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DESIGNING REFLECTIVE FRAMEWORKS FOR ENHANCING COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN NGOS AND ACADEMIA.

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DOI: 10.63442/BILP5640

ABSTRACT | While the essence of social design varies between cultures and local contexts, two of its key features are working with and for local communities and partnering with stakeholders other than the industry. While many design researchers, practitioners, and educators work with NGOs, be they local and small-scale or structured global entities, working with NGOs is hard to define. Indeed, reflecting on the key writings of classic social design (Papanek, 1971 and Margolin, 2002, to name just two), we find key attributes that are debated at length, but the importance of working with NGOs in this sphere of design practice is far from ideal. Tromp and Vial (2022) offer several components revolving around adding to a broad and rather flexible ethical common good. First, care-driven activities for the well-being of underprivileged people. This component accentuates an active role in starting with empathy and care while aiming at communities that truly need the additional knowledge of design professionals. Second, responsiveness-driven activities for good governance. This approach is especially important during collaborations with civil servants, NGOs, and nonprofits in better addressing the needs of their beneficiaries. Third, political progress-driven activities for empowered citizens.

Social justice, design ethics, participatory strategies, and politics-in-action are especially important when conducting joint projects with NGOs and local communities. NGO as a key partner differs immensely from other typical stakeholders. Due to its ideological nature, as well as its reliance on volunteers and pro-bono contribution, as well as its complex relation to industry and commercial venues, this all imbues working with an NGO with a unique layer.

The workshop is aimed towards design researchers and educators working with NGOs in higher educational contexts. During the workshop, participants in a group setting familiarise themselves with two collaborative scenarios: 1) a student project with an established long-term partnership with a community center, and 2) a design research project with a new collaboration with a local NGO. After choosing one scenario, participants dive into planning the community engagement by thinking through a framework that is currently under development by the authors: the level of participation, the necessary context analysis, trust-building exercises, care-driven activities, emerging conflicting themes, as well as collaborative strategies and suggestions. The creation of the framework is also supported by a probe kit that encourages participants to create a three-dimensional model of participation for discussing responsiveness.

This creative planning exercise helps design researchers and educators carefully consider all elements prior to setting up a collaboration with an NGO. The proposed framework as a workshop could be organized among team members within relevant HEIs, design students, or with local NGOs. The reflective questions developed by the authors during the Change Agents, an EU-funded project, can enhance future partnerships by creating fairer collaborative processes.



20 participants (3-4 on each team)

Timeline (90 minutes):

- 5 min - introduction and icebreaker
- 10 min - presentation of the context and frameworks
- 60 min - facilitated group work (5 groups)
- 15 min - shareback and conclusion

References

Margolin, V. (2002). *The Politics of the Artificial*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Papanek, V. (1971). *Design for the Real World*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.

Tromp, N., and Vial, S. (2022) Five components of social design: A unified framework to support research and practice, *The Design Journal* 26(2): 210-228 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2022.2088098>

About the Authors:

Ruth-Helene Melioranski is the Dean of Design at the Estonian Academy of Arts. She has a background in design research, practice, and education, focussing on exploring how design can tackle societal challenges. She conceptualises new and emerging design practices in higher educational and professional contexts through her research-through-design projects. Her research focuses on relational design and its qualities.

Dr. Bori Fehér, an associate researcher at MOME Innovation Center, leads the Social Design Hub, guiding practice-based research projects for over a decade. Her focus lies in social, eco, and humanitarian design, particularly addressing the climate crisis and its impact on social resilience, particularly in rural areas. She co-founded and co-chairs the Social Design Network and is currently leading the Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership Change Agents project. Bori has been a visiting researcher at the Maryland Institute College of Art Center for Social Design since 2014. She earned her degrees in architecture and design management from MOME, where she also obtained her doctorate summa cum laude. With prior experience in architecture in Budapest and New York, USA, she now teaches R&D&I courses and supervises at the MOME Doctoral School.

Associate Professor Jonathan Ventura (PhD) is a design researcher teaching at the Department of Inclusive Design at Hadassah Academic College, Jerusalem, and is Chair of The Unit for History and Philosophy of Art, Design, and Technology at Shenkar: Engineering. Design. Art. Jonathan is also a Research Fellow at the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, Royal College of Art, London, and a fellow at the PhD School at MOME University in Budapest. He specializes in design theory, design anthropology, and social and medical design. Jonathan is also the co-founder and co-director of the international Social Design Network. His latest book, titled *Introduction to Design Theory*, was co-authored with Prof. Michelle Gal and published by Routledge in 2023.

Eva Liisa Kubinyi is a design educator and researcher at the Design Faculty of the Estonian Academy of Arts, currently pursuing her PhD on the topic of youth mental health. Her design practice focuses mainly on children's roles within society, resulting in creative workshops or service concepts. She holds an MFA in Child Culture Design from HDK-Valland (SE) and previously worked as a designer at VIVISTOP Telliskivi (EST), a creative accelerator for kids and youths.

P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN

This contribution was presented at Cumulus Budapest 2024: P/References of Design conference, hosted by the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest, Hungary between May 15-17, 2024.

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ISBN Volume 1: 978-952-7549-02-5 (PDF)

ISBN Volume 2: 978-952-7549-03-2 (PDF)

DOI Volume 1: <https://doi.org/10.63442/IZUP8898>

DOI Volume 2: <https://doi.org/10.63442/TADX4016>

Conference Organisers

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest (MOME)

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