To support civil society organisations, research funders must listen to their needs

A key premise of research impact is that the inclusion and active involvement of different stakeholders in research processes can create more useful research outcomes. One key stakeholder in many areas of social scientific research are Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), such as charities and community groups. However, despite being acknowledged in research funding frameworks their reasons for engaging in research funding are not well understood. In this post, **Wouter van de Klippe** *discusses findings from a case study of CSO organisations and explores their motivations for engaging (or not) with research funding and academic research.*

If they want to address urgent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate emergency, research and innovation systems cannot operate in isolation from civil society. By including social movements and civil society organisations (CSOs), funders benefit from the inclusion of diverse perspectives and agendas that might otherwise be 'undone', by incumbent corporate and political interests. However, despite promising recent developments, research funders have so far found it difficult to incorporate these groups into research systems.

Take as an example the European Commission's policy device of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), part of the Horizon 2020 framework programme, which aims to 'engage citizens/ CSOs in research activities such as through agenda setting, foresight, and public outreach'. How far has this actually been achieved and what kinds of civil society organisation been involved?

As part of the wider SUPER MoRRI project to develop a monitoring and evaluation system for RRI, I wanted to explore this often unasked question; whether (and which) CSOs are legitimately given the opportunity to engage with the research system, and test the extent to which policy rhetoric matched the experiences of CSOs. The case study involved interviews with representatives from small to medium sized CSOs working on environmental issues, primarily in the Netherlands. They revealed a dramatic disconnect between how funding opportunities are designed and the practical needs of CSOs.

Dispelling the myth of distance

There is a common misconception that the disconnect between research and social movements is due to a lack of overlap. It is argued that CSOs don't need additional research for their work, or that opportunities provided through research innovation systems are too theoretical or technical for use within social movements. Whilst the former was swiftly disproven in the interviews, the latter likely represents a flaw within the research and innovation system needing attention.

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Interviewees expressed interests in a diverse array of research topics, ranging from the impacts of advertisements for fossil fuel companies on consumer behaviour and children to research on the extent to which pension funds currently invest in fossil fuel companies. A disconnect emerged when these research projects had to be aligned to particular academic interests and incentive structures. The legacy system of academic publications, research outputs, peer review, hierarchical and linear career progression, were all frequently mentioned by interviewees as impediments to legitimate collaboration. Fortunately, there have been moves to reconsider the existing regime of recognition and reward schemes within academia, such as the OCSD net manifesto for open science and the call for slow scholarship manifesto, both of which call for an academia which is more open, inclusive, and just.

Resource constraints

Allied to this issue of incentive misalignment, interviewees regularly cited resource constraints. These consisted of a lack of financial resources, expertise, employees, among others, which served as barriers at different points in the funding process, but above all at the proposal writing stage.

Interviewees reported that it was unreasonable to expect that their organisations could run the gamut of exercises necessary to apply for funding through calls at research funding organisations. They also highlighted that it was unfeasible for small to medium sized CSOs to dedicate staff to only work on funding calls with exceptionally low probabilities of success, and that typically it was directors who spent considerable time writing proposals.

Multiple interviewees also mentioned that they were considering cutting their budget and seeking out more reliable and less burdensome funding sources. Notably one participant remarked that they '*would rather cut the funding by a third or more than have to repeatedly go through the burden of writing proposal after proposal*.'

Lack of resources has significant implications, resulting in larger well-resourced CSOs, having a systematic advantage in winning funding. Small and medium sized CSOs are forced into a resource bind due to the institutionalized funding acquisition scheme – resulting in the funding schemes of the commission perpetuating, rather than diminishing, the inequality between these organisations.

The accountability burden

As opposed to research funding, interviewees indicated that most of their funding comes from private foundations. This was due to the low accountability burden and the high degree of trust displayed by private foundations. Accountability within these relationships typically consisted of around two meetings per year for an open discussion on the status of the work which was funded and how the organisations might co-operate to address challenges. These evaluation meetings often coincided with pre-existing internal evaluations, reducing their demands on the organisations.

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In contrast, civil society organisation interviewees took issue with the accountability burdens imposed from grants from research funding organisations, and in particular the *types* of burdens imposed. They argued that it was not their mission to write articles, deliverables, or other reporting documents, and that imposing demands for these documents on their organisations served as a barrier to the tasks central to their missions. Interviewees remarked that the burden of accountability, coupled with grant proposal writing, can at times take up more than 50% of their working capacity. This highlights again the risks that CSOs face of being co-opted into academic value regimes, rather than the academic system being open to alternate forms of knowledge production and valuation.

Closed networks and mission movement

Several additional themes came out of the interviews, including that there was a lack of awareness that calls seeking to reach out to civil society existed at all. Most interviewees had not heard of the terminology of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), despite expressing explicit interest in and intention to engage with the research and innovation system.

This raises the question of what kinds of civil society organisations *are* engaging with these funding calls. It may be the case that the same large CSOs are able to expend the resources required to engage with the research and innovation system, and consequently, the same actors tend to engage. This inhibits the creation of a truly inclusive and diverse environment for research and innovation, by systematically excluding smaller and less-resourced organisations from participating.

Finally, interviewees described a common pressure to shift their foci, change their practices, or fulfil particular projects set by funders which contrasted with their organisational goals, a phenomenon referred to as mission movement. This often led to the inclusion of civil society and CSOs as a tokenistic exercise, rather than a legitimate partnership, despite research indicating the [many roles these organisations can play](#).

Future trajectories for CSO inclusion

What emerged from these interviews was a consistent set of recommendations:

- Greater clarity on how funders expect NGOs to be able to participate in calls.
- Intentional efforts from funders to reach out to small and medium sized CSOs.
- CSO participation in the creation of calls to better align them to their needs and capabilities.
- More flexibility and trust, and a curated approach to accountability practices for CSOs.
- Ambition to step outside conventional project-based funding and deliverable based funding models.
- Material support for the creation of networks and relationships between excluded CSOs.

We face a multitude of crises. In response, research funding organisations have made, at least at face value, attempts to align the research and innovation system closer to the needs of society. This study revealed there is still a significant gap between rhetoric and reality. The ways that the current funding models operate require considerable, and ambitious, rethinking to legitimately create a more inclusive and socially oriented research and innovation system. This is a moment for ambition and change, not convention and conservatism.

The case study described in this post takes place in the context of the [SUPER MoRRI](#) project, which seeks to create a monitoring and evaluation system for the policy device of [Responsible Research and Innovation](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below

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