

European initiative on citizen science campaigns

The challenge

Research which advances our society includes many issues that cannot be solved by researchers alone. These challenges have to be addressed jointly as a society and require ambitious actions to engage people, communities and organisations across national borders. A number of these challenges also relate to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Citizen science is a powerful tool for improving our societies through research and civic participation. Citizen science produces empirical data outside of institutionalised science organisations, research questions are developed together and citizens' expertise is included in the scientific process. This approach has the advantage of nurturing exchanges between society and science, broadening access to knowledge and improving citizens' perceptions of the benefit of research. It also builds confidence and provides learning experiences for participants from both civil society and research.

Citizen science activities should be understood in a broad sense of the term, covering a range of different levels of participation, from data collection to co-design. This in-depth involvement in science can also enable citizens to participate in agenda setting as well as co-designing and implementing science-related policies. Citizens can also be involved in the publication of results and teaching science. Citizen science is not an end in itself and has to meet scientific standards. Activities therefore need to be based on scientific excellence and a fair representation of all stakeholders involved.

We would like to gather member states'¹ support for citizen science and to establish a more coordinated and coherent approach to European citizen science campaigns. Relevant citizen science initiatives should be identified and built on a larger base in order to achieve higher levels of participation and better results.

A proposal for a European approach

Germany proposes that a discussion of the opportunities of European citizen science campaigns should be discussed at the Informal Council Meeting of Research Ministers. We propose to bring more targeted attention to citizen science and to enlarge the scale of these activities. As member states we can join forces, together with the European Commission, to promote existing and new citizen science campaigns, taking into account individual national citizen science strategies. Better-coordinated actions will prove to be more effective and convincing for European citizens.

With this in mind, our initiative on citizen science has two main objectives:

1. To work together as the Trio Presidency with the member states on continuing to initiate Plastic Pirates – Go Europe! with the long-term goal of inspiring future trios to launch new campaigns every two years
2. To emphasise the importance of citizen science campaigns as a core component of an open science policy approach

1. Regular European citizen science campaigns in ERA – start with Plastic Pirates – Go Europe!

Kick-starting the citizen science initiative, the Trio Presidency of Germany, Portugal and Slovenia will pursue the “Europeanisation” of a joint pilot citizen science campaign, Plastic Pirates – Go Europe!. First established in 2016, the Plastic Pirates project brings researchers and citizens together to investigate the pollution of rivers

¹ This includes all EFTA countries who are invited to participate in the initiative.

in Germany. The main target group are school pupils aged 10–16 and their teachers. Supported by a research institute and school outreach institute, they collect samples and upload empirical data on plastic waste in German rivers. The first results of this study have already been published. However, European-wide data on the origin of plastic waste in our waters is still missing. The Plastic Pirates trio campaign will be launched during the German Presidency and continued in cooperation with Portugal and Slovenia in the context of the Trio Presidency. Opportunities for supporting the possible European-wide rollout of the initiative could be explored, especially in the context of upcoming missions as part of Horizon Europe.

2. Emphasising the importance of European citizen science campaigns

Our aim with such an initiative would be to develop and implement European initiatives that largely build on national initiatives and where the EU can play an active role in ensuring mutual learning, exchange of best practices and a wider dissemination of results.

The Common Understanding on Horizon Europe from March 2019 allows for such active support from the EU, notably in the intervention area “Reforming and enhancing the European R&I system”. In wider terms, it can be said that participatory approaches and methods are to be given greater consideration in other areas of Horizon Europe, such as the missions and clusters, in particular when viewing citizen science in the broader context of open science.

Actively involving citizens through providing reliable information and taking the results of citizen science campaigns seriously, can help built trust between science and society, strengthen the scientific process and, in this context, also enhance societal resilience. The interaction between society and science should be further improved to ensure the recognition of science within society and to integrate citizen’s expertise into the research process. Furthermore, the exchange of knowledge between science and society should become an integral part of R&I priority setting and programming.

Steps towards the goal

1. Pilot initiative Plastic Pirates – Go Europe!

Running in 2020–2021, the pilot initiative Plastic Pirates – Go Europe! will be the first citizen science campaign of a Trio Presidency with the aim of broadening participation across the Union. The successful original initiative is led by a group of well-established partners. Together with research institutes and civil society organisations from Portugal and Slovenia, all partners are working together to turn Plastic Pirates into a joint citizen science initiative in a truly European spirit.

The DE-PT-SI consortium has already been set up and respective teaching, learning and communication materials have been developed. We expect to gather the first parallel samplings by school pupils in autumn 2020, insofar as far as the COVID-19 situation allows for this.

At the next stage, more countries would be very welcome to join. The campaign is financed by the Trio Presidency and also supported by the European Commission. A wider European rollout should also be considered in the context of the healthy oceans mission.

2. Council debate on 21 July 2020

On the occasion of the Informal Council Meeting of Research Ministers on 21 July, the German Presidency will seek support from member states, EFTA countries and the Commission to establish a European approach to citizen science campaigns, notably with the objective to

1. Exchange of views on the overall policy approach
2. Gain orientation on the proposal of holding regular European citizen science campaigns
3. Identify member state interest in participating in the further development of Plastic Pirates

Slido questions

During the Informal Council Meeting, Slido questions will be presented in order to gather information from all participating countries. Slido questions will be sent out in good time before the meeting.

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