually converge into a shared vision. **Monitoring thus became a tool not only to check progress, but to prototype new changes for improvement that could be immediately tested.** We experienced that such an approach enabled the new experimental services to adapt to complexity, **allowed partners to strengthen trust among themselves, and ensured that the solutions developed were not only effective, but also deeply recognised by the stakeholders involved**.

This project was a continuous surprise in terms of timing, objectives, and outcomes. It began with the aim of analysing the fragilities and criticalities of the public service system for people in a state of homelessness, and then evolved into a transformative initiative focused on reorientation and innovation within those services. Subsequently, the pathways opened by the participatory analysis of the system and **the identification of new transformative strategies led to new opportunities for experimentation**, co-designed to respond to specific change objectives.

Had we not embraced these experimental processes with an observational and reflective mindset, we would not have reached the new service models as they gradually developed and were tested. Nor would we have been willing to step back and assess whether the effects of the experimentation where truly aligned with the initial objectives or, conversely, whether it was worth revisiting those objectives in light of what the experimentation had revealed. **Being open to questioning and reconsideration rather than solely validation was key** to all this.

The participatory approach was fundamental in ensuring that this process was not reduced to a mere consultancy exercise. Instead, **it gave agency to the professionals involved and shaped the project into a consistently transformative process, with resilience and the capacity to prioritise impact over specific objectives or problems**.

A story from NUSTPB…

We took part in the **NerveRepack consortium** and focused on simple, regular usability sessions rather than long debates. We invited people with different roles to try very early mock-ups and walk through short tasks. Our job was to **listen, watch, and keep the process light: quick notes, quick changes, quick retests**.

Across rounds, similar signals kept appearing: **plain language helped everyone, clear states reduced hesitation, and removing extra steps made the flow easier**. We avoided arguing preferences in the room; instead, we turned comments into **small, visible edits and checked them in the next session**. When something did not improve, we **rolled it back and tried another option**.

We also made participation easy: short time slots, simple materials, and the option to contribute by talking, sketching, or writing. The outcome sometimes was not a "perfect" prototype; it was a clearer direction that more people understood and felt comfortable using. **That steady loop — try, learn, tweak — kept momentum, built trust, and pushed the design towards something more inclusive**. [NerveRepack Project www.nerverepack.eu]

A second story from POLITO…

The project **"Alimenta"** originated to address the criticalities related to food poverty experienced by people in public shelters in the city of Turin. What began as an attempt to improve the quality and availability of meals quickly grew into a systemic initiative, linking local institutions, civil society, and local communities to **build a more resilient and inclusive food system through three different actions**: redistribution of resources for food support; workshops and activities for people's food-related capability building; research for the monitoring and the evolution of the project — also identifying new responses to food poverty.

We designed the **monitoring process as a form of action-research, managing it not just as a data collection process, but alternating reflective observation with active participation *within* the project itself**. On a practical level, this meant – and still means – for us to be present in the shelters involved, in the kitchens, and in the community workshops created by the project, listening to how beneficiaries and social workers experience the services and interventions, and seeing how the partner organisations use the economic and material resources provided.

Through this ongoing observation, it was possible to continuously revise and adapt the actions enacted by Alimenta. **New needs emerged, leading to fresh experiments**: from cooking labs in dormitories to food waste recovery workshops, from personalised meal kits to neighbourhood events fostering conviviality. **Monitoring thus became a generator of innovation, turning feedback into concrete practices**. Most importantly, this collective and ongoing approach created **shared ownership**. Final beneficiaries, cooperatives' staff, and local actors were not only observed but engaged in producing knowledge together.

The coexistence of the three different axes within Alimenta was not predetermined from the outset. It rather emerged mainly from the openness of both the process and the actors involved to embrace new transformative perspectives, to channel initial resources in new ways, to recognise previously unseen aspects of the problem, and at the same time to identify new responses that could be mobilised by engaging the same or additional actors. Without an open and flexible mindset, it would not have been possible to integrate these diverse and complementary forms of intervention, which continue to interact with one another even after more than a decade.

References

RECOMMENDED READINGS

[Available in ATELIER's Repository of Literature]

Eglin, R., & Ngamlana, N. (2015). *Responsive planning and responsible implementation: improving good local governance in the Integrated Development Planning process*. Good Governance Learning Network (GGLN) Local Governance Report 2015 on 'In pursuit of Responsible and Responsive Local Governance': 34-45. https://www.ggln.org.za/media/k2/attachments/SoLG.2015-Afesis-corplan.pdf

Jones, P. (2014). Systemic Design Principles for Complex Social Systems. In G. S. Metcalf (Eds.), Social Systems and Design, 1:91–128. Springer Japan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-4-431-54478-

FURTHER READING

Van Cauwenbergh, N., Ciuró, A. B., & Ahlers, R. (2018). Participatory processes and support tools for planning in complex dynamic environments. *Ecology and Society*, 23(2). https://www.jstor.org/stable/26799081?seq=13

Links to other Competencies

Competency 6 – *Inclusion and accessibility principles*
Diverse participants can only contribute meaningful feedback if the process and artefacts are understandable and accessible. Inclusion improves the quality and legitimacy of revisions.

Competency 18 – *Project development management*
Replanning is the engine of an iterative project cycle, where feedback from one phase informs another, and continuous adjustments reframe the direction and results of the overall process.

Competency 24 – *Real-time, low-fidelity prototyping*
Low-tech prototypes make feedback concrete and fast; they give people something tangible to react to, so changes can be tested and verified immediately.

Co-design for social impact and inclusion

25 competencies by the ATELIER Project

Developed within the Erasmus+ project ATELIER – *innovATive Education for sociaL Inclusion via co-dEsign pRactices*, this handbook offers a transdisciplinary introduction to co-design for social inclusion. Co-created by the project's eight partners, it is part of a broader Learning Programme designed for students, educators, and early-career professionals.

Combining theory, methodologies, case studies, lived experiences, practical guidance, and reflective tools, the volume explores how collaborative design processes can foster projects aiming at inclusion and social impact, and support vulnerable and marginalised communities.

Bridging the analytical perspective of the Social Sciences with the transformative potential of Design, the handbook guides readers through 25 concise learning units, each dedicated to a key competence and designed to nurture critical thinking, social research, design thinking, and participatory practices, offering an entry point to meaningful and sustainable pathways for social change.

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