

Article



Findings from a European, cross-national project study on service user participation: Implications for social work policy, practice and education

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#### **Abstract**

This article reports on a European project that sought to explore the relationships between social work and service user participation, using a five-country (Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, Ireland and Portugal) case study approach. It revealed areas of comparison and contrast depending upon respective histories of social work development, organisation, education and research that determined forms of service user participation. It is argued that such cross-national case study approaches can enhance our understanding of vital aspects of social work organisation, practice, education and research in the social work research, policy and practice community in areas of service user participation.

### Keywords

Case study approach, comparison, Europe, service user empowerment, social work

### Introduction

The growing literature on social work and service user participation is uneven and complex. In this field of research, it is important to recognise the competing, sometimes contradictory concepts and definitions which underpin the knowledge base. In an early commentary, Beresford (2010) explored how and why service user involvement in research and evaluation can be embraced or resisted in a range of policy contexts. Other social work scholars have addressed the difference between tokenistic and genuine participatory approaches, arguing that service user involvement should embody a fruitful and valuable strategy for gaining an in-depth understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of social problems in which social workers intervene (Krumer-Nevo, 2016). Conceptual clarifications about issues of service user involvement are also crucial to enable forms

of representation and policy change (Krick, 2022). Such debates are prevalent in social work literature. McLaughlin (2009), for example, discusses how, in Britain, various concepts have, historically, been used to describe citizens who engage with social work services, for example, using the terms 'client', 'customer', 'consumer', 'service user' and 'expert by experience'. These often inform and shape policy, practice, education and research in this field.

Such ideas can be associated with notions of social justice; for example, Fraser's (2007) notion of 'parity of participation' is used when arguing that injustices that confront individuals and groups are often rooted in economic, cultural and political realms (Boone et al., 2018). In order to attain forms of social justice, social work services should be challenged to implement organisational changes and strategies that enable service users and staff to have increased access to knowledge and methods, as well as resources (Matscheck and Piuva, 2022). Thus, interventions can be used to traverse professional boundaries, power differentials and knowledge systems to achieve change in this field (Cui et al., 2022). This can be achieved through interprofessional educational projects, thoughtful management skills and agreed-upon, authentic, shared professional approaches to engagement with service users.

Where state and other forms of regulation of social work exist, there are often requirements that educational institutions and academics embrace forms of service user participation in the delivery of the curriculum (Feely et al., 2022; Fox, 2022). Crucially the way in which these judgements are made can determine how co-production and creative strategies may enhance the educational experiences of students and service users. Reviews of the literature have focused on service users' involvement in social work education (Adamson et al., 2024; Stanley and Webber, 2022), high-lighting types of strategies and perceived benefits but only partial evidence of changes in student skills and practice or subsequent outcomes for service users and carers. Problems remain about issues of resourcing, training, facilitative skills and the fragility of forms of collaboration (Driessens et al., 2016). In addition, the recruitment and resourcing of service users and the identification of roles and responsibilities may affect the outcomes of service user involvement (Cabiati and Levy, 2021).

Finally, it is important to discuss how service users may be involved in social work and other forms of research, often described as the co-creation and co-production of knowledge. At one level there is a degree of caution and criticism of such opportunities given the potential for tokenism in this field (Williams et al., 2020). However, when the ground is prepared to increase the confidence of service users and thoughtful methods are employed, then forms of co-production can occur (Faulkner et al., 2021). Research has shown that participatory practices also come with power relations and asymmetries, contested understandings of the required reflexivity of professionals, researchers and service users, and unintentional exploitative, counterproductive, tokenistic, or exclusionary consequences (Schön, 2016).

# Aim and objectives of the project

The paper discusses the findings from a seminar which formed part of an Erasmus+ project 'Innovation through reflexivity and participation: strengthening the education and professionalisation of social work in professional interfaces' (INORP) (2020–2023), in which researchers, students, public service organisations, service user organisations and social work educators aimed to gain a critical, in-depth understanding of approaches to service user involvement in social work research, education and policy and practice development in diverse national contexts across Europe. It was co-financed by EU funds under the Erasmus+ K203-CAC1B7D2 strategic partnership for innovation for the period 2020–2023. The project partners were Charles University (Czech Republic) – Project Coordinator; Ghent University (Belgium); Helsingin Yliopisto (Finland);

University College Dublin (Ireland); and Cooperativa de Ensino Superior de Serviço Social (Portugal).

Seminar aim. To compare and contrast participants' understanding of service user participation in social work research, education and policy and practice development.

Seminar objectives. To enable participants to use country-specific case studies to discuss areas of comparison and contrast. To use these discussions to develop a tentative analysis and overview of these areas of comparison and contrast in preparation for participative teaching guidelines and a model curriculum.

The seminar took place over 1 week in October 2022 and was attended by 28 project participants, including 14 doctoral or master's students and 14 academics from the partner organisations in each of the five countries, and involved presentations and agency visits to Irish health and social care organisations. The timetable was designed to integrate formal as well as informal learning.

Prior to the seminar, students were tasked with preparing a 1000-word case study (n=7) and presentations that reflected upon participation in a range of topics and client groups (older people, people with disabilities, unemployed people, Roma communities and students) across the participating countries. In addition, there were presentations by local organisations and three agency visits on the topics of children in state care, people with mental health problems, people with addictions and the needs of older people. These activities were used as learning platforms for participants to engage in dialogue and learning spaces to understand the conditions and contexts that contribute to, or hinder, service user participation across various domains, including politics, institutions, education and socio-economic structures. The seminar adopted a developmental and iterative approach to avoid oversimplification and promote meaningful exchange, challenging conventional discourses in the field of social work and service user participation.

# Methodology

### Data collection

Various methods of data collection were used before and during the seminar. Prior to the seminar, a 'light variant' type of scoping literature review of the knowledge base, described by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), followed five stages: identifying the research question; identifying relevant studies; study selection; charting the data; and collating, summarising and reporting the results. These steps enabled the construction of a national report by each of the participating universities, and enabled the development of a further, integrative contextual literature review (Neuman, 2013). This offered further opportunities to link, analyse, critique, synthesise and integrate a larger body of knowledge and representative literature on service user participation, which could inform topics for social work research, education and policy and practice development.

Detailed minutes of all the meetings, discussions and exchanges were taken, and the crossnational literature review, the national case studies, the PowerPoint presentations and detailed minutes served as a solid basis for the systematic analysis of the data.

# Data analysis

The process of data analysis was informed by a directed approach to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), drawing upon the existing knowledge base informed by the integrative contextual literature review and then comparing this understanding through 'feedback loops', with

the findings from the case study presentations. This was managed by the host Irish research team, who engaged in this analytical process in iterative ways (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which resulted in a report for the sponsoring agency.

### Ethical considerations

Attention was given to a range of ethical issues before and during the seminar. The national case studies that were prepared and circulated before the seminar were all based on ongoing doctoral research in each of the participating countries. This ensured that process-orientated ethical clearance and reflection were pursued by the institutional ethics committees of universities in which the research projects took place. Moreover, during the seminar, three presentations involved service users speaking to a range of sensitive topics associated with services to adults and families and children. The seminar organisers, who had already established co-teaching relationships with these presenters, ensured that principles of confidentiality and duty of care were followed before, during and after the sessions.

## **Findings**

## Findings (i) analysis of the country reports

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the country reports based on differences whose significance had to be elaborated: diverse histories; regulation and non-regulation; uneven forms of service user participation; and opportunities to fund research.

The short history of professional social work and its relatively young institutional place in academia was emphasised in two of the country reports. For example, the reconceptualisation of social work education in Portugal after the collapse of the dictatorial state in 1974, followed by a period of political dynamism marked by the growth of new social movements, offered important spaces for social workers to perform alternative forms of interventions, which had the potential to engage progressively with service users. This implied moving away from the assistance-focused practices characteristic of the former authoritarian regime. Encouraged by new progressive political agendas, social workers stood at the forefront of the Revolution, working alongside grass-roots movements in an experimental participative project that espoused political change (Silva, 2019). The full recognition of university academic-level social work in the Czech Republic occurred after the 'Velvet Revolution' of 1989, later gaining further strength through doctoral programmes at four Czech universities. Since 2006, Czech law regulates the position of social workers, increasing professional status, thereby also widening power differentials.

Although social work was established in Ireland over a century ago, it, like in the Czech Republic, was only recently state-regulated both in terms of practice and educational provision. Yet, some of the characteristics of social work and healthcare provision remain connected to older forms of social welfare delivery, for example, in terms of the role of the Catholic church, as is the case in Portugal and Belgium.

Within Belgium, where social work has not received full recognition on a university academic level in the French-speaking part of the country, there are variations in policy and practice paradigms (Roets et al., 2020). This contrasts with social work academic traditions in the Dutch-speaking universities that have historically focused more intensively and critically on participatory approaches and service user involvement. The case studies also reflected upon how, and why, service user participation was understood and operationalised in different forms of social work education. Across the reports, there was variable evidence of a commitment to participative principles of

social work education in the curriculum and concerns about the type of tokenism that is also found in social work practice and organisations.

The concept of social work generally differs between these countries (e.g. in terms of historical origins and state regulation) and this appears to affect the way that service user participation is researched and understood. For example, in the Portuguese and Czech case studies, there is relatively little that has been written and published on these experiences. The Irish report highlighted a growing literature (Ní Shé et al., 2020), although most do not refer specifically to the social work role. There were, however, some examples of diverse, localised approaches to participatory research across several client groups, for example, young people in state care and people with addictions (Loughran and Broderick, 2017), as well as older people in hospitals and other institutions. These findings contrasted with the experience of the other two countries, Belgium and Finland, where more active research and publishing environments on this topic were established during the previous decades. The Belgian literature search resulted in numerous publications and endeavours dealing with participation and reflexivity in social work policy and practice development in social work education (including practitioners, researchers and educators) and at the academic level in Flanders. The insights, however, also document the complexities and dangers of drifting into tokenistic approaches of service user participation: service users might not be sufficiently involved in contributing to a democratic creation of knowledge that informs social work research, education and policy and practice development that corresponds to their subjective needs and interests (Beresford and Croft, 2001; Krumer-Nevo, 2016). The review of the literature in Finland identified three categories under which the relationships between social work and service user participation were analysed: studies about methods of participation; experiences of participation; and legislative studies and political discourses on participation.

If the state and other bodies do not support service user participation research initiatives, then change is less likely. For example, in Portugal, where social work is not a registered academic discipline, there is little or no opportunity to fund participatory (or other) research. Belgium and Finland have a much longer established tradition of participation in social work research, education, policy and practice development, and Ireland's shift to a Public Patient Initiative model appears to have also been influenced and driven by the requirement of funding bodies. It is generally the situation, however, that little social work and healthcare funding in Ireland will be agreed unless there is core involvement of service users in the design and delivery of research projects. It remains a question as to why research funding bodies in some countries require the involvement of users in the research process and others do not. Where there are funding opportunities that encourage participatory approaches, these may lead to more meaningful studies on service user participation in social work research.

# Findings (ii) analysis of the seminar presentations and discussions

The analysis of the documented seminar processes led to the development of 10 themes (INORP, 2023b).

Teaching, learning and trust building. Discussions about the engagement of service users in social work practice and education revealed complex ethical and professional dilemmas. Students and service users often face challenges in being heard and included in teaching design, and there are similarities in how policies are implemented across different political cultures. An analysis of such difficulties showed that they can be taken as learning incidents concerning the 'reality' of power differences enshrined in established teaching practices, university regulations and other formal restrictions concerning, for example, insurance for academic activities. Establishing common

ground rules and safe spaces for difficult conversations is crucial without assuming, however, that these alone would eliminate inequalities. Thus, one Irish case study presented several innovative pedagogical approaches to enable women with addiction problems to use their 'experts by experience' status in teaching with social work students. The learning event needed to involve more than presenting 'personal testimonies'; service users were encouraged to be partners in the design, delivery and assessment of the teaching. In highlighting the difficulties this entailed, the experience had a cathartic effect on both students and service users.

The research environment. The issue of co-production and engagement with service users in research projects was also discussed. It was generally agreed that service users should be supported as much as possible to become full partners in the research process, for example, in terms of setting the research agenda questions, rather than being simple objects of study. Involving service users in these ways means sharing responsibility for the consequences of possible 'agenda deviations' and hence for intended changes, thereby recognising service users as facilitators of change with the associated responsibilities. For example, a Portuguese case study revealed the importance of establishing trust and proximity with participants through reconnaissance, informal contact and regular engagement to facilitate meaningful participation of the older people in the research project, which at times implied unforeseen changes in the original research objectives.

The personal, professional, social and political. During the seminar, discussions took place about the relationships between personal, professional, social and political factors when implementing participatory approaches. The historical development of services, professional cultures, political climates and legal conditions often differed clearly across countries, and this shapes the conditions for or against participation. Analysing these observed differences during the research process implied a requirement for distinct forms of negotiation within national and local contexts, including one's personal habits and assumptions. In particular, the various histories and success of self-advocacy, survivor and social movements in respective countries provide challenging reference points which can create both welcoming and defensive personal and organisational responses before being transformed into relevant practices. Thus, the Belgian case study, discussed above, revealed how neoliberal educational policies and an instrumental view of education can lead to exclusionary practices and hinder genuine participation, particularly for marginalised students.

Positive effects of more meaningful participation. Where these spaces are created, trust is promoted, and a genuine learning process is initiated at personal, professional and organisational levels. It is then possible that participation and co-production can lead to more purposeful empowerment of service users, greater academic depth in research, increased legal and ethical accountability and the development of autonomous teaching and learning environments. It was emphasised in the analysis of various experiences that such positive effects cannot be achieved by means of following a 'universal formula' but only through the careful negotiation of specific circumstances, needs and expectations. The Belgian case study demonstrated the complexity of democratic participation in practice when working with a woman with intellectual disabilities, emphasising the need for professionals to embrace vulnerability and interdependency and create a democratic space for dialogue and the gradual co-construction of care and support.

Representation. The concept of representation was a recurring and complex issue discussed during the seminar, which is frequently absent from idealised proposals for user participation. On close examination of the examples of successful participation, unavoidable dilemmas and complexities were discussed. For example, the superficiality of collective labels of disadvantage and exclusion

becomes apparent when participants in shared teaching or research are expected to speak on behalf of such assumed 'collectives'. Our attention was also drawn to power differentials among participants, in the application of recruitment methods and other hidden normative assumptions. The dilemma hinges on the notion of a sense of authenticity, which ultimately can apply only to individual experiences and positions while we concluded that speaking authentically for groups can only be claimed when representation has in some manner been formally legitimated within the group. A Czech case study, for example, explored how the views of Roma workers could be enhanced when focusing on internal processes of representation so that they can then address more forcefully imbalances in power with their Czech counterparts. Historically, the unequal nature of these relationships often led to distrust and suspicion based on categorisation and labelling on both sides. To deal with these issues, a participatory group-based research process was created that attended to issues of representation and provided a space for meaningful and differentiated dialogue, which, in turn, enabled behavioural and attitudinal changes to occur for participants within that space.

Supporting and financing service users. Supporting and financing service users' engagement can become a thorny administrative and challenging political issue, particularly as they often rely on state social benefits that may restrict payment for their involvement in teaching or research projects. Denying them due financial recognition, however, can be taken as a further incidence of exclusion and discrimination. Groups such as Roma and Traveller organisations are particularly disadvantaged in this respect, as bureaucratic hurdles may combine with racist popular assumptions about fraudulent incomes in such populations. In the Finnish case study, the participation of unemployed individuals in rehabilitative work activities was hampered by the fear of losing unemployment benefits if they did not comply with regulations that did not take such participative occasions into account, which hindered authentic service user participation.

The avoidance of tokenism through peer advocacy and building systems of social justice. Our examination of experiences with participatory approaches indicated that whenever the above contexts are not adequately dealt with, then impediments to participation tend not to be recognised, are avoided or smoothed over; this has the effect of risks becoming reduced and a tendency for practices to be tokenistic, an issue that was of particular concern in seminar debates. A potential strategy to deal with these problems is through approaches to peer advocacy, which can foster genuine collaboration and reduces tokenistic involvement in a range of teaching, research and practice contexts. An Irish case study exemplified the importance of reciprocal participation and highlighted how tokenism can be addressed by allowing service users to define and negotiate their own terms of participation. This led to a re-evaluation of service user involvement arrangements, resulting in increased teaching hours, co-designing assignments and further engagement in research projects on human rights and social justice issues.

Finding a 'third space' and acknowledging contradictions. Engaging in participatory approaches requires acknowledging the complexity and non-linearity of the process and avoiding simplistic solutions. To achieve authentic participation, seminar discussions highlighted the importance of finding a common third space where power differentials and contradictions can be acknowledged and negotiated. This implied that 'each side' has to be prepared to shift perspective and avoid superficial compromises. The Portuguese case study demonstrated this approach by revealing ways of mediating the relationship between older people, the public entity and social support services, allowing the voices of older people to be heard. This was achieved by designing interventions that address social isolation and challenge social structures, acknowledging the limitations on

all sides but without resorting to all-or-nothing positions. The project demonstrated this notion of the third space where different proposals for overcoming the problem were negotiated creatively.

Radical non-intervention. The difficulties in communicating with and accessing marginalised communities call for alternative approaches to personal and organisational relationships that prioritise rights to meaningful relationships and self-representation. For example, the conventional process simply to invite participation may have little meaning for some communities and may be immediately perceived as a way of reinforcing systems of power and privilege, whereas ceding the steering authority to user groups can give space to unexpected developments. The Czech case study, as discussed above, focused on giving a voice and autonomy to Roma workers in the social field, which set priorities independently and appropriately by establishing a partnership of trust and security. Through participatory research, Roma workers were able to determine their priorities based on their perspectives and past experiences and this led ultimately to a more authentic and mutually beneficial participation arrangement.

Organisational parameters. Three field visits in Ireland provided opportunities to examine the importance of organisational practices in participation and yielded important insights and questions about what factors in organisational culture can either facilitate or hinder participation. Although there was variation in client groups and contexts (young people leaving care, people with problems of addictions and people with healthcare problems), the field visits revealed how each organisation had found specific approaches to service user empowerment and how a variety of approaches were used by professionals and organisations, shaping the way that seminar participants reframed stereotypical notions of participation and their understanding of service user empowerment. A Czech case study also reported how a careful co-creation of a new research team involving non-academic participants helped overcome organisational obstacles that were found to be bound up with prevailing organisational cultural assumptions that often failed to promote equal access. In this medical context, regulatory constraints of staff time and task allocation commitment posed initial limits to challenges for accommodating participatory approaches, highlighting the need for ongoing evaluations of the validity of organisational rules and dedicated resources to arrive at more support for meaningful engagement with patients in the process.

### Discussion

Unsurprisingly, there was considerable variation in the way that examples of social work practice, policy, education and research helped the project team understand the issues of service user participation, partly explained by diverse historical, political, cultural or academic traditions. It is important now to reflect on how such issues can be understood and analysed to allow tentative comparisons and lessons for the future.

The seminar discussions revealed variations in political culture manifested in diverse forms of democracy, history of social movements and the path dependency of countries. Various notions of citizenship (conditional/unconditional) affected how citizens have a right to be heard, to co-determine or 'earn' rights, for example, by learning how to conform, become educated and thus gain levels of citizenship competence. However, building relationships, using flexible creative methods and finding ways to incorporate the experiences of those who, metaphorically or literally, have no 'voice' at all, is not a one-off interaction (Locock et al., 2022) and often takes time and considerable resources that do not neatly align with consumerist agendas.

There were debates about how service user participation was defined by the ideological principles of the state, using concepts of centralism, familialism, nationalism, populism and participative forms of democracy. These, in turn, tended to shape forms of public administrative structures that either facilitate or create barriers to participation, often described in the social policy alternatives of federalist, subsidiary versus centralist approaches to the delivery of social work and social welfare services. These ideological tensions have frequently led to 'blurred lines' forming between 'profit-seeking and knowledge-seeking pursuits' (Lund, 2020: 466), while academics and students are encouraged to 'move one step closer to the values of global neoliberal capitalism' (Hayes and Jandrić, 2014: 1950). For example, despite older people representing the fastest growing and largest 'service user' group, attention in social work programmes within the neoliberal university frequently has a narrow focus on minimal safeguarding and risk-averse work with the 'oldest old' or fourth agers (Carey, 2022).

It was also evident from the discussions that there were substantial variations in how social work education was organised and delivered. In some countries social work education is strongly regulated, student entrance is controlled and attention is paid to competence-based learning. In others, there is less state regulation and more flexibility with the content of the curriculum. These different models inevitably shape the way that service user participation is understood and integrated in educational and practice contexts. Our findings suggest that it is important to engage with a range of organisations and diverse service user groups not only to avoid the charge of only using the 'usual suspects' but also to ensure that student social workers are exposed to a range of perspectives; service users, like social work students, are not a homogeneous group (Driessens et al., 2016).

The capacity of the state and social work organisations to deliver authentic forms of service user participation is often determined by social and economic conditions. In some of the country case studies, there were important contrasts in how rural and urban environments affected the delivery of services, sometimes impaired by problems of communication. There was the possibility of better service user participation if service users were provided with, or could access supportive resources and public spaces, to enable service user empowerment to develop.

Despite the inevitable variations in history, culture and organisational and practice contexts, there are discernible messages to be learned from these encounters. These include the importance of establishing trust and creating a safe environment for open dialogue in supporting service user involvement (Loughran and Broderick, 2017) and the need to consider personal, professional, social and political factors in participatory approaches (Beresford, 2002). The positive effects of participation, such as empowerment and academic depth, were emphasised, while issues of representation and tokenism are acknowledged as complex challenges. In this context, peer advocacy and communities of practice are proposed as an alternative approach to reduce tokenistic involvement and promote collaboration. Finding a 'third space' that acknowledges power differentials and contradictions is seen as crucial for authentic participation. In addition, alternative approaches such as radical non-intervention are suggested to address challenges in communicating with marginalised communities (Aaslund, 2024).

The influence of organisational parameters on participation is recognised, emphasising the need for dedicated resources and support. Sustainability and resources have been key themes in the literature (Baldwin and Sadd, 2006). Organisational issues that can present barriers to involvement include access to universities, paperwork, the inflexibility of university payment systems, the support and training of service users and working with academic staff to ensure the meaningful involvement of service users (Driessens et al., 2006). By considering these themes, we can deepen our understanding of service user participation, inform teaching and research and contribute to the development of inclusive and meaningful practices. Further research and exploration of these themes can enhance the field of social sciences, promoting inclusive and empowering approaches that prioritise the voices and experiences of service users and promote social justice.

It was evident from the country reports and presentations and the subsequent discussions that there was variety, complexity and fluidity of the concepts that were being used to understand service user participation within and across the different national contexts. Thus, the terms participation, user participation, involvement, user/customer involvement, user engagement, empowerment, engagement, social inclusion, (partner) collaboration, partnership, customer driven orientation and agency were variously used depending on contexts and, therefore, have to be examined critically as to the version of participation they are intended to promote. It also appeared that there were different levels of case study focus. For example, one Irish case study interrogated the relationships between people with dementia and their carers tending to explore micro issues of decision-making in the context of capacity law. On the other hand, the Belgian presentation paid more attention to political and social drivers that tended to shape processes and rules about student behaviour in higher education. These contrasts suggest that there is a need to understand issues of participation systemically, at the levels of micro, mezzo and macro.

It was also evident that, at different levels, types of user participation have emerged during the previous decades, but for different, sometimes competing reasons, depending on national policy drivers, academic or social work curriculum requirements or requirements of research funding organisations. One, somewhat instrumental explanation might be that such changes represented an intention to improve social and healthcare services; a more critical view is that these represented opportunities for (re)defining power relationships between researchers, practitioners and clients/ consumers, the academia, the public and private sectors and civil society. Thus, in a Finnish case study about the needs of unemployed people of a working age, it appeared that the 'instructor', as gatekeeper and decision-maker, was key to the delivery of services; how this role was carried out tended to determine whether forms of participation were made possible. This notion of mediation was also highlighted in a Portuguese case study, where a group-based research process with older people helped mediate and create a space that enabled clients to make decisions that were hitherto not available to them. In general, however, there was a general perception across several case studies that real shifts in power relations seem often to have remained rather modest in the participating countries. The concern is that service user participation remains, to an important degree, tokenistic across these domains.

This important issue of tokenism was also evident in other case studies, which can partly be explained by the attitudes of professionals and others in asymmetrical positions of power. Notions of resistance to change might be explained by exclusionary professional attitudes. Professionals often spend years learning about knowledge and skills, which some believe cannot be subject to sharing through a transfer of power to service users. Some of the country reports also raised the question of forced participation, in which the outcomes of different participatory approaches and interventions may reinforce the problems that they intended to solve. Some service users may be comfortable with this inequality; they want the expert to diagnose or direct. Even where practitioners wish to engage with service users and become more inclusionary, organisational cultures are difficult to shift. Sometimes notions of service user participation and empowerment are used in instrumental ways by governments and politicians to break down professional solidarity and replace state provision with market-based interventions.

Thus, although user involvement (or participation) in social work research (as well as in education and practice) was considered desirable among almost all partners participating in the project, the question posed was how realistic is it to expect there to be outcomes that represented an authentic redistribution of power and a democratic co-creation of knowledge? This appears to be contingent on the involvement of different stakeholders representing governments, large NGOs or academia that determines which resources to initiate, what issues to define and who should and

could be involved. Participation is also often embedded in projects and activities that do not live up to the genuine aims of participation, or the projects are too short-term.

## **Study limitations**

Although the seminar organisers sought to organise a broad range of presentation topics across various client groups, it is acknowledged that these are not representative of the many areas of service user empowerment in the participating countries and internationally.

## Conclusion and looking to the future

In conclusion, it is argued that the iterative processes that were involved in the project led to a better understanding of the complex political, institutional, educational and structural factors that shape the forms and extent of participation in the countries involved in the project. The case study approach revealed variations in political culture, notions of citizenship and ideological principles of the state that influence the democratic processes, administrative structures and social policy contexts that appeared to shape the way social work responded to issues of service user participation. These included types of organisational cultures and delivery systems and contrasts between entrepreneurial-managerial and traditional bureaucratic models. Educational differences in social work programmes highlighted that variety of ways in which an understanding and integration of service user participation was, or was not made possible, ranging from regulated and competencebased approaches to more flexible curricula. Structural conditions, including social, political and economic dimensions, also play a significant role in facilitating or hindering authentic participation, and these and other factors shaped the way in which it affected service delivery; access to supportive resources and public spaces is essential for enhancing service user involvement for social workers and social work organisations. A central theme was that recognising the significance of difference and variance at all levels, rather than seeking universal approaches, is crucial for the development of meaningful participation. In understanding and analysing these complex factors using comparisons across countries, it is possible to provide important insights into the contextual influences on service user participation and informing strategies for promoting situation-specific inclusive and effective practices.

The deliberations that occurred during the project provide a foundation for further research and academic inquiry in the field of service user participation. As part of the aim of the overall INORP ERASMUS+ project, the Dublin seminar informed a second seminar which took place in Ghent 6 months later, focusing on how specific concepts of reflexivity in social work can trigger important processes that can enhance opportunities for participation (Van Beveren et al., 2024). An additional feature of the project was the delivery of a range of events and methods to disseminate the findings across the five participating partner countries (INORP, 2023a).

By sharing knowledge across countries and social work regimes, critical discussions can take place, which enable the ongoing development of theories, methodologies and practices that support meaningful and inclusive participation of service users. As we look to the future, it is important that the development of ideas in these crucial areas of social work research, policy and practice is critically monitored and situation-specifically enhanced (Adamson et al., 2024; Bromark et al., 2024; Flanagan, 2020).

## Ethical approval

This was not a discrete empirical study, so no ethical approval was required.

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