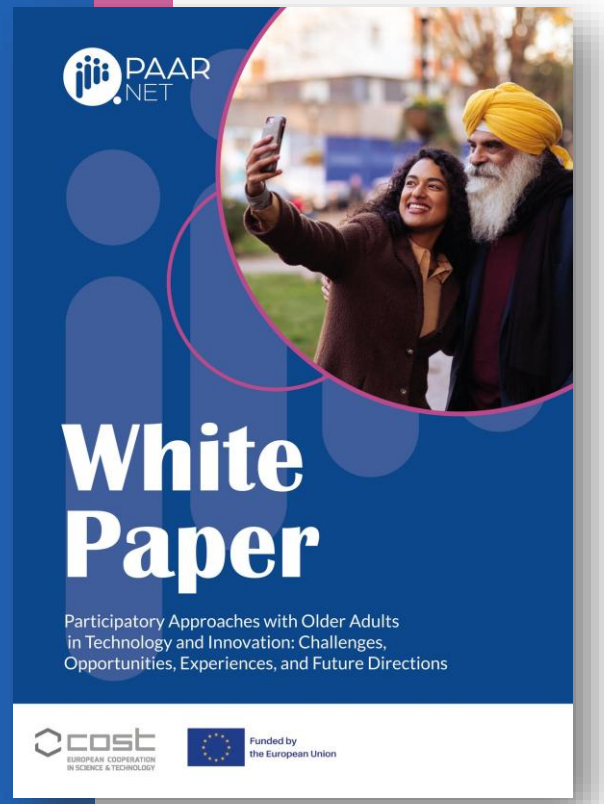
PAAR-Net White Paper 3

Technology and Innovation

Participatory Approaches with Older Adults in Technology and Innovation:

- Challenges,
- Opportunities,
- Experiences,
- and Future Directions



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Participatory Approaches with Older Adults in Technology and Innovation:

European population ageing continues to accelerate

The “silver economy” is growing significantly across the EU, driving investment in healthcare, age-friendly technologies, housing, mobility, leisure, and care

WHAT WE LEARN IN WHITE PAPER THREE

- **Reframe technology** for ageing beyond cost-cutting and health decline; challenge ageist discourses.
- **Embed** older adults as co-creators in all stages of policy, research, and innovation design.
- **Tackle** psychological, social, and economic barriers to prevent digital and social exclusion of older adults.
- **Encourage** cross-border, interdisciplinary knowledge exchange to build inclusive socio-technical ecosystems.
- **Adopt** creative, experimental participatory methods to future-proof innovation and ageing policies.

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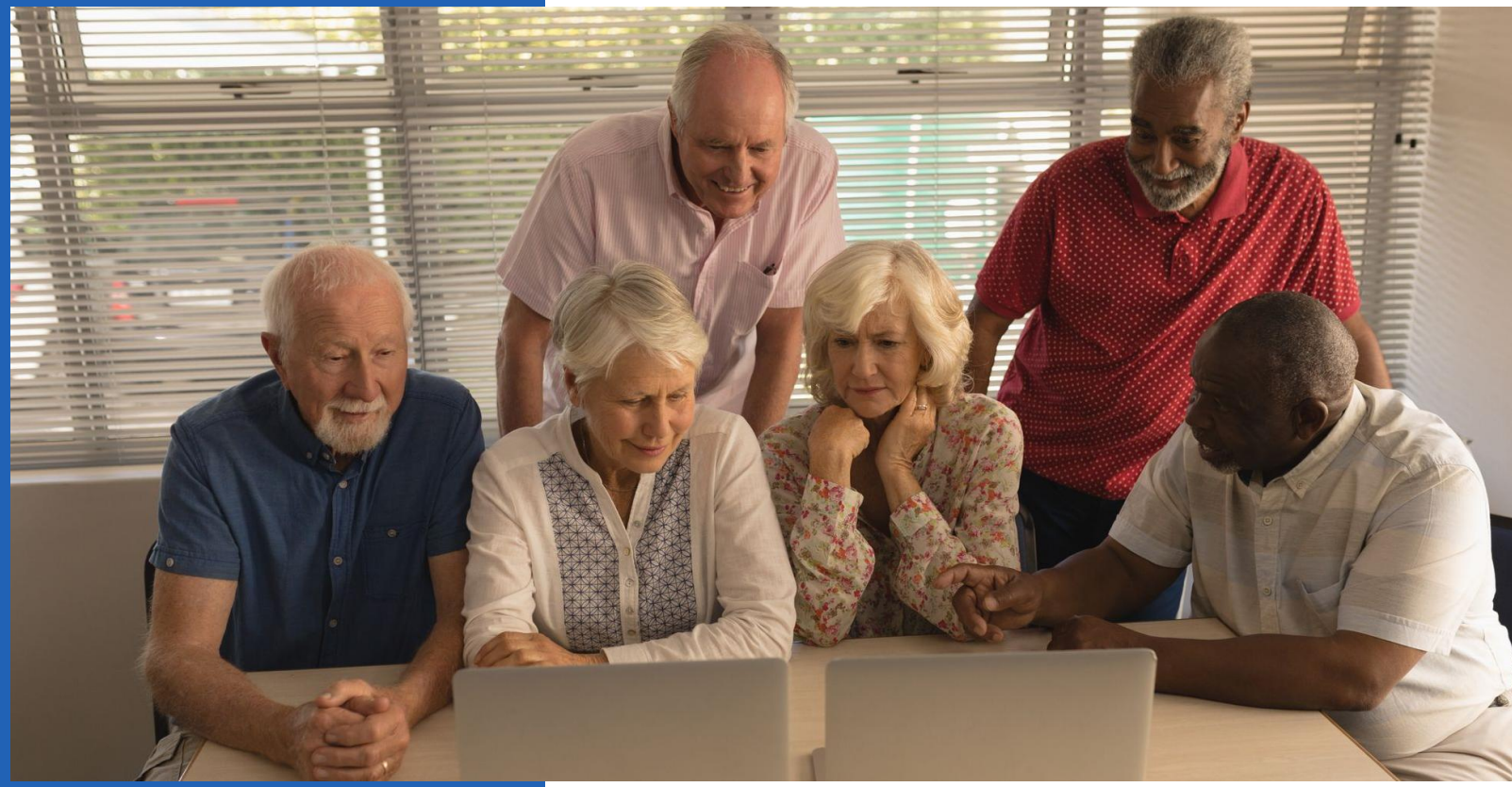
Learning for Practitioners and Researchers



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Challenges

Ageist framing undermines innovation: Persistent deficit-based assumptions in research and design lead to technologies that stigmatise older adults and fail to meet their diverse needs.

Tokenistic participation limits impact: Older adults are often engaged too late or superficially in projects, reducing the value and adoption of co-created outputs.

Hard-to-reach groups remain excluded: Socioeconomic, geographic, and cultural barriers — alongside varying levels of digital readiness — prevent many older adults from participating in research and innovation.

Fragmented ethical and methodological standards: Inconsistent approaches to consent, privacy, and inclusivity complicate collaboration across borders and disciplines.

Lack of alignment in multinational projects: Differing national priorities, terminologies, and research cultures slow knowledge exchange and hinder cohesive progress.

Underuse of experimental methods: Creative and anticipatory approaches (e.g., speculative design, AI-supported participation) are rarely tested at scale, limiting their potential to drive innovation.

Opportunities

Scope to deepen multi-stage participation: There is potential to involve older adults more meaningfully across all phases of research, from planning to dissemination, to enhance the relevance and usability of outcomes.

Room to refine creative participatory methods: Approaches like unfettered design, speculative workshops, and AI-supported engagement could be further developed and tested to generate fresh insights and foster equity in participation.

Potential to broaden inclusivity: Adapting research practices to better accommodate sensory needs, cultural differences, and varying levels of digital literacy could open participation to groups often left out of innovation processes.

Opportunities for intergenerational and intercultural exchange: Creating spaces for cross-age and cross-cultural collaboration could enrich participatory work and improve cultural sensitivity in design.

Possibility to strengthen transnational knowledge exchange: Shared frameworks and tools across COST-affiliated countries could reduce duplication, enable comparative learning, and scale effective participatory practices.

Chance to build a stronger evidence base: Systematic evaluation of participatory approaches could help quantify their benefits for technology adoption, usability, and older adults' well-being.

Implementation Imperatives

Practitioners and Researchers can:

Adopt multi-phase participation models: Integrate older adults across all stages of research and innovation, from defining research questions to dissemination , to enhance the relevance and uptake of outputs .

Refine creative and experimental methods: Expand the use of approaches like unfettered design, speculative workshops, and AI-supported participation, ensuring these methods are tested for feasibility and impact in real-world settings .

Prioritise inclusivity through adaptive practices: Design participatory processes that accommodate sensory, cultural, linguistic, and digital competency differences, making engagement possible for diverse older adult groups .

Build interdisciplinary and transnational networks: Strengthen collaboration across COST countries and academic disciplines to share methods, co-develop tools, and collectively address challenges in ageing and technology .

Evaluate and evidence impact: Systematically assess the effects of participatory approaches on technology usability, adoption, and older adults' well-being to inform both practice and policy .

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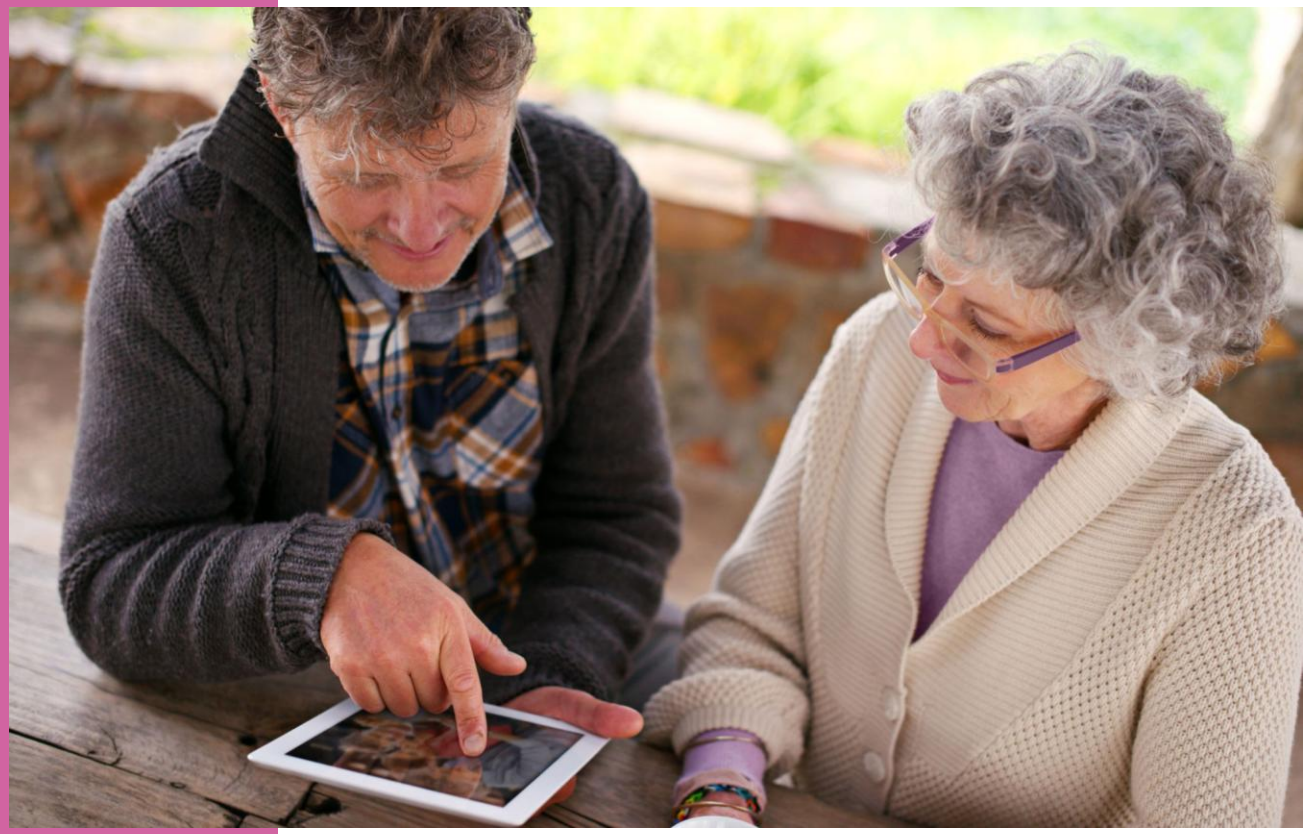
Learnings for Policymakers



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Challenges

Digital ageism and homogeneous narratives: Policy and innovation discourse often frames ageing as a problem, leading to stigmatising and irrelevant technologies.

Limited and uneven participation: Despite widespread recognition of the benefits of co-design, there remains a significant gap between the ideal of involving older adults throughout the design process and actual practice.

Intersecting inequalities: Socioeconomic status, geography, education, gender, and cultural differences continue to shape unequal access to technology and exclude disadvantaged older adults from participatory projects.

Lack of shared standards and practices: Varied national approaches and fragmented methodologies hinder the development of cohesive EU-wide participatory frameworks.

Ethical and methodological constraints: Challenges include addressing sensory decline, privacy, security, and ensuring meaningful consent while avoiding tokenistic participation.

Opportunities

Recognise diversity in ageing experiences: Policies can be informed by the insight that older adults are a heterogeneous group, with differing abilities, needs, and cultural contexts. This requires flexible participatory approaches rather than one-size-fits-all interventions.

Strengthen participatory practices beyond tokenism: The White Paper highlights that co-creation adds value when older adults influence not only design but also decision-making processes, ensuring that outputs are meaningful and more widely adopted.

Expand digital inclusion as a social policy priority: Structured literacy initiatives and intergenerational learning environments can address intersecting inequalities (gender, geography, socioeconomic status) and help reduce digital and social exclusion.

Support integrated, cross-border approaches: EU-level frameworks can reduce fragmentation between national efforts, enabling participatory methods to be standardised while respecting local contexts. This also creates opportunities for shared learning and more robust evidence bases.

Foster innovation through experimental design: Creative approaches, including speculative and AI-supported participatory methods, allow for forward-looking policy development and better alignment of technologies with the lived realities of ageing populations.

Implementation Imperatives

Policymakers can …

Integrate participatory approaches into mainstream policy frameworks: Embed co-creation principles in the design of ageing-related strategies, ensuring older adults can contribute meaningfully at every stage of policy development and programme implementation.

Support capacity-building for participation: Provide funding and resources for digital literacy, participatory training, and intergenerational learning, empowering older adults and those working with them to fully engage in technology and innovation processes.

Develop harmonised EU-level standards: Create shared guidelines for participatory methods across countries, balancing flexibility for local adaptation with consistent metrics for evaluation and impact measurement.

Promote cross-sector and cross-border collaboration: Facilitate partnerships between governments, academia, industry, and civil society to share knowledge, align priorities, and co-develop innovative solutions for ageing populations.

Invest in experimental and future-oriented participatory practices: Encourage the use of creative methods such as speculative design and AI-supported engagement to anticipate future challenges and ensure policies remain adaptive and forward-looking

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WP3 Country Case Study Matrix

Country / Case Study	Theme 1: Counteracting Ageist Narratives	Theme 2: Multi-Stage Participation	Theme 3: Digital & Social Exclusion	Theme 4: Interdisciplinary Collaboration	Theme 5: Future-Oriented Strategies
Sweden Welfare@Home	Welfare@Home			Welfare@Home	Unfettered Design
Poland Consumer Engagement Labs	Consumer Engagement Labs	Consumer Engagement Labs			Consumer Engagement Labs
Türkiye Digital Inclusiveness Project		Digital Inclusiveness Project	Community Digital Skills Training		e-Nabız Digital Health Platform
Moldova Active & Healthy Ageing Program			Active & Healthy Ageing Program and Ungheni Senior Club	Generations United Hackathon	
Hungary eHungary & Gondosóra			eHungary & Gondosóra		
AFECO Project – 6 Countries		AFECO Project			AFECO Project

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