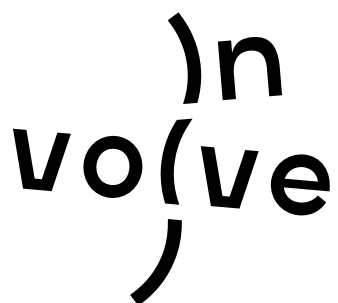




Recommendation paper

Assessing INVOLVE Alliances of Knowledge

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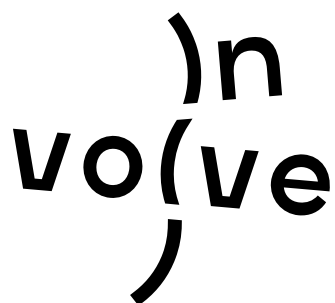


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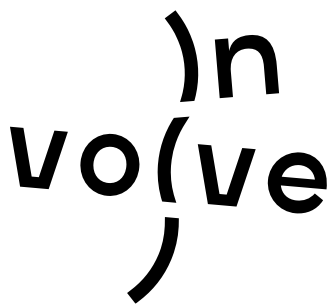
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Assessing INVOLVE Alliances of Knowledge.

Introduction

An Alliance of Knowledge (AoK) brings together people who know a social problem from different positions: people directly affected by it, practitioners and NGOs, researchers, service managers and public authorities. Its purpose is to produce knowledge that none of those groups could develop as fully alone and to use that knowledge in pursuit of social change. Each contribution is situated. A person using a service knows how rules work in daily life; a practitioner knows its routines and constraints; a researcher brings methods and wider evidence; an authority knows what it is empowered to decide. An AoK aims to make those perspectives inform and challenge one another. [1, 3–4]

The AoK is therefore a way of working, rather than simply a meeting or a list of partners. Its procedural side concerns who can choose topics, speak, question evidence, interpret findings and help form proposals. Its ethical side requires political listening: taking another account seriously enough that it might change one's own position or action. Dialogue across different experiences needs a common language and trust, but it should not erase disagreement. The relationship is especially difficult when people with less institutional authority address those who design services or policies. Equal respect in conversation must be paired with clarity about unequal formal powers. [1–4]

Citizen science offers a practical test of whether this ambition is realised. Inviting people to tell stories or collect information can be valuable, but co-production asks whether they can also frame questions, contest categories, examine interpretations and see a reasoned response to proposals. The lecture supplied for this report follows a contribution from observation to analysis, proposal and decision; it also asks researchers to test accounts carefully rather than treating any single experience as automatically representative. INVOLVE's theoretical framework calls this a capability for voice: the real opportunity to express a judgment and make it count. Support to participate, opportunities for action and the ability to judge and influence outcomes are connected. [2–3]

The assessments were requested to examine how these principles operate within partner organisations, across the INVOLVE consortium, in discussion groups and in encounters with more powerful stakeholders. This report compares eight assessment documents to identify established practices, tensions and practical choices for organisations using an AoK. The main finding is that trust and opportunities to speak are widely reported, while shared authority over research and visible institutional responses are less consistent. Focus Ireland makes this distinction particularly clear: it describes substantial customer involvement in its own organisation, yet reports that people with lived experience were missing from the consortium-level AoK in the Irish work. [1, 5–12]

Scope and limits

The eight documents cover Belgium, COZZ in Poland, Rede DLBC Lisboa in Portugal, EHESS, UNIGE, CNCA, Grdr and Focus Ireland. The UNIGE file also contains five responses by “NF”, who refers to the “MU team”; those observations are attributed separately below. The assessments were written at different stages and are principally partner self-reports. They offer useful evidence about practice and perception, but do not provide a common measure of participant experience or independently verified long-term outcomes. This report compares the accounts without ranking partners. [5–12]

Partner perspectives at a glance

Partner or viewpoint	Reported practice	Issue for organisational action
Belgium	Participants chose discussion and Cross Talk topics; trust grew within the consortium.	Coordination brings agenda power; politicians do not engage as equals. [5]
COZZ, Poland	Care workers reportedly led union priorities and gained wage improvements and employer dialogue.	Protect workers’ ability to speak and hear care recipients directly where possible. [6]
Portugal	Themes evolved with participants; careful facilitation supported one Cross Talk.	Check how institutional language and authority affect whose proposal is adopted. [7]
EHESS	NGO feedback informed instruments and analysis; migrant women sought a common issue.	Give stakeholder dialogue enough time and decision authority to lead to a response. [8]
UNIGE, ML/JMB	Plain language and neutral venues helped young people take part.	Academic expertise still went insufficiently challenged; Cross Talks were pending. [9]
NF, MU team	Labs and NGO work informed documentary synthesis; engaged research has some recognition.	Resource and prestige gaps still limit sustained democratic research. [9]
CNCA	Analysis was returned to participants for validation before proposals entered Cross Talks.	Record what validation changed and which service decisions followed. [10]
Grdr	Recognises the value of field knowledge and an open consortium.	Involve communities earlier; fund continuity despite organisational and personal constraints. [11]
Focus Ireland	Customer committees, surveys, ambassadors and paid peer roles support involvement; Cross Talk attendees listened.	Bring lived experience into AoK governance and build stronger links between Irish NGO and academic partners. [12]

Analysis and recommendations for organisations

Give people influence at the level where the AoK is governed

The assessments distinguish internal consultation from control over a project. Focus Ireland describes a Customer Involvement team, customer committee representation, surveys, a lived-experience ambassador programme and employment as peer supporters or peer researchers. Staff contribute to five-year strategy discussions and have board representation. These are concrete organisational routes for participation. Yet the Focus Ireland respondent says that people with lived experience were absent from the AoK's consortium-level direction in Ireland, and that the Irish NGO and academic partners worked too separately. The two levels should not be conflated: a customer role inside an NGO does not automatically become influence over a research consortium. [12]

Other accounts reinforce the point. Belgium's coordinating role gives it more agenda and resource power. Portugal consults staff while its board decides. CNCA's coordination group initiates strategic proposals. Grdr says communities have limited opportunities to shape activities, while UNIGE notes that formal representative bodies coexist with academic status differences. **Organisations should identify the decisions open to participants at each level**—local groups, partner teams, consortium meetings and public outputs. A lived-experience advisory group with paid preparation time, agenda rights and a route into consortium decisions, as Focus Ireland suggests, would address a clear gap. Direct invitations to selected meetings can complement it, provided no small group is assumed to speak for everyone affected. [5, 7, 9–12]

Connect academic, NGO and experiential knowledge throughout the work

The consortium contains complementary expertise, but exchange does not occur simply because partners share a project. EHESS describes NGO feedback on research instruments and draft analysis; COZZ values methods learned from researchers and reports respect for its organising expertise. Portugal credits flexible coordination. In contrast, Focus Ireland reports weak links with its Irish academic partner. Grdr describes differences between university and association responsibilities to participants, and CNCA says researchers sometimes need to translate findings into useful language for practitioners. UNIGE observes that NGOs and participants may hesitate to challenge academics; NF describes the lower status often assigned to participatory research despite formal recognition. [6–12]

Research organisations and NGOs should jointly plan questions, methods, interpretation and publication. Use paired leads, plain-language terms and shared draft reviews. Give NGOs and participant groups time to prepare questions before joint meetings. Academic partners should show where challenges changed an output; NGOs should check whose experience their networks miss. [2, 9–12]

Move from testimony to shared interpretation and useful outcomes

Discussion groups are a starting point, not a complete AoK. Belgium, Portugal, EHESS and UNIGE describe participants choosing or reshaping topics, but the accounts less often trace their influence over final interpretations. Grdr calls the groups partly extractive when participants share experience without shaping the research question. CNCA describes a stronger intermediate step: it returned a synthesis to participants for validation before forming proposals and discussing them with stakeholders. COZZ reports a

(more direct route from worker-led concerns to union action and wage gains, although this remains its own account of the outcomes. [5–11]

Focus Ireland names solidarity, confidence, education and increased capacity as potential gains, while treating policy change as uncertain. It also says non-extractive work requires ownership and co-production, with financial, practical and emotional support. **Organisations should build participant review into the research and record its effect:** which interpretation was challenged, what other evidence was checked, what changed in a proposal, and what could not be changed. Findings should return in accessible form. Where people work on analysis or public outputs over time, organisations should agree on payment, credit and control over the use of personal stories. These measures give participants a role beyond supplying illustrations for a report. [2, 10–12]

Make participation possible without demanding continuous availability

The partners work with people who may face unstable housing, care duties, low income, language barriers or fear of institutional consequences. Grdr notes that participation varied during the project and that limited availability may reflect precarity rather than lack of interest. Portugal describes the need to adapt pace and language and to allow disagreement. UNIGE began some meetings away from university buildings to reduce intimidation. Focus Ireland describes several routes into its own organisation, including surveys, committees and peer employment, rather than one format for every customer. [7, 9, 11–12]

Organisations should budget the conditions of participation as part of the method: compensation, transport, childcare, interpretation, accessible materials, flexible meeting times and emotional support where needed. They should offer short and sustained roles, explain consent and withdrawal in practical terms, and seek out people absent from committees or discussion groups. Ambassadors and representatives can help, but a public story or a seat on a committee should not be treated as proof that a population has authorised one person to speak for all of it. [2, 7, 11–12]

Use Cross Talks to secure a response, not merely a respectful encounter

The partners describe different experiences with service managers and policymakers. Focus Ireland says the stakeholders who attended its Cross Talks were receptive and listened; attendance alone cannot show whether less receptive decision makers were reached. CNCA reports that initial defensiveness eased when stakeholders could share service difficulties and develop proposals. Portugal found that personal narratives encouraged reflection, while technical language and institutional authority remained strong. COZZ describes protected dialogue and regular contact with employers. Belgium finds political relationships persistently unequal; EHESS and Grdr point to the time and authority that overstretched public services may lack. [5–8, 10–12]

Organisations convening Cross Talks should identify the institution's decision maker and scope for change before the meeting. Separate preparation, accessible evidence and facilitation can help participants speak without forcing consensus. The meeting should end with a record of proposals, unresolved disagreements, who has authority to respond and when a reasoned response will be given. Public bodies need staff time and resources to act on what they hear; Focus Ireland's call for investment in inclusion and public services is therefore an institutional condition, not simply a request for more meetings. [2, 7–8, 10–12]

Responsibilities by organisational role

Role	Action that follows from the assessments
Consortium coordinators	Reserve paid places and agenda rights for people with lived experience; publish which decisions they can influence and who answers their proposals.
Universities and research teams	Co-lead work with NGOs and peer researchers; return preliminary interpretations for challenge; make changes to methods and outputs visible.
NGOs and community organisations	Offer flexible routes into the work, look beyond familiar representatives, support participants materially and avoid speaking in their place.
Services and public authorities	Send people empowered to decide, acknowledge constraints openly, resource agreed changes and give a reasoned response after Cross Talks.

Conclusion

Across the eight assessments, an AoK is most credible where people can do more than describe a problem: they can question its framing, test interpretations, shape proposals and receive a response from those with power to decide. Existing strengths include participant-led topics, CNCA's validation step, COZZ's reported collective action and Focus Ireland's varied customer roles. The main constraints are uneven consortium-level voice, separations between academic and NGO work, scarce time and resources, and the difficulty of turning receptive dialogue into institutional change. Organisations can address these constraints through explicit decision rights, sustained joint work, supported and varied routes for participation, participant review of findings, and accountable follow-up from public authorities. [1–12]



Source documents

- [1] 2025_Assessment of Alliances of Knowledge.docx — AoK assessment questionnaire.
- [2] Citizen_science_lecture_English_40_minutes.docx — citizen science lecture by Michel Debruyne.
- [3] D1.1_Theoreticalfoundations_final.pdf — INVOLVE theoretical foundations.
- [4] Alliance of knowledge_PB.pdf — methodological account of the Alliance of Knowledge.
- [5] assessment_AoK_BE.docx — Belgium assessment.
- [6] AoK_Assessment_COZZ_Dec2025.docx — COZZ assessment.
- [7] 2025_Assessment of Alliances of Knowledge_respostas Portugal.docx — Rede DLBC Lisboa assessment.
- [8] 2025_Assessment of Alliances of Knowledge_EHESS.pdf — EHESS assessment.
- [9] Assessment_AoK_UNIGE.docx — ML and JMB responses, plus NF responses referring to the MU team.
- [10] 2025_Assessment of Alliances of Knowledgeh.docx — CNCA assessment.
- [11] 2025_Assessment of Alliances of Knowledge - Grdr.docx — Grdr assessment.
- [12] 2025_Assessment of Alliances of Knowledge_FI.pdf — Focus Ireland assessment.

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