

Horizon Europe project: Increasing the responsiveness of social services to citizen
voice across Europe

RESPONSIVE

WP3

Research Report

CITIZEN-LED ACTIONS FOR CHANGE IN SOCIAL SERVICES
Recognising need, addressing gaps and mobilising systems'
responsiveness

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Contacts

If you have questions or would like more information on the research results or the RESPONSIVE project, please contact colleagues at the University of Warsaw or CAL Association.

Agnieszka Naumiuk, WP3 Lead and D1 coordinator, agnieszka.naumiuk@uw.edu.pl

Izabela Grabowska, WP3 coordinator and D2 coordinator, izagie@gmail.com

Author list

This report is a collective work. It was compiled by Izabela Grabowska, Magdalena Kuleta-Hulboj, Barbara Lipińska-Zańko, Agnieszka Naumiuk, Marta Jadwiga Pietrusińska, Szymon Wójcik at the University of Warsaw and CAL, Poland, based on research by country teams, listed in alphabetical order, highlighting country Leads, in the following table.

Report Lead	Agnieszka Naumiuk, University of Warsaw
Austria country team (University of Innsbruck)	Michael Rasell (country Lead) David Furtschegger Anja Hofmair Florian Ohnmacht Katharina Streicher
Denmark country team (Aalborg University)	Mette Rømer (country Lead) Valentin Hammershøj Maja Müller Lars Uggerhøj Sarah West
France country team (Paris Nanterre University)	Agathe Osinski (country Lead) Clarissa Figueira Andreea Gruev-Vintila Anna Rurka
Poland country team (University of Warsaw)	Agnieszka Naumiuk (country Lead) Katarzyna Gajlewicz-Korab Izabela Grabowska, CAL Magdalena Kuleta-Hulboj Barbara Lipińska-Zańko Marta Jadwiga Pietrusińska Bohdan Skrzypczak, CAL Szymon Wójcik
Portugal country team (ISCSP, University of Lisbon)	Fernando Serra (country Lead) Ana Esgaio Carla Pinto Elvira Pereira Sónia Sebastião Ana Barata, PhD student support
Romania country team (CFCECAS)	Adela Șetet (country Lead) Alina Costin Lucian Caciamac Herbert Paulischin
Reviewers	

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Executive summary

1. Introduction and research methodology

The Work Package 3 Report is a part of the Horizon Europe project “Increasing Responsiveness to Citizen Voice in Social Services across Europe (RESPONSIVE)” (2023–2026), which aims to enhance the responsiveness of social services to citizens in vulnerable situations by increasing their involvement in service development. It recognises that people in vulnerable situations often have their voices marginalised. The project concentrates on four key areas of social services: mental health, disability, child protection, and youth at risk of social exclusion, with data collected from six partner countries: Austria, Denmark, France, Poland, Portugal, and Romania.

While the overall purpose of RESPONSIVE is to enhance responsiveness to citizen input, **Work Package 3 specifically examines citizen-led actions that challenge unresponsive social systems.** This research uses diverse data sources, including thematic media analysis, social media campaigns’ analysis, online petitions analysis as well as and interviews with leaders and participants of actions, to explore and integrate knowledge on citizens’ reactions to current services perceived as non-responsive, as well as to study public visibility of these actions.

The research enhances the understanding of responsiveness in social services by building on the definition of responsiveness as social services reaction to service users’ voice, established in Work Package 2: **“Responsiveness in social services is the process of learning from and reacting to the voices and actions of citizens facing diverse social challenges. It aims for citizens’ voices and lived realities to have an impact on their individual situations and influence on social services”** (Müller, Rømer, Uggerhøj 2024: 5). Work Package 3 adds the importance of learning of the responsive approaches by **including the knowledge and expertise that citizens generate through their various own-led actions outside formal social service systems.** These actions often arise when people perceive that the system is unresponsive to their needs. By these actions they signal that a faster and more appropriate response is needed, ultimately aiming to reduce the negative impact on their or other citizens’ lives.

Through the research process the Partners have:

- 1) collected information on citizens’ messages and experiences gained during various citizens’ actions,
- 2) analysed the methods citizens employ to raise public awareness about social service needs and challenges,
- 3) analysed citizens’ experiences in voicing the need for changes in social service areas.

The report recognises that the complexity of qualitative results may partly be associated with diverse cultures of citizen engagement, as European democracies vary significantly. Citizens’ experiences and the realisation of democratic participation differ, often marked by tensions with governments’ responsiveness to their needs. Many citizens feel excluded from decision-making, which raises concerns, particularly in the case of groups in vulnerable situations.

The research emphasises the need to reflect on dynamics outside traditional social service contexts. The study employed a qualitative research design that facilitates more in-depth exploration of citizen-led actions. We studied the following aspects: 1) how citizens understand responsiveness through their actions; 2) what actions citizens take in response to unresponsive practices; 3) and what methods help to achieve their goals as well what role art, technology and mass and social media play in these processes.

The Consortium's primary research question in this work package was as follows: What are the scope, objectives, content, and approach to citizen-led actions for change in social services?

2. Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design that facilitated broad exploration of citizen-led actions in reference to social services' offers.

The research process consisted of three main phases:

1. Exploring the complexity of citizens' activities;
2. Identifying citizen-led actions through analysis of media content, social media campaigns content, and online petitions content in the defined RESPONSIVE areas over the last five years;
3. Analysing the lived experiences of citizens currently engaging in civic actions, through provided interviews with artists, organisers, and participants of actions, to learn about their perceptions of the responsiveness of social services and the ability of citizens to propose modifications to social service systems.

3. Findings

The research team identified four key areas, the findings of which are grouped into:

- **Media coverage on citizen-led actions:** A critical perspective on how media portrayed citizens' actions, common themes emerging across countries focused on public awareness and the identified needs for responsive services.
- **Use of social media and online petitions by citizens:** The essential role of technology in amplifying citizens' voices, revealing emerging patterns in how petitions and social media campaigns are organised.
- **Artist involvement in commenting on citizens' needs:** Artists acting as agents of change highlighting themes of vulnerability and public awareness, utilising their work to address social issues and stimulate civic engagement.
- **Citizens' experiences of contesting the systems:** Diverse citizens' motivations and relationships with social services, emphasising the importance of establishing stronger connections between citizen-led actions and social services' offers.

3.1. Media coverage on citizen-led actions

The analysis of media coverage of citizen-led actions was crucial in identifying various initiatives for further examination and understanding how the mainstream media present these activities in relation to Responsive project topics.

Altogether, we analysed 439 media articles published in the most significant national media between 2018 and 2024 across six countries: Poland, Romania, France, Austria, Denmark, and Portugal. The aim was to capture the diversity of citizens' actions and the visibility of their voices on issues such as disability, child protection, mental health, and youth at risk. The study categorised these actions into various types, including awareness-raising, networking, service creation, monitoring, and lobbying.

The media coverage notably prioritised actions with a high degree of contestation, such as public protests, particularly in the disability sector, where advocacy efforts were prominent. Significant actions from each country were summarised to highlight the dominant narratives.

Through the media analysis, key themes emerged in relation to the challenges faced by groups in vulnerable situations in the six partners' countries:

1. **Lack of responsive public services:** There is a widespread criticism of the inadequacy of government action to address the needs of populations in vulnerable situations, with change often prompted by public outrage.
2. **Barriers to accessibility:** Systemic barriers hinder access for individuals with disabilities, children and youth in state care, and persons facing mental health issues, including long waiting times and exclusion from decision-making processes.
3. **Need for political commitment:** Citizens' call for greater political will to ensure that policies accommodate the specific challenges encountered by these groups.

Media coverage highlighted significant systemic failures, with particular focus on disability rights activism and the inadequacies of mental health services. High-profile events, such as the protests in Poland following tragic incidents in child protection, illustrated how public emotions drive media narratives.

The media frequently pointed to the slow government response to policy issues, showing little coverage of proactive actions initiated by citizen groups or local authorities. Notably, the voices of ordinary service users were largely absent, being replaced by experts' commentaries.

The analysis also revealed a range of tones in media reporting, with coverage often sympathetic yet tending toward neutrality, especially regarding political issues. The tone varied by sector: disability coverage featured more direct quotes from service users, while mental health and child protection narratives leaned more on experts' opinions. Occasionally, rebellious actions regarding youth activism were noted, though not so positively.

In each country, the media represented public pressure differently. Austria's coverage of disability rights and mental health campaigns emphasised the active role of citizen advocacy. In Denmark, mental health discussions were primarily driven by professionals rather than direct citizens' involvement. In France, documentaries highlighted child protection failures, whereas in Poland, significant protests highlighted urgent reform needs.

The media across the six countries focused on systemic failures and the urgent calls for reforms, with a consistent drive to advocate for the rights of groups in vulnerable situations. While the media play a critical role in amplifying these civic actions and public demands, the lack of direct representation from the affected individuals and groups suggests a gap that needs addressing through inclusive practices that social services are experts on.

3.2. Social media campaigns and online petitions. Technology at the service of citizens' voice being effective

Recently, citizens' actions have increasingly shifted online, with digital tools like social media campaigns and petitions becoming essential for raising awareness, mobilising communities, and influencing decision-makers. This digital activism complements traditional methods such as voting and protesting, broadening participation opportunities, especially for those facing barriers to conventional social engagement. It plays an important role in amplifying marginalised voices and addressing critical issues. While face-to-face interactions remain important, they coexist with digital participation.

Our research indicated that citizens across various countries utilise internet technologies for civic actions, including petitions' writing, online advocacy groups' creation, and organising platforms for disseminating information, among others. Notably, while social media facilitated interaction and content sharing, other technologies were employed less commonly.

New technologies were mentioned in the development of apps for support related to gambling addiction, highlighting the role of e-health interventions for individuals with mild to moderate issues. Moreover, new technologies, especially online ones like webinars, online workshops, have allowed them to reach the broader public. Additional tools for remote communication facilitated work within many citizens initiatives.

To analyse the usage of new media in citizen-led initiatives, we focused on online petitions and social media campaigns. These methods vary in form; petitions are a longstanding civic practice (however online petition platforms are relatively new), while social media campaigns are relatively recent in the civic engagement landscape. We faced challenges in categorising actions into specific RESPONSIVE areas, as many initiatives addressed multiple issues and shall be identified as cross-sectional.

Online Petitions: Initially planning to analyse 12 petitions (two per country), we expanded our scope to 17 due to the relevance of additional actions. The petitions concerned the following RESPONSIVE areas: disability (8 petitions), child protection (4), mental health (3), and youth-at-risk (2). Most petitions aimed at legislative changes and heightened awareness regarding the needs of groups in vulnerable situations.

The petitions frequently drew from personal stories and emotional appeals, highlighting the situations of groups facing marginalisation. However, many still spoke on behalf of service users, potentially leading to paternalistic representations.

The effectiveness of these petitions is often unclear, as many organisers did not evaluate their impact independently. However, certain petitions (like in France), played a role in prompting legislative changes.

Social media campaigns: Social media campaigns stand apart from traditional campaigns by allowing direct audience interaction and enabling real-time responses to current events. They are more cost-effective, allowing smaller organisations to reach wider audiences. We analysed 17 social media campaigns across four RESPONSIVE areas.

These campaigns predominantly focused on raising awareness (11 out of 17) and advocating for specific issues (5). They were mainly initiated by CSOs (Civil Society Organisations), aiming to exert pressure on politicians by mobilising public sentiment through metrics like shares and likes. The campaigns analysed often highlighted systemic gaps in support for groups in vulnerable situations, illustrating a strong grassroots advocacy movement aimed at policy reform.

The analysed petitions and campaigns indicated particular issues raised within specific RESPONSIVE areas. In disability, narratives centred around rights and support structures, while mental health campaigns confronted stigma and promoted access to care. For child protection and youth-at-risk, the majority of actions focused on systemic shortcomings, particularly in care systems.

A common theme across social media campaigns is the emotional appeal stemming from personal stories, which enhance credibility and foster empathy. For example, campaigns on mental health highlighted the struggles of individuals experiencing crises, showcasing narratives that evoke public sympathy and encouraged action.

Across the RESPONSIVE areas, the integration of new technologies showed no significant discrepancies, though messaging platforms were notably popular among youth and persons with disabilities.

We note that technology plays a critical role in citizen-led initiatives by enhancing the dissemination of ideas and the methods of engagement. Social media serve as a vital tool for amplifying voices and creating dialogue around critical social issues, particularly for young people who utilise these platforms to support and express themselves.

We can highlight the impact of new media on citizens' interactions and engagement with social services. Online actions empower citizens to mobilise around essential issues, forming community bonds that exert pressure on decision-makers. While these technologies create extensive opportunities for engagement and advocacy, responsiveness to citizens' needs remains insufficiently addressed. Most citizens' actions are predominantly led by organisational representatives rather than directly incorporating the voices of those they aim to serve, underscoring a critical area for ongoing attention to issues such as digital exclusion. The evolution of civic engagement in actions continues to unfold, raising essential questions about the balance between traditional involvement and the expanding landscape of digital citizenship, which social services should take into account.

3.3. Artists' experiences: call for public attention

Activism, or socially engaged art, serves as an important tool for effecting social change. We define activism and activist art as the artistic activity aiming at social change or responding publicly through art to social issues (Glăveanu, 2017). Artists utilise their artistic endeavours to comment on and transform communities, playing a crucial role in bringing attention to various issues including disability, mental health, child protection, and youth in at-risk situations. In the research, we conducted 33 interviews with engaged artists whose art addressing studied four areas.

They mentioned three main topics worth considering, addressing RESPONSIVE project:

1. **The mediating role of art in social change.** Artists see their work as a means of expressing social emotions and eliciting empathy among audiences. They emphasise the significance of creating safe spaces for dialogue and reflection that allow individuals in difficult situations to express themselves. Examples of diverse artistic practices, ranging from theatre to street art, demonstrate how different art forms can impact public perception of social issues.
2. **Collaboration with groups in vulnerable situations and decision-makers.** Artistic projects often engage individuals with lived experiences in various ways, enhancing their relevance and impact. Artists recognise the need for collaboration with decision-makers and civil society organisations (SCOs), although this partnership can be challenging and often requires mutual understanding and openness to dialogue.
3. **Challenges and artists' social responsibility.** Despite the positive aspects of artists' social engagement, concerns arise regarding the potential instrumentalisation of their work. This challenge necessitates a high level of sensitivity and responsibility from artists in relation to the issues they present.

Though art plays a vital role in shaping social discourse and raising awareness of issues affecting diverse groups, it is considered a fringe aspect of citizens' voices. It is used more as a rehabilitation tool, a platform for empowering service users and as an artistic expression, rather than as an important part of building awareness of citizens' needs and a rights-based approach that uses alternative means for civic participation and contestation. Through artistic actions, artists can inspire reflection, call for action, and may contribute to changes in policy and social services. The effectiveness of these efforts binds on the artists' ability to create spaces that facilitate open and empathetic conversations while addressing the complexities of human experiences. Social services may see the value in artistic production and collaboration with artists to co-create the messages on what seems to be the core injustice, exclusion or deep personal experience.

3.4. Citizens engaged in actions – lived experiences of reacting to needs

This is part of the report which highlights citizens' perspectives on civic engagement, social service planning, and challenges through contesting current social systems. The findings emphasise the growing potential of grassroots initiatives and the need for greater citizen involvement in social policies and service delivery.

The interviewed leaders and participants of actions (140 informants), the majority of whom were women (101), and who represented two major age groups: middle age (between 40 and 59 of age – 72 informants), or younger (between 20 and 39 or less – 56 informants), agree that citizens play a crucial role in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of social services. However, their current roles are often limited. Many informants stress the importance of citizen consultation in decision-making processes, advocating for platforms that facilitate these dialogues across different levels of governance. In their opinion citizens should not wait for invitations from decision-makers; rather, they should assert their right to effect change within their communities.

The diversity among citizens was emphasised — encompassing various experiences, knowledge, and needs. For social services to be effective, the voices of people directly affected cannot be separated by the issues in policy making. Notably, some citizens called for greater intersectionality and representation, highlighting the need for decision-making committees to reflect the diversity of the population, including socioeconomic status and gender.

Despite the conviction surrounding citizen participation, many interviewees expressed concern over tokenistic practices in participatory processes. They note that citizen engagement is often superficial and driven by bureaucratic requirements rather than genuine interest in incorporating citizen input. Participants reported feeling that their contributions are frequently overlooked and that public institutions are often resistant to meaningful collaboration.

Two major factors impede citizen influence on social policy: the willingness and ability of citizens to engage, and the systemic limitations of social service structures. Some individuals lack the necessary resources: time, knowledge, and networks, to participate fully in co-creation processes. Additionally, many citizens are unaware of their potential to influence decision-making and need encouragement to engage.

On the systemic side, many social services were described as lacking mechanisms to incorporate citizen feedback comprehensively. There is often a gap between recognised needs and actual service responses, leading to frustration among citizens. Bureaucratic red tape and a focus on formalities can dilute the impact of citizen-led actions.

The motivations of citizens can be categorised into three groups:

1. **Personal experiences on vulnerability or inadequate service use:** people often articulate their dissatisfaction with the existing social services and their desire for change based on direct experiences of inadequacy in the support received.
2. **Professional insights on potential of services:** Some people are motivated by their dissatisfaction with the systemic deficiencies they experienced as workers in social services or social organisations.
3. **Collective values:** A commitment to broader societal change is evident in many responses. Citizens often speak of moral obligations to advocate for those in vulnerable situations and the injustices observed within social systems. Emotions such as anger and indignation regarding societal issues, particularly concerning children and marginalised groups, often catalyse their engagement.

The relationships that citizens engaged in actions have with social services vary significantly. Some individuals view these services as essential allies, while others perceive them as adversarial entities that fail to meet community needs adequately. Informants reported feelings of frustration due to inefficient bureaucracies and a perceived lack of empathy from service providers. Many believe that social service workers operate within outdated systems that prevent effective collaboration with citizens who are not necessarily served by the system.

However, some interviewees described positive encounters with social services, particularly in contexts where collaborative relationships have been nurtured. Such examples suggest that meaningful engagement is possible when there is a mutual willingness to cooperate. The Danish initiative 'Folkemødet' was highlighted as a successful model for fostering dialogue between citizens and decision-makers.

Among challenges, burnout and exhaustion were identified as a significant concern, particularly among leaders of grassroots initiatives who often juggle multiple responsibilities. These individuals frequently face overwhelming workloads due to the demands of administrative tasks alongside their civic participation. The emotional labour associated with advocating for groups in vulnerable situations adds another layer of complexity to their experiences, contributing to stress and fatigue.

Developing supportive environments, establishing effective communication channels, and fostering collaborative relationships can mitigate these risks.

Citizens engaged in social actions demonstrate a profound commitment to improving social services, however, their engagement is facing numerous challenges, including systemic barriers, and a lack of understanding and support in long-term endeavours.

3.5. *Characteristics of citizen-led actions*

This part studied citizen-led initiatives across four areas of social services (disability, mental health, child protection, and youth at risk), analysing how these actions were planned, implemented, and communicated in relation to social service fields.

Though citizen-led actions vary significantly across different countries and areas, they are driven by the need to address systemic deficiencies in social services and improve the quality of support provided to groups in vulnerable situations. They aim to enhance social inclusion, advocate for human rights, improve access to services, and combat stigma.

Citizen-led actions employ a variety of strategies, including protests, advocacy, lobbying, media engagement, grassroots organising, and awareness campaigns. Each of these approaches aims to influence public opinion, policy decisions, and ultimately the effectiveness of social services in meeting the needs of groups in vulnerable situations.

While many initiatives target wider societal and policy issues, such as systemic reform or advocacy for specific rights, others provide tangible support for individuals, such as self-help groups and direct assistance to service users. The collected data reveals three overarching scopes of action:

- **System change:** Initiatives that aim to advocate for policy reforms, criticise current practices, and propose innovative solutions.
- **Own, citizen-led services:** Direct actions that involve the establishment of citizen-led organisations providing services not adequately addressed by state service (might be alternative to public social services).
- **Awareness raising and empowerment:** Actions educating the public on the challenges faced by specific populations and promoting social inclusion.

The research identified a variety of target groups for citizen-led actions. These include populations in vulnerable situations such as individuals with disabilities, young people in care, and families at risk. Importantly, initiatives often aim to engage not only direct beneficiaries like service users but also other stakeholders such as the general public, professionals, and policymakers.

Actions that target decision-makers and policymakers are particularly vital, as they aim to challenge changes in legislation or improve the responsiveness of social services. However, the effective representation of groups facing vulnerability in these initiatives varies significantly. Some areas, particularly mental health, have seen user organisations gain prominent participation of service users, while others remain dominated by professionals advocating on behalf of marginalised voices.

Citizen-led actions are characterised by both spontaneity and structured planning. Factors influencing the planning process include the nature of the social issue, available resources, levels of public interest, and the community's previous experiences with social engagement.

Actions can be classified into four categories:

- **Independent online actions:** Spontaneous responses often initiated by individuals leveraging social media to raise awareness.
- **Grassroots groups actions:** Longer-term community organisation that evolve from informal support networks into recognised advocacy groups.
- **Ad hoc mixed actions:** Temporary campaigns responding to urgent or emotional triggers, leading quickly to public mobilisation, including physical and digital participation.
- **CSO's led actions:** actions led by established CSO's (Civil Society Organisations) that utilise strategic opportunities to influence policy and advocate for change systematically.

Many successful citizen-led actions transit from grassroots movements to institutionalised entities, gaining in time greater recognition and influence. In the report we use CSOs to distinguish them from big, highly corporate or international NGOs such as Red Cross, Caritas etc.

While some actions achieve clearly defined goals, such as the opening of a mental health facility or particular legal reforms, citizens struggle to quantify the goals and impact of their efforts comprehensively. Success is often perceived in subjective terms; feelings of agency, community engagement, and the ability to raise awareness about neglected issues are indicative of achievement.

Outcomes of citizen-led actions may be categorised according to Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory (1977) as macro (system-wide changes), meso (local improvements in services), or micro (direct benefits to individuals). The cumulative nature of these results blurs the lines between each level, emphasising the interconnectedness of individual actions and broader systemic change.

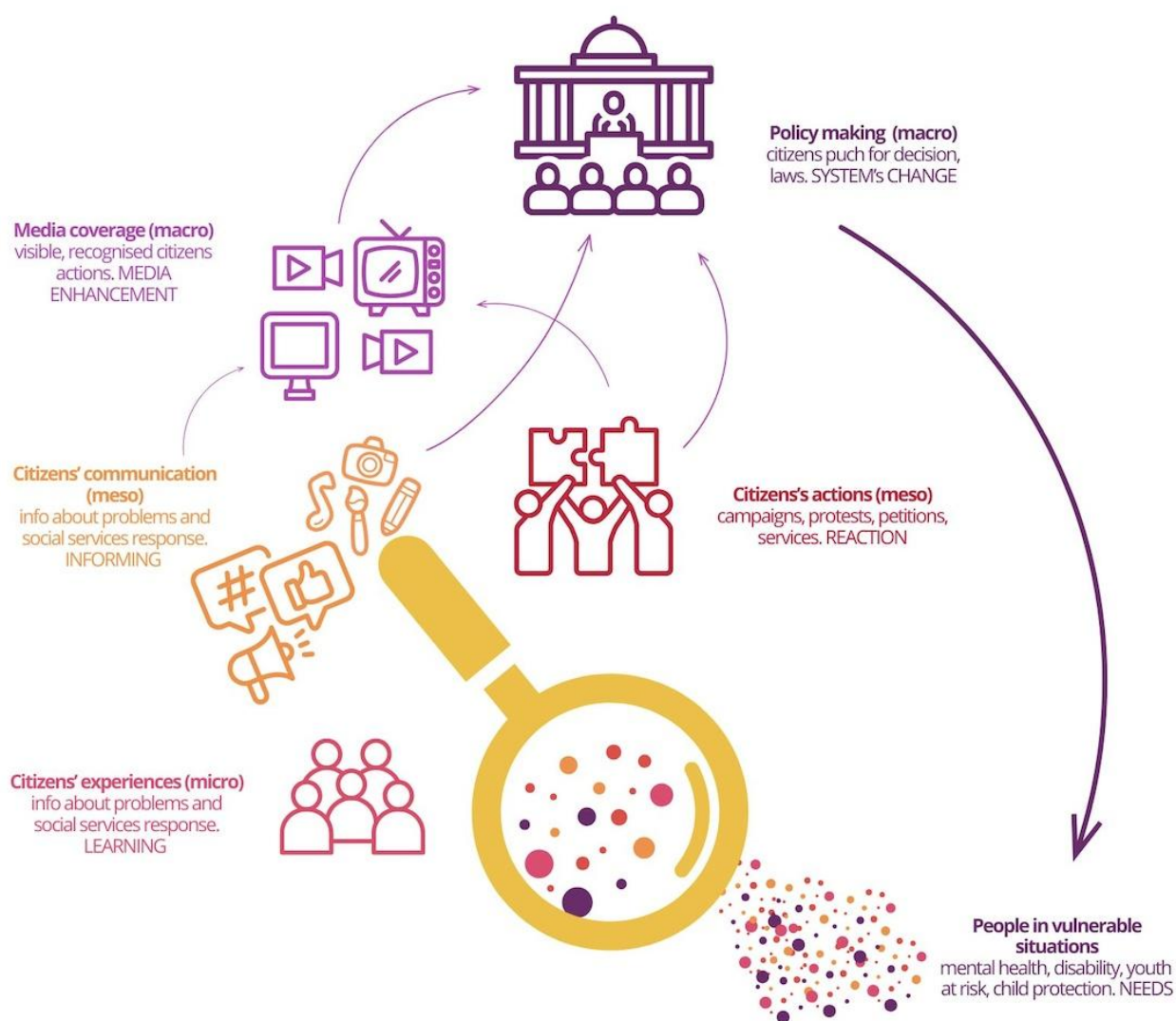
Networking and partnerships play a crucial role in the success of citizen-led actions. Collaborating with organisations, policymakers, media, and experts enhances the reach and effectiveness of citizens organising actions. Common challenges related to networking include competition among CSOs for funding and differing organisational goals, which can lead to conflicts and hinder cooperative efforts. Trust and personal relationships, due to participants' statements, can greatly facilitate collective action, while bureaucratic barriers often impede open dialogue between citizens and social service providers.

Using a SWOT analysis framework, it is possible to conclude that the strengths of citizen actions include passionate leadership, diverse competencies, and strong social networks. Conversely, weaknesses encompass issues such as over-professionalisation, funding challenges, and potential burnout among leaders. Opportunities, including favourable funding conditions and public interest in specific issues, contrast sharply with threats from political indifference, bureaucratic inertia, and the marginalisation of voices from within the communities facing vulnerability.

In conclusion, citizen-led actions for social change are multifaceted and dynamic. They serve as critical avenues for publicly advocating improvements in social services, particularly for groups in vulnerable situations. While many challenges persist, including over-professionalisation and funding pressures, these initiatives demonstrate the potential for effective civic engagement to drive systemic change and enhance service responsiveness within social sector. The ongoing collaboration between citizens, organisations, and policymakers is vital for fostering a more inclusive and responsive social services landscape.

The overall findings bring to discussion the citizens' potential (particularly in meso level) advocating for more responsive systems and services as presented in the graph below:

Graph 1. Illustration of findings. Citizens participate mostly in meso level activities through advocacy and engagement of different stakeholders towards more responsive services and a systemic change, but catalyse micro and macro changes.



4. Conclusions: Citizen-led actions as a (rocky) path to endorsement of more responsive social services

The research outlines several topics raised during the analysis of findings, summarised in the conclusions below:

Driven by a humanitarian concern for groups in vulnerable situations, citizens utilise personal experiences and knowledge, often shared via social media, to mobilise support. Their actions can be both individual and collective, attempting to foster collaborations with local social services, although experiences in these endeavours have not been consistently positive. On regional and national levels, citizens advocate for a change in the societal perception of groups facing vulnerability by emphasising personal stories that highlight the consequences of systemic failures.

Engagement strategies can be short-term, responding to urgent needs, or long-term, structured efforts aimed at systemic change. They are a diverse array of creative tactics that leverage technology for enhanced communication and information sharing. Active partnerships with media, and political representatives are also essential in amplifying their messages.

Citizens who engage in civic actions face significant challenges, including burnout due to extensive responsibilities, insufficient collaboration with bureaucratic social service systems, and a lack of understanding among network partners. These hurdles foster feelings of frustration and mistrust. Portrayals in mass media can perpetuate stereotypes while also gain public attention.

The study also emphasises the emerging trend of using artistic expression as a means to raise awareness about complex social issues. Their innovative practices in the social services' creation show that citizens explore collaborative actions alongside more conventional protests, demonstrating a will to affect change through various channels. Citizens' involvement provides vital insights into the responsiveness of social services, even though it is not directly focused on them.

The analysis indicates a gap in fully integrating citizens' perspectives into governance systems, which are often viewed as disruptive. The relationship between citizens and decision-makers can be fragmented, owing to differing priorities and methods of communication. Often, citizens' input in governance is minimal and tokenistic, leading to scepticism about participatory models and lack of mutual trust.

Citizens express a desire for meaningful engagement from social services, expecting co-construction of policies and recognition of their problems. However, many express frustration that social systems fail to acknowledge their perspectives adequately. Notably, while participatory initiatives have strong foundations in some contexts (e.g., Denmark), elsewhere, citizens feel compelled to work around the established systems to address immediate needs.

5. Recommendations

Based on a comprehensive analysis of the above conclusions, the RESPONSIVE Consortium recommends some changes in current approaches towards supporting the development of more responsive social services, to five groups of stakeholders: citizens, social services, policymakers,

researchers, and media representatives. The fundamental message across these recommendations is to recognise citizens as essential partners in the reform of social services, moving away from narratives of pity or shallow consultations. Emphasising collaboration and responsiveness, the recommendations are organised into four key areas, selecting key recommendations for each stakeholders group:

1. **Open access to information and transparency:** Citizens shall have access to updated, comprehensible public information, enabling them to respond more constructively rather than driven by anger.
2. **Respectful engagement:** Citizens should feel respected and welcomed in their rights to engage with social services, fostering a deeper understanding of these services.
3. **Collaborative decision-making:** There is a need to shift traditional top-down decision-making approaches to more horizontal and co-creative processes involving citizen participation.
4. **Effective communication:** Good communication is vital, utilising various platforms, including media and artistic expressions, to bridge gaps between citizens and social services.

Recognising the unique insights and capacities of citizens still remains as a potential for change in developing responsiveness in social services. Citizens' effort not only aims to improve the quality of services but also seeks to empower individuals and communities, leading to a more equitable and supportive social system. At this stage of negotiating their active roles in democracies in Europe, citizens (in various stages, depending on the country) express their position and share ideas for change, as well as show resistance to the current system's ineffectiveness. In this way, they show a responsive and responsible attitude but do not believe in responsive services yet. That is why they push systems to give directives on responsiveness that shall be obeyed by social services, rather than wait for internal transformations.

The recommendations selected to each group of stakeholders are as follows:

Citizens

- Share experiences, engage with social services on equal rights level, and promote best practices
- Build long-term change and communication means
- Advocate for inclusive standards and citizen participation particularly among groups in vulnerable situations

Social Service Professionals

- Promote inclusion of citizens in your work, minimise public mistrust and respect contestation of your work
- Strengthen your own communication and engagement
- Standardise participatory actions and measures
- Policy makers

- Regulate data collection, include citizens' voices and social services work based on citizens input
- Make stronger public communication and promote citizen engagement in decision-making
- Build social cohesion, reduce polarisation, appreciate citizens' participation

Researchers

- Collaborate and communicate results with stakeholders including citizens
- Consider methodologies helping discover citizens' needs, voice and knowledge

Media representatives

- Be mindful of media social responsibility and impact on public opinion – it may positively change social services' system and its responsiveness.

Below graph illustrates the key recommendations to these main stakeholders:

Graph 2. Illustration of recommendations. Applying outside-of-the-system citizens' experience in social service reform leads to more equitable and responsive learning systems through initiation of co-creation processes.



Full Report

1. Introduction and Research Context

The Work Package 3 Report presents the third part (*Citizen-led Actions for Social Change*) of the Horizon Europe research and innovation project: “Increasing Responsiveness to Citizen Voice in Social Services across Europe (RESPONSIVE)”. The project (2023–2026) aims to investigate and increase responsiveness in social services to input and participation from citizens. The project is based on the assumption that people in vulnerable situations are at high risk of having their voices excluded and their influence marginalised in the development and implementation of such services. It looks for ways and knowledge to better identify and utilise existing untapped civic capital (understood as values and beliefs that support cooperation in the communities) in the change, improvement, and development of social services’ response to citizens’ needs. Our attention is particularly focused on four key areas with respect to some citizens cross-sectoral approaches as defined in Work Package 1 Report:

“Community-based services to support inclusion and independent living for adults with disabilities, e.g. personal assistance, supported living, supported employment in mainstream settings. Services for children and young people with disabilities are not considered if they fall into the remit of education or health/social care.

- Mental health services: community-based and residential-based support for adults or young people living with mental health issues, including addictions, ADHD, depression, suicide and anxiety (see WHO definition). The services may include social interventions, psychiatric or psychological care, psychological support and housing initiatives.
- Services for youth at risk of social exclusion (15–29), including alternative education, employment, criminal justice (probation and reintegration, not penal system) and alternative care (housing, residential, fostering). Young people may engage voluntarily with these services or else be required to take part.
- Child protection services: for families and children where there are concerns about neglect or protection. The engagement may be on a voluntary basis or compulsory by order of social services or courts.” (Rasell et. al. 2024: 1)

The RESPONSIVE project is conducted by a consortium of universities working in collaboration with social partners, including both national and international organisations such as civil society organisations, local authorities, and the International Federation of Social Workers in Europe.

While the overall purpose of the RESPONSIVE project is to enhance the responsiveness of Europe’s social services to input from diverse citizens, this work package (WP3) focuses on citizen-led actions that address situations where unresponsive or partly responsive systems and social services need to be challenged, and civic reactions are triggered towards advocating for change.

The data collection process followed an exploratory approach, using diverse qualitative data and triangulation of analyses. Data and findings in this report were compiled from research reports produced in six countries, each following common guidelines (Austria, Denmark, France, Poland, Portugal and Romania). The aim was not to generalise findings across areas or compare countries but rather to identify core themes and emerging patterns.

The information was gathered and compiled between March and August 2024 from six partner countries and consists of thematic analysis of: media reporting on citizen actions; selected social media campaigns and petitions; and semistructured interviews with engaged artists and organisers or participants of citizens' actions. The data reflects different societal perspectives and partners' reflections on different aspects of the information gathered. It enabled us to both: recognise the richness of the material and many possible ways of analysis reflecting exploratory character of this research, and identify common grounds and approaches managing such heterogeneity of citizens' world, to understand it as a driver or factor important to social service responsiveness concept.

1.1 Aim and objectives

The Report of Work Package 3 aims to **add new knowledge** to the concept of "responsive services": „WP3 looks at citizen actions to generate responses outside of the structures created by social services" (Project Responsive application, Part B: 9) so goes beyond the „social service providers – service users" traditional modus operandi. It acknowledges that there is still a tension between an open society and direct democracy realities (Popper 1945), where free public opinion shall be but currently is poorly involved in discussions (political debates, representation and new decision-making forms (Castells 2013a) toward social services quality, efficiency and goals. Such interaction, between strong collaboration and critical contestation, is crucial in modernisation efforts, since social service systems currently try to implement new, participatory and co-creative models (Ostrom 1996; Pestoff 2012; Andersen et. al 2017).

Stating that, Work Package 3 has identified the following three main objectives:

- Collect information on messages, experiences and views of citizens participating in various citizen-led actions addressing citizens' need and desire for change, in the four areas that social service systems operate;
- Analyse methods and processes citizens use to gain public attention and raise awareness of needs, problems and solutions in social service fields while trying to make the change and challenge social services;
- Identify individual and collective actors engaging in public conversations and actions who claim the right to voice the need for change in social service areas and possible overlap or tensions (if appearing) in ownership, power and access to resources.

Two previous reports in the Horizon Europe RESPONSIVE project provide background context for the research on citizens' actions. The first report found that there are limited legal-policy frameworks mandating citizen participation and especially responses by social services within social services in the six project countries (Rasell et. al., 2024). The second report analyses

experiences of citizens who are or were service-users in participation of co-creation processes (Müller, Rømer, Uggerhøj 2024). This report focuses on a variety of citizen-led actions that show diversity of citizens' reactions to responsive or unresponsive practices as well as their experiences in using public opinion, networks, and their own voice, to push legal systems to make mandatory change towards more responsive social services.

The current report analyses citizen-led actions and their role in recognising need, addressing gaps and mobilising systems' responsiveness, using the following project definition of responsiveness: "Responsiveness is the process of learning from and reacting to the perspectives of diverse citizens who use social services. It ensures that citizen voices have an impact on social services." (Rasell et al. 2024: 24).

In addition to the Report we also developed an interactive list of examples of studied actions, available at the project [website](#)

1.2 Operational definitions

The report's findings and conclusions refer to several agreed definitions as operational ground for the joint research:

- engaged art (artivism): artistic activity aiming at social change or responding publicly to social issues;
- social media campaign: a planned series of digital articles, media events, videos, blogs, interviews etc. that are intended to achieve a particular aim – in our case, this aim was related to the change in social services;
- petition: a document signed by a number of people demanding or asking for some action from the government or another authority - currently in social service fields dominate online forms;
- citizen-led action: an initiative started, led and owned by citizens, not decision-makers or social service institutions; the initiative strives for change in social services on the micro, meso or macro (social policy) levels (as presented in Work Package 2, according to Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory, and followed in this Report); such actions range from grassroots initiatives up to long lasting systemic actions established by well established CSO;

Definitions as agreed in Work package 1: "The term 'citizens' is used in this report to emphasise that social services are used by persons who hold democratic rights to voice and self-determination. The impact of social services on people's lives means that there is a fundamental democratic argument that they should have influence over these interventions. The fundamental right of citizens to participate is not always clear with the terms 'users', 'beneficiaries' or 'clients' that are generally used in social services. The term 'citizens' is also potentially less divisive and othering because it does not position 'service users' as a group separate to professionals, social services and the broader citizenry." (Rasell et al. 2024: 19) The term 'citizen' is used in this report also in an inclusive sense to refer to all people and not just those who are granted formal entitlements in a particular country.

RESPONSIVE areas of study: four researched areas in the project focus regarding people, social issues and practices. These areas are: disability, mental health, child protection and youth at risk, described in the Introduction part of this Report.

1.3 The contexts of citizen-led actions: diverse European realities and changing landscapes of citizen engagements

Due to the historic legacy of geopolitical, sociocultural and economic disparities, the concept of “European democracy” remains a work in progress¹. As a result, the experience of citizens and the dynamics of the democratic processes vary with paces and local/national diverse realities, often marked by tensions between citizens and governments (Della Porta 2015) and local authorities. Even though the European Union has sped up the integration processes in the 21st century, the current application of democratic principles, values, laws and even the concept of “citizen” still varies a lot and faces substantial criticism (Koopmans, Statham 2010).

Current studies indicate that the idea of citizen governance is still considered more as a theoretical concept rather than a practised reality. This is largely due to the challenges institutions face in fully understanding and acknowledging citizens’ ownership of social spheres, as well as factors such as class (Eder 1993), economic and social dynamics (Cohen, Fuhr, Bock 2018), gender (Siim, Mokre 2018), and diversity (Zapata-Barrero 2020) that interfere, challenge but also energise consolidation and democratisation processes of the European Union. The notion of care for citizens has long traditions and strong ideals behind them, leading to a certain level of fear, mistrust and concern that citizens, especially groups in vulnerable situations are not capable of fully participating in decision making related to planning, implementation and evaluation of social services. Such services are still predominantly organised by professionals who claim to have a better understanding of how to provide support.

In relation to citizens’ involvement, the term “power” might be used as a positive term to explain actions towards achieving collective goals, contesting government power that lead to innovative solutions or social transformations (Avelino 2021). In recent years, not only is a reflection on such power relations that may weaken service-users presented, but also the empowerment concept is explored mostly by emancipatory approaches towards citizenship such as direct democracy, self-governance, civil rights movements (Parpart, Rai, Staudt 2002). The recognition of citizens as self-conscious and critical society members still becomes a challenge to decision makers but also to social service organisers in public institutions, private companies and some civil society organisations. Opening decisions to them as partners in co-creating solutions requires soft skills that are contradictory to contemporary managerial models requesting fast, efficient and low-cost service. Such debates on the role of protesting, contestation and resistance have long intellectual traditions in Europe of the value of citizens’ right to disobey oppressive systems following philosophies of Rousseau, Kant, Arendt to name a few.

Data from six European countries with an attempt to explore the phenomena of citizens’ realities in different contexts, has its part in discussions on future democracy in Europe that shall

¹ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy_en

take into consideration the change of the narrative and practice of “tokenistic” participation. In-depth understanding of citizen engagement is needed to overcome simplifying, stereotyping and limiting the picture, due to the complexity and diversity of its nature and multi-level interrelations. Social need and support is of such universal nature that it cannot sit within systems only. It is shaped by civic developments and understanding of current social services and citizens’ variety of collaboration patterns, oppositions, contestations and conflicts having impact on participatory experiences, exercised by existing power of citizens in changing social services. Such partnership is always shaped by democratic environments, which are the mix of past and present participatory trends as well as ideals for future democratic well-being.

Country-specific factors pointed by Consortium Partners play an important contextual role of citizen actions researched such as the Danish citizen-collaborative approach, Portuguese post dictatorial regime recovery, Polish and Romanian post-socialist/post-communist civic reengagement efforts, Austrian political fractions and strong government’s customs re-modelling aspirations, or strong French pride of contestation/revolt traditions of street protests, to name a few. They constitute the diverse picture of dynamics in challenges that each and every country faces, along with the visions for integration and globalisation of democracy ethics playing their part in micro, meso and macro discourses on citizenship. Below are some illustrations of various contexts in which social services might come to a dialogue with citizens in the six countries and four studied areas of citizens’ needs (disability, mental health, child protection and youth at risk of exclusion) mentioned by project Partners.

Austria – emerging self-advocacy and online engagement initiatives

Austria has a corporatist policy system with consultative mechanisms for developing new policies and representing the interests of different stakeholder groups. However, these structures are often not clear or transparent in transferring decision-making power. In the field of social services, providers and employers tend to have greater representation than people who use social services, for example in the national Disability Council (*Behindertenrat*), which is the official consultative body on disability issues. In this area smaller self-advocacy groups often organise more specific protests, such as leaflet campaigns to politicians, to highlight for example the need for personal assistance. The ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2008 provoked a broader transition from institutionalised and welfare-based to community- and rights-based models. This shift as well as critical remarks on its insufficient implementation has strongly been influenced by activist movements. Currently a new form of activism and online engagement is emerging, using digital platforms to reach new audiences.

Movements in the mental health area are inspired by and interconnected with narratives in fields of disability. Especially in the last 15 years, Austrian mental health practice has established various participatory models (e.g. peer work, triaologue, national network platform) initiated, coordinated or co-developed by experts with lived experience. Large demonstrations have gained momentum post-COVID, focusing on the underfunding of mental health services and calling for better care, including state-funded psychotherapy.

In recent years, calls for children's needs almost exclusively arise from professional stakeholders rather than citizens. Due to pandemic-related challenges, the child and youth welfare system has seen increased advocacy with public statements and reports highlighting resource shortages and inadequate federal standards due to the mental health crisis (DOEJ 2022). Apart from that, media and public discussions on child protection often involve polarised views on gender-specific and migration-related issues, reflecting a wide range of persons involved.

Denmark – disputing citizens' rights for input in decision-making processes

Citizen involvement in social services in Denmark has a strong legal foundation, particularly through the 1998 Consolidation Act on Legal Protection and Administration in Social Matters. Over the past 25 years, this act has shaped guidelines for citizen participation at various levels and open possibilities for collaboration. However, research indicates that citizens in vulnerable situations often feel excluded, with their experiences of participation similarly to those from decades ago (Uggerhøj 2014).

The perceived lack of responsiveness and inclusion at organisational and political levels has contributed to the growth of movements and protests over the past 25 years. These movements, often led by strong organisations or by prominent artists, have raised awareness of neglected issues and groups. There is a tradition in Denmark for consulting citizen organisations for feedback, comments and suggestions when new acts are discussed in the parliament – and all suggestions and comments must be processed by government officers and presented for politicians, such as Danish deliberative citizens' assembly based on the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) principles. Likewise, the access to local and central politicians is easy and often groups facing vulnerability like young people, homeless people, people with disabilities are invited into the parliament or to meet with specific ministers and politicians to plead their case. Despite these traditions many civic leaders feel that more actions are necessary to ensure that marginalised voices are truly heard and considered.

France – forming social critique and “counter-democracy” channels

French society has a long tradition of political contestation, marked by revolutions and social movements from 1789 to May 1968. French politics has often been visible in the streets, with regimes frequently being challenged or overthrown through revolutionary actions. In modern times, France remains characterised by strong state power, low social capital, and a high tendency for unconventional political participation (Fillieule 2017). Historian Pierre Rosanvallon observes a rise in participation, including protests, strikes, and petitions, even though electoral participation is on the decline (Rosanvallon 2014).

Examples of popular contestation over the last five years in France include most notably the Yellow Vest Movement, climate protests, pension reform protests and manifestations against sexual and sexist violence, with citizens actively challenging policies and public (in)action perceived to be unjust.

These large-scale social movements as well as the smaller-scale actions identified in this research contribute to the creation of a “counter-democracy” which “is not the opposite of democracy,

rather one form of democracy that opposes the other, the democracy of indirect powers distributed throughout society, the democracy of organised mistrust in the face of the democracy of electoral legitimacy” (Rosanvallon 2016: 16). Such actions play an important role in the societal surveillance of power through three distinct channels: scrutiny, whistleblowing and rating or evaluation. While collective, citizen-led actions were identified in all four areas of the RESPONSIVE project, they appeared more visible in the disability and mental health areas than in areas relating to youth at risk of social exclusion.

Poland – struggling for space for independent citizenship voice

Citizens’ engagement in social services in Poland is shaped by a long tradition of political and philanthropic activities. During the communist era, social services were monopolised by the state or linked to resistance movements like Solidarity or the Catholic Church, fostering the ideal of the socially engaged citizens (Iłowiecka-Tańska 2006). In the 1990s and early 2000s, civic engagement became more professionalised through the rise of CSOs, which became heavily dependent on external funding, leading to a lack of continuity and a degree of conformity with public authorities (Naumiuk 2003; Charycka et al. 2022).

Since 2015, with the rise of the right-wing government, civil society has experienced significant challenges. Funding for non-government-aligned organisations has been restricted, and new technologies have facilitated grassroots activities. Today, civic engagement in social services remains largely SCO-driven with strong SCO leadership, but increasingly relies on social media for mobilisation and fundraising.

Social media play a crucial role in organising protests, educating the public, and engaging with beneficiaries, decision-makers, and donors. However, much of this engagement is campaign-based and ad hoc, often limited to one-time financial support or participation in protests (Jarmołowicz 2016). The disability area is the most developed in terms of participation in social services, but is highly medicalised (Runswick-Cole, Goodley 2015). The mental health area has recently seen a rise in patient-centred initiatives due to increasing mental health issues within the Polish population. The child protection area is highly professionalised and legally constrained, making citizen involvement challenging, while the youth-at-risk area notes minimal civic engagement as social and political exclusion from public debate is precisely what they are experiencing and what makes them vulnerable.

Portugal – empowering service users in citizens skills’ building

User participation is a key principle in Portuguese public and institutional policies, but actual participation experiences are often shaped by the country's sociocultural and historical context. Decades of dictatorship and low education levels, particularly among older generations, contribute to generally low levels of citizen participation (Pinto 2018). In social services, issues like discrimination, tokenistic participation, and indirect user representation by families and professionals limit meaningful participation and responsiveness to users’ needs (Pinto, Serrano 2022). Practitioners also report difficulties in promoting user participation due to low engagement from users and their families, as well as a lack of skills to support participatory processes (Delgado, Carvalho, Alves 2023).

Community-based and arts-based practices have shown positive impact on user engagement (Lindeza et al. 2022; Jorge-Monteiro 2015). In the case of at-risk children and youth, focusing on user promotion has positively impacted organisational decisions to engage them in participatory processes (Antão et al. 2020; Marques 2018).

However, the responsiveness of social services is not consistently addressed in research, legislation, or institutional discourse. This lack of focus may discourage user participation by reducing their perceived influence over organisational and socio-political processes. Nonetheless, there is evidence that participatory processes can lead to positive outcomes in social services, particularly in the design, implementation, and evaluation of activities.

Romania – continuing reforms towards democratic values implementation

During Romania's communist regime (1947–1989), citizens' rights were restricted, and social assistance suffered. The totalitarian regime ignored social issues and did not officially recognise social assistance needs. Democratic development post-1990 saw increased citizen engagement and reform in social services. In 1997, General Directorates for Social Assistance and Child Protection were established at the county level, marking a significant reform in social services. In the period following 2000 significant laws like the Child Protection Act (2004) and the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) were enacted. The Factsheet on social services in Romania (Matei 2019) shows in detail the current study on the social services offered.

Recent decades have seen a rise in citizen actions advocating for rights and freedoms. The largest protest in recent history occurred in 2017, with up to 600,000 people protesting against corruption-related legislative changes. A review of the participation of citizens in campaigns, protests, and actions to facilitate their involvement as a collective voice reveals the existence of regions where such actions have been undertaken, particularly in view of the forthcoming electoral year in Romania, encompassing local, parliamentary, and presidential elections. In this regard, an initiative was implemented whereby children and young people in the protection system were afforded the opportunity to serve as ministers for a day, able to provide politicians engaged in the election campaign with a realistic perspective of the experiences of children in social services.

In disability services, Law No. 7/2023 supports deinstitutionalisation, allowing adults with disabilities to live in the community. However, the implementation is hampered by insufficient resources. Mental health initiatives have focused on addressing mental well-being and addictive behaviours, but the response from social services remains largely unresponsive and formalised.

Overall, while Romania has made steps in citizen engagement and social services reform, the effectiveness of participatory processes and responsiveness remains limited, influenced by historical and structural challenges (OECD 2023).

The concept of “citizen-led actions” reflects a blend of realities, highlighting diverse relationships between social services and citizen engagement that vary by context. Each country faces unique challenges, particularly regarding the implementation of democratic rights of having voice, representation and freedom of action that engages in the discussion on social services.

2. Research Design and Methodology: Qualitative analysis of the citizens' engagement in social change through actions

2.1 Introduction

The research was conducted between March 2024 and August 2024 by researchers from six countries: Austria, Denmark, France, Portugal, Poland and Romania led by the team from Poland.

Examining diverse concepts of citizenship, democracy, and citizen actions requires acknowledging various methodological traditions while adopting a unified approach with a coherent set of tools applicable across culturally and socially distinct contexts.

A research guidebook was developed to navigate research processes, offering instructions, operational definitions, and data collection tools. The guidebook also included templates for delivering country-level findings and a list of examples of citizen actions that informed this report. Consortium meetings as well as bilateral meetings between the research Leading team (Polish) and each country team were held regularly to monitor timelines and discuss content, with National Advisory Boards encouraged to provide country-specific adaptations and comments.

2.2 Research questions

The primary research question for this work package identified by the RESPONSIVE Consortium was: **What are the scope, aims, content, and approaches of citizen-led actions for change in social services?** We sought practices that could enhance our understanding of responsiveness and improve the responsiveness of social services.

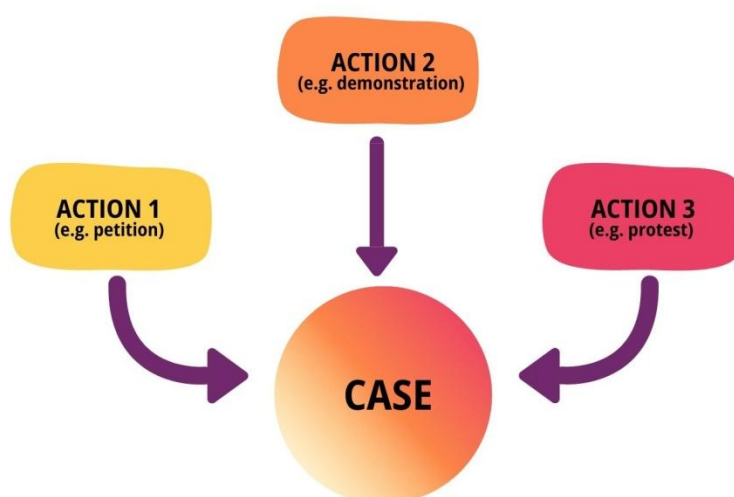
We also formulated specific research questions:

- RQ1. What are the main topics of citizen-led actions relating to social services (issues, aims, forms etc.)?
- RQ2. How do participants justify their actions? (In what words/terms/categories/values?)
- RQ3. How is knowledge (on citizen engagement) created in citizen-led actions? (What are processes, strategies, role of technology, postulates, relationships, recommended roles etc.)?
- RQ4. What are the engaged citizens' experiences of relations with decision-makers and social services? How is support for the cause built?
- RQ5. Who are the main and additional recipients/targets of citizen-led actions?
- RQ6. How do citizens involved in actions view their impact on social services (namely the impact of their actions towards responsiveness)?
- RQ7. Who is leading, organising, initiating, and engaging in citizen-led actions (typology of citizens, diversity of voice, diversity of motivations, leadership styles)?

2.3 Research design

We adopted a qualitative research approach, allowing for deeper exploration and understanding of the analysed phenomena. Despite its many advantages, qualitative research also presents challenges related to sample selection, especially in international studies. To effectively structure the collected data, we employed a case study as our research design. According to Creswell and Creswell a case study is “a qualitative design in which the researcher explores in depth a case: a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. The case(s) are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time” (2018, n.p.). A case is a unit of analysis, a complex issue in its real-life setting. In Work Package 3, by case, we mean citizens’ actions that might be studied from the multiple perspectives in this report – media coverage, social media activities, petitions and campaigns (if relevant and possible). The case may be very complex and consist of several actions linked together by the same or similar topic, or it may be simple and consist only of one or two actions such as petition and rally (see Graph 3).

Graph 3. Case identification.



We aimed to conduct case studies of 4 purposefully selected cases (consisting of a set of citizen-led actions) per country, one case from each RESPONSIVE area: child protection, youth-at-risk, mental health, and disability, which would mean a total of 24 case studies. However, this turned out to be difficult due to the diversity of citizens’ actions. Not all countries could identify distinct cases across all four areas as they needed to have covered a range of actions in the same topic. In some countries, some areas the actions were of smaller scale and less connected than the research plan envisaged. Moreover, we encountered challenges categorising the analysed actions within specific areas. There are cases where online citizen-led actions target two RESPONSIVE areas, e.g. disability and mental health or youth-at-risk and mental health. Some actions simply targeted a few areas at once. This methodological challenge encountered by the research consortium in previous work packages is linked to the overlapping nature of the four RESPONSIVE areas (disability, mental health, child protection, and youth at risk of social exclusion). Considering these difficulties, we decided to use case studies where possible, and in

other situations, to select for analysis those civic actions that met the remaining methodological criteria in each specific task and provided the maximum informational value.

The case study research design enables the integration of diverse research methods and tools. For this study, we employed semi-structured interviews for tasks 3.2 (interviews with artists) and 3.5 (interviews with engaged citizens) and conducted content analysis for tasks 3.1 (media coverage of citizens' actions), 3.3 (social media campaigns analysis), and 3.4 (online petitions analysis). Detailed descriptions of these methods and the associated research tools are provided in the subsequent subsections of the report.

2.4 Research process

The research process was organised into three primary phases:

1. Exploring and selecting citizens' engagements. This phase involved reflecting on the project's earlier research on legal-policy frameworks for social service responsiveness (Rasell et al., 2024) and citizen experiences of co-creation processes (Müller, Rømer, Uggerhøj, 2024) as well as gathering information from various sources, including personal contacts and consultations with members of national advisory boards for the RESPONSIVE project in each country, to create a comprehensive list and assessment map of potential actions, campaigns and other initiatives that could be taken into consideration.

2. Identifying and studying citizen-led actions in media and social platforms. This phase involved searching for actions, campaigns, and other initiatives featured in traditional media and social media, as well as citizens' online petitions that have raised public attention. The focus was on sampling citizen engagement processes across the four RESPONSIVE areas within the timeframe of 2019–2024. Target actions were then selected for further investigation, focusing on themes significant for citizen engagement.

3. Analysing the experiences of citizens engaged in actions. Leaders and participants of citizen-led actions were interviewed to gain insights into their motivations, perspectives on the need for responsive social services, and the importance of citizen action. This included interviewing artists to understand the role of art in raising awareness and fostering civic engagement as a supplementary aspect of public responsiveness to citizens' needs.

Phase 1. Exploring and selecting citizens' actions.

Earlier research in the RESPONSIVE project about policy and organisational structures for citizen participation in social services (Rasell et. al., 2024) gave valuable context for the research in this report, as many citizens direct their public concerns toward political bodies and decision-makers rather than directly to service providers. This reflects the acknowledgement of the top-down decision-making power within social services and the belief that significant change can be achieved through public awareness and macro-level interventions. This research report adds value by recognising actions and initiatives often overlooked or ignored at the meso and micro levels by top decision-makers.

Research on how people using social services experience co-creation revealed that many service users do not participate in the planning and developing of social services due to various obstacles mentioned in Work Package 2 Report (Müller, Rømer, Uggerhøj 2024). As a result, they become clients who feel served rather than empowered, experiencing fear, dissatisfaction, and a lack of competence. This dynamic is exacerbated by social services' paternalistic attitudes, which overlook the need for empowerment and dialogue. These research findings greatly influenced the approach to engaging with citizens taking action and emphasised the need to adapt our research process to gain a better understanding of public perceptions and media narratives, which may influence our conversations (interviews) with key actors and new bottom-up initiatives.

At this stage, the decision was made to prioritise tasks in the following order:

Task 3.1 – Media coverage of citizens' actions;

Task 3.3 – Social media campaigns analysis;

Task 3.4 – Online petitions analysis;

Task 3.2 – Interviews with artists;

Task 3.5 – Interviews with organisers and participants of actions.

Phase 2. Identifying and studying citizen-led actions through analysis of media, social media and petitions

Media attention to citizens' actions (task 3.1)

The aim of task 3.1 was to analyse how citizen-led actions related to social services in four RESPONSIVE areas were represented in national and local media. Additionally, it aimed to gather contextual information about these actions to inform subsequent tasks.

Specific research questions in this task were the following:

1. What types of actions are described in the media?
2. What actors and stakeholders take part in them?
3. Whose voice(s) are included in the media report?
4. What problems or needs of groups in vulnerable situations are mentioned?
5. What is the dominating tone of the materials toward the actions?
6. Is responsiveness of public services mentioned and commented on?

The methodology employed content analysis based on the Berelson method (1952) applied to a sample of media reports sourced from major online news portals in each country. The sampling procedure for each partner country was the following:

1. Identification of the five most influential online media services, based on their reach as detailed in the annual Reuters Institute Digital News Report.
2. Selection of keywords related to each RESPONSIVE area (disability, mental health, child protection, youth at risk) based on Stage 1 prior mapping of citizen-led actions.
3. Conducting Google searches limited to the identified media services and covering the period post-2018 for each Responsive area.
4. Inclusion of 15 to 25 of the most relevant articles from each search, totaling 60 to 100 articles.

Table 1. Number of analysed articles by area and country.

Area / Country	Austria	Denmark	France	Poland	Portugal	Romania	Total for area
Disability	26	25	17	26	17	26	137
Mental health	16	25	0	19	20	21	101
Child protection	16	25	18	24	4	24	111
Youth at risk	13	25	13	18	17	17	103
Total for country	71	100	48	87	58	88	452

Data analysis utilised a matrix table common to all country teams. While some fields were predefined, additional comments could be added in adjacent columns as needed. The completed tables were then submitted to the coordinator for aggregate analysis.

[Social media campaigns and online petitions as digital civic engagement \(tasks 3.3 and 3.4\)](#)

During this stage, data were gathered by collecting and analysing social media campaigns and individual or group petitions. Research teams in Austria, Denmark, Poland and Portugal focused on nationwide social media campaigns, which served as analytical cases for a variety of related actions. In France, due to the abundance of active social campaigns, specific topics were selected to illustrate an integrated approach across all four studied areas. This led to the identification of four main topics in mental health linked to disabilities, five main topics in child protection, and three main topics in the youth-at-risk area.

Specific research questions in these tasks were:

1. What issues do citizens raise in social media campaigns and petitions?
2. What are the explicit aims of these actions?
3. What are the forms of these actions?
4. How do the citizens justify their actions? (In what words/terms/categories/values? To what do they refer (e.g. documents)?)
5. How is the knowledge (on citizen engagement) created in citizen-led actions?
6. What is the role of technology (mainly the Internet) in citizen engagement in citizen-led actions?
7. Who are the main and additional recipients/targets of citizen-led actions?

Table 2. Number of analysed social media campaigns and petitions by area and country.

Area / Country	Austria		Denmark		France		Poland		Portugal		Romania		Total for area		
Social Media Campaigns/Petitions	smc	p	smc	p	smc	p	smc	p	smc	p	smc	p	smc	smc	p
Disability	1	1	1*	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	5	1*	8
Mental health	1	1		1	1	0	1	0	2	0	0	1	5		3
Child protection	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	3		4
Youth at risk	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	3		2
Total for country	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	3	3	2	4	17		17

Abbreviations: smc - social media campaigns; p - petitions; * cross area

Phase 3. Analysing the experiences of engaged citizens: interviews with artists, organisers and participants of actions (tasks 3.2 and 3.5)

The detailed research questions in these tasks were:

1. What themes/issues do socially engaged artists and engaged citizens want to introduce in the public discussion?
2. What are the aims and forms of their actions or artistic work?
3. Who are the recipients/target groups of these actions or artistic works?
4. How do they justify their actions or artistic work? (In what words/terms/categories/values? To what do they refer?)
5. How do socially engaged artists and engaged citizens involve groups in vulnerable situations in their actions? What does the creative process look like, what are the effects and the relationships with the represented groups?
6. What is the role of technology (mainly the Internet) in citizen engagement in citizen-led actions and artistic work?
7. Why and how do socially engaged artists and engaged citizens seek relations with decision-makers? On what level? What are their experiences in this field?
8. How do engaged citizens view their impact on social services (namely the impact of their actions towards responsiveness)?
9. Who is leading, organising, initiating, and engaging in citizen-led actions or socially engaged artistic work?
10. How do socially engaged artists perceive the role of art in creating social change (ex. influencing social policy)?

The initial outreach to campaign leaders (organisers), understood as persons currently in management positions of CSOs or with coordination/leading responsibilities in specific citizens' actions, referred to in this report, was based on the researchers' knowledge from previous work packages and their professional or personal connections with active citizens involved in collective and individual actions within the RESPONSIVE areas: mental health, child protection, youth at risk, and disabilities. This knowledge was supplemented with data from tasks 3.1, 3.3 and 3.4 of

the work package which included media coverage of citizen-led actions, social media campaigns' analysis, and the examination of individual or group petitions available online. Additionally, online searches were conducted to identify specific leaders and participants and obtain their contact information. Members of the National Advisory Board were also consulted to identify potential leaders and participants in citizen actions (Portugal, Poland). Based on the compiled contact list, email invitations for interviews were sent, and consent forms were obtained before and during the interviews (in all countries).

In the recruitment phase, not all potential informants decided to participate in interviews. Some did not reply to invitations, despite repeated reminders through multiple communication channels. In Denmark, for example, it has been a challenge to mobilise young leaders to participate in research; in Portugal – the leaders from child protection and youth-at-risk areas. In Poland, there were some challenges with mobilising leaders in the area of disability. They were motivated and engaged when confirming interview appointments but sent their apologies shortly before the interview or did not turn up.

Semi-structured interview templates were developed for artists, leaders, and actions' participants, tailored to the specific context of each country. These templates included questions organised around key areas relevant to the research objectives.

The interviews with leaders and participants primarily focused on the specific actions they were involved in. We explored their aims, motivations, strategies, content, target groups, and the overall impact. Additionally, we discussed the role of technology in their efforts. Personal experiences related to engagement, motivation, and leadership style were also examined. Furthermore, we inquired about their networking activities and the broader role of being involved in improving social services.

In interviews with artists producing socially engaged content, the structure was largely similar to those conducted with leaders and participants of citizen actions, but with notable differences. Common topics included questions regarding aims, motivations, tools and strategies employed, the role of technology, (co)creation with target groups, and the impact of their work. However, the interviews diverged in their focus on the political dimension of art and its role in transforming social reality. Artists were also asked to reflect on the specific qualities—such as language, working methods, and relationships—unique to socially engaged art, which are typically absent in the practices of social services.

Interviews, conducted either online or face-to-face depending on the participants' preferences and availability, were audio-recorded, lasting between 40 minutes and 2 hours. All interviews were transcribed and coded by designated researchers in each partner country. In one case, in Portugal, an artist opted to provide written responses via email due to scheduling constraints. A thematic analysis of the collected data followed, yielding a diverse and rich body of research material, capturing a wide range of approaches to activism within social services.

The interviews reached a point of saturation, enabling the identification of common patterns and the drawing of general conclusions. The synthesis of findings was considered both at the individual country level and across the consortium. Additionally, the interview data were

supplemented with information from the websites of the actions studied, as well as relevant reports and other materials we were able to find.

2.5 Research participants

The interview respondents were categorised into three main cohorts: artists, action leaders, and action participants. Leaders were individuals who at the time served on the managing boards of relevant associations (e.g. presidents) or held coordination or leadership roles in the specific citizen-led actions discussed in this report. Participants, on the other hand, were individuals who have been involved in these actions, though they may not necessarily have taken on leadership roles. Some participants may have assumed responsibility for certain activities at various points in the process, but leadership is not a defining feature of their involvement.

These three groups were selected to explore their lived experiences of engagement in the public sphere, focusing on four key areas of social services. The informants represented diverse backgrounds and held multiple roles—often simultaneously. They included current and former service users, family members of individuals in vulnerable situations, friends, neighbours, current or former professionals within social services, paid CSO staff, voluntary participants, and professionals from other fields such as journalism and the arts. These overlapping roles and contexts shaped the varied experiences and perspectives on citizen participation.

The table of the respondents interviewed is presented below:

Table 3. Number of interviewed respondents by country, role and area (integrated table)

Country / Area	Campaign leaders (L)					Campaign participants (P)					Artists (A)					Total for country
	D	MH	CP	YR	Cross	D	MH	CP	YR	Cross	D	MH	CP	YR	Cross	
Austria	5	2	6	4	0	3	2	1	0	0	2	1	0	1	1 CP/Y	28
Denmark	2	2	3	3	0	4	6	1	1	0	1	2	0	2	0	27
France	2	1	3	6	0	4	0	6	2	0	1	2	2	1	0	30
Poland	3	2	3	2	0	3	5	4	3	0	1	1	1	1	1	30
Portugal	2	3	4	0	0	2	4	4	0	0	1	2	0	0	3 CP/YR	25
Romania	2	4	5	1	0	8	2	3	2	0	0	0	0	1	5 D/CP/YR	33
Total for area	16	14	24	16	0	24	19	19	8	0	6	8	3	6	10	173

Abbreviations: D – Disability, MH – Mental Health, CP – Child Protection, YR – Youth At Risk

Detailed characteristics of informants are provided in Table 2a and 2b (see Annex 1).

2.6 Ethical considerations and research limitations

Our research followed ethical guidelines based on “Certificate of Good Standing”, issued to Consortium on September 19, 2023 granted by University of Innsbruck. Ethical concerns primarily centred around issues of anonymisation, given that many interviews referenced activities or groups with a distinctive and easily identifiable status. Due to the specificity of the actions discussed, fully anonymising the data proved to be highly challenging, as interviewees’ activities were often central to the focus of the interviews. This challenge was consistent across all partner countries. Consequently, the analysis of these interviews will be included in both the country-specific and cross-country reports, while full interview transcripts are unlikely to be made available to researchers outside the project. Additionally, in Portugal, a decision was made to transcribe interviews selectively, focusing only on segments relevant for use as direct quotes.

Another ethical challenge in this research involved the fact that most interviewed artists across partner countries did not express a desire for anonymity. However, they all agreed to adhere to the ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity required by the research team. To address this, it was determined that any quotes included in the reports would be attributed only in general terms—either to a specific field or country—without revealing any identifiable characteristics of the respondents. This approach was adopted for two key reasons: first, to protect informants from potential repercussions or retaliation resulting from their expressed views; and second, to ensure interviewees felt free to express themselves fully without concern for possible consequences. This strategy aimed to encourage more candid reflections, allowing participants to be as critical as they wished regarding prior public interventions or the specific actions in which they were involved.

The project team made a key decision to only include publicly available information in the research report and not share personal identification or contact details of informants, even if they were public figures and open to be named. This ensures that informants retain full control over how, or if, they wish to be contacted in the future, safeguarding their privacy and autonomy.

Regarding the research limitations, conducting qualitative research using semi-structured interviews across various national contexts introduces specific limitations. They relate to the following issues:

Cultural differences, which may influence the participants’ responses to interview questions. These were addressed in the research in such a way that at every stage of data analysis and the writing of subsequent sections of the report, all national teams were actively involved in these activities. All Consortium members had the opportunity to comment, refine, and discuss the validity of the analyses.

Diverse interpretations of concepts: concepts such as “citizen”, “activism”, or “engagement” may have different meanings in different countries and different socio-economic settings. This can affect the participants’ responses and make cross-national comparisons challenging. We attempted to overcome this potential limitation by adapting the research tools

to national contexts and engaging in discussions within the Consortium, including with National Advisory Boards' members; however, certain limitations were certainly unavoidable.

Access and sampling bias: in every project country we encountered some challenges related to reaching potential research participants. They have been described in the previous parts of the report. These difficulties may have led to a focus on more accessible or willing respondents, as well as more visible or "media-friendly" actions, which, in turn, may have led to a lack of representation of some marginalised groups or alternative perspectives. To minimise the impact of these factors on the diversity of voices included in the study, we employed various access pathways to enhance the likelihood of achieving diversity among respondents and the actions analysed. Moreover, we also faced over-representation of female participants (101 interviewees) compared to male (37) or non-binary/ not willing to identify by gender (2) participants. However it seems that such over-representation of one gender is coherent with the higher engagement of women in social services issues.

3. Findings of citizen-led actions' characteristics and citizens' lived experiences important to responsiveness of social services

3.1 Media coverage of citizens' actions untapped potential

Introduction

Analysis of media coverage was an important element of Work Package 3. Firstly, it allowed us to **identify citizen actions** that were subjected to in-depth analysis in subsequent stages. Secondly, it provided insight into how the media with the greatest reach in society presented actions initiated by citizens in the areas of social services we studied and thus how they could be perceived by recipients. Wherever actions taken by public administration were discussed, we also paid attention to the presence of the **idea and concept of responsiveness** and how it was framed.

Task 3.1 consisted of the analysis of media coverage of citizens' actions conducted in six project countries under common methodology and using standardised analytical framework. Altogether 439 media articles from 6 countries were analysed: 137 regarding disability area; 111 – child protection; 101 – mental health; 90 – youth at risk. They were published in the most influential online information portals in each country from 2018 until 2024. The analysis aimed at capturing the **diversity of citizen actions**, identifying **actors** that are visible in media coverage and if and **how their voices are presented**. (See Tables 3a., 3b., 3c. and 3d. in Annex 1 for more details).

The media across six countries – Poland, Romania, France, Austria, Denmark, and Portugal – have portrayed actions that have spanned **protests, advocacy efforts, awareness campaigns, and social solidarity**, often aimed at addressing social injustices and improving legislative frameworks.

The analysis included a wide range of actions that varied in degree of collaboration and contestation and can be framed in the following categories:

1. Information, education, awareness-raising;
2. Networking, partnership building;
3. Creating own services, proposing innovations;
4. Monitoring of services;
5. Empowering and emancipatory actions;
6. Lobbying / advocating for change in law;
7. Public protesting.

The media reports analysed included all types of actions. However, the focus was largely on **the actions with higher degree of contestation** that engaged audience emotions, such as public protests or interventions. These often highlighted cases of service users who were abused or whose needs went unmet. The most significant actions are summarised in below, in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary of actions – topics described in media materials by country and area.

Country/ Area	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth at risk
Austria	- Nationwide protests for the rights of people with disabilities - Criticism of charity programme	- Protests and petitions for better mental health care - Campaigns to support mental health	- Criticism of shortcomings in child protection services (esp. in foster care) - Campaigns and actions against violence towards children	- Youth protests on several topics - Demands for help for Care Leavers - Projects helping youth at risk
Denmark	- Individual stories of people with disabilities struggling with the system - Organisations and leaders pointing to the shortcomings of the system	- Stories of (mostly young) people struggling with mental health problems - Ideas and research to diagnose and solve mental health problems	- Discussions around new child protection law - Question of vaccinations	- Problems of homelessness of young people, problems with finding job and integration of immigrants - Appeals to hear the youth voices in several public debates
France	- Protest in Paris for the rights of persons with disabilities - Petitions to change the calculations of benefits - Equal wages for workers with disabilities		- Discussions and actions against housing youth in hotels	- Student protests concerning their economic situation - More support for care leavers - Protests concerning the living conditions of migrant youth
Poland	- Two rounds of protests of the caregivers of people with disabilities	- Changes in mental health system' March - Mental Health Congress	- Citizen and political initiative to change child protection law after a tragic death of a boy	- Actions and protests to enhance care for youth with mental health problems - Protests and meetings of the LGBTQ youth
Portugal	- Marches and actions within the context of the European Day for Independent Living - Dissemination of reports and studies revealing the insufficiency of the policies - Projects using ICT for helping to denounce limitations	- Raising awareness actions including three different awareness campaigns on mental health issues - Creating own services/proposed innovations - Lobbying for change in laws or institutions	- Stories of irregularities and abuse involving children in foster care and in catholic church institutions - Stories regarding children being placed outside family against the will of parents	- Projects helping youth care leavers
Romania	- Protests against abuses and bad conditions in social centres - Information about new services for people with disability	- Controls and protests in psychiatric hospitals - Articles on raising the amount of mental problems (esp. among youth)	- Stories of irregularities and abuse involving children in foster care - Appeals from organisations helping children for support - Problems of youth social workers	- Irregularities and problems in institutions for youth - Problems connected with drug abuse by youth - Projects and actions to help young adults

Media coverage sheds light on a variety of **challenges and needs** faced by groups in vulnerable situations. Across these countries, common themes of **inadequate public services, slow governmental responses, and systemic barriers** emerge. Within these narrations typical focus was on inadequate welfare allowances, dysfunctional institutions, norms and standards that are not fulfilled as well as the vulnerability faced by particular subgroups (e.g. young care-leavers) that are not covered by the system and do not receive support. Such stories fulfilled the analysed media need for moving or **shocking the readers and creating intense emotions**.

Across countries, a diverse range of **actors and stakeholders** were shown in media materials related to areas studied. These actors typically fell into three broad categories: **civic stakeholders (CSO representatives, leaders, activists), experts (scientists, doctors, psychologists, and lawyers), and government stakeholders (ministers, directors, MPs, ombudspersons, local authorities)**, with their involvement varying depending on the issue and the country. **Only rarely were the voices of regular service users provided and these often belonged to those who had transitioned into professional or semi-professional leadership.** These were individuals who, while representing these groups, had gained a level of expertise and visibility that might set them apart from the average person affected by these issues. One of potential reasons for not representing the regular users is the weakness of modern online journalism, where reporters tend to present the positions of individual stakeholders provided to them, rather than trying to reach users at the grassroots level. In this way, they become media for expert and political discussions rather than a source of reliable knowledge about citizens' problems.

In addition to the content analysis, a tone analysis was conducted which revealed a **spectrum of tones ranging from sympathetic to neutral, with critical perspectives present in a minority of cases** (see Figure 1. in Annex 2). The tone of material was coded by the researchers based on the wording, choice of quotes within the article and overall conclusions of each material (and was also vulnerable to subjectivity). The tone often depended on the specific issue being reported, the stakeholders involved, and the political or societal context surrounding the topic. Across all countries, while neutral reporting is common, especially in politically sensitive or complex issues, there is a consistent tendency toward sympathy when people facing vulnerability are the focus of media attention. Media focus on the demands of helping groups in vulnerable situations, providing them with benefits and services rather than strengthening their voice in the public debate, although there were also exceptions in the analysed materials. Critical tones, particularly regarding government or institutional responses, appear when systemic failures are discussed, emphasising the need for reform and greater accountability.

The analysis of media materials from six countries demonstrates the varying presence of the topic of responsiveness from public services to the needs of people facing vulnerability. **While responsiveness is not always directly mentioned in the media, it is often framed in terms of failure or inadequacy, with few instances of proactive, positive change** initiated by citizen groups or public authorities themselves. The media tend to highlight instances where public services are slow to react, with change only occurring after public outrage or grassroots pressure. Examples include action to change child protection in Poland after massive protests following the

tragic death of the 8-year boy (Kamilek Case)² or discussions and actions against housing of youth in hotels after the death of a girl and documentary film in France (*Familles d'accueil, hôtels sociaux: le nouveau scandale des enfants placés*)³.

3.1.1 Common themes across countries: awareness and need for action

Throughout the material several common themes can be traced that keep repeating in public discussions on social services across all countries participating in the research. These themes could be identified as follows:

- **Lack of responsive public services:** across six countries, public services are often criticised for their slow, ineffective or complete lack of responses to the needs of groups in vulnerable situations. Proactive engagement is rare, and change is often driven by public outrage or media pressure.
- **Barriers in accessibility and inclusivity:** people in vulnerable situations face systemic barriers to accessing the services they need. These barriers include long waiting lists, insufficient service coverage, and exclusion from decision-making processes.
- **Need for political commitment:** leaders and media across these countries call for stronger political will and commitment to addressing the needs of groups facing vulnerability. Government action is often seen as insufficient, and there is a clear demand for more inclusive policies that consider the specific challenges these groups face.

3.1.2 Media highlighting gaps, challenges of responsive service and citizens' reaction

Disability coverage was marked by substantial focus on protests and advocacy efforts, particularly in Austria, Denmark, France, Poland, and Romania. Unlike other areas, the disability area appeared the **most combative**, with media frequently highlighting **the fight for disability rights**. Self-advocacy organisations used the media as platforms to strengthen their calls for equality, often referencing international human rights frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Austria, France). In Poland and Romania, there were persistent reports that even the most basic needs of persons with disabilities remained unmet, emphasising the **systemic neglect** of this group. Across all six countries, a recurrent theme in media coverage was the **slow political response** and the lack of lasting, meaningful change, leaving individuals with disabilities struggling for adequate support and access to services. In many countries it is underlined that a deeper change in approach to the people with disabilities is needed and merely more resources or more helping facilities (as it is with the mental health area).

² E.g. *Marsz sprawiedliwości" po śmierci 8-letniego Kamila. Poruszę niebo i ziemię*, ONET, 12.05.2023, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/slask/nigdy-wiecej-krzywdy-po-smierci-kamila-organizuja-marsz-sprawiedliwosci/q7zd7kzz> [Accessed: 29.02.2024]

³ E.g. « Zone interdite » : M6 lanceur d'alerte sur « le nouveau scandale des enfants placés », 20 minutes, 16.10.2022, <https://www.20minutes.fr/television/4005467-20221016-zone-interdite-m6-lanceur-alerte-nouveau-scandale-enfants-places> [Accessed: 22.03.2024]

Mental health coverage, on the other hand, was focused more on **awareness-raising** efforts and aimed at **reducing stigma and increasing knowledge** about mental health issues (across all countries). Reports frequently included the voices of experts like psychologists and psychiatrists, and emphasised the need for greater empowerment of individuals facing mental health challenges. However, there was **widespread criticism of public mental health services for being insufficient or inaccessible**. The media often pointed to the gap between what individuals need and what public systems provide, with Austria and Denmark highlighting slow, bureaucratic responses that fail to adapt to individual needs. In Romania, reports of patient mistreatment in psychiatric hospitals led to public outrage. Across the board, media reports showed the **lack of timely interventions and support, especially in light of growing demand for mental health care, particularly among youth in the post-pandemic context**.

Child protection issues were frequently reported in the media in connection with high-profile cases or documentaries exposing the **poor conditions faced by children in care**. France, for instance, saw significant attention drawn to the child protection system through documentaries broadcast on national television or in the aftermath of tragic events⁴, leading to some reactions on the part of public authorities. Political leaders were frequently criticised for downplaying the severity of the issues or **responding too slowly to children's needs**. In Denmark, the Prime Minister dedicated her 2020 speech to children, especially children in vulnerable positions, and declared that she would be the Prime Minister of the children⁵. It got a heavy media coverage but it was not followed up by political actions. In Poland, media attention after a tragic child death led to legislative changes, showing **the power of the media in pushing for reforms**⁶. Despite these isolated examples of progress, the general portrayal of child protection services was one of **bureaucratic inefficiencies and a lack of proactive measures**, with reforms typically **occurring only after public outcry following tragic events**.

Youth at risk was portrayed as an area where various **social issues intersected**, including the challenges faced by care leavers (Austria, France, Romania), homeless youth (France, Denmark), young victims of trafficking (Romania), young immigrants (Austria, France), youth with mental issues (Denmark, Poland) and LGBT youth (Poland). The mental health of youth also featured prominently in discussions, particularly in Poland and Austria. Unlike in other areas, the media often highlighted the **self-organisation of young leaders**, who used protests and demonstrations to demand systemic change. University and high school students were frequently presented as organising protests within their institutions, but their **exclusion from decision-making** processes related to their care and well-being was a common criticism. **This lack of youth participation in policy discussions was seen as a significant gap** in the system.

⁴E.g. *Le gouvernement va interdire l'hébergement en hôtels des enfants placés*, 20 minutes, 28.01.2021, <https://www.20minutes.fr/politique/2963751-20210128-gouvernement-va-interdire-hebergement-hotels-enfants-places> [Accessed: 22.03.2024]

⁵ *Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's New Year Address*, 1.01.2020, <https://english.stm.dk/the-prime-minister/speeches/prime-minister-mette-frederiksens-new-year-address-1-january-2020/> [Accessed: 10.04.2024]

⁶ E.g. *Ustawa o ochronie małoletnich to zobowiązanie wobec Kamilka z Częstochowy*, ONET, 14.06.2023, <https://www.onet.pl/informacje/kai/ustawa-o-ochronie-maloletnich-to-zobowiazanie-wobec-kamilka-z-czestochowy/9zmphbx,30bc1058>, [Accessed: 29.02.2024]

Dominating tone – sympathising but neutral and with reservations about youth contestation

The tone of the analysed articles also differed depending on the area. While sympathising and neutral tone dominated in all areas, there were some differences. In disability, half of the articles (50%) were classified as neutral and 36% as sympathising. In child protection and youth at risk areas, 51% were classified as sympathising and around 40% as neutral. In mental health as much as 63% of the articles were classified as sympathising. Interestingly, thematic analysis has shown that the disability area articles gave most voice to the service users themselves. It can mean that the sympathising tone was more present in the areas where less voice was given to the users (mental health, child protection, youth at risk). It can also mean that the sympathising tone may be also in some contexts a paternalistic one, where journalists and experts support groups in vulnerable situations but with insufficient participation of the actors. Additionally, in the youth at risk area there was a 10% proportion of articles classified as denying their demands. This was connected i.a. with criticising too radical forms of youth protests (see Figures 1a., 1b., 1c., 1d. in Annex 2).

3.1.3 Different ways of portraying citizens' public pressure

Austria:

Visible disability and mental health areas are strong in contestation and **collective action supported by media's criticism** of the government for its failure to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities⁷. Public protests and calls for increased resources to improve the mental health system are visible. Both areas are portrayed as actively pushing for change through organised public pressure. In the field of child protection and youth at risk, several types of actions were described, concerning lack of resources and national standards within child and youth welfare services, implying a variety of negative consequences for social service users and professionals. Also, actions addressed the problem of ending support for young people in state care at the age of 18.

Denmark:

In Denmark, actions described were primarily **driven by professionals** (third parties, such as CSOs, researchers, and medical professionals), who use the media as a platform to advocate for better services and greater attention to mental health issues. Citizens' voices were focused on the **inequalities faced by individuals** among others with mental health and problems and disability problems. The role of **experts** and institutions was more central to media coverage than direct citizen activism. Topics connected with child protection and youth at risk were also

⁷ E.g. *Behindertenrechte in Österreich bisher kaum umgesetzt*, "der Standard", 3.04.2023, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000146117420/behindertenrechte-in-oesterreich-bisher-kaum-umgesetzt> [Accessed: 19.02.2024]

visible and concentrated around the newly-introduced Law of the Child (*Barnets Lov*) although in this respect the domination of expert voices over the users were even more visible⁸.

France:

In France, the media items in the sample strongly emphasised disability rights and child protection, often through **means of cultural production: documentaries and films that highlighted** the failures of social services. These media portrayals generated public **debates** about the care system, particularly in relation to child protection (although it is worth noting that the voices of parents in the child protection sector were almost totally absent). There appeared to be less focus on mental health in the media based on chosen selection criteria, with only limited reporting on shortcomings in mental health institutions. Protests by at-risk youth, especially **migrant youth**, received attention, with the media focusing on social vulnerability and the demand for better support systems⁹.

Poland:

In Poland, media coverage prominently featured two major **protests**: one led by **parents and caregivers** of people with disabilities in 2018 and 2023, advocating for better government support for most pressing needs¹⁰, and another related to child protection, sparked by the **tragic murder** of an eight-year-old boy Kamilek in 2023¹¹. These protests **highlight human life risk** and aim at **legislative changes**. Other actions that were not so dramatically expressed received less media attention.

Portugal:

In Portugal, citizens' actions related to disability were characterised by a more **dialogic approach: marches, vigils, and public reports** criticising the slow implementation of policies. Mental health advocacy mainly revolved around awareness-raising campaigns and lobbying for better legislation and services. Additionally, there was one protest calling for **more resources for the health services** in general, reflecting a broader concern for public health infrastructure¹². The only direct connection aligned responsiveness capacity gap. In relation to children and youth at risk, the main result of analysis was that citizen-led actions were almost non-existent in the media landscape.

⁸ E.g. *Barnets Lov har gjort det sværere for de mest udsatte*, "Politiken", 27.02.2024, <https://apps-infomedia-dk.zorac.aau.dk/mediarkiv/link?articles=ea1d2c21> [Accessed: 16.04.2024]

⁹ E.g. *La situation des jeunes majeurs étrangers représente un terrible gâchis humain et social*, "Le Monde", 02.03.2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/03/02/la-situation-des-jeunes-majeurs-etrangers-represente-un-terrible-gachis-humain-et-social_6071689_3232.html [Accessed: 26.03.2024]

¹⁰ E.g. *Ogólnopolski protest rodziców i opiekunów osób niepełnosprawnych*, "ONET", 25.04.2018, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/tylko-w-onecie/ogolnopolski-protest-rodzicow-i-opiekunow-osob-niepelnosprawnych-elzbieta-rafalska-w/bwkvsjr> [Accessed: 6.03.2024]

¹¹ E.g. *Sprawa skatowanego Kamilka wstrząsnęła Polską. Jeden wniosek po tragedii*, "WP.pl", 20.05.2023, <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/sprawa-skatowanego-kamilka-wstrzasnela-polska-jeden-wniosek-po-tragedii-6899556840827776a> [Accessed: 6.03.2024]

¹² *Movimento cívico apela à participação na manifestação nacional pelo SNS*, "RTP Notícias", 6.01.2023, https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/pais/movimento-civico-apela-a-participacao-na-manifestacao-nacional-pelo-sns_n1490418 [Accessed: 3.11.2024]

Romania:

In Romania, media coverage of citizens' actions focused heavily on cases of **abuse and neglect**, particularly in the disability and child protection areas. Protests by people with disabilities, their caregivers, and social services workers received substantial attention, with **media highlighting inhumane conditions** in residential centres, some described as "death camps."¹³ Awareness campaigns aimed at disability rights and inclusion were also covered, as were efforts by CSOs to spotlight these issues. Overall, Romanian media placed a strong emphasis on **systemic problems and the urgent need for reform**.

In conclusion, while the specific actions varied across these countries, common themes of protest against lack of governmental actions, advocacy for the rights of groups in vulnerable situations, especially children, youth and people with disabilities as well as awareness-raising on problems of groups at risk of exclusion were evident in media portrayals. Media reports typically focused on highlighting **systemic failures, advocating for reforms, and enhancing voices calling for social justice, with varying levels of attention and success in influencing public discourse and policy**. The media thus show the lack of responsiveness in public services, but at the same time indirectly stimulate government representatives to take up difficult topics and respond to citizens' demands. The media often acted as a sounding board for civic actions, although giving direct voice to those directly affected was not common.

¹³ 'Death camps' – almost 100 social centres closed or suspended following inspections, "Stiripersurse.ro", 16.07.2023, https://www.stiripersurse.ro/lagarele-mortii-aproape-100-de-centre-sociale-au-fost-inchise-sau-suspendate-in-urma-controalelo_2993943.html [Accessed: 14.03.2024]

3.2 Citizen-led actions through social media campaigns and petitions: technology at service to citizens' voice

Introduction

In recent years, citizens' actions have increasingly shifted online, with social media and digital petitions becoming important tools for community mobilisation, raising awareness, and influencing decision-makers. These online actions complement traditional methods like voting, protesting or lobbying, and should be considered as legitimate forms of civic engagement. The digital space offers new opportunities for participation and engagement in social and political issues, particularly for individuals facing barriers to conventional forms of activism, thereby expanding the reach of active citizenship. Research suggests that online activism can amplify marginalised voices and issues (Jenkins et al. 2016; Loader, Vromen, & Xenos 2014). However, its potential to strengthen democratic participation and thus renew democracy is debated, as it offers both opportunities and challenges (like misinformation or shallowness discussed below) (Bernholz, Landemore, Reich 2021). This chapter examines how citizens use new technologies in diverse civic actions for social change, exploring their various uses and purposes across different initiatives.

3.2.1 Use of new technologies in citizen-led actions: emerging pattern

Identifying dominant forms of citizen participation is challenging, because it would require extensive quantitative research, but face-to-face interactions remain prevalent, increasingly complemented by digital engagement like social media campaigns, online petitions, and virtual advocacy groups. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift toward digital activism (Mehan 2023), both by adapting in-person initiatives and highlighting critical issues such as mental health and strained social services.

Our research shows that citizens in all project countries involve **internet technologies** in such citizen-led actions as **petitions, campaigns in social media, online advocacy and support groups, actions' websites** providing information and serving as a tool for promotion, **workshops and webinars, blogging and vlogging**. They also use social media as channels for internal and external communication and promotion.

However, **aside from social media and online platforms** facilitating interaction and content sharing, other **new technologies were rarely used** in the citizen-led actions analysed. A notable exception is an NGO using AI-generated photos of children for online posts, reducing reliance on real images.

Also in general, in external communication, we use AI and since February there have been no photos of children. Even if we have consents, we don't publish them. We only publish in exceptional situations at most, young people over eighteen who have already been able to express their will more consciously. Sometimes there are still archived posts with photos on the website, but they are successively replaced (L2_YR_Poland¹⁴).

¹⁴ Excerpts from respondents' statements are labelled as follows: A – Artist, L – Leader, P – Participant; 1 – first interviewee in this category; D – disability area, MH – mental health area, CP – child protection area, YR – youth-at-risk area; and country name.

One of the Romanian leaders (a social service professional) provided another example of the deeper integration of new technologies in civic actions:

We have apps built; we are currently building a new app to help people on the gambling side. We have e-health type interventions, where people with mild and moderate problems can go through some online sessions, and contact a specialist. We have the platform test-audit.ro, where people can also self-assess themselves there. We are also interested in AI, to see how we can use it in our programs. (L11_MH_Romania)

Some of the artists interviewed also utilise new technologies in their work for social change. An artist from Romania introduces the innovative concept of a **digital museum** as a space for inter-community dialogue. This platform bridges the gap between the “invisible community” of former child protection system wards and the broader Romanian society, promoting mutual understanding and recognition:

We have created this cultural, museum-like platform where we meet the invisible community of children, now adults who have gone through the child protection system. And the general public, the Romanian society needs to see these children, and these children [...] today need to be seen by the Romanian society. (A3_CP_Romania)

This participatory museum provides a platform for sharing material and immaterial testimonies, ensuring that these stories are not forgotten and that the public understands the historical context and its impact on current social services. This project exemplifies how digital art can serve as a tool for education and historical preservation.

3.2.2 Petitions and Social Media Campaigns: citizens' ways to get their voice in public

To take a closer look at the use of new media by citizens in their self-led actions, we conducted an in-depth analysis of two types of online citizen-led actions: online petitions¹⁵ (task 3.4) and social media campaigns (task 3.3). While petitions are a form of civic action with a long history, social media campaigns represent a newer form of civic engagement. We focused on the use of digital technology in civic actions supporting individuals and groups in vulnerable positions.

In both tasks, we encountered difficulties in assigning analysed actions to a specific RESPONSIVE area. Some online citizen-led actions targeted multiple areas, such as disability and mental health, or youth-at-risk and mental health. For example, a petition about young people in mental health crises fits both youth-at-risk and mental health areas. Campaigns like Portugal's “Pirilampo Mágico/Magic Firefly” and Austria's “#ChangeForTheYouth” similarly spanned multiple areas. In other instances, the actions are part of a case that cuts across areas, particularly in cases concerning mental health and disability, child protection and youth at risk, or mental health and youth at risk (e.g. Danish action “EnMillionStemmer/OneMillionVoices”). This cross-cutting complexity of RESPONSIVE areas has been a recurring issue.

For both the social media campaign analysis and the analysis of petitions, we focused on those actions for which we could find the most information. We also sought to diversify the areas in

¹⁵ In the Portuguese case there are some online petitions and traditional petitions with complete information available on-line.

the sample, so that the petitions and social media campaigns analysed related to as many different RESPONSIVE areas as possible.

Petitions

We identified petitions related to various RESPONSIVE areas and selected those most relevant for deeper analysis (Stake 2005)¹⁶. Initially, we planned to analyse 12 petitions (2 per country) but ended up with 17 due to the relevance of additional petitions. In Romania, 4 petitions were analysed in-depth. Denmark and Poland each had 2 petitions analysed; France, Austria and Portugal 3 each (see Table 4a. for more detailed description of all petitions).

Each selected petition was analysed using a standardised analytical framework. Additional contextual data, such as the creation date, petition platform, and number of signatures, were collected. The analysis focused on the petitions' aims, issues raised, public response, and engagement. The “life cycle” of the petitions, from initiation to potential outcomes, was also examined. This approach ensures the study addresses the research questions and deepens understanding of both the role of technology in citizen-led actions and their impact on societal issues.

Table 5. Summary of the key issues raised in the petitions by country and area.

Country/ Area	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth at risk
Austria	Salary instead of pocket money for people with disabilities working in workshops aimed at increasing their economic activity (<i>Gehalt statt Taschengeld: Selbstvertreter übergeben Forderung an den Vorarlberger Landtag/Salary instead of pocket money: Self-advocates submit demand to the Vorarlberg state parliament</i>)	Gaps in mental health care (<i>Für eine bessere Versorgung von Menschen mit psychischen Erkrankungen in Österreich!/For better care for people with mental illnesses in Austria!</i>)	Better protection for children/young people from violence, unprotected rights for young unaccompanied refugees & contact rights proceedings (<i>Nehmt die Rechte der Kinder ernst/Take children's rights seriously</i>)	—

¹⁶ Given the variation in population size across the project countries, different timing of petition creation, and the diverse levels of public interest in the four areas in the project countries, applying representativeness criteria was neither possible nor appropriate.

Country/ Area	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth at risk
Denmark	Responsibility for the disability sector should shift from local municipalities and regional support to state-defined rights to ensure equal living conditions for people with disabilities (<i>Handicapområdet skal væk fra kommunerne/The disability sector must be removed from the municipalities</i>)	Unethical social policy regarding people with mental health issues without suggesting any specific actions (<i>Vidnesbyrd 2020-2024/Testimony 2020-2024</i>)	—	—
France	Changing the method of calculating the AAH (adult disability allowance) Address discriminatory treatment and payment disparities between workers with and without disabilities (<i>Désolidarisation des revenus du conjoint pour le paiement de l'Allocation aux Adultes Handicapés/Decoupling the spouse's income from the calculation of the Allowance for Disabled Adults</i>)	—	—	The well-being of migrant youth, the rights of migrant youth (<i>Jeunes majeurs étrangers, sortir de l'impasse/Young foreign adults: finding a way out of the deadlock</i>)
Poland	Establishing a law on personal assistance for people with disabilities (<i>Ustawowa asystencja osób z niepełnosprawnościami/S tatutory assistance for persons with disabilities</i>)	—	Implementing the law on the protection of children ASAP (<i>Dość przemocy wobec dzieci! Podpisz petycję o natychmiastowe uchwalenie ustawy Kamilka z Częstochowy/Stop violence against children! Sign the petition for the immediate passing of the "Kamilek from Częstochowa" act</i>)	—

Country/ Area	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth at risk
Portugal	Creating the National Day of the Person with Mental Disability (<i>Dia Nacional da Pessoa com Deficiência Intelectual/National Day of the Person with Mental Disability</i>) Targeted support for children with ASD & their carers (<i>Apoios a crianças, jovens e adultos com Perturbação do Espectro do Autismo e seus cuidadores</i>)	—	Approval of the Victim Status for children in the context of domestic violence (<i>Aprovação do Estatuto de Vítima para crianças inseridas em contexto de violência doméstica</i>)	—
Romania	Facilitating voting access for people with disabilities in Romania (<i>Persoanele cu dizabilități trebuie să aibă acces neîngrădit la vot/People with disabilities must have unrestricted access to voting</i>)	Need of support for people with autism, rights for people with mental health difficulties (<i>Nu sunt un Diagnostic - drepturi și oportunități egale pentru persoanele cu dizabilități mentale/I Am Not a Diagnosis – Rights and Equal Opportunities for People with Mental Disabilities</i>)	Reducing discrimination: treating children & youth in the care system equally to their peers (<i>Uniți pentru a schimba negativismul în DGASPC CLUJ și Consiliul Județean Cluj/United to change the negativity in DGASPC CLUJ and the Cluj County Council</i>)	Proposing measures & recommendations to support institutionalised children & care leavers (<i>Copiii din orfelinate au nevoie de ajutor/Children in orphanages need help</i>)

Overall picture

Of the 17 petitions analysed, 8 relate to disability, 4 to child protection, 3 to mental health, and 2 to the youth-at-risk area. Most of the petitions have multiple aims, with **11** of them **advocating for issues** such as **legislative changes on a macro level**, **access to rights**, and **recognition of groups in vulnerable situations**. Usually, these petitions also target **awareness raising on the situation and needs of persons from groups facing vulnerability**. 8 address **specific solutions**, though only 2 focus solely on this and 2 others emphasise solidarity and recognition. The petitions were initiated by individuals, including parents of children with disabilities (10 cases), CSOs (5), and social movements (2).

The analysed petitions usually have **a clear purpose, target specific audiences (such as decision-makers)**, and are often based on personal stories. They highlight the **situation and needs** of these groups, presenting them in a way that **evokes emotion and compassion** (e.g. French petition *Jeunes majeurs étrangers, sortir de l'impasse/Young foreign adults: finding a way out of the deadlock*). However, **only a few petitions include the direct voices of service users** (e.g. Romanian petition *Uniți pentru a schimba negativismul în DGASPC CLUJ și Consiliul Județean Cluj/United to change the negativity in DGASPC CLUJ and the Cluj County Council*, run by a young person in child protection system). The rest speak on their behalf, which leads to paternalistic

framing, especially in the language used. For example, the Austrian petition *Wages instead of pocket money for people with disabilities* refers to people with disabilities as “very special people”.

The effectiveness of the petitions is unclear, as organisers generally did not assess it. Many petitions are part of broader efforts, making it hard to isolate their specific impact. However, some, like the AAH (*Allocation aux Adultes Handicapés/Adult Disability Allowance*) petition, are likely to have contributed to legal or regulatory changes in France.

Area and country-specific results

The analysed petitions cover various topics, primarily related to **support systems** for specific groups, especially people with disabilities. They also address **mistreatment** issues.

In the disability area, all partners analysed at least one petition, totalling eight (Austria, Poland, Romania, Denmark, and two each from France and Portugal). These petitions often reference the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities or Universal Declaration of Human Rights and are typically based on **personal stories and individual needs**. Although the specific demands vary, most focus on **legislative change**, with Austrian and French **highlighting inequalities** between people with and without disability. The French petition on AAH (*Allocation aux Adultes Handicapés/Adult Disability Allowance*) even contributed to a change in the law.

In the **mental health area**, the only cases of petitions for analysis came from Austria, Denmark, and Romania. They focus on improving support systems for individuals facing mental health challenges. These petitions consistently **highlight the rights of people in mental health crises**, particularly in terms of access to appropriate support. The case from Denmark involved analysing citizen testimonies rather than a traditional petition, featuring quotes from individuals and **highlighting shortcomings in Danish social services to inform future policy changes**. In their own words:

These testimonies from people with disabilities and their relatives indicate that Denmark is entering a new dark chapter, where it is about surviving a battle rather than living a life. We hope that this collection of testimonies can contribute to providing future politicians with the necessary insight and willingness to learn from the mistakes of their predecessors.
(<https://enmillionstemmer.dk/index.php/vidnesbyrd/>, accessed 3.05.2024)

In the **youth-at-risk area**, only teams from France and Romania selected petitions. The French petition, an open letter, addresses migrant minors (both unaccompanied and those with families) receiving an OQTF (*Obligation de quitter le territoire français/Order to Leave French Territory*) at age 18. Romania’s petition proposes measures to support institutionalised children and care leavers. Both use **rights-based language with emotional appeal but lack youth voices**, as CSOs initiated them.

In **child protection**, four petitions from Austria, Portugal, Romania, and Poland were analysed. They aim to **improve child protection systems**, with initiators ranging from individuals to CSOs. While all use **a rights-based approach**, **only Romania’s petition includes children’s voices**. The others focus on children’s rights but lack direct input from service users.

The analysed petitions were also examined for elements related to responsiveness. In half of the petitions, no information linked to responsiveness was found, while the others either mentioned it indirectly or noted its absence in social services. In four petitions, responsiveness was associated with (1) individualised solutions providing service users with maximum control over support, (2) listening to individual claims and needs, (3) timely and tailored assistance, which requires expertise and in-depth knowledge, and (4) offering adequate support. For example, the Polish petition on personal assistance for people with disabilities (*Ustawowa asystencja osób z niepełnosprawnościami/The statutory assistance of persons with disabilities*) emphasises enabling individuals to choose their assistance providers, thus granting them maximum control over how support is delivered. It calls for assistance that is responsive to real needs, with an adequate number of hours and a range of services, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Another implicit mention of responsiveness is found in the Austrian petition by an individual advocating for the protection of children and young people from violence in child protection and contact rights proceedings. This petition asserts that children's needs and voices must be considered in decision-making processes.

Social Media Campaigns

Social media campaigns, as a relatively new tool of civic engagement, differ from traditional campaigns in several ways. First, they enable direct interaction with audiences, allowing real-time commenting, sharing, and reacting, which fosters two-way communication and gives users a sense of influence. Audiences can engage by sharing posts, organising actions, creating user-generated content, or crowdfunding activities. Second, social media campaigns reach a broader audience and are more cost-effective, enabling smaller organisations or non-formal civic groups to conduct their activities. Third, they support various content formats: videos, memes, blog posts, infographics, and live streams which can be dynamically tailored to user preferences. Finally, their flexibility allows for rapid creation and publication, enabling immediate responses to current events. Consequently, social media campaigns are increasingly popular as a form of civic action.

In each project country, we identified several social media campaigns that met the following criteria: they occurred between 2019 and 2024 timeframe, addressed one of the RESPONSIVE areas; and took place on one of the following social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter) or LinkedIn. The platforms were chosen based on data from the "Digital 2023: Global Overview Report" (Digital 2023).

Different social media platforms facilitate various types of activity and content. Facebook primarily supports sharing textual and visual content while fostering communities of interest. X (formerly Twitter) emphasises short textual messages and microblogging, whereas Instagram focuses on visual content. LinkedIn caters to professional and business networking. These platforms attract distinct demographics: Instagram is popular among Generation Z (those born between 1999 and 2007), LinkedIn appeals to professionals, X is favoured by users born between 1989-2005, predominantly men, and Facebook remains popular among Baby Boomers (born

between 1946 and 1964) and Generation X, born in 1965–1979 (Przewodnik po social media w Polsce, 2023).

After a brief overview, for deeper analysis, we selected those social media campaigns that allowed us to learn the most (Stake 2005)¹⁷. Altogether **17 social media campaigns were analysed in detail** – three from each country, except for Romania, where two campaigns were analysed. They are listed in Table 5. below:

Table 6. Summary of social media campaigns analysed by country and area.

	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth-at-risk
Austria	<i>#LebenNichtBehindern (Do not 'disable' life)</i> Campaign for collecting signatures for an ongoing petition about the lack of budget for the care of people with disabilities. [12.04.2019-24.05.2019]	<i>#ChangeForTheYouth</i> A user-led movement/campaign emphasising the lack of awareness & resources for the mental health of young people in Austria. [4.03.2023-now]	<i>#KindistKind (A child is a child)</i> Organised by several children's and human rights CSOs. Addresses the unequal treatment of unaccompanied refugee children living in Austria. [25.03.2022-now]	—
Denmark	<i>EnMillionStemmer (OneMillionVoices)</i> A campaign by the people's movement working to secure legal justice/rights for people with disability and mental vulnerability and their relatives in Denmark. [2019-now]		<i>De Anbragtes Villkår (Placed Children Conditions)</i> ¹⁸ A campaign by an organisation of former foster care residents that empowers current & former residents by amplifying their voices in political discussions & practices at foster care institutions, aiming to reduce disparities between those in care and those not. [1987-now]	<i>Liv Over Lov (Life Above Law)</i> An open support group (an unlimited campaign) advocating for citizens' rights by proposing laws that hold public services accountable for harmful practices like forced activation and work placements. [2017-now]

¹⁷ Given the variation in population size across the project countries, the differing timing of petition creation, and the varying levels of public interest in the four areas of Responsive in the project countries, applying representativeness criteria was neither possible nor appropriate.

¹⁸ This campaign overlaps with youth-at-risk area.

	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth-at-risk
France	<i>#PasSiDouceFrance (NotSoSweetFrance)</i> An inter-association initiative highlighting the state's shortcomings in disability rights, including social protection & access to social services. It seeks to raise awareness & advocate for changes. [17.04.-3.05.2023]	<i>Parlons en autrement! (Let's talk about it differently!)</i> An awareness campaign aimed at changing the discourse & vocabulary around mental health, addressing the realities and breaking the implicit taboo surrounding these issues. [Oct 2020]	—	<i>#nAbandonnonsPasNosEnfants (Don'tAbandonOurKids)</i> A campaign launched by the Repairs! association, an organised group of care leavers. It aims to raise awareness & urge the government to increase support for care leavers, easing their transition to independent adulthood. [25.09.-9.10.2023]
Poland	<i>Póki My Żyjemy (As Long As We Are Alive).</i> A public awareness campaign by the Our Advocate Initiative and its fellow community organisations to mark National Carers' Day, which is celebrated on 12.02.2024. [Jan.-Feb. 2024]	<i>#na zdrowie psychiczne. Przekaż 1,5% na pracę Asystentów Zdrowienia (#onmentalhealth. Donate 1.5% to the work of Recovery Assistants).</i> A fundraising & awareness-raising campaign for the eKropka Foundation. This is an NGO acting to prevent the isolation of individuals after a mental health crisis, combat stigmatisation, and break stereotypes associated with mental illnesses. [1st half of 2024]	<i>REAGUJ na przemoc wobec dzieci (React to Child Abuse),</i> organised by Empowering Children Foundation in connection with the World Day for the Prevention of Child Abuse (19 Nov.). [Nov.-Dec. 2023]	—

	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth-at-risk
Portugal	<i>Pirilampo Mágico (Magic Firefly)</i>¹⁹ Promoted by FENACERCI since 1987, an awareness-raising initiative focused on promoting inclusion & advocating for the rights of people with intellectual or multiple disabilities. [since 1987 annually May 9th-June 2nd]	1. <i>A Doença Mental Não é Limite (Mental Illness Is Not a Limit)</i> Launched by The GIRA Organisation, aiming to raise awareness of the importance & value of mental health. [Oct 2021-now] 2. <i>Saúde Mental - Vamos descomplicar? (Mental Health - Let's uncomplicate it?)</i> Campaign by the Self-Representation Groups of carers/users from 12 healthcare establishments run by the Institute of the Hospitaller Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Funded by a pharma company (Roche), aims to foster the participation of citizens & patients in health decision-making processes. [2020]	—	—
Romania	<i>Pledoarie pentru demnitate. Oprește abuzurile din centrele pentru persoane cu dizabilități mentale! (Plea for dignity. Stop abuse in centres for people with mental disabilities!)</i> <i>Concentration camps – near you – „Lagărele de lângă tine”</i> a campaign aimed at raising awareness of social services, legislation, and the rights of people with disabilities (incl. mental disabilities, featuring actions such as theatre plays, interviews, and social media posts. [no timeframe identified]	—	—	<i>De la abandon la succes (From abandonment to success)</i> ”Campaign dedicated to all those who, although they were tested by life since they were children because they grew up in residential centres or under the care of foster families” [19.05.2023-? not stated]

¹⁹ This campaign overlaps with the mental health area.

Each campaign (text, graphics, and videos) was analysed using the same framework. We also gathered contextual information, including the start date, the platform used, and metrics like followers and likes. Special attention was given to the campaigns' aims and issues. This methodological approach allows the study to address the research questions and enhance understanding of the role of technology in citizen-led actions and their broader societal impact.

Overall picture

Similar to the petitions, categorising some campaigns into a single area proved challenging. However, considering the predominant group they address, we found that one-third focus on disability, another third on mental health, and three campaigns each target youth-at-risk and child protection (Table 5). While we aimed for maximum diversity across the RESPONSIVE areas, campaigns in disability and mental health were the easiest to find, with social media campaigns analysed in nearly every country except Romania. This may reflect strong advocacy movements that enhance visibility and action, which is lacking in the other two areas. The petitions' analysis in task 3.4 supports this, as more petitions related to the disability area were analysed than those in the youth-at-risk and child protection areas combined (see Table 5).

Regarding **the aims** of social media campaigns, many had multiple objectives. Nearly two-thirds **focus on raising awareness** (n=11), while the second most common aim was **advocacy for specific issues**, such as **access to rights or legislative changes** (5). Three campaigns **promote specific solutions**, and two **focused on fundraising**. The remaining aims included **collecting signatures** and **promoting empowerment**.

Most of the analysed social media campaigns were **initiated by CSOs** (n=13), often comprising parents and friends of individuals with disabilities or mental health issues. Four campaigns were initiated by **individuals, including parents of children with disabilities and service users**.

In contrast to the petitions, the campaigns were **primarily directed at the general public**. This applies to all the campaigns analysed. The majority also **sought to put pressure on politicians and decision-makers** in this way. The large volume of reactions and comments serves as evidence of widespread concern, which can compel policymakers to take the issue seriously. The social media campaigns analysed addressed a wide range of topics (see Table 6), primarily focusing on **the lack of adequate support for people facing vulnerability** across all RESPONSIVE areas.

In mental health, a common theme was the prevention of stigma and discrimination against individuals with lived experience of mental health crises, indicating that this is a significant issue in all project countries.

In the disability area, two campaigns (*#NotSoSweetFrance* and *#AsLongAsWeAreAlive* in Poland) highlight **the challenges faced by families and caregivers of individuals with disabilities**, emphasising the need for state intervention and support.

In the child protection area, two campaigns addressed **domestic violence against children** (*React to Child Abuse* in Poland and *#KindistKind* in Austria). The French (*#nAbandonnonsPasNosEnfants*) and Austrian (*#KindistKind*) campaigns deal with

unaccompanied children seeking asylum. The **situation of children and young people in foster care, as well as care leavers**, is the primary focus of all campaigns in the youth-at-risk area and partly in the child protection area.

Table 7. Issues raised in the social media campaigns by country and area.

Country/ Area	Mental health	Disabilities	Child protection	Youth at risk
Austria	Insufficient funding for support	Insufficient funding for support; discrimination	Domestic violence towards children	—
Denmark	Regional disparities in public support & social services and related inequalities	—	Less chance of a good life for children in foster care/residential institutions	Misuse of the legislation by the system to save money
France	Stigmatisation, discrimination & epistemic injustice experienced by people with mental health conditions	Insufficient social support, the standard of living of people with disabilities; accessibility of public services, transport & health services; access to education; protection of families & carers	—	Lack of systematic support for care leavers, geographical disparities, difficulties in accessing support after age 18, their overrepresentation among the homeless population
Poland	Common concerns for individuals in mental health crisis (e.g. stigma), insufficient resources for recovery assistants, and a lack of knowledge about recovery assistance	Situation of caregivers for individuals with disabilities, incl. their rights & human needs: the right to live without fear of the future, to receive support, to feel safe, to have personal time	Lack of adequate reactions to the situations of child abuse in everyday life	—
Portugal	Stigmatisation; participation in health decision-making processes	Inclusion and rights of people with intellectual disabilities or multi-disabilities	—	—
Romania	Necessary legislation to monitor respect for the rights of persons with mental disabilities	—	—	Children & young people raised in foster care

Nearly all campaigns framed their messages around **democracy and rights**. For example, the Austrian *#AChildIsAChild* campaign uses rights-based language to advocate for the inclusion of unaccompanied refugee children in national child protection services, emphasising the responsibility of social service and civil society to uphold basic human rights for all children. Some campaigns also incorporate themes of **innovation** (e.g. two Danish campaigns) and **efficacy** (e.g. *#ChangeForTheYouth* in Austria, *Let's talk about it differently!* in France). The latter focuses on **enhancing democracy and rights by addressing epistemic injustice, stereotypes, and**

discrimination. It links stigmatisation to a denial of citizenship, arguing that such stigmas deter individuals with mental health issues from seeking help, thus prolonging their suffering. The campaign emphasises that silencing these voices violates their rights and subtly introduces **themes of efficacy** by stating that stigma slows down seeking help, thus hindering recovery.

Many of the analysed campaigns utilised individualised life stories to enhance credibility and emotional impact. For instance, the Austrian *#TheChangeForTheYouth* campaign highlights personal stories from young people facing mental health challenges, using these accounts as powerful **advocacy tools grounded in lived experiences**. Those campaigns **centred on lived experiences** of, for example, family members and caregivers of people with disabilities, recovery assistants or young people leaving foster care. For example, the French campaign focusing on care leavers (*#Don'tAbandonOurKids*) was framed around the themes of rights denial and governmental betrayal. It **employs emotionally charged language**, repeatedly using terms like “abandon” to provoke feelings of outrage and sympathy. This emotional appeal was highlighted through visuals of youth, emphasising the government’s moral obligation to provide support. A poignant quote from one of the campaign posters encapsulates this sentiment: “When I was a foster child, the state invested in my future but then abandoned me”²⁰. The campaign describes the situation as both “humanely unacceptable” and “economically illogical,” reinforcing its urgent call for change.

This emotional strategy can lead to **the objectification of the individuals involved** by portraying people who use social services as passive recipients rather than contributors or partners. The Polish *#AsLongAsWeAreAlive* campaign uses rights-based language to address systemic gaps, portraying caregivers as deserving of compassion. It emphasises their struggles with loneliness and sacrifices, evoking the audience’s empathy. By focusing on caregivers’ challenges while not mentioning their joyful moments, it primarily appeals to emotions and creates an image of caregivers as objects of compassion and pity. Similarly, the Austrian *#DoNot'Disable'Life* campaign emphasises Vienna’s reputation for the highest quality of life, asserting that this standard should also apply to people with disabilities. While it features short films presenting the perspectives of individuals with disabilities, the inclusion of non-disabled assistants may overshadow their voices.

Overall, the campaigns utilise rights-based language and emotional appeals to reshape perceptions and drive systemic change. In doing this, they often incorporate **voices from diverse stakeholders**, including NGO leaders, professionals, family members, or service users themselves. Hardly ever are there voices of politicians or other decision-makers. However, **more often than not, all the voices included in the campaigns speak on behalf of people who use social services**. Only about one-third of the analysed campaigns prioritise the perspectives of individuals from people facing vulnerability, such as young people with mental health challenges and people with disabilities (respectively *#ChangeForTheYouth* and *#DoNot'Disable'Life* in Austria); youth leaving foster care (*#Don'tAbandonOurKids* in France); mental health service users (*Mental Illness Is Not a Limit* and *Mental Health – Let's uncomplicate it?* in Portugal),

²⁰ <https://accompagnement-jeunesmajeurs.org/kit-de-communication/> (accessed 10.09.2024).

children and young people (*Mental Illness Is Not a Limit*, Portugal); and recovery assistants, i.e. people with experience of mental crisis supporting others (*##onmentalhealth. Donate 1.5% to the work of Recovery Assistants*, Poland). The **voices and perspectives of children affected by violence were the least represented in the analysed campaigns.**

Most campaigns were **visually appealing** and utilised **various media formats**, such as films, photographs, and text, tailored to each social media platform. Some campaigns **provide the audience with additional materials, information, or tools**. Notable examples include the Polish campaign *REACT to Child Abuse* and the Danish *Placed Children Conditions*. The former, aiming at enhancing public awareness and readiness to respond to suspected child violence, provides extensive information on recognising signs of abuse and response methods, along with resources like necessary documents and letter templates. An e-learning course on how to react is available on the campaign website as well. Similarly, the latter provides tailored recommendations and guidance for citizens on seeking assistance, including a comprehensive guideline for parents of children in foster care or residential institutions that outlines legal rights and available support.

We **know little about the effectiveness** of the analysed campaigns, as they were often part of broader citizens actions, making it challenging to identify specific elements that produce effects. Most campaigns targeted a wide audience, aiming to raise awareness or sensitise the public to issues faced by specific groups.

In the analysed social media campaigns, elements related to responsiveness were examined. Half of the campaigns did not mention the responsiveness of social services, while the others either mentioned it indirectly (n=5) or directly as listening to people's voices and adapting services to their needs (n=4). For instance, the Polish campaign *REACT to Child Abuse* references responsiveness indirectly, in the discussion and comments about unresponsive social welfare institutions. Similarly, the French campaign *#NotSoSweetFrance* implicitly highlights the lack of responsiveness of the French state towards the demands of associated organisations and the Council of Europe's condemnation:

Our associations have been denouncing this incessantly for decades. Today the Council of Europe confirms it. The French state is failing to meet its obligations towards its disabled citizens and their families (<https://www.unapei.org/article/pas-si-douce-france/>).

An interview with a campaign leader confirmed this initial impression. After the government failed to respond to the Council of Europe's condemnation, a social media campaign was launched to raise awareness about this condemnation and gaps in French disability policy, and to pressure decision-makers to address these shortcomings.

An example of a direct reference to the responsiveness of social services (but without mentioning the term) was the Danish campaign by *Placed Children Conditions*. The campaign emphasises that children in foster care or residential institutions deserve adequate, fair and sufficient support from public services to lead fulfilling lives. The system is responsible for ensuring their well-being.

The research indicates that citizens connected to social services increasingly conduct their campaign activities online, leveraging the advantages of technology and employing various

strategies to address pressing social issues. While this digital engagement can potentially create a platform for marginalised individuals to voice their concerns, responsiveness was not a predominant feature in the actions analysed. Most campaigns did not explicitly address responsiveness, with only a few referencing it indirectly. The predominant voices in these campaigns are primarily organisational representatives rather than direct voices from groups in vulnerable situations. Advocacy is largely conducted by individuals or organisations speaking on their behalf. Even in campaigns aimed at supporting groups in vulnerable situations, their voices are rarely listened to.

3.2.3 Technology in the name of the social cause

Given the previous section, it is clear that technology is important in citizen-led actions, particularly petitions and social media campaigns, as it enables the spread of ideas, feedback collection, and signatures gathering. The role of technology varies based on factors like the action's phases, aims, target groups, and citizens' skills or experience. For example, technology helps inform citizens, politicians, social workers, and other stakeholders about organisations and leaders and their work. As one interviewee recalls about the use of social media for one petition:

Likewise, circulating the petition link was disarmingly easy. As with the Arab Spring, as with all these movements. It's true that these technologies really serve to accelerate and facilitate the movement. It's obvious. (P1_D/MH_France)

By analysing interviews with leaders and participants of citizen-led actions, as well as specific actions like petitions and social media campaigns, we identified the benefits and drawbacks of using technology, primarily new media, in these actions.

We have identified the following **advantages** associated with this:

1. **Increased reach:** technology helps to connect with a broader audience across geographical, social, and language barriers, and engage diverse individuals around shared causes and interests while facilitating the rapid circulation of ideas. One Danish interviewee puts it this way:

It's Twitter that started it all. And honestly, I wasn't supposed to be on Twitter at all but then someone thought it would be good for me to be on there [...] And it just started small. Then I discovered that people liked what I wrote and were interested in it. Suddenly, it became more of a goal for me that as many as possible should be informed about how badly things can go in cases with job centres. (P19_YR_Denmark)

In addition, in some cases, it serves as a promotional tool for some artists' artwork:

We also use (technology) to promote products, because a lot of our cultural products are on YouTube for example. We have many recorded plays that are there, we have movies from various workshops, and we have educational materials in Romanian sign language. (L8_CP_Romania)

2. **Real-time communication:** Social media enables rapid information dissemination, allowing leaders to quickly respond to current events and shifts in public sentiment. It also facilitates internal and external communication through platforms like Messenger, Facebook, WhatsApp, and online meetings via Zoom or Google Meet. This is especially vital for groups

in vulnerable situations, including young people and individuals with mobility disabilities. For instance, a leader working with youth describes the functionality of their Messenger groups. She says:

We've been thinking about it, we have an anti-abuse policy and we talked a lot about this kind of contact, for example, on Messenger, which is not encrypted very well. So, we don't go into such deep topics there in that way. But we have Messenger groups, where we remind each other what time the meeting is, and that makes it much easier for us to communicate. And also young people write to us individually, to the coaches, on Messenger. And then, when we see that it's a more serious matter, we propose a meeting and a conversation [...] Even myself, in that kind of contact with young people, I usually use Messenger. Sometimes I try to call and I find that it's more difficult to get in touch. They don't reply to text messages either, not always. It's more effective through Messenger. (L1_YR_Poland)

3. **Accessibility:** this is related to the previous point. Technology enhances accessibility to information and ideas for individuals with disabilities and those in remote areas, enabling broader audience engagement with relevant issues.

[...] At the time of Covid, the band [a group of musicians with autism] gave an online concert promoted by a multinational. And then yes, digital media allowed us to reach people across the country [...] [Researcher – But is there publicity on social media?] Oh yes, that's right. Publicity on social media and even the production of videos to present the band, the impact of the band [...] we publicise the band's concerts, we always send links to these videos making this reference, either to the process of creating the project, from the band's naming, to the documentary trailer, so we have everything in digital form so that it is accessible to those who want to know us. (P1_D_Portugal)

4. **Enhanced engagement and easier mobilisation:** one example of such usage of social media is an initiative born online, as a Facebook group, created in response to the suffering and subsequent death of a boy battered by his stepfather. It was founded by one person moved by the suffering of the boy. Later its founder came into contact with other similar FB groups and so a 20,000-strong social movement acting towards the changes in the law was born.

With Facebook, I was always reluctant. I didn't like the tool, I didn't like social media, whereas somewhere along the line I concluded that you just have to shout and let the world know that something like this has happened. And I decided that I was starting a Facebook group. [...] In the beginning, it was important to me that this group was popularised in some way. The message that such a group exists, and it brings together people who are not indifferent to Kamilek's fate and his misfortune. And I also used various publications on Facebook and elsewhere, where you could post comments. And I put information in these comments that there is such a group, that it gathers people who are not indifferent to Kamilek's fate and suffering, and that I cordially invite them to join. (L2_CP_Poland)

In Austria, one social media campaign utilised target group analysis to achieve its objectives. Messages were customised for particular platforms and content, ensuring they resonated with specific groups whose values aligned with the campaign's subject. This approach involved using sociological marketing strategies, such as milieu analysis, to determine which social media channels could effectively engage specific groups with tailored messages.

5. **Community building:** social media and online platforms foster a sense of community, uniting individuals around common causes.

We still have a blog, a podcast, and informative content on social media; there is this online connection, bearing in mind that we promoted the map online, but here it is basically for any age group and the therapists are also from all age groups. There is a support group on a Discord server where there are, I think, about 1500 people and there is a free discussion about different disorders, occasionally we also have psychologists invited on the server who have discussions and there are social evenings. (L4_MH_Romania)

6. **Online activities and resources** (e.g. webinars, workshops, e-learning): the COVID-19 pandemic forced some CSOs to shift their activities online, for instance, in 2020, the Yellow Ribbon March in Poland was held on social media under the hashtag #poGodność (#forDignity). Since then, leaders have increasingly utilised new technologies, implementing online workshops, webinars, and YouTube discussions. Another Polish campaign, *REACT to Child Abuse*, offers an online course on responding to suspected child violence.
7. **Tools for fundraising or collecting signatures of support for petitions:** a French petition to keep €1 meals for all students exemplifies this, gathering over 15,000 signatures in just two weeks—an achievement made possible by social media and digital platforms, especially given the campaign leaders' limited resources. Thus, technology was crucial in accelerating and amplifying their efforts.
8. **Cost efficiency:** as the previous point illustrates, digital tools often require fewer resources compared to traditional methods, making it more feasible for grassroots organisations to mobilise efforts.
9. **Pressure on politicians through numbers** (of likes, shares, tweets): the Austrian campaign mentioned above used not only target group analysis but also an email-to-target tool for an ongoing petition. Every person who signed the petition creates an automatic email to nine Federal Ministries of Social Affairs requesting an improvement of care conditions for young refugees. More than 60,000 such emails have been sent until now and have created the following reaction:

We were able to realise very quickly during the discussions, or rather my colleagues who conducted them, that this has definitely not left them unaffected. Because, of course, they also represent this part of the population. (P25_CP/YR_Austria)

In Poland, one participant active in the child protection sector puts it directly:

In terms of this role of the Internet, well, for me, it's okay that politicians see the pressure there, in these numbers, I don't know, Twitter, whatever, shares, but it also reaches them, about the meanings (P1_CH_Poland).

10. **Facilitated management of the action:** through enhanced communication, cost reduction and easier coordination.

However, there are also some important **disadvantages or drawbacks** of using technology in citizen-led actions that interviewees indicate. They are as follows:

1. **Digital divide:** not all citizens have equal access to technology or the internet. This can limit participation for those without access to devices, reliable internet, or necessary skills, excluding marginalised groups such as the elderly, low-income individuals, and those in rural

areas. For instance, a Polish organisation active in the field of post-penitentiary assistance cannot make more extensive use of new technologies because its beneficiaries do not have access to or the skills needed to use them:

Facebook and the website have to be simple enough so that our gentlemen or ladies who are coming out of prison can operate it from any phone and they can get on with it. So I also don't go into some innovative things, because with this social group, it absolutely won't work out and it's pointless spending money (L1_D_Poland).

The Austrian leaders of the People First group for persons with learning disabilities also emphasise the downside of the internet as an information technology for activism in terms of accessibility:

And we also do a lot via post, because many people don't have the internet – people with learning difficulties have little internet. And we also sometimes offer a mini-course where they can come to us and we bring Word or Excel – Excel less so, but you can also surf the internet with us. We also support them with that. (P23_D_Austria)

However, another one of the leaders from the People First movement talks about changes in this area:

You can already feel that people with learning difficulties are increasingly using their smartphones to network. Or maybe that wasn't even an issue ten years ago. (P24_D_Austria)

2. **Overload:** some interviewees note that social media activity is time-consuming and requires a certain level of knowledge and engagement. They mention constant pressure to be present, post and interact with users. One leader says:

It's a lot of work, and it's terribly burdensome, today it's already noon, and I haven't posted any stories yet and that's not good, because it has to happen. (L4_YR_Poland).

In addition, the audience is also exposed to information overload, which can result in decreasing engagement and interest.

3. **Online hate/harassment:** some research participants note that hate is closely linked to the presence of individuals/CSOs in social media. They can be targets of online harassment or trolling. One person describes how she experienced hate on Twitter:

Yes, I encountered something like that in various groups on social media or Twitter. I am attacked for seeing potential in people who do not have it. (...) I mean, I understand these people, because these are usually people who write, these are people who have simply been left alone for years with the topic of supporting such a person, who has given up everything in life because of this situation and who were not supported by any services in their community, in small villages, or anywhere, it does not matter (P2_D_Poland).

Similar voice comes from Austria:

And I have to be honest, I haven't even tried it now because I'm saving myself the frustration and effort. So it doesn't work like that. I don't want it on social media because it just sparks horribly polarising and sometimes very below-the-belt discussions that I'm even less keen on. (P11_CP/YR_Austria)

4. **Privacy and security concerns:** citizen-led actions often require collecting personal data (e.g. in online petitions). This raises privacy and security concerns. There is also the risk of exposure of leaders' or service users' private information. Some leaders mention that they

had to learn how to protect the data of their clients or people who communicate with them through social media (e.g. via Messenger).

I've finally taken this as an opportunity to make a few adjustments to my internet presence – my social media presence, in other words – or simply to see who actually sees my profile and the like, and I've restricted all that. Something I've always felt was important, but was always too lazy to do, I did before I linked it because I thought to myself – that's too much, it's such an irritating topic that it doesn't keep everyone friendly and I didn't want to have too many private things linked. (P26_CP_Austria)

5. **Epistemic bubbles, echo chambers and risk of stronger polarisation:** In addition to enhancing communication, social media fosters the formation of “epistemic bubbles” and “echo chambers”²¹. These structures, shaped by algorithms, expose users only to content aligning with their beliefs, limiting engagement with opposing views. Both reinforce existing views, reducing exposure to diverse perspectives and potentially increasing polarisation, weakening democratic dialogue. This concern is echoed by Austrian respondents in child protection area, who avoid social media to prevent polarised debates and privacy violations.
6. **Shallow engagement – “slacktivism”:** lastly, interviewees question whether online engagement constitutes genuine civic participation, with some expressing doubts that online activity alone suffices for this classification. For instance, a person engaged in Kamilek’s case in Poland says:

Something like that, so here unfortunately I have the impression that it simply puts us, the Internet knows that such, oh we have such convenience, oh I did something, right? I signed a petition, I have a comfortable one here, from the comfort of my couch and I'm generally great, right? And I work for the good of children, and here something else would be useful, right? And the Internet does not bring that. So it does not translate, in my opinion... It translates into pressure, of course, and as a tool, but it does not translate into commitment (P1_CP_Poland).

This reflects scholarly criticism of online activism, termed “slacktivism” or “clicktivism,” as low-risk and superficial, often replacing more meaningful offline actions like protests or strikes. This shift may undermine the effectiveness and long-term impact of activism (see “the slacktivist hypothesis,” Howard et al. 2017). Some authors argue that moving activism from physical spaces to virtual platforms may dilute the impact of radical actions, creating conditions more suited for community-building and education than for contentious actions like strikes or protests (Sorce & Dumitrica 2023).

3.2.4 Technology use in analysed areas – specificities

The research reveals **no significant differences in new technology use across RESPONSIVE areas**, except that internet messaging platforms are notably more popular among young people and individuals with disabilities than other groups. In the youth-at-risk area, the use of new technologies for user engagement is evident, as social media and messaging platforms are integral to young people’s daily lives.

²¹ Nguyen (2020) differentiates them: “In epistemic bubbles, other voices are not heard; in echo chambers, other voices are actively undermined.”

[They play] A very big role. When it comes to contact with young people, between group meetings, reminding them of deadlines or generally getting in touch with them about various issues, instant messaging is simply the easiest solution. (L1_YR_Poland)

Youth are particularly inclined to use digital and social media platforms for participation processes, hence **technology plays a fundamental role in activism for children and youth rights**. As one Portuguese leader interviewee emphasised, the mobilisation of influencers and their social media followers gives visibility and strength to campaigns that would not be possible otherwise.

For **at-risk youth**, social media offers a more accessible means of seeking help. It enables anonymous communication, reducing stigma, fear, and shame while providing immediate access and minimising barriers to support. For individuals with mobility impairments, online communication is notably more convenient and accessible. One interviewee describes using WhatsApp to coordinate within an CSO while working on projects:

These are usually some WhatsApp groups. There are many people with very significant disabilities, who do not move anything, with muscle atrophy, and who are not able to meet or go somewhere. And we mainly rely on these messengers. We simply throw a topic there, give some time to think it over and those who can simply show their position. And then we come, come, come, until we make it common. (P2_D_Poland)

3.2.5 Technology as a new environment for citizen-led actions (summary and conclusions)

New media have transformed relationships between citizens, and between citizens and social services, by making communication more indirect, faster and far-reaching. Citizens increasingly use social media to mobilise around key issues (e.g. Facebook groups described above), forming virtual communities united by a common cause. These communities, because of their size, can exert significant pressure on social service decision-makers. Social media also facilitate direct communication between service users and providers (e.g. via Messenger) and among active citizens (e.g. by sharing information about specific issues).

Furthermore, the Internet serves as a tool for raising awareness, shifting attitudes, and providing education for the general public. Social media platforms and online learning resources are instrumental in fostering these changes in public knowledge and perceptions.

Technology plays a crucial role in rapidly amplifying and spreading support on a mass scale. Most interviewees highlight the significant role of media and digital networks in their civic interventions, with younger citizens more likely to engage consistently through these channels. Some emphasise the need for a more professional approach to enhance the effectiveness of their actions, noting that the appropriate use of technology and social media is crucial for success. Key forms of civic participation, such as filing complaints and submitting petitions, have become digitalised, suggesting continued growth in their usage.

For more direct actions, such as protests, mobilisations, or strikes, technology remains vital, particularly social media, which is used to communicate, provide updates, and coordinate

activities. Many interviewees indicate that their actions would not have been possible without digital tools.

Technology plays a more supplementary role in other types of actions, particularly research and advocacy campaigns. While it facilitates communication and dissemination, these actions often prioritise face-to-face interactions and focused advocacy efforts, such as private meetings with decision-makers, rather than broad, large-scale awareness campaigns.

Additionally, some informants argue that the Internet may “kill the civic spirit,” as many individuals support initiatives online—signing petitions, donating, and sharing information—without participating in in-person events like protests or marches. This observation raises a critical question: Is online participation a new form of civic engagement, or is it contributing to a decline in traditional civic participation? Answering this question is vital for shaping the innovations being developed in WP5.

3.3 Artists' experiences: call for public attention

Introduction

The role of art in social change can hardly be instrumentalised but we cannot deny art its value in changing societies. The strength of art lies in its impact on emotions and its appeal to the imagination. Art attracts attention and works on the sense of amazement, usually using metaphors. We noticed that sometimes artists who focus at social change through art can be called or consider themselves as activists. The artists' actions aim at being democratic, eliminating inequalities for the time being of the artistic experience and often act as an immediate commentary on social events (Glăveanu 2017; Campana 2011). In the RESPONSIVE project we see value in researching artistic processes and productions as a source of inspiration in using different means to introduce social change towards greater responsiveness.

During 33 interviews with artists, they had difficulty making a clear distinction between being artists and activists. In the division of the areas presented in the art we collected 7 interviews for disability, 7 for mental health, 3 for child protection and 6 for youth at risk. Moreover 10 artists identified themselves or by researchers were identified as creating within cross-areas. In each country we conducted 5 to 6 interviews.

The interviews with artists focused on three main pillars: 1) art as a tool for public engagement and social change, 2) artists as engaged citizens, and 3) the artistic language used to communicate citizens' needs.

We explored the role of art in driving social change in the context of social services responsiveness, including how it engages decision-makers, as well as what themes these artists address in their work and their motivations for advocating for change through art. It was also crucial to capture the unique form of communication that socially engaged artists bring to the realm of civic responsiveness. Interviews conducted by research teams in six partner countries covered all four areas (disability, mental health, child protection, youth at risk). In Austria, France, and Romania, the artistic production of some artists was identified as general/across-area. In Denmark, all areas were represented except for the child protection area. In Poland and Portugal informants had experience of art production that could be identified as cross-area as well as area-specific in all areas (see Table 2a in Annex 1). It results in a situation where we identified less area-specific findings, since 10 out of 33 interviewees were primarily acknowledged by research teams as cross area artists. Later on during the interviews more than a half of the artists were not recognising their work as bound to one specific area, which is an interesting finding and has consequences in less data on area-specific findings.

The informants represented a wide range of artistic fields, including theatre producers and actors, film directors, podcast creators, dance groups, writers, stand-up comedians, musicians, visual artists (working with installations, exhibitions, videos, paintings, design, and street art murals), performers, photographers, and animated film creators (see Table 2a. in Annex 1). This diverse group, with its variety of talents, perspectives, and artistic experiences, provided valuable insights into how different forms of art and expression carry distinct potentials for

communication, dialogue, public engagement, and the ability to reach, inform, provoke, or deeply impact various audiences.

Although primarily identifying as artists (with a focus on performance and aesthetics), some informants also view themselves as **leaders**. They feel both capable and responsible for using their art **to support groups in vulnerable situations** by amplifying their voice and recognition to those who have limited or no opportunities to fully express themselves. Hence, creating the new platforms of responsiveness that could influence social services and decision-makers.

3.3.1 Themes artists address in relation to social service and responsiveness fields

The **themes and subjects considered in artistic creation vary**, based on the specific sector and the personal experiences of the artists. Most interviewees note a continuity in the social themes and issues they addressed in their work, despite changing forms of artistic expression. It is worth noting activist actions are often not the only creative activity of the artists as they also create works of art loosely or not related with social issues.

Aforementioned variety of art forms gave us the possibility to observe a multitude of approaches and ways of introducing social change through art. Below, we mention only a few to portray diversity of analysed examples. The selection was made from those artworks whose authors agreed to publication.

"*Jugendwelten*" is an Austrian podcast (available on streaming platforms) for and from young people, coordinated by a street work service. Participants and professional leaders report that the podcast positively affected community building and individual empowerment and what started as a professional-led service became citizens-led initiative.

In Portugal, the cinematic Mental Festival was created in 2017, with the primary objective to speak clearly about mental health. It is an event with the main objective of giving visibility to mental health, offering a varied program, from cinema to the arts, including debates and featuring several experts from different areas.

In Poland, accompanying the Congress for Mental Health, the youth theatre created and performed the play "*Dzieci i ryby głosu nie mają*" (Children and fish have no voice). Play aimed to present experiences of young people, presently struggling with their mental health and in doing so give representation to young voices so often unheard in everyday life.

In Romania, the MONOCHROME project was realised. People with Down syndrome designed and created their own clothes, styling them with their own paintings and collaborating in rendition of their vision with other young artists.

We identified key universal themes of social engagement mentioned by artists and integrated in the table below:

Table 8. Key themes identified in artistic actions by country.

Field/ Country		Austria	Denmark	France	Poland	Portugal	Romania
Law							
	Compliance with established laws of social inclusion			X			X
	Social policy law (co)creation through art	X					
Management							
	Simplifying bureaucratic procedures for accessing social services and artistic activities for groups in vulnerable situations	X					X
	Pointing at voluntary organisations (also CSOs) in the area of advocacy and social services for becoming too professional and too focused on the collaboration with authorities to be critical & activistic		X				
Culture							
	Accessibility of cultural experiences for all kinds of audience	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Lack of accessibility in art institutions for both artists and audiences with any type of special needs.	X			X		
Voice and empowerment of the groups in vulnerable situations							
	Raising awareness of general public and stakeholders about specific conditions of groups and individuals in vulnerable positions	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Building historical awareness of social issues		X		X		X
	Empowering equality and self-determination for people with disabilities	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Pointing at the disempowering effects of overly protective practices by professionals in social services			X	X	X	

3.3.2 Taking up the vulnerability topics and communicating them through art

General themes mentioned above and examples of art productions presented by interviewed artists were in close connection with the work of social services even if only by shared interest in citizens' situations of vulnerability.

Susceptibility to social issues was connected by interviewed artists mostly with „**sensitivity**“. According to interviewed artists, sensitivity is a professional ability that they train to develop in their artistic work as well as it could be a personal trait that originally led them to become artists. **Being sensitive** serves as both the **motivation and the justification for their engagement** in presenting citizens' problems. They see art as a tool to foster a more sensitive, aware, and conscious society, which recognizes inequalities, injustice, and human rights violations however small the change would be. Artists *modus operandi* could be defined as “not to be indifferent” in which they are close to the ideas of social services' professionals.

The motivations of artists to address social issues through their art comes (without any country exception) from artists' contact with the unjust world, whether it would be on **personal, social, professional or political level**. On the personal level, lived experience plays a significant role: in some cases, it is the vulnerability of the artists themselves or their close ones (family members, friends). These personal, social, professional as well as political **experiences** shape also involvement in groups, artistic spaces, organisations, or communities artists engage into. In some cases, the motivations are linked to a broader social and political response to **discussed issues or hidden problems** that artists want to bring as important **reasons to react to**.

They could be very personal and attached to artists problems, like informants from Austria and Denmark stated:

Talking about the subject of the art: "Well, it's relatively easy to say – I am the subject [...] my illness. How people react to my body, to my person. (P10_D_Austria)

I am primarily a poet and disability activist, which is a word I have started to say, which really just means that I know something about the disability field and speak about it publicly. (A5_D_Denmark)

They may be considered as artists fighting for human rights, protesting on behalf of people in difficult situations. Artists present these issues as their personal obligation to convey them in artistic form, as highlighted by French and Romanian artists:

I combine photography with the ability to write. I mainly address the protection of human rights, whatever the situation. I have intervened, over the years, in issues concerning vulnerable groups. (A6_MH_Romania)

The motivation to take up the topic may also stem from the artist's emotional stirring having a **need to express themselves** externally in an artistic way and not always because they are particularly sympathetic to sensitive groups. This is well illustrated by the example of an interviewed artist from Poland.

I only write most often about things that stir something emotionally in me and at the same time I am able to write about it in a way that would be... artistically interesting for me. (A4_YP_Poland)

Artists emphasise that their primary identity is that of an artist, but they also carry a cause or issue they feel obliged to "fight" for, even if not all of them define themselves as leaders. They often stress that their goal is not to accuse individuals, but to **bring attention to various injustices and sources of suffering** (e.g. social and professional exclusion of groups in vulnerable situations).

The interviewed artists are driven by a desire **to create meaningful and accessible** works of art. Although the theme of impossibility of art that is accessible to all appears in few interviews (France, Romania). Their motivations can be categorised as a deep desire to foster empathy, highlight overlooked issues, enhance accessibility, and combat discrimination. For artists with lived experiences of vulnerability, artistic expression is a way to process their own experiences—not as therapy, but as an inner, spontaneous need for self-discovery and personal authenticity, or a search for inner truth and empowerment.

Another motivation and role of art, as highlighted by the artists, is to **inform** the general public **about social issues**, particularly those that do not receive strong media representation and to raise awareness among the audience, the artistic community (e.g., production teams), and other stakeholders directly or indirectly affected by the work. In some cases, especially when the artist has personal experience with vulnerability, it also involves pointing out the shortcomings of existing social-support systems.

As responsiveness of social services revolves around listening to the citizens, artists with their engaged productions probe the readiness of social support systems to change when hearing civic (artistic) calls for that change.

3.3.3 Expressing feelings as important aspect in communicating social issues through art

The interviewed artists' interest in social issues extends beyond their decision to address these issues through art. Nevertheless, we explore those instances when they choose art as a **medium to express their thoughts, feelings, and the need** for change in the society. In interviews, the artists emphasised the need to speak out on a particular issue, which is well illustrated by the statements from Poland and Denmark:

Art is there to be used. In all possible ways. It can be political too. It is always political. You always take a stand in some way. (A4_YR_Denmark)

[...] in fact, the function and role of art is also to draw attention to what surrounds us, to what challenges, in my case primarily social ones, surround us. (A5_CP_Poland)

According to interviewees, artists with an established status and audience can use their art to critically highlight the shortcomings of various systems. They leverage their platforms to amplify the voices of groups in vulnerable situations usually by interweaving their stories in art production and making space for artistic expression of the vulnerable. Using their position (visibility) in the art world, often established before taking up the social issues as an art theme, to bring in the "hidden truth". Rather than acting as spokespersons, they see themselves as **facilitators and mediators**, bridging the gap between those who are unheard and the public. The following statement from Romania illustrates this observation.

I am a poor photographer, a nobody, but there are people on this planet who are considered artists who have an extraordinary audience and who could, through the messages they would transmit, extraordinarily influence certain aspects of various problems that people, no matter what corner of the planet they are in, are facing. (A4_YR_Romania)

Due to the long history of artistic provocation as a well-established tool, artists recognize their “right” and ability to **provoke, speak loudly, stir emotions, and use humour to unsettle** audiences accustomed to conventional reactions to serious, sensitive issues, while challenging taboos. Some interviewees refer to these provocative practices as “disruptive methodologies” and present them as a way to bring greater visibility to complex social issues. Artists from Denmark and Romania speak about that directly:

In addition to being highly entertaining, [it must] also challenge people’s view of normality and shake people’s prejudices [...] After all, we are also trying to give someone a voice. (A3_MH_Denmark)

We know that our methodologies are very disruptive and create tensions. [...]. [Artistic] production is always delicate, it is made up of conflicts, confrontations, tensions, it is never a bed of roses, our work causes this, in fact [...]. I think that the responsibility that we have in the social sector reverberates in the same way, perhaps in a more intense way, because our responsibility is perhaps even greater, because we lift many flaps, we bring to the surface many situations, many questions. (A4_YR_Portugal)

Artists find that using the tools available in art—such as metaphor, imagery, and alternative forms of communication—effectively **facilitates and mediates dialogue** between stakeholders such as groups in vulnerable situations, decision-makers and social workers. In the opinion of the interviewed artists, art has the power to encourage audiences **to view the world from different perspectives** and to shift their understanding of societal issues. They see their work as a **medium for challenging the status quo**, provoking audiences to take a stand, and questioning existing narratives and practices.

Artistic actions may work well in **community building** for building networks and relationships, as artist from Austria pointed out:

Importantly, art, sport and culture projects in social services would be great ways to create friendships and communities as a safety net for vulnerable groups. (A4_YR_Austria)

Inscribed in art itself, emotions are the powerful creative force, not only of the art work but also of the community around it. Artistic actions of our interviewees show how emotions work towards building a more sensitive society.

3.3.4 Cooperation, representation or individual expression concerns

The collaboration of artists with other stakeholders generally occurs on two levels: with the groups in vulnerable situations, whose experiences are represented in art production, and with decision-makers.

Cooperation with groups in vulnerable situations can be categorised in several ways, such as by **timing** (when or during which part of the artistic process the group is involved?), **level of engagement** (how creatively is the group involved in the artistic process?), and the **position of the artist** (what stance does the artist take toward the represented issue?).

Engaging represented groups in the creative process can take different forms:

- **Direct participation:** when the group is involved in planning and performing the artistic work.
- **Feedback loops:** a continuous feedback during the creative process and after the work's publication/release, including personalised accessibility. This creates a platform for discussion that fosters recognition and a sense of therapeutic community dialogue even if artwork itself is not co-created with a group in a vulnerable situation.
- **Storytelling:** Personal and community-based storytelling through gathering information from individuals and groups, which can be done via field research, observation, and interviews in the preparatory process for artistic design. This process often involves both conscious and unconscious accumulation of elements that later are presented in the final artwork.

These methods ensure that the artistic products are **open, relevant, and impactful** in conveying a message of need for social change.

Although differences are visible mostly in cross countries analysis, we acknowledge also the differences regarding research areas as they are quite subtle. It is visible in the choice of artistic medium that in turn influences the way of engaging groups in vulnerable situations in the artistic process.

As **disability** seems to be the **most heterogeneous area regarding versatility of represented groups**, the artistic media differs the most; from theatre and film to stand up and painting. Artists employ the methods that allow for representation, focusing on the artistic presence shifting from one-side, problem-based representation towards a more holistic approach.

Artistic productions in the area of **mental health** have **more intimate character**, for the performer as well as for the audience. They involve writing/journaling, creating music and street art. Those art forms allow the audience to meet with the issue **at their own pace**.

Areas of **child protection and youth at risk** often blend with each other but if we were to distinct some art forms specific for each area in the child protection area it would be a film as a tool to educate on various topics of childhood experience. In the youth at risk area artistic productions that build community are the most used (e.g. dance group, creating podcast). Both areas lean towards theatre as it can educate and create community at the same time.

An interesting dynamic emerges from the fact that some artists themselves have lived experience of vulnerability, even if they are not currently in vulnerable situations. Their **greater sensitivity** to social issues informs their artistic work. One notable example involved an artist from Austria who, in addition to being a film director, also served as the personal assistant to the person who inspired the lead role in his film.

The issue of accurate representation can seem less pressing for artists who might be part of the groups they represent, as they draw on their own experiences and want to show rather the **individual internal affections/impressions**. There is a risk of feeling omnipotent or burdened with representing an entire group, rather than just personal experiences. This duality highlights the **complexities of navigating identity, representation, and artistic responsibility**.

Artists acknowledge that their art **cannot avoid being political**. However, a few artists discuss creating political art that is not necessarily directed at politics itself but communicating to policy makers that inclusion is at their sphere of power.

In Austria, artists reported a range of relationships with decision-makers. Some were positive and effective, others were nonexistent or ineffective in driving social change. One artist, while working with both decision-makers and groups in vulnerable situations, leveraged his well-established position to insist on full funding to ensure the participation of all stakeholders (e.g., interpreters, psychologists). However, the artist acknowledged that this required a **strong political will from the decision-makers**.

In Denmark, the relationship with decision-makers is **tied to funding** and, in some cases, can be seen as a form of **dependency**. While not all artists receive government funding, they are still **required to report back** to their funders. In Denmark, analysed art productions are focused on driving social change and **fostering new understandings** of phenomena connected with groups in vulnerable situations in question. It operates on multiple levels: helping individuals (a micro level approach), challenging authorities in their work with people in vulnerable situations, inspiring educational institutions (a meso level approach), and promoting broader societal changes (a macro-level approach), influencing not only decision-makers but also the **media and the public**. Below citation illustrates this approach properly:

After all [in art] there is an opportunity to point to structures and, even more importantly, there is an opportunity to write disability in, as part of our shared history and also to challenge what is right, who and what has the right to be described as something beautiful. And I think art plays a really important role there. (A5_D_Denmark)

In France, the interviewed artists **do not actively seek relationships with politicians**, as this is not how art touches on social issues, focusing instead on reaching the general public rather than specific target group. Artists from France describe their work as political at heart.

In Poland, artists commonly **collaborate with CSOs** rather than with decision-makers. Efforts to engage with decision-makers are often in their opinion **unproductive**, mainly due to the **lack of recognition of artists as legitimate partners in social discussions**.

In Portugal, efforts to influence political decision-makers are also often **ineffective**, especially at the municipal level. Artists face fragmented voices among people with disabilities,

seen as **lack of decision making**, and **struggle with tokenism in political interest** what is illustrated with the citation below:

We have already been to a PSP [Public Security Police] event, where we performed, and where the President of the Republic was present. At the time, it was impeccable. He took photos and of course, he praised [the band] a lot, but everything is very superficial and 'just for a picture'. However, we feel this with any contact we have with political power, I confess. The agenda is very well handled, and, therefore, no matter how much the association is visited [by the politicians] and they say that they 'had no idea about all those limitations', then they go out the door, another appointment appears on the agenda, and things begin to disappear. (A2_D_Portugal)

In this country influence seems to be more effective when artists get involved in **networks or partnerships that develop projects**.

In Romania, relationships with decision-makers are mainly funding-based, with **public financing often shaping the topics artists present**.

I have not met artists who take a stand without caring. They know that most of the money comes from politics, from the state, from the City Halls, and then, how can he take a stand against an abuse that, let's say, a City Hall is doing against disabled children, when that's the only mayor who organises concerts? Then it's very hard to accept that. I haven't encountered it. I mean, I'm not saying it doesn't exist, but I haven't encountered it. (A5_D_Romania)

Artists aim to create work that offers a **nuanced view of social services** and society as a whole. However, reaching the core of the problem in offering the social services "mirror" to reflect on is often challenging, sometimes impossible, due to **the service's sense of being judged**. One French artist analysed the **difficulty to start open conversation** due to false sense of judgement as well as the artists' responsibility for the process of denunciation and its outcomes, in this way:

And yet, every time, these reports and books trigger the same thing, that is, worlds close in on themselves in the name of protection. In other words, we protect life, but we kill living things. Supporting people also means allowing them to live, to take risks and so on. I don't know if it's very clear what I'm talking about, but I think that here too, there's a political responsibility that says "When we denounce something, where does it lead us?" It's too easy to say: "I arrive, I denounce, I leave." Okay, you've denounced, now what do we do with that? (A3_CP_France)

Another obstacle to finding common ground with social services arises from the fact that these two professional groups have different training, skill sets, and communication codes. It is described well by a Portuguese artist:

Social sector professionals complain that artists are unbearable, they are egocentric, they do whatever they want in the process, they don't know how to listen to people. And artists complain that social sector professionals are paternalistic, that they do not give people autonomy, that they think they oversee their lives and their paths. Which is very interesting, because if we look at the basic training of the various people involved, we understand. Artists are educated and trained to express themselves and, effectively, to occupy a space in that expression, and social technicians are educated, from my point of view, not to express themselves, for a kind of neutrality that obviously does not exist. (A5_Cross area_Portugal)

In seeking connection with social services, decision-makers and other stakeholders, artists uncover and expose in artistic activities possible strengths and potential flaws from responsive communication between social-support systems and the citizens.

3.3.5 “Shaking safely” – artistic means for creating a social change

When asked about the role of art in creating social change, artists across all partner countries provided varied responses that, at their core, share a similar spirit. Aesthetic intervention impacts two interconnected levels: a **personal impact** (shaping perceptions and attitudes, “shaking mentalities”) and **public influence** (acting as a factor for change in the broader social sphere).

The most crucial aspect of art in general and art creation in particular, it seems, is its ability to create a safe space. For artists, the role of art is to offer a space where expression and reflection can occur without confrontation or judgement, whether within the art creation process or when experiencing art pieces e.g. while watching film or seeing murals. It is:

- **A space of safety:** a secure, welcoming environment that allows people to present their concerns and the associated difficulties and challenges, and then work on them interactively (Romania). Artists strive to break down barriers and create environments where everyone can engage with and benefit from the arts, building bridges between people, and loosening societal “corsets”.
- **A space of freedom:** a place to liberate expression, where art becomes a forum for people to express themselves. Artistic forms allow freedom of action and provide a less restrictive framework for participation and empowerment.
- **A space of experimentation:** a laboratory for imagining new worlds, languages, and socio-political situations (France, Poland). It is a testing ground for envisioning better, more inclusive, just, and pluralistic social scenarios and the pathways to achieve them.

The concept of the safe space is inextricably linked to the artist’s sense of responsibility for the message they create, leading viewers into potentially difficult and sensitive topics, particularly in raising the issues of groups in vulnerable situations. This is well illustrated by a quote from the French artist:

These are subjects where we come face to face with the shadow of humanity, and so they are difficult to grasp. There’s a seriousness to it. That’s why I was talking about responsibility. In this case, the artist really does have a responsibility in what he shows, in the fact that he doesn’t overdo it and that he creates a space on stage that is really a space for shedding light on the shadows. That’s what it’s all about. I’m not complacent with the shadow, I don’t marry the shadow, I don’t add shadow to shadow, but I do shed light on the shadow. I create a path so that I can go out and meet it with light.
(A4_CP_France)

According to informants, art involves challenging societal norms provoking the audience to take a stand. As a medium for emotional conversation, art plays a key role in sensitising audiences’ views, “stimulating the sensitivity of others” (as one informant from Poland expressed), and also offers a cathartic experience, providing a sense of liberation from imposed stereotypes.

Moreover, art could enhance relationships with decision-makers at various levels by transforming a **“dialogue with politics”** into a platform of dialogue for a wider circle of stakeholders. It also improves the life opportunities of people in vulnerable situations, promoting social cohesion and fostering conviviality within diverse social and cultural contexts. Several interviewees also described their role as helping to **re-politicise issues that had been depoliticised** over time, by bringing social services, social service users into the mainstream, drawing attention to them and triggering debates. These artists described their refusal to accept issues related to care, vulnerability and social work as technical or bureaucratic. According to the artists, art is essential for participating in debates and driving change in a way that differs from traditional political discourse, without turning the art into therapy or social work.

3.3.6 New knowledge introduced by artists in social sphere

The main goal of interviewing artists was to explore the new knowledge they bring to the social sphere. This new knowledge can also be understood as a **shift in perspective** on topics that are already present in public discourse often represented through a one-dimensional narrative. Most of the artists identified this **change in perspective as a key motivation for addressing social issues**. They strive to tell stories by unconventional, thought-provoking forms, encouraging new perception, through the eyes of others, without judgement. It is well illustrated by the below citation from Romania.

Art can be made with meaning. Well-chosen films can mirror real life situations of the person in the cinema chair, and that person can understand or empower himself: ‘Look, that character could do it and I could do it’ or simply realise that he is no longer alone.
(A4_YR_Romania)

Artists also aim **to shift the focus** from the experience of vulnerability **to the complexity of human existence**, viewing the “problem” not as a central theme. They strive to portray reality not solely through actual individuals but by **emerging universal issues** from true stories while remaining faithful to the essence of the people represented.

In France, artists concerned with social issues emphasise the **importance of representation** to showcase real bodies and real lives, **countering invisibility and amplifying marginalised voices**. They employ creative techniques to literally **“reveal”** what is often unseen, seeking to give form to otherwise abstract issues without compromising the privacy of people experiencing vulnerability. By finding a fictional narrative “rooted in reality,” they create a safe space to convey the nuances of complex situations. This was directly pointed out by an artist from France:

People who are forced into tragic situations. I thought fiction was... Really, I thought it was the ideal way to talk; ideal, in any case, as applied to these situations. You see, it's impossible to grasp the despair of a mother whose children have just been taken away. You're not going to shove a camera in her face in a documentary or a news report, to film her face, her despair. (A4_CP_France)

Artists often combine innovative and disruptive methodologies with **empathetic messaging** in topics typically discussed rationally and **point at inclusive practices** to foster deeper

understanding to affect change. They bring these new qualities to their work, reshaping how social issues are discussed and addressed.

In Portugal, there were collaborative efforts between the social and health sectors and art institutions, including a **mental health program** based on **cultural prescription** as one of its artistic strategies for user intervention, which is illustrated by the below citation.

A mapping is being carried out of all the cultural offers that exist in the municipality, so that family doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists can consult when they are with a social worker, when they are caring for a person in the population and can make a match between that person's situation and the cultural activity that is taking place, also connecting with issues of mobility, understanding what is closer, what is more viable. (A6_cross area_Portugal)

In Denmark, artists view art as a **new or alternative language** that enables them to express life's challenges. They incorporate **interactive tools** into their performances, making the audience **active participants** in the process while also **diminishing the authority of the artists**.

It [the performance] is interactive in a different way than giving a lecture, right? So, it makes demands on the audience ... We're involving the audience. They have to come up with solutions on how to resolve a conflict, right? ... They can in principle take over a character's role [during the performance]... and play a scene a little bit differently so that it has a positive outcome, instead of a negative one. (A2_D_Denmark)

In Poland, some artists feel that society perceives them as “free spirits,” which allows for **greater freedom of expression**. They use diverse languages and create **alternative narratives** through imagination. **Engaging communities, politicians, and social workers** not only enriches their work but also helps prevent professional burnout by shifting perspectives.

And art, you know, I also very often use this in my everyday life, artists are allowed to do more. And this is a very nice belief. A lot of people feel it and see it and actually it loosens them. [They say] ‘ah, an artist’ and they wave their hand, but thanks to this I enter areas where a man in a suit would have no chance. (A2_MH_Poland)

In Austria, a theatre director pioneered a legislative theatre project that brought together users of social services, civil servants, political leaders, managers, and legal representatives. This artistic initiative showcases the potential of **artistic interventions to change traditional sectoral approaches to social intervention**, fostering intergenerational perspectives and community building. Furthermore, one Austrian artist employed letters as an alternative means of communication to address sensitive topics with his informant, despite their daily interactions.

It was actually a kind of letter to me about what it was like for her that we were filming together – with lots of questions too. And then I simply replied to it and sent it back. And so we negotiated a lot of things during the filming phase that we often couldn't verbalise, but were then able to address extremely well via this text level. (A2_D_Austria)

In Austria, France, and Poland, artists use their art **to highlight the symbolic level of exclusion** such as an accessible entry located at the back of a cultural institution symbolically and factually hiding persons with special accessibility needs.

Interviewed artists do not claim to be social workers and thus transfer of knowledge between art and social services is not linear. Sphere of art could be seen here as a “playground” for social change that can strengthen skills of social services professionals.

3.3.7 Some challenges in using artistic practice towards social change

A French artist expresses concern about the **instrumentalisation of stories** of groups in vulnerable situations by selecting only those parts that prove the artist’s point without presenting broader personal context. The artist drew attention to the risks associated with the use or **overuse of vulnerability**:

People rarely resent you for showing difficult things [in their lives]. On the other hand, they do resent you if you use them to defend a thesis, so that they feel they’re being used, that you’re only showing a part of them. (A4_CP_France)

In Portugal, artists confirm the **risk of instrumentalisation of artwork** from a political perspective. They also fear that art could lose its socio-political character:

Art is afraid of being instrumentalised, afraid of being used to solve social problems, of being a commissioned art, of propaganda, in some way. There’s a bit of this ghost. (A5_cross area_Portugal)

Artists are also aware that if not treated **mindfully**, the creative process and artwork itself could **take part in maintaining social inequality and discrimination** by recreating oppressive mechanisms in art production.

In France, artists mentioned **difficulties in penetrating** the partly “closed world” of social services, others had **struggled to find funding** to produce and distribute their work. Some of them had found it difficult to find demand for their work or felt trapped in maintaining the interest of a ‘niche’ audience or audience composed of social work professionals. In Austria, one artist showed that **art is very elitist** and it in a way **is blocking the evolution of social topics in an open and inclusive way**.

Final comments

Art plays an important role in epistemic liberation that seeks to democratise knowledge production and validation, enabling a **plurality of voices** to be heard **and approaches** in understanding the world. It promotes intellectual freedom and freedom of expression by encouraging the acceptance of **different ways of experiencing, expressing, thinking and knowing**. But also it brings **universal humanism** to any social issue.

Engagement of art and artists in social change can be seen both as an intellectual way of amplifying voices and expressing clear opinions, and as engaging practical tools for making diverse groups be listened to and then influence organisations, policies and society.

Analysed art productions show the **links with responsiveness**. Art assures sharing the knowledge on social issues with different audiences. Often, not having one set goal, artists open themselves as active listeners and observers who are sensitive to the diversity of issues. They experiment with **new, creative, empathic language or art** that, adopted by social services, could

allow for better, more holistic understanding of vulnerable situations and people experiencing them. Spaces of art support abandonment of hierarchical roles played outside of it.

From the interviews we learned that the role of artists is often only one of many that are played in social life by them. They are artists but they might also be leaders not associated with art, sometimes they may act as activists but they are also parents, politicians, persons in situations of vulnerability. Although multiple roles themselves could require analytical separation, the experiences integrated empower responsiveness topic as lived experience of responsiveness connection to artistic forms of expression of citizen voice.

3.4 Experiences of leaders and participants of actions

Introduction

This chapter examines some characteristics of individuals—engaged citizens (leaders), including both leaders and participants of various actions, and their motivations, drives, identities. We were interested in various ways they engage, the aspects of organising and planning actions that are important to them. We also explored their perspectives on engagement, facilitators, constraints, support, and challenges they encounter.

The leaders (organisers) of citizen-led actions and as well as other participants are important sources of information regarding their lived experiences of full or partial engagement in issues that matter enough to them to take action. Through individual conversations, we aimed to understand their perspectives on the need for and value of personal or collective ‘intervention’ in the current functioning of the systems designed to help citizens facing vulnerable situations. We were also interested in their assessments of the current responses provided by social services in such cases, particularly regarding what they feel is lacking.

We wanted to understand not only the personal motivations and experiences related to social services but also the knowledge acquired through participation. The factors arising from contestation, collaboration, or innovative actions as part of social change, can serve as a strong argument for providing citizens with greater opportunities for involvement and allow them to take on roles in planned innovations for pro-responsive experiments which are the topic of Work Package 5).

Although we collected a significant amount of qualitative data, our research cannot be regarded as representative, and the results gathered here cannot be generalised. Citations are exemplary. However, they indicate certain trends that highlight some interesting aspects worth future research on similar topics.

3.4.1 Citizens’ potential in-waiting

Interviewed leaders and participants of citizen-led actions agree that **citizens should play an important role in social service planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation or change, on different levels**. They also see that currently their role is limited and downplayed. It was noted a shared belief in the effectiveness of grassroots initiatives and civic actions taken to meet the needs of citizens themselves. As the below quote shows, citizens have the right to speak with their own voice, on their own issues.

[...] So, in fact, citizen consultation, by bringing together people from different social categories, etc., probably brings out questions and points of vigilance that would probably be very interesting for politicians to hear. (P4_ D/MH_France)

Our informants were convinced that **citizens should be informed, consulted and take part in decision-making processes**. They also should be able to **monitor and evaluate** implementation of the changes. Dialogue with them should take place on macro (national policy), meso (local community) and micro (individual) groups of interest levels. Such processes should be based on the foundations of democratic approach. Some informants even postulated

specially designed democratic bodies²² that would regularly provide a platform for such partnership.

There should be an institution, a democratically legitimised institution, that enables us to participate directly in decision-making on a partnership basis. (P35_MH_Austria)

There were also voices that citizens do not have to wait to be invited by decision-makers. Citizens can have the right to try to change their reality themselves, outside or parallel to the system, get involved into everyday life needs for the common good of the community, and make micro-changes.

What we as citizens should do, we should look around us, react when we see this homeless person sleeping on a bench on a hot day, because he might have a stroke, let's call the municipal police, if a neighbour burns rubber, some tires, let's call, let's not pollute the environment, let's react, we don't all have to participate in great changes as citizens [...] Really, it's not like everyone has to wonder how to become a social activist, no, but of course let's be interested in what's going on, if there's a law that's being created in our country that we don't like, that we don't agree with, then let's know that we have the ability to disagree with something. (L4_YR_Poland).

Informants indicated that citizens should be **invited to the co-construction of social services** or social policies of different types. They indicated the variety of needs and showed diversity of voices. The heterogeneity of citizens can provide different aspects of knowledge (e.g. lived experience, professional knowledge, academic knowledge, business knowledge to name a few). Nevertheless, almost all interviewees agreed that the most important are those people who are directly concerned by the issue. They argue that decisions affecting social services would be better informed and ultimately more effective if people with direct experience were given more space in defining policies. As one Austrian activist from the disability area noticed:

Knowledge is always also physical knowledge and if certain physicalities are missing in a room, then knowledge is missing. (L8_D_Austria)

There were also interviewees that indicated that intersectionality and diversity of experience shall be acknowledged and incorporated into decision-making processes.

Just as we respect gender parity, for example for a citizens' commission that would be responsible for deciding on social policies, we could have gender parity and recruit people according to their income. In other words, not just rich people, but people who can get involved. What's more, I think some citizens on low incomes would be delighted to take part in this kind of convention, [...] seeking out, if you like, business leaders, but also workers, cleaning ladies, ordinary people. (P2_D&MH_France)

²² A Danish institution called Folkemødet is an example of such a platform. "Folkemødet is a physical setting and a gathering point created in cooperation with political parties, grassroots and different associations and companies. The democratic ambition is that citizens and decision-makers meet up at Folkemødet in the beautiful surroundings of Bornholm (an island in eastern Denmark) to engage in dialogue through interesting debates, presentations, cultural events, speeches, workshops etc. The purpose of Folkemødet (<https://folkemoedet.dk/en>) is to strengthen Danish democracy and during the three days, the motto is that 'we care about each other and increase the understanding among us' as well as 'find the solutions to the challenges of our joint society and get inspired by each other'. Even though Folkemødet is open to the public, mostly larger organisations can afford to participate and mingle with politicians at the macro level. This is different to the smaller organisations/movements etc.".

Some leaders also emphasised the importance of incorporating people with lived experience into different levels of participation in social services. However, participation should be designed from a **non-paternalistic** perspective. Some participants refer to the tendency, observed in public sphere interventions, where there is used paternalistic or “ableist” appropriation of the place and voice of individuals, aimed at supporting them rather than listening to them and making changes to the services. This is particularly important in the case of children and youth, where there still are strong biases against these groups. Romanian leaders who work with youth explain how beneficial participation of minors could be.

Society can help with the smooth running and with changes by getting involved through CSOs, creating contexts for young people in the system to participate with others. [...] The community together with public institutions can organise activities in which disadvantaged people can participate and become aware of their role. (P5_YR/CP_Romania)

Although interviewees from all research countries indicated that voices of children and youth are valuable, non-academic young people often do not come forward and are not taken seriously by decision-makers.

Many leaders mentioned that reality is far from the fully participatory stage and so based on their descriptions it could be considered rather as non-participatory or tokenism “rungs” according to Arnstein’s ladder of participation (1969)²³. Participants were aware that cooperation between public institutions and citizens is often to some extent illusory or shallow. Their lived experience shows that the invitation to be part of different participatory processes related to responsiveness (mainly consultations or research) are exercised because of the law requirements, and not because their voice is really taken into account. It may also be politically attached. For instance, one of the Polish leaders from the disability sector talked about it this way:

[...] unfortunately you’ve just brought up an interesting topic (laughs) because it’s political and unfortunately it’s very often the case that it’s only the politicians who have an influence on what’s going on, or people connected with politics, organisations connected with politics, institutions connected with politics, but not the ordinary citizens themselves, who have nothing to do with it, so I think this is a great pain for every person who doesn’t want to network politically, but wants to have an influence on what’s happening in Poland. (L1_D_Poland)

In addition, a leader from Romania talked about inconsistency of the participation procedures which significantly hinders active ongoing involvement in decision-making processes:

I have been invited to consultations, for example, to be part of the advisory committee that debates the National Prevention Plan and Action in the Field of Alcohol Consumption, but this committee never met again. Neither the advisory committee nor the inter-

²³ Sherry Arnstein symbolises citizen participation with an 8-rung ladder, where each rung represents a different level of involvement in decision-making. The first two rungs (Manipulation, Therapy) are considered non-participatory, where citizens are engaged in a paternalistic manner, often feeling uneducated and experiencing gaslighting. The next three rungs (Informing, Consultation, Placation) involve varying degrees of tokenism, serving as steps toward legitimate participation. Citizens receive information, but it often flows only one way, and their input may not be genuinely considered. Though some may join decision-making bodies, they remain a minority with limited influence. The legitimate participation levels are Partnership, Delegated Power, and Citizens Control, where power is shared between citizens and authorities, recognising citizens as experts on their issues.

ministerial committee which was to consult the advisory committee. That was, I think, the only invitation I received to participate in such a committee. It remains at the invitation level. (L11_MH/YR_Romania)

We identified two main **factors that reduced citizens' power** to influence social services or social policies. The first one is related to citizens themselves. Not all citizens are able or are **willing to participate** in co-creation of social services. In some cases citizens do not have sufficient resources like funds or time to participate in unpaid, day-time meetings. Some people are lacking competences like knowledge, skills or networks to enter sometimes quite complicated co-creation processes (e.g. often public consultations are conducted based on the specific, bureaucratic, legislative language that is difficult to understand to the general public, thus is exclusive). What is interesting, some interviewees explained that citizens can slowly learn how to be involved and how to cooperate with social services if they are given smaller tasks and in time they can start to be involved in bigger, more complicated actions.

There are also citizens more pessimistic about citizens' interest and critical or compliant stage they stop at. Some others also indicated that **citizens simply are not aware they can play a part in decision-making processes** and need to be asked, motivated to get engaged.

It seems to me that some people don't even know that they can do something, that's the first problem, so it would be nice to make people aware that they can, but also not force them, because that never brings anything good. But it's precisely this showing that it's possible, because there are people who may have the enthusiasm, but they don't have this activating element, that they are simply not invited, and they don't know, or they don't have enough initiative to look for it. (P2_YR_Poland).

There are some general systemic gaps. Interviewees indicated that many social services do not have procedures or tools that provide deep responsiveness and wide participation. For instance, a French informant (working in CSO) described ambiguity around social service response:

[...] I spoke about it to my former manager, who was ambiguous because he told me, 'I agree with you', but in the end, that's what's ambiguous about it. When you talk to them, they are aware of the problem, but in the end, they don't move. So we're stuck in the same position. (L8_D/MH_France)

Even though it may not be the real picture, many interviewees seem to associate the crucial role in the process of civic engagement with citizen-led CSOs²⁴ as organisations that represent citizens better. In their opinion, CSOs have more leverage and power, a stronger voice, greater capacity for action, and formal status – they are better positioned than ordinary citizens.

And as far as citizens are concerned, of course civil society will demand their rights and just say from the bottom up, we want this, we want that. The coolest way to do it is to do it with the support of an NGO, because it has some kind of legal standing, it has a KRS number [national court register number], it's registered with the court. It has the legal power, it has the power to write some letters, of course every citizen does, but here there can be more power. But, on the other hand, this cannot be demanded of citizens, so simply

²⁴ In some countries (e.g. Portugal) NGOs are considered as big international bodies, not smaller citizen-led entities.

the third sector in the form of organisations, not free electrons of citizens, but already active organisations, is really something we should focus on. (L3_YR_Poland).

That is why many informants claimed that citizens who want to influence social services need to professionalise and set up CSOs to become partners that social services take seriously.

We held a protest in January 2024, at the Ministry of Education on the issue of free transportation for students and they, frankly, were making fun of us, not listening to us, trying to stop our voices (...). It doesn't seem to me that the system considers us mature enough to be able to present our problems and our needs and they often make fun of us, just because we are children (...) I mean we are not treated seriously. (...) And after all, we are the future of this society. (Participant 13_CP_Romania)

3.4.2 Citizens' experiences and relations with social services: aliens, enemies, friends, neighbours?

The engaged citizens we talked to had at least some **experiences with the social services**: either as direct service users or as indirect service users (e.g. caregiver/ member of the family of service user); or as engaged service providers. One group among participants and leaders consisted of people with lived experience who wanted to make a difference for themselves or people in a similar situation to them. Their life trajectory took them from ordinary users of social services to engaged leaders and volunteers and then professionals and leaders of civil society organisations (CSOs).

I went through the same situation when I was in a wheelchair in 2019 [...] and I saw that you can help some people who really need guidance, advice, to lift their spirits at the beginning, because it's not easy to change your life suddenly, everything happens suddenly, you go back to, let's say, the beginning, you don't know anything to do what you were doing before and then you need someone to guide you. (P10_D_Romania)

Some of them are engaged in the **self-support or self-advocacy grassroots initiatives** and some became more professionalised and set up or joined CSOs. Only a few leaders acted completely independently. Some (especially younger) leaders and participants used social media around social awareness mainly in areas related to mental health or disability. People with lived experience who became professionals or experts were working in the CSOs, as it gave them access to more resources and recognition than as individuals.

Another group consists of **family members** or caregivers of service users. As indirect users of the system, they sought to change social services to support their loved ones but also considered it as their own need. They try to manage their civic involvement with regular professional work in another area or try to be actively involved in the work of some CSOs.

Another group consists of different types of **professionals, without lived experiences**. Some of them are former workers of social services who were dissatisfied by the system and transferred to CSOs to be able to be more effective and more efficiently share their competences with others. Some of those professionals were still working in social service, for instance as doctors, teachers, social workers, but in their free time they were engaged in various actions. For instance one of the mental health organiser explained his dual role in this way:

I cannot dissociate my role as a social worker from this role of influencing public policies. Otherwise, I think it's playing with the profession (...) What motivates me? It is indeed a sense of professional and civic duty. This collective dimension must be associated with the profession I chose. (P1_MH_Portugal)

There were also some experts like journalists, public figures, celebrities who have a dense social capital, namely political support and, in this sense, they played the role of “policy brokers” or “policy facilitators”.

A smaller sample interviewed were **people who, due to their inner needs and values** (social justice, equality), **decided to act** because they believed in the cause and had no direct or indirect own interest. We gave this group the joint title “friends of the cause/ allies”. These were primarily participants in mass protests and supporters of online social campaigns, as well as leaders not associated with any particular cause. Some of these people got involved in activism due to the strong emotions (e.g. outrage) and disagreement about certain social problems. For instance, a French activist explained why he/she decided to get involved in the protest that supported ESAT (*Établissement et service d'aide par le travail/Supported employment workplace*) workers:

I'm not an ESAT worker, I'm not even in the [region] any more, so that's saying something. But it's out of loyalty to people I respect, and also because I don't think it's fair. (P4_D/MH_France)

A Romanian activist involved in child protection also recalled that intense emotions and disagreement were an impulse that made her protest.

The initial motivation when I got involved in the community [...] was a very strong revolt on my part because it seemed to me that in the area of specialists and in the area of citizens, there was an overwhelming racism and discrimination, reported to people who come from very poor or marginalised areas and Roma people. (L1_CP_Romania)

Interestingly, regardless of their age, **engaged citizens had at least a few years of experience** in civic activities. As involvement trajectories may vary, undertaking various grassroots initiatives, e.g. protests, social media campaigns, networking with other people, building a support network etc, may develop into larger activities, more formal and professional, which was the case of our informants, but the reverse could probably be explored, but we had no contact with this group during our research.

Due to the lack of representativeness of the sample, it was difficult to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the trajectory of becoming leaders in the context of specific factors. However, we managed to notice some interesting aspects of their experience. **Younger generation**, starting from **more “spontaneous” actions**, is quite effective in the use of social media and then gets involved in fieldwork such as seminars or lectures in schools, work in associations, etc. For example, a Romanian leader explained that they were able to directly reach 3,000 students during their workshops in schools, even though they started from limited online activities.

[...] our mission, in all these years since we have been formed, is now moving in two directions. On the one hand, we have activities in the area of raising awareness of the importance of mental health and de-stigmatisation of disorders [...] and the second, major

direction is to increase access to quality mental health services for as many people as possible [...] In terms of awareness-raising, so far our projects have been mainly targeting young people, especially high school and college young people. [...] We still have a blog, a podcast, informative content on social media and another project quite dear to my heart. (P4_MH_Romania)

Thus, sometimes they are getting recognition quite fast and are able to reach a greater number of people than leaders who follow a more traditional path without social media. Experiences of the leaders from the middle age or senior groups are more related to the laborious, systematic, long-term groundwork related to social change goals.

Moreover, in the youngest age group there were people with lived experience who through their actions not only worked for specific changes in social services, but also their activism was becoming an element of their own empowerment. They not only wanted to implement new laws, solutions, and tools to improve social services, but also felt they were fighting for their rights, dignity and social inclusion. Using the Internet as a tool for communication allowed them to amplify their own voice, not the voice of an organisation. One of the Danish informants explained it as follows:

I've experienced several times that when you join an organisation or association, you sometimes don't get a full say but are instead expected to... you have to advocate for their cause and follow their agenda, rather than being able to contribute your own input. So, even if you join an organisation or an association... at least that's my experience—I can't speak for everyone—but I've found it to be very top-down, where some people decide what should be said, to whom, and when. (P6_MH_Denmark)

Another interesting element we noticed is linked with the **feminisation of the CSOs sector** in Europe (Charveriat et al. 2024). Also in our study we talked with more women than men, though this might be the situational aspect, or might differ according to areas, roles, countries (see Table 2b. in the Annex 1). Especially among engaged citizens who were family members of service users the number of women was high.

The citizens' actions and their organisers described in this chapter decided to act for various reasons when their needs or the needs of groups in vulnerable situations were not sufficiently met by social services. We have placed their actions on a spectrum between contestation and cooperation.

The relationship between engaged citizens and social services varied depending on their former experiences of use or no use of social services, positive or negative encounter as well as individual life-path including past role of being service provider but not much was said on social services work directly, rather on system that needs to be changed.

Among informants there were voices that social service is a hard, unappreciated work, with high responsibility but there is uncertainty if they are welcomed or not (with exception of simple, low qualified voluntary work) or if there is a role for them. Social services, according to some interviewees, cannot formally deny citizen participation, but it is not so much welcome without clear "outside role" regulation due to various reasons:

- belief in professional competence over citizen engagement;

- distrust in citizens skills and knowledge;
- competition over resources and fear of citizen criticism or monitoring.

There is also **state–citizen tension on roles in democracy**, a legacy of welfare state position (Poland, Romania) or European Social Policy (EU 2024) regulations towards high standards of Caring System model, which play roles in demanding good quality services for all citizens, while the reality is far from perfect and funding not efficient. The status quo and lack of relationship-building and communication skills between social services and citizens make collaboration tokenistic, nominal or unclear.

The following observation adds that even if there is a will, there might be a lack of time or collaboration focus and that there is no template for relationships – it all depends on the people representing public bodies, their vision on citizens’ roles or simply the relationships being built:

The Ministry [...] congratulates us on everything we do, but when it comes to involvement, they are almost non-existent, the Ministry [...] disappears because they have other concerns. This is just an example. On the other hand, we have good collaborations with the Ministry [...], various city halls, and universities [...]. So, they are supportive and, let’s say, involved. Some are more about ticking boxes, while others are realistically engaged with proactive and continuous involvement. (P2_CP_Romania)

In such an environment responsiveness of social services towards citizens and citizens willingness to change social service practice seems a challenge. The collected information showed that minimum or none in some countries citizen-led activities aimed at social service improvement. They either were focused on making claims to policy decision makers to make social services change by legal regulation force or to design alternative constructs that would show how it could be. This lack of citizens’ interest/focus on support for social service practitioners is worth further study.

There is confirmed **hardship and learning agency**, by practice experience in making social change as well as personal competencies such as courage or strength of people who expose themselves voluntarily to public resistance, misbelief in change, question of engagement’ impact in addition to tough theme of vulnerability (no easy sell) itself:

[Answering to a question on what did she/he learnt with the actions in which she/had participated?] That change can always be made, even though change is met with a lot of resistance. There is always a lot of resistance, whether from health professionals, society, politicians, people with mental illness themselves, or their families. There is a lot of resistance to change. [...] But change is a catalyst that we can develop and it is a very beautiful thing to see once we have managed to develop and bring about that change. (P3_MH_Portugal)

Informants in Portugal observed obstacle in building open relationships and mutual trust as in their opinion it is connected with organisational hierarchy and constraints with staff will to engage but no permitted to do so and so there are entered informal ways that staff tries to make contact, to show that relationships are possible:

Most organisations, though not all, whether public or private, operate in a very hierarchical and outdated system, which is one reason they don’t change, right? It’s also a

reason that sometimes they might have employees (professionals) who want to change things but are not listened to and lack the space to create... projects, ideas. That is also one of the reasons they come to us. There's always a little ant inside who thinks they can use us, which is great, to show others that change is possible. (P2_MH_Portugal)

Informants pointed out that **access of citizen-led actions to social services are too bureaucratic, hierarchical, and top-down controlled**. Pre-determined agendas and often long-term planning cycles can be seen as barriers to innovation and responsiveness. Even when leaders are invited to contribute, and are persistent, their input may not fit within the existing framework, may be leading to frustration and a **sense of powerlessness**:

It's still not the politicians who are listening; it's just as closed off as before. But we have gotten a larger group of other stakeholders who listen to us, but not the politicians. [...] I don't think we can see our fingerprints on anything at all. And it's also the case when we sit in those meetings... Yes, we have also been part of the Ministry of Social Affairs' advisory group on placements for several years, but when we get there, we are not asked what we think is important right now. There is a very controlled agenda, and it is mostly one-way communication.. (P3_CP_Denmark)

As a result of above mentioned constraints and challenges in relations with social services many may be limiting expectations towards relationship building. So in some cases the outcome (measure of success) is not introduction of change, but maintaining the dialogue and having no way back from what was already accomplished.

One thing is certain, there were no setbacks and that was worth it. When we are asked in terms of results, I would say that one result is that [...] no retreat has occurred [...]. And this may seem little, but it is not. Because those who are in these areas know how easily [...] certain policy measures are completely dismantled. And then, we have the perception that they are conscious that the civil society is active, is vigilant and will react to any movement. [...] Maintaining vigilance is an action that has no visibility but it exists in Portuguese society, even more than it seems. Many of the organisations, not being street activists, in the public space, remain organised and remain vigilant. (P1_MH_Portugal)

Although the interviewees indicated many barriers and challenges in relations with social services, the Danish example of Folkemødet proved that cooperation and responsiveness of social services and decision-makers is possible.

Beside **physical, safe space** where citizens and decision-makers can talk and cooperate interviewees mentioned that one of the key aspects seen as needed for change in formal practice both on policy and social work level is taking off traditional formal "suit" sending the message that non-engagement equals professionalism. The empathy expressed to needs but also helping organisations, initiatives changes relations, collaboration atmosphere and feeling of common good approach. For example the Romanian leaders believe that developing empathy towards children with disabilities could help these public officials be more cooperative and **receptive**.

[...] it's easy to sign a partnership on paper. You go and sign it, and it may or may not be implemented. But I think it's about empathy. The people sitting in those chairs need to be empathetic about certain things. [...] Social services can be more open and receptive to collaborating with organisations in the field of mental disabilities. (L10_D_Romania)

In addition to relationships established for modernisation of social services, the EU is recognised by citizens as game changer in motivating, especially on local level toward making new relations with authorities and **dialogic behaviour** seen as good move in listening each other and making appropriate change:

At [National Authority], I have seen a significant change. If it used to be very difficult to reach and open a door there, now it is very easy, people listen to you. I have seen ideas being adopted... At the Ministry [...] and the Ministry of [...], it is much easier to enter, to express your concerns, to propose measures, to ask for help, or to ask for ideas... One of the reasons for this openness is clearly that associations have been active together for the last 10 years, and decision-makers in this field are much more attentive. Also, I believe the influx of information from Brussels plays a significant role, as it indeed requires certain things to be done through CSOs, with CSOs, with the help of CSOs. (L10_D_Romania)

To conclude, we noticed that engaged citizens with whom we talked, find it **quite difficult to cooperate with social services**. In general they rather have to persistently “knock out the door” so that they are at the doorstep of collaboration seen by social services and decision makers. Many interviewees mentioned that their relations with social service are a constant struggle. Thus, they decide to create their own social services offered mainly through CSOs or self-support groups which are more responsive. Some leaders decide to cooperate with social services and try to find a way to be heard and treated as partners as they see the need for public response. However such partnership is mainly possible for big, well-established, experienced CSOs. That is why also some interviewees decide to contest and criticise social services by protesting, signing petitions, engaging in artistic civic involvement without encounters with social services.

3.4.3 Engaged citizens motivations: personal, prosocial, universal

Citizens’ willingness to participate towards greater responsiveness is related to the motivators that make them engaged and leading actions. Based on the data collected we were able to divide citizens’ motivations into three categories²⁵ depending on the levels they come from and the changes they are concerned with.

The first category consists of **motivations** that had their **roots in the lived experience** of being members of or close to groups in vulnerable situations. These motivations can be related to the micro level – individual experiences with social services. One of the motivations identified was current or past negative experiences with services as direct or indirect services users. Our informants often mentioned that they decided to get involved in different actions and initiatives because they could not receive the support they needed or were dissatisfied with their experience as social service users. These past or present service users who had resources decided to transfer their negative emotions like dissatisfaction or anger into something positive. One of the Polish interviewees explains it as follows:

²⁵ This division serves only as an analytical tool. Citizens’ motivations often overlap. In many cases the same citizen would express motivations that could be classified in two (or even three) out of these three categories.

It was also a lot of anger, so somehow my experience with the system was also on someone, maybe I felt injustice that it happened to me, that I felt somewhat scared [...] So I will say it was in me and a lot of anger and such needs of doing something and such a need for such a thing that I really want to do something important that would give sense to all I have passed. (P4_MH_Poland)

Citizens with service user experience often knew what they specifically needed, so they started to engage because they wanted very specific solutions to be implemented to satisfy these needs. Some people with lived experience and their family members openly admitted that the first impulse to get engaged was related only to satisfaction of their needs (self-centred motivations). Mother of a person with intellectual disability explained:

As a student, I was no longer entitled to a one-euro meal; it affected me personally. And then I also had my militant commitment on the other side, which allowed me to see that I wasn't alone in this problem, that I was even a bit lucky compared to other students (L1_YR_France)

Also informants with lived experience mentioned that they were **motivated to support others**, because as current or former service users they were aware what difficulties other service users may be experiencing (empathetic motivations). One of the leaders from the disability/mental health area shared with us story about his/her motivation:

We're from a fairly average social class. It's important, I think, to specify, because without being rich, my parents still had "the means" to make up for certain needs linked to my disability, because we often see that the most precarious disabled people have even more difficulties than those who are less so or who are not. (L5_D/MH_France)

These engaged citizens want to inspire others that a good end is possible (inspirational motivations). For instance one of the leaders from Poland who works with youth at risk in the youth sociotherapy centre said:

I myself had a somewhat harder life, with my parents and all. I want to show that it is possible [...] I know that it is possible, that you have to grab onto a specific thing when life is bad, pull it along and it can, when you pull it, pull you up. I think that music has changed my life a lot and I think that it can change people's lives. (P1_YR_Poland)

The opportunity to raise someone's own voice and show their own perspective helps to empower others.

My main motivation is that, having experienced mental illness for such a long time myself [...] I have personal experience with mental illness, and having felt so discriminated against, sidelined, and stigmatised for so long, I thought, why not help others? Why not turn something bad into something better? Improve, progress, and turn a difficult situation into an opportunity. Sometimes crises happen, and crises can sometimes become opportunities. Helping others, informing others, training others, and seeing change happen around us is also something very beautiful. (P3_MH_Portugal)

Quite numerous groups of people with lived experience mentioned that they decided to get involved into different initiatives, because they had a **desire to pay back for the support** (gratitude motivations) they had received in the past. For example one of the leaders from Romania put it in this way:

I went through the same situation when I was in a wheelchair in 2019 [...] and I saw that you can help some people who really need guidance, advice, to lift their spirits at the beginning, because it's not easy to change your life suddenly; everything happens suddenly, you go back to, let's say, the beginning, you don't know how to do anything, what you were doing before and then you need someone to guide you. (P10_D_Romania)

Regarding the second category of **motivations**, they are **rooted in experiences of practitioners** from social services. These motivations can be related to the organisational experience of service providers and professionals who had to navigate in the system and services that were not always efficient. Many interviewed practitioners mentioned that they decided to engage in citizens' actions, because of deep disagreement regarding the way in which social services were functioning (expressive motivations). For instance, a French social worker explained how they were dissatisfied with the approach towards service users that were in the centre that they worked:

And I think that for a long time, in the institutions that I attended or that I had the opportunity to... because in the [centres], we also have children who are dealing with social assistance, because there are family difficulties. So every time, I was struck by the suspicion we could have towards the parents. It struck me, it shocked me, it seemed unfair. And I think that in my work, I already had a bit of this awareness, I would say. (P6_CP_France)

Some social workers who wanted to change the system, but were not able to do it from inside, decided to create their own social services that work more efficiently.

They also indicated that they want to change social services not only for social causes but also for themselves – to **improve their workplace**. They were aware that better work conditions for practitioners might result in better quality of the services they provide.

So, what is missing, and I know no politicians want to hear this, is that there are not enough economic resources to have skilled employees, to train/educate them, and to ensure they are not overworked. There are definitely skilled employees out there. I met many of them. They just aren't allowed to do their jobs properly. It is a shame. (P3_CP_Denmark)

Some of them also said that due to their privileged position they decided to engage because they want to **be the voice of those who are not able to speak** (representative motives) for themselves like children. For instance, one Romanian leader in the area of child protection explained what pushed him to become active:

The desire to protect children, to make their voice heard. All children must be heard, helped by the state, creating access to structures, giving them the opportunity to express themselves. (L5_CP_Romania)

Some statements of engaged citizens express that helping others is for them the source of fulfilment, satisfaction, development and agency.

I do it with great pleasure [...] I feel professionally fulfilled [...]. I feel I use all my skills [...] We do things that make a lot of sense to us [...]. It gives a lot of satisfaction to the fact that we are doing things that are useful and that are important in our society. [...] I really, really, really enjoy doing it. That is new and contributes in some way to leaving work done.

Maybe it's quite selfish, I want to die and say: ok, I did things that were worth it, that helped, that gave meaning. (L2_MH_Portugal)

I have an older sister who has developmental disabilities, autism and CP cerebral palsy (CP). So I have somehow grown up with the fact that you have to fight for some things to make things work. She lives with me, I inherited her when my mum died, or our mum died. And that's when I really started to realise that you really have to fight because I had seen my mother struggle with many things [...]. I was really shocked at how things were done [...] so I had to take the bull by the horns and find out how all these things were connected. This has opened my eyes to a lot of things in the social field and also, in general, our legal rights around society, also outside the social field. So in recent years, it has simply meant that not only do I work hard for my sister and her rights, but I also have to help others. (P12_D_Denmark)

Helping others is also a source of joy and excitement, thus it is related not only to professional development but also to individual pleasure.

So it's great to be able to do your bit to make other people's lives better and to make me feel the sense of what I'm doing too. [...] Life is so short that you have to ask yourself if what I'm doing makes me happy and if this is what I'm doing. (L3_D_Poland)

Third category of **motivation** is related to macro level and relates to categories of motivations such as **common good, moral values and systemic changes**. It consists of general desire to change society, societal attitudes towards groups facing vulnerability and laws, system, social services. Many citizens engaged in civic actions mention that these desires are rooted in values important to them such as social justice, equality, human rights, solidarity (value-based motives). For instance, a French leader, when asked about their motivation, responded:

Justice. This law, before it was changed, was really unfair. Disability doesn't disappear when you're in a partnership. That just doesn't happen. Otherwise, it would be too good to be true. Social justice. Equal rights. Respect for rights. (P3_D_France)

Such motivation can be based on the **moral duty towards others**. As one of the Romanian leaders who experienced foster care said:

The moral duty of each one of us is to know our past, our history: we have a moral duty, as the survivors say – we were not to blame – and certainly they didn't have a public voice for many years and they don't necessarily have one today. We risk very much as a society forgetting that these people ever existed. (P2_CP_Romania)

There was also a quite numerous group of interviewees that decided to get involved in certain initiatives due to strong negative feelings related with widely covered news by the media. The motivation was strong disagreement or even outrage, especially visible in the child protection area. The interviewees from France and from Poland explained how intensive emotions related to child abuse pushed them to get involved.

When you read in the newspaper or in the telegram that there are children being beaten up, or staying alone in their apartment and their parents aren't there, and the social services do nothing, and then you see the children who are with their parents, who do everything, and they place their children for nothing, it's true that we wonder, but where is France? (P5_CP_France)

What is the greatest motivation for me? The biggest motivation for me is the harm done to (name) [a boy who was brutally murdered by his step-father], so that never again does any child have to suffer like this and, above all, die. (L2_CP_Poland).

In summary, the three categories of motivations can be differentiated as those related to:

- **positive urges**, e.g. empowerment, desire to repaying for the good that was previously experienced and desire to support less privileged others; desire to use own competences and experience for the sake of others; or moral duties rooted in professed values;
- **negative urges**, e.g. dissatisfaction/disagreement with the way social services work; linked to human suffering in specific events or general societal attitudes;
- **both (mixed) or processual**: occasionally starting with the positive and developing the negative or opposite, having the negative at the beginning and seeing the value, the outcome of being engaged. It was also visible in the research that the motivations changed according to systems response (or lack thereof), and citizens were adapted/modified methods and actions according to the situational factors.

Area specific results concerning citizens' motivations

There were not many significant differences between the areas studied concerning citizens' motivation to engage. Nevertheless, due to the different composition of citizens in different areas some tendencies were visible. **Mental health and disability** areas were the most represented by the citizens who wanted to **share their lived experience and support other** people in similar life situations. In the mental health area a lot of informants talked about empowerment and desire to raise their own voice as an important motivation. In these two areas there were motivations rooted in the positive urges. Nevertheless, there was also a lot of dissatisfaction or even anger on the system and desire to change it for their own good or for others. Contrary, **child protection** area might be characterised by **negative urges**, especially strong emotions and disagreement regarding children's situation in the system and inefficient functioning of social services. In the majority of studied countries citizens engaged in initiatives related to the **youth at risk** area represented mainly motivations rooted in the **practitioner's experiences** with the system and their empathy to young people in vulnerable situations not getting proper support. The exception were young people from Austria, largely involved in self-help activities and related self-advocacy actions. Their motivation was primarily based on the need for individual and collective empowerment.

3.4.4 Leadership exhaustion

Knowledge about **burnouts** and relation between civic engagement and regular life is important in designing responsiveness innovations, because it can indicate factors that might have a negative influence on the citizens' readiness to engage with a dialogue with the social services. Thus, we wanted to understand what causes burnouts among leaders and participants involved in citizens actions. These causes can be divided into four categories. First category is related to **work overload**, especially among leaders. Often our informants who worked in rather small CSOs had to carry out a lot of administrative tasks related to running the organisation and

tasks related to substantive activities. Also participants experienced burnouts due to work overload, because they often combine their activism with regular work. For instance, one participant from France mentioned overwhelming civic involvement and the constraints of other life demands, trying to focus on the positive aspects:

And that sometimes it comes into conflict with other things in life. You have to accept that too. That's part of being an ally. Sometimes the commitment you make is going to overwhelm you. There's a good side to it, because it means there's enthusiasm, there's a desire for things to change, no doubt, there's also a feeling of usefulness for everyone, and I fully recognise that. And then, sometimes, it puts other things in strain in relation to the rest of life. (P6_CP_France)

Leaders also mentioned that they were experiencing tiredness and burnout because instead of direct support towards others they were dealing with pointless **bureaucracy**.

I have a pure aversion; in the same way that I have this passion for doing things and the know-how, I have an equal amount of disgust for everything that is bureaucracy, paperwork, financial matters, and whatnot. (L3_MH_Portugal)

Another group of factors that influence burnouts of engaged citizens are to some extent related to **tiredness and extensive work**. However this tiredness is related to the emotional labour that is an integral part of initiatives for/ with groups in vulnerable situations.

If someone gets involved it is obvious that it will bring about other dynamics, which can sometimes be heavy, right? [...] I think that especially in Portugal, people become very emotional and exhausted and bring a lot of their ego into the issues, which then makes it difficult to be rational. I believe that sooner or later, this leads to cases of burnout; that's what I've seen around me. [...] It's exhausting; that is, especially when working in mental health, every day there are many stories, a lot of stuff, and many people wanting to talk. (P2_MH_Portugal)

Many informants also mentioned that at some point their **activism was a sense of mission**. Some interviewees completely lost themselves in their activities for the benefit of others. One of the interviewees lost his job due to his civic involvement and another got divorced. Another group of informants deal with this situation by **involving their loved ones in the activities** they undertake. Additionally, for some of them engaging their children in their activism is a form of civic education.

If I do something and I get involved, then very often my family gets involved too, right? Right from the beginning, somewhere in my first action, it turned out that my husband was involved and the child, now my son was also involved and for me it was so important that he knew what was happening with it. That he was learning what does it mean to be a citizen. (P4_CP_Poland)

Huge emotional involvement and sacrificing private life for citizens actions often led to exhaustion and burnout among our informants if these initiatives did not bring the expected results. It was related to the lack of agency and visible effects of interviewees actions. One of the leaders of initiative from the mental health area described how within the time she was getting more and more frustrated by the lack of change of the social services in Austria.

You see, that's also the experience with politics. You work for two years, put all your expertise into it and in the end there's just nothing, yes. And that's also – how should I put it – important political experience and that's not unusual, but you have to be able to cope with that, yes. I could go into a lot more detail now – in any case, the main experience is that participation doesn't work at the political level – it doesn't lead to change – although even this process, which actually failed, can be said in retrospect to have led to a certain, small degree of awareness-raising at various levels in the long term. (P1_D_Austria)

One French leader mentioned the overall characteristics of such work as done on the top of ordinary life, where there is no way out of the imbalance:

[...] I think there's a collective failure here too, which is that we don't give people enough time to fight for their social services, because we live in societies that alienate us in some ways from the things we have to do. You have to study, you have to work, you have to eat, you have to survive. (P9_YR_France)

An additional group of factors that contributed to the burnout was related to the **criticism or hate** experienced by leaders and participants. It has happened that the activism involving the public sharing of their stories was met with hate, especially on the internet. This caused some to withdraw from their activities for a while.

There were a few moments when I thought that maybe it was enough, that it was over, that there was no point in getting involved. There was hate. I processed a few such hates on my person, quite serious ones, where it came to such a breakdown that no, it doesn't make sense anymore, you just have to withdraw, leave it alone. But I survived this hate, I separated the haters from myself, from the group, so to speak, and the group is still there, and I am still there. So I think I managed to do it effectively. (L2_CP_Poland)

Also some leaders mentioned that, even though they do not care about recognition or praise, the **lack of appreciation** for what they do, demotivates them (e.g. in Poland).

In our study we confirmed that civic engagement might be related to the burnout (Ana 2023). However, we have noticed that the professionalisation of the third sector also includes awareness of fatigue and the measures taken to prevent it. Especially those leaders or participants who have many years of experience in social activities or are or were professionals in the area of social services **are aware of the risks associated with**, have introduced various **strategies to prevent it**. Among their strategies are: supervision, sharing responsibilities with team members, finding a passion/hobby, support of therapists or coaches, taking part in workshops and training.

Area and country specific findings

Even though we did not find area specific differences, we noticed that the exhaustion or stress experienced by citizens is likely connected to the depth of vulnerability that citizen-led actions entail. However, it is also situational and linked to individual coping skills. It is important to note that there are factors within the social service system that contribute to this issue. The first factor is system unresponsiveness (lack of reaction), which is perceived as a lack of change; even with significant citizen involvement, this can lead to feelings of hopelessness and fatigue. The second factor is the lack of recognition for their efforts and the presence of criticism, which can diminish their energy and enthusiasm. Lastly, the bureaucracy expected from these systems

often appears detached from the empathetic engagement that citizens seek when participating in actions.

An interesting country specific finding was mentioned by the Danish partner that there is a significant difference in Denmark in feelings of being exhausted due to financial coverage of citizen-led actions on citizens' behalf. This effect seems to be preventing burnout and unbalanced, mission driven work.

There were signals but no definite statements about burnout issues among participants in Austria or Romania.

3.4.5 Citizens engaged in actions – diverse identities

Interviews with citizens engaged in civic actions revealed that being a leader – leader or participant – is often a very important part of their self-identity. Since a person's identity is a very complex concept and limiting it to a few dimensions noticed in this study does not allow for generalisation, or might be perceived as reductionists, for the analytical reasons we decided to present an emerging typology of citizens who are engaging in actions we have developed during analysis of interviews with leaders and participants of actions. We also acknowledge the intersectional dimension of their identities. Features like: age, gender identity, origin (ethnicity, nationality, skin colour, socio-economic background), education, level of physical and mental ability, family status, sexual orientation, personality, life trajectory etc. overlap with elements of leader identity, creating a unique identity in each case, so in our opinion it is worth consideration and broader research in the future.

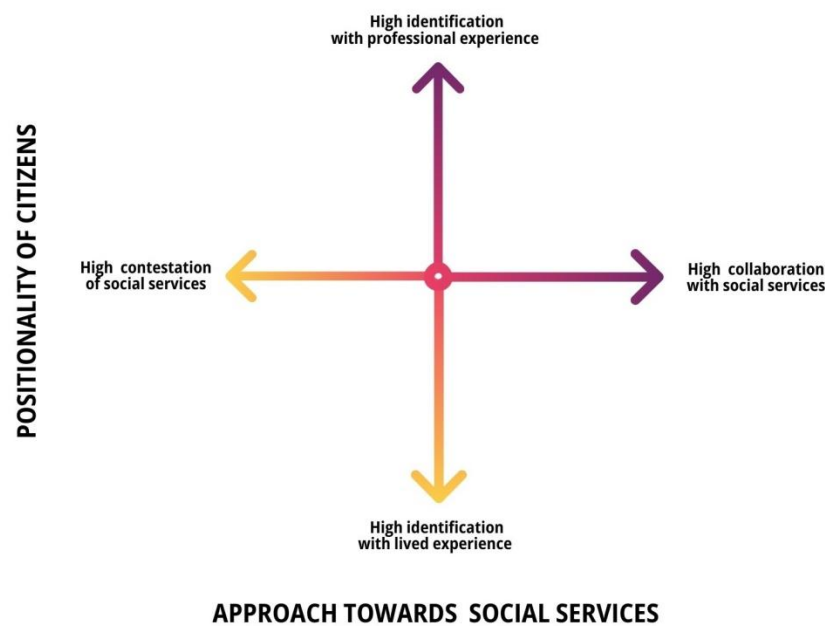
The first spectrum is related to the **positionality** of the most active citizens who organise or participate in actions. On one end of the spectrum are these interviewees who have their own lived experience in the area of one's civic involvement. In this group there are also people who, having lived experience and being professionals, emphasise their experience in the first place. People who are close ones of persons with lived experiences can be placed in the middle of this spectrum as those who experience vulnerability indirectly. On the second end of the spectrum are these interviewees who present themselves mainly as experts or professionals no matter if they have lived experience or not.

The second spectrum describes **attitudes towards building relations with social services** providers and decision makers. The attitudes range from contestation (e.g. protests) through building alternative solutions (e.g. services provided by CSOs) to cooperation with social services (e.g. being members of advisory boards).

In this illustration we acknowledge the **fluidity of citizens engaged in actions identity** in both spectra – by engaging in various actions and by changing their identity over time. For example, among our interviewees there was a noticeable tendency towards professionalisation. We noticed that in some cases experienced leaders involved in user-led organisations transformed into professional experts by telling their own stories repeatedly. In their eagerness for political impact, it is expressed that they forgot to listen to and be responsive towards the stories of peers. Contrary, there were also people who after many years of slow systemic work reach the point where they start contesting social services and demanding their rights.

We identified that crossing these two spectra may show interesting dynamics of fluid identity among four categories within two spectra, having sometimes mixed role identity experience or indefinite role identity:

Diagram 1. Citizens roles across positionality and approach spectra.



- 1) On one end of the spectrum are these interviewees who have their own lived experience in the area of one's civic involvement. In this group there are also people who, having lived experience and being professionals, emphasise their experience in the first place.
- 2) On the second end of the spectrum are these interviewees who present themselves mainly as experts or professionals no matter if they have lived experience or not.

Considering that sometimes mixed identity experience or undefined identity were discussed among the research group and that such an exploration of identities needs to be continued in more extended or deeper research, this first attempt to analyse such activities has shown that there is no single pattern or clarity around such a complex issue, but all we can confirm the need for a more complex analysis of leaders' roles than a simple, one-dimensional typology.

Area specific results concerning citizens' identities

Although leaders and participants presented various approaches in the **disability area**, there are many highly professional organisers of actions. Although they have lived experiences, they often present themselves as experts. In this area, families of people with disabilities were also active, typically adopting a more contesting approach rather than a cooperative one.

In the **child protection** area we also noticed many professionally prepared leaders, however there was a strong group of protesters who were using "windows of opportunity" to contest the system and call for rapid and deep changes, mainly because of children at risk

situations. In this area there were almost no children engaged (except Romania), however a group of indirect social service users (parents) were also active here.

Contrary, the **mental health** area was represented by many people with lived experience. Especially there were many leaders and participants calling for the rights and dignity of people with difficult experiences regarding their mental health issues. In this area, we mainly spoke with representatives of self-help and self-advocacy individuals and groups. However, there were also people inclined to collaborate with CSOs and social services.

Youth at risk service seems to be the area with most leaders who want to cooperate with each other in self-support groups (e.g. LGBTQ+ groups in Austria and Poland). In this area there were only a few individuals contestating social services (e.g. in France). Majority of leaders and participants chose slow, persistent actions towards systemic changes.

3.5 Citizens' actions aiming at social change

Introduction

In this chapter we focus on citizen-led actions. We will briefly describe types of actions that citizens whom we spoke, created and implemented. We also explain how these actions were planned, implemented and communicated as well as how outcomes of these actions were described. In the last section of this part we will also present strengths and weaknesses as well as opportunities and threats that have influenced these actions based on the SWOT analysis approach.

We analyse them in the context of the responsiveness of social services. We are therefore interested in finding out whether citizens take into any aspects of responsiveness in social services, if in any way they complement services, enter into dialogue with them or disagree. Through an in-depth analysis of citizens actions, we also try to capture their own responsiveness and draw on their good practices in this area.

3.5.1 Content of citizens' actions: focusing on the situation of groups in vulnerable situations and quality of social service

Our research was exploratory in nature, thus we have chosen different actions in four analysed areas to see the picture of area specific approaches or cross-area more universal themes. These actions (presented in Table 8.) show examples in each country regarding disability, mental health, child protection or youth at risk areas of social services only to some extent.

Table 9. Issues addressed in citizens' actions.

Country/ Area	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth at risk
Austria	- Blaming the social inclusion and independent living of people with disabilities - Fight for the personal budget to guarantee an independent life (e.g. performative protests)	- Destigmatisation of mental illness - Self-help group trying to raise awareness about mental health & illnesses with different media, artistic formats, and events	- Self-help groups and associations for single mothers in child protection trials aiming to empower the voices of single mothers and their children - Improvement of financial support for young unaccompanied refugees	- Self-representative groups that aim for more participation in social services for young people - Self-help/ advocacy group for queer youth facing exclusion and stigmatisation
Denmark	- Raising awareness of the lack of rights and social inclusion of people with disabilities - Improving the support to people with disabilities - Handicapped toilets at a specific public place (awareness about the issue of access and quality)	- Keeping the Psychiatry Ward in the local area (demonstration) - Improving the support to people with mental illness - De-tabooing and de-stigmatising mental illness - Campaign to normalise parents with mental illness	- Raising awareness about and strengthening the conditions of current & former foster care residents	- Homes for young people (creating a network/ alliance preventing homelessness among young people)

Country/ Area	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth at risk
France	- Ensuring fair rights for workers with disabilities - Improved access to disability allowance - Improved access to and quality of services for persons with disabilities	- A critique of the medical model of mental healthcare	- Improving quality of support for children in care - Ending 'abusive' child placement based on poverty-related motives alone - Better and systematic protection for unaccompanied minors - Adapting child protection measures to cases of domestic violence	- Dedicated and sustainable support for care leavers - Better support for migrant youth - Addressing students' precariousness
Poland	- Fight for the drug reimbursement for rare diseases - Lobbying for the personal assistants for people with disabilities: support - Opening the Centre of Rare Diseases	- Calling for reform of the mental health system, increased funding for the system - Working against the stigmatisation of people in mental health crisis - Keeping the psychiatry centre in the local area - Helpline for man with mental health issues - Conducting workshops and educating about life with mental illness	- Legislative changes in child protection laws and child protection standards - Lobbying for changes in foster care system - Supporting biological parents at risk of losing their children - Research about condition of foster care in Poland - Education about child abuse prevention	- Housing support for youth at risk of homelessness (foster care leavers, ex-prisoners)
Portugal	- Low compliance of the International Convention for the integration of the Persons with Disability - Claiming to improve the support for autonomy of the people with disability (ex. extension of the support during the weekends) - Raising awareness related to the need to reduce poverty among people with disabilities	- Fighting against stigmatisation and discrimination - Reporting the lack of information about social services, barriers and lack of accessibility to services, including financial issues - Claiming for more mental health literacy	—	—

Country/ Area	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth at risk
Romania	- Writing a letter to the Ministry of Labour for solving the problems of people with disability - Making cultural, touristic and leisure spaces accessible for people with disabilities - Drawing public attention to the problems of children with Down Syndrome	- Raising awareness of the importance of mental health and stigmatisation of people with mental disorders - Research about conditions in mental health institutions - Support groups to treat depression, - Advocating for a more equitable, inclusive, patient-sensitive and socially sensitive health system	- Social work and education for children from marginalised communities - Improving child protection legislation	- Education and support for Roma youth
All countries Main themes	Access, special needs & proper support, financial support, autonomy, inclusion	Destigmatisation, normalisation , proper support, existence of services: funding and access	Empowerment of service-users, child protection: quality of services and law change, education	Housing, proper support in transition to adulthood, inclusion

Citizen-led actions use various methods to highlight these topics, including:

- protests, demonstrations, marches;
- (self)-advocacy means;
- lobbying;
- petitions, open letters, calling-out;
- informal meetings with politicians/ experts/ activists;
- building networks of engaged citizens (off/online);
- participation in the official decision-making/ consultation bodies;
- press conferences, media appearances;
- dissemination of knowledge (scientific reports, evidence-based and/or good practices, study cases, innovative projects...);
- awareness raising campaigns;
- artistic events and street activism;
- different ways of informal and non-formal education like trainings, workshops, e-learning, but also leaflets on the streets, accidental education;
- direct support for or with the clients/ groups/ individuals;
- self-support groups and peer-support;
- fundraising campaigns;
- providing different types of direct support to the service users.

The data collected also allow us to see some tendencies in the studied area (see: Table 9a in Annex 1). Actions might be found in all aspects of social functioning: macro (laws, social service system and policy, public awareness), meso (social services) and micro (individual needs, empowerment). We found three groups of scopes:

- actions that aim at **changing systems** by advocating for specific solutions, criticising existing quality measures, existing procedures, used tools and implemented models or by designing and experimenting with innovations;
- actions that aim at providing **alternative services** offered by citizen-led organisations, mainly by CSOs;
- actions related to **awareness raising** mainly by educating about issues of certain needs.

Below we integrated the themes found while interviewing leaders and participants.

Table 10. Citizens' actions by general themes and areas.

General theme / area	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth at risk
Law	2	0	2	1
System	6	3	2	4
Service	6	5	5	5
Awareness	4	7	3	2
Empowerment	1	3	1	2

(More detailed table on citizens actions' aims is presented in Table 9a. and on citizens actions' target groups is presented in Table 9b. in Annex 1)

Although the actions presented above allow us to see only a certain fragment of civic engagement fields in the four areas studied, we noticed that many of these **actions do not target direct change within the social services**. They rather discuss issues in the public so the other citizens and politicians **hear their voice**. More on this aspect – see the discussion and conclusions parts of this report. Such results might come from the study limitation and from the WP3 aim, but also confirms WP2 observation on limited engagement of service users in social service change.

3.5.2 Target groups of citizens' actions

In the study, we were also interested in identifying the target groups for these activities. Knowledge about these groups, combined with information on the topics of civic activities (see tables above), helps us understand which areas of social services require particular attention.

Actions led by citizens, as analysed in the project, target various groups; however, it is important to note that these groups share similarities across all participating countries. They include eight most emphasised ones:

- general public;
- specific subgroups that might be interested in the issue (e.g. parents with small children);
- media;
- politicians and decision-makers (including the president, prime ministers, ministers, members of parliament, regional and local authorities);
- groups and individuals in vulnerable situations;
- service users;
- families and caregivers of service users;
- professionals and experts (social workers, teachers, psychiatric practitioners, nurses, NGO workers etc.);

The overall set of target groups can be classified into two main categories: those expected to benefit (either directly or indirectly) from the action, and those anticipated to respond to the action (the latter being more frequently referenced). **Beneficiaries** are individuals who gain something from the initiative, such as direct support or an enhancement in their quality of life. **Respondents** are those who are expected to react in some manner to the initiative, whether by changing their attitudes or implementing changes within the system or laws. The first group consists of service users and their close ones and the second group is represented by the general public, professionals and experts, politicians and decision makers as well as media. We present the findings in more detail in Table 9b. in Annex 1.

Typically, there were multiple target groups involved in a single action. For example, a dual target approach addressing both decision-makers and the general public was considered as strategically necessary when citizen-led actions aimed to raise public awareness and exert pressure on decision-makers regarding these issues.

Target groups often span multiple areas in every country. For instance, citizen-led actions aimed at young people in mental health crises bridge both the youth-at-risk and mental health areas. In some cases, these actions are part of a broader initiative that crosses sector boundaries. This is particularly relevant for cases or actions related to mental health and disability, child protection and youth at risk, or mental health and youth at risk (e.g. *March of the Yellow Ribbon* in Poland has addressed the issue of child, adolescent and adult mental health care systems; *One Million Voices* in Denmark addresses the issue of people - children, youths and adults – in the disability and mental health care systems; in France and Romania most of the actions regarding mental health and disability are at the intersection, since disability includes '*handicap psychique*'; Austrian campaign *Change for the youth* tries to strengthen the voice of young people with mental health problems and therefore crosses areas of youth at risk and mental health).

Area specific results concerning target groups and their representation

There are some differences in studied areas concerning which group is objectified and whose voice is silenced/suppressed. For instance, in some countries there is a specificity related to the **mental health** area, where the main voices that take space in the public sphere and public agenda are user organisations. In initiatives from this area many **self-advocacy actions** were present. It seems that in the majority of the researched countries mental health patients are getting louder and emancipated. Many initiatives (Portuguese campaign *Mental health is not a limit*; Danish campaign *Are you afraid of me?* or Polish *#nazdrowiepsychiczne* – for mental health), involve testimonies and life stories of people with mental health issues.

As regards the area of **disability**, much of the public **discourse appears to be shaped by professionals and practitioners** as well as **family members** of people with disabilities (beside Denmark where historically people with disabilities have had a voice, and Poland, where people with disabilities have gained more visibility and a voice in the last years due to the protests that were shown in national media). Some organisations that position themselves as user organisations are, in fact, “hybrid” in the sense that they bring together professionals, users and families. This may have important implications for the type of demands and recommendations that are made.

Organisations in the areas of **child protection** and **youth-at-risk** are also more overly represented by **experienced professionals, practitioners** or **others who mediate the voices of children and youth**. Due to legal regulations related to the protection of children, their images or individual stories are not/forbidden to be made public. On the other hand, despite such restrictions, there is a claim to give children and adolescents the opportunity to speak up on their own matters. In France, we were able to identify a few citizen-led actions that amplified a voice to minors. There was a large campaign launched known as *n'abandonnonspasnosenfants*²⁶ or the *#ChaquePasCompte* campaign led as part of the “Oubliés de la République” collective, that amplified the voice of care leavers (as “experts by experience”) and sought to raise awareness of elected officials and other decision-makers about the problems of the child protection system based on the experiential knowledge of youth. Similar examples can be found in Romanian CSOs that represent children and care leavers, e.g. campaign *From abandonment to success*. Interviewees mentioned different CSOs and actions that advocate for children’s rights, but in many cases minors were not the main stakeholders and creators of the actions, but they were taking part in the initiatives set up by adults.

To summarise, there is a question of representation and recognition of groups in vulnerable situations in responsive social services. From our analysis, we can recognize that there may be a **risk of over-professionalisation**, which can overshadow the narratives of people with lived experiences, mainly children and youth at risk.

²⁶ *#n'abandonnonspasnosenfants* campaign was a campaign to raise awareness about care leavers and improve support for this population group.

3.5.3 Planning and implementation of citizens' actions

The **citizen-led actions** were not only **spontaneous** but were also **planned** to some extent. Even though the initial impulse to act was immediate (e.g., information about the closing of a mental health unit, the death of a child, shocking reports on the high number of lost young refugees), the subsequent actions were managed either individually or collectively. The way planning, implementing, and managing actions was handled depended on a few factors:

- issues that are in the centre of actions (e.g. long lasting problem of social services, a sudden, tragic event);
- groups of engaged citizens;
- preferred form of engagement (protest, education, monitoring, empowerment, advocacy etc.);
- preferred space of action (online, offline, both);
- resources of the citizens (among others time, fundings, people, structures, knowledge, technical background);
- social capital and networks (esp. relation with the decision makers and media);
- previous experiences in action-taking/ campaigns/ participation in other actions;
- level of institutionalisation of initiatives (CSO, grassroots group, individual not-connected);
- scope of actions (local, regional, national, international);
- estimated duration of the initiative;
- general public response, social climate, interest and level of public emotions (e.g. public outrage) regarding issue;
- interest or indifference of media, decision-makers and politicians.

Regarding these factors we were able to distinguish five sorts of actions from conscious implementation.

- **Individual independent actions that take place mainly online** (e.g. leaders in Austria). These actions often are related to awareness raising actions, education and self-advocacy, as their organisers are people with lived experience. The online-activists communicated via social media, blogs, podcasts and YouTube-channels. They spoke about the largely positive response from the public and, most importantly, the positive impact of the support group on the members themselves. Due to the limited resources of individuals such initiatives are rarely part of some bigger strategies. They might result from the need for self-expression and emancipation. Moreover, they are often spontaneous and a result of strong emotions. For instance in France there was a petition regarding rights of people with disabilities that was launched by an individual and spread online, same thing in Portugal – a single person's petition was mentioned as an example of a voice of a mother of a child with disability. They take place from time to time, on a point-by-point basis.

- **Grassroots longer-term online and offline actions** (e.g. Facebook groups in Austria, Denmark) that are often related to self-support groups. The studied ones were the response to the lack of or not sufficient social services and were the reaction of dissatisfied citizens or citizens whose voice is not taken into account. Within time such groups start to be more institutionalised and change into self-advocacy communities that use online and offline initiatives that sometimes reach national scope. They are more focused on people with lived experience and self-help, however within time their initiatives related to empowerment start to influence decision-makers and the general public (as examples of Yellow Vest Protest in France or Yellow Ribbon March in Poland).
- **Grassroots ad hoc online (and offline) actions that are the reaction to emotion provoking events** (e.g. death of a child, legislative changes like limitation of personal budget in Austria, abolished access for all students to €1 meals at the Crous canteens in France). These kinds of initiatives often reach the general public and involve them in online and offline actions. They are often related to numerous protests and online contestation actions like sharing some informations, signing petitions. Some of such ad hoc initiatives transform into more institutionalised actions.
- **Institutionalised, systemic actions (CSOs) that use certain social climate** to raise particular issues topic (eg. *One Million Hearts* event during preliminary elections in Denmark²⁷). Organisers of such initiatives often network with ad hoc grassroots initiatives to combine resources and involve various stakeholders. Long-lasting organisations often look for the “window of opportunity” that is related with media or general public interest regarding certain issues. One leader from the mental health area concluded as follows:

If the opportunity arises, we can propose something. But if we see that it's a giant elephant, we'll be banging our heads against the wall. There must be a right time. (P[no number]_MH_Portugal)

When the social climate is conducive they are able to lobby for change or start awareness raising and education campaigns (e.g. campaign related to the rights of caregivers of people with disabilities in Poland or "Not the France I imagined" campaign by Human Rights Watch in France)

- **Institutionalised, systemic actions (CSOs) that work on a daily basis** and step-by-step try to change social services. They often create their own social services and offer direct support to service users. CSOs have different types of resources to plan and implement long-lasting strategies related to lobbying, educating, monitoring and researching. The more mature ones use well-thought narration and aim at a certain outcome.

²⁷ It was a one-off campaign in connection with the municipal elections in 2019, where 64,500 little red hearts were put on popsicle sticks, with each heart representing a child in Denmark living below the poverty line at the time. The 64,500 hearts were set up in a huge heart in a well-known park and the movement made a lot of videos with drones as a happening around it. The message was to show and create awareness among the population that many children in Denmark are growing up in poverty to influence voters to consider this. As the leader said: It doesn't matter what you vote for at the election, but please remember that there are all these poor children sitting here when you make your mark.

While there were different types of initiatives studied, the vast **majority of them ended as institutionalised actions**. From what we heard as paths to grow citizen-led initiatives may start as grassroots/informal initiative (more and more often in the form of online actions, e.g. FB groups) of dissatisfied citizens (social services users or workers) and by the time they become more institutionalised and CSOs are being established. For instance an leader from Romania indicated that creation of CSOs is related to greater influence on policy-makers:

All the projects that are being carried out in Romania on such issues, which have to do with access to health services, to modern social assistance services, must be done by a strong network creating pressure on both organisations and public institutions that provide such services, but also on policy makers. Any association means greater visibility and increases the chance that reality will change. (P6_MH_Romania)

Area specific results concerning planning and implementation of actions

Data collected during this part of the project allowed us to grasp some differences regarding developing (growing, maturing) processes related to managing citizen-led actions. In the **mental health** area there was a relatively high number of self-support and self-advocacy groups that had started from the **online grassroots initiatives** and evolved into more institutionalised actions. It may suggest that people who experienced mental health issues try to raise their voices and work toward empowerment. This area is also represented by **informal online actions of individual leaders** who also fight for their own emancipation and dignity. Nevertheless, due to the fact that quite a large number of initiatives in this area are informal, citizens involved do not have access to many resources. Hence, they are looking for innovative ways of reaching to decision makers and general public (eg. artistic events, controversial or emotion provoking events).

In the **child protection** area we found **institutionalised, systemic actions as well as grassroots ad hoc actions**. Although this area seems highly professionalised some triggers resonating with the public like death of a child²⁸ allows a professional network with regular citizens and media to put pressure on decision makers. Initiatives that use social climate (e.g. outrage) seem to be most likely to achieve their objectives. On the other hand, it is difficult to predict when a trigger opening a window of opportunity might appear. As a result, CSOs might work on certain issues for many months or years without succeeding, but only one event is enough to quickly achieve the planned goals (like in the described above case in Poland).

Disability and youth at risk areas in our study were characterised mainly by **systemic, institutionalised actions**, many of which were related to direct support for groups facing vulnerable situations. With the exception in Austria where there were many grassroots initiatives related to self-support of youth at risk (e.g. queer youth).

²⁸ Three Polish activists who worked in the area of child protection and were connected to the introduction of Kamilek's Bill openly admitted that Kamilek's death was an opportunity to change the law. For instance one of the participants said: *I am also saying that this act [Kamilek Bill] contains so many solutions that [name of NGO] has been asking for and has been drawing attention to for years, that it is simply, it may sound bad, but it would be a sin not to simply take advantage of opportunity [the death of Kamilek](P4_CP_Poland).*

3.5.4 Results and outcomes of citizens' actions

The citizen-led actions may also be regarded as result-oriented. This helps citizens define their achievements. In turn, this is associated with a sense of agency, which provides motivation to take further action. When examining the responsiveness of social services, it is important to understand how engaged citizens perceive achievement. This understanding is crucial for defining the forms of cooperation they use to achieve desired outcomes.

Interestingly, a large portion of the actions studied **did not have clearly defined or measurable goals**. Aside from systemic, institutionalised ones, most of these actions were primarily responses to various deficiencies and irregularities in the functioning of social services, although some were clearly defined (e.g., destigmatisation of people with mental health issues). Some actions, especially these related to the **publicly funded project** must have precise, measurable results. For instance, Portuguese participant explained how the change within their action is considered:

There is a questionnaire before and a questionnaire after, where we ask about satisfaction, and we use a stigma scale and a mental health literacy scale (...) we know that there is an evolution in the literacy and stigma scales, there is a positive evolution that is significant statistically. (P[no number]_MH_Portugal)

However, to almost all leaders it is clear that such tools do not allow us to grasp the real impact of the initiative. Many interviewees argue that **it was not possible to clearly link the actions to the outcomes**. As one French interviewee explained:

It's hard to explain, it's a bit of a mystery: why does a social movement, at one point, take off when, just before, it was stagnating? We don't really know. It's the first time this subject has taken on such importance in public debate. In any case, I couldn't find any obvious traces before that. (P1_D/MH_France)

Beyond the immediate reactions and short-term results, the impacts of actions appeared also difficult to evaluate by the leaders and participants of the actions. As several interviewees said, the **outcome appeared difficult to quantify** and to **attribute to a specific action**. In cases where an initiative had a concrete, specific purpose (one-off action), such as: keeping psychiatric ward open, opening of Rare Diseases Medical Center, individualising the calculation of adult disability benefits; it is sometimes possible to identify a specific connection between action and result. In other cases, where the aim of the initiative is more broadly defined, such as raising awareness and disseminating knowledge about a challenge/problem, it was difficult for the interviewees to pinpoint whether, or to what extent, their action had a tangible impact. Moreover, some of the aims of initiatives changed over time in response to the changing needs of people or changing groups in need. For instance, a leader from Poland explained:

It was a process, it didn't all happen at once, when we founded the organisation we didn't really know that we would deal with homelessness [...], it turned out that the system of resocialization of minors in Poland often ends in homelessness, because initially we were supposed to deal with young people leaving resocialization facilities, but we didn't recognise this group as a group without a roof over their heads. We thought more about the fact that we would support here psychologically, materially [...] reality showed us that

the first need of these young people leaving resocialization facilities, because we wanted to focus on them, is precisely a place, a roof over their heads, an apartment. And then in a short time it turned out that this problem does not only concern this group but also children who are just out of care, but also increasingly young people who are raised in a family and have never had any contact with the system. (L4_Y_Poland)

Many interviewees had difficulties to determine whether their initiative was successful. They argue that **success is something that is felt** (e.g. by sense of own agency, gratefulness of initiatives beneficiaries, changes in the behaviours and thinking of the general public) rather than something that can be measured. As participant from Austria mentioned many forms which might make change but also together they make a difference, hard to distinct on is role in the final outcome:

[...] it's usually not one thing that does something but that it trickles in more and more and that this more and more confrontation with the topic changes something. (P6_YR/MH_Austria)

Some leaders and participants described envisaging scaling up their actions to more confrontational ones in order to exert more impactful pressure. Others explained that they had learnt important lessons from organising or participating in the actions and that they were reassessing the best way forward. Yet others, including those involved in actions that had ultimately achieved their goals, said they would pursue their efforts by remaining alert to new developments and staying faithful to the cause, like a French leader who said:

In concrete terms, I think that all social rights are under threat. For me, this victory is temporary. I'm not at all ruling out the possibility that we'll have to pull on our shirts again in the future (P1_D/MH_France)

Some leaders were able to indicate some outcomes that could be divided into macro, meso and micro levels. On the macro level they are in the first place related to changes of the whole system e.g. by introducing new solutions (e.g. personal assistants for people with disabilities) or changes in implementation of new solutions in current legal framework (e.g. Kamilek's Bill in Poland, adult disability allowance in France). These outcomes are often easy to identify, however it may also take years of systematic work of many stakeholders to achieve them. The final result is the cumulative effort of many people and includes both small success stories as well as big failures. However, outcomes in these areas are highly dependent on the political situation. For instance change of the ruling party can stop or reverse the process of changing the law or accelerate it. Such an opportunity occurred in France, where adult disability allowance was an issue on the table for years, but finally a favourable political atmosphere, side actions like customised letters to MPs followed by the petition that reached over 100,000 signatories allowed the introduction of new legislation.

Changes in society attitudes towards certain groups or topics are also considered as macro level. However such outcomes are extremely difficult to measure. Moreover, such changes are mostly visible over a long period of time. One of the Romanian leader from disability area told us how she/he was experiencing such change:

The last few years have been years of learning [...]. I think they [young people nowadays] will be much more empathetic and you will feel the change. I feel it because, for example, on the tram, 20 years ago, maybe people were pulling their child away from my child. That doesn't happen anymore, even though it's obvious that [...] has Down Syndrome [...] but I don't feel like people are running away from him anymore. Rather, people are getting into the dialog faster than they used to or even if they don't know they come and ask. In the old days they wouldn't even ask you a question, they would just take their child and run away from you. (L10_D_Romania)

Outcomes on meso level are related to local changes of the system, laws, social service, elaboration of new tools or models on local/ institutional/ organisational level. Meso outcomes are also related to changes in the public perception of particular CSOs, recognition of their work, empowerment of groups in vulnerable situations.

We have significantly reduced the waiting time for the disability allowance and we are in the process of creating a new model, so the government has also set aside some money for it, which will look at making the case processing shorter. And that's what we're trying to do, to find some of these constructive examples where it makes sense both for citizens with disabilities, but also makes sense for the various agencies and institutions (L6_D_Denmark)

As a result of our interactions with public institutions, when there are major decisions we are consulted, they come to us. When the government prepares a piece of legislation establishing something that is related to adoption and child protection, whether we are talking about implementing rules or a decision, a ministerial order, we are usually asked if we are okay with what is there and if we have feedback, before we face it in court. (L7_CP_Romania)

On the **micro level outcomes** are related to service users, leaders themselves and their families. Concerning changes of particular lives of service users interviewees mentioned that they are easily measurable. For instance one Portuguese leader said:

I know that on an individual level, reaching family X or Y, I know it has effects, I can help someone do something and have access to their rights. I can clearly understand the results, because it is a more direct relationship. People write to me, I reply, do this, do that ([ID not provided]_CP/Y_Portugal)

Many leaders also mentioned that outcomes important to them are related to changes in their own life. They become empowered and gain a sense of strength, agency and self-fulfilment. One of the French leaders described this as follows:

I feel like I count. [...] To show my kids that I'm fighting for them. Maybe not for them, right now, because it's over, but I'm fighting a little for the others. For those who come after. When they have children, I want this vicious circle to stop (P8_CP_France)

Due to their civic involvement some engaged citizens emphasised that they developed their competences, gained experience and increased their professional recognition. There were also voices that civic engagement allowed leaders to regain motivation and strengths to act by believing in human kindness again.

[...] it really showed that human nature is stronger, and that when we have to help each other, we help each other. Personally, I was touched to see all that, to see all the names that were put around that petition. (L1_YR_France)

Moreover, for many people, especially involved in self-support or self-advocacy groups, becoming a member of a community was an important personal outcome of their involvement.

This group motto, this mutual learning from each other and walking the path together is simply a wonderful experience. And a wonderful experience that there are people who see it the same way and that therefore quite a lot goes on. (P20_MH_Austria)

Some leaders indicated that awareness and citizenship engagement of the members of their families was an important result of their actions. One of the Portuguese leaders told us how her/his son learnt to be an active citizen by participating in the protest she/he organised.

I think it has a positive impact on my children. My middle son, at my first protest, went with me. I said I had two posters and that I needed someone to help me. For him to be there too, for him to have this experience of being more politically active, which is important. Therefore, just in terms of discussions, I think it is very positive that he has had this greater perception. And they need to be aware and know their rights and know how to defend their brother or other colleagues. Because then you transfer this to school, wherever you are, you must be aware of situations of injustice and raise your hand to defend someone, not to remain silent. (L9_CP/Y_Portugal)

3.5.5 Social networking as key component

For the majority of interviewees, networks and partnerships were assessed as being a key component of the analysed actions and one of the most crucial elements of their accomplishments. These **networks and partnerships vary in nature and composition**. Almost all interviewees talked about different aims and strategies of networking as well as about different networks regarding people or organisations involved. We have identified seven main categories of entities that were chosen for networking by our informants (Table 10).

Most important entities mentioned by our interviewees were other **CSOs or NGOs**, **decision-makers** and **politicians**. Partnerships were set up also among people with lived experience (e.g. **self-support groups** of people with the experience of mental health crisis), celebrities and well-known personalities as well as experts. Many people also mentioned building a network of contacts with various **media** and some with social services and other public institutions. What is interesting, besides some voices from Portugal and Poland networking with the business sector, cultural institutions or religious organisations was not mentioned. It is interesting finding worth further study on the role of these partners as not seen of big value to engaged citizens.

The table below explains in detail the reasons, forms of cooperation and challenges mentioned by citizens in relating to other partners seen as valuable collaborators:

Table 11. Networking practices in citizens' actions

Group/ individuals	Aims or reasons of networking	Forms and strategies of networks	Challenges related to the networking
Other CSOs or NGOs	- to increase resources - to exchange knowledge and expertise - to learn from each other - to put pressure on politicians - to broaden the scope of own activities and reach broader public - to work across different areas - to gain legitimacy by smaller CSOs	- federations, alliance - umbrella organisations - some of those network exists on regular basis (e.g. umbrella organisations) and some activates when there is a need (e.g for demonstration) - based on personal or professional relations	- different goals among organisations - competition for fundings/ beneficiaries - legal and organisational differences - ego of leaders that impede cooperation
Decision - makers and politicians	- to be able to introduce real changes - to influence most important authorities (e.g. ministries) - to accelerate the process of change (e.g. introduction of new law)	- lobbying - advisory boards and other legally constituted bodies - personal relations with politician were as well useful as formal connections	- politicians are difficult to reach and get involved - decision-makers may use CSOs or for their particular interest - ideological differences - lobbying is cost consuming - dependency regarding fundings
Media	- to put pressure on politicians - to reach general public - to amplify messages	- press conferences - controversial, emotion provoking content (e.g. of social campaigns) - ambassador or partners of the initiative - based on personal or professional relations	- mainly interested only in controversy, intensive emotions - quickly lose interest
Celebrities, influencers and tv personalities	- to help publicise initiative and reach to general public - to reach goals in a short time without much resources needed - to put pressure on politicians and stakeholders	- ambassador of the initiative - social media campaigns	- reluctance to get involved in political/difficult matters - ideological differences
Experts	- to gain more knowledge, expertise - increase resources - to give credibility to own actions - to widen range of resources, competences and networks - to connect service users and providers outside the system - allies could provide different competences	- alternative services - congresses, marches, protests	- positionality conflict - lack of time thus shallow engagement - ego of some experts that impede cooperation

Group/ individuals	Aims or reasons of networking	Forms and strategies of networks	Challenges related to the networking
Other people with lived experience	- to amplify own voice - to not to feel alone - to gain collective agency - as a tool for empowerment - to learn from each other	- self-support groups - self-advocacy groups - networks often based on personal/ informal relations - often online tools like FB groups are used to build a community with peers with similar interests	- ego of leaders that impede cooperation - difficulties in reaching/ connecting certain groups - lack of trust towards institutions
Social services and other public institutions	- to connect service users and providers and to have easier access to service providers - to unite to change the system - to open services for change - to learn from each other - to increase resources	- participation in the official decision-making/ consultation bodies	- social services image as “unfriendly, closed” - paternalism of social services - illusory responsiveness and willingness to cooperate

Networking allows a wide **scope of resources** (people, knowledge, competencies, fundings, networks, tools etc.). Setting up federation, associations, umbrella organisations or teaming up with experts or well-known celebrities allows to **reach a more numerous and more heterogeneous group** of respondents (those who shall respond). One leader from Romania mentioned how due to networking with different CSOs they started to work cross-sectoral:

So far, we have worked with many other CSOs that are not necessarily related to mental health. For example, we have collaborated with [...] CSOs in the LGBT area. [...] When it comes to mental health organisations, we have had, I think, several small, big collaborations. We also collaborated with psychologists, we also had guests on social media. (P4_MH_Romania)

Networking, especially with other CSOs or media, allows greater **pressure on decision-makers**. A leader from mental health organisation in Portugal explained what strategy they used to reach politicians:

[...] the first thing we did to create pressure, political lobbying, we created a federation. [...] (association name) helped to create other organisations. Knowing that there would be competition later, but... When we had 4, 5, 6 organisations, we created a federation. First strategy. Create a national lobby. (L[no number]_MH_Portugal)

In addition, a Polish participant from a child protection CSO recalled how media involvement allowed them to introduce new laws.

So many people were involved in interviews, but the media too, I mean, I think they had their role. We also talked to them in such a way that through the media, the decision-makers exert pressure on politicians, on members of parliament, on senators, and this pressure that is created through them, well, I think it also mobilises politicians to make these decisions (P4_CP_Poland)

Similarly **power of media** was mentioned in other researched countries (except Denmark, where due to the small number of inhabitants networking with politicians is more direct^[1]). For

instance an leader involved in petitions about student meals indicated the importance of media and different partnerships by saying:

I think [the success] was a combination of a lot of different players that made this petition visible. On the one hand, it was the media, because the petition was supported by [organisations], so there was a lot of publicity for the petition. So the media took an interest. The major national media, such as France Inter, etc., and France Télévisions, did short reports on the subject to explain that the {name of action} would soon be a thing of the past. That's also how we reached people who weren't necessarily familiar with the student environment, particularly pensioners, etc., who were also outraged. (L1_YR_France)

Networking with other partners allows one to gain **legitimacy, credibility and recognition**. As a result it is easier to be treated as partners by public institutions. Allies could also provide different competences related to: advocacy and lobbying, legal expertise, advice in communicating and using digital tools, producing visuals, bridging experiential and academic knowledge, providing useful concepts and frameworks, and assisting with various practical tasks.

Building **alliances with the media** helps to amplify the voices and publicise the issue in a short time. A leader of one of the Austrian CSOs that works in the area of youth at risk mentioned how they try to involve media interest.

[...] So we always combined this with expertise on the current situation of young people and our political demands based on expertise on children's rights, and that really worked, I mean I'm not completely objective, I'm the campaign manager [laughs] but it worked very well, we were very satisfied with the media coverage. (P3_CP/YR_Austria)

Collaboration with celebrities or well-known people in the world of arts and entertainment also allows to speed up the process of reaching the general audience. Artists and famous people make the difference by offering and enhancing visibility to campaigns. They have the capacity to make certain themes, “hype”. The participation of *influencers* and celebrities in a specific petition or campaign brings followers and viewers and has the potential to reach masses in a short time. Also connections (esp. private ones) with politicians help to accelerate the process of change. One of the Polish lobbying leader explained the process of lobbying for new law against children violence as mapping politicians, knowing them better, selecting those who could be useful for the action:

So if we are researching decision-makers, well, we are looking for someone who can be our ally, because for example this topic is close to them for reasons, I don't know, personally or politically, it doesn't matter much, but somewhere this common point, right? (...) But without this check beforehand, whether there is a child, but without checking beforehand, what, well, you know, we would go in blind, so here it is about simply getting to know these people [politicians], even like this, well, finding out quite a lot about them, what is important to them and their kind of... well, looking for those people who will be closest to us or who may be interested, so if I mean this simply, this mapping, this is a very, very important stage for sure. (P1_CP_Poland).

Similar approach was mentioned in Romania, where a leader in the CSO from the child protection area, explained their strategy to reach out to politicians and develop their empathy by networking them with service users – children from the foster care sector.

No politician can go and vote in Parliament with the same ignorance after interacting with children who have been adopted and after hearing their stories: how they came to be adopted, how difficult it was, and why it was difficult, what the obstacles were. Once they understood these things and went to vote, it is clear that they no longer had the same freedom of conscience to not vote for certain amendments. (L7_CP_Romania)

Many informants mentioned the **strength of personal connections**. In their opinion good cooperation between citizens and social service providers or decision makers, besides legal basis such as procedures and tools, needs to be built on mutual trust, respect and on liking each other.

This type of network also facilitates relations between service users and service providers but also creates a **platform to learn from each other**. The leaders who were able to convince social services staff to become more open mentioned the positive outcome of such cooperation, as described by one of the Romanian participants:

Colleagues from state institutions who are supposed to do their work in the community, they got infected with our enthusiasm and the way we do things and we started to team up, they started to be much more present, more empathetic and responsible because of that [...]. We have some colleagues who joined, even though they work at the state, we feel like we are a team. (P1_CP_Romania)

Nevertheless, many of the leaders saw networks with social services as challenging. They mentioned that it is easier to create a relationship with experts from social services than with institutions as a whole. They believed that **some networks** regarding citizens and social services exist only **because there is a legal requirement** to do so, but due to organisational bureaucracy in these institutions, real dialogue is not possible. Some interviewees even argued that decision-making bodies are often apparent or are instrumentalized by politicians and used mainly for promotion reasons.

Although informants mentioned many positive outcomes of networking, they also mentioned different **challenges regarding building relations with different stakeholders**. For instance, CSOs' networking can be related to different goals and strategies of particular organisations that might result in the conflicts between people.

I saw people with opposing views. [...] Do we talk to the unions or not? Are we revolutionary or not? It was, at times, very theoretical. And we saw that it irritated people. I think there were also forms of oppression that went into these questions. (...) It's a bit of a categorisation, but there were bourgeois who were very much into revolution. People who were more down-to-earth and who wanted to be as pragmatic as possible, because [they have] less money and if you can have 100 euros more [in compensation], that's good. (P9_YR_France)

CSOs might also **compete for fundings and beneficiaries**, which can be an obstacle regarding networking. Networked CSOs might have different organisational and legal backgrounds, thus there might be some legal issues concerning their cooperation (e.g. fundraising). Development of CSO networks functioning on a daily basis also needs a lot of

different resources and is related to significant time and energy spent on coordination between partners in an action. As a result, some organisations prefer to focus on more direct support.

Over the years we have been in collaboration with many associations, but on projects. Or, we've joined all sorts of coalitions that were looking for change like the anti-smoking coalition. But we are not currently part of an active group of CSOs working together to change public policy. Again, for CSOs to get involved in such an endeavour, it means time, it means money, it means voluntary work. Which, yes, becomes difficult.
(L11_MH_Romania)

Networking with **politicians** and decision makers was mentioned as one of the **most important factors** of success. However it was also indicated as extremely uncertain, because politicians are difficult to reach and made involved. They mainly want to engage in some initiatives when they can make political capital on the issue. Some interviewees also mentioned that there are situations when decision-makers use CSOs or leaders for their particular interest and deceive them. One of the Polish participants recalled a situation, when her/his CSOs were used by the Ombudsman for children:

It is a situation where we did not suit the Ombudsman's [for children's rights] worldview, but at the same time he used us a bit as something to boost his PR, right? (P1_CP_Poland).

Some interviewees also raise the question of ideological differences between them and politicians. They mentioned that sometimes they had a dilemma to join forces with politicians who were not aligned with the organisation's vision or worldview but who could provide crucial support for the action (similar situations also occur with celebrities and influencers).

Networking with politicians and lobbying was often seen as an activity that needed specialist knowledge and financial resources, which is often out of reach of smaller organisations²⁹. It is often that resources invested into the networking with politicians do not pay back. One French leader recalled a disappointing process of consultation with the decision-makers:

The politicians understood that this was creating a public problem, so they took it into account. But they didn't listen to us, because they didn't act on our demands. They were contemptuous and decided to ignore us. Yes, I think the word "ignore" is important in nuance. I think we were heard, but there was no reaction. So that's why I said "not listened to", because I believe that when you listen to someone, there's a reaction. Or even you could have felt listened to, but we didn't feel listened to. (P11_YR_France)

Interviewees valued their relationships with the media, but they emphasised that the **media are often interested in controversy** or events related to intense emotions, thus it might be difficult to grasp their interest about less media issues. Contrary, many celebrities, influencers or well-known personalities do not want to engage with controversial or political issues. Media also quickly lose interest in a given issue, which makes it difficult to retain their interest for a longer period of time.

²⁹ The short distance is illustrated by leaders telling how they build partnerships with politicians by drinking coffee with the politicians in the parliament as well as one of the leaders illustrating how a homeless man wanders the corridors of Christiansborg, the Danish Parliament with his dog which is recognised by the politicians who greet and chat with him when they meet him

Cooperation with various types of experts is beneficial according to leaders. However, there were some constraints regarding such cooperation. Some experts are also **social service workers** and it is **difficult for them to contest institutions while working there**. Moreover, due to their professional duties experts are not always able to be deeply involved for a longer period of time in the initiatives. Sometimes experts are charismatic people with big egos, thus it might be challenging for them to unite instead of compete.

Regarding networking with people with lived experience, interviewees claimed that on the one hand it is **difficult to reach some people from groups in vulnerable situations** and encourage them to participate e.g. in self-support groups, but on the other it might be empowering. It is due to their own vulnerabilities (e.g. lack of time, competences, health condition), but also lack of trust towards institutions in general.

Area specific results concerning networking

Leaders from all studied areas mentioned the importance of networking. In the mental **health area** as emerging in activism they used all types of networking. They try to build a wide alliance that incorporates collaboration among CSOs, decision makers as well as experts, celebrities or service users together with the media. Leaders in the **disability** area have a similar approach, however they were not so eager to create exclusive self-support groups or engage with celebrities or the media. Contrary to **child protection** area networks, relations with media were one of the most important, right next to relations with decision makers. Well-known personalities and experts were also important allies of leaders from child protection services. It seems that the **youth at risk** area was **the least** networked among the areas studied.

3.5.6 Factors that support or hinder citizens' actions

To identify what factors contribute to the actions and which constitute a barrier we used the SWOT analysis matrix. It consists of two dimensions: 1) positive or negative aspects, and 2) external or internal aspects. The intersection of these two dimensions allows us to create a matrix, in which we discuss strengths and weaknesses and opportunities and threats of citizens' initiatives.

Table 12. SWOT analysis of citizens' initiatives.

	Facilitating factors	Hindering factors
	Strengths	Weaknesses
Internal origins	● other engaged people ● energy of those involved dedication, passion and mission of people involved ● charismatic and competent leader(s) ● different competencies of people involved, such as: ○ (self-)advocacy and lobbying, ○ legal expertise, ○ advice in communicating and using digital tools, producing visuals, ○ adequate use of technology, digital means and social media ○ bridging experiential and academic knowledge ● a reputation, credibility and experience built on previous activities ● social capital especially good communication with different stakeholders (decision makers, groups affected, general public, inside the initiative group)	● NGOisation of initiatives ● paternalistic, hierarchical relations within organisation ● lack of professionals ● challenges regarding funding and financial sustainability, lack of fundings ● personal costs of getting involved: ○ burnouts ○ experiencing hate and critique
	Opportunities	Threats
External origins	● the availability of fundings ● window of opportunity ● a situation/ event that grasps public attention and creates a public climate for change ● public opinion and massive mobilisation ● media interest in the topic ● luck ● social capital including: ○ willingness of some of the representatives of public institutions or social services and professionals to cooperate ○ involvement of people with lived experience	● indifference, lack of involvement and users' invisibility, thus lack of voice of persons directly affected ● political circumstances and political dependencies ● challenges regarding funding and financial sustainability ● bureaucracy ● resistance to change in social services

Strengths

When asked about the most important **factors that facilitate success** of their initiatives, interviewees unanimously answered that these are mainly **other people with whom they cooperate**. They indicated that the energy of those involved as well as their dedication, passion and sense of mission are the factors that allow them to achieve many goals. A leader from an informal group explained this as follows:

We have the freedom to do things how it makes sense to us. In other words, we are not inside a giant institution where there are goals to be met, people have a very specific job... We do this very much driven by our enthusiasm and motivation. (L [number not provided]_MH_Portugal)

Sense of mission and passion is also related to the charismatic, competent and dedicated leaders who are able to unite people around certain issues and build a sense of joint team working together for the sake of certain groups in vulnerable situations or for the whole society.

I remember very well a meeting in September when we all got together (...), and at one point we might have had the feeling that things were going off in all directions. So how do we get back on track? I think that's what the support team really helped us to do, but they were both a support and a driving force, helping us to get back on track (....) (P6_CP_France)

When talking about people involved in the initiatives the informants mentioned that one important success factor is **different competencies of the people involved**, such as: (self-)advocacy and lobbying, legal expertise, bridging together empirical and academic knowledge, providing useful concepts and frameworks, and assisting with various practical tasks. They also referred to high communication skills, for instance: communicating adequately with different groups to engage leaders and decision-makers and the public in general, using digital tools, creating visuals.

By demonstrating competence, CSOs gain reputation, credibility and recognition. More people want to join actions and decision-makers treat them in a more partner-like manner. Also, well-known CSOs are more likely to win grants that allow them to sustain and develop their actions.

I think that some previous activities made it possible and also, I don't want to say reputation, because that's too much to say, but a certain recognition, I think, made it possible for us to win the first grant. (L11_CP_Poland)

Interestingly, funding is a determinant of both the success and the failure of citizen-led actions. As expressed by the leaders, it is challenging for a social movement to decide whether to remain a social movement or independent of others or to develop into a professional organisation with a professional secretary. The risk of the latter is an impact or change in the message of the movement due to a possible dependence on the funding organisation no matter if it is private or public funding. Some movements remain grassroots movements to avoid outsiders' influence on movements' messages and the connectedness with the citizens.

Weaknesses

Individual leaders or those connected to grassroots organisations mentioned that the **professionalisation and NGOisation** of initiatives often is an **obstacle** to implementing meaningful actions. They argue that the constant need to seek the grants, the need to follow legal frameworks, hierarchies within organisations limit spontaneity and freedom of action and, as a result, to some extent kill the spirit of civic engagement. Hierarchies also to some extent limit the democratic participation and equality that are characteristic of more informal initiatives.

There is a lot of fear in teams. And this is obviously closely linked to people's precariousness, of course, but it is not just related to precariousness. (...) there is a tendency to perpetuate a very paternalistic relationship, in which someone decides, in which someone has the last word, a certain paranoia with the boss, what the boss says and what the boss doesn't say (...).(P8_cross_sector_Portugal)

Among other issues, it was pointed out that the lack of professionals and expertise poses a serious challenge to the quality of civic actions. One of the Portuguese leaders from the mental health area described the significance of professional lobbying for their activities:

This needs professional lobbying (...) the problem is too invisible (...) why do these problems often lack visibility? Because they affect a minority, (...) the individuals themselves have a weak capacity to self-represent due to the lack of energy that the (mental) illness generates (and due to stigma). Therefore, in the field of mental health, we need to professionalize lobbying. (P[number not provided]_MH_Portugal)

Insufficient human resources and lack of staff are linked to constant issues with money. Many leaders who run NGOs complain that they do not have sufficient funds to operate peacefully.

The lack of finances is definitely one of the major obstacles we have faced. As an NPO, since you don't depend on the state or state funds, you can do many impactful things. But the funding lines are quite difficult, many of them are very cumbersome, and you risk facing legal processes for various issues related to procurement or other matters. (L11_MH_Romania)

When establishing alternative programs they do not have sufficient funds to remunerate their employees adequately or that may be due to funding obstacles and reliance on voluntary resources.

This is something abnormal and it really pisses me off, I would like to know that I have money for my activities, that I have a good salary, that my people have a good salary, a decent salary, because all of them, if I have to hire a social worker, he will get better money in the Social Welfare Centre, but he may not do such a great job as he will do in the [name of the organisation], so I have to have lunatics employed, people who have a mission, but it is unfair and it pisses me off, it pisses me off terribly (L4_Y_Poland).

Among the internal constraints, leaders, especially those with long experience, indicated the **high personal costs of engagement**. Many of them mentioned burnout (see 2.4.4) as a barrier and a cost of civic engagement, as one leader from Poland stated:

Yes [I feel burnout], on the occasion of some big hate, or such smear campaigns. Or some, you know, people often printscreen, some statements [from the Internet] are taken out of context. I had such moments when I wanted to quit (P2_D_Poland).

The personal costs of civic engagement are also related to experiencing **discrimination, criticism or hate**. One of the Portuguese activists admitted that she had experienced some time of exclusion:

By taking on this type of advocacy, we start to be identified as uncontrollable individuals, and that is not desirable in a group, whether professional or organisational. And that comes with a cost. (P1_MH_Portugal)

Additionally, another person from Poland told us that she experienced hate on the Internet because of her work in the area of disability.

Opportunities

Among the external factors that facilitate citizens' initiatives the interviewees listed several. Firstly, they mentioned the **availability of funding** (public or private) especially flexible funding (e.g. allowing for greater experimentation). Some of them said that new funding opportunities (e.g. a financial grant from a private company) could be a turning point in their civic action. Secondly, many informants mentioned that a “**window of opportunity**” has been one of the most significant factors of action, which creates a **public climate for change** and allows them to introduce the issues they have been working on into the public debate. Often such situations provoke strong emotions and, as a result, a massive mobilisation of public opinion. This also generates media interest in the topic, which helps to gain greater visibility for the cause and put pressure on decision-makers. Below, one of the leaders engaged in the introduction of the new law against child abuse describes how the media help them achieve their goals:

I think it was spectacular that the media reported day after day for a month about this boy's fight for life and that people were very moved by it. I mean, if it was, that it wasn't such, you know, an act, it happened, the boy died on the spot, but that for another month you were with him in this fight for life, first, and then in the last week, basically, in accepting that this fight would be lost. And I think it was so moving, that this additional tragedy of this boy's month-long stay in hospital and really a very big media interest, because it was also very spectacular that all possible services were involved there, and despite this, this boy could not be protected. So it also aroused such outrage in people . [...] it moved many people at the time and was certainly a factor that helped in this act. (P2_CP_Poland)

Similar situation happened in Denmark when the Danish Prime Minister announced herself as the children's minister in her annual speech at New Year. The announcement legitimised the existence of citizen-led organisations within the child protection and youth at risk area.

Some interviewees explained that the “window of opportunity” is simply related to **luck**. Sometimes for no particular reason some topics gain public interest. Thirdly, interviewers indicated that success of their initiatives was related to the **social capital** they have. They

mention that willingness of the institutions to cooperate (e.g. an appropriate environment for change like safe space where decision makers and engaged citizens can set up a dialogue) as well as good cooperation with some of the representatives of public institutions or social services are factors that support their initiatives.

Also **support from well-known personalities, celebrities and influencers** was mentioned as a facilitating factor which allows it to broaden the scope of activities and reach a wider audience with its own message.

Active citizens argue that the involvement of people with lived experience, including service users, in their initiatives was an important factor as it gave greater credibility and allowed multiple perspectives to be united, thus strengthening their voice and amplifying their message.

Threats

The **lack of self-representation** of people with lived experience was lifted as one of the biggest threats to the initiatives, on the other hand. As one mental health leader mentioned, she was disappointed by the limited number of people with mental health issues on their protest march:

What worries me? I think I wish there were more people. I would like these people to join the movement, to support it. (L11_MH_Poland)

According to leaders, people with lived experience often are reluctant to get involved due to fear of stigmatisation and discrimination. There is also a general pressure to conform and protesters are often seen not as whistleblowers but as troublemakers. Moreover, informants also mentioned that it is difficult to determine what will mobilise the general public at a certain moment.

Another big threat according to interviewees was related to **unfavourable political circumstances**. There is limited interest in some politicians or decision-makers to implement concrete actions in the social field. Some leaders indicated that politicians often change their mind and cannot be trusted and it is difficult to rely on them.

Policymakers (...) will never want to know (...) Although, it is, obviously, a topic they all handle perfectly during election times. (...) It is a very appealing topic that everyone talks about and promises to address, saying it will make a difference, change things, and happen. Then the time comes, and somehow, what was allocated in state budgets for mental health disappears and is redirected elsewhere. (L3_MH_Portugal)

Interviewees also argue that **change in the political climate** (e.g. changes of the government), might be a threat for their initiatives. For instance, Austrian leaders working with refugee minors indicated how issues related to this group are not a priority of the current Austrian National Council.

In view of the National Council elections, this means that custody and the care and support of refugee children will remain a priority issue in the next legislative period. Because – and this is often concealed by the current government – although custody is actually part of the current government's programme from day one, unfortunately it has yet to be implemented. (P25_CP/YR_Austria)

Also **financial dependency to public funds** is seen as a potential challenge, as it often stops CSOs from criticising politicians. It also threatens financial sustainability. Many interviewees complained about a very limited number of sources of funding for their activities and a very large number of organisations competing for these funds in order to survive.

The constant search for financial resources also entails a great **deal of bureaucracy**, which leaders see as a huge barrier to their activities.

(...) the bureaucracy (...) is a hassle. Filling out applications in calls, no matter the level, in Portugal, not just here, even the ones for Europe (...) Obviously, I ask for help. When I have time, there are colleagues and friends who know how to do it; I give them the content, and they transform what I say into political jargon. (L3_MH_Portugal)

Bureaucracy is also connected with general **resistance of social services to change and cooperate**. Some informants argue that social services are hierarchical, outdated, and treat citizens not as partners but as enemies, competitors. For instance, one interviewee from Poland said that they have to deal with extensive control and lack of trust on a daily basis :

It's also like this, that it pisses me off that there are 13 years of proving that we can do something, that we're really doing something important, that damn, it's necessary [...] I'm starting shitty projects, describing invoices and proving that you're not camels, submitting to hundreds of random, simply complicated checks. (P4_YL_Poland)

Final comments

Citizen actions are plentiful and diverse, involving numerous individuals, groups, and organisations, each targeting various groups with a wide range of content and aims. In modern times, especially due to the prevalent use of new technology such as social media, effective communication is essential to navigate our busy society. Interviewees shared many different messages they conveyed during their actions, as well as their strategies and experiences, some of which were mentioned earlier. Below we summarise some of the key elements of the message in public discourse that seem of great importance to engaged citizens:

- multidimensional inclusion of various groups facing vulnerable situations;
- empowerment and recognition of groups and individuals at risk of exclusion;
- need to introduce changes in law, system or services:
- reporting or protests about problems/ challenges/ lacks,
- calls for change on a societal scale,
- concrete proposals for legislative/ systemic changes and detailed proposals for organisational change and social services;
- promoting values such as dignity, solidarity, justice, equal opportunities.

These messages related to different messages refer to three levels of content:

- **Macro: Reporting 'structural' situations** of injustice and human rights violations that create or reinforce situations of vulnerability (poverty, discrimination, stigmatisation, public indifference);

- **Meso: Reporting the lack of or insufficient policies**, thus unable to solve or mitigate situations of vulnerability and lack of protection (delays in implementing strategic plans; inadequate definition of criteria for the admission of beneficiaries; scarcity of resources allocated to policies and programs, lack of certain legislative solutions, etc.);
- **Micro: Reporting the inability of social services and organisations** to respond effectively to the needs of individual citizens in situations of need or vulnerability (lack of information, lack of accessibility, slow responses, bureaucracy, opaque processes).

Interviewees indicated two main issues regarding communication. The first one is related to the usage of **stories or testimonies of people with lived experience**. On the one hand, such stories are appealing and reach people. On the other hand, they might be related to **reinforcing stereotypes** and contribute to further **stigmatisation and discrimination** of groups in vulnerable situations.

The second issue is related to the **representation**. The narratives built by the people with lived experience have to follow certain strategic communication lines. Moreover, often the **voices of groups in vulnerable situations are mediated** by professionals and follow **expert discourse**.

There was also one more observation. Public opinion knowledge is built on different narratives. The **emancipatory narrative**, mainly in the area of **mental health**, which to some extent may be based on controversy and confrontation with reality (e.g. Yellow Ribbon March, “Are you afraid of me?” awareness raising campaign), and **caring narrative** which is more professionalised, based on expert discourse and aims to inform the public about specific issues and explain them, mainly in the area of **child protection** but also **disability and crisis situations of minors**.

4. Conclusions on citizens' role in creating more responsive social services

4.1 Citizen-led actions - an important but rocky pathway to endorse more responsive social services

The data and analyses highlight that citizens who see the need for change in social services, use various means to voice it publicly and try to push for a change. They care about quality and access to social services of groups in vulnerable situations and see it and respond to needs. Nevertheless, in some cases, **citizens tend to speak on behalf of groups in vulnerable situations rather than help them to amplify their own voice**. They have lived experience and knowledge, which they share directly or indirectly through personal networks, technology communication (mainly social media) or through mass media news. They take actions individually and collectively, depending on the situation, the emotions evoked, capacity and scope.

They try to collaborate directly with local social services towards practice change (though their experience is not yet too positive). On a regional and national level, which demands much stronger **communication** means and tactics, they **mobilise** different social groups to reach out to politicians and decision makers.

The main effect they try to achieve in all levels is to **change public perception** of groups in vulnerable situations, to arouse **empathy** by pointing to individual situations as consequences of wrong decisions and to **build social awareness** of the need to take concrete steps towards a **change** in systems or social services.

Their engagement has various paths: either **short term**: they engage in ad hoc actions requiring immediate response to various personal, family and professional obligations; or **long-term**, more professional through civil society organisations (CSOs) that aim for broader change and more long-term goals; or mixed. The specific actions are diverse and depend on the creativity of the initiators, but the growing role of technology (especially social media and online platforms) gives them the opportunity for wider sharing and better access to information by other people.

They actively learn to use formal and informal **networks**, financial resources, and the social capital of people who have skills and contacts as opportunities to reach those who have the power to change situations from the top. They mobilise representatives of media, politics, science, use art to strengthen the message, gain recognition and push for change.

Their actions **show a wish to voice** the needs of people and advocate for ways of access to co-create responsiveness in social services, defined in Work Package Report 2 (mentioned here on page 6). Citizens engaged in actions want to achieve impact in individual situations (sometimes their own) but at the same time make the change as a case for systemic **solutions that are needed** and might be implemented in different places and by different entities.

Our findings show that engaged citizens face certain **challenges** and limitations in their response due to:

- **insufficient collaboration with the social services system** which has its bureaucratic characteristics and demands, which raises anger, frustration, and mistrust in public management and public policy;
- **burnout** connected to exhaustive tasks, demanding responsibility, lack of resources, mobilisation of others, constant communication of results, coordination of actions if it is a collective effort;
- **network partners' lack of understanding and biases needing education**: e.g. mass-media focus on extreme events, and perpetuate stereotypes which may work in favour of the cause but also might be ethically challenging, politicians who may want their gains from collaboration, other CSOs having survival and competitive strategies, to name a few.

Specific attention in citizen-led action shall be paid to the role of **artists** as an emerging phenomenon around the voice that may be communicated through artistic expression that raises awareness of things that are “real but hard to explain”. Such innovative approaches in social services like **art as means of alternative communication or tailoring services** through different types of personal assistance, or many smaller initiatives (group, local, national, international) show that citizens also **know the ways** to overcome difficulties and, apart from protesting, are **open to participate in more collaborative actions that support change**.

The research also shows that there is a **wider context** in the responsive approach of social services that consider not only the experiences of service-users and service providers, but also the **expertise and voice of other citizens**. Of particular importance seems to be the growth of **peer support and self-advocacy groups**, which are crucial to complementing professional responsiveness. It is worth noting the growing role of technology in making space for all sorts of activism, mainly for younger generations but also as means for quick, mass information sharing and acting upon situations that are not accepted (by somebody) .

It is important to recognise area-specific differences in citizens' engagements, selected actions, networking, and mobilisation strategies, although in many situations the **aims of actions are intersectional** and people are **needs-oriented rather than area-oriented**. In the area of disability, the study has shown mainly emergency situations involving individual cases; in the area of mental health, we found an emphasis on building social awareness around stigmatisation; and in the area of protecting children and youth at risk, laws and regulations that need to be changed. We also found growing peer support across all areas. However, it needs to be stated that the picture is dynamic and fluctuates according to the current challenges and needs observed by citizens.

The identified outcome of citizens' actions, even if indirectly planned, or done through search of change, **empowers** and **emancipates citizens** by taking or supporting action. Many citizens mentioned the learning they appreciate and the changes seen in the people who are target groups of their messages.

Recognising the research limitations connected mainly with the exploratory nature of our approach, time-frame constraints, and dealing with the diversity of civic involvement traditions among partners, it is important to state that these initial observations will be continued and analysed in a deeper or more systematic way. This is because of the importance of citizens' perspectives that can be found and services may learn from the outside the contexts of support

systems. It should also be noted that gender issues seem to be a factor during our discussions with informants (the majority of whom were women: 69.5% (120 women out of 173 informants). In terms of age we also noted that mostly middle aged citizens (40–59 years old) and younger citizens (20–39 years old or younger) were engaged in the actions studied (respectively 50.1% and 40.5%).

The context of responsiveness social services may take into account some key questions:

- 1) What sort of engagement and responsive approaches in social services do citizens expect? (co-construction of decisions, invitation to open, fair discussions, participation in services' monitoring?)
- 2) How citizens would like to collaborate: have their ideas adopted or designed bottom up collectively with social services?
- 3) How can young people and children be more involved as partners in discussions due to their under-care status?
- 4) How do social services and systems recognise and address citizens' problems and needs? Some citizens want only to be seen (and fight for it) their problems to be recognised by social services and systems.
- 5) How can equality of voices in the system–citizen conversations be implemented so that the power of decision-makers does not dominate the voices of citizens?

Citizens taking part in social actions who shared their experiences, see responsiveness on all three levels, with focus on micro level change via meso level practice as most probable, and macro level as a must. They achieve it through struggle and mitigation:

- **at the micro level:** adapting services to individual needs of a particular service user;
- **at the meso level:** inviting people to social services in local communities for public consultations, creating spaces for responsiveness and tools for co-decision making (advisory councils consultative bodies);
- **at the macro level:** least seen as a collaboration or partnership between policy makers and citizens, rather done by force or by raising tension due to lack of trust in public management, so formal consultations seem not so interesting to participate in.

There were not many direct examples of responsive social services mentioned by citizens, and the key finding is that **citizens feel that social services are not sufficiently responsive**, that the participatory models based on consultations are tokenistic and not functioning well. They feel that citizens need to fight for responsive treatment/services and it is a continuing effort. (There are some exceptions like in Denmark, where citizen direct participation in social areas is being formally normalised by laws and regulations as participatory tools, although still some improvements are discussed).

Such perceptions result in scepticism for direct collaboration with decision-making structures, while engagement occurs **around** services to make them change by top-down regulations. The mistrust and disbelief in a change in services is connected with and results in a **lack of or minimal collaboration experiences**. It seems easier and less painful or more pragmatic to create own social services or self-support group methods that bring quicker responsive solutions to immediate or long-term needs, especially those well received by people in vulnerable situations, and are self-tested as **responsive practices**. Collaboration seems to be

sometimes a pragmatic choice, especially in the situation when service-users face some dependency on social services.

While aiming at systemic change, citizens use personal stories as the main tool to show (for example online and in media) the real life situation contexts.

Responsiveness among citizen-led actions might be **put in question** as well as in some cases some engaged citizens focus on the organisational aspects and professional response (including professional campaigning), **which leads more attention being paid to the responsive and inclusive practices of some organised citizens' groups.**

4.2 The responsiveness of social services includes practices to be open to citizens who advocate for change

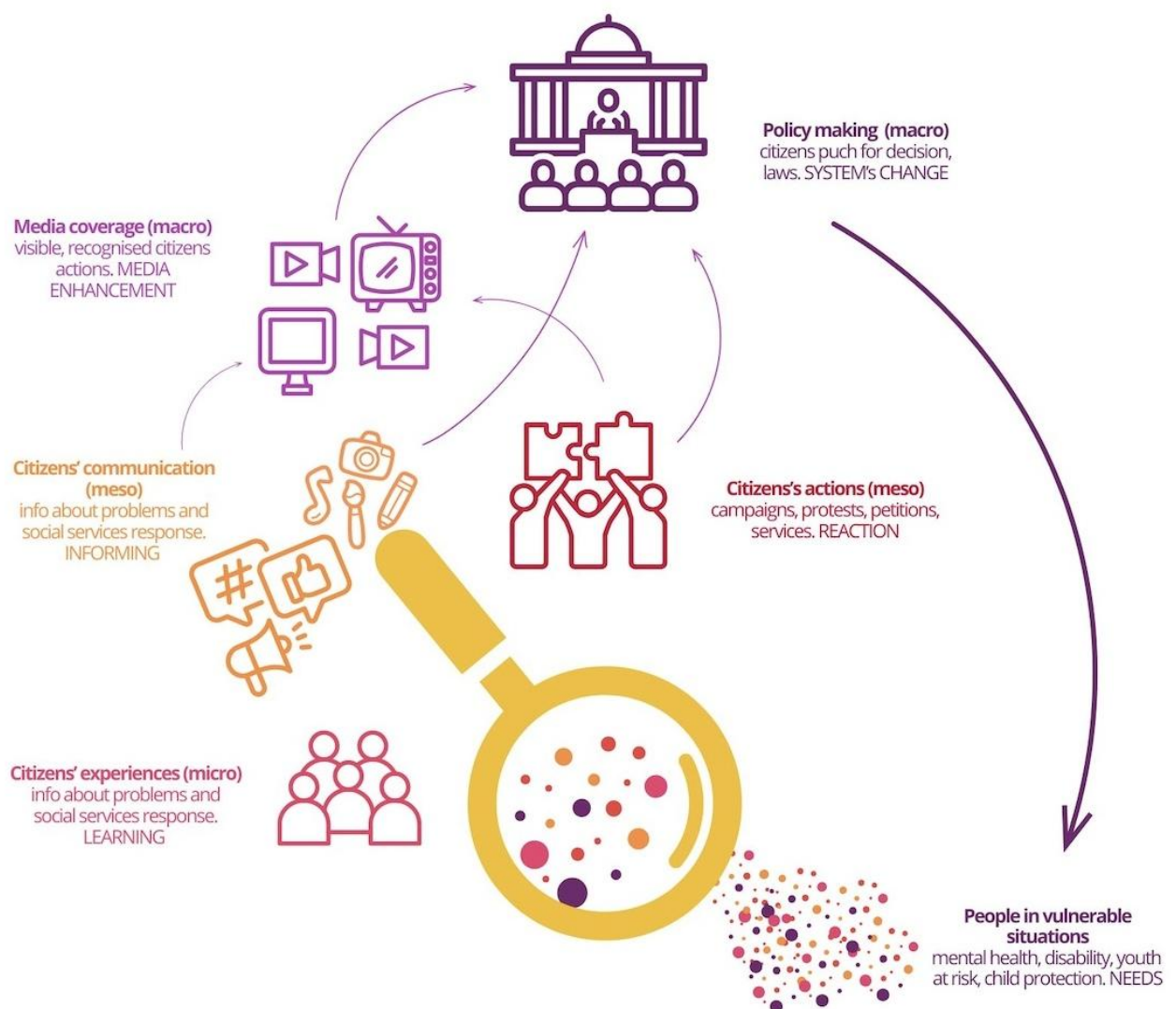
As some respondents mentioned, there remains a reluctance to fully include citizens' perspectives. Partly the lack of trust may lie in perception of their voices as disruptive, uncontrollable, or non-standardised in the way organised systems function. **Communication between citizens and governing bodies** (policy/decision-makers) often **lacks cohesion**. This disconnection may arise from the differing characteristics of both sides: citizens' open, complex, and dynamic social realities versus the planned, organised, and standardised procedures of governance.

The proposed graph below (**Graph 1**) illustrates, based on our cross-country findings, the current situation of citizens in Europe who, in a variety of ways, try to build a bottom-up knowledge of services that may work well, and bring this knowledge to the meso level (in local communities, cross-areas, engaging public opinion through the media and social media) in an attempt to raise the voice on needs and urge for action that would be visible in macro level. This is the reaction to partially or non-responsive social services and to policies that lack the necessary procedures and legal frameworks to respect citizens' voices in decision-making processes. This is particularly evident in the areas of disability, mental health, child protection, and youth at risk of exclusion, though the greatest experience in such endeavours have citizens in the disability area –in high demand for various social services. In the mental health area there is still a public awareness stage focused on building an inclusive environment for growth of appropriate services, while in child protection the institutional reforms seem to be the citizens' priority. The most neglected area is dedicated to youth at risk of exclusion as there are different perspectives and no integrated strategies to address the problems. With the growing role of technology in information sharing, there is a visible shift towards digital communication and engagement that is driven by news provided mobile phones, apps, internet news and social media constant contact. On the other hand this way of new civic reaction excludes many people used to traditional means and prevents longer term engagements requiring physical meeting.

The findings in this research also highlight the critical importance of communication between citizens in fostering a responsive mode of practice and bringing the issues through advocacy campaigns, petitions and protests to macro level reaction. Currently it is done through the media (mostly local), social media, networking or artistic productions, but occasionally smaller actions become strong national causes for change. Understanding the goals, objectives, and the value of various platforms for dialogue with citizens, is essential but in many situations,

their needs are not visible. In particular, individual experiences are not perceived as important enough to change laws and regulations, while citizens recognise them as not only individual. They see in them patterns and representations of bigger scale issues. They do not lose touch with needs but also through various roles they take in society, they see different interrelations, not only through service users' lenses. Their participation is built on a foundation of knowledge, emotions and understanding of different aspects of an issue (including national economy, local management or policy level structures). This non-systemic perspective and broader ways of engagement are key to establishing knowledge and networking with greater influence than just the participation of citizens in vulnerable situations who use services. This “meso plus” level of civic-support strengthens a co-creative concept for more responsive services. It extends the perspective of understanding the definition of responsiveness in social services (see page 6) by **including possible contribution of people who might not be directly using services but can provide valuable input by participating in co-development of social services.**

Graph 1. Illustration of findings. Citizens participate mostly in meso level activities through advocacy and engagement of different stakeholders towards more responsive services and a systemic change, but catalyse micro and macro changes.



The research findings reveal a diverse picture of citizens' experiences and motivations, encompassing not only service users, but also supporters of the cause, artists, and engaged professionals, as well as a mix of organisational entities (public, private, and hybrid) as additional voices of people who recognise and respond to issues. Citizens respond in various ways – individually, in groups, through movements, or within organisations – driven by specific needs or universal values. Their engagement may be short-term or part of a long-term commitment, utilising different tactics and evolving roles. Some choose, or feel compelled by circumstances, to professionalise their responses. The scale of their reactions ranges from positive, collaborative attitudes, to awareness-raising efforts aimed at fostering social consciousness, and, when necessary, to confrontation and radical protests. These differences arise from a variety of factors, but data suggest that particular situations become a blend of strategic and expressive motivations (see Castells 2013b).

New technologies, namely social media related innovations have **recently opened up more democratic potential**, empowering some citizens to participate in more open narratives and joint discourse accelerating diffusion of information, ideas and experiences and education through blogging, vlogging, webinars, podcasts facilitating content sharing and communication, but such direct and open discussion with social services is not yet realised in full. Meanwhile, some other citizens feel that the system should even more inherently provide for their needs, and they see the role of technology as publicly highlighting the necessary changes. As a result, **actions vary from reform efforts to radical critiques**, often involving pointed commentary on the system.

It is important to note that this research offers only an exploratory glimpse into the fragmented and diverse nature of these social domains. Given their complexity, this limited study can highlight only certain aspects worth considering, rather than providing a comprehensive, consolidated picture of social involvement in the areas of disability, mental health, child protection, and youth at risk studied across six countries.

The key value of the collected data lies in highlighting that the relationships between people using social services and providers in social services are not simply dual or hybrid but multifaceted, shaped by a complex set of factors and need to bring other perspectives. These factors make it difficult for helping systems to fully navigate, organise, or control interactions.

The **call for deinstitutionalisation** (Grabowska, Kelm, Skrzypczak, 2024) as a remedy for change, is not so much noted in conversations with citizens, rather a call for improvement of existing institutions and making them more humane. This observation is highlighting the challenge of releasing rights to citizens who are not only experiencing vulnerable situations but are often viewed as not having full citizenship rights, particularly in cases where they are predominantly placed under care or in preventive systems (e.g. children in care, youth at risk, parents deemed abusers).

Citizens adopt their own **“free-style” methods of responding to problems**, while systems struggle to determine which forms of engagement they consider legitimate and impactful. This ongoing negotiation creates a visible political tension across multiple levels of policymaking. Advocacy, awareness-building, and networking emerge as the dominant forms of citizen capital, while critical thinking and creativity stand out as key strengths of citizen action.

There is a **complementary role of art in bringing the social dialogue** to the table, allowing freedom of speech and expression. This goes beyond quick, managerial solutions but builds on universal desire to understand human nature in the complexity of determinants that create the unique value of each person. While individual needs must be confronted with social, political and economic powers, art brings a constant reflection on why we are, what help means and how we listen to and see each other. This value based approach is necessary to take and sustain a responsive approach in social services from an ethical standpoint, and not just the organisational one.

While this research does not fully resolve these challenges of citizens' response, it provides valuable insights into how people perceive citizens' rights amid the diverse factors that shape them across the four areas studied. The analysis considers roles, interests, motivations, and triggers for action, adding depth to the understanding of civic engagement as a spectrum of creative realisations rather than a fixed pattern of collective or individual model actions.

This study resonates also with Etzioni's exploration of societal power presented in his book "The Active Society" (Etzioni [1968] 2012), in which he explores how democratic societies strive to make systems more flexible and responsive to citizens' needs. The author elaborates on two drivers towards responsiveness: consensus and equality and points at three factors blocking responsiveness: expressive (psychological and ideological stiffness), instrumental (lack of knowledge, resources) and connected with distorted communication. In this research, in our conversations we have come across the two later ones: instrumental and communication barriers. Etzioni's point that the remedy to maintain collaboration rather than domination of decision-makers is to build space for critical discussion is confirmed. This not only opens up and balances information, leading to more effective decisions, but also makes systems more flexible and sensitive to the needs expressed. In this view citizens at the current stage fight for recognition of their voice to be heard and seen in the first place.

Responsive thinking and action are still uncommon not only in support systems but also among citizens who present different attitudes from full engagement in different emotional states to non-engagement in social issues. Though we studied the engagement potential, we recognise that responsiveness has limitations (mental, application-based, stemming from fears of chaos, and many more). It requires the assistance of researchers to identify and highlight possible specific areas of collaboration, resources and practices to identify practical methods for changing social services with help of citizens.

4.3 Public information strengthens positive participation of citizens and builds joint knowledge base and mutual trust

From the above descriptions it is clear that there are some roles of main stakeholder groups active in changing social services' process: the social services themselves, the citizens, the policy makers, the researchers and media. The overall message lies in the fact that a responsive approach includes citizens and social services as partners-in-cause, and that there needs to be a change in the current narrative of pity and care as well as facade consulting, perceived by citizens as stiff obligation on the side of decision makers rather than a need to listen and change ways of

helping. Citizens have in fact their unique perspective, skills and capacities, which might be used for the constant improvement of social services and their institutional learning. Recognising the complex, diverse and ambiguous reality of citizens' involvement the following statements come from the validation of results that citizens are **knowledgeable about the subject and have influence on decisions** about social service practice change, if it is recognised by the helping professions systems.

There is **untapped potential of mass media** that generally sympathise or are at least neutral in providing information on social issues, though the greater visibility of social services' responsive practices and more voice of people in vulnerable situations would add value to the public knowledge on what is happening in the helping professions. Also it would be great if national media extended their social mission, by showing social needs and by engaging citizens in actions, helping them navigate how to reach for help, how to engage and how to co-create change. This may also support advocacy raising, understanding the systems but also respond by stronger appeal to politicians, who care for media attention. The research shows that reporters can be "the eyes, ears and voice" in creating public discourse on the changes needed.

These statements drive our further recommendations (presented in Chapter 5) to various stakeholders. They may be taken into account in citizen-led activities to build more responsive social services:

1. Citizens need to **have access** to up-to-date, updated and citizen-friendly public information to be able to react otherwise than by anger-driven force.
2. Citizens need to **be respected** and be welcomed, to exercise the right to freely act and respond to offers of social services to be able to understand them better.
3. Collaboration with citizens changes the top-down or bottom-up traditional approaches to decision-making, towards **amore horizontal and co-creative collaboration**.
4. **Good communication** is of great value to citizens in terms of their needs, so mass media, social media but also artistic production stimulate conversations, relationship building and joint actions with social services.

5. Recommendations to build more responsive social services

Based on the reports presented, the Consortium proposes the following recommendations that different stakeholders may take into consideration to support responsiveness in social services:

5.1 For citizens

Share experiences, engage with social services on equal rights level, and promote best practices

- **Document your experiences and share them as facts (data)** that others may use both individually and collectively, informing social service platforms on its existence.
- **Utilise your experience and expertise and act** when you see the need for more responsive systems. Share your experiences and ideas for improvement with social services, and ask for their feedback. Promote good practices in social services that encourage a responsive approach.
- Do not polarise opinions based on political values – social services are for all citizens.
- **Believe in your expertise through experience** – social service professionals can only react if they are informed. Engage in constructive dialogue, contributing to improvements that benefit all, regardless of political differences.
- **Share your best practices not only within your groups** and on social media only. Think that your expertise is of value to social services, experts and decision makers.
- **Do not be afraid to engage with social services**, be aware that they also may be afraid of your critique and every entity has some resistance stage before change.
- **Try to trust social workers** and believe in their good intentions. Build up your curiosity towards others – members of your group, social services and decision-makers.
- **Be proud of your lived experience** and the competences you have. Nevertheless do not forget that real partnership is based on mutual curiosity, respect, trust and engagement.

Build long-term change and communication means

- **Be persistent but realistic in your efforts to make change.** Think long-term, as it may take months or even years of consistent advocacy. Be creative in considering who can help and which stakeholders have the capacity to support your cause.
- **Map stakeholders and their interests, find allies in the social policy field.** Good preparation is the key to success – do not fear politicians. Learn what their personal interests might be, and explore how you can leverage specific social events to bring your cause to visibility. Act in the name of a cause beyond political divisions.
- **Learn methods of public information sharing** and improve your communication skills. Collaborate with the media and through social media to reach a wider audience and gain visibility for the issues you care about. Effective communication can help you achieve your desired outcomes by drawing attention to the problem.

Advocate for inclusive standards and citizen participation particularly among groups in vulnerable situations

- **Learn from experienced citizens** and “artists” how to object to **unjust practices** and pay attention to the **consequences** of language and messaging used to have constructive change: do no more harm to other groups and do not treat social services or policy makers as enemies, even though your frustrations might sometimes be high.
- **Learn about the topic before forming stereotypes** and focus on broadening your understanding. Listen to other experiences and perspectives, as this will help build stronger arguments and foster inclusion.
- **Advocate for communication learning** to all stakeholders engaged in social service areas, particularly public speech and the negotiation, with focus on people facing vulnerable situations whose voices are not heard: e.g. children, youth, immigrants.

5.2 For social services professionals

Promote inclusion of citizens in your work, minimise public mistrust and respect contestation of your work

- **Children and youth in vulnerable situations do not protest.** Pay attention not only to engaged youth or people claiming to be their representatives. Find ways to include their perspectives in social service improvements.
- **Avoid competitive thinking in the social service field.** You can support citizens who organise actions and activities, by educating, mentoring and supporting them as partners in the cause.
- **Foster ongoing citizen reactions and ideas** to social services work by outreach methods and tools. Don't wait for a crisis that stirs negative emotions and anger.
- **Support citizen-led actions** such as petitions and social media campaigns that may change social services regulations and practices towards citizen good.
- **Avoid paternalism and control in dialogue with citizens.** Consider deinstitutionalisation processes as empowering citizens to take actions on their behalf.
- **Develop collaboration and partnership** with leaders, artists and people using social services in media, campaigning, and policy advocacy to achieve mutually agreed changes in services.
- **Do not be afraid of citizens and their critical voices.** Believe that they are not your enemies, who are just looking to judge you, but try to perceive citizens as your allies with whom you work for the sake of the same cause by exchanging your experiences, knowledge and competence. You and citizens complement each other.

Strengthen your own communication and engagement

- **Strengthen communication skills** to be proactive in media and through social media, publicly demonstrate what social services stand for, and prepare for public speaking

when important messages need to be communicated. Enhance contact, exchange, and information for service users.

- **Respect and represent diversity** of opinions—political, social, and cultural—while emphasising social services as a common good that supports individual well-being and integrates citizens.
- **Foster a proactive strategy** for dialogue with a wide range of citizens interested in improving social services. Participate in strategic alliances and networking with citizens. Seek external support among citizens given the shortage of staff and resources.
- **Represent needs.** People trust social service professionals’ professionalism and ability to serve as mentors and brokers.

Standardise participatory actions and measures

- Consider practices of work and monitoring public citizen participation at both micro and meso levels. **Collaborate with researchers and higher education institutions** to understand what citizens need and how social movements may help social services grow.
- **Increase citizens’ participation and encourage and follow their feedback**, giving them greater control and decision-making power, to minimise barriers leading to misunderstanding of common goals and opportunity for collaboration.
- Strengthen the approach of “expertise by experience” through participatory events.
- Recognize the importance of long-term relations and constant dialogue with citizens to build mutual trust, to better understand different perspectives.

5.3 For policy and decision makers

Regulate data collection, include citizens’ voices and social services work based on citizens input

- Make data collection policy and tools that ensure information sharing, collected from and for citizens. Think of online platforms to promote open access and user-friendly tools for data collection.
- **Promote easy-language for public use**, in reporting and publicising policy papers, build dialogue around differently used and understood terms and definitions (such as inclusion, self-determination, independent living, responsiveness), mind different stakeholders’ languages (citizens, policy makers, social services, inclusive educators).
- **Welcome and include different citizens and citizen groups voices**, recognize the diversity of experiences, roles, ages, genders, and service-related positions as well as their supportive roles in social service provision. Pay particular attention to those who may be easily excluded.
- Acknowledge that **not only big data matters**. Smaller groups and individual voices are also important data (especially to well-being and lived realities in using social services), so **collaborate with research centres on qualitative data** collection esp. gathered by participatory approach .

- **Encourage alternative methods of documenting and sharing information**, such as art, videos, posts, petitions, and social media calls for action. Use active listening methods to make sure people feel a reaction. Treat emotions, experiences and alternative perspectives as data enabling policy makers to better understand citizens' needs and voices.
- **Maximise equality, minimise inequality in citizen representation.** Strong speakers often claim to represent others and they become the main voice for all people in vulnerable situations. Recognise the emotional labour and cultural capital required for participation, public speaking and coordination of citizen and leader groups **Particularly children and youth in vulnerable situations are at risk** of being excluded from voicing their opinions, but also groups such as **migrants** might have difficulty in openly expressing their multi vulnerability position.
- **Foster transparency** in sharing information and reporting from social services to the public, to make sure citizens are informed of any information important to them but also for means of public monitoring.
- **Trust in social workers competencies.** Do not use citizens' critique as a tool to judge and criticise your subordinates but as a tool to improve social services. Be aware that social services try their best to support service users.

Make stronger public communication and promote citizen engagement in decision-making

- Clearly communicate through various modern technologies (live streams, visuals, public reporting) not only about what is changing in social policy but why.
- **Educate on policy legislations processes** and show how changes may happen so citizens may understand realities. Make your message clear on the role of citizens and limitations, to avoid resignation, frustration and misunderstandings.
- **Call for citizen feedback**, offer easy-to-use feedback tools, share the participation process design and results publicly. **Manage responses and expectations** of citizens' engagement.
- **Provide space for self-support groups** as collective voices and action-oriented approaches that contribute valuable knowledge and practice. Support their development.
- **Foster feedback from social services** (based on citizens' input) to policymaking on changes that need and can be made at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Help them in this way to represent voices of people in vulnerable situations they work with.
- **Discuss with citizens** how the system can be **adaptive and responsive** and identify **elements of social services** that play key roles in citizen inclusion in planning, decision making and quality assurance. Make these elements a priority in assessing social services and **consider them as innovations in the system** that promote democratic values.
- **Train other** decision makers, politicians, and government representatives **on a responsive approach in policy making**, incorporating **citizens' input** on necessary legal changes in social service systems – beyond political disputes and individual interests. Use cases, templates, guidelines (e.g. sample of feedback to petition, feedback forms in public social service institutions, that show good practices of collaboration with citizens).

Build social cohesion, reduce polarisation, appreciate citizens' participation

- **Build social cohesion through strategic alliances and networking** to enhance the collective response to complex problems rather than focusing on divided claims that polarise society and groups.
- **Be transparent about funding for outsourced services and programs and monitor results.** Ensure transparency in the selection process, support citizens with the necessary advice and training on expectations, outcome measurement, financial and project management, and public reporting.
- **Do not block fundings** due to citizens' criticism of some of your decisions. Do not make CSOs silent because they are dependent on public funding. Their critical feedback is more valuable than flatteries.
- **Acknowledge and appreciate activities that take a responsive approach in social services,** through different forms of recognition (awarding, certificating, public acknowledgment).
- **Prevent from polarisation** of political decisions or media narratives by addressing common good outcomes and common good processes of citizen involvement. State non-partisan approach in social service provision.
- **Speed up the process of responding to citizens** to prevent their anger from escalating and avoid creating conflicts among citizen groups advocating for separate rights (e.g., parents instead of mothers).
- **Take certain issues as cross-sectional,** avoid division into areas by vulnerability, target groups, or financial levels. Some specific solutions address needs across areas, though too holistic approaches may seem inefficient in practice. Strive for **balance with reality and use different formats** that may encourage greater participation of people with intersectional needs.
- **Take a critical approach towards existing data:** pay special attention to “silent and hidden” areas, groups, and complex problems that require specific approaches. Ensure continuous research on the factors that influence and maintain vulnerability and unresponsiveness in social services.

5.4 For researchers

Collaborate and communicate results with stakeholders

- **Collaborate with policymakers** on data collection from citizens (as experts by experience), focusing on methods, ethics, feedback processes, user-friendly tools, diversity, strategies for access and identifying gaps.
- **Support field social services and projects** (as system outreach to groups in vulnerable situations) and **mediate dialogue** between citizens and social services, both in conflict situations and on a regular basis, regarding data collection, assessment or recommendations for improvement as a way of good practice of responsive attitude.

- **Publish materials online** specifically designed as response to citizens' needs, promote usefulness of such knowledge and as a reality check, via collaboration with social services. **Collaborate with the media** to spread the message to the public.
- **Provide information on tools** for data collection to all stakeholders. Respect confidentiality of informants, assess tools and limitations of statements, establish ethical rules of data use and protection (if needed).

Consider methodologies helping discover citizens' needs and knowledge

- **Explore "silent and hidden" areas**, groups and complex problems that require specific approaches, particularly among groups in vulnerable situations.
- Conduct further **research on the complexities of civic engagement** and the **factors that influence vulnerability**, as well as other **elements that impact the responsiveness** of services, with the aim of improving them through a deeper understanding of citizen-based realities.
- More frequently **apply citizen-participatory** methodologies to help discover new knowledge and foster connections among citizens related to citizen-led actions. Be mindful of language and respect the special needs of citizens in vulnerable situations.

5.5 For media representatives

Be mindful of media social responsibility and impact on public opinion – it may positively change social services' system and its responsiveness.

- **Balance information and verify facts.** Secure balance of the opinions of experts, professionals, leaders, NGO representatives and politicians – they may be different from ordinary citizens' lived experience. Recognise that the interpretations may differ and shall be checked.
- **Collaborate with social services and researchers on the ways to show perspectives of the citizens in vulnerable situations.** Allow citizens the diversity of their voices and methods of expression. Do not chase for sensation, think about the social responsibility of the media in making change towards problem solutions through information sharing. Develop guidelines for journalists to address sensitive topics, allow diversity of voices and align with the citizens "best interest" approach).
- **Educate the public and support social awareness campaigns** even if they are small-scale. The media play a crucial role in empowering citizens through accurate information, journalists' expertise, as well as by pushing for political change through objective reporting.
- **Build public trust in social services' helping potential** through providing clear, facts-based reporting on how these services address citizens' needs, particularly those of groups in vulnerable situations. The media may investigate and showcase success stories as well as areas for improvement, offering a balanced perspective on service accessibility, efficiency, and adaptability.

Graph 2. Illustration of recommendations. Applying outside-of-the-system citizens' experience in social service reform leads to more equitable and responsive learning systems through initiation of co-creation processes.



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Appendices

Annex 1. Tables

Table 2a. Target group characteristics: Artists engaged in social cause

Country	Total	Gender		Age range			Artistic productions represented	Areas covered				
		Male	Female	Young <20–39	Middle 40–59	Senior (60+)		D	MH	CP	YR	Cross
Austria	5	3	2	2	3	0	Theatre, film, podcast, dance, book	2	1	0	1	1 CP/Y
Denmark	5	3	2	2	1	2	Theatre, stand-up, writing, music	1	2	0	2	0
France	6	2	4	3	2	1	Theatre, book, film, installation, video, performance, photography, writing	1	2	2	1	0
Poland	5	3	2	2	3	0	Theatre, visual arts (painting, design), street art (murals), film, music	1	1	1	1	1
Portugal	6	2	4	3	3	0	Music, theatre, poetry, visual arts, photography, film	1	2	0	0	3 CP/YR
Romania	6	1	5	2	4	0	Theatre, music, expositions, stories, photography, animated film	0	0	0	1	5 D/CP/YR
TOTAL	33	14	19	14	16	3		6	8	3	6	10

Abbreviations: D-Disability; MH-Mental Health, CP-Child Protection, YR-Youth at Risk

Table 2b. Target group characteristics: Leaders and Participants of actions

	Leadership	Gender			Age range				Areas					Total number
Country/Identification	L/P	Male	Female	no data non binary	Young <20–39	Middle 40–59	Senior (60+)	no data	D	MH	CP	YR	Cross	
Austria	L	2	15	0	8	8	1	0	5	2	6	4	0	17
	P	0	5	1	3	3	0	0	3	2	1	0	0	6
Denmark	L	2	7	1	4	5	1	0	2	2	3	3	0	10
	P	2	10	0	6	4	0	2	4	6	1	1	0	12
France	L	5	7	0	5	5	2	0	2	1	3	6	0	12
	P	5	7	0	7	2	3	0	4	0	6	2	0	12
Poland	L	3	7	0	2	8	0	0	3	2	3	2	0	10
	P	2	13	0	2	13	0	0	3	5	4	3	0	15
Portugal	L	3	6	0	2	6	1	0	2	3	4	0	0	9
	P	2	8	0	2	7	1	0	2	4	4	0	0	10
Romania	L	6	6	0	4	7	1	0	2	4	5	0	1 (CP/YR)	12
	P	5	10	0	11	4	0	0	8	2	3	2	0	15
ALL	L	21	48	1	25	39	6	0	16	14	22	12	1	70
	P	16	53	1	31	33	4	2	24	19	19	8	0	70
TOTAL		37	101	2	56	72	10	2	40	33	41	20	1	140

Abbreviations: L-Leader; P-Participant; D-Disability; MH-Mental Health, CP-Child Protection, YR-Youth at Risk

Table 3a. Number of analysed articles by area and country

Area / Country	Austria	Denmark	France	Poland	Portugal	Romania	All 6
Disability	26	25	17	26	17	26	137
Child protection	16	25	18	24	4	24	111
Mental health	16	25	0	19	20	21	101
Youth at risk	13	25	13	18	4	17	90
Overall for country	71	100	48	87	45	88	439

Table 3b. Media sources used to analyse citizens' actions visibility by country

Country	Source
Austria	der Standard, Tiroler Tageszeitung, kleine Zeitung, Kurier, ORF, Kronen Zeitung, Falter, Mein Bezirk, Tips, vienna.at, Heute, OÖNachrichten
Denmark	TV channel: TV2 News; radio channel: Danmarks Radio News; 3 Newspapers: Ekstra Bladet, Berlingske Tidende, Politiken
France	20 Minutes online, TF1 News online, France Info and Le Monde online; regional or local newspapers online: France Ouest, Le Parisien, Sud Ouest
Poland	ONET, WP, Interia; websites of national TV stations: TVN24, TVP; Websites of radio stations: Polskie Radio, RMF; website of Polish Press Agency
Portugal	SIC Notícias; RTP Notícias; Jornal de Notícias; Expresso; Público
Romania	Digi24; Libertatea; Pro Tv online; stiripesurse.ro; ziare.com

Table 3c. Types of actions portrayed in media materials by area and country

Types of actions/ Areas	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth at risk
1) Information, education, awareness-raising	PT	RO, PL, DK, AT, PT	RO, AT, PT	RO, PL, DK
2) Networking, partnership building	PT	PL	PL	PL, FR
3) Creating own services, proposing innovations	RO, PT	AT, PT	–	PT, RO
4) Monitoring of services	DK, AT, PT	RO	RO, PL, DK, AT, PT, FR	PL, AT, FR
5) Lobbying/ Change of laws	DK, FR	PT	PL, DK	–
6) Public protesting	RO, PL, AT, FR, PT	PT	PL	AT, FR

Abbreviations: AT – Austria, Dk – Denmark, FR – France, PL- Poland, PT – Portugal, RO- Romania;

Table 3d. Media articles analysed by country, area, tone and prognosed outcome

		Poland	Romania	France	Austria	Denmark	Portugal	All countries
Disability								
No. of analysed articles		26	26	17	26	25	17	137
Tone of the article	Neutral	23	19	11	5	0	11	69
	Sympathising with groups	0	5	6	16	19	4	50
	Denying demands	2	0	0	1	6	0	9
	Other	1	2	0	4	0	2	9
Factual or prognosed outcome	Success	5	1	5	7	3	10	31
	Failure	2	0	1	5	1	1	10
	Not specified	19	25	11	14	21	6	96
Time span	From	2018	2018	2019	2018	2018	2018	2018
	To	2023	2024	2024	2024	2024	2023	2024
Child protection								
No. of analysed articles		24	24	18	16	25	4	111
Tone of the article	Neutral	19	12	4	8	0	3	46
	Sympathising with groups	4	11	13	8	20	1	57
	Denying demands	0	0	0	0	4	0	4
	Other	1	1	1	0	1	0	4
Factual or prognosed outcome	Success	17	3	5	1	2	0	28
	Failure	3	0	2	2	1	0	8
	Not specified	4	21	11	13	22	4	75
Time span	From	2023	2020	2019	2019	2018	2018	2018
	To	2024	2023	2024	2023	2024	2023	2024
Mental health								
No. of analysed articles		19	21	0	16	25	20	101
No. of media portals used		11				5		16
Tone of article	Neutral	4	11	0	7	3	6	31
	Sympathising with groups	14	10	0	9	18	13	64
	Denying demands	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
	Other	1	0	0	0	3	1	5
Factual or prognosed outcome	Success	1	1	0	5	2	7	16
	Failure	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Not specified	18	20	0	11	23	13	85
Time span	From	2019	2020				2019	2019
	To	2023	2024				2023	2024
Youth at risk of exclusion								
No. of analysed articles		18	17	13	13	25	4	90
No. of media portals used		6	5	4	5	4		24
Tone of article	Neutral	0	16	8	6	0	2	32
	Sympathising with groups	14	1	3	7	19	2	46
	Denying demands	3	0	1	0	5	0	9
	Other	1	0	1	0	1	0	3
Factual or prognosed outcome	Success	6	1	0	2	7	0	16
	Failure	2	0	0	2	2	0	6
	Not specified	10	16	13	9	16	4	68
Time span	From	2021	2018	2019	2019	2018	2018	2018
	To	2024	2024	2024	2024	2024	2023	2024
Overall for country								
No. of analysed articles		87	88	48	71	100	45	439
No. of media portals used		11	6	4	5	5	0	31
Tone of article (K)	Neutral	46	58	23	26	3	22	178
	Sympathising with groups	32	27	22	40	76	20	217
	Denying demands	5	0	1	1	16	0	23
	Other	4	3	2	4	5	3	21
Factual or prognosed outcome	Success	29	6	10	15	14	17	91
	Failure	7	0	3	9	4	1	24
	Not specified	51	82	35	47	82	27	324
Time span	From	2018	2018	2019	2018	2018	2018	2018
	To	2024	2024	2024	2024	2024	2023	2024

Table 9a. Indicated aims of actions by field, country and area

Field/Country		Austria				Denmark				France				Poland				Portugal				Romania			
		D	MH	CP	YR	D	MH	CP	YR	D	MH	CP	YR	D	MH	CP	YR	D	MH	CP	YR	D	MH	CP	YR
Law	1. Ensuring existing rights				X					x								x		x		x			
	2. Changing legislation	x		x								x			x			x					x		
System	3. Advocating for certain solutions (e.g., additional financing)	x			X					x															
	4. Implementing changes in the system	x	x	x		x	x					x	x					x		x	x	x			x
	5. Criticising existing measures/ solutions/ models and advocacy									x		x			x	x		x					x		
Services	6. Fighting for more responsive services				X																				
	7. Keeping services						x								x										
	8. Increasing quality of existing services								x	x		x	x					x	x			x			
	9. Providing alternative services														x	x	x	x					x	x	x
Awareness	10. Destigmatisation and fight against stereotypes		x	x			x	x							x			x	x			x	x		
	11. Inclusion	x	x			x												x							
	12. Education about issues/ problems of certain groups					x	x		x			x			x	x									
	13. Researching															x							x		
Empowerment	14. Gaining recognition by sharing lived experiences						x								x			x	x						
	15. Self-support				X										x			x	x						
	16. Rising the voices			x								x			x										

Legend: x,xx,xxx – indicated aims in studied actions

Table 9b. Target groups of citizens' actions by country and area.

Country / Area	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth at risk
Austria	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries
	- People with different forms of disabilities	- Children and youth with MH issues - People with MH issues	- Single mothers & their children - Refugee children	- Care leavers - Young people using child & welfare services - Queer youth
	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents
	- General public - Decision-makers - Civil society	- Politicians - Decision makers - Civil society - People with MH issues	- Politicians - Decision-makers - General public - Judges, reviewers, social workers, welfare officers	- Politicians - Decision-makers in youth welfare services - General public
Denmark	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries
	- People with physical and mental disability + relatives - People in wheelchairs - People who need a focus on legal certainty in obtaining disability and mental health support	- People with physical and mental disability + relatives - People who feel badly treated in the welfare system - People with mental illness (incl. depression, anxiety)	- Children & young people in foster care - Children in vulnerable and exposed positions - Parents of children in foster care - All families in need of support, e.g. financial help, help with food, material things, and services	- Children & young people placed in foster care - Young homeless people - Young people with disabilities
	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents
	- General public, politicians - Decision makers - Civil society - People with disabilities in general	- General public, politicians - Decision makers - Civil society - People in mental health crisis in general	- General public, politicians - Decision makers - Civil society - People within child protection system	- General public, politicians - Decision makers - Civil society - Youth at risk in general
France	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries
	- People with disabilities - Their families/carers	- People with MH difficulties - Their families/carers	- Children in foster care - Mothers & children experiencing domestic violence - Adults with children in care	- Unaccompanied minors – migrant youth - Youth in care (in residential centres & foster families) - Care leavers - Students at risk of precariousness

Country / Area	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth at risk
France	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents
	- General public - Decision-makers - Workers with disabilities	- Decision makers - General public - Socio-medical services for people with MH difficulties	- General public (& families with children) - Judges & social workers/professionals	- General public - Families with children - Decision-makers - “Departments” (territorial sub-divisions)
Poland	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries
	- People with disabilities - Carers of people with disabilities	- People with MH issues	- Children - Biological parents at risk of losing their children	- Youth in foster care & care leavers - Queer youth - Youth experiencing homelessness
	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents
	- Decision makers - Politicians - Local social services - Medical professionals - Doctors and medical professions - Local social services	- General public - Decision-makers - Politicians - Media - MH professionals	- General public - Decision-makers - Politicians - Media	- Media - Decision-makers - Experts
Portugal	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries
	- People with disabilities (autism spectrum) - Families and/or carers - General public	- People with mental health difficulties - People with mental issues and intellectual disability - Families and carers - Practitioners - General public	- Children victims of maltreatment and domestic violence - Parents victims of alleged abusive removal of children under law	- Students in compulsory education (6–12 years old)
	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents
	- Decision makers - Politicians (political parties in Parliament) - General public	- Decision makers - Municipalities support structures	- Politicians (political parties in Parliament) - Decision makers - Practitioners - Parents and/or families	- School leaders and - Teaching staff - Parents and/or families

Country / Area	Disability	Mental health	Child protection	Youth at risk
Romania	<i>Beneficiaries</i>	<i>Beneficiaries</i>	<i>Beneficiaries</i>	<i>Beneficiaries</i>
	- People with disabilities - Young people with hearing impairments - Children with disabilities - Caregivers of people with disabilities	- Young people & students - Patients of MH services - People with addiction problems	- Children with disabilities (e.g. hearing impairments) - Children in poor areas with a majority of the Roma population - Children from marginalised communities - Children & young people in rural areas - Children in foster care - Foster care leavers	- Young Roma people - Students - Youth in residential care - Foster care leavers

Annex 2. Figures

Figure 1. Dominating tone of articles in all 6 countries studied (N=439)

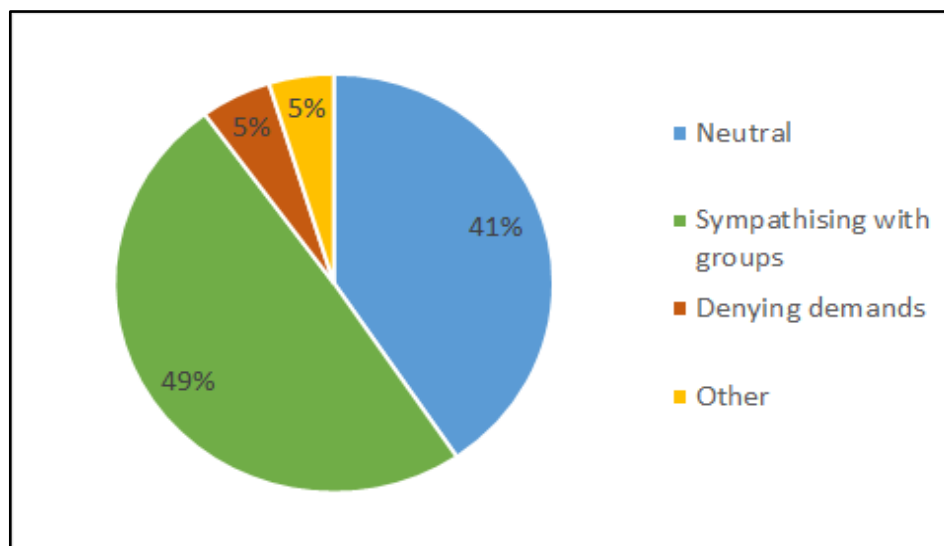


Figure 1a. Tone of articles (disability)

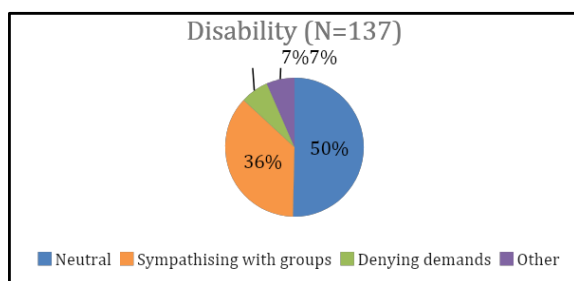


Figure 1b. Tone of articles (mental health)

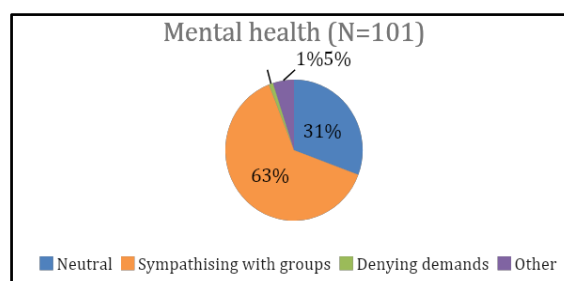


Figure 1c. Tone of articles (child protection)

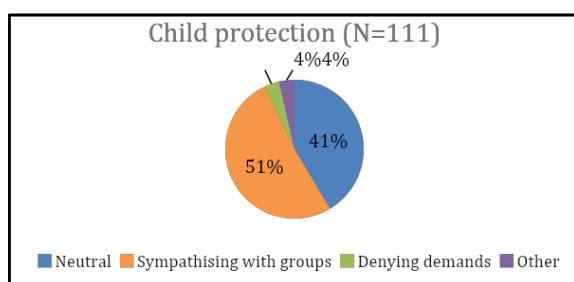
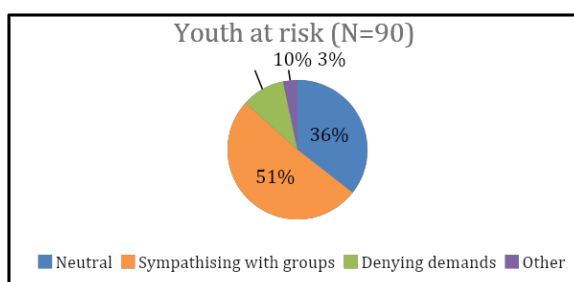


Figure 1d. Tone of articles (youth at risk)



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