



Key Advice

Fostering meaningful participation and collaboration

We are currently witnessing active discourse and policy development focused on participation, which weaves together design and planning with community building and social cohesion. This discourse often centres on the participating citizen, highlighting how inhabitants and users can contribute to more inclusive and user-oriented design while addressing challenges that range from personal (e.g., loneliness) to societal (e.g., democracy) and global (e.g., climate).

In this context, participation is typically seen as a step that citizens take towards an initiating party, such as completing a questionnaire, attending a consultation evening or caring for the community garden. However, less attention is given to the role of organisations and institutions that propose these participation opportunities. Specifically, how much can these parties and their staff contribute to meaningful participation? This tool aims to address the role of the participating professional.

'Participating as a Pro' means moving towards people impacted by improvement efforts. It involves actively seeking to understand their lived experiences by engaging in day-to-day life and applying professional skills to enhance public well-being. This requires humility: understanding the lived realities of people first, then collaboratively setting goals and deciding on the most suitable approaches for improvements. With this foundation, further participation and collaboration can thrive, built on mutual understanding and respect.

Participant observation is particularly well-suited to these goals of relating to people and co-initiating action. This method can challenge preconceived notions about how a place is lived in and used, who belongs and who does not, and the stereotypical images of neighbourhoods and their residents (Verloo, 2020). In practice, this tool provides guidelines for student teams to gather insights on the lived experiences of relevant actors, including inhabitants, users and regulators, as well as those currently "voiceless" (i.e., those whose viewpoints and experiences have been overlooked) concerning a current issue. Once sufficient insights have been collected, student teams can facilitate the organisation of relevant actors to co-initiate practical actions to improve public well-being.