

Active Citizenship: Designing a Pathway Towards the Future

Ciudadanía Activa: Diseñando un camino hacia el futuro

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Abstract:

The "Programa Cidadãos Ativos" (Active Citizens Fund), funded by the EEA Grants and managed in Portugal by the Calouste Gulbenkian and Bissaya Barreto Foundations, aims to strengthen civil society and empower vulnerable groups. It promotes democracy, human rights, social justice, and NGO capacity building. Over nine months, we supported 25 projects through monthly sessions with project representatives (a Consultative Group), focusing on their progress, goals, and evolving perspectives on active citizenship. These sessions provided participants with skills to enhance civic engagement within their projects. By fostering critical reflection, the Active Citizens Fund has shown substantial potential to enhance civic participation and create a more inclusive, democratic society. This model could be adapted to support collective action and active citizenship in other contexts.

Keywords:

Active citizenship; Empowerment; Civil society; Democracy; Civic participation.

Resumen:

El "Programa Cidadãos Ativos" (Fondo para los Ciudadanos Activos), financiado por los EEA Grants y gestionado en Portugal por las Fundaciones Calouste Gulbenkian y Bissaya Barreto, tiene como objetivo reforzar la sociedad civil y empoderar a los grupos vulnerables. Promueve la democracia, los derechos humanos, la justicia social y la capacitación de las ONG. A lo largo de nueve meses, apoyamos 25 proyectos mediante sesiones mensuales con representantes de los proyectos (un Grupo Consultivo), centradas en sus progresos, objetivos y perspectivas en evolución sobre la ciudadanía activa. Estas sesiones proporcionaron a los participantes habilidades para mejorar el compromiso cívico dentro de sus proyectos. Al fomentar la reflexión crítica, el Fondo para la Ciudadanía Activa ha demostrado un potencial sustancial para mejorar la participación cívica y crear una sociedad más inclusiva y democrática. Este modelo podría adaptarse para apoyar la acción colectiva y la ciudadanía activa en otros contextos.

Palabras claves:

Ciudadanía activa; Empoderamiento; Sociedad civil; Democracia; Participación cívica.

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Active Citizens Fund

The concept of citizenship has evolved from passive national identity to active participation, encompassing political, social, and personal engagement. Active citizenship empowers individuals to contribute to democratic societies through activities ranging from political action to self-improvement. Amid rising citizen disengagement, promoting civic participation is crucial for strengthening democracy. The Active Citizens Fund (ACF), funded by EEA Grants and managed in Portugal by the *Calouste Gulbenkian* and *Bissaya Barreto Foundations*, supports NGOs in promoting democratic engagement, human rights, and social justice. ACF emphasizes empowerment, offering training, resources and funding, especially for marginalized groups, fostering broader civic participation and long-term societal change.

Active Citizenship & Community Engagement: Theoretical & Conceptual Background

The theoretical underpinnings of ACF are summarized in the parts that follow, together with the methodological strategies (Community-Based Participatory Research and Youth Participatory Action Research) and important concepts (civic engagement, social transformation, and active social participation). It also examines the data supporting ACF's social innovation, inclusiveness, and sustainable community development initiatives. ACF's distinctive approach in the European context makes it a crucial model for advancing civic engagement and justice in local and global contexts. It emphasizes a collaborative, cross-sector model that unites NGOs, local communities, legislators, and international partners to enhance collective impact, promote democratic governance, and empower marginalized groups. Active social participation bridges individual civic efforts with broader societal change, serving as a key element in inclusive, community-driven initiatives.

Active Social Participation involves individuals engaging in activities that foster interaction within community settings. It is dynamic, evolving over time with changes in individual resources, societal context, and individual interests and circumstances (Levasseur et al., 2022). Active social participation is central to community-engaged and participatory research approaches, as it ensures that community voices, needs, and perspectives shape the research process and decision making. Equitable financial arrangements, institutional support, and relationship building are crucial to overcoming barriers and fostering meaningful, and sustainable collaboration between researchers and community stakeholders (Martinez et al., 2023).

Particularly, but not exclusively, for older persons, active social participation has numerous advantages for both individual and societal well-being. Keeping involved promotes health and lessens isolation. Although it might be difficult to adjust to changes in mobility and health, research indicates that it improves well-being (Löfgren et al., 2022; Nomura & Koyashi, 2024). By co-creating opportunities that are appealing and relevant, a person-centered strategy that adapts activities to each person's needs and interests can encourage participation. It also improves social cohesion, which helps a variety of groups, such as young people and underprivileged areas. Meaningful contributions to the well-being of the community are made possible by active social participation, which promotes inclusivity and community engagement.

Civic engagement encompasses individual and collective actions to address public concerns and promote community well-being (Chan et al., 2014)., research increasingly highlights

the multifaceted nature of civic engagement, examining its influences and long-term impacts. For example, Phan and Kloos (2023) emphasize how youth civic engagement catalyzes social change, particularly among youth from minoritized communities. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (2005), they propose a framework that highlights the interplay between individual civic aptitude and contextual influences such as culture, community, and socioeconomic factors. This framework positions the individual as both a participant in and a promoter of social change. Studies further highlight the value of civic education and youth involvement, demonstrating that these elements promote social transformation and individual growth (Alegría et al., 2021; Phan & Kloos, 2023; Saud, 2020).

The intergenerational transmission of civic values is also a key aspect of fostering civic engagement among youth. Schmid et al. (2023) explore how philanthropic values, such as civic responsibility, are passed down through family discussions and parental modeling.

Another crucial component of civic engagement is media literacy. Media consumption, especially online news and political debates, improves civic engagement and political understanding. Park et al. (2023) confirm this necessity of providing people with digital skills, demonstrating that increased civic participation is linked to higher levels of media literacy and online engagement.

Civic engagement is also influenced by neighborhood ties. According to Dang et al. (2021), neighborhood trust indirectly promotes civic participation through commitment and responsibility to the community, whereas neighborhood friendships have a beneficial impact on civic engagement. In conclusion, several factors such as community ties, media literacy, youth empowerment, and family influence, may determine civic engagement. Promoting civic engagement via education and community connections can strengthen group initiatives to address societal issues and advance intergenerational well-being. Civic involvement drives social transformation by promoting both individual and collective actions that empower organizations, address public problems, and promote societal change.

Long-term shifts in social, cultural, political, or economic systems that alter societal norms and values are referred to as **social transformation**. Civic and social participation and engagement can provide various benefits across the lifespan, especially for youth and young adults. For example, youth engagement has been found to promote resilience and protect against adverse mental health impacts from challenging experiences (Ballard, 2019), volunteering has been positively correlated with mental health and empowerment among students (Vus et al., 2021), and engagement in citizenship activities is positively correlated with life satisfaction among emerging adults (Zalewska, 2023). Similarly, Laurence et al. (2021) found that participation significantly improves life satisfaction, especially among economically disadvantaged youth. This improvement is attributed to enhanced psychological resources and reduced negative interactions, demonstrating how social participation can narrow gaps in subjective well-being.

Lastly, social participation plays a role in feelings of connectedness and belonging, which are key drivers of psychological well-being in adolescence. Bärwalde et al. (2023) emphasize the role of social participation, especially with peers and family, in fostering a sense of belonging among adolescents. Similarly, Blum et al. (2022) note that programs focused on maximizing human connectedness and supportive relationships are more effective than those that treat youth as problems to be solved. By enabling communities to actively solve problems, confront injustices, and promote social change, Community-Based Participatory Research promotes social transformation.

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) has the potential to enhance civic participation through actively involving community members in the research process. It is designed to dismantle traditional research hierarchies and power imbalances through shared decision-making, democratic processes, and validation of lived experiences. Its goal is to empower participants through shared ownership over planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. Co-learning, collaboration, and reciprocity between researchers and community members are key components of CBPR, achieved through a balanced research process rooted in mutual trust and respect. CBPR aims to enhance health equity and minimizing health disparities by addressing the social determinants of health and encouraging culturally relevant interventions tailored to each community's unique context (Wallerstein et al., 2020).

CBPR seeks to create practical and actionable solutions that benefit the communities directly and influence public policy toward sustainable change. This approach to social change ties directly to civic engagement through its aim to equip communities with the skills and competencies necessary to respond continuously to shifting social, economic, and political challenges and conditions. The cycles of capacity building, action, and reflection within CBPR are designed to equip communities within the capacity to sustain this progress longitudinally, long after the actual research project is complete (Amauchi et al., 2022).

Gallegos et al. (2023) highlight the importance of moving beyond traditional participation models by actively involving marginalized populations in research. Their work stresses the need for researchers to address structural barriers to inclusion and to work with communities to build trust. They suggest a range of strategies such as partnering with community organizations, offering culturally sensitive trainings, and using informal settings for data collection. Youth Participatory Action Research extends CBPR by actively involving young people as co-researchers, empowering them to address community challenges and promote social change.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is an approach to CBPR that specifically focuses on engaging young people as co-researchers and places them in a leading position of change within their communities. Similar to CBPR, YPAR emphasizes the importance of equity, collaboration, and the validation of local knowledge. This synergy between CBPR and YPAR demonstrates the flexibility of participatory research approaches to civic engagement and community-driven transformation in diverse settings and groups.

According to Lindquist-Grantz and Abraczinskas (2020), YPAR is in line with the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework, which emphasizes the value of developing young resilience and developmental strengths. By fostering social-emotional skills, agency, and resilience, engagement enhances psychological well-being and mental health, according to the PYD framework (Hoffmann et al., 2023). The Dream Teens Project in Portugal (Matos & Simões, 2016; Frasquilho et al., 2018; Matos et al., 2020; Branquinho et al., 2020a, 2020b), exemplifies YPAR's role in promoting PYD and civic engagement by enhancing social participation and active citizenship.

Moreover, YPAR fosters critical consciousness by encouraging youth to reflect on systemic inequalities through a cyclical, iterative process. (Cohen et al., 2019). A key aspect of YPAR is its potential to use youth-driven insights to bridge the gap between research and policy change. For example, YPAR-generated research about student tardiness has led to the adjustment of school schedules at the local level (Ozer et al. (2020b), as well as a district-wide change that extended the passing period between classes (Cohen et al., 2019). Programs like California's Stockton Unified School District's Peer Leaders Uniting Students (PLUS) illustrate how YPAR can

be scaled to influence policy and decision-making at institutional levels (Cohen et al., 2019). The study emphasizes the importance of feedback loops and capacity building for both youth and school administrators to ensure the sustainability and impact of YPAR initiatives. Lastly, beyond education, Ozer et al. (2020b) highlight that youth-generated evidence can be crucial for making decisions that better reflect the needs of marginalized groups across various sectors and systems, such as public health.

Active Citizenship & Community Engagement - Current Challenges & Limitations

Despite global efforts to promote citizen participation, challenges remain in capturing and evaluating the outcomes of youth and community engagement initiatives. Catalano et al. (2019) highlight the need to address gaps in current practices, such as understanding and measuring the impact of participation from individual perspectives and ensuring that participation rights are effectively upheld across different contexts. Although YPAR represents a powerful tool for promoting youth empowerment, personal development, educational reform, and civic engagement, its success depends on thoughtful implementation, the balancing of power dynamics, and ongoing research to strengthen the evidence base for its long-term impacts (Cohen et al., 2019; Ozer et al., 2020a).

YPAR is a powerful tool for fostering youth empowerment, educational reform, and civic engagement. However, its success depends on careful implementation, addressing power dynamics, and strengthening the evidence base for its long-term impact (Cohen et al., 2019; Ozer et al., 2020a). Challenges include tokenism, where participation is superficial, and barriers such as lack of confidence, inadequate support, and systemic power imbalances (Bailey et al., 2024).

More broadly, Falanga and Ferrão (2021) focus on the challenges of evaluating citizen participation in policymaking, pointing out that a strong global evaluation culture is still lacking, noting that conceptual complexities and the diversity of participatory processes make it difficult to establish standard evaluation metrics. The authors point out that the scarcity of empirical data and evaluation methodologies remains a key obstacle to advancing this field.

In conclusion, tackling today's social issues requires promoting civic participation and active citizenship through participatory strategies like YPAR and CBPR.

Active Citizens Fund: Key Elements

As previously outlined, the "Program Cidadãos Ativos" (Active Citizens Fund) aims to strengthen civil society by fostering active citizenship and empowering vulnerable groups in Portugal. This section critically reflects on the program's impact and areas for growth. For a detailed overview of ACF please refer to <https://gulbenkian.pt/cidadaos-ativos/>.

Even while research on participatory approaches like CBPR and YPAR is expanding, further studies are needed to fully understand how these models transfer into practical outcomes, especially when considering the context of ACF's activities. This study identifies key obstacles and opportunities in the development and use of ACF's framework, and explores how it could inform and strengthen current models of civic participation and social transformation. This study

intends to add to the larger conversation on social innovation, participatory research, and the function of civil society in promoting systemic change by pointing out the shortcomings in existing models and providing useful insights.

Methods

The objective of this study was to explore the concept of active citizenship and develop strategies for fostering active participation. The study aimed to understand each project's focus, main characteristics, achievements and remaining challenges, future aspirations, and the evolving role of active citizenship, by means of recruiting a Consultative group formed with representative of funded ACF projects. This study analyzed the contents of nine sessions comprising of discussions and exercises designed to guide participants through a structured roadmap. To assess the integration of individual and social dynamics, this analysis views interactions as patterns revealing a collective truth, while recognizing individual perceptions in social interaction (Holloway & Todres, 2003; Silverman, 2005; Birks & Mills, 2011). Experiences, meanings, and expectations, were studied using thematic analysis based on qualitative research principles, which allow for deeper understanding of participants' perspectives and the complex nature of the phenomena (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2009). In this way, through real participation that will generate data connected to social transformations, we believe that there is a real implementation of a post-positivist paradigm of behavior (Birks & Mills, 2011).

Participants

A total of 25 participants were selected to form the ACF Consultative Group in Portugal. Of these, 13 were under 30 years old, 9 were aged 30-70, and 3 were over 70; 18 identified as female and 7 as male; 11 participants resided in the Lisbon region, 7 in the Northern region, 6 in the Center region, and 1 in the Islands.

Procedures and Interactive Instruments

The by the *Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation* selected 25 projects for their strong alignment with the ACF objectives : *i)* promoting democracy, active citizenship, good governance, and transparency; *ii)* advancing human rights and equality by combating all forms of discrimination; *iii)* fostering social justice and the inclusion of vulnerable groups; *iv)* strengthening the capacity of NGOs. From March to November 2024, participants formed a Consultative Group and contributed to what they described as "a program's narrative" -a collective, co-constructed narrative - using a proposed roadmap framework throughout (Image 1).

The process began with the presentation of the Active Citizens narrative roadmap during an in-person kick-off session. Over 9 months, there was a combination of in-person and online sessions, lasting about 90 minutes (Table 1).

Table 1 summarizes the methodological process, including objectives, activities, outcomes, and homework.

Image 1

Proposed Roadmap

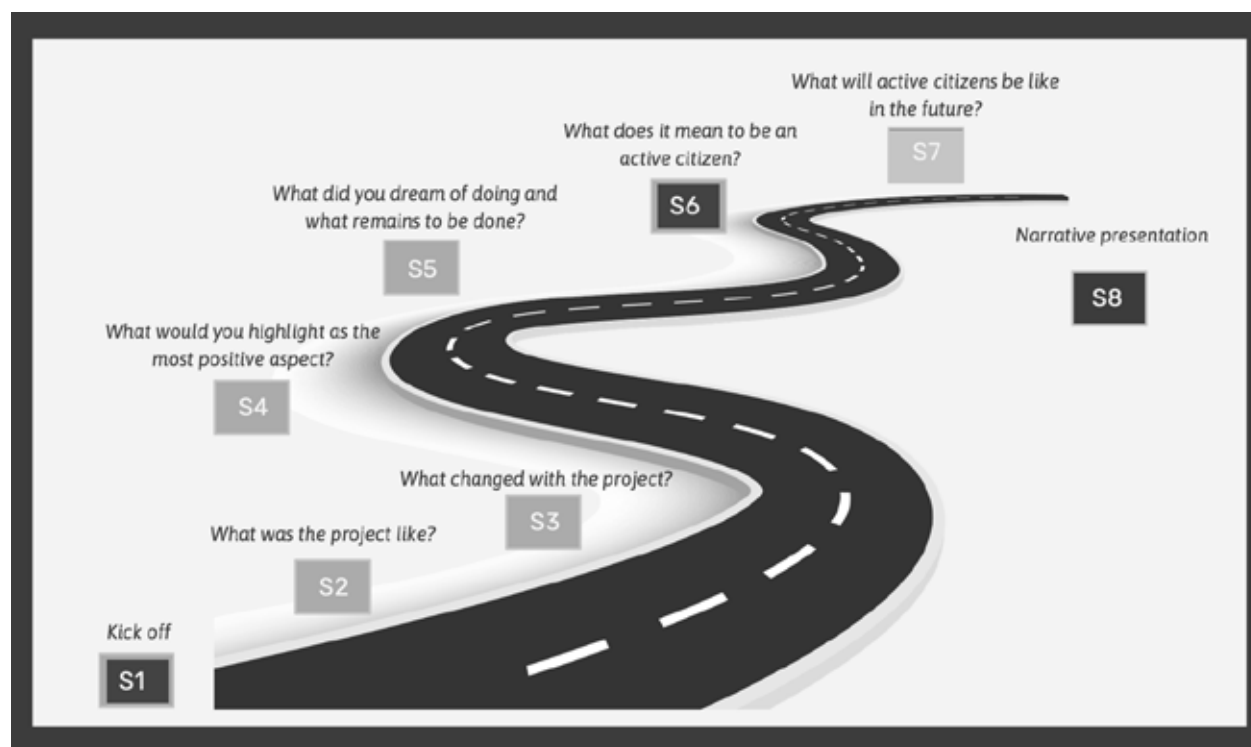


Table 1

Methodological Process

Session (S)	Objectives	Activities	Results	Homework
S1 - Kick off	Introduce participants, their projects, and motivations for active citizenship.	Pair-sharing exercise, group dynamic exercise to identify common characteristics.	Participants established initial connections and understanding of each other's projects.	Reflect on the characteristics of their projects.
S2- What was the Project like?	Brief participants on the project scope, embrace digital tools, and characterize projects.	Collect detailed information on each project using Google Forms.	Detailed project profiles for further analysis.	Think about what changed with their projects.
S3-What changed with the project?	Explore the transformative potential of each project.	Nominal group technique for reflections on transformation. (Delbecq, Van de Ven, and Gustafson, 1975),	Gained insights into the transformative aspects of projects.	Bring an object, image, text, music, or video representing the most positive aspect of the project.
S4- What do you highlight as the most positive aspect?	Highlight the positive aspects of each project and propose improvements.	Presentation of a project highlight (through image, video, drawing, or music) and suggestion of a small improvement step.	Showcase of project strengths and actionable improvement suggestions.	Reflect on how they would like to see their project develop in one year.

Session (S)	Objectives	Activities	Results	Homework
S5- What did you dream of doing and what remains to be done?	Envision the future of the projects one year later.	Discussion and reflection on future goals and remaining tasks.	Future aspirations for each project.	Find a way to keep the group active and united during the holidays.
S6- What does it mean to be an active citizen?	Understand active citizenship and identify potentialities and obstacles.	In-person visit to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's Museum with observations recorded in predefined areas.	Insights into active citizenship and evaluation of the Foundation's museum in key areas.	Weekly sharing in a WhatsApp group about community work or innovative ideas during the August break. Reflection on what the active citizen of the future will be like.
S7- What will active citizens be like in the future?	Conclude the narrative and envision future active citizens.	Online meeting focusing on the vision of future active citizens.	Concluded narrative with a vision of future active citizenship. Collaboration on the <i>bluebook</i> - conclusions and recommendations	Preparation of the final session.
S8- Public presentation	Publicly present the results of the Active Citizens Program (ACF) .	Conference presentation at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.	Final presentation of the project results.	-----

The first session provided an opportunity for the Consultative Group participants to introduce themselves, present their projects, and share their motivations for engaging in ACF. Subsequently, participants were briefed on the scope and methodology of the project and were challenged to embrace digital tools in the following session, which focused on characterizing the projects.

The second session promoted the development of technological skills and bridged generational gaps. Online forms were utilized to collect detailed information on each project, including participant profiles, beneficiary types, areas of focus, objectives, and suggestions for next steps assessment (Table2)

Table 2 presents a brief description of the projects represented in the Consultative Group and their associated institutions.

Table 2

Synopsis of the projects and project representatives

Participants	Institutions	Projects	Scope
Male, under 30 years old, Center	Associação Coolabora	Coolaboratório	Training young people in human rights through activism and art.
Female, 30-70 years old, Lisbon	Bela Vista - Centro de Educação Integrada	Olhar o Futuro	Enhancing societal awareness of the organization through marketing, more active participation in the community, creating platforms for greater interaction between parents and the institution.



Participants	Institutions	Projects	Scope
Male, 30-70 years old, North	Centro Social Soutelo	Circo Elétrico e Salsal	Empowering young people through circus art for personal fulfillment and self-knowledge.
Female, 30-70 years old, Center	Associação de Solidariedade Social de Lafões	Mulheres Ativas e Integradas	Enhance the integration of women into the workforce (working in a Day Center with older adults).
Male, under 30 years old, North	Centro Social Soutelo	Re(veste)	Integration of people with disabilities or mental incapacity, which aims to organize weekly workshops, such as clothing customization
Female, under 30 years old, North	Pista Mágica	Projeto 13+	Use of volunteering as a means of social inclusion.
Female, 30-70 years old, Lisbon	Associação Acreditar	Capacitar para Acreditar	Enhance the rights of parents of children with cancer.
Female, over 70 years old, Center	ATLAS – People Like Us	RADICES	Fight isolation among older adults.
Female, under 30 years old, Center	CASPAE	Agentes de Transformação 3C's	Safeguard the rights of children, particularly with parents who are incarcerated.
Female, under 30 years old, Lisbon	Associação de Apoio à Vítima		Improving access to information and support for victims by volunteers.
Female, under 30 years old, North	Conselho Nacional da Juventude	Politicamente Desperto	Promoting democratic literacy and civic education.
Female, under 30 years old, Lisbon	ISPA – Instituto Universitário	Dar Palco à Diferença	Theater in raising awareness about the importance of human rights.
Male, under 30 years old, Lisbon	Wave by Wave	Surf for Good	Surfing as a therapy tool.
Female, under 30 years old, Lisbon	Associação Acreditar	Dreaming with Survivors	Raising awareness of post-treatment and after-effects in pediatric cancer.
Female, 30-70 years old, Lisbon	Pao Pao	Mesa Escola Projeto	Three months as an apprentice at a hotel school, followed by two months to train at a restaurant.
Female, under 30 years old, Lisbon	Associação Mais Cidadania	Mais Cidadania	Aimed to promote active citizenship and raise awareness about the importance of activism and human rights at schools.
Male, over 70 years old, North	Hope! Respostas Sociais	Memórias do Bairro	Co-reconstructing the human rights requirements of older adults and/or people with dementia.
Female, 30-70 years old, Lisbon	Serviço Jesuíta aos Refugiados	Work up+Corações que cuidam	Training for senior care.
Female, 30-70 years old, North	Associação ASAS	Projeto Gestão em voluntariado	Supporting the transition home among institutionalized children.
Female, 30-70 years old, Center	Associação Coopera	Rasgar Silêncios	Project to empower survivors of domestic violence
Male, over 70 years old, Islands	Instituição Novo Dia	Projeto + Voz – Envelhecer com dignidade	Creation of a senior municipal council for active participation.
Female, under 30 years old, Lisbon	Associação Passa Sabi	Correspondentes do Bairro	Teaching journalism from the Rego neighborhood, in the Cape Verdean and Roma communities. Inspire young people by interviewing influential people from the neighborhood.
Female, 30-70 years old, North	Associação Pista Mágica	Projeto Voluntariamente	Making people active who were on sick leave help other people.
Male, under 30 years old, Center	InPulsar – Associação para o Desenvolvimento Comunitário	GiraComigo	Promote the social inclusion of Roma people to enhance academic and professional success and reduce stigma.
Female, 30 years old, Lisbon	REDE – jovens pela igualdade	Faz Delete	Diagnose, raise awareness, and prevent image-based sexual violence against young women.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from small quiz during the sessions were analyzed through brief descriptive statistics using *SPSS* (v. 29), and qualitative data from debates and texts were examined using *MAXQDA* software (v. 24), following a line-by-line procedure until reaching saturation. The content analysis was conducted according to Bardin's (1977) method, which consists of three main phases: pre-analysis, material exploration, and the treatment of results, inference, and interpretation. The thematic categories created were based on the *COM-B Model for Behavior Change* (Michie et al., 2011), specifically: Capability (the skills and knowledge necessary for individuals to actively participate), **Opportunity** (the external circumstances that enable or facilitate engagement in citizenship practices), and **Motivation** (the internal reasons and disposition for action).

Results

Session 1 | March 2024 | in person, 23 participants

The first session aimed to foster group cohesion. After individual presentations, participants took part in a group dynamics exercise to identify common ground. The exercise revealed several points of convergence, including (1) self-identifying as active citizens; (2) having a collective appreciation for people, (3) traveling and new experiences; (4) sharing the desire to support societal development and (5) being agents of change with their communities.

Session 2 | March 2024 | online, 20 participants

Session 2 was focused on gaining in-depth insights into each participant's projects (Table 2), including the project's target group, action, sector, activities, and objectives (see Tables 3-7 to visualize the five most voted topics analyzed), which helped lay the foundation for each project's final narrative.

The findings of this session revealed that the beneficiaries of the projects were women ($n = 17$), adolescents (ages 12-18) ($n = 16$), adults (ages 25-64) ($n = 15$), men ($n = 15$) and youth (ages 18-24) ($n = 15$). (Table 3)

Table 3

Type of beneficiaries - The project you took part in was aimed at:

Population	Not directly included or directly included a little	Included occasionally	Included a lot or these are the participants
Women	4	4	17
Adolescents	7	2	16
Adults	7	3	15
Men	8	2	15
Youth	6	4	15

Children (under 12), older adults, and people with chronic health conditions, families and intergenerational, refugees and couples were mentioned, but their participation in the projects was lower.

The most frequently included actions (Table 4) were : action in the community ($n = 15$); action in the family ($n = 6$); promoting ethnic diversity ($n = 5$); supporting people with disabilities ($n = 5$); and assisting informal caregivers ($n = 5$).

Cultural diversity, national diversity, action in the workplace, support for parenthood, action on disease, sexual diversity, unemployment, poverty, and religious diversity were mentioned but less frequently.

Table 4

Type of action - The project you took part in was aimed at:

Action	Not directly included or directly included a little	Included occasionally	Included a lot or these are the actions
Action in the community	8	2	15
Action in the family	14	5	6
Ethnic diversity	17	3	5
People with disabilities	18	2	5
Informal caregivers	19	1	5

The most common sectors (Table 5) were: citizenship ($n = 15$), volunteering ($n = 10$), education ($n = 10$), welfare ($n = 9$) and justice ($n = 6$).

Art, vocational training, culture, sport, housing, digital education, and entertainment were mentioned but had less coverage.

Table 5

Type of sector - The project you took part in was aimed at:

Sector	Not directly included or directly included a little	Included occasionally	Included a lot or these are the sector
Citizenship	3	7	15
Volunteering	12	3	10
Education	11	4	10
Welfare	14	2	9
Justice	16	3	6

In terms of areas of focus (Table 6), the most prominent areas of involvement were: support for vulnerable groups ($n = 17$); defense of human rights ($n = 17$); social participation ($n = 16$); fostering equal opportunities ($n = 15$); and prevention of social exclusion ($n = 14$).

Promoting well-being, prevention of discrimination, promoting peace, prevention of racism, prevention of violence, vocational training, crime prevention, promoting active leisure, and prevention of addictions/substance abuse were mentioned but were less frequent.

Table 6

Type of area of activity - The project you took part in was aimed at:

Area of Activity	Not directly included or directly included a little	Included occasionally	Included a lot or these are the activities
Support for vulnerable groups	7	1	17
Defense of human rights	7	1	17
Social participation	7	2	16
Equal opportunities	6	4	15
Prevention of social exclusion	8	3	14

Regarding the ultimate outcomes of the projects (Table 7), the most emphasized were: participation ($n = 19$); empowerment ($n = 18$); future ($n = 16$); social cohesion ($n = 15$); awareness ($n = 15$); and equity ($n = 15$). Facilitation, socialization, new learning, preparing for the future, transformation, psychological health, autonomy, valuing diversity, well-being, interaction, fun, interpersonal communication, free time, entertainment, professional support, power, economic support, and physical health were mentioned but less frequently.

Table 7

Type of outcomes - The project you took part in was aimed at:

Objectives	Not directly included or directly included a little	Included occasionally	Included a lot or these are the objectives
Participation	1	5	19
Empowerment	6	1	18
Future	1	7	17
Social cohesion	9	1	15
Awareness	7	3	15
Equity	8	2	15

Session 3 | April 2024 | online, 20 participants

In the third session, through the nominal group technique (Delbecq et al., 1975), each participant had the opportunity to share the transformative nature of their project. The analysis of participant reflections on the transformative nature of their projects revealed behavioral changes aligned with the COM-B framework. Participants mentioned increased **capability**, including enhanced self-esteem, knowledge, teamwork and skills reflecting. They considered that

projects fostered **opportunities** for personal and collective growth (social interaction, support, and community building, social networking, collaboration, extra funding, partnerships). All participants were intrinsically **motivated** to help others and make a difference.

The projects often fostered a shared sense of **motivation** among participants, suggesting the importance of collaborative approaches to address complex social issues. By working together, the projects showed how individuals and groups can leverage their diverse skills and resources to achieve common goals.

Table 8

Examples of Project Transformation Analyzed Through the COM-B Model

COM-B	Excerpts
Capability	"Our first session was in the aftermath of the pandemic, we were almost young children learning about children's rights. today we are all young adults, more capable and ready to act, defend, and safeguard the rights of children and young people from their peers and families." (Female, under 30 years old, Center)
Opportunity	"This Mais Voz project has covered all 14 parishes in the municipality. It's a senior project." (Male, over 70 years old, Islands)
Motivation	"We were able to find arguments to raise awareness. we ended up being heard, and the result is that we changed the law, now parents have 20 days instead of 5 days." (Female, 30-70 years old, Lisbon)

The session also included a word selection exercise where each participant voted on synonyms that felt aligned with "transformation". The following concepts stood out among the 19 responses: evolve ($n = 16$); create opportunities ($n = 16$); change ($n = 15$); grow ($n = 14$); and motivate ($n = 14$). Other concepts mentioned although with lower votes were: optimize; imagine; initiate.

A final exercise in this session, conducted via *Google Forms*, aimed to identify the impact of the ACF project on the Consultative Group's participants. More than 50% of participants agreed that they were happy to be part of the Active Citizens Fund Project ($n = 18$), were responsible and fulfilled their commitments ($n = 18$), were punctual and reliable ($n = 18$), and believed that the diversity of people around them fostered personal growth ($n = 18$). Less voted although also mentioned was viewing difficulties as challenges, followed by having ideas about how the world could be a better place, believing in one's talents and abilities, and knowing what the program is about.

Session 4 | May 2024 | online, 12 participants

In the fourth session, each participant presented a product or a key highlight of their project, followed by a brief discussion of a potential area for improvement. First, participants had one minute to share their project's main outcome or standout feature using their choice of image, video, drawing, or musical instrument. Next, participants proposed a small step to enhance their projects.

It was found that at the level of **capability**, participants demonstrated various competencies such as creating regulations and participating in councils highlight individuals' capacity to con-

tribute to structural and administrative changes. Other participants emphasized the development of technical and creative skills, such as clothing customization and theater production, indicating that the projects provided an environment conducive to acquiring and applying these competencies. Additionally, the intention of some participants to measure the impact of volunteering and expand projects to new locations reflects their ongoing development of the ability to use their voice for social causes and express creative ideas.

Opportunities for engagement and expansion of the projects are widely reflected in the participants' accounts: Institutional support, such as from municipal councils and associations, plays a crucial role in facilitating active participation and enabling the broadening of their actions.

The impact of project exhibitions on television shows the importance of support and media visibility. The analysis also reveals how socio-cultural context encourages participants to contribute. Examples include theatre performances and digital promotion. Table 9 shows some examples. Many participants expressed a strong **motivation** to promote social and personal change, such as advocating for human rights and fighting against discrimination. Motivation was often fueled by personal experiences and life stories, such as advocacy for legislative change related to parental bereavement. Additionally, the desire to expand projects to schools and universities, as well as to incorporate additional scientific knowledge, reflected the continued motivation to enhance initiatives and achieve a broader impact.

Table 9

Examples of Improvement Steps Analyzed Through the COM-B Model

COM-B	Excerpts
Capability	"I would like to be part of a research team and measure the impact that volunteering has in terms of human rights." (Male, under 30 years old, Center)
Opportunity	"Change in the law with the help of the Acreditar Association, which involved careful preparation and argumentation." (Female, 30-70 years old, Lisbon)
Motivation	"I would like to serve as an example to inspire others who continue with the project." (Male, 30-70 years old, North)

Session 5 | June 2024 | online, 17 participants

The next session focused on participants' aspirations for the future of the project. Participants shared their visions for their projects one year in the future, discussing the progress they hope to achieve and their personal expectations for the project's development. Vis-à-vis **capability**, the analysis reveals that participants have developed skills and competencies that they are keen to apply in advancing their projects. Their visions for the future demonstrate an understanding of how to leverage their expertise to enhance their project's impact. Participants showed an improved ability to apply their skills to actionable plans, such as through expanding their project's scope, addressing complex issues, or innovating within their field (see Table 10 for examples).

The insights gathered highlight the various **opportunities** participants perceived in terms of the growth and expansion of their project. They described identifying and utilizing external resources such as institutional support, partnerships, and digital tools to enhance their initiatives.

Participants recognized the value of leveraging these opportunities to overcome challenges and drive their projects forward.

Participants' **motivations** are deeply rooted in their personal experiences and their desire to effect meaningful social change. Participants are motivated not only by their personal connection to the issues but also by a vision of broader societal benefits.

Table 10

Examples of Projects Expectations Analyzed Through the COM-B Model

COM-B	Excerpts
Capability	"... The first part was to encourage care homes to basically write a charter of rights for their users and the other part was to value people's lives by interviewing them about their lives as elderly people. Now, one of my dreams, in particular, was to write a letter of good intentions and another was to see this content come to life on paper. I suggested, and they agreed, that we should carry out an evaluation of how what is written is put into practice, and then the next step would be to formulate a protocol, some kind of evaluation. I had another dream that I don't know if it's feasible, which was to institutionalize the idea of interviewing old people about their lives... I am from the generation that still lived through April 25 intensely and that generation will soon gradually disappear and I think it's important for Portuguese youth to know what it was like before April 25." (Male, over 70 years old, North)
Opportunity	"Maybe create a culture, a circus company of its own. To have some involvement with people who are socially vulnerable, either because of unemployment or because of some pathological issue, and then these would be two paths, these two dreams that could be followed, to leverage the projects and let society know that, in fact, people, however difficult they may appear to be, have the capacity to make a positive impact on society." (Male, 30-70 years old, North)
Motivation	"Basically my dream is that the methodology, which I think undoubtedly works, would work for everyone, of course it works more for some than others, depending on the person, but having already had four projects, one of which is underway now, that it would actually be something. There is empowerment, but for people to be included in society would be ideal, that was my dream." (Female, under 30 years old, North).

Session 6 | July 2024 | in person, 20 participants

The sixth session was held at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum and featured a case study exercise titled *What Does It Mean to Be an Active Citizen: A Visit to the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum*. Participants were divided into two large groups and had 45 minutes to critically analyze the museum visit through the lens of one of five key areas: accessibility, inclusion and representation, comfort and well-being, intercultural dialogue, and knowledge appreciation. Following the visit, participants gathered in small groups for facilitated discussions led by the museum team, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their observations. The key findings are categorized in Table 11.

Table 11

Insights from Active Citizenship Exercise

Areas	Insights
Comfort and Well-being	The climate control within the museum was praised, but there were remarks about the lack of adaptation in outdoor spaces, with suggestions to improve lighting and add sensory elements. Limited time and difficulty in interpreting the artworks were also pointed out.
Intercultural dialogue	More natural light was suggested for the European section, along with the inclusion of videos beneath the artworks for added context. There was mention of minimal differentiation among Portuguese paintings and similarities between works from different cultures.
Knowledge appreciation	The integration of QR codes and initiatives like Gulbenkian4Kids were appreciated. Guided tours and information projections were recommended to provide historical context and create a clearer narrative throughout the exhibits.
Inclusion and representation	Although the visit was considered inclusive, it revealed accessibility challenges in two rooms for wheelchair users. More immersive experiences for all visitors and more detailed information on plaques were suggested to cater to a diverse audience.
Accessibility	The museum was praised for its ramps and wide doors, but it was suggested to increase seating options in each room and include sign language guides and Braille information plaques for better accessibility.

The WhatsApp Group: Staying connected during summer

The WhatsApp group, created in late July 2024 to foster group cohesion and encourage weekly sharing of community-related content and ideas, remains active among the Consultative Group members. To date, participants have exchanged 71 messages, sharing both text and images. Participants expressed interest in topics like sustainability, social inclusion, mental health, and civic engagement, demonstrating **Capability** in communication and collaboration skills, as well as in identifying societal challenges and responses. The WhatsApp group provided **Opportunity**, for idea exchange, fostering a collaborative environment, for sharing opportunities and community engagement. **Motivation** was driven by themes of solidarity and social justice.

Table 12

Examples of WhatsApp Messages Analyzed Through the COM-B Model

COM-B	Excerpts
Capability	"...The Olympic Games have concluded, and for the first time, there was absolute parity in the sports (all had both male and female events). These were also the Games where environmental concerns were present from start to finish. This includes the issue of the River Seine, which shows us that no matter how well we take care of our own garden, if our neighbor's garden is not well maintained, ours will always have problems. And in this, we prove that the environment is a joint mission!..." (Male, 30-70 years old, North)
Opportunity	"... as this is a group particularly composed of experts in overcoming challenges, I would like to share with you the award that Portugal received this afternoon!" (Female, 30-70 years old, Lisbon)
Motivation	"We ourselves manage to find defenses and ways to overcome both obstacles and new challenges that may arise, and we need to keep up with technologies... We are all fighters, which is why we are in this group—despite our vulnerabilities, we still HELP a lot of people." (Female, 30-70 years old, North).

Session 7 | September 2024 | online, 25 participants

In the final session before the culminating event, every participant from the Consultative Group participants reflected on their vision of active citizenship and active citizens 10 years into the future (see Table 10 for examples). At this moment, they foresee **capability** as the ability to integrate new technology, adjust to societal changes, and motivate others to participate. They stressed the value of preparing youth for social and environmental spheres by emphasizing citizenship education in schools and encouraging volunteer work. **Opportunity** was a recurring theme in several interventions, indicating the social and political frameworks that either encourage or restrict active engagement. Examples of local organizations and settings that can foster group action for the common good include technology hubs, parish councils, and religious organizations. Participants highlighted geographical differences, such as those between rural and metropolitan areas.

In terms of **motivation**, it was noted that there is a strong dedication to the common good, which is demonstrated by the persistence of social and cultural traditions as well as the will to take on new tasks. Themes that inspire civic engagement, particularly in youth, include environmental concerns and the ethical application of artificial intelligence. Another common idea was that future engaged citizenry need to be proactive and resilient, capable of handling new challenges head-on, and show imagination. Motivation was fueled by the hope for a time when artificial intelligence would be a tool for citizenship rather than a danger to vital autonomy, in addition to the need to protect the environment and cultural traditions.

Table 13

Examples of Perspectives Related to the Active Citizen of the Future Analyzed Through the COM-B Model

COM-B	Excerpts
Capability	"...I want the citizen of the future to use artificial intelligence as a tool, and I hope that this will not be a substitute for human critical and autonomous thinking." (Female, under 30 years old, Lisbon)
Opportunity	"...I think that schools should also focus more on citizenship, because young people need to know more about helping others. I believe that being an active citizen is also very much about helping and facing many diversities." (Male, under 30 years old, Center)
Motivation	"Above all, it is a committed citizen who pursues their causes and truly tries to make a difference, thinks differently, but does not give up on changing what is wrong." (Female, 30-70 years old, Lisbon).

Session 8 | November 2024 | in person (final wrap up and public presentation)

The project narratives were presented during the last event, by members of the Consultative Group, as a synthesis of the knowledge and experiences gained over the course of the "Program Cidadãos Ativos".

This in-person meeting brought together participants from the 25 selected projects, as well as stakeholders and the general public, to discuss the shared path of promoting active citizenship in Portugal. Participants emphasized the major effects of their projects on vulnerable groups and civil society by showcasing their major accomplishments, lessons learned, and future goals. In addition, the program offered a platform for discussion and introspection, enabling participants to interact with the stories that are being told and exchange tactics for maintaining

involvement after the event ends. The purpose of this final presentation was to encourage continuous collaboration and dedication to community empowerment by highlighting the interconnection of the projects and their contributions to democratic values and social justice.

Additionally, the Consultative Group responded to a request to collaborate in a blue book (<https://eeagrants.org/news/launch-blue-book-consultation>) that included reflections on the final outcome and narrative and a few recommendations. Parts of this final document were integrated in the current discussion/conclusion (Consultative Group, 2024)

Limitations and suggestions for future studies

A longitudinal approach evaluating the transformative process across a greater number of projects and stakeholders would have enhanced the study. However, this project was successful in identifying a range of best practices that can serve as guidelines for future studies and initiatives. It also highlighted the role of a “Consultative group” formed from project representatives.

This project showcases 25 contexts in which was revealed the the impact of civic participation not only in the materials for data analysis, but evidenced in the practices and dynamics of these organizations/people. These contexts demonstrate transformative social impact. This project underscores the importance of participatory approaches in supporting transformative science and society, that is, participatory approaches can serve as a fundamental strategy for engagement, with regular group sessions, discussions of objectives/expectations, collaborative exercises and reflection activities, allow participants to be increasingly part of a citizen’s consciousness, as it identifies ‘roots and routes’ to strengthen civil society, and prioritizing the future of Active Citizenship in societies. In other words, active citizenship could be further integrated into education and social policy-making, promoting a more resilient democracy.

Discussion/ Conclusion

This paper provides a detailed account of a specific outcome of the Active Citizens Fund project, by the hand of a Consultative Group formed by projects’ representatives, highlighting its achievements and potential as a model for fostering civic engagement and active participation.

A key vision for the future of ACF is to cultivate a culture of active citizenship. ACF means to foster critical reflection and civic participation, empowering diverse voices in democratic processes. Its adaptability allows it to support active citizenship and collective action across various contexts. This will require sustained efforts to educate and engage citizens from a young age, fostering civic responsibility and community-mindedness. Schools, universities, and community organizations can play a crucial role in this process by integrating civic education into their curricula and activities (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Innovation in civic engagement is essential, and ACF should continuously explore new and creative ways to engage citizens, leveraging emerging technologies and methodologies such as participatory budgeting, digital platforms for public consultations, and innovative community projects addressing local needs (Smith, 2009). Additionally, focusing on areas such as digital literacy and environmental sustainability can equip citizens to navigate the digital landscape and tackle pressing issues of climate change. Ultimately, ACF must continue to strengthen de-

mocratic institutions by promoting transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. By advocating for responsive government policies and practices the program can contribute to the creation of a more robust and resilient democracy (European Commission, 2023).

The Consultative Group (2024) state during a final reflection paper, that they felt inspired and encouraged to expand their goals beyond the current timeframe, driven by the exchange of ideas and best practices with future ACF projects. They hope that their work will serve as a foundation for other citizens, empowering them to bring their own projects to life with the ACF support, so that these initiatives can help shape and transform society. As a result, it was suggested that the Consultative Group either continue its efforts or lay the groundwork for a successor group, one that can continue fostering the exchange of experiences and sharing the results achieved. Citizen expertise is particularly valuable epistemically when it is grounded in distinct, non-ubiquitous experiences and in collective insights, rather than solely in individual ones (Krick, 2022).

Given the visibility gained, it is suggested that this solution (the Consultative Group) might be applied to other countries in the EEA Grants which, to our knowledge, has not been tried. The interaction between the various projects has led to the integration of new ideas that may allow society to develop better as a whole. If there were similar organizational structures in other countries, that is a group of project representatives to promote visibility and integration in society and the exchange of ideas to strengthen individual projects, this might improve ACF project 's odds of success a success always mediated by empowerment, inclusion and democratization. To be successful, though, the Consultative Group thinks, it would require more than just meeting project objectives; it would also require adherence to the democracy, inclusion, and empowerment tenets, which guarantee that all opinions are heard and that the procedure is open and equitable to all parties. The ACF projects are essential for empowering, developing, and training citizens who, in certain moments and under specific circumstances, would be described as marginalized or lacking influence in societal and political spheres. On an international scale, Hopman et al. (2021) have examined the potential of public-community partnerships in tackling complex social and ecological issues.

Overall, the ACF project, in its current form in Portugal, has shown that it can make a difference and achieve changes in society, for example: by *law* – Law 1/2022 from January 2nd, 2022, through which Parliament changed Article 251 of the Labor Code and prolonged from five to twenty days the period of mourning for the loss of a child; and through *technological innovation* – an app created to accompany preschool and primary school children in their daily development; or by *(re-)integrating into society* victims of domestic violence and giving them psychological support; by *reintegrating senior citizens* in social isolation or struggling with the loss of cognitive capacities back into their communities; or *through art*, to empower and train people at social risk, such as those out of work or those with disabilities.

The construction of a Consultative Group has been crucial in forming the project's vision and direction, and it continues to provide strong support as the program moves into a new cycle.

This ACF project would be an opportunity for citizens to transform their difficulties into opportunities through the effort of those who believe in their causes and, in a supported way, change and improve their context and society. By sharing this model, others can learn from its successes, adapt it to their own contexts, and contribute to the creation of more resilient and inclusive communities (European Commission, 2023).

Finally, it was suggested by the Consultative Group, to have the Blue Book (<https://eeagrants.org/news/launch-blue-book-consultation>) published in the languages of each country that may participate in the ACF project, thus enhancing its inclusivity, and making its “technical” language more accessible to citizens across different contexts.

Critical reflection demonstrated that the program holds significant potential for fostering a more engaged and empowered citizenry.

The ACF project can serve as a model for similar initiatives worldwide, demonstrating the power of collective action and civic participation in building a just and inclusive society.

Interests

The authors of this publication declare there are no competing interests.

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Ethical concerns

This paper adheres to the guidelines set by Helsinki Declaration, the American Psychological Association (2018).

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