ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP TODAY

Cindy Horst
Marta Bivand Erdal
Kjersti Fjørtoft
Jonas Jakobsen
Noor Jdid
Per Mouritsen
Tore Vincents Olsen
The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit institute established in 1959. The overarching purpose of the institute is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.

© Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), 2019. This is an Open Access publication, licensed under CC-BY-NC.
ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP TODAY

Cindy Horst
Marta Bivand Erdal
Kjersti Fjørtoft
Jonas Jakobsen
Noor Jdid
Per Mouritsen
Tore Vincents Olsen

Insights from the research project Active Citizenship in Culturally and Religiously Diverse Societies (ACT), led by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).
In public debates on citizenship, the need for active participation among citizens is increasingly stressed. But do normative ideas of what active citizenship is reflect people’s lived experiences in present-day Europe?

In Europe’s culturally and religiously diverse societies, citizens have different frameworks for how they act in and interact with their close and distant surroundings. This increasing diversity leads to diversified citizen participation. In order to advance theorizing on citizenship and to evaluate and improve the relevance of the current participation agenda for the lived experiences of residents in Europe today, the ACT project set out to empirically study civic participation in two Scandinavian contexts – Oslo and Copenhagen.

The ACT project has produced a range of new insights on active citizenship, which are presented by the project researchers in this publication. Citizenship has three main components, which are interlinked. First, it consists of a rights dimension, and the resources to go with those rights. Second, citizenship is about participation, the active or good citizenship. A third dimension of citizenship is its membership dimension. The project has focused on the relationship between participation and membership aspects, conceptualizing ‘active citizenship’ both as a disciplining discourse that expects citizens to contribute to the nation-state in specific ways and as empowering and emancipating action.

Our study shows that the discourse on civic virtue and participation is strong in Norway and Denmark and that research participants want to live up to these norms. Yet, many research participants challenge two aspects in particular: first, the idea that civic participation happens in formal, public spaces only; and second, an understanding of a ‘common good’ that is defined by a particular idea of the national community.

Our research participants from Oslo and Copenhagen instead stress the importance of everyday interactions, informal conversations or being a role model for others as crucial civic contributions. Furthermore, they question the idea of the ‘common good’ as
Apological, non-partisan and areligious and ask why waffle baking at the local sports club is understood as civic participation while the same activity in the local church or mosque is not.

We find that everyday forms of active citizenship in Oslo and Copenhagen are influenced by a diversity of identities and multiple forms of belonging that each exist in parallel in an individual’s life, shaping their societal engagement. Our research has shown that certain identity categories – such as those of being a parent, or a member of a religious community – matter in some contexts and not in others. This cautions us to avoid conducting research that reduces such complexity by drawing comparisons based on only one characteristic, like ‘migrant background’.

A research approach that includes a more holistic empirical method to identity-, value-, cognitive-, and behaviour-based differences – starting from residence in different parts of the city – has enabled us to see interesting parallels in the data that we otherwise may not have found. The study, for example, shows that socio-economic divisions play a bigger role in explaining types of engagements than national differences: there are bigger differences between Holmlia and Røa than between Norway and Denmark, and there are more similarities between Sydhavn and Tøyen than between Sydhavn and Østerbro. We argue that both research and policy could benefit from this more holistic empirical method, in order to do justice to increasingly diverse everyday realities for residents in Europe today.
The ACT project addressed three overarching research questions:

- What are the implications of diverse virtues and values on the motivations of citizens to give voice to societal concerns and take an active role in public affairs?

- How do shifting understandings of ‘society’ and ‘community’ and shifting experiences of belonging impact the locations in which active citizenship practices take place?

- What tensions and contestations arise in debates on what it means to participate as an active citizen in society?

The primary aim of the project was to advance theorizing on citizenship. Constructive interdisciplinary exchanges that aimed to draw on and integrate inductive and deductive approaches have played a central role in the research process and analysis. The project has reviewed conceptions of active citizenship in philosophy, political science, anthropology, geography and feminist studies; collected empirical data on everyday experiences of active citizenship; and integrated theoretical models with empirical findings.

The project team collected empirical data on local, national and transnational active citizenship in socio-economically distinct neighbourhoods in Oslo and Copenhagen through life history interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation. A total of 112 life history- and semi-structured interviews were conducted, and 12 focus group discussions were completed. Besides the general data collection, researchers in Oslo decided to focus on three cases: a Christian parish, a Muslim youth initiative, and civic engagement by individuals with a refugee background. In Denmark, additional research was carried out on the case of Muslim participation in Danish public debate on the hijab and on homosexuality.
However defined and delineated, the ensemble of institutional and cultural practices that we call citizenship has three main components, which are interlinked.

First, citizenship has a rights dimension – civil, political, social rights etc. – and resources to go with them. Together, these rights and resources empower each individual, in cooperation with others, more or less effectively and equally, to live a life of her choosing and to act in the world.

Secondly, citizenship is the actual ‘acting’ of an individual: the active or good citizenship, including traditional political participation but also many other forms of participation. Different actors may argue about whether or not this or that activity – including actions beyond or between nations; informal activities in the neighborhood or a church; even ‘private’ actions, such as a refugee pursuing education and work qualification; or parents raising their children – constitute such active, ‘good’ citizenship. At the core of this dimension are the ideas of (duties towards) doing something good for the community; the idea of governing oneself – in some sense of being able to influence and shape one’s own life situation – and also the idea of sharing an influence on common affairs, whether locally or nationally.

A third dimension of citizenship is its membership dimension. Legally and institutionally, it corresponds, at the nation-state level, to the status of at least permanent residence and preferably full national citizenship. However, it also has a more or less corresponding social component – that of being recognized as belonging to a bounded community. Such citizen-membership is a precondition of the full and equal enjoyment of rights, but also often of participating – and being taken seriously in doing so – in one’s community. The membership dimension is the key, indispensable element of citizenship as what Hannah Arendt called ‘a place in the world’.

The rights-and-resources dimension is a precondition for effective action: you cannot act as well if you are poor, uneducated, or afraid of the police – or not allowed to vote or stand for office. On the other hand, rights and resources do not come out of the blue. Historically, they were fought for – the result of the mobilized actions by consecutive new groups – and they continue to depend on watchful citizens, and particularly the empowerment and mobilization of the least powerful.

Many projects and books have dealt with the rights-dimension of citizenship and with the ancient ideal of active citizenship, separately or in combination. The ACT project, in multifarious ways, has been particularly concerned with the relationship between the action-participation aspect and the membership aspect. New people arriving to a community – for instance refugees, family migrants, and work migrants to Denmark and Norway – also stake their claim to citizenship, whether in the sense of formal rights to the ‘good passport’ or at least a permanent residence, or in the sense of being recognized as members. However, as they do so, they invariably enter public contestations, which go on in many different arenas in local civil society, in national public spheres, or in transnational spaces, about what such belonging means.
Moreover, the very right to belong is inevitably implicated in discussions about and projections of one’s own normative ideals of what it means to be a good and active citizen. These are representations of what it takes to ‘deserve’ or ‘earn’ one’s membership, and what constitutes the mental, discursive, or institutional barriers to ‘prove’ and legitimize one’s belonging, and to enact it with others (one’s own group, or across ethnic, religious, or other barriers) – as an autonomous, good, contributing citizen.

This dialectical relationship between participation and belonging is at the heart of citizenship as a bounded, solidarity-related concept. Whereas only some individuals at any given time are full members of a community – and thereby have access to participation (and rights) – boundaries are in perpetual flux. This is not only because modern societies such as Norway receive migrants of different origin and circumstance, but also because cultural and religious diversity constantly provokes renegotiation of what contributing and acting in one’s community could mean.

On the one hand, the very ideas of contributing and active citizenship have become standard elements of welfare state steering and disciplining strategies. States need employable, hardworking, flexible, loyal, volunteering subjects. But they also seek – e.g. through integration programmes, citizenship education and other policies, which are also directed at ‘majorities’ – to create autonomous, liberal-democratic, ‘modern’ citizens. Such discourse – as well as even more sinister, old-fashioned ethnic and racialized nationalism and out-grouping of undesired types of people – also feeds into contemporary populist movements and regular electoral democracy. Many citizens use their active citizenship to seek to contract the boundaries of membership, and to raise the bars and narrow the scope of acceptable, required contribution (at least for others).

Democratic politics, including both ‘identity politics’ and ‘class politics’, is thus often about preventing access and withholding civic recognition – by questioning or denying the inherent capacity or will of newcomers to be good citizens. Such boundary drawing can be observed, for example, in debates about common national values – national Leitkultur as it is called in Germany, where ‘culture’ is increasingly given a civic content, which does not always make it more accessible. Or in debates about Muslims and the proper role of religion in (or rather, somehow, outside) politics.

However, active citizenship – in the social mainstream, not least among the young, among descendants, among the numerous individuals who have multiple ethnic roots and transnational experiences, and less easily, among refugees and other newcomers – is also used to stake normative claims about one’s right to be seen as a contributor and about the reasonableness of more diverse, less rigid registries of contribution, suitable for the multicultural and religiously diverse realities of the advanced Nordic welfare state.
What Does It Mean to Be an Active Citizen?

Noor Jdid, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

What does it mean to be an active citizen? While conducting research for the ACT project, I have grappled with this question as a person and as an academic. Active citizenship is a normative ideal that my interlocutors strive to live up to, as they associate it with being a good and contributing member of society. However, although ‘everyone’ who participated in my research can agree that being an active citizen is something positive, active citizenship is a highly contested concept and practice.

On the one hand, research participants evaluate what practices they consider to constitute ‘active citizenship’, thereby delineating seemingly ‘good’ citizens – who are active in specific, desirable ways – from the ‘not so good’ citizens – who are presumably passive or do not contribute in expected ways. On the other hand, my interlocutors are motivated by personal experiences and a wish to do something good for the collective – whether or not these efforts take the form of expected or normatively desirable contributions.

In other words, active citizenship can be understood as both a disciplining practice that evaluates citizens as ‘good’ and ‘active’ or ‘not so good’ and ‘passive’, and an empowering practice where citizens assume a personal responsibility to contribute to a cause or a community in ways that are not normatively intelligible.

What is it, then, that makes a contribution normatively ‘intelligible’ and ‘desirable’? In the Scandinavian context, there is a strong civil society tradition where participation in voluntary associations – most notably on the local level – is associated with good citizenship. My interlocutors stress this type of civic engagement as desirable and a positive contribution to society. However, they also recognize that to restrict the definition of active citizenship to strictly formalized and public practices is unnecessarily limiting; instead, they underline the value of practices that take place in private and informal ways.

Nadia, for instance, tells me how important it is for her to help minority women understand the bureaucratic welfare system. However, when I ask Nadia to list her civic engagements on a piece of paper, she writes down formal types of engagement, such as being a board member in various organizations. When I ask her why she did not mention these activities before, Nadia explained:

Like I said: to me, it’s more important to help a single mother who is having a hard time understanding the system than to talk about the organizations that I am a board member of, because that is quite familiar. You can read in the papers what this and that organization does, but you don’t read about the 28-year-old woman with three kids who has never been outside her apartment, who doesn’t know where to go or what to do. I’m very concerned about minority women, that they’re doing well in Norway, that they know where to go when they need help. Because I’ve seen this and I also remember when I was in that situation myself.

Nadia’s conceptualization of active citizenship is coloured by her social positionality as a minority woman.
and the challenges she experienced when she first arrived in Norway. Although Nadia does not downplay the role of formal engagement in public arenas, she nevertheless stresses the importance of the ‘invisible’ kind of engagement that happens through interpersonal relations in informal and private arenas. Informal care work is a recurring theme in my material, especially among women. It could be care for neighbours, care for one’s own or other people’s children, or even care for the neighbourhood.

Many of the interlocutors from Sydhavn, a historically working-class area in Copenhagen, conceptualized good citizenship as caring for one another and for the neighbourhood. Sydhavn has a high rate of unemployment, substance abuse and citizens on social welfare. The residents whom I spoke with consistently emphasized the importance of inclusiveness and respect for the ‘other’. Such values, they argue, are what makes one a good citizen in Sydhavn. Indeed, because of the high number of disenfranchised citizens in need of various kinds of assistance, the interlocutors from Sydhavn stress the importance of ‘small’, everyday acts and generally being a Good Samaritan by, for example, assisting one’s sick neighbour with everyday chores such as grocery shopping or having a tolerant and inclusive attitude towards ‘outsiders’.

We have many social connections with... like, there is a lot of social capital here, horizontally. Because we are quite ... it happens that we sometimes get tired of those who sit and drink on the streets and shout slurs and act stupidly. But if someone comes and says that those alcoholics must leave, then I would say to them that they shouldn’t say that, because they are a part of the cityscape. There’s this spirit here... one just doesn’t throw people out, just because they are different than you.

These research insights show that the normative, one-size-fits-all conceptions of active citizenship often presented in policy documents obscure the significant diversity in how differently socially and geographically positioned citizens experience and express active citizenship. Moreover, these insights blur the boundaries between public and private spheres of action, thus challenging the dichotomist categories of the ‘good’ and ‘active’ citizen and the ‘not-so-good’ and ‘passive’ citizen.
My work focuses on two ‘sources’ of good citizenship that have gained less attention within contemporary citizenship literature: the family and religious traditions. First, while it is commonly acknowledged that such activities as paid work, social work, and political participation are proper contexts in which good citizenship is exercised, I demonstrate that parenting and the family – raising, educating and caring for future citizens – is equally important for the socio-economic reproduction of liberal democratic societies. Within the family, the recognitive attitudes and capacities that are required for democratic participation are cultivated (or not cultivated) at an early age, and developed (or not developed) continuously over time. The family therefore has an enormous influence on our motivational and moral predispositions – that is, on the formation of our ‘second nature’ as individual persons. Democratic communities can only sustain themselves as long as democratic virtues and recognitive attitudes are passed on to future generations at an early age.

At the same time, however, my work also discusses how the ‘proper values’ that parents should transfer to their children in order to teach them the virtues of citizenship are essentially contested in culturally and religiously diverse societies. Is it justified, for example, to expect parents with conservative religious backgrounds to teach their children about the values of gender equality in all areas, full and effective religious freedom, and equal rights for LGBT people? In dealing with this question, my work attempts to find balance between a ‘liberalism of neutrality’, which abstains from any judgment about the ‘private’ lives of citizens and focuses exclusively on law and politics, on the one hand, and a ‘paternalistic liberalism’ that actively seeks to impose comprehensive liberal values on the citizens. One way of doing this, as a citizenship theorist, is to admit that the normative expectations associated with good citizenship are controversial, and not shared by everyone, while at the same time being aware that these expectations are always infused with majoritarian prejudices and interest, and articulated within specific hierarchies of power. This allows us to defend controversial norms and principles,
given that we are always self-critical about their content and the interests they serve, and given that we are constantly engaged in a dialogue with minorities, dissenters, or marginalized groups who object to them.

Second, my work also addresses religion as a potential source of civic engagement and citizenship education, given the ability of religious traditions to motivate and inspire their members to non-egocentric actions, focused on the common good. However, the introduction of religious motives and justifications into the public sphere and political disputes also raises a different kind of discussion related to the religious arguments (arguments drawing explicitly on specific religious doctrines or practices), given their controversial status in diverse and multi-religious societies. Again, my work tries to find a balance between a ‘full exclusivism’ that has no place for religious arguments in the public sphere, on the one hand, and a ‘full inclusivism’ that sees no problems with religious justifications of political views whatsoever. Full exclusivism makes it hard or difficult for religiously motivated citizens to actively realize their political citizenship on equal terms. Full inclusivism, on the other hand, fails to recognize the dangers of sectarian political language and the corresponding need to cultivate civic virtues such as reciprocity and inclusion in public dialogue. Together with Kjersti Fjørtoft, I have therefore developed a new position in the philosophical debate on religion in the public sphere, called ‘moderate inclusivism’. Moderate inclusivism recognizes the positive contributions that religious citizens might make to public deliberation qua religious, but it also confronts religious as well as non-religious citizens with certain specified conditions for respectful deliberation in diverse political contexts.

However, whether moderate inclusivism provides a better theoretical framework than existing models is a question that can only be answered by testing the theory more thoroughly against real world debates, cases and experiences, exploring its strengths as well as its weaknesses.
When people come together across lines of division associated with language, culture, or religion and participate in joint activities, a sense of togetherness is fostered. Such togetherness transcends multiple layers of difference, as interpersonal and basic human experiences of sharing take centre stage. In this way, experiences of collective action hold the potential to build bridges and forge social cohesion. However, participation and active citizenship rarely take place on an entirely neutral and level playing field. Rather, the bridge-building power of collective action is affected by structural conditions.

The connection between participation – understood in a broad sense as civic engagement – and sense of belonging in a wider collective, is not a given. Yet, across human societies, the potential for this connection is inherent. Meanwhile, it is pertinent in the context of a society such as the Norwegian – marked on the one hand by migration-related diversity, and on the other by a persisting unease in its own self-understanding as a diverse society – to reflect further on the possible connections between participation and belonging. For, if the playing field is uneven, for whom and on what basis does participation contribute (or not) to a sense of belonging? And a sense of belonging together with whom?

Creating community through participation

Drawing on the ACT project’s data and its analytical focus on active citizenship in the midst of diversity, one might ask: How and to what extent is a sense of community created through multiple spaces of participation?

It is evident that there are multiple spaces of participation in the lives of residents of, for instance, Oslo. These include spaces often associated with civic engagement, such as parental involvement in schools or in connection with children’s extra-curricular activities, as residents taking care of shared spaces in the neighbourhood, and many more.

The ACT data and analysis point to ways in which some spaces are considered to be more or less legitimate than others for civic engagement. Despite some variation in the way different spaces were considered, there was an overall convergence of certain ideas about what makes a proper and legitimate space of participation – which is understood to be accepted by all as legitimate.

Religious sites of participation

Religious arenas – more specifically, those connected with mosques or minority churches – are seen as legitimate spaces of participation by individuals who are engaged in activities, such as teaching children about the faith, in such spaces. Yet, individuals who are active in mosques and minority churches in Norway express a sense that these spaces are not universally considered to be or accepted as legitimate arenas of participation and civic engagement. Many of those active in such spaces at some level feel that religious arenas are not fully acceptable spaces of active citizenship – as perceived by the public eye – in present-day Norway. Rather, often implicit norms about what constitutes a proper space of active citizenship – and what does not – prevail.
The Norwegian context is marked by the triple trends of strong secularization, the recent dissolution of the union between the State and the Lutheran Church of Norway, and increasing religious pluralism. It appears that the role of religious diversity – and of religion as part and parcel of the civic engagement of Norway’s inhabitants – remains an area of considerable dissonance between various positions and parts of the public sphere.

Beyond binary boundaries of belonging

ACT research participants included people with no immigrant background, the children of migrants, as well as migrants with roots from across the globe. Across the board, connections between participation and belonging are perhaps the most evident in the context of local neighbourhoods. Through communal participation in these local environments – such as the local kindergarten or school – parents co-construct the communities in which children grow up. Yet, such local communities are not free-floating, but rather – in different ways, more or less explicitly – constitute the nation, in the sense of an everyday national community.

A national community naturally has boundaries, signalling who is included, and who excluded: who is one of us, and who is not. On the one hand, such boundaries – in the context of participation and active citizenship – underscore the changeable nature of boundaries, in functioning as much as mechanisms of inclusion, as of exclusion. But on the other hand, these boundaries – with or without active participation – may uphold particular iterations of more or less unquestioned belonging.

Among ACT research participants, young people of colour – who are the Norwegian-born children of migrants – experience exclusionary rhetoric and instances of more or less overt racism. This naturally provokes reflections about belonging, and about hierarchies of belonging where skin colour is not irrelevant, among these individuals. Whereas civic engagement can – and does – foster a sense of togetherness, clearly there are limits to the co-constructing of national togetherness in the face of exclusionary rhetoric, as often reproduced on online platforms, social media and beyond.

Through the methodological and analytical approach taken in the ACT project, binary divisions between the majority population and minorities have continually been questioned, empirically and theoretically. Analysis of the ways in which diversity appears in relation to active citizenship underscores the need for such a perspective, foregrounding age, gender, physical and mental health, life stage, and being a parent or not as central mediating factors that (often) transcend migrant background. Meanwhile, as the children of migrants in Norway are coming of age, the pressing need for Norwegian society to come to terms with its by now inherent cultural, racial and religious diversity, and to move beyond binary approaches to the majority vs. minority, appears increasingly urgent.
Active Citizenship, Pluralism and Compromise

Tore Vincents Olsen, Aarhus University

To practice active citizenship in a pluralist society is likely to involve openness to compromises. To practice citizenship is to be minded on the common good and to be willing to maintain those communities and institutions which provide people with rights, individual and collective goods, and opportunities, and at many levels: global, national and local. But what are compromises and why would citizens be motivated to compromise?

Recent literature places the concept of compromise between a bargain and a consensus. Consensus is here defined as a complete agreement between parties. In contrast to bargains, compromises are not only deals obtained between parties who engage with each other on purely strategic grounds, entering into an agreement because they do not see any other way of furthering their respective agendas. Like consensus-oriented processes, compromises are based on giving reasons, rather than on an exchange of threats and benefits (as in bargaining). Unlike consensus, however, compromises do not imply full agreement. Parties to compromises still hold reservations about the content of their agreement and would ideally prefer a different solution.

Compromises involve the recognition of the equality and legitimacy of the other party and some measure of understanding for the reasons they provide for their position – minimally, an understanding of those reasons as good reasons for them. Compromises thus involve a measure of mutual adjustment of positions and convictions between parties. Compromises can be between different interests. Here agreements can typically be reached by ‘splitting the difference’, e.g. through dividing resources such as time, space and money.

But compromises can also, and more controversially, be between values or principles. A value compromise could for example be between maximizing human welfare on the one hand and securing biodiversity on the other – a type of compromise you sometimes find in the politics of urban development. Compromises result in balanced agreements, which accommodate both parties but not to the full...
extent. This also points to why compromises are demanding: they involve people giving up part of what they think ought to be done (neglect) and they might even imply that people are – or see themselves as – contributing to wrongdoing. Given this, why would anyone as an active citizen be motivated to venture into compromises?

There are a number of instrumental and principled reasons for compromising. First, and in line with the dominant instrumental view of citizen virtues, the virtue of compromise is needed to ensure the viability of communities and institutions at all levels. Even if the majority – in a democratic setting – is entitled to make decisions they find justified as long as they respect the basic rights of minorities, a community in which ‘the winner takes all’ may not prove viable in the long term. This point is particularly pertinent in contexts of citizenship where the community in question and its institutions are not fully developed and backed by formal laws and organizations, such as local community initiatives and voluntary organizations. Compromise is needed to secure their continued existence and with them the rights, goods and opportunities they provide for all members and participants. Similarly, compromising is often needed to solve everyday interaction problems between different actors – say in a school setting between parents, students and teachers or in the housing community – in a manner that allows the actors to ‘go on together’. I think that many active citizens realize that there is a limit to how much one can disregard the interests and viewpoints of others if one shares an interest in keeping valuable communities and institutions.

Second, there are some principled reasons for compromising; that is, reasons for compromising regardless of the beneficial results that compromise might carry with it. One is to respect others as ‘co-rulers’ in setting the terms of the community. A compromising view entails the recognition that the collective ‘we’ or ‘the people’ is not a homogeneous or monolithic entity but consists of many different members and groups who each have their view on what the common good is and thus on what the terms of the community should be. Compromising respects the plurality of social and political life among citizens. A second principled reason for compromising is to recognize that you are equal to others in your ability to know what the common good requires, and that your own views as well as those of others are tainted by a level of uncertainty. In being willing to compromise, you recognize that your co-citizens are your epistemic peers.

Most active citizens may not be able to explain exactly to what extent they rely on one or both types of reasons for making compromise with others, but many are surely convinced that some level of compromise is necessary to respect others and ensure the continued existence of shared communities and institutions. This is why being an active citizen in a pluralist society is very likely to involve being a party to compromises.
What kind of citizens are needed to maintain the stability of democratic welfare states? What kind of sense of belonging is necessary to nurture values such as solidarity and justice? National liberalists like David Miller argue that a healthy democracy needs to be supported by citizens who share a national identity. Religiously and culturally, diversity is considered to be a threat to the shared values that are necessary to support social cohesion. Multiculturalism policies, aimed at protecting diversity and cultural identities, are criticized for encouraging people to retreat behind the boundaries of their own group-based identities. The fear is that in culturally diverse societies, citizens will be less willing to participate in the social, economic and political life of the society and they will be less willing to make sacrifices for one another. In this line of thinking, since diversity undermines social cohesion, and social cohesion is a condition for the welfare state, diversity undermines the welfare state. Whether or not this is true is, of course, an empirical question. Studies of the impact of diversity on social cohesion are mixed and there is no clear evidence that cultural diversity in fact undermines either social cohesion or trust and solidarity among citizens.

I want to discuss the following: is it true that a culturally pluralistic society, without a source of unity, is not strong enough to support a democratic welfare state? This claim is typically justified by the assumption that people who share a national identity are more motivated to practice justice, are more able to care for one another and are more motivated to take moral responsibility for future generations. I agree that a democratic society needs a source of unity. People need to feel that they belong. Nevertheless, I do not think that sharing a national identity is a necessary condition for unity and sense of belonging.

We can distinguish between two forms of belonging: political and cultural. Political belonging refers to membership in political, social and economic institutions. The citizens share basic political and democratic norms and values that guide their political life, but they do not share
deep cultural values. This is a liberal and Rawlsian conception of citizenship. Cultural membership implies that citizens identify with values that are constitutive for national identity. People who share national identity are connected through history, landscape, historical events, architecture, national symbols etc. These are the kind of things that make people able to explain why they belong with each other. However, the problem is, in liberal pluralistic societies there is no such thing as a ‘common culture’. There are of course perceptions of what is typical and essential for different cultures, but I am not sure we need to share those perceptions in order to trust each other or to develop a sense of justice. We should also be aware of the fact that conceptions of what common values may be are made by the most privileged in the society, and are moreover results of processes of marginalization and domination.

I think it is possible to develop a thinner conception of common culture, based on shared political values embedded in the tradition of democratic thoughts. People can be united by principles of justice and values that protect their opportunity to participate in the society on equal terms. History has found that assimilation politics does not necessarily create solidarity and trust. From the ACT project, I have learned that citizenship and civic engagement is expressed in many ways. I have also learned that the experience of being an outsider, and being marginalized, can be precisely what makes people willing to engage and take responsibility for the future society.
Life Events as Inspiration for Civic Participation

Cindy Horst, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Individual experiences of loss, exclusion or degrading treatment can be drivers of civic participation. Such life events can transform an individual’s civic motivations, sense of responsibility and political action. For this to take place, it is essential that the individual has a sense of personal power and choice.

In research for the ACT project, life events were shown to be an inspirational catalyst for civic participation. This was the case for many different groups of people, including individuals who experienced the Second World War in Norway; refugees; those who feel marginalized based on a particular minority background; and those who have experienced a traumatic event in the course of their lifetime.

I registered as Red Cross volunteer (hjelperekorps) and the background for that was that when I was young, there was a time that I found a woman on the street who had died. And I experienced the feeling of not being able to do anything. (Raghnild Hansen, nurse, Søndre Nordstrand).

In order to act, one needs to have a sense that one’s actions might contribute or make a difference. Whether or not an individual has this sense depends *inter alia* on upbringing, role models, education, past experiences and expertise. These realities are classed, gendered, racialized etc. How an individual understands her or his own role in society also depends on their understanding of how change occurs. For individuals to feel that they can contribute to societal transformation, this often requires a certain modesty in expectations about the scale at which such change may take place. Change can be incremental, often occurring at the person-to-person level rather than on a larger, national scale.

A number of research participants who have experienced loss, exclusion or degrading treatment express a strong sense of responsibility or duty to participate in political and civic action. Factors that play a role in explaining this sense of duty include having experiential knowledge; seeing that no one else will act (and recognizing the implications of not acting); or understanding oneself to be in a unique position to contribute. When we ask Yassar al-Hassan what motivated him to contribute to neighbourhood initiatives to provide food and shelter for asylum seekers arriving in Tøyen during the 2015 refugee reception crisis, he explains:

*I know how I experienced it. I understand very well what it means to travel from war and look for a new life, and the journey from your home country to another country. I understand very well what they feel when they have been at sea, for example, two, three, many days and how they think [...]. They do not deserve to sleep outside so we just tried to do something for them. Because they deserve to be in a better situation here in Norway.* (Yassar al-Hassan, local politician, Tøyen).

Reflections on individual responsibility also relate to reflections on institutional responsibility. How are every-
day assumptions about institutional vs individual responsibilities taking shape? When do residents feel they need to step in because the government (at a local or national level) is not doing what it is supposed to do? Refugees may be particularly willing to take individual responsibility as they have experience from pre-war and war contexts where government institutions were either unable or unwilling to protect citizens.

Experiencing particular life events or forms of marginalization and exclusion can be a very powerful driver for political action that focuses on transformation. How can societies and communities benefit from this crucial experiential knowledge about what the consequences of inaction are? How can stable societies like Norway draw on the invaluable resources of refugees and others in ways that acknowledge the transformative potential of trauma? What role do civil society and civic education play in motivating individuals to participate in society? These are some of the questions that arise when acknowledging the importance of life events as inspiration for civic participation.
Research impact is commonly seen as being based on a binary approach to knowledge, where researchers are the creators of knowledge, and society is a passive recipient and user of it. As a point of departure for the ACT project, we sought to break out of this binary conception of knowledge production, instead exploring the ways in which knowledge can be co-created. Knowledge co-creation refers to an inclusive approach to knowledge production through interaction and dialogue between researchers and stakeholders, from research design phase to data analysis and communication. This approach can have societal impact and simultaneously improve the quality of research, policy and practice.

In the ACT project, we engaged in co-creation approaches through several means, including User Board involvement and a range of interactive workshops and conferences. The User Board consisted of around 20 members with expertise in and experience from a wide range of civic engagement arenas in Oslo. The team met both at project outset and while the project was ongoing, in order to receive feedback and gain insights from different stakeholders, while members of the User Board were also invited to workshops and conferences.

A key issue that emerged from the ACT project was that of how diversity was being discussed in public debate on active citizenship in Norway, and the consequent impacts of this debate on those with a minority background, of one kind or another. In collaboration with the Red Cross and with co-creative practice and learning coach Miram Sandbæk, we developed a participatory workshop and a subsequent interactive conference on this theme. Artists, academics, entrepreneurs and individuals working in the public sector and civil society came together to explore the different stories that are told about diversity in Norway today.

The workshop, which brought together about 20 participants, aimed to explore how stakeholders experienced this theme and their own role within it. The subsequent conference built further on these explorations with a larger group of around 75 participants. The intention was to
increase awareness about how different stories about diversity, belonging and participation impact individuals and their agency, and how different organizations and individuals were working with these themes. Through a series of workshops that were hosted by practitioners, the conference aimed to create room for alternative stories and actions. To name but a few, the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue offered a community dialogue workshop, Palestinian artists showed film and other artworks, and Cura Salas used role-play to explore the theme of ‘angry young men’ in their work with the Norwegian Child Welfare Services.

Thus, the conference explored interactive ways of sharing and creating knowledge, inviting artists, entrepreneurs and a range of organizations to share their visions and practices around storytelling on diversity. The broader aims of this conference were to make different stakeholders known to each other, enabling them to exchange perspectives and tools. At the same time, this exchange not only drew on, but also provided invaluable insights for our research on active citizenship.

Exchanges focused on key themes of participation, belonging and public debate on ‘the good citizen’.

By creating an arena for a diverse group of people to come together, connect and exchange tools, the conference aimed to increase the participants’ ability to contribute to a more inclusive and humane debate about diversity, belonging and participation, one that affects all residents in Norway, irrespective of age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, migration background, educational background, political standpoint or area of residence.

While this conference is one concrete example, the research process included many interactions between researchers and other stakeholders where exchanges of perspectives, information, knowledge and experience could occur both ways. Whether in the context of an interactive workshop, or when recruiting research participants, conducting interviews, attending relevant seminars, or engaging in social media, researchers interacted with stakeholders, including policy makers, in various ways throughout.

Such interactions may inspire new questions, shift perspectives and approaches, encourage action, and in other ways influence both researchers and stakeholders. Discussions on research questions and ways of conducting research may not only influence the researcher but also practitioners and policymakers. Being interviewed or taking part in a focus group discussion can have a profound effect on research participants, for example when sharing one’s life history for the first time. And taking part in interactive workshops where one learns about the practices and perspectives of other stakeholders can likewise influence individuals’ ideas about and will to engage in civic participation. As such, co-creation approaches improve the quality of our knowledge while also having a greater chance of creating societal impact than traditional binary approaches.
Research communication has been central to the ACT project throughout the project period. The researchers have participated in meetings and invited talks within a range of academic and popular fora, as well as making media appearances through newspaper op-eds and interviews.

The ACT researchers produced a regular newsletter that functioned as a channel to communicate with an audience of academics, practitioners, collaborators, and others. The ACT newsletters contained research reflections written by team members, updates about project activities and events and, as the research progressed, announcements about new publications.

Social media was used as a means to communicate research. The use of Facebook enabled the project to advertise events, as well as publications. Twitter was used at conferences to share insights with a larger audience. Conference participants have also been encouraged to communicate on social media using conference hashtags, enabling further debate online.

Core insights from the ACT project have been disseminated through concise, 4-page PRIO Policy Briefs, which are directed at policy makers and practitioners and towards the larger public.

For more information about the ACT project’s communication activities and outputs, visit www.prio.org/ACT
ACT Policy Briefs

Policy briefs have been an essential complement to academic publications in the ACT project. The briefs summarized below do not necessarily make policy recommendations, but present research-based insights to make our findings more accessible to relevant audiences.

Rethinking the ‘Good Citizen’
by Cindy Horst, Noor Jdid and Marta Bivand Erdal

Ideas about the ‘good citizen’ are increasingly debated in western Europe. This growing interest relates to pressures on the welfare state, concerns over migration and a sense of a ‘crisis of democracy’. Research on everyday perceptions of civic participation and belonging shows that debates on the ideal-type ‘good citizen’ affect how residents of Oslo judge their own and others’ contributions to society. We find that active citizenship takes on a range of forms of participation and belonging, requiring us to rethink norms about good citizenship as only taking place in the public sphere and as limited to a single, national, community.

What is Diversity?
by Cindy Horst and Marta Bivand Erdal

Cultural and religious diversity is a common characteristic of many European societies and cities. On the one hand, ‘diversity’ can refer to the quality or state of having many different forms, types and ideas, and is thus conceived of as a desirable source of potential, often associated with inspiring creativity and driving innovation. On the other hand, diversity is often understood as identity- and value-based diversity, and associated with a range of societal problems, including a perceived threat to social cohesion. In this policy brief, we explore how to study and write about diversity in ways that do not reproduce essentializing ideas about which aspects of difference matter and which do not.

Co-Creating Knowledge
by Cindy Horst and Marta Bivand Erdal

How can research contribute to address pressing societal challenges, whilst remaining both independent and trustworthy, living up to the highest scientific standards of validity? In this policy brief, we explore multiple ways in which collaboration between researchers, artists, policy makers and practitioners contribute to research that is better equipped to result in societal impact. We provide practical examples from the ACT project.
Academic Audiences

Active Citizenship Today: Discourses, Conditions, and Contestations

It is widely assumed that the ‘good citizen’ is an active citizen who participates in – and contributes to – his or her society. This assumption is mirrored in political discourse but also in political theory and philosophy. However, who defines the requirements of active citizenship? How are practices and ideals of active citizenship challenged by cultural and religious diversity?

The ‘Active Citizenship Today: Discourses, Conditions, and Contestations’ conference was held at the UiT – The Arctic University of Norway mid-way through the ACT project with an international group of 40 participants. Discussions during the two days focused on political-philosophical conceptualizations and lived experiences of active citizenship. Keynote lectures were held by Lynn Staeheli (University of Arizona), Philomena Essed (Antioch University), and ACT researcher Per Mouritsen. Professor Staeheli discussed dissent and active citizenship through examples of protests in South Africa and Lebanon. Professor Essed introduced the concept of ‘entitlement racism’ to the audience as she talked about racism as public humiliation and the dignity of dissent. Professor Mouritsen discussed participation, citizenship as membership, and empowerment through rights, illustrating the dialectics of good citizenship in welfare states.

Asserting and Contesting the ‘Good Citizen’

What tensions and contestations arise in debates on what it means to participate as an active citizen in society? How do lived experiences of citizens today challenge existing models of democracy? To what extent do these experiences contrast with official policies and public discourse, and in what ways are experiences and discourse affecting one another?

In 2017, we held an academic workshop at PRIO where 20 selected paper presenters were invited to present draft papers on tensions and contestations in debates on what it means to be a good citizen and how lived experiences of citizens today challenge existing models of democracy. The three-day workshop included papers from disciplines and fields such as migration studies, philosophy, gender studies, geography, political science and anthropology. Topics discussed were among other things the linkages between active citizenship, democracy and belonging, the relevance of civic pedagogies and how active citizenship is related to space. The workshop was organized so that the participants had ample time at the end of each day to discuss how their contributions intersected, and how the ACT project could build on this shared knowledge.
Societal Stakeholders

A Different Story

The participatory workshop ‘A different story’ was held at PRIO in 2017 as part of the ACT project. Artists, academics, entrepreneurs and individuals working in the public sector and civil society came together to explore the different stories that are told about diversity in Norway today. The workshop, which brought together 20 participants, aimed to explore how stakeholders experienced this theme and their own role within it. We aimed to generate awareness about the power of story and to explore the tools by which we can introduce alternative stories more effectively.

Storytelling about Diversity

The roundtable conference ‘Storytelling about Diversity’ was held in 2017 as a collaboration between the ACT project and the Red Cross. Around 75 participants took part in a range of practical workshops that explored alternative tools, stories about and actions around diversity. The roundtable brought together artists, academics, politicians, journalists and other relevant stakeholders to both facilitate and participate in workshops. The roundtable created opportunities for learning and exchange about how the current discourse on diversity affects people’s agency and their ability to act, while providing participants with alternative modes of discourse.

Active Citizenship Today

The final ACT conference took place in Oslo in October 2018, for which 105 researchers, policy makers and practitioners signed up. At this conference, a selection of the project’s main findings was presented and discussed in interactions between the project team and relevant stakeholders. The discussions centred on three themes:

- **Motivations**: what inspires active citizenship today?
- **Community**: how is a sense of community created through multiple spaces of participation and scales of belonging?
- **Public debate**: how is the idea of the ‘good citizen’ represented and contested?

The conference also included a keynote held by Noor Jdid, doctoral student on the ACT project, on ‘Active Citizenship in Scandinavia: motivations, locations and contestations’, and an inspiring talk by photojournalist Iffit Qureshi about her project ‘The Activists’. This final ACT conference generated great interest, including requests from the Directorate of Immigration and Diversity for project members to present at conferences on volunteering and active citizenship.
Cindy Horst
Cindy is a Research Director and Research Professor in Migration and Refugee Studies at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). In her research on (transnational) civic engagement, she asks questions that problematize normative ideas of ‘active citizenship’, exploring how people living in culturally and religiously diverse societies engage with their surroundings. Cindy is the ACT project leader. Apart from leadership and coordination, she contributed to data collection on active citizenship in Oslo. She has also been Noor Jdid’s supervisor.

Marta Bivand Erdal
Marta is a Research Professor at PRIO and a Human Geographer. She is interested in impacts of migration in both emigration and immigration contexts, for individuals and societies. She combines research on migration processes and transnational ties with research on living together in culturally and religiously diverse societies, focusing on citizenship and nationhood. Her geographic focus is on South Asia and Europe. In the project, she worked alongside Noor and Cindy with data collection on active citizenship in Oslo, with an emphasis on religious environments.

Noor Jdid
Noor is a Doctoral Researcher on the ACT project. She is exploring different conceptions of ‘the good citizen’ among differently socially positioned residents in various areas in Copenhagen and Oslo. Her focus is on the active aspect of good citizenship, looking at what motivates people to be active in society and what it means to be a good citizen in Scandinavia. She draws inspiration from feminist and human geography studies on citizenship that challenge the theoretical divide between the private and public spheres and one-size-fits-all definitions of active citizenship.
Per Mouritsen
Per is Associate Professor in political sociology at Aarhus University’s Department of Political Science. He works with issues of civic integration, citizenship, cultural pluralism and national identity, and has a particular interest in what he calls the ‘civic turn’ in Western European migration-, integration- and naturalization policies and discourse. Per directed the literature review for the ACT project, coordinating the different disciplinary reviews. Together with Tore Vincents Olsen, he was responsible for adding the political science perspective to the ACT project.

Tore Vincents Olsen
Tore is Associate Professor in political theory at Aarhus University. He is working with theories of international and transnational democracy as well as issues concerning immigration and integration policies in Denmark and other European countries. In the ACT project, he was together with Per responsible for adding the political science perspective on the meaning of active participation and citizenship including transnational citizenship.

Kjersti Fjørtoft
Kjersti is Professor at the Department of Philosophy at the UiT – The Arctic University of Norway. Kjersti is working with different conceptions of citizenship within normative political theory. Her task in the ACT project was to work with the theoretical framework and in particular develop analytical tools in order to analyze and define the concept of active citizenship in the contexts of plural modern societies.

Jonas Jakobsen
Jonas is Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy at UiT – The Arctic University of Norway. His work within social and political philosophy focuses on multiculturalism, deliberative democracy, secularism, religion in the public sphere, free speech (and its limits), tolerance and recognition. Jonas contributed to the ACT research project with theoretical perspectives and discussions on (active) multicultural citizenship, and its contestations.
Research Assistants

Jorick Jeroen Albers
Ida Roland Birkvad
Anna Christine Hjuler Dorf
Melina Duarte
Haben Helene Habte
Teresa Marko Klev
Lubomila Korzeniewska
Sundus Osman
Ana Veronica Roman
August Schwensen
Trude Stapnes
Ebba Tellander

User Board

Karin Afeef
Usman Asif
Ove Bevolden
Cecilie Campos
Roland Daus
Lemma Desta
Elise Koppang Frjord
Alexander Golding
Steinar Grastveit
Anders Huuse Kartzow
Manzoor Khan
Dana Jdid Mahmoud
Hosai Malik
Eivind Johnson Meltvik
Hussein Awad Nur
Anne Sender
Aga Skorupka
Susanne Soholt
Annette Sørlie
Jon-Sigurd Vangsøy
Arne Waag
Guro Ødegård
These are publications that are based on research within the project. As this report goes to press, they are in various stages of completion; about two thirds have been published and the remainder fall into three categories:

**In preparation:** has been drafted and is undergoing revisions.

**Under review:** has been submitted to the publisher and is being evaluated.

**In press:** has been accepted for publication and is being prepared by the publisher.

Titles of articles that have not yet been published may change in the course of the review and publication process.

Updated information about final publications can be found at [www.prio.org/ACT](http://www.prio.org/ACT)


4 Erdal, Marta Bivand (Under review) ‘Migration and Multiscalar Active Citizenship.’ Journal article.

5 Erdal, Marta Bivand (In preparation) ‘Asserting, contesting, and navigating groupism in the superdiverse Catholic church in Norway.’ Journal article.


7 Fjørtoft, Kjersti (In preparation) ‘Citizenship as belonging: Identity or shared fate?’ Journal article.


14 Horst, Cindy, Noor Jdid and Marta Bivand Erdal (Under review) ‘‘The good citizen’: Asserting and contesting norms of participation and belonging in Oslo.’ Journal article.


21 Jakobsen, Jonas and Per Mouritsen (Under review) ‘Civic integration as Civic (Mis)recognition: Axel Honneth and the struggle over good citizenship.’ Journal article.


We are immensely grateful to all the individuals who have shared their thoughts and experiences through interviews, focus groups, workshops, and conferences, and thereby made this research possible.
What inspires active citizenship today?

How is a sense of community created through active citizenship practices?

How is the idea of the ‘good citizen’ represented and contested in public debate?

This report presents insights from the research project Active Citizenship in Culturally and Religiously Diverse Societies (ACT), funded by the Research Council of Norway. The project has reviewed conceptions of active citizenship, collected empirical data on everyday experiences of active citizenship in Oslo and Copenhagen, and integrated theoretical models with empirical findings. The research was conducted between 2014 and 2018 by researchers at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), the Department of Philosophy at the UiT – The Arctic University of Norway, and the Department of Political Science at Aarhus University.