



**BETTER
Life**



What is BETTER Life project?

**Bringing Excellence
to Transformative Socially
Engaged Research in Life
Sciences through
Integrated Digital Centers**



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WELCOME TO OUR NEWSLETTER



BETTER Life for better life

It is not easy to communicate the project that is about socially engaged life sciences. It is even more difficult when such communication concerning science is one of essential pillars of socially engaged sciences. However, the wording and acronym of the project “BETTER Life” perfectly suits this intention. Life, in all its dimensions, is central to us. Life makes our existence and making life better is, I hope, the desire of most of us (it means, I acknowledge there are exceptions of those who do not want better life). The project “BETTER Life” addresses life through the prism of life sciences. They are the sciences for which the life is the core of their research. Life sciences and life must obviously go hand in hand. As such, we can speak not only about our project contributing to better life but also about making life sciences better. If life sciences become better in terms of their performance and outcomes, they will also make our lives significantly better because they will be more related to society, they will be engaged in society. Moreover, the study of life is not limited to life sciences only. Life has its social dimension as well. That is why fostering socially engaged life sciences is highly important. Talking about better life sciences used to make better life in society is challenging.

The word “better” is not value-free. However, for a long time, life sciences were building their research domain based on the assumption of being value-free. Society and life sciences were separated. The beginning of considering the values results in bringing society and life sciences back together. Such mutual links between society and life sciences will not be beneficial only for society. It will be beneficial also for life sciences. Thanks to a member of our project team, Piotr Tryjanowski, who informed us about an article from Nature journal named “‘Disruptive’ science has declined – and no one knows why”, I believe that strengthening links between life sciences and society, and training early career researchers to be able to act as socially engaged scientists might again bring disruptions into sciences and contribute to answering the questions asked in the article. Life sciences necessitate one to be more socially engaged if they want to progress and enrich our knowledge with new and findings and ideas. They must be disruptive; they cannot be oriented to “business as usual” model. One of the ways how to achieve this goal is to train early career researchers in life sciences to be socially engaged.



BETTER Life

WELCOME TO OUR NEWSLETTER

Making social sciences socially engaged is a very broad topic. We do not build our project out of the blue. We have already started with mapping the existing status-quo, and I am surprised how wide the already existing social engagement of life sciences is. Citizen science, transdisciplinarity, community based research, communicating scientific results, co-creation, ethno-sciences (e. g., ethno-medicine) are the examples of words which reflect socially engaged life sciences. Socially engaged life sciences do not mean any extreme activism forcing the change with violence. They mean the ways how scientists, by using their expert knowledge, work together with people who have their everyday knowledge of locality or community being part of it. Such work will eliminate distrust existing among scientists and ordinary people.

Today, ordinary people often consider scientists as members of “governing elites” working against them (we have seen many examples of such an approach during the COVID-19 pandemics). On the contrary, scientists often consider ordinary people as having no expertise to do any science and therefore they should be, if possible, excluded from any intervention into doing research. Doing research together, scientists and ordinary people will generate new knowledge thus breaking out from the existing status quo in scientific disciplines; they will bring disruptive knowledge resulting in scientific revolutions. To do that, a new generation of scientists in life sciences should be trained towards being skilled in socially engaged life sciences. Such task is the essence of the projects “BETTER Life”. Life is life.



Michal Lošťák, BETTER Life project coordinator



WHAT IS SOCIALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH IN LIFE SCIENCES?

The concept of Socially Engaged Research (SER) in life sciences refers to a strategic research approach that involves meaningful interactions between diverse societal stakeholders in life sciences. The primary goal of this type of research is to improve the accountability, responsibility, quality, relevance, and positive impact of research on society at the regional, national, and international levels.

SER in life sciences encompasses all aspects of research process, from idea formulation to data collection, analysis, knowledge production, dissemination of results, and evaluation, and includes public involvement at any or all stages.

SER in life sciences is necessary because involving diverse stakeholders in research

process ensures that research is grounded in the realities of society. Further, by encouraging collaboration between academia, industry, government, and civil society, SER can lead to research that is more relevant, of higher quality, and with a range of positive impacts on society.

This allows for the development of new knowledge and innovative solutions that can help address the challenges faced by society. Furthermore, by involving the public in research process and making sure that research is transparent and accountable, SER in life sciences can help to build public trust and improve the reputation of life sciences.

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SOCIALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH IN LIFE SCIENCES: AN APPROACH TO TACKLING SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

Life sciences play a critical role in improving the quality of life for people worldwide. From the development of new medicines and treatments to the discovery of new ways to prevent diseases, or to find solutions for controlling plagues decimating crops, life sciences have the potential to make a significant impact on society. However, traditional approaches to research and innovation in life sciences are no longer sufficient to address the complex and interrelated challenges faced by society today. This is where socially engaged research (SER) in life sciences comes in, offering a new and innovative approach to the definition, planning, management, and execution of a research agenda.

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IMPLEMENTING SOCIALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Aligning SER with the research agendas in higher education requires deepening in the concept, creating tools, and facilitating the enabling conditions for research units. There is a need for developing a supportive culture for SER in life sciences by providing resources, funding, and support for researchers. This includes providing training and professional development opportunities for researchers to help them engage with diverse stakeholders in research process.

Moreover, the creation of partnerships with organizations outside of academia, including industry, government, and civil society, is a necessary condition to facilitate SER in life sciences

These partnerships can help to increase the relevance of research and impact of higher education institutions in their context. Additionally, to enhance the implementation of SER, it is necessary to provide incentives for researchers to engage with the stakeholders of their surrounding ecosystems. This can include recognition of socially engaged research in life sciences, as well as opportunities for researchers to collaborate with other researchers and stakeholders in research process.

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STATUS QUO REPORT ON RESEARCH AND POLICIES IN SER

The BETTER Life Project is taking a closer look at the state of SER in life sciences, aiming to shed light on its definitions, benefits, challenges, and potential impacts, with the ultimate goal of crafting a comprehensive report that will serve as a guidepost for the project and for academics. As a foundation measure, the project partners are working on analysing recent literature and policies to offer a broad panorama of SER from the perspective of life sciences. This report will present the theoretical frameworks of SER, the definition of key terms, enabling mechanisms, key elements of implementation, opportunities and implications. The report will be launched on the website of the project.

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FRAMING THE EUROPEAN DIGITAL CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE BETTER LIFE

The BETTER Life Project aims to establish a European Digital Centre of Excellence for fostering Socially Engaged Research (SER) in Life Sciences. This BETTER Life Digital Centre of Excellence is an inter-institutional support structure for developing the capacities of early career researchers to foster SER. By developing these capacities, BETTER Life will contribute to tackling societal challenges in diverse surrounding ecosystems while consolidating itself as a reference for planning, supporting, and implementing SER in life sciences.

The creation of the European Digital Centre of Excellence is a key foundational element for the development of a framework for SER adapted to the disciplinary characteristics of life sciences. This framework will guide the development of the strategic plan and it will be later enhanced to establish standards of SER in life sciences. The “institutional framework” of the Digital Centre of Excellence is a set of formal organisational structures necessary for the development of the activities of the centre. The framework is the precondition for the implementation and management of intervention tools. It is composed of dimensions that constitute the building blocks of the Digital Centre of Excellence.

The Framework for the European Digital Centre of Excellence BETTER Life focuses on the institutional perspective of SER in life sciences. On the one hand, there exist diverse frameworks focused on SER projects, such as the Engaged Research Framework that identifies opportunities for community engagement across the research lifecycle (CampusEngage, 2018), or the Model of Engaged Research emphasising the contextual conditions and engagement intensity (Ferguson et al., 2022).

On the other hand, there are frameworks focused on digital centres of excellence such as the Analytical Framework for CoE Schemes in Capacity Building (Hellström, 2018), focused on strategy development, or the Framework for Big Data and AI Centre of Excellence (Curry et al., 2021) focused on the flow of processes. The partners of the project are merging both perspectives to determine the building blocks of the European Digital Centre of Excellence BETTER.



The Digital Centre of Excellence BETTER Life is a unique combination of framework-related digital Centre of Excellence and engaged research, and it proposes a holistic approach to support early career researchers from the early planning stages to the actual implementation of SER. This approach ensures the sustainability of the Digital Centre of Excellence, by combining the best practices from both SER and digital CoEs to create an integrated framework adapted to the particularities of life sciences. This framework will provide the necessary guidance for planning a centre of excellence supporting the implementation of SER in life sciences, helping to foster SER in life sciences and to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life in the surrounding ecosystems.

The BETTER Life Project contributes to the development of a more sustainable and socially engaged research environment in life sciences, and it will undoubtedly set high standards for other research projects in the future.

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SOCIALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH IN LIFE SCIENCES IN EUROPE

Socially Engaged Research in Life Sciences in Europe is a rapidly growing field that aims to address societal challenges through interdisciplinary collaboration between researchers and stakeholders. By incorporating public perspectives, this approach seeks to ensure that scientific advancements align with the values and needs of society. In Europe, numerous initiatives have been launched to promote Socially Engaged Research in Life Sciences, including the Horizon 2020 program, which supports projects that tackle societal issues such as health, food security, and sustainable energy. This approach not only generates new scientific knowledge, but also creates opportunities for public engagement and co-creation of solutions to pressing problems.



With its emphasis on collaboration and stakeholder engagement, Socially Engaged Research in Life Sciences holds great promise for a sustainable and equitable future in Europe. Through public engagement and co-creation of solutions, this approach not only generates new knowledge, but also empowers communities and creates opportunities for positive social impact. By combining scientific rigor with societal relevance, Socially Engaged Research in Life Sciences is a promising approach to creating a sustainable and equitable future.

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HOW TO IMPLEMENT SER IN LIFE SCIENCES

Implementing Socially Engaged Research (SER) in life sciences requires a proactive approach and a willingness to collaborate with stakeholders outside of the academic community. Here are some steps that organizations and individuals can take to implement SER in life sciences:

- **Identify societal challenges:** Start by identifying the key societal challenges that are relevant to life sciences, such as healthcare, food security, or environmental sustainability.
- **Engage with stakeholders:** Establish meaningful and ongoing relationships with stakeholders, such as community organizations, policymakers, and industry partners to ensure that their perspectives and needs are integrated into research process.
- **Foster interdisciplinary collaboration:** Encourage collaboration between researchers from different disciplines, such as biology, medicine, and social sciences to bring a diverse range of perspectives and expertise to bear on societal challenges.



- **Develop and support SER initiatives:** Develop and support initiatives, such as public engagement events, co-creation workshops, or interdisciplinary research projects that enable researchers and stakeholders to work together towards common goals.
- **Evaluate and communicate impact:** Evaluate the impact of SER initiatives and communicate the results to stakeholders, researchers, and the wider public to demonstrate the value of this approach and inspire future efforts.
- **Foster the culture of SER:** Encourage and support the development of the culture of SER within academic and research organizations by promoting the importance of stakeholder engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and societal impact.

By taking these steps, organizations and individuals can successfully implement SER in life sciences and contribute to creating more sustainable and equitable future.

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COMPENDIUM OF INNOVATIVE PRACTICES ON SOCIAALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH

All the partners of the consortium have identified the best innovative practices in the EU and showed how universities implement Socially Engaged Research in real life. The compendium presents 25 Innovative practices that are accomplished and still ongoing within the local, regional and international frameworks. We have valuable examples (three per academic partner with a life science focus and two by non-academic partners focused on nonlife science practices) with high impact potential and innovative practices implemented by the partners of the consortium and/or external institutions. The showcases overcome such challenges as: embedding social innovation and sustainability into product-service-system design; articulating the open knowledge, resources and stakeholders for sharing the knowledge on how to establish, run, network and enhance the impacts of science shops implementing community-based research solved in mutual synergistic actions by all the partners.

Our valuable examples also exceed the goals such as: science for soil protection and healthier food for civil society, naturally based production for environmental health improvement; development and application of unique bioremediation methods in order to eliminate dangerous toxic substances from the environment, primarily contaminated land, water and air; developing and validating high quality product that would be 100% natural and effective in treatment of *Helicobacter pylori* infection but will not cause side effects and bacterial resistance; need for an applicable set of indicators along with their validation at different scales and in different ecosystems; providing the evidence base for ecological intensification and demonstrating the concept in seven representative agricultural landscape types in the EU;

synthesizing management and policy recommendations, concerning ecological intensification in agriculture; providing the evidence base impact of green energy on plants and animal communities; creating educational materials for subsequent decision-making direction of the development of hunting tourism in the European Union countries; increasing of the innovative potential in region with new research infrastructure; these are real outputs of cooperation and mutual transfer of knowledge between universities and scientific institutes, industry partners, local government communities and civil society.

Compiling 25 Innovative practices in socially engaged research is inspiring and serves as an incentive for future ventures. This diligent compendium has showed the importance of joint actions of all stakeholders, the importance of a better understanding of the different angles and perspectives of each of the participants, the strength of the consolidated civil sector and the implementation of real knowledge for better life. Or maybe even more – the implementation of better knowledge for real life

EDUCONS



STAKEHOLDER INTERACTIONS LAUNCHED BY ESTONIAN UNIVERSITY OF LIFE SCIENCES

Estonian University of Life Sciences (EMU) has ensured that the most interesting practices of Estonian socially engaged research in the field of life sciences are identified and reported. In particular, we have submitted the descriptions of the most exciting cases, which are concerned with the research of pollinator health and mortality in cultural landscape, with the development of the national program for the promotion of remote sensing information in environmental and natural resources management, as well as with the identification and valorisation of grassland ecosystem services. The case study descriptions have been prepared by Anton Shkaruba and Kalev Sepp.

At the moment we are having stakeholder consultations. For the consultations we have selected representatives of quadruple helix stakeholders, including public authorities, companies, academia and NGO. For instance, Maria Habicht and Liina Eek from the Estonian Research Council (ETAG) will be interviewed. The Research Council maintains and develops a balanced, high-level and internationally successful research, development and innovation (RDI) system in Estonia, as well as a knowledge-based and sustainable Estonian society. Two companies have agreed to be interviewed: one of Estonia's leading food producers Agrone and the Environmental Agency Viridis.

In 2019, the Agrone group took a strategic decision to launch a green action program aimed at employing the principles of circular economy to the fullest in their production activities so that in the next 15 years to reduce the harmful footprint our activity has on the natural and living environment. Vice-President Raul Savimaa from the Estonian Society for Nature Conservation will be involved. The aim of the Society is to coordinate the relationship between nature and society, to value the national cultural heritage, to promote and advocate sustainable development, use of nature and landscape management, and to increase people's environmental awareness. The interviews are taken by Kalev Sepp and Veljo Kabin.

Of other current BETTER Life tasks, the EMU team is working on the analysis and descriptions of barriers to socially engaged research. This work is based on the structured literature review performed by BETTER Life partners during the previous months. The report is being developed by Anton Shkaruba and Kalev Sepp.

EMU



SUSTAINABILITY IN BETTER LIFE

The Sustainability and Valorisation Strategy will be a key document throughout the entire duration of the project. It will be used to map out, direct and inform all avenues of exploitation of results to ensure that the project will not “die” after the funding ends. As such, it would be revisited and revised as new outputs are created and new opportunities for commercialisation and exploitation are engendered. The key success factor will lie in the commitment, ingenuity and strategic thinking of all partners, their regional/local/national realities and institutional capacities and needs.

Once the deliverables are created during the lifetime of the project, it will be up to partners to organise sustainability meetings and exercises to carve the pathways and business models for outputs that have the largest potential. This will also be done in conjunction with other similar projects through the EU project synergy map.

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NEWS IN CZU



Prof. Lošťák talks about the BETTER Life project in a popular Czech magazine called the Universe in the context of the interaction of the life sciences with other social sciences (Czech language only).
Okna příležitostí dokořán - Časopis Vesmír (vesmir.cz)

CZU organized two consultation sessions with different stakeholders at its premises. The local stakeholders included representatives of industry, public authorities, and societal actors (NGOs, academic and research representatives). The events identified the existing regional capacities, pains, needs, challenges, potential, and opportunities for growth. Both sessions took place in face-to-face interaction.

CZU representatives promoted BETTER Life project in the seminar focused on European Excellence Initiative (EEI) 2023. The event focused on the preparation of project proposals for the EEI 2023 call, which is the second call of the new Widening instrument in Horizon Europe. Participants were informed about the outcomes of the first call, successful projects, and the most frequent comments of evaluators. CZU introduced the BETTER Life project from the point of its origin, main goals, and current implementation.

<https://www.horizontevropa.cz/cs/kalendar/yiif-calendarevent/598/cz-sk-seminar-k-vyzve-nastroje-eei...>
(Program in Czech language only).





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