



**HECSOs**  
community engagement



**TOOLKIT n°1**  
Compass



Erasmus+

# INDEX

1. General Executive Summary	Pag 03
2. Why these toolkits have been developed	Pag 06
3. How they took shape	Pag 08
4. Who they are for	Pag 11
5. What they consist of	Pag 13
6. What they can do for you	Pag 15
7. How to use them	Pag 17

# 1 - General Executive Summary

This series of toolkits originated within **HECSOS** three years project: **Higher Education Institutions and Civil Society Organisations together for community** funded by the European Union in the framework of **Erasmus + Key Action 2 – Cooperation among organizations and institutions**.

The project is implemented by 8 partners (4 Universities and 4 CSOs) from 6 EU countries (Austria, Cyprus, Greece, Italia, Romania, Spain): The University of Torino; SYNTHESIS Center for Research and Education; S-nodi; The University of Thessaly; Caritas Community Work; Mind2Innovate (M2I).

The project consortium established a trans-disciplinary and collaborative research group and it has developed international and **research-based learning approaches** to identify and disseminate **innovative and evidence-based models** of intervention and related implementation **tools**.

HECSOs aims at improving Universities' capacities to cooperate with Civil Society Organizations systematically and continuously on community engagement as an innovative and impactful way for socio-economic inclusion.

The project has the priority and purpose of **working on common values** in order to **increase community participation and citizen engagement** through reaching **synergies between the academic world and the third sector**. The values of sharing and European solidarity are at the center of the project.

Stimulating innovative learning and teaching practices is one of the specific priorities to which HECSOS project responds, which will allow:

- students and researchers to integrate studies on community engagement in their university and extra-university CVs
- professionals to update themselves and observe their work through the theoretical filter.

At the same time, it is thanks to the contribution of practices and lessons-learned in the field of community engagement that the research outputs realized within the project are anchored to the concrete needs of the sector.

This set of toolkits was born under project objective 1: "To develop innovative and evidence-based models (and related implementing tools) for impactful community engagement interventions by setting up a trans-disciplinary and continuous collaboration between Universities and CSOs, analyzing existing innovative practices on the ground all over Europe and adopting collaborative and research-based learning methodologies."

Within this logic **these toolkits are an orientation "how to do" guide for professionals, researchers and policy makers**. Doing research and modeling promising practices of community engagement will reinforce the interaction between academies, territorial projects and local policies in order to develop and institutionalize new methodologies and practices in teaching and learning.

## Here is a brief introduction to each specific volume:



### Toolkit 1: Toolkits' compass

Toolkit 1 is designed as a compass. It is an introductory toolkit that defines the context each volume has been conceived in, the general objectives this series addresses, who it is aimed at, how it has been created, how it can be used and for what purpose.



### Toolkit 2 - Atlas of Best Practice

Toolkit 2 is based on the research undertaken by HECSOS partners in the early stages of the project through a multi-case study analysis that chose inspiring stories from all over the EU. It offers a glimpse into practices related to the topic of community engagement chosen among examples that revealed successful outputs, impacts and interesting data.



### Toolkit 3 - Community Engagement: A EU conceptual institutional framework

Starting from the thesis that there is no agreement on the concept of community engagement, being it a term that encompasses heterogeneous practices, methods and fields of application, Toolkit 3 explores how the concept of community engagement is used at a European policy level, briefly preceded by an overview of the most relevant scientific and academic literature as further evidence.



### Toolkit 4 - Key Elements for Community Engagement

Starting from the thesis that community engagement can be defined simultaneously as a principle with mutual benefit at its core; a method involving multiple partnerships and collaborative work; an objective to achieve societal development and social change, Toolkit 4 aims at unpacking the concept of Community Engagement through exploring some recurring elements: collaboration and cooperation; bringing together people and points of view; building a common vision; capacity building, collective leadership; governance.



### Toolkit 5 - The Theory Of Change

As argued in Toolkit 3, although various terms exist to refer to engagement, the goal of jointly addressing societal needs reveals to be a common aspect. But how do we collectively tackle a societal need or a social challenge? How do a community shape a common vision of a desirable future? How do professionals foster the different stakeholders of a community to be part of a shared decision-making process? Toolkit 5 focuses on the Theory Of Change as a useful tool to answer all these questions, briefly preceded by an examination of the meaning and concept of “social change” and why community engagement is so central to it.



### Toolkit 6 - Community Engagement Model Canvas

This toolkit guides the reader through the concrete development of The Theory Of Change and guides the reader step by step during this process of designing, implemented by practical tips, self-compiling schemes, questions and checklists.

### Toolkit 7 - Community Engagement Competence Framework

Toolkit 7 is based on HECSOS Competence Framework for professional development in the field of community engagement as an orientation tool for professionals dealing with an innovative fields of research and actions around competencies and skills that are more likely to be required in new hybrid and multisectorial working profiles.

In the following chapters we will explore why these toolkits came into being, what needs they address and what are the goals (1.2); how they were developed (1.3); who they are developed for (1.4); what they consist of (1.5); what they can do for you (1.6) and how to use them (1.7)

## **2 - Why these toolkits have been developed**

As mentioned in the introduction, the creation of these toolkits was in response to the project objective to **identify and disseminate innovative and evidence-based models of intervention and related implementation tools** and to **foster collaboration between the world of academic research and that of civil society organizations**.

These toolkits also respond to other important objectives on which the project legacy is built and can be observed and evaluated:

- **to encourage the emergence and consolidation of a community of practice** of professionals, researchers, policy-makers by offering a methodological synthesis of the many approaches and tools that can be observed

- to provide a practical-theoretical orientation for these professionals, researchers and policy-makers to initiate, guide and **promote processes of community engagement also understood as capacitation paths** that enable community members to be agents within decision-making processes that affect their territories and their future.

These toolkits are thus created with **the aim of building a community of practice that is generative of as many communities of practice**, a preliminary step as we shall see in toolkit 3 to shape new models of shared leadership and effective governance that are inclusive, participatory, sustainable.

**Communities of practice are 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'** (Lave and Wenger, 1991 and 1996). They stimulate **cross-organisation collaboration and knowledge sharing**.

The idea of connecting people through their practice both within and outside organisations has been around as long as people have been part of organizations. The increasing interest in communities of practice in organizations could be attributed to the useful perspective they provide on explicit and tacit knowledge, learning and development within a field of practice as being key to improving performance.

**Resilient organizations invest in the learning and development of their people and the organization as a whole** (Webber, 2016).

Communities of practice are an excellent instrument for **fostering collaboration among** internal and external **stakeholders**: they can bring groups with different knowledge perspectives together and can strengthen their capacity to work and learn creatively together. Thus, **communities of practice harness the collective intelligence in organizations and help improve performance**.

In order to achieve this objective and for the realization of such a community, these toolkits therefore seek:

1. **to value and observe practical knowledge and experience** (Toolkit 2);
2. **to clarify the concept of 'community engagement'** and critically explore the disagreement around it (Toolkit 3);
3. **to highlight recurring elements within different practices** and common aspects (Toolkit 4);
4. **to offer solid analytical and designing tools** that can fit different fields of applications and scopes (Toolkit 5);
5. **to explain how to use and apply them** (Toolkit 6);
6. **to clarify to the reader which competencies and skills are needed** by the challenges of community engagement processes by a competence framework shaped by a parallel research within HECSOS project (Toolkit 7).

## **3 - How they took shape**

These toolkits are the result of observing practices (Toolkit 2) examined in detail in the project resource HECSOS Multi-case study analysis report, comparing the evidence that emerged from this research with theoretical resources, academic and scientific literature (see the bibliography for each toolkit).

As argued in the report mentioned above, a case study is a type of **qualitative research design** that helps researchers understand a case within a specific context by collecting data from different sources (interviews, secondary data, direct observation, etc). **The case study method** is a particular research approach that makes an effort to **develop more broad theoretical claims about regularities in the observed occurrences** while also attempting to reach a thorough grasp of the phenomenon being studied. A multi-case study appears to be an appropriate research technique for examining the community engagement phenomenon since a large variety of factors and relationships are included where no basic laws exist to determine which factors and relationships are important and when the factors and relationships can be directly observed. The generalizations that result from the studies mapped are not asserted to be valid generally, but rather only in circumstances that are comparable to those under study. By adopting a multi-case study instead of a single case one, limits the weaknesses of this approach. As such, this method aimed to meet the conditions outlined by Yin (2017) and Ridder (2017): construct validity, which allows the researcher to accurately assess the studied concepts; **internal validity**, which checks the appropriateness of the inferences made from the data; **external validity**, which measures how well the results capture the phenomenon under study; **reliability**, which relates to the possibility of the study being replicated by another researcher.

These toolkits also originate within the **action-research approach** to which the multi-case study research choice is associated, as well as within the theoretical **approach of social innovation**.

**Action research** is a philosophy and methodology of research generally applied in the social sciences. It seeks transformative change through the simultaneous process of taking action and doing research, which are linked together by critical reflection. Kurt Lewin, coined the term "action research" in 1944. In his 1946 paper "Action Research and Minority Problems" he described action research as "a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action" that uses "a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action".

Here are some key aspects of action research in European scientific literature:

1. **involves collaboration between researchers and stakeholders** (such as community members, non-profit organizations, governmental bodies, etc.) to address a specific issue. It focuses on practical action and improving existing conditions, while simultaneously incorporating processes of reflection and analysis.
2. typically follows an **iterative cycle** of planning, action, observation, and reflection. Researchers work closely with involved actors to design and implement interventions, monitor outcomes, and reflect on experiences for subsequent improvements.
3. the active **inclusion of participants** in the research process. The voices and perspectives of those involved in the issue are valued and integrated into the decision-making process.
4. **promote social change** and generate positive impacts in the communities involved. This can include improving policies, organizational practices, or empowering the individuals involved.
5. **researchers** do not just act as external observers but are **actively involved** in the action and resolution of the problem. This approach is often described as "research with and for" rather than "research on".
6. is **sensitive to local context** and takes into account the cultural, social, and economic specificities of the communities involved. Outcomes and solutions are often tailored to the particular needs of the situations faced.
7. **promotes the sharing of knowledge and experiences** both among participants and with the scientific community and other stakeholders. The learnings gained from action research can contribute to solution-building and informed practice.

Concerning the theoretical approach of social innovation, although the definition of social innovation may vary depending on the context and theoretical approach, however, some **key common elements** (e.g. "The Power of Social Innovation: How Civic Entrepreneurs Ignite Community Networks for Good" by Stephen Goldsmith; "Social Innovation: An Exploration of the Literature" by Alex Nicholls; "Social Innovation: A Decade of Changes" di European Commission - DG Research & Innovation 2015) in the definition include:

1. **responding to social challenges:** Social innovation is geared towards solving or addressing existing social challenges, such as poverty, social exclusion, access to services, climate change, inequality, community well-being and more.
2. **people-centered approach:** Social innovation is focused on the needs, expectations and aspirations of the people and communities involved. Innovative solutions are developed in collaboration with stakeholders, promoting inclusion and empowerment.
3. **systemic change:** Social innovation aims to bring about change at the systemic and structural level, not just at the individual level. This may include changes in public policies, social norms, institutions and organizational practices.
4. **sustainability:** Social innovation is concerned with the long-term impact and sustainability of proposed solutions, seeking to create lasting and positive changes in society.
5. **collaboration and partnership:** Social innovation often develops through collaboration between different stakeholders, such as governments, non-profit organizations, businesses, local communities, academics and other entities.
6. **focus on different sectors:** Social innovation can be applied in various sectors, such as welfare, health, environment, education, employment, economy, urban planning and many others.

**In the social innovation perspective, change is thus driven by the search for new and creative solutions to address social problems and is characterized by a participatory, sustainable and people-centered approach.**

The toolkits presented here were produced with reference to the perspective offered by these two theories and approaches.

## **4 - Who are they for**

These toolkits are intended for professionals working with communities (which may be national or international), interested in orientation on the topic and the construction of a subsequent learning and in-depth study path. The orientation is aimed at improving skills useful for professional development.

However, to answer this point more precisely, we need to define the professional profiles we are addressing. This question required real research within the HECSOS project to define a detailed Competence Framework that clarified the point. Indeed, as argued in the introduction to toolkit 3: "New epochal changes concerning how common resources are managed and administered, how decisions on the collective future are made and how the development of territories is planned, are challenging the core values of public management across Europe. New forms of governance, engagement of people and new ways of building social cohesion through local and community participation are permeating the functioning and structures of local governments, welfare organizations, higher education institutions and professional works. In this scenario innovative methodologies, approaches and professional profiles working for "community engagement and territorial development" are emerging."

A detailed reflection on this matter is provided by Toolkit 7, which is based on the HECSOS Competence Framework above mentioned. Below we briefly answer with a preliminary list of professional profiles that emerge when typing the term "community engagement" into the **ESCO** (multilingual classification of European Skills, Competences, and Occupations) and **O\*Net** portals (the **Occupational Information Network**, a free online database that contains hundreds of job definitions developed under the sponsorship of the US Department of Labor/Employment and Training Administration) that have been consulted within the project. Some of these professional profiles are for example:

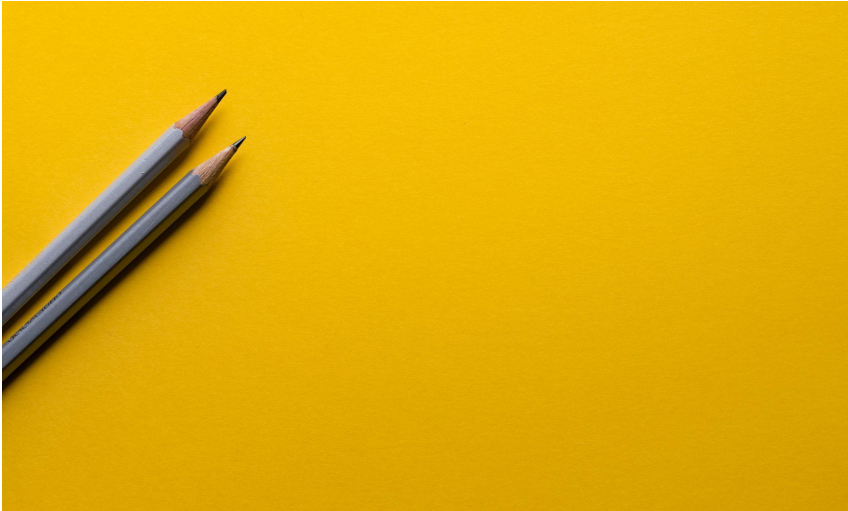


## **5 - What they consist of**

The term 'toolkit', borrowed from computing, literally translates to 'tool box'. In the context of computing, it refers to a set of basic software tools, typically libraries, used to facilitate and standardize the development of more complex derived applications.

These six products are conceived to be **an open resource - implementable, updatable, and freely consultable online**. They are designed as a synthetic resource and guide, a tool for orientation and a starting point to align practical choices and theoretical knowledge.

The use of **visual design** is intended to facilitate reading through the use of images and graphics to speed up the assimilation and learning of complex concepts.



## **6 - What they can do for you**

## **These toolkits can help answering the following questions:**

- What is meant by community engagement?
- What are the main approaches to community engagement?
- How can I situate my practice within the European debate on community engagement?
- What does a community engagement process consist of? Are there recurring elements that distinguish and describe it?
- What is the purpose of community engagement? Toward what goals are certain theories and experiments oriented?
- What tools does a practitioner need to initiate, guide, replicate an effective community engagement process?
- How is such effectiveness evaluated?
- What skills, abilities, knowledge, attitudinal and behavioral resources are required of professionals involved in such processes and settings?
- How to direct one's career path to acquire or upgrade them?

## **7 - How to use them**

The toolkits created have been designed to be used **as individual resources** aimed at professionals, individual researchers, **or** as a resource **to be used collectively** within a work group to stimulate debate about practices or for the methodological alignment of operations. They can also be used as a tool and resource **to train other work groups**, transmit important knowledge and concepts on community engagement, **experiment with new tools** (the theory of change), and be able to observe them in practice.

The structure in which they have been written follows the numerical order in which they are bundled, however it is possible to approach the toolkits also as independent modules and according to one's own logical and operational order.

Most of the toolkits are enriched by **a bibliographic section** that validates and enriches the content of each, conceived as an additional resource for further study.





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