

Participatory Research to Address Societal Challenges and Radicalisation: An Introduction

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Abstract

This special issue aims to explore and understand the role of participatory practices to address great societal challenges. The focus of this special issue will revolve around the methodology of social labs as real-world practices aimed at promoting social inclusion, countering radicalisation, and bolstering local resilience.

The radicality of the asymmetries present in society tends to generate phenomena of social marginalization and exclusion that generate resentment amongst the affected individuals. Such anger can severely affect the processes of interaction between individuals and their integration in the social fabric. Dynamics of violent extremism and polarisation are just two examples of the most impelling challenges threatening social cohesion that must be countered. Because of their persistence and increased intensity, societal challenges like the ones of violent radicalization and polarisation have increasingly gained the attention of national, supranational, and transnational institutions. However, the inherent complexity of issues related to radicalization and polarization, their pervasive presence in various social spheres, and the influence of new digital technologies, one-size-fits-all policies may prove insufficient in the overarching effort to counteract these phenomena. Consequently, existing policies could greatly benefit from innovative approaches that integrate contemporary scientific and political expertise with the knowledge, experiences, and needs of individuals involved or affected by dynamics of social exclusion.

The Special Issue encompasses four interconnected tasks, one methodological and three empirical, offering a unique perspective on fostering inclusivity and understanding local responses to violent radicalisation and polarisation.

The structure of the Special Issue includes four sections (*Methodology; Municipalities; Schools; Religious Communities*). More specifically, the contributions

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will shed a light on the method and implementation of Social Labs, highlighting the opportunities and the challenges related to such methodology (also in comparison with broader Participatory Action Research methods). Empirical contributions will operate such analysis on the basis of a comparative reconstruction of their successes and failures, and insights on embedding social inclusion into policies addressing great societal challenges like violent radicalization and polarisation.

Keywords: participatory research, radicalisation, prevention life.

1. Introduction

Violent radicalization exemplifies a wicked problem, as it is deeply rooted in complex and multifaceted dynamics that make it difficult, if not impossible, to solve definitively. One of its defining characteristics is the unclear problem definition: radicalization lacks a universally agreed-upon explanation, with stakeholders often diverging in their interpretations of its root causes, whether they be social, cultural, economic, or ideological. Additionally, radicalization is interconnected and systemic, deeply embedded in broader societal structures such as marginalization, inequality, and political grievances. Addressing one aspect—such as economic exclusion—may inadvertently overlook or exacerbate other contributing factors, such as identity politics or digital radicalization.

The absence of a clear solution further complicates efforts to counter radicalization, as interventions can lead to unintended consequences, such as further alienating targeted communities. Tackling the issue requires engagement from diverse stakeholders, including governments, civil society, educators, and affected communities, all of whom bring differing perspectives and values to the table, making consensus-building a persistent challenge. Moreover, radicalization is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon, influenced by changing geopolitical contexts, social norms, and technological advancements, such as the spread of extremist ideologies through digital platforms. Finally, the success of counter-radicalization efforts often cannot be tested or verified immediately; it may take years to determine whether interventions have effectively mitigated the problem or shifted it into another form.

The wicked nature of violent radicalization demands innovative, participatory approaches like Social Labs, which prioritize collaboration, iterative learning, and systemic thinking to address such deeply embedded societal challenges.

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This special issue explores and evaluates the role of participatory practices in addressing pressing societal challenges. Central to this issue is the methodology of Social Labs, presented as real-world practices aimed at fostering social inclusion, countering radicalization, and strengthening local resilience.

The persistence of social asymmetries often generates marginalization and exclusion, leading to resentment and anger among affected individuals. These dynamics can severely impact social cohesion and integration, manifesting in phenomena such as violent extremism and polarization. Addressing these challenges has become a priority for national, supranational, and transnational institutions. However, the pervasive complexity of issues such as radicalization and polarization, coupled with their entrenchment in diverse social spheres and the influence of digital technologies, reveals the limitations of one-size-fits-all policies. Consequently, there is a growing need for innovative approaches that combine scientific and political expertise with the lived experiences of individuals affected by social exclusion.

This special issue provides a unique perspective on fostering inclusivity and understanding local responses to violent radicalization and polarization through a methodological discussion and empirical insights into participatory research frameworks, with a particular focus on Social Labs. Many of the results presented in this issue emerge from the Horizon 2020 PARTICIPATION Project (*Participatory Approaches to Radicalization Prevention in European Cities*), which has been instrumental in applying and refining Social Lab methodologies to address societal challenges across diverse European contexts¹.

2. Social Labs within Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative and action-driven approach that unites community members, activists, and scholars to co-create knowledge and foster social change (Cornish et al., 2023). Grounded in the lived

¹ Data and analyses contained in the articles of this monographic issue are part of the activities of the PARTICIPATION project aimed to analyse, through a participatory approach, different social contexts to develop a participatory analysis of the phenomena of the polarisation and radicalisation of young people. One of the activities of the project “PARTICIPATION” has been specifically designed to developing a general framework for comparing P/CVE policies and assessing their impact and education approaches and community-based strategies involving practitioners, stakeholders and young people, in order to empower and improve the resilience of the communities and people at risk in specific areas such as Municipalities, Schools e Religious Communities.

experiences of those confronting injustice, PAR aims to address systemic issues and develop shared solutions through inclusive and context-sensitive methods. It is a flexible process that adapts to the needs and contributions of participants, focusing on producing knowledge that supports concrete interventions rather than serving purely academic purposes (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

PAR critically examines and seeks to transform power dynamics both within the research process and in broader societal structures. Emerging in the 1970s and 1980s from anti-colonial movements in the Global South, PAR emphasized the importance of local knowledge systems while challenging Western epistemic dominance (Fals-Borda, 1987). Its development has been enriched by feminist and postcolonial perspectives, particularly those of Black feminists, who underscored the value of marginalized voices and critiqued hierarchies in knowledge production (Smith, 1999; Collins, 2000). While Kurt Lewin's earlier action research in Euro-American contexts focused on organizational efficiency, it later influenced participatory practices in areas such as education, health promotion, and development (Lewin, 1946).

PAR has been applied to a range of contexts, including anti-racist and abolitionist movements (Kelley, 2002), efforts to promote gender inclusivity (Connell, 2012), climate activism (Taylor, 2014), and participatory development initiatives (Chambers, 1997). By incorporating innovative and creative methods, it empowers communities and promotes integrated, equitable development. However, PAR scholars often face challenges in navigating the boundaries between academic and community spheres, addressing power imbalances, and reconciling conflicting interests, making it a complex yet transformative endeavor.

A guiding principle in Participatory Action Research (PAR) is the prioritization of relationships over research—captured in the ethos “relationships first, research second” (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Effective PAR requires long-term, collaborative relationships that extend beyond the confines of any single project. Rarely does a solitary PAR initiative achieve transformative change; rather, meaningful progress arises from sustained partnerships. Scholars who briefly engage with communities to complete research projects may produce academic publications, but they are unlikely to support the deep, sustained work required for participatory change (Fals-Borda, 1987).

To achieve such enduring collaborations, institutional support is critical. This includes stable staffing, recognition of the value of university–community partnerships, and administrative resources that enable continuity (Israel et al., 2013). These structures facilitate shorter-term projects within a broader framework of long-term collaboration, allowing for contributions by temporary

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researchers or new collaborators while maintaining the integrity of the relationship.

The initial phase of PAR, often described as the “entry,” is better conceptualized as relationship-building, emphasizing the enduring and dynamic nature of these connections. Building trust requires scholars to engage authentically, acknowledging institutional pressures while safeguarding community interests. This involves resisting exploitative practices and ensuring that collaborations prioritize community benefits over resource or knowledge extraction (Smith, 1999). Transparency about one’s motivations and positionality—defined by attributes such as race, gender, class, and professional background—is essential for earning trust and establishing credibility.

Communities historically marginalized in research often view academic endeavors with suspicion due to legacies of exploitation and exclusion (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Scholars must address critical questions: Who are you? Why should we trust you? What will our community gain from this collaboration? Credentials or academic prestige often hold little weight compared to demonstrated solidarity and prior contributions to community goals (Cornish et al., 2023). Endorsement by a trusted community member can significantly enhance credibility, as can evidence of a scholar’s commitment to transformational action (Smith, 2012).

In cases where relationships do not already exist, researchers may need to begin as outsiders, introducing themselves at public events or through local organizations. Trust, however, must be earned through consistency and humility. Overpromising outcomes or raising unrealistic expectations can undermine relationships, making it imperative for PAR practitioners to be transparent and measured in their commitments (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995).

The concept of positionality underscores the complexities of PAR relationships. Researchers’ identities—including their race, gender, socioeconomic status, skills, political views, and personal experiences—interact with those of community members to shape how problems are defined, and solutions are co-created (Chilisa, 2012). These identities are not static but fluid, often shifting within the dynamics of the research process. While it is common to differentiate between “university-based” and “community-based” researchers, these roles frequently overlap or evolve, challenging simplistic notions of insider versus outsider status (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

Diversity within PAR teams is crucial for avoiding tokenism and ensuring inclusive representation. Careful attention must be given to whose voices are prioritized, why, and how privileges related to race, gender, class, or physical ability may shape access and influence within the collaboration. Communities themselves are not monolithic; they are sites of both unity and division, equality

and inequality, and it is essential to interrogate assumptions that might perpetuate harm or reinforce systemic inequities (Mohanty, 2003).

Strong PAR projects cultivate reflexivity among all participants, encouraging critical examination of power dynamics, differing perspectives, and stakes within the collaboration. Reflexivity can be uncomfortable, as it often challenges deeply held beliefs or confronts disparities within the research team or the community. Nevertheless, fostering a culture of openness and mutual accountability can transform discomfort into meaningful growth, ultimately strengthening the project's impact (Maguire, 1987). Reflexive practices, such as structured exercises or facilitated discussions, help participants navigate these complexities and align their efforts with the shared goal of social transformation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

By centering relationships, positionality, and reflexivity, PAR creates a robust framework for co-producing knowledge and action that reflects the values and aspirations of both scholars and communities.

Social Labs follow all the PAR rules in addressing complex societal challenges. Social Labs are innovative platforms designed to address complex societal issues by bringing together diverse stakeholders in a collaborative and experimental setting. Their methodologies align closely with the core principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), a research paradigm committed to social change through co-created and iterative processes.

Both Social Labs and PAR emphasize inclusivity and the value of collective intelligence. In Social Labs, diverse stakeholders—ranging from community members and activists to researchers and policymakers—come together to co-design solutions. This mirrors the PAR principle of valuing lived experiences as equal to academic or professional expertise. For example, Hassan (2014) emphasizes that Social Labs bring together “the whole system” of stakeholders, ensuring that the solutions are informed by those most affected by the issues. Similarly, PAR scholars argue for the democratization of knowledge creation to challenge traditional hierarchies of expertise (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995).

Social Labs operate through iterative cycles of experimentation, reflection, and adaptation, similar to PAR's cyclical structure of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). This iterative nature allows both approaches to remain responsive to the complexities of real-world problems. For instance, Social Labs often use prototypes to test potential solutions in real time, learning from failures and successes to refine their interventions. This reflexivity is central to PAR's commitment to adaptability and continuous learning.

While PAR often focuses on challenging power dynamics and addressing structural inequalities, Social Labs complement this by explicitly tackling systemic issues. They use tools like systems mapping to identify root causes of

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problems and target interventions that can create ripple effects across entire systems. According to Schön (1983), complex societal problems require “reflective practices” that connect systemic thinking with actionable solutions. Social Labs operationalize this by working at the intersections of social, economic, and environmental systems, ensuring interventions are holistic.

Both Social Labs and PAR prioritize knowledge that leads to tangible social change. Rather than producing abstract or purely academic knowledge, the focus is on “knowledge-for-action,” which can be immediately applied to improve conditions on the ground (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Social Labs emphasize actionable outcomes through participatory methods, echoing PAR’s commitment to research that directly benefits marginalized communities (Fals-Borda, 1987). In both cases, the aim is not only to generate insights but also to empower participants and create sustainable change. Social Labs and PAR are united in their commitment to social justice and equity. Social Labs are explicitly designed to empower communities by centering their voices and creating spaces where they can influence decision-making processes. This aligns with PAR’s goal of dismantling power hierarchies within research and society.

PAR challenges exploitative research practices by ensuring communities are active agents rather than passive subjects (Smith, 1999). Social Labs adopt similar principles by fostering trust and building long-term partnerships that prioritize community benefit.

Both approaches recognize that meaningful change takes time and sustained effort. Social Labs often operate as long-term initiatives embedded in broader institutional contexts, which parallels PAR’s focus on cultivating enduring collaborations. Institutional support—such as funding, dedicated staff, and administrative backing—is essential for the success of both Social Labs and PAR projects. Without this, efforts may risk becoming fragmented or unsustainable (Hassan, 2014).

Strong Social Labs, like robust PAR projects, cultivate reflexivity among participants. This involves critically examining one’s own assumptions, positionality, and contributions to the project. Scholars like Fals-Borda (1987) and Cornwall & Jewkes (1995) emphasize that reflexivity helps ensure research is accountable to the communities it serves. Social Labs embed reflexivity through workshops, dialogues, and exercises that encourage participants to question biases and consider diverse perspectives. This process helps avoid the reproduction of existing inequalities and enhances the inclusivity of solutions.

Social Labs are a modern evolution of the principles underpinning Participatory Action Research (PAR), combining its emphasis on inclusivity, reflexivity, and empowerment with innovative tools like systems mapping and rapid prototyping. By addressing complex societal challenges in participatory

and adaptive ways, Social Labs not only adhere to PAR principles but also extend their application to new contexts and challenges.

3. Social Labs as tools for addressing complex societal challenges

In response to rising socio-educational and socio-political challenges, participatory methodologies have emerged as effective tools for fostering resilience, inclusivity, and actionable change. These approaches aim to address the tension between scientific rigor and the inclusion of affected groups—a recurring debate in social and political sciences. In his critique of Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922), John Dewey (1927) emphasized the importance of strengthening democratic practices through small-scale deliberative and cooperative processes involving affected individuals. This foundation, coupled with the rise of participatory movements in the 1970s, has sustained high levels of interest in exploring democratic approaches to major societal challenges.

Methodologies such as Technology Assessment, 'by-design' approaches, Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), and Citizen Science have emerged to bridge the gap between science and society. While these approaches emphasize deliberation and consensus, their focus on rational, communicative practices risks excluding other dynamics of social interaction crucial for driving change. Grounded Theory and Participatory Action Research (PAR) address this gap by integrating action-oriented dimensions into the analysis of societal challenges, fostering co-creation and practical experimentation.

Social Labs represent a methodological innovation, bringing together diverse stakeholders to collaboratively address complex social problems (Timmermans et al., 2020; Shanley et al., 2021). Originating from Zaid Hassan's work (*The Social Labs Revolution*, 2014), Social Labs operate as experimental, systemic, and action-oriented spaces. Unlike other participatory frameworks, Social Labs emphasize iterative cycles of reflection, action, and learning, making them particularly effective in tackling multidimensional issues like radicalization and inequality.

Living Labs, Transition Labs, and Social Labs share common principles, including active stakeholder involvement and systemic thinking. While Living Labs focus on urban development and technology, and Transition Labs on sustainability transitions, Social Labs are uniquely positioned to address societal issues such as polarization, education, and inequality by promoting social innovation and community engagement. The aim of the Social Lab is to provide a space for deliberation where affected stakeholders and citizens can come together to share their perspectives on an overarching problematic scenario. As wicked problems involve multiple, often conflicting aspects, addressing them necessitates incorporating diverse perspectives in innovative ways. One of the

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distinctive strengths of participatory action research frameworks, such as the Social Lab, lies in their emphasis on operationalizing measures and policies to drive actionable outcomes.

While the nature of Social Labs privileges a contextual and community-based approach, the problem framing and potential solutions identified within them can often be adapted and applied to other contexts that share similar characteristics. Consequently, the value of insights emerging from specific contexts, such as those presented in this Special Issue, extends beyond their immediate settings, offering useful applications for practitioners working in diverse environments.

4. Social Labs: pros and cons in studying radicalisation

Social Labs represent a promising methodology for exploring complex societal challenges, including the phenomenon of radicalisation. Their emphasis on collaboration, systems thinking, and actionable solutions aligns well with the multifaceted and dynamic nature of radicalisation. One of their primary strengths lies in their collaborative and multi-stakeholder approach. Social Labs encourage participation from diverse groups, including community members, policymakers, researchers, and those directly affected by radicalisation. This inclusivity fosters trust and ensures that interventions are sensitive to the cultural and social contexts in which radicalisation occurs. Scholars like Hassan (2014) highlight how Social Labs engage “the whole system,” addressing the interconnected political, economic, and social factors that contribute to radicalisation. Moreover, by involving local communities, Social Labs build trust and legitimacy, a critical factor when studying sensitive topics such as violent extremism.

Another strength of Social Labs lies in their focus on systems thinking. Radicalisation often stems from complex and interdependent factors such as structural inequalities, ideological influences, and personal grievances. Social Labs use systems mapping to uncover these root causes and interconnections, avoiding oversimplified narratives. As Schön (1983) argues, systems thinking enables researchers to consider the broader “ecosystem” of a problem, making it particularly effective in addressing the multifaceted drivers of radicalisation. Furthermore, Social Labs emphasize experimentation and iterative problem-solving, allowing researchers to adapt interventions in real-time. This flexibility mirrors the need for evolving approaches to preventing violent extremism, as noted by Schmid (2013), who advocates for context-specific and adaptable

solutions. Through rapid prototyping, Social Labs help test and refine strategies for countering radicalisation in dynamic environments.

In addition to fostering innovation, Social Labs empower communities by prioritizing their ownership of solutions. This empowerment aligns with the need to address the grievances and vulnerabilities that often fuel radicalisation. By co-creating counter-narratives or alternative pathways, communities become active agents of change. Bhui et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of community involvement in countering extremist ideologies, noting that local participation fosters resilience and trust. Social Labs also have the potential to reduce polarization by creating spaces for dialogue among stakeholders with divergent viewpoints. Neumann (2013) highlights that such platforms can serve as mechanisms for conflict resolution, addressing one of the root causes of radicalisation.

Despite these strengths, the application of Social Labs to radicalisation research is not without limitations. Building trust with communities affected by radicalisation can be particularly challenging. Many such communities harbor deep distrust toward researchers, especially in contexts where research is associated with surveillance or control. Smith (1999) underscores that establishing authentic relationships with marginalized or scrutinized communities requires significant time and effort, which may exceed the typical timelines of Social Labs. Additionally, the collaborative and open nature of Social Labs can raise ethical risks and security concerns. Addressing radicalisation often involves sensitive topics and vulnerable populations, making it critical to ensure participant safety and confidentiality. As Sageman (2004) warns, ethical considerations must be central to any research on radicalisation to avoid unintended harm.

Another limitation of Social Labs is their tendency to focus on short-term solutions. While they excel at piloting interventions, the long-term structural changes required to address the root causes of radicalisation may fall outside their scope. Schmid (2013) argues that short-term fixes often fail to address the systemic drivers of violent extremism, highlighting the need for sustained efforts. Furthermore, the inclusive ethos of Social Labs can sometimes inadvertently reproduce power imbalances. For instance, the inclusion of community representatives may result in tokenism if these representatives do not genuinely reflect the diversity of affected populations. Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) caution that participatory methodologies must avoid marginalizing certain voices, particularly in politically charged contexts like radicalisation research.

Finally, the context-specific nature of Social Labs can limit the generalizability of their findings. While this specificity is a strength in addressing localized manifestations of radicalisation, it may hinder the ability to apply

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insights across different settings. Tilly (2003) emphasizes the importance of scaling insights to address global phenomena such as radicalisation, which often operates across transnational networks but manifests differently depending on the region. These challenges highlight the need for careful design and implementation when applying Social Labs to radicalisation research, ensuring that they address ethical risks, power dynamics, and the need for sustained, systemic change.

Social Labs offer a powerful framework for studying radicalisation by fostering collaboration, systems thinking, and adaptability. Their emphasis on community engagement and iterative solutions aligns well with the need to address the complex and dynamic nature of radicalisation. However, their effectiveness is contingent on navigating challenges such as building trust, managing ethical risks, and ensuring long-term impact. By addressing these limitations, Social Labs could play a transformative role in understanding and countering radicalisation.

This special issue showcases a diverse range of studies from Belgium, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, and the Netherlands, offering a comparative perspective on the application and impact of Social Labs. Much of this work has been conducted within the framework of the PARTICIPATION Project, leveraging its resources and methodologies to explore innovative solutions to radicalization and polarization.

Daher and Gianni explain how Social Labs function as cooperative platforms that bring together stakeholders from various sectors to design, implement, and reflect on social experiments. This iterative approach is essential for addressing the multi-dimensional challenges of polarization and radicalization. In this chapter the two authors build on previous knowledge to highlight the objectives and main features of a Social Lab approach that can be applied to radicalization and polarization. Given the sensitive nature of the societal challenge, these insights can be useful also for practitioners dealing with vulnerable populations or individuals reluctant to take part in deliberative and cooperative settings.

Bichi et al. highlight the alignment of the Social Lab method with notorious sociological approaches. They specifically do so by illustrating the evolution of Participatory Research (PR), highlighting its similar role in bridging academic inquiry and community engagement. PR aims to empower marginalized groups by involving them as co-researchers, fostering solutions tailored to local needs while addressing power dynamics and challenges related to engagement.

Leonora et al. and Gamuzza et al. present compelling case studies from Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands, where Social Labs have engaged religious leaders, interfaith networks, and community members to counter extremism. These studies, while discussing a series of challenges pertaining to the role of

religions in addressing polarisation, they underscore the value of localized, community-driven initiatives in promoting interreligious dialogue and mitigating socio-economic and cultural tensions.

Abdulla and Nouri address the role of municipalities in addressing and mitigating radicalisation. They present a case study from Delft, Netherlands, where Social Labs were used to adapt local networks for preventing radicalization and polarization as part of the PARTICIPATION Project. This investigation demonstrates how iterative learning and collaborative workshops can foster resilience and cohesion within diverse communities.

Davide Laurretta's contribution extends the application of Social Labs to the education sector, focusing on the role of schools in addressing polarization and the early symptoms that could lead to radicalization. The findings reported in this article emphasize the importance of equipping educators with strategies to teach contentious topics and foster democratic values, thereby creating resilient learning environments.

While Social Labs offer innovative solutions to complex problems, their implementation is not without challenges. The methodology requires significant resources, sustained engagement, and institutional support. Issues such as inclusivity, power dynamics, and methodological rigor must be addressed to maximize their impact. Depending on the specific populations included and the issues addressed, achieving meaningful engagement can sometimes prove more challenging than expected.

Despite these challenges, the articles in this special issue highlight strategies for optimizing the effectiveness and sustainability of participatory initiatives. By integrating diverse expertise and experiences, Social Labs can serve as a model for addressing societal challenges in a holistic and actionable way.

This special issue contributes to the growing recognition of participatory methodologies, particularly Social Labs, as powerful tools for addressing societal challenges. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, integrating diverse perspectives, and emphasizing actionable outcomes, Social Labs hold significant potential for driving social change across Europe and beyond. As societal challenges become increasingly complex, these methodologies will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping inclusive and sustainable solutions.

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