Toolkit

Co-creating our city

Participatory research for
youth engagement in cities

THE Gambrell FOUNDATION   d|part   G | M | F   SCI:MOVE

Contents

Introduction

1. What is 'Co-creating our city'?

'Co-creating our city' denotes a participatory project that brings together local young people and decision-makers to shape opportunities for youth engagement in cities and municipalities.

Young people and city officials engage in workshops and work as a team of co-researchers to explore the needs, challenges, and opportunities for youth participation in their communities. 'Co-creating our city' projects can focus on a specific topic that a community wants solutions for (e.g., housing, transport, or sustainability) or on creating better structures and opportunities for youth engagement across many issues and areas of governance. Based on findings from their research, young people and local decision-makers jointly develop concrete recommendations, ensuring that young people have a meaningful voice in shaping decisions about their local environment and community.

'Co-creating our city' projects allow cities to gain deeper insight into youth needs and experiences, increasing their capacity to design inclusive policies and making participatory democracy more legitimate and sustainable. By fostering collaboration between young people and city officials, 'Co-creating our city' projects

- create a dialogue between young people and local decision-makers,
- capture and include in solutions the perspectives of those most affected, and
- establish and increase trust between young residents and city institutions.

> 'Co-creating our city' is about bringing together young people and city staff and local administrators to create ideas for how young people can be engaged in their communities and their cities.
>
> **Dr. Christine Hübner**
> *Project lead, dlpart*

> 'Co-creating our city' is a concrete research project on the opportunities for young people to engage in local political decisions. It is about capturing the voices of those who are really affected. These are young people who could participate politically but perhaps don't know how or perhaps don't know yet that their interests could be implemented politically. But it is also a project for administrative staff as well as local politicians, who have an interest in getting in touch with young people.
>
> **Dr. Anna Soßdorf**
> *Project lead, SCI:MOVE*

Project documentary

Take a look at this video documenting the project in the two 'Co-creating our city' pilot cities – **Charlotte, NC**, and one in **Düsseldorf, Germany**

2. How can this toolkit be used

What is this toolkit?

As more cities involve young people in the design and delivery of research to inform decisions impacting their urban democracy and communities, we hope this toolkit can support that work. The aim is to inspire and support you on your journey to running a 'Co-creating our city' project.

This toolkit brings together learnings from two 'Co-creating our city' projects, one in the US city of Charlotte, NC, and one in Düsseldorf, Germany. It details the project process and steps, shares good practices, and provides you with concrete resources, tips on how to overcome challenges, practical learnings, and checklists.

Who is this toolkit for?

The toolkit is for city staff, youth engagement practitioners, youth workers, local community organizations, and researchers who want to involve young people and local decision-makers in a co-created research project to include youth voices and increase youth engagement in local communities.

How can this toolkit be used?

You can use this toolkit to start thinking about your own 'Co-creating our city' project in your city or community. You can move in and out of modules to find advice on the benefits and challenges of co-creation projects and how to set up your own 'Co-creating our city' project. The resources and toolkit can also help deepen an existing youth engagement research initiative in your city or community.

What is in the toolkit?

The toolkit has five modules:

I.   Making the case for 'Co-creating our city'

II. Setting up your own 'Co-creating our city' project

III. Bringing young people and city leaders together

IV. Doing participatory research with young people and city leaders

V.   Achieving impact with your findings and outputs

## 'Co-creating our city' in Charlotte and Düsseldorf

Case Study

In June 2024, two pilot cities, Charlotte, North Carolina (US), and Düsseldorf, Germany, launched yearlong 'Co-creating our city' projects to address the mismatch between opportunities for youth engagement offered in their cities and what young people seek as opportunities to engage with city administration.

Using a participatory research approach called Citizen Science, young people aged 14 to 24, city staff, and local politicians joined forces to create a research question and conduct primary research exploring the needs and opportunities for youth engagement in their cities. Based on the findings of six months of research, the groups made recommendations for tangible solutions answering their research questions. Each project offered ideas on how to create vibrant communities with more and better opportunities for youth engagement. Co-researchers concluded the project with a presentation of findings to their communities and city leaders in summer 2025.

As part of the pilot project, the youth co-researchers from Düsseldorf also flew to Charlotte to work with US-based youth co-researchers on solutions for next-level youth engagement in cities and to bring together learnings from the projects for this toolkit.

Acknowledgements: We thank The Gambrell Foundation for their thought leadership and generous support of the two pilot projects. We thank the members of staff at the City of Charlotte, Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf, and Jugendring Düsseldorf for their support of and enthusiastic interaction with this project.
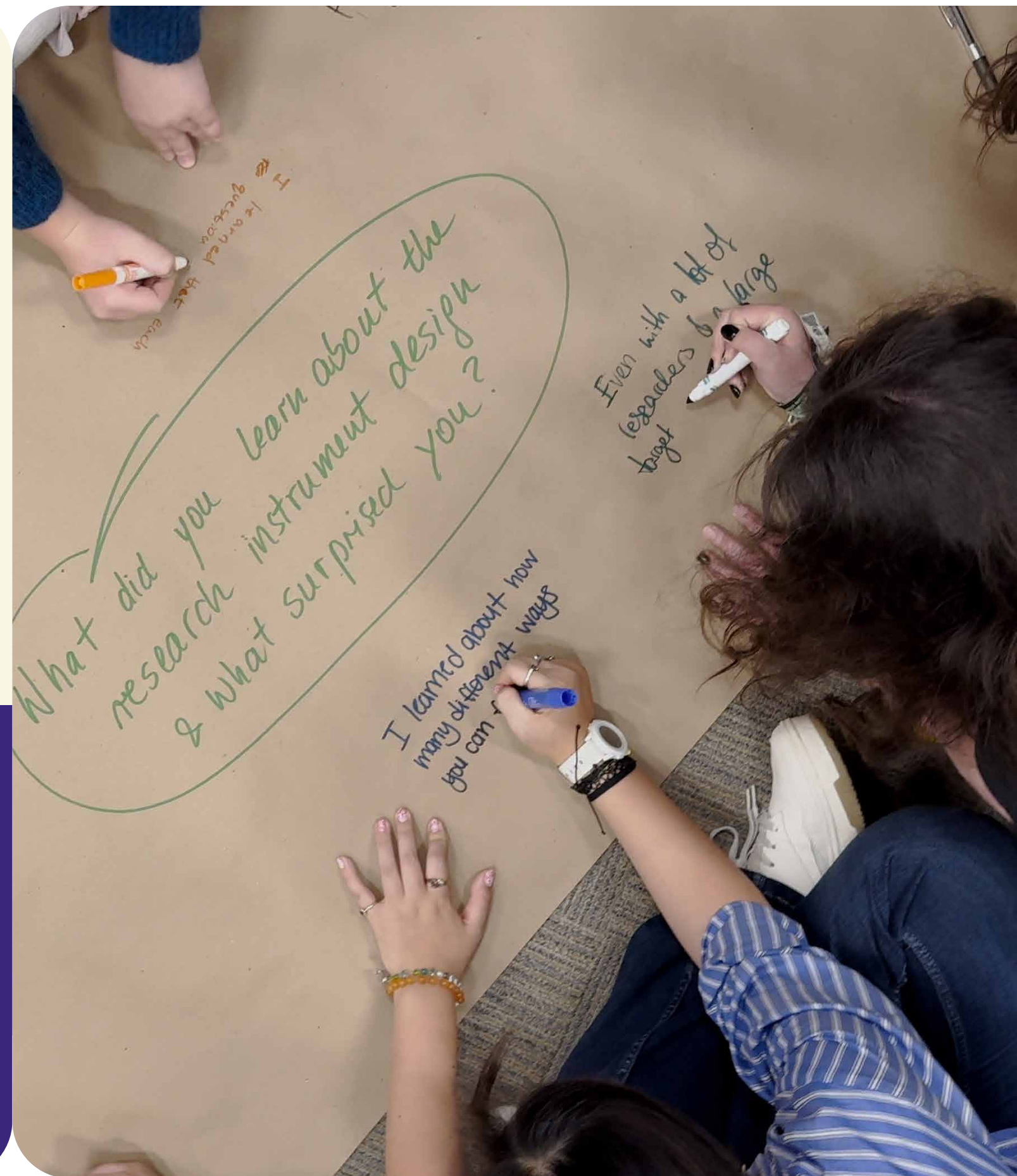
Contact us with questions or to let us know of your 'Co-creating our city' project at

✉ **citiescomms@gmfus.org**

I. Making the case for 'Co-creating our city'

1. Why do we need projects like 'Co-creating our city'?

Many cities and municipalities recognize the importance of involving young people in community development and local governance. City leaders and local decision-makers benefit from insights gathered through structured dialogue with young people. Engaging young people's voices ensures that city governance is inclusive and sustainable, benefiting not just young people but the entire community.

However, despite these intentions, young people and city decision-makers can miss out on opportunities to meaningfully exchange ideas —especially young people who are underrepresented, at risk, or may not yet have engaged with existing offerings. In many cities, there is a mismatch between the offered opportunities for exchange and what young people seek as engagement to enact their ideas about vibrant communities.

Young people want to contribute meaningfully to civic life if given the opportunity, but they can lack incentives and suitable pathways to do so. Cities, on the other hand, can lack efficient ways to engage in productive exchange with young residents. Traditional youth participation mechanisms (e.g., youth councils) can be experienced as tokenistic or disconnected from real decision-making.

> " There is definitely a disconnect between the youth and government and I didn't realize how important this program really was until I was actually in it, and I was speaking with leaders and understood that there's a big disconnect between us.
>
> **Jessica Akonga**
> *Citizen Scientist, Charlotte*

> " We often compartmentalize our interactions with youth in government. People think of, like, youth protesting or they think of youth doing a program, or an internship. But we rarely really find ways to engage with what their thoughts are, and their opinions are, which is odd, because when we think about city plans, we usually plan out 15, 20 years. Somebody who is 16 now, that is who we are planning for in the future. So not having them involved in that process, I think we're really missing out on really good ideas.
>
> **Alexis Gordon**
> *City of Charlotte*

Read more about youth engagement in communities

On the lack of youth engagement and invisibility in local decision-making:
→ *Grant, H. (2025). Why aren't young people interested in local government? Local Government Information Unit.*

On the barriers to engagement among urban youth in London, Belfast, and Dublin as reported by policymakers, public officials, and youth work practitioners:
→ *Brady, B., Chaskin, R.J., & McGregor, C. (2020). Promoting civic and political engagement among marginalized urban youth in three cities: Strategies and challenges. Children and Youth Services Review, 116.*

On the democratic potential of youth-adult partnerships in local governance:
→ *Booth, R. B., Guzman, P., Suzuki, S. (2023). How effective youth-adult partnerships can grow voters. Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Tufts University.*

On the importance of informal, localised ways of engaging with local democracy for young people:
→ *Harris, A. & Wyn, J. (2009). Young People's Politics and the Micro-territories of the Local. Australian Journal of Political Science, 44(2), 327–344.*

On the need for new ways of including young people that are genuinely inclusive and share real power:
→ *Harada, A. (2021). How to involve a diverse group of young people in local government decision making: A case study of Danish youth councils. Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 53(5), 820–836.*

On the support required for youth participation to influence local decision-making:
→ *Harsant, J. (2025). A Critical Inquiry into Young People's Participation and its Impact within Local Government Decision-Making (Doctoral dissertation. Huddersfield: The University of Huddersfield.*

On the meaning of local communities as meaningful arenas for youth engagement:
→ *Pitti, I. (2015). Rediscovering the local: youth engagement. Open Citizenship, 5(2), 24-35.*

On the mismatch between policymakers' views and young people's everyday participation in local democracy:
→ *Vromen, A., & Collin, P. (2010). Everyday youth participation? Contrasting views from Australian policymakers and young people. Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research, 18 (1), 97–112.*

On the barriers youth face to finding space and voice in local democracy:
→ *Walther, A., Batsleer, J., Loncle, P., & Pohl, A. (2020). Young people and the struggle for participation: Contested practices, power and pedagogies in public spaces. Routledge.*

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'Co-creating our city' projects are collaborative projects that use a Citizen Science approach to do research steered and conducted jointly by local decision-makers and young people with lived experience of the issue being studied. Based on their research, young people and local decision-makers develop concrete proposals reflecting what young people want to see in their communities and what is feasible and achievable. The Citizen Science approach includes the perspectives, needs, and informal knowledge of those with exclusive access to their communities.

'Co-creating our city' projects offer a way to meaningfully involve young people in decision-making, research design and delivery, and policymaking. The approach empowers the co-researchers, young people and decision-makers alike, to work together, to articulate their ideas of youth engagement and vibrant communities, and to use scientific research methods and engage in impactful discussions about these ideas (thereby addressing important objectives of scientific and democratic literacy), as well as to experience real-life political efficacy by promoting change in their cities.

At its core, co-creation and Citizen Science methods represent a paradigm shift: They challenge entrenched ideas about who holds legitimate knowledge and decision-making power, disrupting power imbalances that can exclude young people's voices. This brings young people's experiences and ideas to the forefront of local initiatives and ensures that young people are not just consulted but positioned as essential partners in the creation of more inclusive, responsive, and democratic cities.

Traditional solutions

- Created **for** young people
- Hierarchical way of working
- Adult expertise privileged
- Knowledge produced for decision-makers and expert audiences

Co-created solutions

- Created **with** young people and adults
- Collaborative way of working
- Multiple forms of expertise valued
- Knowledge produced for practical application and shared with stakeholders

Principles of 'Co-creating our city' projects

1. 'Co-creating our city' projects actively involve members of the studied community and local decision-makers in the process of generating new knowledge about, or understanding of, the needs of their communities.

2. 'Co-creating our city' projects answer a genuine question about how to improve engagement in local communities and seek to conduct high quality research to produce actionable and impactful findings.

3. 'Co-creating our city' projects strive to involve young people and local decision-makers as co-researchers in as many aspects of the research process as possible.

4. Participants in 'Co-creating our city' projects, whether project leaders, young people, or adults, benefit from taking part and gaining new perspectives to help strengthen their understanding.

5. 'Co-creating our city' projects take into consideration legal and ethical issues surrounding data protection, copyright, intellectual property, confidentiality, attribution, and the impact of any activities on communities.

6. 'Co-creating our city' participants are adequately compensated and acknowledged in project results and publications. They are informed about the impact of their work and actively involved in sharing findings with stakeholders in their communities.

7. 'Co-creating our city' projects are evaluated for their research, participant experience, and wider societal or policy impact.

More on co-creation in cities and municipalities

Co-creation in local governance was first described in 1978 by economist Elinor Ostrom of Indiana University, who emphasized the importance of citizen involvement in the creation of knowledge and decision-making. Ostrom argued that when communities are actively involved in shaping the policies and services that affect them, outcomes are more responsive, equitable, and sustainable.

Co-creation projects can be intentionally designed to reflect what people truly want and need, leading to greater public engagement, more efficient use of resources, and improved public service delivery.

In a community project setting, the mutual sharing of power, experience, and expertise fosters stronger communication, trust, and unity among residents, ultimately strengthening democratic governance and collective ownership of local outcomes.

→ Banks, S., Hart, A., Pahl, K., & Ward, P. (2019). Co-producing research: A community development approach. Policy Press.

→ Greenhalgh, T., et al. (2016). Achieving research impact through co-creation. BMJ Open, 6(2).

→ Hickey, G., Richards, T., & Sheehy, J. (2018). Co-production from proposal to paper. Nature, 562(7725), 29-31.

→ Ostrom, E. (1990). Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action. Cambridge University Press.

→ Torfing, J., & Ansell, C. (2021). Co-creation: the new kid on the block in public governance. Policy and Politics, 49(2), 211-230.

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2.   Advantages of running your own project

A 'Co-creating our city' project has benefits for young people and cities, in the short and long term.

For young people:

- promotes civic engagement and trust in city institutions and inspires young people to feel more connected to their city;

- increases democratic literacy, understanding, and efficacy: belief in being able to shape public life and policy;

- develops scientific literacy and leadership and communication skills;

For cities and communities:

- creates opportunity to gain deeper insight into youth needs and experiences and to discover new intergenerational pathways for youth engagement within the city;

- generates collaborative solutions that tend to have greater longevity and rates of success, as they incorporate both lived experience and practical considerations;

- strengthens democratic processes by bringing young people's perspectives to local issues and increasing the city's capacity to design inclusive and sustainable policies;

- builds trust and connection between young residents and the city, making cities equitable and sustainable communities and places where people want to live;

"
 Youth are so insightful and so wise. It really benefits us to incorporate youth in our planning and design of programming that we're thinking about as a city.

LaKeeshia Fox
City of Charlotte

"
Ultimately, we are the future. And I feel like making sure that our voices are heard and that we feel well educated and have the opportunity to bring change and bring an impact to our own communities, and forming communities that want to stay connected, is important. It's just better for our future and it's better for forming strong communities.

Kayleigh Mayhew
Citizen Scientist, Charlotte

A theory of change: Co-creating our city

If...   (Assumptions)

- Young people care about their communities and want to participate.

- Local decision-makers are willing to engage in open dialogue and see youth as valuable partners.

- Decision-makers are willing and able to meaningfully engage young people, not just consult them after decisions are made.

Given...   (+) (Input)

- Skilled coordinator/project team with experience in youth engagement, facilitation, research, and participatory methods.

- Funding & resources for workshops and to share findings.

- Safe, accessible physical/digital spaces for co-production.

- Commitment and participation from local government officials.

- Support from gatekeepers/youth groups to recruit different youths.

Through...   (+) (Activities)

- Citizen Science workshops where young people and local decision-makers collaborate to explore and conduct research on a local issue.

- A team of youth and local officials who actively collaborate to co-design and carry out their research project (with some support from the project team).

- Joint analysis of research findings and preparation of outputs to share outcomes and inform future policy and practice.

Produces   (Outputs)

- Research-based insights into what young people want and what is feasible to implement in their communities.

- Jointly developed recommendations, policy proposals or initiatives informed by young people's lived experiences.

- New or improved solutions to a local governance challenge shaped by youth input and ready to be piloted or adopted.

Leading to...   (↓) (Outcomes)

- An increase in young people's democratic and research skills, confidence in local institutions, and understanding of civic processes.

- A deeper understanding of youth perspectives and needs among local decision-makers and officials.

- A culture of open dialogue and mutual respect between young people and local decision-makers.

- Trust increases between young people and city institutions.

To achieve in the long-term...   (↓) (Impact)

- Responsive, equitable local policies reflecting youth experiences.

- Inclusive and participatory local democracy recognizing youth as valued and legitimate stakeholders.

- Sustained youth participation in local governance processes.

- A shift from tokenistic consultation to ongoing, genuine partnership.

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Links to other projects on youth engagement in communities

→ **The Reinventor Collective**
   Brings together young people within Teach For America to co-create, amplify
   youth voices, and collaborate with adults in designing educational experiences.

→ **By/With/For Youth**
   A research and development initiative that partners with public media organizations to
   engage tweens and teens as co-creators of content and media experiences.

→ **Jugend entscheidet**
   Empowers young people to choose and vote on real municipal decisions,
   giving them a direct voice in local governance.

→ **Partnership for Young London**
   Brings together youth voices, policymakers, and organizations to co-create solutions that
   improve the lives of young Londoners.

→ **Jugend checkt Düsseldorf**
   Involves young people in reviewing and assessing city policies to ensure they reflect youth
   needs and perspectives.

→ **ALDA (European Association for Local Democracy)**
   Engages young people in creative, cross-border problem-solving sessions to co-design
   ideas for better local democratic participation.

→ **BeeWell Greater Manchester**
   Measures and responds to young people's wellbeing through youth-led research to shape
   education, health, and community policies.

→ **Berkeley's Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) Hub**
   A collection of resources and guidance on empowering young people through Youth Par-
   ticipatory Action provided by the University of California, Berkeley and San Francisco Peer
   Resources.

II. Setting up your own 'Co-creating our city' project

To set up your 'Co-creating our city' project for success, it is important to establish clear goals, a good team, strong community engagement, and buy-in from city administration and local partners who work with young people in your community. This chapter gives practical tips on setting up your own 'Co-creating our city' project, including how to build your project team and relationships with local partners and how to plan, fund, and budget for your project before you start.

1. Defining the goals and scope of your project

For your 'Co-creating our city' project to be successful, it is essential to start with a shared understanding of what success looks like. Establishing clear objectives and guardrails early on can help you use time effectively and drive towards concrete outcomes and impact at city level.

This involves setting concrete objectives for your project:

- Are you aiming to solve a specific policy issue or impact one policy area, such as sustainability, transport, or housing?

- Or is the goal to develop new solutions for and strengthen youth engagement in city governance overall?

Clarifying the scope of potential solutions early on is important to connect with the most relevant people within your city and to drive impact and avoid disappointment when it comes to the implementation of suggested solutions. It also ensures that the project is designed with the right scale, scope, and stakeholders in mind.

Establishing a theory of change for your 'Co-creating our city' project can be a powerful tool at this stage: a theory of change helps articulate how and why a project like

'Co-creating our city' is expected to lead to the desired change. Your theory of change should outline, concretely for your city or community, the change you expect to see, what activities and partnerships are needed to achieve that change, the assumptions that need to be met, and how progress will be measured.

In addition to defining the scope and goals, you may also want to consider and discuss the project's long-term potential with stakeholders. Will this be a one-off initiative, is it designed to be a pilot for a recurring program, or the start of a permanent youth or citizen advisory body within the city? Thinking through these possibilities early can help shape the project's structure, resource needs, and sustainability.

It is also good to do a landscape scan of what already exists for participatory opportunities in a city. There may already be some structures for ongoing youth engagement, but the questions are:

1. To what extent do existing programs appeal to youth needs and vision for the community?

2. To what extent do youth get to use these spaces to shape outcomes?

3. To what extent do they feel as though their contributions are having an impact?

Imagining the change you want to see

Consider these potential outcomes for your 'Co-creating our city' project:

- A concrete solution to an issue (e.g., sustainability, transport, or housing) that takes into account young people's needs and views

- New processes to communicate with or solicit ideas from young residents

- A youth newsletter or multimedia segment

- A new program for youth engagement or new youth engagement strategy

- A recurring peer research program for young people in the city

- New opportunities to increase transparency on city functions that impact youth

- Pathways to participate in or engage with departments and city staff

2. Building the project team

Your project team does not need to be big, but it needs to have sufficient capacity for workshop facilitation and logistics as well as some experience with social research and data analysis. Think about who you need on your project team to manage the following responsibilities:

- setting up the project timeline

- managing the budget for your project

- developing and carrying out a plan to recruit young people and city leaders as co-researchers

- designing the workshop structure and content

- onboarding co-researchers, both young people and city leaders

- scheduling and facilitating workshops, including managing group dynamics

- training co-researchers on how to conduct social research (e.g., how to conduct

surveys, observations, interviews, or focus groups in their communities)

- designing data collection tools (e.g., questionnaires, observation protocols, or interview or focus group guides) and conducting data analysis (of quantitative data, qualitative data, or both)

- summarizing results and making them accessible

- engaging co-researchers in dissemination and impact activities

- assessing and managing risks, including ethical standards and data protection

If you have all these skills yourself, you could run the project and bring in help from colleagues or temporary staff to facilitate workshops and logistics at events.

You can find an example role description in our resource collection: Position description example Co-creating our city

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Team set-up in 'Co-creating our city' pilot projects in Charlotte and Düsseldorf

For the pilot project in Düsseldorf, SCI:MOVE and d|part took on all project management and communication with city partners. The team designed and conducted the workshops and research work. The City of Düsseldorf and the Jugendring Düsseldorf provided staff time to support the recruitment of participants and coordinate workshops and events. In addition, the Jugendring Düsseldorf provided staff time for the preparation of workshops as well as rooms to meet.

For the pilot project in Charlotte, the team consisted of a part-time project lead with support from city staff. GMF staff provided off-site support for recruitment and workshops, primarily for logistical tasks such as ordering catering and materials. d|part and SCI:MOVE team members provided content development support, much of which is available in this toolkit for customization. On occasion, interns added capacity for workshops and data analysis.

Reflecting on the limited capacity in the team in Charlotte, team members might also be drawn from other organizations or governmental agencies. For your project city interns, university students, or university-based researchers in social or behavioral sciences could add additional capacity for workshops, survey management, and administrative support such as photocopying and workshop set-up. An administrative support person at the city, similar to the setup in Düsseldorf, could also provide some of the support.

If you do not possess all these skills, consider adding team members who can support you with either project management, workshop facilitation, communication, or the research process and data analysis.

At the start of your project, you may also want to take time to think about how your team will collaborate and stay aligned over the course of the project. Think about the following issues:

- How you can achieve alignment and clarity on your project's objectives?

- What your individual team members need to achieve these objectives?

- How you might structure your team to coordinate and get work done?

- Who makes decisions and on which questions (based on, e.g., hierarchy, competence, or expertise)?

- What infrastructure and collaboration tools are needed for your team to work together (e.g., communication, file sharing, digital or project management tools)?

- Which different needs and perspectives are represented in your project team and what your team's blind spots may be?

3.   Securing buy-in and identifying project champions at city and local levels

Securing buy-in from key stakeholders—champions in the city administration and local partners as well as youth work organizations—is crucial for a project's success. Early engagement of key stakeholders and local partners also fosters a sense of partnership, increasing their willingness to support the project while it is ongoing and to consider and act on the results. Project champions and local partners can open doors to resources, data that already exists, the networks needed to recruit co-researchers and research participants, and implementation of findings.

One way to achieve this commitment is by building relationships with key stakeholders at the city level from the start, for example by seeking and aligning expectations in early meetings and identifying both the problems they would be most open to addressing and what city resources (budget, staff, time) will be available to implement or pilot youth-driven solutions.

You can achieve alignment in stakeholder expectations from the outset by

- verbalizing and sharing a theory of change for your 'Co-creating our city' project

- scheduling project kick-off meetings to agree on objectives and assumptions

- listening and responding to concerns

- agreeing on key dates and process expectations

- outlining where there is flexibility as well as contingency plans

Champions at city level

A key assumption for the success of 'Co-creating our city' projects is that city officials are open to dialogue with young people and willing to adapt governance practices. To achieve lasting impact, your project must secure commitment and resources from city leaders, not just to listen, but to act on insights and pilot solutions. Early buy-in helps create a clearer pathway for translating research into policy or program changes. When decision-makers feel included, they are less likely to dismiss findings that challenge current policies. Having project champions within city administration can also help align research goals with city priorities and amplify the project's impact.

Prospective participants include staff from the mayor's or executive office, officials already involved in youth engagement, and staff from departments that deal with issues young people are interested in, such as housing, planning, transportation, technology, and economic development. Multiple representatives from a department may want to join to share the responsibilities of engagement in the project and research, as in Charlotte, where Housing and Neighborhood Services and Planning staff shared participation.

Early conversations with officials are a chance to stress the value of learning from young people and clarify expectations. Framing the project as a modest time commitment and an opportunity to hear directly from young residents can encourage involvement. In Charlotte, officials valued the rare opportunity to interact directly with young residents.

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Talking points to secure buy-in from champions at the city level

Interested in setting up your own 'Co-creating our city' project but not sure how to win champions at city level? Here is a list of talking points you can use.

A 'Co-creating our city' project...

- ... tackles a persistent challenge we face (e.g., youth disengagement, mistrust in institutions, lack of civic engagement) with innovative, participatory solutions.

- ... builds a long-term culture of civic engagement and intergenerational collaboration by strengthening the relationship between young residents and city institutions.

- ... delivers real, actionable insights grounded in evidence and lived experience, leading to policies and interventions that are more feasible and supported, as they're co-developed by young people and local decision-makers.

- ... enhances the legitimacy and responsiveness of policies, as they reflect diverse needs and lived experiences.

- ... demonstrates a visible commitment to involving young residents in shaping their communities, positioning our city as a leader in participatory governance.

- ... moves beyond tokenistic consultation: Young people are treated as partners, not as subjects of research or passive recipients of policy.

In short (for quick meetings):

- "This project isn't just about youth engagement. It's about transforming how we govern. By co-creating solutions with young people and city leaders, we can develop smarter, more inclusive, and more sustainable policies that reflect real needs. It's a low-risk, high-impact investment in our city's future, both socially and politically."

Local partners and youth organizations

Local partners and youth organizations are key in helping your project connect with the community and bringing on board (non-city) stakeholders who care about youth voice and youth engagement. They can help identify participants, involve young people in the various engagement opportunities your 'Co-creating our city' project offers, and bring your project findings back to young people in the community.

Depending on your local context, local partners can refer to any of a broad range of community-based groups who involve and work with young people, for example:

- sports or cultural associations
- neighborhood initiatives
- environmental and nature conservation associations
- migrant and refugee self and support organizations
- youth organizations of aid agencies
- humanitarian and human rights organizations
- libraries
- faith-based groups
- scouts

Civic institutions that work with or advocate for young people or specific communities of young people can also be important partners, for example:

- youth centers
- youth or student councils
- youth services
- boys' and girls' clubs
- school district youth advisory boards
- afterschool programs
- other school-based initiatives

Local partners and youth organizations often have trusted relationships with young people and communities that may be underrepresented in city decision-making processes, making them vital connectors and advocates throughout the co-creation process.

They can help identify and recruit young participants, for example, by nominating young people to the team of co-researchers or by distributing information and encouraging sign-ups. They are also crucial partners in the dissemination of findings from your project to the wider community of young people and residents in the city. By involving them early on, you can win their support, hear about their priorities and ideas, and bring in their support.

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3.   Planning the duration and timing of your project

The length of 'Co-creating our city' projects can vary depending on the goals and scope of your specific project. To address a specific issue or work with one city department only, a meaningful process typically requires a minimum of 4 to 6 months. This is to allow for recruitment of co-researchers, relationship-building, designing, conducting, and analyzing the research, and developing and sharing ideas and solutions based on the research. Broader projects that aim to influence city-wide decisions and embed lasting change in youth engagement may benefit from a 9- to 12-month timeline. Scheduling should careful-ly align with key calendars: the academic year (avoiding exam periods and school holidays), political timelines (e.g., elections, budget planning cycles, council meetings), and major city events that could either compete with or complement the project.

For a 9- to12-month project, the start of the academic year could offer a good opportunity to work with a cohort of young people, though chal-lenges may arise when workshops and research activities clash with key exam dates, vacation periods, political or major city events.

For shorter projects, aligning project activities with the summer break may offer flexibility for en-gagement of young people who are in secondary or further education, but also risks lower availabi-lity of both youth and decision-makers.

Crucially, building a timeline that is flexible and anticipates these factors ensures more consis-tent participation, maximizes opportunities for influence, and respects the time constraints of the co-researchers who are involved.

Example plan of activities in 'Co-creating our city' pilot project in Düsseldorf

Case Study

Month	Planned activities	Actors involved
May–Sep 2024	Project setup, including recruit-ment and training co-researchers to become Citizen Scientists	Project team, funder or sponsor, and city authorities
Oct 2024–Mar 2025	Citizen Science research period, accompanied by a dedicated researcher in each city	Project team & co-researchers
May–Jun 2025	Closing event	Project team, co-researchers, city authorities, wider public
Sep–Oct 2025	Dissemination activities	Project team, selected co-researchers

4.   Budgeting for your project

Staff time

Depending on how you build your project team and staffing costs, the funding required for your own 'Co-creating our city' project might be relati-vely minimal. The main costs are incurred for staff time to plan and conduct the project, including recruitment of co-researchers, facilitating work-shops, conducting and analyzing research, and disseminating the project findings.

If you work alone or your team's time is (partial-ly) paid for through existing roles in the city or a stakeholder organization, you may not have to consider this cost. If you plan on bringing on board team members whose time needs to be costed for this project, consider:

- The number of months or the number of indi-vidual events each team member is brought on for

- Their weekly working hours or hours worked to facilitate individual events

- The level of experience required for the role and what appropriate pay might be for that role

- The contract type used to bring on these members of staff and additional costs that may be incurred (e.g., social security or pen-sion contributions, institutional overheads)

Other costs

In addition to staff time, consider what you may need to budget for the following activities:

- Workshop facilitation, including room rent, catering for yourself and your co-re-searchers, and staff costs in case you use temporary facilitators

- Materials to use during workshops (e.g., flip chart paper, pens, subscriptions to digital tools)

- Incentives (gifts, vouchers, etc.) for your co-researchers should you decide to include these [read more about that here]

- Research costs (e.g., costs for hosting or distributing a survey, interview transcripti-on, analysis software, catering or incentives for research participants, room rent for focus group discussions)

- Travel for your team and/or co-researchers to workshops and events

- Costs and fees for a closing event to share and discuss findings with the wider public

- Resources to support the dissemination of project findings (e.g., paying an editor/graphic designer to produce a final report, a video editor to produce videos of the project, costs to run a campaign on social media, paying a live illustrator to produce a visualization of discussions)

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II.   Setting up your own 'Co-creating our city' project

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Example budget of 'Co-creating our city' pilot project in Charlotte

Case Study

Budget	Expenses
Workshop costs (room rent and catering, 5 workshops)	$1,580
Workshop materials	$900
Incentives for co-researchers	$1,500
Research support	$2,000
Travel costs	$1,200
Closing event (room rent, catering, travel)	$700
Peer-to-peer media campaign	$0

Budgeting and cost mitigation

As you give up some control over aspects of your project to your co-researchers, for example the chosen research topic, research methods, and dissemination ideas, it is inevitable that unexpected costs can come up. To manage your budget in light of this uncertainty, build in some extra cash you can use to support your co-researchers' ideas and keep track of what part of your budget is being spent and on what as you go along.

You may also want to consider these cost mitigation strategies:

* Using city- and nonprofit supplied workshop spaces for workshops and events,

* Assigning internal city staff as program team members to run the project while saving on staff time,

* Involving graduate research students in nearby universities to support the co-researchers in conducting the research or data analysis,

* Collaborating with local or youth media outlets or further education students in graphic design or video editing to produce outputs for dissemination in exchange for bursaries,

* Relying on city interns to assist with logistics at events.

III. Bringing young people and city leaders together

Recruiting committed co-researchers and keeping them motivated is crucial for the success of your 'Co-creating our city' project. This chapter gives practical tips on bringing young people and city leaders together as co-researchers in a meaningful way and how to overcome common challenges around collaboration and motivation that can arise in the process.

> We don't really typically get to connect with city officials as much. I think having initiatives like 'Co-creating our city' will bridge that gap and allow us to better understand the government and also for them to understand like what we might like.
>
> **Megha Mittal,** *Citizen Scientist, Charlotte*

1. Recruiting co-researchers

For co-researchers, participation in a 'Co-creating our city' project can be demanding and time-consuming, but also very rewarding. To make the recruitment process fair and transparent and tailor it to the strengths and interests of your future co-researchers, it is important to:

- Identify relevant target groups whose insights can enrich the project.

- Engage multipliers and gatekeepers early on to build networks and trust.

- Approach potential participants through personal contacts to establish trust and commitment.

- Use group-specific approaches to recruitment, to tailor communication and invitations and make them most relevant.

- Clearly define collaboration terms to set expectations and avoid misunderstandings.

- Clarify mutual expectations, including what co-researchers hope to contribute and what they can gain.

- Identify participant needs to ensure an inclusive and empowering process, so co-researchers can participate effectively on their own terms.

The exact number of co-researchers you bring on depends on your context, the specific objectives of your project, and the timeframe you envisage for it. We do find that a suitable group size is around 15 to 20 co-researchers, including both young people and city leaders. This size allows everyone to participate and have their voices heard in discussions of, for example, your project objectives and research question, but is big enough to share work effectively; smaller groups may reach consensus more quickly and develop a stronger sense of team spirit, but with fewer hands, the amount of research and data collection that the group can do can be reduced. Especially for projects with a longer timeframe, those that run over a period of 6 months or lon-

ger, you should consider recruiting more co-researchers to allow for absences and people dropping out.

To amplify the voices of young people in the project and reflect the diverse perspectives within this group, consider recruiting more young co-researchers than city leaders. This can also help address power imbalances between young people and adults in your groups of co-researchers. For the pilot projects in Düsseldorf and Charlotte, the aim was to form groups of around 20 co-researchers: 15 young people and five representatives from various areas of city politics and administration.

Recruiting young people

Cities sometimes lack efficient ways to engage in productive exchange with young residents, especially with those who are underrepresented, at risk, or may not yet have engaged with existing offerings. At the start of your project, it is important to take a closer look at these groups in your community and identify who you may want to recruit as co-researchers and the appropriate channels for reaching them.

To identify what types of young people you want to recruit, it can be helpful to consider:

- The social structure in your city, for example demographic backgrounds or residential areas. You might recruit young people through schools or youth centers in specific neighborhoods.

- Associations that young people identify with, for example interest groups, sports clubs, scouts, or religious groups.

- Types of disadvantage, which may relate to education or employment. For example, in Düsseldorf, unemployed and out-of-school youth were reached through youth career assistance services.

- Existing youth engagement services or local civic engagement organizations, such as youth or student councils. In Düsseldorf, the youth council nominated participants. In Charlotte, connections were made with Communities in Schools and local civic engagement organizations.

> I wanted to get more involved in the community and with my internship, it's geared towards like underrepresented students. And after learning about how people like me aren't really, you know, represented in my own community, it kind of made me want to change that.
>
> **Hailey Dagout**
> *Citizen Scientist, Charlotte*

> It does feel like politics frequently forgets youth, especially the youth that doesn't go out into the street and shout their opinions or go out on Instagram or TikTok and shout their opinions. So, it felt like, if I'm already doing some volunteering work in my community, I might as well do something bigger, more political, more like at the entire city level.
>
> **Alina Shub**
> *Citizen Scientist, Düsseldorf*

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Participation as co-researchers should be open and accessible to all types of young people regardless of their demographic, social, or educational background. It must also be acknowledged that participation in 'Co-creating our city' requires a high level of commitment from participants. You should therefore consider and take note of the motivation participants bring along in the recruitment process. In addition to motivation, factors such as age, gender, place of residence, and type of school may be collected during application.

If you end up with more applications from potential co-researchers than capacity, you can use this information and background characteristics to select a suitable and diverse group of participants.

Avenues for reaching young people

To reach young people, it is a good idea to rely on cooperation with established players in youth work in your city or community. Young people who are already active in youth centers, volunteer work, or clubs can be approached through these networks. A broader audience of young people can also be reached through schools.

Information about the project should be phrased and presented in a way that is appropriate for young people, e.g., in concise language, as a visually appealing poster or leaflet. Social media and websites are an important source of information for young people and can be used to distribute recruitment calls, too. To inform young people about the project, find out which social media sites or webpages they know and use. These could be event calendars, micro-influencers in your community, or local blogs.

Age range

The approach of 'Co-creating our city' is suitable for a wide age range of young people, though educational concepts and communication must be adapted to ages of the young participants you end up working with.

When working with younger co-researchers and those with little prior knowledge of, e.g., social research, local politics, or city governance, it is particularly important to use simple language and to consider keeping workshops and sessions rather short and variable in their format, for example including movement and playful elements that can allow the co-researchers to explore the issue themselves.

Older participants, those who have prior experience with youth engagement or a more advanced understanding of research or prior knowledge, e.g., young people who have previously engaged with city institutions or are at college or university, need more opportunities for in-depth discussions and to voice their views. Workshops can be longer and should involve room for young people to drive the project and exchange ideas. If there is substantial variation in the ages of participants or in their educational backgrounds or prior experience, it can be more difficult to find a balance in formats.

When working with younger people (especially minors), there is additional responsibility to comply with safeguarding laws and ensure consent from parents or legal guardians. To provide clarity and a point of contact in case of questions, it may be useful to give guardians a document outlining the expectations and safeguards of the project and providing contact information for the point person who will respond to their concerns; you may want to host an evening meeting for parents and guardians at the start of the project. The age of the participants also influences their mobility and availability to attend workshops or conduct research.

Compensation and incentives

In order to encourage young people from different backgrounds to participate, the project team needs to signal willingness to break down barriers and respond to individual needs. Participation must be free of charge and travel expenses and meals for the workshops must be covered. This should be communicated clearly during the recruitment phase.

In addition to covering co-researchers' travel and meal costs, providing co-researchers with incentives, in the form of direct payment, vouchers, or gifts, can send an important signal that the project recognizes and values their time, effort, and expertise. Incentives can help ensure equity and motivate co-researchers to keep engaged over the course of the project. Incentives can be especially important for young people who may face financial or time constraints, or both (e.g., due to part-time work or longer travel times). Incentives can also signal that young people's contributions are valued on par with those of city staff.

Before you consider providing incentives, consider the following:

- Incentives may unintentionally shift motivations from intrinsic to transactional, creating unequal dynamics among participants, particularly if some participants (e.g., adult decision-makers) are unpaid.

- Incentives may raise ethical and budgetary concerns. Carefully plan what incentives your budget can cover and make sure you know how these can be paid out in line with labor and employment laws (directly, as vouchers, to a certain limit).

Strategies to reach young people used in 'Co-creating our city' pilot project in Düsseldorf

Case Study

	Düsseldorf
Networks	Mailing to local youth work partners via the Office for Youth and Social Affairs
Offline	Mailing and direct recruitment via youth associations who are members of the Jugendring
Offline	Selection of representatives from the city youth council
	Recruitment through personal networks (teachers, youth workers)

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- You may consider announcing or providing incentives at the beginning of your recruitment efforts, to attract young people who may not otherwise be able to participate, or at a later stage in the project as a thank-you.

In addition to monetary incentives or tokens of appreciation, a certificate of participation in the project and proof of the content and skills taught can also be a helpful incentive. This is especially true for participants who are transitioning from school to entering apprenticeship or further education, and who may need evidence of development activities.

Recruiting city leaders

One of the project's goals is to facilitate a dialogue between young people and decision-makers and members of the city administration. Involving both young people and city leaders is key for the co-researchers to develop city-specific proposals that are directly actionable. To achieve this, 'Co-creating our city' projects seek to involve decision-makers and members of the city administration or council in the group of co-researchers.

Whom to approach

For the success of your 'Co-creating our city' project it is worth the effort of involving staff from a variety of departments within the city administration, and not just those that are youth-focused or engaging with young people already. Decision-makers who do not usually get to speak to young people can particularly benefit from participating as co-researchers. Equally, for young people, it is important to be able to have a say in issues that go beyond the topics of youth policy and education. Our survey among young people in Charlotte showed that young people were particularly interested in having a say in areas such as economic development, planning and development, technology and innovation, and communications and marketing.

When approaching decision-makers, it is worth considering governance structures and focusing adult recruitment on those areas where city leaders have autonomy to make decisions. In Düsseldorf, the project team involved decision-makers in areas such as education and youth work, because young people considered them key places for increasing engagement and the city has a degree of autonomy over decisions in these areas. In Charlotte, in contrast, the city is

not involved in school governance (which is handled by an independently elected board of education), and these areas of activity were not discussed as options for decision-maker participants.

If you decide to involve local politicians or recruit through partisan organizations, it is essential to keep the recruitment of decision makers nonpartisan—or, at least, to approach all parties or governing coalitions equally. Having representation from the different factions within the city government is important for the success and impact of your project, because (1) it ensures broad community and stakeholder support and (2) it helps the project and its solutions to outlive the administration under which it took place and to be accepted and acted on by future administrations. For the pilot project in Düsseldorf, for example, the project team informed and invited all members of the youth welfare committee, regardless of their political affiliation.

Working with gatekeepers

To approach decision-makers and secure their participation in the project, it is necessary to understand the governance structures, hierarchies, and processes within the city. Gatekeepers and supporters, people who can make introductions and have agency within city administration or local politics, can help open doors to recruiting city staff as co-researchers. It is also a great advantage if the city approves working hours for employees to participate in the project; gatekeepers can broker this type of support for your project team.

When working with gatekeepers, it is important to clarify who handles communication with potential participants and which hierarchies

or processes must be followed. Potential areas of conflict, due (for example) to power dynamics, should be identified at an early stage and resolved where possible.

How to approach city leaders

To promote the project, city leaders need a clear and concise introduction to the project, including information about the concept and vision, the process, the stakeholders involved, and envisioned outcomes. You should also include an indication of the expected time commitment and whether events will take place during or be approved as working hours. This information should be provided as a one-pager.

📄 You can find an example in our resource collection: Recruitment example Co-creating our city

When addressing decision-makers, it is particularly important to emphasize how the project's approach differs from and complements existing activities and youth engagement. City leaders need convincing reasons why they should invest their limited time. Some points you can make:

- Engaging young people's voices ensures that city governance is inclusive and sustainable.

- Structured exchange with young people opens up valuable perspectives.

- The applied Citizen Science approach leads to valid youth-led insights.

- The process generates ideas for vibrant communities that young people and decision-makers in cities share.

Incentivizing and thanking participants in Charlotte

Case Study

We did not mention any monetary compensation during the recruitment process. We decided to provide participants with gift cards worth $25 at the end of each workshop. Participants expressed gratitude, although a few said it was not necessary.

You can poll participants on their preference from a pre-set list of options. Charlotte youth collectively preferred Amazon gift cards, our initial choice.

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2.   Legal and ethical considerations

When working with young people and adult decision-makers in a 'Co-creating our city' project, it is crucial to consider legal and ethical aspects to ensure safety, respect, and compliance with relevant laws.

Consent to participate

Co-researchers and research participants need to provide voluntary and informed consent to participating in the project and the research it involves. Consent forms for both co-researchers and research participants should be age appropriate and clearly explain the purpose of the project, what participation involves, risks/benefits, and participants' right to withdraw their consent and how and when they can do so.

For co-researchers and research participants who are minors (under 16 or under 18 depending on the laws in your country or local area), informed consent must be obtained from a parent or legal guardian, and from the young person themself. Co-researchers and participants who are legally considered adults can provide informed consent directly.

Check your country and locality's guidance (for example, in the US, your state) on research integrity and informed consent:

- European Network for Research Integrity and Ethics (ENERI)

- United States Department of Health and Human Services

Permission to use photos, video, or audio

You may want to take pictures or make audio or video recordings of workshops and events to help with the dissemination of your project findings and as a reminder of what was discussed. Written permission must be obtained before capturing or sharing identifiable images, video, or audio of co-researchers and participants. For minors, this includes permission from both the young person and their parent/guardian.

Consent forms should specify:

- That the participant (and their parent/guardian) explicitly agree to have their image and/or voice captured.

- Where and how the material will be used (e.g., social media, reports, public events),

- The right to withdraw permission later, and how and when this can be done,

- Whether a young person's full name will be used on marketing materials.

Data protection

Participating in the project as co-researchers likely involves the sharing of personal data, including names, contact details, dietary or other sensitive information. This data must be securely stored and processed in line with your country's data protection laws (e.g., GDPR in the EU). Participants must be informed about:

- What data is collected

- How it will be used

- Who will have access

- How long it will be stored and when it will be deleted

Research participants (e.g., interviewees, survey participants) also provide personal data, for example through their responses. This data must also be handled securely and in line with local data protection laws. In addition, anonymization or pseudonymization should be used where possible to protect people's identities.

Child and youth protection

Depending on the laws in your country and who you recruit as co-researchers and research participants, you may be required to comply with child safeguarding policies and youth protection laws. In many countries participants who are under 16 or under 18 are legal minors and this requirement would apply to you and your project team.

Safeguarding policies often require:

- Staff, researchers, and facilitators working with youth undergo background checks prior to any interaction with underage participants

- Staff be hired who have appropriate professional qualifications or experience and are trained in safeguarding and ethical youth engagement

- Ensuring safe environments (physical and online)

- Avoiding situations where adults are alone with young participants

- Having clear reporting procedures for suspected abuse

- Having a clear code of conduct and supervision structure for staff

- Preparing and reviewing a risk assessment before the project starts

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Legal and ethical requirements for your 'Co-creating our city' project

Consent to participate

☐ The laws and research ethics guidelines for my country/local area checked

☐ Informed consent obtained from all participants

☐ For young people who are minors: Parental/guardian and youth consent obtained

☐ Consent forms are age-appropriate and easy to understand

☐ Participants informed of their right to withdraw at any time

Data protection & privacy

☐ Personal data collected and stored in compliance with data protection laws (e.g., GDPR)

☐ Participants informed about what data is collected, why it is collected, who has access, and how long it will be stored

☐ Data anonymized or pseudonymized where appropriate

☐ Secure storage and limited access to sensitive information ensured

☐ A plan for when and how data will be deleted put in place

Additional ethical considerations

☐ Activities designed to minimize power imbalances

☐ Safe and inclusive space for youth participation created

☐ Diverse voices and experiences represented

☐ Transparent communication about project goals and use of results aimed for

Photos, video & audio recordings

☐ Written permission obtained for taking and using images/audio/video

☐ For young people who are minors: Parental/guardian and youth consent obtained

☐ Participants informed where and how recordings may be used (e.g., reports, social media)

☐ Right to revoke media consent clearly explained

Child and youth protection

☐ Project team checked and informed about national child protection and safeguarding laws

☐ Adults who work with minors have been vetted and authorized

☐ Staff have had professional qualifications checked and have been trained

☐ Safeguarding policy in place and communicated to all staff

☐ Clear procedures for reporting concerns or incidents

☐ Risk assessments completed for all activities

3.   Motivation, inclusion, and accessibility

The (young) participants take part in the project voluntarily and devote their free time to act as co-researchers. It is therefore important to ensure they perceive the project as enriching, to show appreciation for their time, and to create an atmosphere in which they feel comfortable to contribute. Project teams should make sure they create an environment in which youth participants feel just as free as the adults to speak up and to participate fully. When bringing together young people and city leaders, it is also essential to acknowledge and address differences in knowledge, experience, and power.

'Co-creating our city' projects focus explicitly on the participation of underrepresented groups. This means that facilitators must think about and make an effort to welcome and include participants from diverse backgrounds and that teams have to be especially conscious of avoiding potential biases or discrimination (conscious or unconscious).

Consider the following to create an inclusive, accessible, and non-discriminatory space for your project:

Safe space: The collaboration and all interactions within the project—meetings, workshops, discussions in person or online spaces—should explicitly be established as a safe space. Workshop facilitators should establish and reiterate a framework for discussing concerns and needs as well as rules tailored to these at an initial kick-off meeting with young and adult participants as well as at the beginning of every workshop. The framework and rules should be established jointly with the group. It is important that all participants commit to treating each other with respect. Regular check-ins and reflections contribute to awareness of diversity and a positive atmosphere for everyone.

Skills and experience: The workshop formats and content should be tailored to the skills and strengths of the participants and be adapted to serve different needs and interests. Consider keeping workshop plans flexible, for example, by including buffer time to allow for spontaneous questions or discussions, and offering reasonable adjustments to agendas, tasks, or the physical environment that allow co-researchers with specific needs to participate in all activities.

Accessibility and inclusivity: Creating accessible and inclusive spaces means removing barriers (e.g., by the presence of ramps, elevators, and tactile guidance systems) and being open to different forms of communication (e.g., sign language, simplified language). The venue must be in reach for all participants. Participants should not incur any additional costs. Accordingly, the project budget must include funds for travel and meals during the workshops. When planning meals, dietary requirements and allergies must be taken into account. Participants could be given the opportunity to vote on a selection of dishes in advance.

You can use an introductory discussion with participants, or alternatively your sign-up form, to identify their specific needs and support requirements. If necessary, consider if you can run workshops to support and provide services and materials in different languages.

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4. Commitment and communication

Building strong relationships is the foundation for the success of your 'Co-creating our city' project. Relationships with your co-researchers must be reliable, respectful, and participatory. This means that young people and city leaders are taken seriously not only as participants but also as active partners and co-researchers.

The Citizen Science approach of the project is ambitious and requires a considerable commitment of time from the co-researchers. This commitment and the time you expect co-researchers to set aside for their involvement in the project should be clearly communicated at the beginning. Participation in the project means attending all workshops and actively engaging in research activities between workshops. How involved individual co-researchers are can change over the course of the project and depends on the size of your group of co-researchers and the scope and research design of your project.

There should be clear agreements among group members about participation:

• What is the minimum level of commitment/time required?

• Who has which capacities and skills to contribute?

• Which milestones do we want to achieve and when?

These questions should be discussed with the group of co-researchers and revisited regularly over the course of the project. At the same time, it is important to show flexibility and take the personal circumstances of the participants into account. Documenting workshops well, e.g. using written notes, digital boards, or video recordings, enables participants to review any content they may have missed. If necessary, workshop facilitators can offer to go through the content by telephone or in an online meeting.

In addition, it can be helpful to provide young people with comprehensive support in their everyday lives, for example, by advising them on educational pathways, providing resources, or recognizing their strengths and skills. However, such support should always be voluntary and needs-based to preserve young people's self-determination and avoid overwhelming them.

Continuous communication is important to ensure that participants remain aware of what is happening over the course of the project. A platform that participants use in their everyday lives works best. Many young people use phone message apps in preference to email. In consultation with Charlotte participants, the group selected Group-Me, an app that ensures no numbers are shared among minors. Düsseldorf participants selected WhatsApp. Both groups used Google Drive as an easy and free platform to document and share content. Your group should decide what platform works best for its needs.

5. Scheduling workshops and activities with co-researchers

It is important to come to an agreement with all co-researchers involved in your project on the days and times that work for everyone to attend workshops and conduct research and dissemination events.

The project takes place during the (young) co-researchers' free time. When planning workshops and research activities, consider scheduling these in evenings and on weekends to allow young people who are in school or further education to participate.

During the week, workshops should not be scheduled to start until after schools close or further education classes finish. The workshops should end at a time that allows all participants to get home safely. Depending on the age of the participants, local rules on youth protection, such as curfews or driving regulations, must be taken into account. Vacation periods and public holidays should generally be avoided. Further scheduling conflicts, such as exam periods or local events, should be

discussed with stakeholders in advance, and ideally also with the participants themselves once you start your 'Co-creating our city' project.

Cities can approve working hours for city staff to participate in the project as co-researchers. Nevertheless, to accommodate collaboration with young people, city staff who participate as co-researchers must be open to working on the project outside of their regular working hours, for example on evenings and weekends. To help overcome these scheduling constraints, consider dividing the five project phases and associated workshops into several shorter sessions or grouping them into longer units, e.g., as a weekend workshop or a project week during non-term time. You can make decisions on scheduling your workshops based on the scope and requirements of your project and research topic and the preferences of the participants. It is also important to consider scheduling workshops and activities so that there is sufficient time for data collection in phase 3 of the project.

Workshop schedule of 'Co-creating our city' pilot project in Düsseldorf

Case Study

Saturday, September 21, 2024,	11 am–3 pm	Workshop: Research question
Monday, October 7, 2024,	6–9pm	Workshop: Research design
Saturday, November 23, 2024	11am–3pm	Workshop: Data collection
Saturday, February 8, 2025,	11am–3pm	Workshop: Dissemination
Monday, March 17, 2025,	6–9pm	Workshop: Data analysis

IV. Doing participatory research with young people and city leaders

'Co-creating our city' projects use participatory research methods to bring together key stakeholders—young residents, project organizers, local authorities, and policymakers—and to co-create knowledge and achieve meaningful change.

This chapter provides a practical guide to the essential elements of participatory research in your own 'Co-creating our city' project, including some tips to overcome challenges. It provides a step-by-step guide to design, facilitate, and sustain impactful participatory research within your own community or organization, including ready-to-use materials and helpful resources.

1. What is participatory research?

Participatory research is a collaborative approach to knowledge creation that engages those affected by an issue as equal partners in all research stages. Unlike traditional research, where experts shape and conduct research, participatory research shares power and decision-making with community members who act as co-researchers. These co-researchers help define research questions, collect and analyze data, and apply findings to create real-world impact.

Participatory research is an umbrella term for research methods involving the active participation of community members. Among these, co-creation and Citizen Science represent distinct but overlapping models, each varying in how power, knowledge, and roles are shared within the research process.

Rooted in inclusion and social justice, participatory research values lived experience alongside expert knowledge. It fosters mutual learning and social action in communities, builds trust, improves data quality, and empowers participants to contribute their lived experience. In this way, participatory research yields relevant and directly actionable insights aligned with local priorities.

What are co-creation and Citizen Science?

Within participatory research methods, co-creation involves participants and researchers jointly creating research agendas, deciding on methodologies, and defining outcomes. The focus of Citizen Science, in contrast, is on members of the general public conducting research, for example data collection or analysis.

There are various typologies to capture the many forms of participatory research, co-creation, and Citizen Science (see, for example, Shirk et al., 2012, and Bonney et al., 2009). They differentiate contribution, collaboration, and co-creation based on the level of engagement of co-researchers and the amount of control research

teams are willing to hand over. With increasing levels of engagement of community members, project teams can achieve more inclusive and impactful research outcomes.

- Contribution refers to projects where participants primarily collect or submit data according to protocols designed by researchers, typically without input into other parts of the research.

- Collaboration involves participants more actively, not only in data collection but also in refining research questions, analyzing data, or helping with the dissemination of research findings.

- Co-creation represents the highest level of engagement, where community members and researchers join forces to design, conduct, and disseminate research, sharing control and responsibilities throughout the process.

Key aspects of co-creation and Citizen Science:

- Active citizen engagement in several research stages: in decisions on the research question, the choice of methods, data collection, analysis, and the interpretation and dissemination of findings.

- Collaboration and equal partnerships between institutional researchers and unaffiliated volunteers who act as co-researchers, for example young people.

- A commitment to rigor, transparency, and sharing of knowledge.

- Empowerment, capacity building, trust and enhanced relationships between researchers and the communities they research.

What are the benefits of co-creation and Citizen Science?

Co-creation and Citizen Science methods represent a shift towards democratizing research and the knowledge it creates, making research findings more inclusive, transparent, and aligned with the needs of the communities it affects. These methods emphasize equity, knowledge sharing, and actionable outcomes, transforming those traditionally „researched on" into empowered collaborators and strengthening the bonds among experts, practitioners, and the community for shared benefit.

Co-creation and Citizen Science offer a range of benefits for different stakeholders: researchers, communities, participants, and policymakers.

Benefits for researchers

Co-creation inspires new research agendas by raising new questions and including ideas based on community knowledge. This is particularly true when co-researchers include young people who would not typically be involved in research teams. The involvement of co-researchers also ensures that results are relevant and directly actionable. This increases the acceptance of recommended solutions within the community.

Benefits for communities

For communities, co-creation and Citizen Science foster community learning. The approach empowers community members, in particular young people, to take part in research and expo-

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ses them to new and diverse points of view that exist within the community. By involving community members from the beginning, co-creation encourages research that is relevant and transparent and promotes the effective transfer of research findings into practice. It democratizes the meaning and practice of research, strengthening both communities and the outcomes they can expect from institutions.

„ It's been a lot of fun working with people. There are a lot of different people with different experiences and different ways of life. And then just seeing how other people see things that you might see very differently and to experience how young people who come up in interviews or fill in questionnaires, how they see politics and how they find contact with politics. I found all of that very interesting.

Felix Reinkemeier
Citizen Scientist, Düsseldorf

Benefits for participants

Participants in co-creation and Citizen Science projects can directly contribute to research discoveries. Their involvement offers young people and city leaders opportunities to build research skills and can deepen their understanding and appreciation of evidence in policymaking, promoting the idea that rigorous research can improve policy and communities for the better. Through their participation, co-researchers gain a better grasp of the complexity of issues the community faces, they contribute to the development of solutions and can experience efficacy in political decision-making. Lastly, the experience is also enjoyable and fosters a sense of trust and belonging.

„ I think the whole workshop really gave me a new experience and motivation to actually be part of something bigger.

Eka Zubov
Citizen Scientist, Düsseldorf

„ My opinion of the city was better because I was like "Look at these kinds of people that are working for my city". I got to learn a ton of stuff that I didn't know before that was being done and the importance of some of the stuff that was being done. And I was like "Oh, ok, well…", you know, this is more interesting than I thought. I can see what work goes into running a city.

Mauricio Martinez Aguirre
Citizen Scientist, Charlotte

Benefits for policymakers

Policymakers benefit from improved communication with citizens, which leads to better public engagement in decision-making. The inclusion of citizen perspectives ensures that decisions and regulations are more effectively

implemented and grounded in current issues. By involving the public, Citizen Science builds broader support for policy measures and provides a wealth of up-to-date, real-world information. This also helps authorities monitor the effects of regulations more accurately and adapt policies as necessary.

„ I found it quite impressive that the young people very quickly got the point that there are some youth who have opportunities to participate politically and others who either do not have them or do not make use of them. This imbalance of opportunities became a topic right away in the workshop and was clearly worked out up to the research question of why certain young people do not take advantage of these political participation opportunities.

Paula Elsholz
City Councillor, City of Düsseldorf

Who are the main players in the Citizen Science landscape?

If you want to learn more about co-creation and Citizen Science and connect with other practitioners, have a look at these organizations:

→ **mit:forschen! (Germany)**
As the leading German Citizen Science platform, mit:forschen! provides resources, networking opportunities, and support for practitioners, researchers, and interested members of the public. mit:forschen! facilitates capacity-building, workshops, and networking.

→ **European Citizen Science Association (ECSA)**
Headquartered in Berlin, ECSA brings together organizations and individuals who practice Citizen Science from across Europe. It advocates for participatory methods, shapes quality standards, organizes working groups, and acts as a hub for Citizen Science in Europe.

→ **Association for Advancing Participatory Sciences (US)**
Focused on North America, this association, formerly the Citizen Science Association, advances Citizen Science through convenings, standards, professional development, and networks among practitioners, researchers, and community leaders.

→ **Zooniverse**
One of the world's most well-known Citizen Science platforms, Zooniverse offers members of the public opportunities to contribute to research in the sciences and humanities, demonstrating the potential of participatory methods for large-scale research and public engagement.

→ **Spotteron**
Provides customizable digital tools and mobile apps supporting Citizen Science projects, in particular for environmental research and volunteer monitoring. Its emphasis on usability helps projects engage a wider audience and enhance participation, especially among young people.

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Classification of public engagement in participatory research and Citizen Science

Co-created

Co-creation represents the highest level of engagement, where community members and researchers jointly design, implement, and disseminate research, sharing control and responsibilities throughout the entire research process.
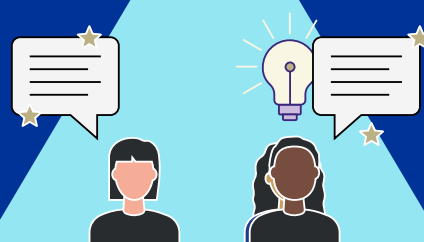
Collaborative

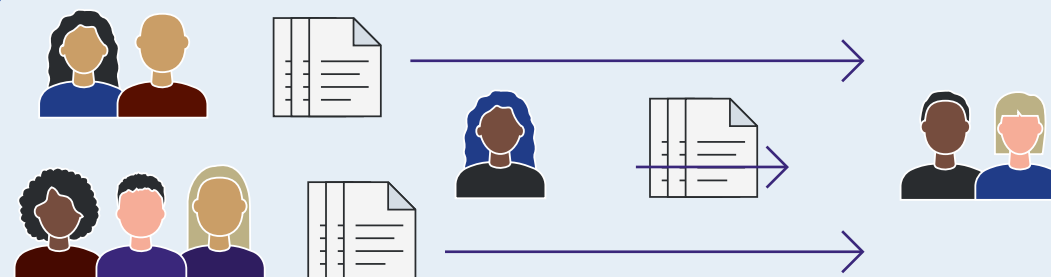Collaboration involves citizens participating more actively, not only in data collection but also in refining research questions, analyzing data, or helping with dissemination.
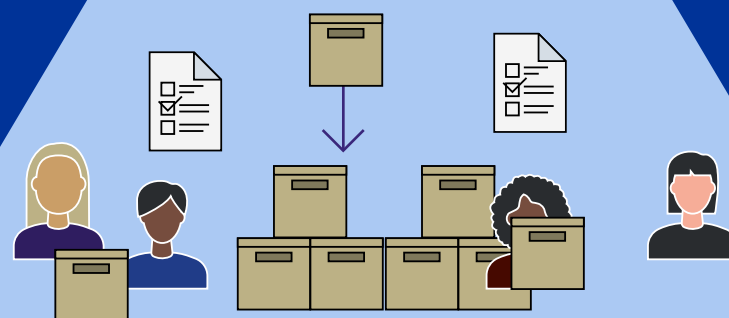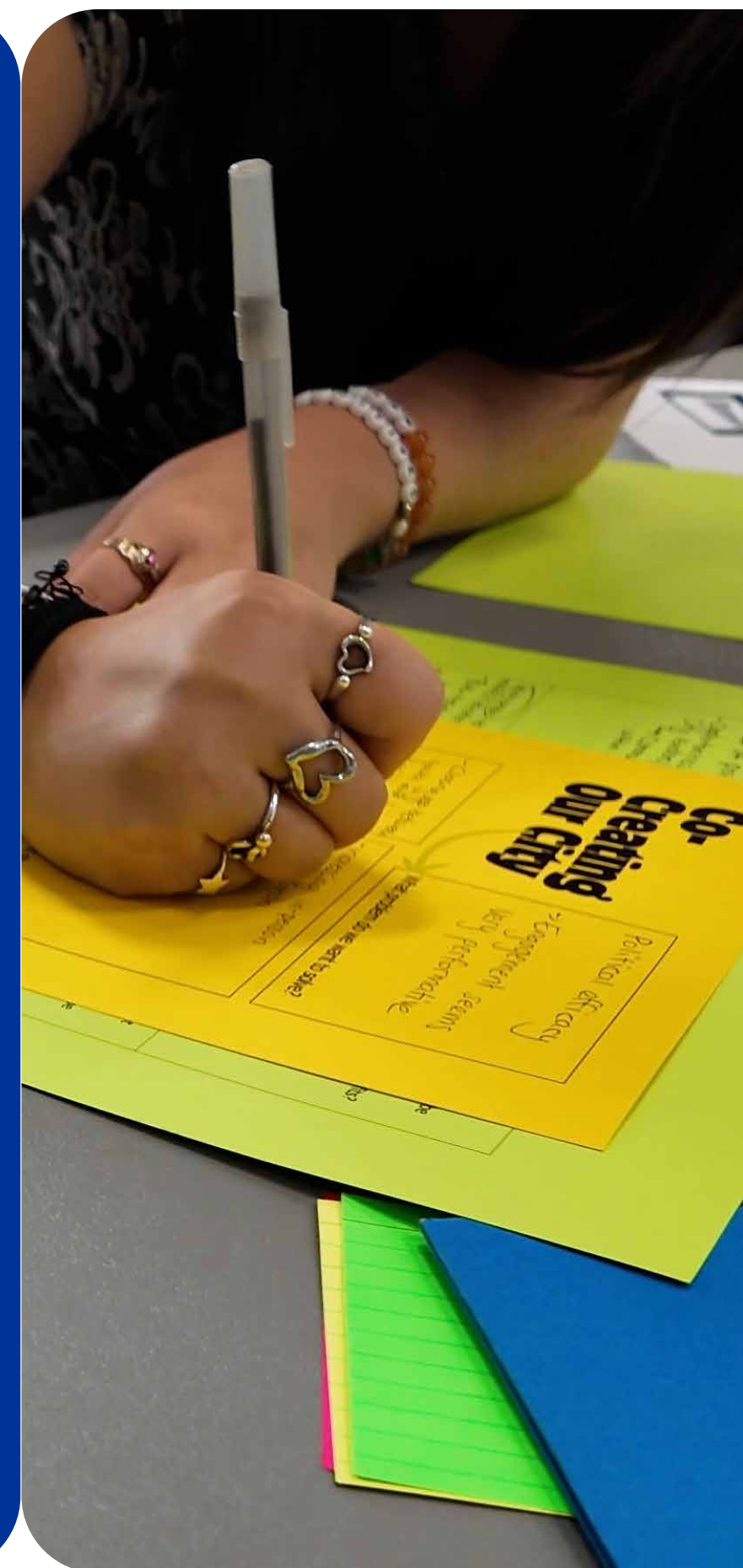
Contributory

Contribution refers to projects where citizens primarily collect or submit data according to protocols designed by scientists, typically without input into other research phases.

Bonney et al. 2009, Shirk et al. 2012

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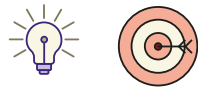Co-creating our city - Participatory research for youth engagement in cities

2.   Five steps to organizing your 'Co-creating our city' project

There are five key steps to the research process using Citizen Science and co-creation. Each step plays an important role in ensuring meaningful participation and effective results:

Follow these steps to successfully run your own 'Co-creating our city' project and consider the details on each of these steps in more detail: specific goals, tasks, and practical considerations.

1. Define a common research goal

Include different perspectives and rely on co-researchers to consider the relevance for the community.

→ Step 1

2. Determine methodological approach

Consider what suits the research question and take into account the co-researchers' ideas, access, and lived experience.

→ Step 2

3. Collect data

Train and involve co-researchers in data collection.

→ Step 3

4. Analyze data

Train and involve co-researchers in the analysis of data.

→ Step 4

5. Disseminate and use findings

Distill key recommendations and choose accessible forms of presentation and communication that suit your target audiences.

→ Step 5

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Step 1

Define a common research goal

Defining a clear objective is crucial for any research project, and in particular for a 'Co-creating our city' project. In the beginning, your project team should focus on identifying what change is needed and why and decide which specific challenges or gaps you want to investigate.

To do so jointly with co-researchers, it is important to gather a variety of ideas on the type of change your community needs and the objectives you want to pursue, for example in a brainstorming session with your co-researchers. This ensures a broad perspective rooted in your community and allows the group to see all potential areas of interest, even those you might not previously have thought of. It is important to try and remain open and flexible during this first step and to be able to adapt to new ideas and feedback from the co-researchers as the project objectives evolve.

Next, identifying commonalities among all potential objectives and areas of interest, for example by grouping aspects that go together, helps with prioritization and allows you to choose a research question and make compromises where necessary.

When settling on a research objective for your project, consider two types of objectives:

- **Knowledge objectives** (What knowledge is needed to achieve this?). These define what kind of information and understanding you want to achieve.

- **Practical objectives** (What do you want to do?). These are important for the impact you want your research to achieve.

When phrasing research objectives for your 'Co-creating our city' project, it can be a good idea to use the SMART criteria: objectives should be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound. Applying SMART criteria to your chosen research objectives ensures clarity, feasibility, and accountability, and helps your project achieve research outcomes that are both meaningful and directly actionable.

Finally, based on your chosen research objectives, you can develop a focused and specific research question. This research question will steer the rest of the research process.

Research objectives and research question from 'Co-creating our city' pilot project in Düsseldorf

Case Study

This example demonstrates how we worked through research objectives and toward an overarching research question in our pilot project in Düsseldorf.

Knowledge objectives:

- Understand how youth in Düsseldorf feel and what they wish for in terms of their opportunities to engage with political issues and in their communities.

- Understand which barriers youth experience and what hinders productive dialogue between city administration and young people.

Practical objectives:

- Reach all youth in Düsseldorf, especially the ones who are otherwise overlooked, e.g., marginalized young people or those who do not already engage with city institutions or third sector organizations.

- Develop ideas and solutions how barriers to youth engagement in Düsseldorf can be addressed.

Research question:

What has to happen so that ALL young people can engage with political issues in Düsseldorf?

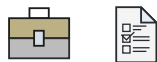## How you can adapt the process to fit your city

Step 1 and the start of your collaboration with co-researchers is also a good moment to

- introduce data on youth engagement that may already exist in your community,
- introduce relevant city departments and key members of staff,
- discuss what are current issues and debates in your city, and
- share information on basic aspects of city governance.

Sharing this kind of contextual information early, in your first or second workshop, helps all participants to be aware of the local context and aligns research objectives with ongoing governance and policy discussions.

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Step 2

Determine methodological approach

The approach you choose for your research project should allow your team of co-researchers to answer the research question and achieve the chosen research objectives. It is important that your methods suit the research question, but also that they are robust and inclusive of your co-researchers' unique knowledge, access, and capabilities.

The first step in deciding your methodological approach is to clarify which data is needed to answer your research question, who can collect this data and when, and how it will be analyzed. Your co-researchers have unique knowledge about and access to their communities that should be taken into account when making decisions about research methods.

To enable effective participation, it may be necessary to train co-researchers in some basic methods of social research, building their confidence and capacity to contribute meaningfully and to help with data collection. This also involves considering what support your co-researchers may need to be able to help with data collection, for example financial resources, time, or extra support. By addressing each of these aspects, the research process becomes more collaborative, empowering, and inclusive of all those involved.

In social science, many projects use mixed methods approaches. This way, different methods can complement each other and solve different parts of the research problem, as in this project where three methods have been combined.

Method A:
Interviews

Determine the underlying motivations for youth engagement

Why is this happening or not happening?

Method B:
Observation

Observe behavior or dynamics in existing forms of youth engagement

What happens and how does it happen?

Method C:
Surveys

To check findings from other methods, obtain generalizable results

Step 3

Collect data

In participatory research, data collection is conducted collaboratively by researchers and trained Citizen Scientists. This allows researchers to rely on bigger teams of data collectors, provides unique access to the communities that are being researched, and ensures that different perspectives are included in the data.

To enable genuine participation and fit the circumstances and schedules of the co-researchers, the data collection phase should be planned with sufficient time and allow for some flexibility. Particularly in the early stages of data collection, it can be a good idea to work in small teams of researchers and co-researchers, as this builds trust and helps everyone become familiar with the data collection methods. In later stages, division of labor can allow you to collect more and better data, as you rely on your team of co-researchers to conduct observations, interviews, or surveys.

It is essential that every step of the data collection remains transparent and traceable, allowing all participants to follow and understand which decisions were made and why. This approach ensures diverse contributions to the data you collect, builds trust in the validity of the data, and encourages shared ownership of the findings.

> Well, I think that the young people are completely amazing. We did 89 surveys of the people of their age and a number of one-on-one interviews and a focus group. They really put themselves out there to figure out what information they actually wanted. And they just volunteered to pick up every aspect of the work and presentation, and talk to adults about this project, which I think is really amazing.
>
> **Katarina Moyon**
> *Project Lead, City of Charlotte*

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Step 4

Analyze data

In participatory research, it is crucial to select data analysis methods that are appropriate to both the research question and the co-researchers involved. Choosing a simpler method of analysis that your co-researchers can contribute to over, for example, a complex method that requires specific expertise enables their meaningful participation in the analysis and interpretation of the data.

By integrating the knowledge and skills of the co-researchers into the analysis process, you can add depth and relevance to the findings. While co-researchers might not bring any experience in analyzing data, they add diverse and contextual forms of knowledge on how to interpret the data in light of what they know about their community to the data analysis.

Recognizing this contextual knowledge as offering valuable and unique insights for the interpretation of your data is key. This is why, as a researcher, you should focus on preparing data for interpretation, coordinating, moderating, and providing guidance to co-researchers during the data analysis. This ensures that the process of analyzing the data remains collaborative and involves the rich and diverse perspectives of the co-researchers.

Step 5

Disseminate and use findings

To use research results effectively and achieve the impact and change you set out to achieve requires careful planning. In this stage, you should go back to your research objectives and consider the kinds of audiences you want to inform and the type of change you want to see based on your data and evidence.

The first step is to identify the specific audiences to whom you want to communicate findings, to ensure that your evidence and recommendations reach those for whom they are most relevant and impactful. Note that you might want to present and discuss your findings with multiple and different audiences, for example young people, a specific community, and policymakers.

Next, it is crucial that you prepare and present the findings appropriately and in an accessible way, tailoring what you select and how you present information to your different audiences. For example, policymakers might appreciate concrete written findings and recommendations, and a brief summary of how the evidence was collected, while the general public might benefit from more creative visualizations of data and findings. Targeting your communication of findings to specific audiences further enhances the reach of your research findings and ensures the results are presented in the most effective way depending on the unique needs of each audience.

Finally, it is important to consider how to acknowledge your co-researchers explicitly and by name, for example through co-authorship or by asking your co-researchers to present findings in meetings, blogs, or the local media. This acknowledges their contributions and promotes fairness and transparency in recognizing who played a role in and made the research possible. Including your co-researchers in the dissemination of research findings also adds their perspectives and experience to the presentation of findings, which can change and sometimes enhance the way others experience and perceive the findings. In this way, the dissemination of results becomes participatory, impactful, and respectful of all contributors.

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3.   From steps to action: Working with co-researchers

To set up and conduct the five steps of participatory research, researchers and co-researchers need to establish effective ways of working and a strong basis for collaboration. They need to collaborate

- at certain points in time, e.g., when you are establishing your research question and research objectives, and

- over extended periods of time, e.g., when you are collecting and analyzing data.

Workshops as space for collaboration with co-researchers

To make space for collaboration at specific points in time, consider organizing a series of workshops where both young people and city decision-makers come together to exchange ideas, build trust, and actively co-design and implement the research project.

Workshops provide a structured yet flexible environment, in which researchers and co-researchers can work and learn together, share knowledge, align expectations, and jointly address challenges. Ideally onsite and with face-to-face interaction, workshops foster mutual understanding and empower co-researchers to take on meaningful roles in the research process and become involved Citizen Scientists, while researchers gain valuable insights from participants' lived experiences and contextual knowledge.

Workshops can be used to work through the five steps of the Citizen Science model one-by-one or they can combine two or more steps into longer sessions, for example a full day or a weekend. This should be decided based on the needs and availability of your co-researchers.

One possible option is to conduct five half-day, in-person workshops over the course of the project duration, with online collaboration to prepare for workshops, add ideas, and accompany data collection tasks in between:

1.   **Workshop 1 – Setting the foundation:**
Introduce the project goals, co-define the research questions, and discuss the roles of the co-researchers. Build rapport among participants and clarify the expectations and ways of working.

2.   **Workshop 2 – Planning the research methods:**
Decide collectively on data collection methods, tools, and responsibilities. Provide initial training for co-researchers to build research skills and become Citizen Scientists.

3.   **Workshop 3 – Preparing data collection:**
Fine-tune materials and protocols for data collection based on pilots and participant feedback. Address any logistical or technical issues.

4.   **Workshop 4 – Data analysis and interpretation:**
Facilitate collaborative data analysis where Citizen Scientists and researchers jointly review and interpret the data, share perspectives, and triangulate and validate findings.
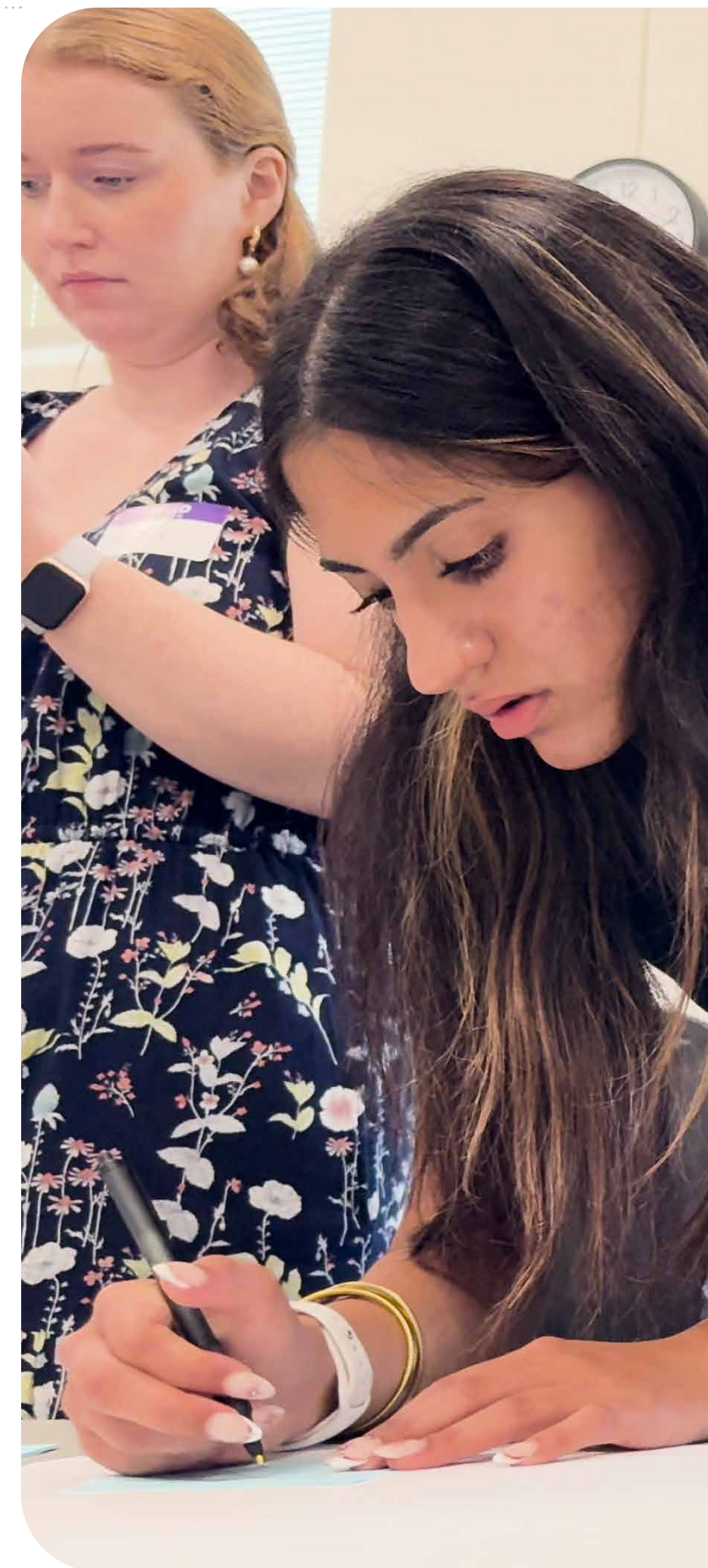
5.   **Workshop 5 – Dissemination and achieving impact:**
Co-create dissemination strategies tailored to target audiences and discuss how to maintain the collaboration and achieve impact beyond the project, including potential further research or community action.

Online collaboration with co-researchers between workshops

To maintain momentum and continuity between workshops and over extended periods of time, you can consider complementing these onsite workshops with forms of online collaboration, either synchronously, for example through online sessions, or asynchronously, through digital collaboration tools. Digital platforms such as project management tools or messaging boards allow the group to stay connected, share updates, discuss ongoing tasks, and prepare for the next in-person meetings, thus blending the benefits of in-person interaction with the convenience of remote collaboration.

The combination of workshops with ongoing digital collaboration allows the group to progress through each step with shared responsibility, ensuring transparency, inclusion, and a drive to achieve change. It also fosters a vibrant community of practice that strengthens partnerships between researchers and communities, maximizing both the quality of the research findings and their impact.

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4. Roadblocks and how to tackle them

Running a participatory research process with young people and city staff as co-researchers offers many opportunities, but it also brings unique challenges. Slow progress and limits to the engagement of your co-researchers can particularly challenge your project, especially if they are not addressed.

Reflecting on our experience with 'Co-creating our city' pilots in Charlotte and Düsseldorf, we recognized several recurring challenges. Anticipating these potential roadblocks and planning how you can prevent or respond to them can avoid delays, strengthen engagement, and create a smoother path toward meaningful, jointly produced results.

1. Attendance and scheduling conflicts

Regular attendance at workshops can be a challenge, both for young people who are co-researchers and city employees. Young people can be busy with school and exams during term time, while city staff have to manage their role as co-researchers alongside their job. It can be tempting to rely on evenings and weekends, but this may disincentivize staff and young people who rely on part-time jobs to support their cost of living.

Solution: Identify and communicate key dates, like those of workshops, early, avoiding known peak periods (like summer holidays or upcoming elections). Consider fewer but longer sessions (e.g., on weekends) to reduce scheduling strain and maintain continuity. Keep workshop locations consistent to ease mental load and build familiarity.

2. Maintaining commitment and motivation

Initial enthusiasm does not always translate into continuing engagement among co-researchers. It can be difficult to keep momentum going and make progress with tasks (for example, conducting surveys or interviews) between workshops. Follow-through from co-researchers on tasks they committed to can sometimes be limited, as they are volunteers in the project. As a result, important tasks in the research process, for example in data collection or analysis, can remain unaccomplished, incomplete or inconsistent.

Solution: From the outset, set clear expectations for the type of engagement and anticipated workload. Co-develop research methods and activities that are realistic within your timeframe and include generous extra time in your plans. Consider integrating some hands-on research activities into workshop time to ensure progress even when participants have competing commitments.

3. Creating clear roles for all stakeholders

The roles of city staff who act as co-researchers must be defined clearly. In our pilot cities it was not always clear what their roles were and how much they were expected to contribute versus letting the young people drive the process. This risked missing out on their unique and valued contributions and created power imbalances between co-researchers.

Solution: Discuss roles and mutual benefits openly and early on in the process. Encourage everybody to be actively involved in workshops and tasks, while keeping the process participant-led to preserve the Citizen Science ethos. Address power imbalances proactively, e.g., by briefing and training city staff ahead of the first workshops with young people.

4. Communication and sharing resources

Although digital collaboration tools (for example, Google Drive) can be very useful, they add additional strain on co-researchers, especially those who do not routinely use them or have never used the selected platform. In our pilot cities, few co-researchers made use of online collaboration tools.

Solution: For updates and reminders, try using tools for communication and collaboration that participants already use, like messaging apps. Demonstrate collaboration tools and how they are used to share resources in workshops and integrate them into session tasks, so co-researchers can see how they are used and practice using them together.

5. Bottlenecks during data collection and analysis

Conducting and analyzing many interviews or a large-scale survey can be resource-intensive, requiring more capacity and staff time than you might have available. In our pilot cities, co-researchers had little involvement in data analysis and therefore missed an important stage of the meaning-making of the data.

Solution: Choose research methods and data collection methods (for example, qualitative interviews or online surveys) that are manageable given the resources and staff you have available. Where large-scale surveys are used, secure extra staff or partners to organize outreach and recruitment of participants. Allocate dedicated workshop time to data collection or analysis of data with the whole group, ensuring youth perspectives shape the interpretation of results.

6. Balancing knowledge sharing with getting work done

While workshops need to emphasize the exchange of knowledge between researchers, young co-researchers and city staff, they also need to use time efficiently to train co-researchers, prepare, and get work done. Workshops thus need to provide space for both learning and doing. In our pilot projects, it proved difficult at times to find the right balance.

Solution: Design work packages that can be deployed as modules in workshops and in-person sessions. Adapt your plans for workshops based on the progress of the project and the needs of your co-researchers, ensuring a balance of skills training, discussion, and hands-on research.

7. Building relationships and external opportunities

While it is key to involve co-researchers in the communication and dissemination of research findings, the project does focus on networking and relationship building beyond the team of researchers and co-researchers. In our pilot cities, youth responded positively to external networking opportunities (e.g., speaking at events or to the media) and valued space provided for relationship building.

Solution: Use the initial workshops to focus on building trust between co-researchers and group cohesion. Provide "value-added" opportunities for co-researchers to build networks outside of the core group and workshop time to sustain motivation and broaden learning.

V. Achieving impact with your findings and outputs

Communicating the findings of your 'Co-creating our city' project is essential if it is to create impact and a change in how youth engagement is practiced. Because the project is rooted in collaboration with young people from the local community, it is vital that the findings are shared with young people in these communities in accessible and engaging ways, especially to young people who may be underrepresented in deliberative democracy and city dialogue. At the same time, the project is designed to inform and inspire action from city leaders, meaning community-generated insights need to be translated into meaningful policy or programmatic change.

This chapter gives practical tips on how your 'Co-creating our city' project can achieve the following two key aims: (1) bringing the results back to (young) people and communities in your city, and (2) motivating city leaders to act on the findings.

> " I'm just incredibly excited. First of all, it's just invigorating to be around young people who are committed to making your communities better. The last few days of sitting in the group have been amazing to me. But more importantly, what ideas are going to emerge from this and then how do we help make those come to life?
>
> **Brian Collier**
> *Project funder,
> The Gambrell Foundation*

> " We'll take a good look at the results and think about them: What do they mean for our structures? What does it possibly mean for future concepts or projects? And where do we really need to look again at what we do and how we do youth engagement?
>
> **Sandra Schwoll**
> *Office for Social Affairs and Youth, City of Düsseldorf*

1. Bringing the results to (young) people in your city

Peer-to-peer campaign

In a peer-to-peer campaign, participants address their networks directly. Your project involves participants from the groups that the project results are intended to reach, so the participants can pass on information effectively and in ways best suitable to their peers. Peer-to-peer campaigns offer the advantage of reaching many people in the desired target groups and in the most suitable ways. By interacting with their peers, participants also deepen their knowledge and gain self-confidence and self-efficacy.

> " I always thought I have to do this or I'll create change when I grow up. And then coming here and doing this, I realized, oh, I can do change. Like right now, I don't have to wait.
>
> **Mauricio Martinez Aguirre,**
> *Citizen Scientist, Charlotte*

> " In these workshops our voices are heard, but we also want to hear the voices of other young people. That's what really motivated me, because I thought: I can make a change with this project.
>
> **Rochelle Namunyak Kirschbaum,**
> *Citizen Scientist, Düsseldorf*

To prepare participants, the workshops should include an introduction to the basics of how to communicate research findings in accessible ways and practical exercises on messaging and translating research language into everyday language. Depending on their interests, participants can produce their own texts, graphics, or even short videos for social media, or create a blog or podcast to accompany the research process. Helpful resources could include templates that can be easily edited, access to tools for video/audio production, and funding for paid social media campaigns.

Public event

A concluding event at the end of the research process creates an opportunity to bring the co-researchers' findings to the wider city community, to discuss them with other young people and local stakeholders, and to begin to design solutions for next-level youth engagement in their city. This event could take place after the research phase concludes and when the co-researchers have identified initial findings.

The closing event is aimed at a wider group of people than those who have been involved as co-researchers: young people, city decision-makers, local experts, interested stakeholders, and members of the general public. A closing event is also a good opportunity to gather impressions from stakeholders and to invite the local press. It could take place in the city premises or a publicly accessible space (e.g., an event space or even a shopping mall).

Co-researchers should be involved in designing the program of the event. The program should offer co-researchers the opportunity to present their findings from the project, for example in a slideshow or a gallery walk, and opportunities to discuss findings with stakeholders and the general public, for example through feedback opportunities during the gallery walk or in a fishbowl discussion. In addition, participatory workshops that discuss aspects of the findings in more detail can strengthen the involvement of the attending stakeholders and general public.

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Agenda of 'Co-creating our city' closing event in Düsseldorf

Case Study

Goals

- **Strengthening youth participation**
  - → Citizen Scientists share their joint findings on the needs and challenges of youth participation in Düsseldorf
  - → Develop and discuss concrete proposals to better involve young people in policy and civic processes
  - → Extending dialogue at eye level between young people, politicians, administration, and experts on urban society

- **Tangible solutions for Düsseldorf**
  - → Identification of initiatives that the city administration and young people can work on together
  - → Involving decision-makers to promote the actual implementation of the ideas
  - → Discussion of concrete next steps and possibilities for adopting the proposals within city policy

Structure

- **Arrival (30 min)**
  - → Drinks and snacks
  - → Informal discussions
  - → Presentation of project results as a gallery walk

- **Opening (10 min)**
  - → Remarks by (e.g.) a representative of the city and a young person

- **Welcome and introduction (20 min)**
  - → Project presentation (possibly with video?)
  - → Presentation of results
  - → Introduction to Bar Camp format

- **Collecting topics and planning sessions (20 min)**
  - → All participants suggest topics for the sessions (e.g., on cards or digitally via Miro/Padlet)
  - → Joint clustering and selection of topics
  - → Creation of a session plan with parallel discussions

- **Break (15 min)**
  - → Moving to sessions

- **Parallel sessions (2 x 40 min, 10 min break for changeover)**
  - → Two rounds of discussions on different topics
  - → Moderation and documentation of the sessions by Citizen Scientists or Bar Camp participants

- **Break and informal discussions (15 min)**
  - → Opportunity for networking and individual discussions

- **Summarizing the results (30 min)**
  - → Short presentation of the most important findings from the sessions
  - → Discussion of next steps and implementation options

- **Closing and commitment (20 min)**
  - → First reaction/comment from a representative of the city
  - → Agreement on concrete next steps between representatives of the young people and the city

- **Informal closing**
  - → Opportunity for networking and individual discussions

Media (local and/or youth focused)

Local media or media outlets that target young people are excellent channels to bring 'Co-creating our city' insights to a wider group of young people in the city. Involving local media and youth-focused media outlets can help build or keep up pressure with city officials to achieve impact and close the feedback loop when changes are being made after the end of the project.

Local media or media outlets that target young people should be involved when com-municating the project findings. Beyond that, opportunities for communication within the project may also arise from documenting the process and workshops, for example the kick-off, calls for participation in the project or in the research, the impact of the findings, or personal experiences of the participants.

The participants can provide valuable insights on suitable channels and media outlets based on their own media usage (e.g., youth media outlets, relevant discussion boards or social media sites, even local social media influencers). Perhaps the young co-researchers are themselves part of a youth editorial team or work on a school magazine where summaries of the findings could be placed.

Ideas for youth-focused media outlets

Germany

- → **Salon 5:** *https://correctiv.org/projekte/salon5/*
- → **Fluter:** *https://fluter.de/*
- → **YouPod:** *https://youpod.de/*

US

- → **Pro Publica:** *https://www.propublica.org/*
- → **Teen Vogue:** *https://www.teenvogue.com/*
- → **PBS News: Student Reporting Labs:** *https://studentreportinglabs.org*
- → **YR Media:** *https://www.yrmedia.org/*

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2.   Get city leaders to take action based on research results

A written report or slide deck

Decision-makers require a comprehensive overview of the research findings and methodology as a basis for developing and implementing solutions. This is best provided as a written briefing or report of findings because it provides city leaders with a clear and credible summary of the research that they can use to understand the evidence, to share with colleagues, funders, or partner organizations, and to justify decisions. Leaders often need documentation to support their decisions internally (to staff or departments) and externally (to the public, media, or other politicians). Written reports can distil complex data into actionable insights, helping decision-makers to quickly grasp key issues and implications and share them with others.

Reports could be delivered as a written report or an annotated slide deck. It is important to keep in mind that reports or slides may be used to brief city staff, funders, or partner organizations without any opportunity for the co-researchers to give further input. This means reports, slides, or data visualizations should be clear, professional, and largely self-explanatory.

Reports can include findings, data insights, recommendations, and ideas that may be useful for turning findings into concrete policies or programs. Having a written record also creates transparency and makes it easier to track progress or revisit decisions on potential solutions later.

Briefings

Briefings where the co-researchers explain their findings to decision-makers are essential for creating impact because they can make the findings more persuasive and memorable, and harder to ignore.

First, when co-researchers present their findings directly to decision-makers, it highlights that the findings of 'Co-creating our city' projects are driven by young people and their communities, not imposed from outside. Direct engagement shows decision-makers that young people and the community are invested, which can create pressure to act.

Second, hearing directly from those who were involved in the project and affected by the issues brings recommendations to life and grounds them in real experiences. Co-researchers have deep insight into the context and needs behind the findings, helping leaders better understand the "why" behind the recommendations. Personal stories and firsthand perspectives can move decision-makers in ways that written reports alone often cannot.

Supporters of the project—your project champions from within the city administration or city council—are important door openers to get opportunities for in-person meetings or briefings. They may identify key contacts or arrange and schedule meetings. In Düsseldorf, for example, the co-researchers were given an official slot on the agenda of the youth welfare committee. In Charlotte, organizers briefed several city departments on relevant findings and brainstormed ideas for improving youth engagement with some of them.

How the 'Co-creating our city' pilot project in Düsseldorf communicated findings to achieve impact

In Düsseldorf, the projec team alongside selected co-researchers presented the project findings during a meeting of the Youth Welfare Council of the City of Düsseldorf, This council makes proposals for and decisions on matters of youth engagement in cit decision-making and convenes regularly to discuss issues concerning children and young people. The Council is composed of elected officials as well as representatives of various organizations involved in children and young people's welfare, engagement, and development.

Jointly with some of the co-researchers, the project team introduced the project and shared the main findings. It was important that some of the young co-researchers presented during the council meeting, contributing to the presentation as well as by bringing the findings to life based on their lived experience in the subsequent discussion.

This engagement with an official institution within the city council proved to be a valuable experience to achieve impact. The findings were communicated to the members of the city council who are best placed to make proposals and decisions based on the evidence presented and the engagement also demonstrated that the young participants cared deeply about the project and thoughtfully reflected on their own contributions. Their active presence ensured that they were taken seriously as part of the process, allowing for a shift in culture within the council as a decision-making institution.

In Charlotte, after the public event, project leads compiled a summary of the results for broader distribution. City participants are moving forward to implement some of the ideas and explore the feasibility of others in the coming months as part of the new Office of Youth Opportunity.

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3. Share and improve co-creation and participatory methods

Pre-/post-project and continuous evaluation

In participatory research projects, it is crucial to continuously reflect on the progress you and your co-researchers are making and the learnings you are gleaning. Working in collaboration with young people and city leaders as co-researchers means that you do not have control over and cannot anticipate with certainty which decisions the group are going to take and what your research project will look like. Working iteratively, your team should be prepared to adapt and improve practices as the project evolves.

This requires regular evaluation after each workshop to gather immediate feedback from your co-researchers and identify areas in which you can adapt and adjust how you work through the project. You can collect immediate feedback, for example, by using a brief online or paper feedback form or making time for a feedback session at the end.

It is equally important to understand what co-researchers are learning and how their skills are developing over the course of the project. You can collect data on, e.g., their understanding of the research process, their skills and scientific literacy, their knowledge of city governance and opportunities for engagement, or their trust in institutions, using pre- and post-workshop questionnaires. Alongside the concrete change and outcomes you achieve with your 'Co-creating our city' project, pre- and post-project evaluation data can also help you demonstrate the effect participation in

the project has on your co-researchers and their communities and help you make the case for a continuation of the project or to attract further funding.

To support this, templates for evaluations and questionnaires can be found in our resource collection.

Improving your own practice

To help you reflect on and improve your practice as a practitioner of co-creation and participatory research, you can present your project and its outcomes at conferences and discuss them with other practitioners.

Engaging with communities such as European Citizen Science Association (ECSA), mit:forschen! or GTPF e.V. and presenting your project and its outcomes can help increase the visibility of your project and provide you with valuable opportunities for reflection and critical feedback from other practitioners. It can also provide avenues for collaboration with other projects and present new funding opportunities.

Such interactions also ensure that your practice remains relevant, and that you have a chance to improve based on insights shared within the broader professional and research community. The organizations mentioned above hold conferences at least every two years to exchange knowledge on various topics related to participatory research.

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Partners

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d|part is a nonprofit, independent, and non-partisan think tank based in Berlin, Germany. The focus of d|part's work is on researching and supporting different forms of political engagement. d|part contributes to a democratic society in which all people can voice their opinions and participate in and contribute to political processes.

SCI:MOVE Science on the move is a consulting agency for Citizen Science and science communication based in the Rhein-Ruhr area in Germany.

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