Co-Creating Inclusive Intersectional Democratic Spaces Across Europe (CCINDLE)

D5.1 – Short Report on Co-Creation Activities

[WP5 – Co-Creating Knowledge]

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Executive summary

The flagship work for Work Package 5 (WP5) is the Feminist Democracy Lab (FDL). The FDL is a transnational peer learning space on feminist experiments with democracy and an opportunity to learn from each other about resistances to anti-gender and far-right ideas, practices and actors. In this report, we outline the processes of organising these events, some of the key outcomes and the implications for understanding co-creation as a principle in our project.

List of acronyms/abbreviations

Abbreviation	Explanation
FDL	Feminist Democracy Lab
TNI	The New Institute

Table 1 List of acronyms/abbreviations

1 Introduction

The flagship work for Work Package 5 (WP5) is the Feminist Democracy Lab (FDL). The FDL is a transnational peer learning space on feminist experiments with democracy and an opportunity to learn from each other about resistances to anti-gender and far-right ideas, practices and actors. The FDLs are co-created with feminist activists, policymakers and other civil society groups (feminist journalists/media, students, philanthropies, think tanks and NGO practitioners) to determine potential ways of successfully countering anti-gender and anti-democratic campaigns.

Our working understanding of co-creation is as follows: co-creation and the inter-related concepts of co-production and participation posit that ordinary people have the right and the capacity to make decisions for themselves. Thus, co-creation can be seen as a process of democratisation and strengthening social citizenship. Co-creation is oftentimes practiced through deliberative dialogue that hinges on consensus-based decision-making in which the process and the outcome are of equal importance. Co-creation in a research process follows a similar format in that key constituents play an active part in research design, data collection, data analysis and dissemination. The question always in participatory processes is whether the project is meaningful for constituent groups.

To date, the CCINDLE team have organised 3 FDLs in Amsterdam, Antwerp and Hamburg which have included upwards of 100 people. In this report, we outline the processes of organising these events, some of the key outcomes and the implications for understanding co-creation as a principle in our project.

2 Amsterdam

The first Feminist Democracy Lab took place on 20th April 2023, the second day of our CCINDLE consortium meeting at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). The idea for this event was developed by the UvA and Radboud teams together with coordinators of Work Package 1 and Work Package 2. Initially it was thought to be part of a rolling Advisory Board, which would serve as a quality assurance and continuous feedback measure for the team. However, when thinking about the details of the session and the general purpose of an Advisory Board, the team realised that this could be an opportunity to pilot a Feminist Democracy Lab. As a result, the Dutch team organised two semi-public events as an opportunity to collectively identify and define the nature of the anti-gender and anti-democratic challenges facing Europe and to consider a range of feminist responses to these threats. The team also used these events as an opportunity to consult different actors from outside of the consortium on some challenges we encountered during the first months of the project, particularly around issues of problem definition and analysis in terms of our central concept of 'anti-gender'.

The invited speakers were asked to prepare for a discussion around the following questions:

1. How can we best understand the current challenges to democracy and gender equality in Europe that are connected to 'anti-gender' and anti-democratic politics? What are feminist responses to these challenges?
2. What are the pathways through which 'anti-gender' action uses and leads to gender-based violence and, how 'anti-gender' mobilisations use knowledge production, including the curtailing of academic and research freedom to promote their objectives?

The first event was opened by the Project Coordinator Mieke Verloo and was chaired by Conny Roggeband. The two speakers were:

- vreer verkercke, a long-time trans* and socialist activist who founded several trans* collectives, such as The Noodles, Principle 17 for the right to the highest attainable standard of trans* health.
- Maayke Botman, a researcher, activist, and writer. She co-authored with Gloria Wekker and Nancy Jouwe, *Caleidoscopische Visies*, a pioneering book about Dutch Black, migrant and refugee women's activism.

verkercke discussed their experiences and reflections on the struggle for the emancipation of the trans* community in the Netherlands whilst Botman discussed the challenges and possibilities of intersectional feminist organising and knowledge production.

The second event was chaired by Andrea Krizsán and Elżbieta Korolczuk, who introduced the other two speakers:

- Mary Hawkesworth, is Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Women's and Gender Studies, Rutgers University, USA
- Hande Eslen-Ziya is Professor of Sociology and director of the Populism, Anti-Gender and Democracy Research Group, at the University of Stavanger, Norway.

Hawkesworth gave a talk on state violence and the limitations of liberal democracies regarding whom they understand as citizens. Eslen-Ziya gave a presentation on the challenges of doing feminist research in the context of an anti-gender backlash.
The Amsterdam events kicked off our co-creation process by gathering insights and experiences from civil society groups, students and other academics through dialogue and knowledge exchange. The consortium has used the insights from these sessions to inform our work on anti-gender campaigns and feminist responses and for the co-creation and design of future Feminist Democracy Labs.

The team has collectively reflected on the outcomes and organisation of the event during a session the following day. Some of the main takeaways, which informed the next event in Antwerp include:

1. The FDLs should not be used as a rolling Advisory Board but focus more on co-creation. If academics are invited, they should be representing 'the margins'.
2. A standard Advisory Board will be substituted by more FDLs to prioritise co-creation of knowledge with a diverse group of actors.
3. For the next FDL, more attention should be paid to the preparation process to avoid mistakes made in Amsterdam, including space that discouraged dialogue, unclear expectations and format, and a small group of participants. The team should consider how all participants can benefit from these events.
4. Participants, especially activists should be compensated for their participation. We should prioritize actors from the margins and facilitate their attendance.
5. Creating a safe space is key. Developing a lasting relationship with participants would enhance potential for co-creation and dialogue.

3 Antwerp

The second Feminist Democracy Lab took place on 14th September 2023 at the University of Antwerp and was organised by Rylan Verlooy. This Lab focused on feminist, queer and anti-racist activism in response to anti-gender campaigns and actors and was attended by 25 activists based in Belgium. The activists differed not only on the content of their activism, but also on their activist methods and social positions. In response to the Amsterdam event, the goal here was to try to balance the number of participants so that the discussions were not dominated by academics. The event was organised around the following questions:

1. How can feminism be relevant to your practices?
2. How can academics and activists work together towards feminist and queer futures?
3. How do you practice solidarity?
4. How does intersectionality inform your practices?
5. What is your biggest concern while practicing feminist/queer activism?
6. What do you need to continue your feminist/queer work?

A key lesson from the Amsterdam Lab was that it was perhaps too 'academic' and not interactive and engaging enough for the non-academic participants. In response, the Antwerp Lab was

organised in a different way in which key principles of co-creation, participation and dialogue were at the centre of the process. To lower the threshold for activists to participate, several actions were undertaken before the FDL took place:

1. We aimed to organize the FDL outside of any university building to avoid creating an environment where academics would feel more comfortable than activists and thereby reproducing hierarchies between the participants. However, due to the unavailability of nearby activist spaces, this was not possible and the FDL was organized in a university building
2. This event was not open for the public and only those invited could join the discussions
3. Food and drinks were provided for all the participants and the event was alcohol-free
4. A separate 'quiet' room was organized for participants who needed to rest during the event
5. Toilets were made gender neutral
6. Name-tags with space for pronouns were handed out
7. At the start of the event, safe(r) space agreements were made to construct a learning environment where we invited participants to reflect on the space they take up in discussions and not to tolerate any form of hate-speech or discrimination

Combining the 'world café' and fishbowl' methods allowed for a deeper and richer conversation with a diverse range of feminist, anti-racist and queer activists. In particular, the Antwerp Lab used the principles from the world café technique (2024) to build trust between participants and encourage critical debate:

1. 'Set the Context: why you are bringing people together and what you want to achieve.
2. Create hospitable space: an environment that feels safe and inviting
3. Explore questions that matter: asking questions that are relevant to the real-life concerns of the group
4. Encourage everyone's contribution
5. Connect diverse perspectives: create opportunities for people to move between tables and meet new people'.

After small group discussions, the participants used the fishbowl method to summarise key points in their dialogues. Fishbowl discussions ranged from the oppositions activists faced, what resources they needed for their work, which intersectional approaches they use, what intersectionality means to them, what improvements can be made in their work, with whom solidary is the hardest, and what solidarity means.

There were several key takeaways from the event:

1. The programme was intensive for some participants; a slower pace would have been preferred

2. English was a threshold for one participant as whisper interpretation was not as easy as we had hoped, and interpretation and translation more generally will need to be better planned for future events
3. There needs to be a better balance between CCINDLE participants and other participants, and between academics and activists in all parts of the programme. A stronger input by participants external to CCINDLE should be envisioned for future events.
4. Launching the fishbowl was not easy, but once participants felt more comfortable, the spontaneous presentation of the insights of each table throughout the discussion worked well. Distributing interventions across different participants worked well, nobody dominated the discussion, and the discussion did flow continuously.
5. As the CCINDLE consortium, we need to reflect again on what co-creation means in terms of what comes after the FDL: What will we do with all the needs, concerns, issues the external participants expressed? How will we build upon what was expressed by external participants and not only our own insights and take aways? How do we ensure FDLs are genuinely meaningful for participants and not simply driven by the needs of our project?
6. We need to reflect upon and make explicit the ethical issues underlying FDLs (and other co-creation activities).

After the event, participants were asked to complete a short survey. Overall, the participants indicate that they found the exchanges very interesting. What the majority of the participants found most valuable about the Lab was the chance to meet new people. However, a consistent concern voiced by some was that they felt like the discussions did not add much to their activism. Here are a few indicative responses from activists:

"I loved listening and sharing in the groups! The exchange afterwards between the different groups didn't always 'add' a lot to the experience, but maybe that also isn't needed. In general, I felt like we really stayed on 'surface level', looking for agreements and common ground, instead of where we divert, where we are doubting, where we are unsure."

"Not really, I think my activism is situated in a very different corner and is more niche. The discussions now were surface level in many ways, which led us to the places we all agree on and are certain about. We didn't end up at uncertain or 'dangerous' places, where we are doubting and unsure and disagreeing -- maybe even with ourselves."

"There were a few connection points in our discussion but also ideas that I could not relate to. My view is very practical and comes directly from personal experience whereas academics who are not queer base their ideas on theories that might not be relatable enough and hence also not helpful for everyday activism."

With the Antwerp Lab, we were able to fix some of the problems of the Amsterdam Lab by making it more participatory and interactive. However, when working with activists we found that whilst the conversations were enriching and creating a social space to meet new people and learn from others was welcomed, it was not always clear whether the Lab delivered in terms of meeting the interests of the activists rather than the interests of CCINDLE.

4 Hamburg

The third Feminist Democracy Lab was held on 7 and 8 March 2024 at The New Institute (TNI) in Hamburg. This Lab was a collaboration between CCINDLE and the TNI programme, Black Feminism and the Polycrisis. Organised by the UK team lead and TNI Fellow, Akwugo Emejulu, this event had co-creation at its heart. The event brought together activists and scholars from across the globe to exchange visions of the future via the influential feminist texts that have shaped how participants think about themselves, their politics and their place in the world.

The Hamburg Lab had four events:

1. **Talking Feminism, Talking Books at Felix Jud Bookstore**: In celebration of International Women's Day, this public event brought together activists and academics from South Africa, Finland, Nigeria, India, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and the United States to discuss the feminist fiction and non-fiction books that had shaped their lives. More than 55 members of the public attended.
2. **Imagination Dinner at EEDEN**: Organised by Hamburg-based writer and activist, Kübra Gümüşay, and her colleagues at the feminist co-creation space, EEDEN, the Imagination Dinner was a working event in which 15 participants imagined intersectional futures through critical dialogue and engagement with the senses. We discussed the following questions: What the social, political economic and cultural problems do you observe? When you imagine a new world, which is just, fair and ideal in every possible way, what role does intersectionality play?
3. **Reading Our Futures:** For this session, 23 participants read a selection of feminist poetry, fiction, and non-fiction chosen in advance by participants and discussed the differing visions of the futures they evoked and how they might reconcile these divergent ideas of new possible worlds.
4. **Zines for the Future:** Working with the Librarian at TNI, Christiane Müller, 23 participants made zines that envisioned our feminist futures. Zines are self-made, self-published booklets that used a variety of text and images to tell a story. Zine-making is an important part of feminist activism and community building. After we completed our zines, we made copies for attendees to take home.

Whilst our conversations were about envisioning feminist futures, it centred specifically on the politics and necessity of joy and pleasure in sustaining activism, about how language is a crucial battleground for feminist and queer identities and authenticity and the dilemmas of addressing anti-gender actors. We did not come to any firm conclusions and resolutions about these matters but rather we perhaps better understand each other's starting positions and perspectives that may facilitate better ways of building and sustaining feminist solidarity in these illiberal times.

This FDL was interactive and participatory and built on the lessons learned from Amsterdam and Antwerp. In particular, the Hamburg team worked intensively with a smaller group of participants over a slightly longer period of time. In this way, trust between participants was build faster and as a result, conversations were smooth flowing and rich. The programme allowed space for informal dialogue and socialising which in turn also positively influenced the quality of discussions. There was

a balance between participants so that the event was not necessarily viewed as being driven solely by the needs and interests of the CCINDLE team.

In the feedback session at the end of the event, concerns were raised about some of the organising and logistics of the event but no substantive issues were raised about the topics discussed. Like the Antwerp event, participants enjoyed the opportunity to come together through this informal social event to learn from each other.

5 Conclusions: Rethinking Co-Creation?

For the CCINDLE team, we will continue to revisit the theory and practices of co-creation. At this stage, we do not think it is necessary to redefine our definition. Our ambition for co-creation in CCINDLE is to think with different kinds of feminist actors to find collective solutions to the threat of anti-gender movements. We believe we are doing a good job in terms of thinking with feminist actors in terms of our problem definitions concerning anti-gender movements and feminist responses. Now that we are in the data collection phase of the project, we are being guided by civil society actors in terms of our fieldwork—the localised grievances to which we should pay special attention, the working practices/activist labour of specific groups and the tensions and conflicts between groups.

However, co-creation works best when all participants have a meaningful stake in the work. Here, the CCINDLE team needs to rethink some of our approaches. Whilst feminist actors may be interested in our research findings, ultimately, they will always be outsiders to this specialised, academic project. We as a team have sought to develop opportunities for co-creation, impact and knowledge exchange about strategy and tactics against the anti-gender threat but for feminist actors who are in the trenches, our efforts to date are not speaking to the immediacy of the moment. As some of the participants in Antwerp note, our efforts are too superficial since we as researchers are not grounded in the context in the same way as activists. The meaning and purpose of co-creation, particularly between differently positioned groups with significant power differentials between them is always bedevilled by these problems of power. For our next Feminist Democracy Lab and for the other tasks in Work Package 5, we need to pay careful attention to how we might reconcile the problem of power in our co-creation work with feminist actors. This is a longstanding problem that we will not resolve but perhaps we can start asking interesting questions about the problems and possibilities of co-creation between academics and civil society actors.