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Stakeholders navigating through rough waters: Five workshops on Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI)

The EU funded Res-AgorA project succeeded in combining a thorough conceptual and empirical field investigation with a down-to-earth involvement of different societal stakeholders.

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The Res-AGorA objective has been to build a strategic governance framework aimed at helping policy-makers and key actors reflect on ways to encourage a higher degree of responsibility in European research and innovation. Conceptual and empirical findings were discussed from different viewpoints through a series of stakeholder workshops. Throughout the workshops, participants reported a wide range of experiences in encountering barriers, challenges and conflict. They also stated that such experiences prevent opportunities that may heighten the possibilities for responsibility within the issues of research and innovation.

Participants discussed scenarios of accounts that displayed elements of deep-seated distrust between different societal actors. They noted the difficulties that emerge from this distrust surrounding the potential for meaningful and productive discussions about the responsible development of emerging technologies and innovations very hard, if not impossible. Reasons for these often-gridlocked situations included, among others, issues of vested interests, lack of transparencies as well as biased media coverage. Conversely, highlighted and discussed by participants were constructive solutions on ways to engage with the Res-AGorA approach for promoting RRI

The Res-AGorA project (EU FP7 project) is a three-year project (2013-16) building a strategic governance framework aimed at encouraging reflexive processes in policy-making on how to make European research and innovation more responsible and sustainable. Two years of intense conceptual and empirical work was followed by five stakeholder workshops held in major European cities. Approximately 80 stakeholders from a broad variety of fields have eagerly engaged in providing adjustments and inputs into discussions on Res-AGorA's preliminary approach to strategically navigate through the rough waters of "Responsible Research and Innovation" (RRI).

Res-AGorA Workshops:

- 1 – RRI in relation to shale gas extraction
- 2 – RRI in the context of GMO
- 3 – RRI in relation to funding strategies
- 4 – RRI in the context of research performing institutions
- 5 – Empowering the governance of RRI in Europe

Barriers and challenges for doing RRI

The stakeholder workshops initiated and facilitated open and constructive debates on responsibility concerns in the context of Research and Innovation (R&I) among the participants and the Res-AGorA team. In the course of the workshops it turned out that in the participant's everyday work such receptive and mutual communication on R&I issues is not always feasible. Instead, public discourses on responsibilities related to Research and Innovation are often rough and easily overturned. A prime example is the heated conflicts surrounding further development and implementation of hydraulic fracturing for shale gas extraction in many countries.

Participants experienced a number of obstacles in relation to the development of more responsible approaches to Research and Innovation. These obstacles included deep-seated distrust between researchers, industry, special interest groups, NGO's, the media and the wider public. The participants also marked contestation of knowledge - the disagreement on the correctness and significance of (scientific) information, the lack of a shared knowledge base or even basic definitions, e. g. on what RRI means - as a further major obstacle in communicating about, or even finding a consensus on the direction and organization of R&I processes.

The discussions also moved beyond the realm of communication and knowledge to touch on the issues of institutional structures, capacities and capabilities. Workshop participants pointed out the lack of incentives provided by research and funding organizations for reflection on and pursuit of RRI. Furthermore they stated that research excellence and output were emphasized as a benchmark for success to a larger extent. In the case organizations want to support RRI, there is often a lack of capacities. Such capacities may include, for instance, financial means or the capabilities such as adequately trained scientists.

Steering towards RRI

Despite the scope of various challenges and barriers, participants overall envisaged such obstacles as a means to improve and further steer R&I processes. The preliminary Res-AGorA approach entailed a reflection on RRI presented to participants. The reflection's outcomes aligned closely with their respective experiences.

Noted by Res-AGorA was the importance of a high-level of quality in interactions. RRI has to manage the complexities found within societal actor landscapes and further possibilities for enhanced accessibility and inclusivity. Negotiation and decision making processes regarding R&I should provide open access to relevant data and information in order to ensure a better understanding of the issues under consideration by all involved and potentially impacted stakeholders. Public engagement processes need to be transparent, moderated and unbiased to their results. Participants did however state the following basic agreements on issues of R&I:

1. Clarification of needs to be reached
2. The timescale considered in decision making
3. Criteria to select relevant stakeholders
4. An agreement on the concept of responsibility

However participants also warned strongly against forcing consensus on antagonistic issues.

Instruments and mechanisms to govern RRI were an additional thread of discussion. Participants highlighted the Res-AGorA principle that such mechanisms need to be context-sensitive and flexible and further aligned and integrated into existing regulation. Furthermore, participants found a mix of different instruments to be feasible such as prohibitive instruments used in tandem with means to proactively enable and promote RRI. For example financial incentives or training.

To enable doing RRI, participants supported the Res-AGorA idea of developing supportive environments and developed concrete best practices. Participants identified funding agencies as well as higher education institutions as important actors in creating an environment supportive for RRI. Such actors are in positions to pave the way for the implementation of incentive structures. Additionally, they have long-standing experiences in creating environments for R&I and could fund and conduct training activities for RRI, thus educating and enabling (future) researchers and other stakeholders to integrate RRI.

Given demands and thoughts illustrated by participants in the workshops, highlighted consistently was the demand for freedom of research as a basic principle to be followed to the greatest extent possible. This basic principle has the prospective to avoid potential negative consequences related to suppressing scientific curiosity as a major driver of research.

Providing orientation: The Res-AGorA “Responsibility-Navigator”[©]

The Res-AGorA team noted elements of discussions as well as the direct constructive feedback and critique on the Res-AGorA approach on RRI throughout the workshops and combined the overall outcome of two years’ worth of research findings. As a result, the Res-AGorA approach was refined, adjusted and further developed accordingly: The format, design and potential user groups were concretized and elaborations were enriched with hands-on illustrations and explanations. The Responsibility-Navigator was born as a means to provide orientation without normatively steering R&I in a certain direction. Until the project’s completion date of January 2016, the Responsibility-Navigator and accompanying materials will be finalized and ready to use for actors that want to navigate Research and Innovation towards Responsible Research and Innovation.

The Responsibility-Navigator[©] - Why, what, how?

Research and innovation organizations need to be managed to achieve more ‘responsible’ work and products. Res-AGorA’s Responsibility-Navigator helps decision-makers to govern such organizations towards more conscious ‘responsibility’. What is responsible will always be defined differently by different actor groups in research, innovation, and society – the Responsibility-Navigator is designed to facilitate related debate, negotiation and learning in a constructive and productive way. The Responsibility-Navigator supports identification, development and implementation of measures and procedures transforming research and innovation organizations in such a way that responsibility becomes an institutionalized ambition.

Forthcoming: Feature article about the Navigator

More Res-AGorA:

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