INSPIRE
Intersectional Spaces of Participation:
Inclusive, Resilient, Embedded

Policy Brief: Advancing Inclusive Participatory Policymaking through an intersectional lens

Dr Sonia Bussu, University of Birmingham

Advancing inclusive participatory policymaking through an intersectional lens

Intersectionality is a theoretical concept and an analytical approach that looks at how different parts of a person's identity – e.g., class, gender, race and ethnicity, age, ability – intersect, shaping unique experiences of discrimination.

Why is it important? Intersectionality helps us to understand and address discriminations (e.g., classism, sexism, racism, ableism) as interconnected and systemic. It highlights how intersecting forms of oppression compound disadvantage, guiding the development of more equitable public policies. A youth employment programme may offer internships in urban tech hubs, but unintentionally exclude youth from rural areas with limited mobility or those from racially minoritised groups facing language and cultural barriers.

How is it used in policymaking? Recent studies show that, despite being acknowledged by policymakers as an important concept, intersectionality is often misunderstood as a policy tool and operationalised inconsistently. Organisations tend to inadvertently exclude certain groups or generalise experiences based on shared characteristics.

Integrating **participatory deliberative democracy** into policymaking can support deeper understanding of intersectional inequalities by centring the voices and experiences of those most affected.

Here we offer some guiding principles to support policymakers in operationalising intersectionality through participatory practices, with a focus on arts-based and creative methods. Recommendations are grounded in ongoing research and practice in the INSPIRE project, which engages marginalised groups across varied geographical and policy contexts. The project aims to deepen understanding of intersectional forms of oppression to inform the design of more inclusive citizen participation to help co-create equitable, and context-sensitive policy responses.

Policy recommendations

✳️Clarify *and Contextualise Intersectionality*

Define Intersectionality in Practice: Include a clear, accessible definition of intersectionality in all public participation strategies, using real-life examples to illustrate how overlapping identities (e.g., race, gender, disability, migration status) shape lived experiences.

Tailor to Organisational Contexts: Encourage departments to collaboratively define what intersectionality means "for us," ensuring alignment with institutional culture and policy goals.

🏛️*Build Organisational Capacity and Culture*

Structured Training and Development: Establish ongoing training programmes on intersectionality and participatory methods, with modules tailored to different roles (e.g., analysts, facilitators, senior leaders).

Incentivise Participation: Offer recognition, funding, or career progression incentives for staff who champion inclusive practices.

Create Internal Champions: Appoint participation leads or "change-makers" across departments to foster cross-sectoral learning and accountability. Senior management's buy-in and support has proved to be crucial to incentivise culture change.

Design Inclusive and Responsive Policy Processes

Embed Participation Early: Integrate intersectional participation from the agenda-setting and problem-definition stages.

Support Community-Led Problem Definition: Create mechanisms for communities to define their own challenges and co-develop solutions, shifting policymakers' roles from decision-makers to facilitators.

Use Creative and Arts-Based Methods: Expand the use of arts-based and creative methods (e.g., participatory theatre, photovoice, games, storytelling) to foster trust, disrupt power dynamics, and surface diverse knowledges.

Foster Long-Term Engagement and Institutional Anchoring

Embed Participatory Structures: Anchor participatory processes to existing institional bodies (e.g., youth boards, intercultural councils) to help embed them in governance frameworks and ensure continuity and impact.

Promote Immersive Learning: Introduce exchange or secondment programmes where policymakers spend time embedded in community organisations to deepen understanding of lived realities.

Advance Intersectional Data Practices

Thoughtful Disaggregation: Collect and analyse data that reflects the complexity of intersecting identities without reinforcing stereotypes.

Participatory Data Governance: Involve communities in deciding what data is collected, how it's interpreted, and how it informs policy.[1]

Define and Measure Success in Context

Contextual Indicators: Develop indicators of success that reflect the specific goals and values of each organisation or policy area.

Monitor and Reflect: Regularly review how intersectionality is applied, identify gaps, and adapt strategies accordingly.

Ensure Ethical Facilitation

Facilitator Training: Develop ethical guidelines and training on trauma-informed practices, inclusive communication, and awareness of power dynamics.

Create Safe and Accessible Spaces: Prioritise emotional safety, accessibility (e.g., translation; childcare), and cultural sensitivity in all engagement settings.

About the INSPIRE project

Standardised models of participation often reflect the preferences, and respond to the capabilities and resources, of a narrow demographic (e.g., white, older and middle-class), thereby reinforcing systemic exclusions.

INSPIRE rethinks participation by co-creating participatory practices and spaces with marginalised groups that tend not to participate. By centring the lived experiences of those historically excluded from public decision-making, we recognise their unique knowledge, expertise over their own realities, and context-specific priorities.

We use arts-based and creative methods to co-create more inclusive participatory spaces that shift power dynamics. Fun, play, and emotions, which are intrinsic to these methods, can help address complex social issues, transcending cultural and educational differences. In this way, we amplify participants' voices and centre their complex intersectional experiences of oppression and agency.

Arts-based methods enable embodied and sensory engagement, allowing participants to express complex emotions and experiences beyond verbal communication and connect with others. Play and creativity help disrupt hierarchies of power and

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[1] Useful resources: Compendium of practices for equality data collection: https://fra.europa.eu/en/promising-practices-list

Guidelines on improving the collection and use of equality data: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a3d2cd88-0eba-11ec-b771-01aa75ed71a1

expertise, enabling the expression of diverse knowledges and inner multiplicity rather than reifying individual identities as victims. These creative expressions build a shared foundation of empathy and solidarity where very different people can start building a common language for change.

Intersectionally inclusive participation

We argue for a move away from focusing on predefined and rigid identities when designing and implementing participatory processes for policy change. Our work highlights how people and communities are shaped by ongoing and changing social relationships, and new relational identities can emerge through engagement in the participatory process. Intersectionally inclusive participation recognises overlapping, self-defined communities and their interconnections. Grounded in everyday democratic practices, this approach enables more inclusive and transformative forms of engagement.

The seven participatory processes outlined below illustrate INSPIRE's approach to co-creation. Participants are also directly involved in evaluating the process, using participatory research methods.

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1. *You're Fried!* The Realities of Youth Employment in the West Midlands, UK

This youth-led Legislative Theatre project empowers a group of 14–17-year-olds — diverse across racial, class, gender identity, and ability lines —to dramatise their lived experiences of employment precarity and systemic neglect. By centring the young people's experience, this participatory process reveals how overlapping identities compound barriers to employment. Through participatory performances, the group co-create policy solutions with audiences of community members and policymakers, fostering empathy, accountability, and structural change.

The policy proposals generated so far, ranging from early career support to young-people-ready employer accreditation standards, demonstrate the potential for tangible impact. This initiative exemplifies how intersectional arts-based approaches can democratise policymaking and generate inclusive, youth-informed reforms.

Its integration with local institutions, such as the Young Combined Authority, builds a strong foundation for sustainability.

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2. Young Men and Political Extremism – Czech Republic

This performance lecture and participatory research process explores how intersecting factors—gender, age, economic precarity, and digital influence—shape young men's susceptibility to far-right ideologies. By engaging young men in dialogue and artistic reflection, this initiative addresses the gendered dynamics of political polarisation and the role of social media in reinforcing exclusionary narratives. Intersectionality is key in unpacking how masculinity, generational divides, and systemic disillusionment intersect to challenge democratic resilience and civic inclusion.

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3. *Reunião* – Disability and Inclusion in Lisbon

Led by artists with disabilities, this Legislative Theatre process foregrounds the intersection of disability with cultural, political, and spatial exclusion. Through co-creation, legislative theatre, and public engagement, this initiative highlights how ableism intersects with other systemic barriers across different areas from mobility to democratic participation. The participatory process ensures that disabled voices shape both the narrative and the policy agenda, fostering inclusive dialogue and generating situated knowledge for policymakers, academia and wider society.

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4. Women in Silver Age – Bulgarian Labour Market

Targeting women aged 50–64, this participatory process addresses how age, gender, and socioeconomic status intersect to marginalise older women in the labour market. Through consultations, expert workshops, and co-designed assemblies, the initiative reveals systemic gaps in policy responsiveness and public trust. By integrating lived experience with expert analysis, this work aims to produce equity-driven labour reforms to empower a group often excluded from digital and civic participation.

5. Safety and Housing – Kőbányai Street, Budapest

This participatory process engages residents with housing needs - many with low education and limited access to services - as co-researchers, to address safety concerns. Using [photovoice](#) and mental mapping, participants highlight how intersecting vulnerabilities (housing insecurity, poverty, social stigma) shape their daily lives. The process has fostered trust, collective action, and dialogue with policymakers, illustrating how intersectional participatory methods can surface hidden injustices and inform inclusive urban policy.
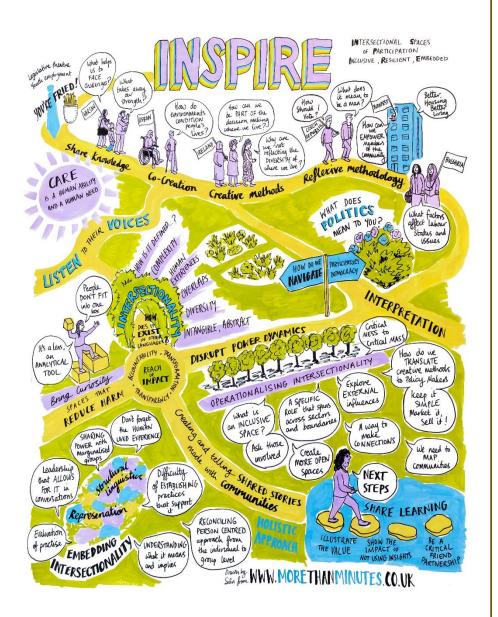
6. Playing for Change: A Participatory, Intersectional Approach to Empowering Ukrainian Refugees in Poland

The Polish participatory process introduces a novel methodology that combines game and play-based formats to engage Ukrainian refugees - primarily women, elderly caregivers, and families with disabilities - living in long-term care centres. Grounded in an intersectional framework, the approach acknowledges the layered vulnerabilities of participants and creates a space where they can collectively explore their needs, resources, and barriers to independence. The use of structured games allows for focused problem-solving, while open-ended play encourages creativity and agency, enabling participants to shape the agenda and co-develop solutions. This approach demonstrates how inclusive, bottom-up policy design can empower marginalised voices and generate meaningful insights, but it also reveals challenges in maintaining depth of discussion, ensuring diverse representation, and managing practical constraints within a limited timeframe.

7. Intercultural Women and Local Governance in Ireland

This participatory process co-develops a new model of inclusive policymaking with the Intercultural Women's Network (IWN), a grassroots group of migrant women in Dublin and Kildare. Grounded in an intersectional approach, this process addresses how gender, migration status, language, and cultural identity intersect to shape

exclusion from local governance. Through a six-month trust-building phase and creative, multilingual engagement methods - including drawing and film – the initiative creates a space where migrant women can articulate barriers to participation and co-design solutions. Anchored in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) Local initiative, this work aims to institutionalise these participatory practices within Kildare County Council's policymaking structures. Early findings highlight the importance of reflexive, community-embedded methodologies and the catalytic role of intercultural leaders in bridging systemic gaps. The process demonstrates how intersectional, arts-based participation can shift power dynamics and embed marginalised voices in democratic decision-making.

Key Lessons

Intersectionality as a Diagnostic and Design Tool

Each participatory process demonstrates how intersectionality - the recognition of overlapping identities and systemic discrimination - enables a deeper understanding of exclusion. This lens helps uncover hidden dynamics and ensures that solutions are tailored to complex realities.

Co-design and Arts-Based Methods Shift Power and Build Agency

From legislative theatre to performance lectures, photovoice, games, and creative multilingual engagement, INSPIRE processes show how participatory, arts-based approaches can amplify marginalised voices, build trust, and help participants connect and co-create policy.

Institutional Anchoring and Long-Term Engagement Drive Impact

Processes that embed participatory practices within existing institutions and invest in long-term relationship-building are more effective in achieving sustainable, systemic change. Institutional buy-in and continuity are key to translating community insights into tangible reforms. Support from and ownership of these processes from local civil society and grassroots groups is crucial to the sustainability of these practices, beyond one-off projects.

For more information

Email: UK-PBA-inspire@ipsos.com

Website: www.inspiredemocracy.eu

Participatory Online Platform:
https://participate.inspiredemocracy.eu/

LinkedIn: horizon_inspire

X: HORIZON_INSPIRE

INSPIRE is about fostering a more inclusive and participatory society, which starts from the experience and knowledge of marginalised groups to inform more equitable policies. We combine different methodological approaches to evaluate the inclusiveness of past and current democratic innovations, and we test arts-based methods as a way to create more intersectionally inclusive spaces to reimagine democracy, bringing fun into policymaking.