

## THE CHALLENGE OF CO-CREATION: HOW TO CONNECT TECHNOLOGIES AND COMMUNITIES IN AN ETHICAL WAY

**Kristina Khutsishvili, Neeltje Pavicic, Machteld Combé**

University of Amsterdam (the Netherlands), City of Amsterdam (the Netherlands), City of Amsterdam (the Netherlands)

K.Khutsishvili@uva.nl; N.Pavicic@amsterdam.nl; M.Combe@amsterdam.nl

### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The contribution aims to reflect on ongoing experiences of connecting the members of technological world with vulnerable and marginalised communities inside the framework of CommuniCity Horizon Europe project.<sup>15</sup> The project draws on three rounds of open calls starting in cities of Porto, Amsterdam and Helsinki and then ‘replicated’ in other European cities during the project timeframe of 3 years. In the beginning of the open call rounds, hosting cities announce societal challenges to which the pilot proposals need to respond. The selected by independent jury pilots aim to develop technological solutions tailored to the specific needs of local communities together with the members of those communities, by means of co-creation.<sup>16</sup> The overall aspiration of the project is to accumulate the experiences and learnings on co-creation with disadvantaged groups, to come up with scalable practices and solutions, with the possibility to use the guidelines for successful open call and piloting processes as well as technical components and tools to replicate solutions in other cities and communities.

At the time of submitting the initial proposal to the ETHICOMP2024, the midterm meetings with the pilot teams are being run and the co-creation sessions with the targeted groups, meaning the members of communities, are being held. The theoretical, ethics-related question that derives from the related empirical observations and exceeds them – seems to be extremely important for future work aimed at the very same direction. The questions addressed by the contributions are:

What is meant by co-creation when we speak about co-creation of the technological solution with the communities? Where can we draw the line between co-creating with the community and ‘testing’ the solution on community? How to develop tech solutions for and with marginalized groups without harming or disappointing them?

These questions are answered by means of reflection on more ‘practical’ issues, among which are: does creating technology with and for the communities imply that the solution is better to be ‘built’ from scratch? is ‘feeding’ the application/platform/technological solution with the data coming from the communities, especially vulnerable and marginalised communities, can be viewed as an exercise of co-creation? can the potential positive externality of making

---

<sup>15</sup> The website of the project: <https://communicity-project.eu>.

<sup>16</sup> The overview of the pilots that have been selected by the independent jury as a result of the first open call is given here: <https://communicity-project.eu/2023/06/22/piloting-teams-announced/>.

the solution less biased through engagement with the members of 'target' communities be seen as a balancing act?

In our contribution, the analysis is drawn on empirical observations of piloting processes and related activities. The conceptual part, in turn, starts from the central notions. Aiming to bring together the world of technologies and vulnerable and marginalised communities, we inevitably face questions on the very essence of the conditions of vulnerability and marginalisation. On the grant proposal stage, the wording 'hard to reach' had been used while describing the communities at the centre of attention. Later we decided to abandon such a phrasing, on the grounds of the points raised such as: "Nobody is per se hard to reach"; "Such a terminology suggests that the municipalities are 'lazy' to reach the groups."

The conditions of vulnerability and marginalisation have different focuses, with vulnerability being the 'inner' condition, an inward situation, while the condition of marginalisation implies being an 'object' of the process of marginalisation, being on the 'receiving side' of the external process, in contrast with the 'inner' condition. The word 'disadvantaged', in turn, is used as a comprehensive notion including the notions focused on different aspects and conditions belonging to the 'disadvantaged' condition. We may outline that the words 'disadvantaged', 'vulnerable', and 'marginalised' vary with respect to their sensitivity, with 'disadvantaged' being more neutral. Both conditions of vulnerability and marginalisation relate to ethical considerations: the 'do no harm' normative principle is supplemented by thoughts on the desirable 'empowering' effect relevant for both conditions, being it the 'inner' condition of vulnerability or the vectored toward the person or group, directed from the 'outside', condition of marginalisation.

It is important to emphasise the ethical complexity of the goal set for the project determined not only by communities and their needs being in the centre of attention. Grants distributed to the winning teams are limited in their amount, as is the piloting period. While in cases of internal resources available, the pilot hosts have an incentive to proceed with projects further, such a scenario is not certain and depends on many factors. Keeping in mind these limitation factors, the main goal of the project is to acquire learnings that will enable replication in other cities and communities. The learnings in their broader sense then include not only successes but failures. At the same time, with the communities being at the centre of the processes, not all 'failures' may be desirable, if we may formulate it in this way. Some failures, the failures potentially having a negative impact to the communities involved, need to be minimised. A replication goal embedded in the project, with so-called replicator cities joining second and third open calls and piloting rounds, as well as piloting funding and timeframe limitations and the focus on learnings derived from the processes, all indicate the experimental nature of the project. The dualism of experimentation with the focus on disadvantaged communities brings unprecedented analytical and research possibilities but also the stress on responsibility and the ethical component.

Running pilots with such groups and involving them in creating and developing solutions can generate valuable technological innovations. Consequently, the long-term value of the pilots and experiments for other people who have similar needs, is quite clear. However, the individuals who take part in the project often may not profit from the results of the pilots themselves, or even if they do, it can take a long time. A few relevant examples from the project: a company ran a pilot for a technology increasing the autonomy of the elderly, the elderly people involved liked the technology, but when the piloting period is over it will be

taken away from them as this was just a pilot to learn from. Another example is a platform that is further developed with a group of youngsters who have been in contact with the law, their input improved the platform but the platform turned out to be too expensive for the involved department of the piloting city to be actually implemented. In general, the common opinion is that when you start a pilot you have to invest in expectations management and explain to the people taking part that the objective is to gather knowledge and experiment and that they should not expect that they will be able to use the solution once the piloting is finished. Members of disadvantaged communities, in turn, may be in a position of need so such a 'warning' is not registered very well, and they still hope for a real solution and may be disillusioned at the end of the pilot. At the same time, the evidence suggests also positive, identitarian consequences of engagement, with community members reflecting on their motivation using phrasing such as "helping people, working together towards a higher goal".

Co-creation activities aimed at the communities in question do not make the piloting processes easier, quite the opposite. Yet, the opportunities for experimentation and learning accumulation enabled by such design are extremely valuable. To facilitate and conduct the related activities of community engagement activities in an ethical way, it is necessary to keep in mind the 'do no harm' principle, the power imbalance including the imbalance of professional, technological subject-related knowledge, and the general condition of belonging to a disadvantaged community. The balancing act as well as the risk of harm mitigation act may be exercised by providing clear and honest communication including the communication on general aims and limitations of the project and particular pilot, encouraging the dialogue on equal terms, aimed at 'de-objectivization' of community and its members and empowering the members of communities from the very beginning of the engagement.

**KEYWORDS:** Ethics, technology, AI, city, community, vulnerability, co-creation.

## REFERENCES

The website of CommuniCity Horizon Europe Project: <https://communicity-project.eu>.