



CIVIS Alliance – Open Lab Project Impact Assessment Report

01 – PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Title of the project Civic by Design: Open Labs in Pop-Up Spaces

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Universities involved CIVIS Open Lab UT, OpenLabStockholm (SU); CIVIS Open Lab PLUS, CIVIS Open Lab UNIL, CIVIS Open UofG, OpenLab.brussels (ULB)

Hub theme Digital & Technological Transformations

Project duration May-July 2025

Place of the activities CIVIS Pop-Up Store ECKSTEIN, Lange Gasse 16, 72070 Tübingen

02 – PARTNERS/TARGET AUDIENCE

Number of internal and external stakeholders involved in and impacted by the project

INTERNAL (All CIVIS universities)				EXTERNAL (All CIVIS cities/regions)	
Academics	Researchers	Students	Admin personnel	Citizens	Other - please specify
45	5	50	17	1500+	11 community partners in programme design and delivery

Non-university associations and organisations that have been involved in the project. *[Please include for each one their (1) name, (2) country and (3) a very brief description (museum/business/public authority/high school/NGO etc.)]*

ASSOCIATIONS/ORGANISATIONS		
Name	Country	Description
Friends Association of Zimmertheater	Germany	Cultural association
Retour Gebrauchtwarenborse	Germany	Business (second-hand furniture)
Hanfingenieur	Germany	Business (engineering company)
City of Tübingen	Germany	Public Authority
Team Tomorrow e.V.	Germany	Political association
adis e.V. – Antidiskriminierung · Empowerment · Praxisentwicklung	Germany	Political association
Interkulturelles Netzwerk Elternbildung Tübingen (INET)	Germany	Cultural network

d.a.i. Tübingen	Germany	German-American Institute
radioBW	Germany	Radio station
Begegnungsstätte HIRSCH für Ältere e.V.	Germany	Community center
University Hospital Tübingen	Germany	Hospital
Lebenshilfe e.V.	Germany	Communal association
BNE*-Roundtable (Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung)	Germany	Cultural network

03 – PROJECT IMPACT

Social dimension

The CIVIS Pop-Up Store demonstrated how a temporary, city-center engagement space can strengthen the social role of a university by embedding research in everyday urban life. Rather than inviting citizens onto campus, the project brought the university into a public space, creating a welcoming environment where dialogue could emerge spontaneously. This approach proved effective in reaching people who would not normally participate in science communication or university events. During the three-month pilot, more than 1,500 people visited the space, including over 360 spontaneous walk-ins.

The project enhanced knowledge exchange by replacing one-way science communication with dialogue and co-creation. More than 50 researchers, around 50 students, and 11 community partners jointly designed and delivered exhibitions, workshops, and discussions. Citizens contributed their own experiences and perspectives to discussions on topics such as democracy, sustainability, diversity, ageing, and the future, while researchers gained a deeper understanding of local needs and societal concerns. Feedback from participants and partners showed that this reciprocal exchange changed perceptions on both sides, helping researchers better understand the communities they work for and enabling community organizations to establish lasting relationships with the university.

The project also strengthened collaboration between academia and civil society. New partnerships were established with cultural institutions, local companies and associations, as well as municipal actors, many of whom actively contributed to program development instead of acting solely as audiences. At the European level, joint activities with CIVIS Open Labs enabled the exchange of methods, experiences, and good practices, demonstrating how local public engagement can benefit from transnational collaboration.

Equal opportunities and inclusion were integral to the project's design. All activities were free of charge and open to everyone, regardless of age, educational background, or previous contact with the university. The central location, open-door concept, and informal atmosphere lowered barriers to participation and encouraged encounters between people who rarely meet in conventional academic settings. The project's success illustrates that accessibility is not only a matter of physical access or free admission, but also of visibility, approachability, and creating spaces where people feel welcome to participate.

Beyond its immediate outputs, the pilot generated practical evidence that pop-up engagement spaces can broaden participation and strengthen trust between universities and local communities. As an experimental public engagement format, the project also demonstrated the potential of temporary city-centre engagement spaces as a scalable and transferable model for civic engagement within the CIVIS Alliance and beyond.

Cultural dimension

The CIVIS Pop-Up Store strengthened the cultural dimension of civic engagement by creating opportunities for mutual learning between researchers, students, citizens, community organisations, and cultural actors. Rather than focusing solely on the dissemination of research, the project enabled different forms of knowledge and experience to meet, interact, and influence one another.

Over the course of the three-month pilot phase, the space hosted 98 events, 9 exhibitions, and 7 interactive surveys covering topics such as democracy, diversity, health, sustainability, ageing, and the future. The program combined scientific, cultural, and community-based perspectives and encouraged dialogue across disciplinary, institutional, and societal boundaries.

Several activities generated impacts beyond the events themselves. A dialogue format involving women with lived experience of endometriosis, medical students, and healthcare professionals led to ongoing collaborations and workshop activities. During an on-site meeting of the CIVIS Open Lab project "Tackling the Challenges of Ageing", discussions with local senior citizens encouraged researchers to rethink how ageing is framed, contributing to a shift from a deficit-oriented perspective towards the more positive concept of "Ageing as a Journey". Likewise, an event on right-wing extremism facilitated new connections between researchers and practitioners and inspired the development of the transnational CIVIS Open Lab project "Responding to the Far Right".

The project also served as a learning environment for students, who designed and implemented their own public engagement activities through two dedicated university courses. By bringing research into a visible and accessible city-center location, the Pop-Up Store created new pathways for learning and exchange and demonstrated how public engagement can enrich both academic knowledge and societal understanding.

Economic dimension

While the CIVIS Pop-Up Store was not designed as an economic development project, it generated indirect economic value through increased visibility, network-building, and the development of follow-up initiatives.

One example of this added value was the opportunity for local community partners to present their work to new audiences and connect with potential supporters, customers, and collaborators. The cultural association "Freundeskreis des Zimmertheater" and the sustainability-focused engineering firm "Hanfingenieur" each designed and curated one of the shop windows facing the city centre, using the central location to showcase their activities and engage passers-by.

The social enterprise "Retour Gebrauchtwarenborse" presented selected second-hand furniture in the Pop-Up Store. Interested visitors were referred to Retour's shop, where purchases could be completed. These collaborations increased the public awareness of local organisations and demonstrated how civic engagement spaces can also support community partners in reaching broader audiences.

The Pop-Up Store also contributed to capacity-building within the CIVIS Alliance. Experiences, partnerships, and ideas developed at the space informed the preparation of follow-up CIVIS Open Lab activities and funding proposals, including the new CIVIS Open Lab project "Responding to the Far Right".

Although no permanent employment was created directly through the project, the pilot demonstrated how temporary engagement spaces can leverage existing resources, strengthen community partnerships, and create conditions for future investment in civic engagement, research collaboration, and externally funded activities.

Added value for the beneficiaries

The CIVIS Pop-Up Store created added value for a diverse range of beneficiaries by providing accessible opportunities for learning, dialogue, participation, and collaboration. During its three-month phase, the project delivered 98 events, 9 exhibitions, and 7 interactive surveys, attracting more than 1,500 visitors, including over 360 spontaneous walk-ins.

Citizens gained direct access to researchers and opportunities to contribute their own perspectives and experiences. Students developed practical skills in science communication, public engagement, and co-creation through dedicated university courses and hands-on activities. Researchers benefited from direct exchange with citizens, community organisations, and practitioners, gaining insights into societal needs

and lived experiences that informed their work. Community partners increased their visibility, expanded their networks, and developed new collaborations with the university. The project also promoted inclusion by offering free and low-threshold participation in a welcoming city-centre location, reducing barriers for people who might not otherwise engage with universities.

The programme addressed a broad range of societal challenges. Civic participation and democratic engagement were promoted through events on participatory democracy, civic engagement, service-learning, youth participation, and global citizenship. Health and well-being were addressed through activities on ageing, women's health, work-life balance, and internet-use disorders among young people. Environmental awareness and sustainability were fostered through events on biodiversity, soil diversity, sustainable development, circular economy practices, and citizen science initiatives such as biodiversity monitoring through the iNaturalist platform. The project further promoted inclusion and diversity through events on discrimination in healthcare, queer literature, diversity in research, provenance research, and intercultural dialogue. Digital transformation and technological innovation were explored through participatory formats on artificial intelligence, social media, democracy, and digital education.

Several activities generated benefits beyond the events themselves. A co-creative dialogue on endometriosis brought together patients, medical students, and healthcare professionals and led to ongoing collaborations beyond the project duration. By combining scientific knowledge with lived experience, cultural perspectives, and community expertise, the Pop-Up Store created tangible benefits through learning, networking, empowerment, and active participation, demonstrating how accessible engagement spaces can contribute to more inclusive, informed, and connected communities.

Relevance to the context

The CIVIS Pop-Up Store responded to needs and priorities at local, institutional, and European levels. At the local level, it addressed a frequently expressed challenge in Tübingen: the perceived distance between the university and parts of the city community. By transforming a vacant retail space in the historic city centre into an open civic engagement hub, the project created a visible and accessible point of contact between research and society. The initiative also contributed to local discussions on the temporary reuse of vacant commercial spaces, a topic of growing relevance for the municipality due to increasing retail vacancy rates.

The project was closely aligned with the University of Tübingen's strategic commitment to public engagement, knowledge exchange, and societal responsibility. It provided researchers and students with new opportunities to engage with citizens beyond traditional academic settings and supported experimentation with innovative participation formats. More than 50 researchers, around 50 students, and 11 community partners contributed to programme development and delivery. Two university courses were integrated into the project, enabling students to design and implement their own public engagement activities and gain practical experience in science communication and civic engagement.

The Pop-Up Store also responded to the CIVIS Alliance objective of strengthening civic engagement through collaboration between universities and local communities. Throughout the project, CIVIS partners were involved through transnational meetings, workshops, knowledge exchange activities, and joint events. Several activities explicitly connected local and European perspectives, including events on democracy, global citizenship, sustainability, ageing, and service-learning.

The project demonstrated that a physical Open Lab presence can complement digital engagement activities by reaching new audiences and fostering trust-based relationships. As a pilot for an innovative engagement infrastructure, the Pop-Up Store tested how temporary urban spaces can function as accessible interfaces between universities and society. More than 1,500 visitors participated during the three-month pilot phase, including over 360 spontaneous walk-ins. Increasing visitor numbers, repeated visits, and growing demand from researchers and community organisations to use the space provided strong evidence of its relevance and acceptance.

Beyond its immediate local impact, the project generated practical experience, methodological insights, and follow-up collaborations that informed subsequent CIVIS Open Lab activities, including new project

proposals and transnational partnerships. The project was selected for presentation at the 2026 European Science Engagement Association (EUSEA) conference, where lessons learned from the pilot were shared with researchers and practitioners from across Europe. The interest generated by the presentation confirmed the relevance of the approach beyond the local context and highlighted its potential as a transferable model for strengthening university–society relationships across the CIVIS Alliance and beyond.

Explain how the project has fulfilled the goals and objectives of the European project CIVIS2 (Erasmus+, 2022-2026)

The CIVIS Pop-Up Store successfully fulfilled the objectives of CIVIS2 Stream 1 by strengthening connections between academia and society, creating new opportunities for civic engagement, and testing innovative approaches to collaboration between universities and local communities.

The project directly supported the objective of building bridges between academia and local stakeholders by transforming a vacant retail space in Tübingen's city centre into an open and accessible hub for dialogue, participation, and co-creation. Citizens, students, researchers, civil society organisations, cultural actors, and local initiatives were invited to contribute to and shape activities around societal challenges such as democracy, diversity, health, sustainability, and the future.

The project also contributed to the development of the CIVIS Open Lab as a locally anchored platform. By establishing the first physical space of the Open Lab in Tübingen, the initiative significantly increased the visibility and accessibility of CIVIS activities beyond the university campus. The Pop-Up Store provided a tangible and recognisable presence for the Open Lab within the city and created new opportunities for interaction with citizens who would not normally engage with university activities.

A key Stream 1 objective is the promotion of challenge-based and collaborative approaches to societal issues. Through exhibitions, workshops, dialogue formats, service-learning activities, citizen participation formats, and co-creation events, the project enabled mutual learning between researchers and communities. Several activities generated follow-up collaborations beyond the project duration, including new partnerships related to women's health, ageing, and responses to right-wing extremism.

The project further strengthened local and transnational networks by involving community partners and CIVIS Open Labs from across the alliance. International collaboration was integrated through hybrid meetings, joint workshops, mentoring activities, and exchanges of methodologies and good practices. By providing a visible physical presence for the CIVIS Open Lab in the city centre, the project also made the European University Alliance more tangible and accessible to local communities. Through dedicated CIVIS events and the involvement of partner universities, citizens were able to engage directly with European perspectives, collaborations, and initiatives, fostering awareness of shared European challenges and opportunities.

The project met or exceeded all major targets defined in the original proposal. Most notably, the Pop-Up Store hosted 98 events instead of the anticipated 30–40 and engaged more than 50 researchers, substantially exceeding the original target of 30+ researchers. It engaged around 50 students and 11 community partner in the program design and delivery and attracted more than 1,500 visitors, including more than 360 spontaneous walk-ins. These results demonstrate strong public interest in accessible civic engagement formats.

Finally, the project contributed to institutional learning within both the University of Tübingen and the CIVIS Alliance. As a pilot model for CIVIS Open Labs, it generated practical experience, methodological insights, and transferable recommendations for future Open Lab activities and demonstrated how temporary engagement spaces can be integrated into long-term civic engagement strategies. Its presentation at the 2026 European Science Engagement Association (EUSEA) conference further demonstrated the wider relevance of the approach and supported the dissemination of a transferable model for strengthening university–society relationships through place-based public engagement.

Project at a Glance: "CIVIS Pop-Up Store ECKSTEIN"

Outputs

- 3 months / 67 opening days in Tübingen city-centre
- 98 events, 9 exhibitions, and 7 interactive surveys
- >1,500 visitors, including >360 spontaneous walk-ins
- 11 community partners, 50+ researchers, and 50 students actively involved
- Involvement of 6 CIVIS Open Labs

Outcomes

- Project targets met or exceeded across all major indicators (planned: 1,000 – 1,500 visitors, 30–40 events; 30+ researchers)
- New audiences engaged through a low-threshold public engagement format
- Stronger collaboration between the university, local communities, and CIVIS partners
- Growing demand from researchers and community organisations to use the space

Impact

- Follow-up collaborations initiated, e.g. on ageing and endometriosis
- New CIVIS Open Lab project initiated: B14.181 „Responding to the Far Right“
- Transferable pilot model for CIVIS Open Labs, presented at EUSEA 2026 conference

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