

ISEED is a multi-disciplinary project with a shared centre of gravity in philosophy of science/social science/economics and political sociology, political economics, organisations and management, policy analysis, communication science, social psychology, feminist theory, as well as public engagement practitioners. Using as its starting point citizen participation in science-related debates and programmes, ISEED will develop a new conceptual approach to the understanding of the **role and value of citizen active participation** in institutional decision making that takes into account open, transparent and shared access to deliberative processes. In particular, ISEED will contribute to the relatively less developed scientific literature about **argument formation and management** in the context of the new technologies of communication.

ISEED, coordinated by Prof.ssa Eleonora Montuschi (DFBC), makes an original move: it uses existing experience in the broadly defined field of **citizen science** (i.e., the participation of citizens who are not professional scientists – individual citizens, NGOs, groups of patients, etc. – to the production and use of scientific knowledge) as a tool to explore under what conditions participative and deliberative practices can be successfully implemented in democratic governance for the purpose of building forms of knowledge-based democratic governance complementary to political representation.

Citizen science will then offer to this project the tools to explore the conditions by which participation and deliberation successfully combine in practice, within and beyond citizen science practices.

Calls for a more participative way of doing science go hand in hand with a **rise of people literacy**. And a larger involvement of citizens in the orientation of research and/or in the production of knowledge is valued for the sake of democracy – an orientation not only justified conceptually but supported for global strategic policy reasons. For instance, the notion of “Responsible Research and Innovation” developed by the European Commission implies that “societal actors (researchers, citizens, policy makers, etc.) work together during the whole research and innovation process” [<https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/h2020-section/responsible-research-innovation>]. Science is no exception to the broader “participation imperative” placed on our democracies.

In ISEED “citizen science” initiatives, in all their diversity, will provide a “methodological toolbox” to rethink how to improve participation and deliberation in democracy, by offering innovative methods to overcome a number of current obstacles faced by deliberative practices.

The focus on participation calls for a re-definition of the nature and role that participation has in democratic societies. The central feature that will be emphasised is deliberation.

Deliberative participation, as formulated and tested in this project, puts the accent not so much on the final act of choosing (e.g. voting for or against a position) but rather on the process that leads to making a choice. Participating in this process entails an active, informed, competent, engaged incentive for ‘taking part in’ or ‘being part’ of that very process, which can only depend on reasons and justifications that transcend the immediate content of an immediate choice. Deliberative participation is, in other words, one of the forms taken by educated citizenship, or commitment to polity.

For this reason deliberative participation can only find a chance of practical implementation in the context of an equally reformulated idea of **public sphere** that proves conducive of stronger forms of engagement, fruitful integration and open communication.

It would be a mistake to imagine a single ‘public opinion’ – an idea that would rest on an excess of optimism regarding the ability of citizens to be informed on all sorts of complex and varied subjects. Rather, what ought to be envisaged, and identified, are numerous ‘publics’ and ‘counterpublics’, taking shape, and equally fading away, not only on the basis of circumstances (and for this reason the scope, and the very existence, of a public sphere cannot be decided a priori), but also and more specifically of the values and interests most felt and defended by a variety of citizens.

ISEED subscribes to the view that in a good deliberative democracy the so-called ‘public sphere’ should be taken as an inclusive term covering several and different publics and counterpublics, engaged with a variety of interests and values on a variety of topics and issues of social concern.

What takes central stage is the role of an **active education of citizens**. Participation and deliberation in ISEED are the tools through which citizens gain critical awareness of their social identities, and control over the decisions that affect their lives. Within the same context, having fair and shared access to spaces and tools of knowledge production is arguably central. Blind participation or simple exposure to even torrential fluxes of information in ‘open’ fora of discussion are not conducive of real awareness or control – which is often the case when the public is exposed, for example, to the unregulated market of news on the internet.

*ISEED also intends to evaluate and assess how misuses of **digital technologies** fuel social and political polarization and how they could instead potentially exert more positive impact in the implementation of deliberative, participatory and direct democracy.*

ISEED will therefore investigate to what extent digital media have contributed to polarising discourses, populist narratives and distrust in science; in what forms emotions, rather than logical reasoning, are much more likely to be the driver behind decisions and in public dialogue on issue of social relevance; and what are the actual and potential contributions of social media to rational argument and better decision processes in debates concerning scientific issues.

The research consortium consists of 12 European and extra-European partners who will jointly work on the conceptual and empirical aspects of the project starting in February 2021.