The objective of the PERARES project is to strengthen interaction in formulating research agendas between researchers and civil society organisations (CSOs). To address this challenge of upstream public engagement, PERARES aims to bridge the worlds of Science Shops (which are often university departments doing or mediating research for CSOs, usually performed by students in their curriculum) with that of public engagement activities and dialogues on science (‘science’ in its broadest sense, including arts, social sciences, humanities, engineering, etc.).

We focus on Science Shops because, as found in literature on public engagement, for many public engagement activities, it is not clear what will happen with the results of dialogues. Moreover, many engagement activities are conducted in a transmission mode of communication. Civil society is positioned as lay citizens, in need of information. In such interaction events, representatives from research have the opportunity to articulate their interests, issues, curiosities, and civil society is put in the role of spectator. They can react and ask questions, but there is a limited opportunity for a window on their ‘world’, i.e. their worldviews, needs, issues and experiences, to be opened up.

Science Shops work the other way round and start from a societal request, so they start by listening. Issues from society are put on the research agenda, the research is done with various degrees of participation, and results are offered to civil society. This is a form of Mode-2 Joint Knowledge Production.

With support from the European Commission, we are now trying to link existing and novel dialogue forms, discussing science, technology and innovation and their societal impact, to those who can actually perform research on the issues. This would give all participants in the dialogues a clear sense of what is at stake. In the PERARES project, we use various approaches. We are starting new Science Shops in ten regions, to set research agendas on a local level. We are studying the role of higher education institutions and research funders, and their policies, to advance joint research and student learning. We are starting continuous dialogue forms where researchers and CSOs regularly discuss research. We are sitting down with a number of organisations to set agendas of social research; we do so with Roma and Travellers Communities, but also with Women’s Aid Organisations to discuss required research on issues of domestic violence.
Research in domestic violence was set up by universities in Brussels, Cambridge and Stavanger, together with an NGO in each city. A joint research question was formulated, to ‘explore how to overcome the barriers health care providers face in identifying and responding to the issue of domestic violence during pregnancy’. Students in all three cities are involved; the project will also serve as an example of how to set a joint research agenda.

As a novel – and challenging – development, PERARES set up an international dialogue website, with a focus on jointly setting research questions. Participants can discuss which research questions need to be – and can be – answered, which need finance from research funders, and which have already been answered. The steps taken by the moderators are: 1) Make start text for webpage, based on local dialogues between CSOs and researchers; this gives some examples of the type of research questions that could be related to the topic; 2) Invite known members of our network for first responses; 3) Actively promote the debate to a wider audience; 4) Distil potential research questions from the debates. These questions will then be offered to the Science Shop network or be brought to the attention of research funders.

As a pilot for this website, we started a dialogue on potential research questions on five separate nano-technology developments. This focus on separate, specific domains was based on our formative analysis of previous nano-dialogues. From that, we learned that it is important to have this focus on particular applications of nanotechnology with relevance to people’s lives, and give ideas of what is at stake. The purpose of the dialogue should be clear, so we described our intentions to have these questions put on research agendas. Finally, we know that dialogues like these are an on-going process of learning and reflection, and they take time.

The nano-pilot is taking place early in 2012. By conducting interviews, organising face-to-face interactions, and document analysis, we managed to articulate what is at stake in different nano-domains (e.g. nanotechnology in healthcare, nanotechnology and food, nano particles and environmental life cycle analysis). The issues (e.g. uncertainties, dilemmas, possible destabilisations of existing societal practices) served as the starting point for the online dialogues on our website.

The face-to-face discussions worked quite well to articulate research questions. An example was the workshop organised by the Dutch civil society organisation Leefmilieu on nano-applications, which we used to draw out research questions. The use of cerium-oxide nano-particles as an additive to reduce the use of diesel fuel in trucks led to the conclusion (based on previously commissioned research by a science shop) that the toxicity is not the main issue (diesel exhaust is also toxic), but that the addition should be studied through full environmental life cycle analysis. This was put as an example question on our dialogue website. We got a response from a professor in environmental sciences who pointed out that cerium was not as scarce as the workshop participants thought, but that this broader analysis of a resource that was used dissipatively was still valuable.

We managed to get some more responses in the web dialogues, further articulating the research questions. Also, people gave links to research reports or stated their views. However, we discovered that it is still a challenge to involve people and organisations in a structured online debate. The moderation is more difficult, has longer lag-times. For Science Shops, work shifts from working with an organised CSO in a face-to-face meeting, to working
with a virtual community which has not previously come together to articulate its research requests, in online, textual communication.

On the more practical side, we made the mistake (though forced by delays in the website development) of testing and improving the dialogue website during the nano-dialogue and not before. Also, even though we do offer translations into English for everyone who wants to contribute in their own language, we knew from the start that we could not translate everything in all EU languages. The fact that we started five dialogues at once also was quite a challenge, though on the other hand it makes the dialogue ‘on nanotechnology’ have more points of relevance for civil society.

We are now trying to distil the articulated research questions and themes so they are available to researchers and research funders to take up. If we manage to get some of these requests researched, we will have proven the concept and we might be able to expand this dialogue website in the future. It will then also be easier to convince participants that it is worth taking the time to participate in the dialogue.

Our next two dialogues will be focused on societal issues, namely the research agenda on Roma and Travellers Communities’ Issues and the research agenda on Domestic Violence. Framing the dialogue from a societal issue instead of from a technological development may lead to increased and easier participation of CSOs and the general public alike.

Our evaluation of our various approaches will give us more knowledge on the specific features, benefits and challenges of each approach, and will enable us to learn from them, and to use this in managing and planning of the work. Also, our evaluation provides accountability for the project. Our evaluation has the following stages: ex-ante (including a checklist at the project’s start), mid-term (to monitor and if needed modify the project), and ex-post questionnaires. With the latter, we use one form directly at the end of the project (to see if the output and outcomes are satisfactory), and one for a later moment (up to 12 months), to see if we can find long-term impact. We are currently testing these forms.

At the end of PERARES, we hope to have achieved more international co-operation in public engagement with research, have more researchers engaged with civil society in their practices, and have more civil society actors involved in research activities – starting with the incorporation of their needs and concerns in research strategies. We aim to have new cooperative research agendas defined, based on the combination of the knowledge and experiences of both researchers and civil society actors.