



REIMAGINING COMMUNITIES AND PLACES: PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES WITH OLDER ADULTS

Building on the activities of Working Group 2 within the PAAR-net COST ACTION, the outcomes of its International Knowledge Exchange Event held in Frankfurt in September 2024, and the insights of older co-creators, this briefing paper sheds light on key challenges in fostering participation within community and place. Through collaborative discussions and shared experiences, researchers, policy-makers, practitioners and older adults themselves identified innovative solutions to address these challenges. This paper synthesises these findings, offering actionable insights and strategies to enhance meaningful participation for older adults in diverse community and place contexts.

INTRODUCTION



Participatory approaches with older adults refer to **methods that actively involve older adults as co-creators** in research, policymaking, and local projects. These approaches encompass diverse frameworks such as citizen science, participatory action research (PAR), co-creation, and participatory design. Their core aim is to **shift the traditional dynamic** where older adults are passive subjects, instead empowering them to contribute as equal collaborators, drawing on their experiential knowledge to inform decisions and effect social change (Urbaniak, Wanka, 2024). By prioritising meaningful involvement, participatory approaches facilitate equitable participation, co-learning, and community mobilisation, challenging the hierarchy between expert and lay knowledge. These methods encourage older adults to actively shape decisions about their communities and places, thereby challenging ageist stereotypes and addressing structural barriers to inclusion. Despite the growing adoption of participatory approaches, significant challenges persist. In community and place-based contexts, ensuring the inclusion of all older adults – particularly those often unheard – remains a pressing issue. This includes older adults living in deprived areas and situations, migrants, Indigenous people, refugees, and those with disabilities. Involving these groups in a meaningful and impactful participation process is complex, as it requires addressing a plurality of experiences of ageing and responding to unequal engagement capacities. This diversity complicates the design and implementation of participation practices, often resulting in processes that struggle to fully accommodate or reflect the realities of all participants.

PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES MUST CONTINUALLY EVOLVE TO ENSURE THAT THE VOICES OF THE MOST MARGINALISED ARE NOT ONLY HEARD BUT ACTIVELY INCLUSIVELY SHAPE OUTCOMES.

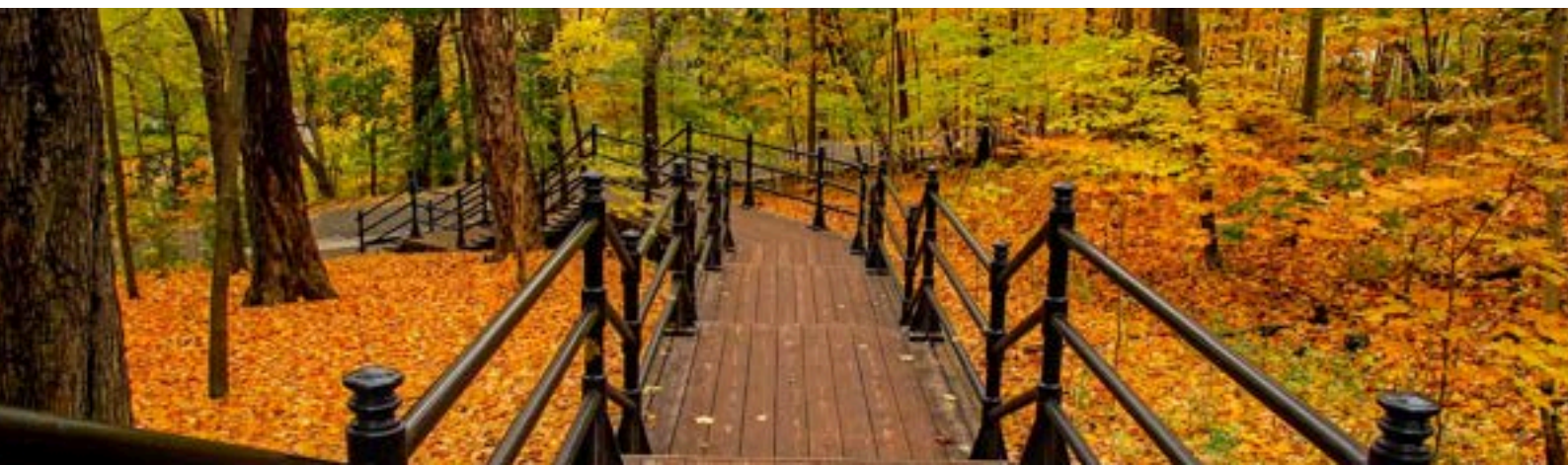
CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES WITH OLDER ADULTS

Among the numerous participatory approaches with older adults emerging, the **Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (AFCC) framework**, established by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in the early 2000s, stands out as one of the most globally recognised initiatives. With over **1600 cities** and communities across **53 countries** participating as of 2024, AFCC has become a global movement aiming to build greater communities to grow old. Direct participation of older adults in identifying challenges, and proposing solutions, is at the core of this framework. To do so, AFCC emphasises eight key areas – **housing, transportation, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication and information, community support and health services and outdoor spaces and buildings** – that influence older adults' well-being and quality of life.

For each of these domains, **cities engage older adults through consultations, co-creation workshops and participatory action plans**, ensuring their diverse experiences of ageing and needs are reflected in the elaboration of local policies and practices. By fostering collaboration between older adults, local governments, and stakeholders, AFCC promotes inclusive places and empowers older adults to remain active contributors in shaping their communities.

PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES EMPOWER OLDER ADULTS AS CO-CREATORS, ADDRESSING AGEIST STEREOTYPES AND PROMOTING SOCIAL EQUITY.

THE IMPORTANCE AND VALUE OF DEVELOPING PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES WITH OLDER ADULTS ARE INCREASINGLY SHARED TODAY. HOWEVER, SEVERAL CRITICAL ISSUES AND CHALLENGES RAISED BY OLDER ADULTS THEMSELVES, STAKEHOLDERS AND RESEARCHERS REMAIN AND MUST BE ADDRESSED TO ENSURE MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION.



CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES WITH OLDER ADULTS

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INSIGHTS FROM A POLICYMAKER'S EXPERIENCE: BECOMING AN AGE-FRIENDLY CITY – THE CASE OF HAMBURG

Hamburg, which is known as the youngest federal state in Germany due to its high immigration rate, is nevertheless experiencing consistent demographic change. With one in four residents now over the age of 60 and the population aged 80 and over growing at the fastest rate, **preparing for an age-friendly future has become an urgent political goal.** While ageing policy is often met with little public support, especially in comparison to issues considered politically more important such as the economy, migration or transport, Hamburg has found a good approach to tackling these challenges by applying for membership in the WHO's AFCC network. This approach has proven to be a 'door opener' and has led to broad support and commitment from local stakeholders.

To make this vision a reality, in a first step, residents were involved in an 'unpretentious social research' through **workshops held in 16 neighbourhoods.**

Around **320 participants** contributed their ideas and feedback, which were analysed and visualised through word clouds to **identify community priorities.**

In a second step, the city conducted **focus group interviews in 7 neighbourhoods**, in which a total of **82 people** between the ages of 60 and 90 took part – 30% male, 70% female. These results were summarised in a cross-departmental action plan resulting in over 100 concrete measures. These recommendations focussed on several key areas: improving mobility, meeting places for older people, improving medical support, improving access to food and solving housing problems.

The workshops highlighted **differences between the priorities** – for example, **transport** was a more pressing concern in the outer boroughs than in the city centre, where **housing** was more of an issue. Feedback also highlighted issues such as unsafe **pavements**, the need for age-friendly **benches** in more areas and the shortage of **public toilets.**

An initial challenge in the participation process was the use of the English term 'Age-Friendly City' in the communication materials, which was initially rejected by the public as an annoying Anglicism. **After the organisers switched to the German terminology, the interest of residents increased**, which shows how important culturally adapted participatory approaches are.

CRITICAL ISSUES AND CHALLENGES RELATED TO PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES WITH OLDER ADULTS

Social and cultural challenges

Participatory approaches with older adults often face **stereotypes and negative representations** associated with ageing. These biases can lead to an underestimation of the legitimacy of their voices, sometimes resulting in their marginalisation or exclusion from participatory processes. This phenomenon, called “**ageism**” (Butler, 1969), manifests itself through more or less conscious ways among those who perpetuate it. It reinforces devaluing attitudes toward ageing, limits the full recognition of older adults as active contributors in their communities and perpetuates **power imbalances** that sideline them in decision-making processes. In addition to these challenges, cultural differences and language barriers often arise in the implementation of participatory approaches with certain older populations. These difficulties are particularly pronounced when it comes to including **older migrants or those with an immigration background, refugees, or Indigenous peoples**. This is especially problematic as it can further reinforce their invisibility – already scarcely seen in representative democracy – and exacerbate their marginalisation in participatory democracy.

Spatial challenges

Participatory approaches with older adults often face challenges related to spatial and digital accessibility. These initiatives are frequently organised in collective formats, requiring participants to gather in spaces that are not always well-equipped to meet accessibility needs – whether in terms of **physical access, acoustics, or symbolic barriers**. Older participants often need to make considerable efforts to attend, such as taking public transportation, driving, or walking long distances, just to reach these venues. Many environments fail to accommodate their physical and social needs, intensifying feelings of exclusion and frustration. Furthermore, a common focus on urban settings for participatory approaches often leaves **older adults living in rural areas overlooked**. Additionally, ensuring the inclusion of voices from specific populations, such as older adults living in **nursing homes or hospitals**, remains a significant challenge. These issues highlight the broader challenges of accessibility and inclusivity in both the spaces that host participatory approaches and the methods developed within them.

Practical challenges

Participation is work and thus **requires resources** as well as **adaptations** in the everyday life of people who are juggling multiple obligations and need to spend their time carefully. Practical challenges, such as the **often-limited resources** available for implementing participatory approaches, undermine the long-term sustainability of these initiatives. As a result, **participants sometimes find themselves abandoned** when a process they have invested time and energy in comes to an abrupt halt. On the other hand, the extended timelines sometimes required for participatory processes can lead to **frustration** among participants. In such cases, participants may feel that tangible results take too long to materialise and that their commitment has not been fully acknowledged. Additionally, many older adults lack the necessary **tools, training, or support** to engage in meaningful participation, highlighting the need for targeted capacity-building efforts. All of this contributes to the invisibility of significant aspects of the ageing experience and produces societies that exclude certain groups. By overcoming social, cultural, spatial, and practical barriers, stakeholders can foster participatory approaches that empower older adults and promote more inclusive communities and places.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Address the heterogeneity of ageing

Address older adults as a diverse group that is not only defined by and does not only identify by a calendrical age. Reflect upon your own images of ageing, the images of ageing in your institution, and the relation of age boundaries to your project: Why do you address and aim to involve people of a certain age? Are you targeting older adults as people with limited mobility or disabilities, as people in a specific life stage (e.g. retirement) or role (e.g. grandparents), or a specific generation (e.g. Baby Boomers)? Disseminate and label your activities accordingly, for example, instead of talking to “people over 65 years”, address “people that have recently retired”. Consider the intersectional nature of ageing, where factors like migration, disability, and socioeconomic status compound challenges to participation. Developing nuanced participatory models and approaches that take these intersections into account will ensure that more older adults are empowered to contribute meaningfully. Initiatives that take these various recommendations into account will be able to involve older adults who are typically marginalised from decision-making processes and mainstream participatory approaches. This would help reveal and address the diverse experiences of ageing, complex situations, and the needs of older adults, ultimately contributing to the creation of more inclusive communities.

Promote context-sensitive participatory approaches

Adopt participatory frameworks that are **culturally tailored** and context-sensitive to better engage **diverse older adult populations**, including **migrants, refugees, Indigenous people, and those living in deprived conditions**. This will ensure that all voices are heard and represented, particularly those often marginalised within decision-making processes. Employ strategies that **reduce linguistic and cultural barriers**, particularly for older immigrants and refugees. This could involve using culturally appropriate communicational materials and offering multilingual support when necessary.

Support capacity building

Older adults themselves emphasise that it requires a lot of resources and skills to actively participate in research, policymaking and practice design: the means to access information, the ability and willingness to learn new things, the capabilities to exchange with others, time, patience and tolerance, self-reflection, and the self-esteem to raise one’s voice. **Provide training and resources to empower older adults with the skills and knowledge necessary for meaningful participation**. This includes offering the tools and vocabulary required to fully understand and engage with the discussed issues. Additionally, ensure that older participants are given adequate time to form their opinions, engage in collective discussions, and refine their ideas, allowing them to actively contribute throughout the participatory process.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Provide resources: time and money

Participatory approaches with older adults require a lot of resources. Some of these resources are spatial, others are related to capacities (see above), but most of all, participatory approaches require **time** – from researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and older co-creators themselves. In many contexts, **this time costs money**. Consequently, it is important to budget for this in terms of personnel months and remuneration for co-creators. Remuneration is not only a means of recognition of co-creators' work, but might also incentivise and enable participation for certain groups that could not participate without compensation (for example, covering public transport costs). Moreover, many older adults are involved in **caregiving activities** for their partners, parents, children and grandchildren, as well as neighbours, and need to know their friends and relatives are taken care of while they are actively involved in co-creation processes.

Share power, control and sovereignty

Participatory approaches shake up the power hierarchies between experts by training and experts by experience and distribute control and decision-making sovereignty between them. In a community and place context, this shift involves creating shared and safe spaces – both literal and symbolic – where all stakeholders can collaboratively shape their environment. These shared spaces should be rooted in the places that matter to older adults, leveraging their existing connections to their communities. For example, local libraries, community centres, or informal meeting spaces like parks or coffee shops can serve as accessible venues for these dialogues. Stakeholders and academic researchers must learn to cope with this empowerment of older co-creators and therefore their own disempowerment, and both groups must learn to negotiate a new way of making decisions beyond the template of experts vs. lay people. One way to institutionalise this process is by establishing mediating positions such as community facilitators or older advocates, and thus help bridge gaps between diverse groups, ensuring inclusive dialogue and fair decision-making.

Improve spatial and linguistic accessibility

Make participatory approaches **accessible both physically and digitally**. Older adults might have negative associations with certain places, like universities, religious institutions, or municipalities. Draw on locations that are already part of the older adults' life worlds you want to address - and consider, again, that these might be diverse, and consider mobile and outreaching approaches. Adapt **venues and formats to accommodate older adults with their capacities and diverse mobility needs**, including providing accessible transportation options, meeting places that are easy to reach, and user-friendly digital platforms (if used) for those with varying levels of technological proficiency. Beyond spatial accessibility, language can pose a significant barrier to inclusive participation. This includes offering multilingual resources tailored to the languages most common in the community, as well as culturally sensitive communication that respects the nuanced views of older adults from diverse backgrounds and will allow them to express themselves and engage with others. This might involve incorporating interpreters, translation services, or visual aids to bridge linguistic divides. It is also essential to actively involve older adults in co-creating communication strategies and formats that resonate with their preferences and lived experiences.

TO FUNDAMENTALLY SHIFT THE POSITION AND ROLE OF OLDER ADULTS IN PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES, IT IS ESSENTIAL TO RECOGNISE THEM NOT AS PASSIVE RECIPIENTS OF SERVICES AND POLICIES OR MERE RESEARCH SUBJECTS, BUT AS ACTIVE CONTRIBUTORS TO SHAPING THEIR ENVIRONMENTS.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Participatory approaches with older adults hold transformative potential to reshape communities and places by positioning them as co-creators in research, policymaking, and local initiatives. These methods challenge traditional power hierarchies and ageist stereotypes, emphasizing the importance of inclusion. While adopting frameworks such as AFCC demonstrates significant progress, the persistent barriers to full participation – social, cultural, spatial, and practical – highlight the need for continued assessment and adaptation of these approaches. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and context-sensitive approach. In this perspective, strategies must prioritise diversity, accessibility, and capacity building while fostering inclusion of usually marginalised groups such as older migrants, Indigenous people, and those with disabilities. By adopting nuanced and well-resourced participatory frameworks, stakeholders can amplify the diverse voices of older adults in the decision-making processes and ultimately contribute to the definition of more inclusive communities.

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