

Participatory approach, dissemination, and implementation of research on aging: the Age-It experience

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Abstract

Objectives: As populations age, health, social, and long-term care policies must promote well-being, active participation, and inclusion in later life. This article examines how dissemination and participatory strategies can bridge research and practice, drawing on the Age-It Research Program—one of Europe's largest transdisciplinary initiatives on aging.

Methods: Age-It involves 1,000+ researchers across 10 “Spokes” and several cross-cutting Boards, engaging more than 100 stakeholder organizations. We describe the overarching dissemination and co-creation strategy developed by the Stakeholders and Dissemination Board, acknowledging the diverse participatory practices within Spokes. We term our approach *incremental participatory*, recognizing both early stakeholder involvement and the practical constraints of coordinating a program of this scale.

Results: Our experience highlights three key lessons. First, establishing a shared language, timeframe, and platform is essential for transdisciplinary collaboration and stakeholder engagement. Second, dissemination and knowledge mobilization must be embedded throughout the research process rather than treated as a final stage activity, combining digital tools (e.g., WikiAge-It, the Age-It Dashboard) with offline, community-based events to foster inclusive participation. Third, while co-creation enhances legitimacy and relevance, sustaining active engagement requires significant investments in resources, infrastructures, and facilitation processes.

Discussion: By integrating participatory research principles with implementation science frameworks, Age-It demonstrates how structured collaboration and knowledge mobilization can support evidence-based policies and practices. However, challenges remain, including uneven stakeholder engagement, time constraints, and the difficulty of translating complex scientific insights into actionable formats. We conclude that dissemination and participatory approaches in aging research must be seen as dynamic, iterative, and resource-intensive processes.

Keywords: Population aging; Participatory research; Demography; Age-friendly environments

Participatory methods in aging research are gaining attention as they can ensure that older people's voices directly shape study design, implementation, and interpretation (Walker, 2007; Gaber et al., 2024). These approaches enhance research quality, promote empowerment and social participation, leading to more relevant and sustainable solutions (Bendien et al., 2022). A key distinction is between collaboration and genuine research partnership, where stakeholders act as co-producers of knowledge (Alberio & Fortin, 2017). Such partnerships face challenges in managing relationships, negotiating power dynamics, and ensuring sustainability beyond individual projects. They must be grounded in local contexts, attentive to cultural and territorial specificities, and inclusive of citizens, civil society, and local actors to avoid “one-size-fits-all” solutions. Social innovation thus emerges both as an outcome and a process of collaboration, experimentation, and dialogue.

Alongside participatory methods, dissemination and implementation science is increasingly recognized as an important function of academia and a growing priority for funding agencies (Rabin & Brownson, 2017; Estabrooks & Glasgow, 2023). To implement effective public interventions, but also to foster innovation within social institutions, it is crucial to disseminate knowledge widely and equitably and to support case studies in fields such as clinical, community, and public health settings (Kwan et al., 2022), and the broader welfare and industry sector.

Nonetheless, the definition of dissemination remains ambiguous. Baumann et al. (2022) attempted to identify different frameworks to define it. Most of these frameworks describe dissemination as the movement or spread of something (e.g., an idea, innovation, or research finding), intentionally or strategically carried out by those leading the dissemination effort. Other

frameworks focus on the outcomes of dissemination rather than the process (e.g., the adoption of an innovation or increased awareness of research results). Despite this fluidity of definitions, it is essential to recognize the growing importance of dissemination in research project strategies across various disciplines. Its goal is to make research findings accessible to a broader audience of potential users and to translate results into public policies and programs, particularly in the gerontological field (Bowen et al., 2005), since macro-demographic transformations and population aging are among the greatest changes facing contemporary societies (Alberio, 2024; Alderotti et al., 2025; Vignoli et al., 2025). In this perspective, dissemination is not merely about transferring knowledge, but also about ensuring democratic access to it, where policies can no longer be imposed on beneficiaries but must instead be co-constructed with them. This shift from “doing for” to “doing with” begins with the ways in which knowledge is produced and shared, fostering active participation and shared responsibility in shaping solutions.

Current study

This paper offers a reflection on the role that stakeholder participation, knowledge co-construction, and dissemination can have in boosting innovation in aging research. Special emphasis is given to the challenges that both researchers and stakeholders can experience in participatory and dissemination approaches.

We draw several lessons from the implementation of the Age-It Research Program (Vignoli et al. [2025] in this issue). Rather than a single project, Age-It is a broad transdisciplinary initiative—one of the most ambitious on aging in Europe—with €115 million funded by the European Commission’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the Italian Ministry of Research. It brings together over 1,000 scholars from fields including demography, sociology, economics, medicine, biology, and public policy to explore the causes and consequences of aging. Its interconnected projects range from health disparities and social inequalities to workforce participation and biomedical research on multimorbidity and frailty. Age-It is anchored to 10 core challenges (or “spokes”): the demography of aging; the biology of aging; clinical and functional factors related to multimorbidity; life course trajectories for active aging; care sustainability; the silver economy; cultural and political dimensions of aging societies; interventions and technologies for age-related conditions; gerontechnologies for healthy aging; and future-oriented policymaking. For details, see Vignoli et al. (2025) in this issue.

The Age-It dissemination strategy presented here should therefore be understood not as a stand-alone narrative, but as part of a larger, complex infrastructure aimed at positioning Italy as a global hub for aging research and innovation. Conducting pioneering research in this context required the ability to establish a shared language and framework between researchers and more than 100 stakeholder organizations. We posit that evidence-based knowledge to support policies and practices needs to be co-created and mobilized in close collaboration with stakeholders, i.e., policymakers, practitioners, and civil society organizations, who stand to benefit the most from it.

In presenting the general dissemination and co-creation strategy of Age-It, we describe our overall approach as “incremental participatory,” given the scale and structure of the Program. Most dissemination and co-creation activities take place within the individual Spokes and cross-cutting Boards, where

connections with stakeholders are stronger and more direct due to the proximity between research topics and civil society practices. The overall research program is, in fact, an umbrella initiative encompassing more than 300 specific tasks (or individual projects/activities), most of which involve stakeholder engagement from the very beginning, starting with the formulation of research hypotheses, and continuing through an ongoing process of exchange. It would therefore be impossible to capture this complexity within a single paper. Hence, the paper illustrates the overarching dissemination strategy of the hub and the main tools adopted, with the aim of informing the audience about their possible use or adaptation. Readers are referred to the Age-It website (<https://ageit.eu/wp/en/>), wiki (<https://wiki-ageit.tech4care.eu/>), and to spoke-specific publications for further details and concrete examples.

Background: participatory research and dissemination strategies

Participatory methods and dissemination strategies in aging research are closely linked, as both aim to enhance the relevance, uptake, and societal impact of scientific knowledge. Involving older adults and stakeholders as active contributors’ grounds research in lived experiences and local needs, while dissemination becomes a process of dialogue and co-creation rather than of one-way communication. The American Geriatrics Society has stressed the need to improve dissemination in geriatrics to bridge gaps between research and practice, particularly in patient care (Farkas et al., 2003). With populations rapidly aging, especially in high-income countries, translating research into effective policies is essential to address challenges such as social isolation, economic constraints, and care needs, while also recognizing the strengths and resources older adults bring (Ellen et al., 2017). Several authors have suggested that one of the most effective strategies for disseminating research projects is to involve the public from the outset, within a so-called “participatory research perspective” (Kwan et al., 2022). Participatory research allows aligning the research with the audience it aims to address by involving it in the research construction process, thus becoming co-constructed (Israel et al., 1998; Sabir et al., 2006; Kwan et al., 2022). Studies emphasized the involvement of older people as co-researchers in the dissemination phase (Doran & Buffel, 2018; Mey & Van Hoven, 2019). These studies highlighted how older co-researchers could play a fundamental role in spreading research results to key stakeholders (James & Buffel, 2023), as the co-production of knowledge with older adults opens opportunities such as: (a) increased pressure for more personalized and responsive services (Blair & Minkler, 2009); (b) the rise of self-promotion movements, like the right to be active players in decision-making processes (Walker, 2007); (c) the creation of public policies that promote active aging (in Europe) and successful aging (in the United States) (Pruchno, 2015; World Health Organization, 2015). This approach also contributes to eliminating power asymmetries, by considering various actors with different professional backgrounds and making the decision-making process collective. It is a strategy that integrates everyday knowledge with professional scientific knowledge. Indeed, the aspiration of any participatory research project is to establish an *egalitarian relationship* between researchers, co-researchers, and stakeholders. This requires a

high awareness of possible power asymmetries throughout the research process to recognize and level them (Kaspar et al., 2024). Crucially, participatory approaches are not only practical but also ethically significant, as they counter epistemic injustice by recognizing older adults as credible knowers rather than passive subjects. As Fricker (2013) explains, “testimonial injustice” occurs when prejudice leads to a deficit of credibility; involving older adults as co-researchers challenges such ageist assumptions. Similarly, Carel and Kidd (2014) note that health-care systems often perpetuate this injustice by disregarding older adults’ subjective experiences when they diverge from biomedical frameworks.

Knowledge mobilization

Grenier et al. (2021) propose a critical approach for a so-called “knowledge mobilization” to connect the perspectives and needs of research with those of society and the older people. According to this approach, researchers and stakeholders are gathered as collaborators, and knowledge production and sharing are recontextualized in a broader economic and political space, so that knowledge mobilization becomes a social responsibility, an act of transparency, and a way to build a community. The phase of knowledge dissemination must, therefore, be a *process of continuous discovery* (Grenier et al., 2021) and be constructed by putting into perspective the expected results (Estabrooks & Glasgow, 2023). This inclusive reconfiguration of knowledge—encompassing both creation and dissemination—directly addresses what Fricker (2013) calls “hermeneutical injustice,” which occurs when marginalized groups lack the interpretive resources to make sense of their experiences. As Anderson (2012) emphasizes, such injustice is structural, rooted in unequal access to meaning-making. By involving older adults in co-defining priorities, participatory knowledge creation helps counter this marginalization and expands the resources available for interpretation. The production and dissemination of information becomes contextual, collaborative, socially engaged, and inclusive of all social actors, including older co-researchers who participated in the project (Grenier et al., 2021). In other terms, knowledge co-creation and mobilization “*can create an infrastructure that shares (rather than directs) the flow of knowledge for social, economic, and intellectual impact in ways that seamlessly integrate new knowledge and discoveries with the everyday lives and input of older people*” (p. 351).

Stakeholder commitment

One of the central aspects to achieve effective co-creation and dissemination for aging research is the identification of partners or stakeholders who must be involved in the theme selection and convinced of the project’s relevance and validity (Boaz et al., 2018). Indeed, Kwan et al. (2022) affirm that thanks to “*authentic partner involvement in all research phases*,” from construction to dissemination, and the contribution of professional skills in communication sciences, it is possible to have a dissemination phase that can also reach historically marginalized communities, such as the frail and older individuals. This is particularly significant from the perspective of epistemic justice, which calls for the inclusion of marginalized voices in processes of knowledge production and application (van Boetzel et al., 2024). Kwan et al. (2022) suggested a four-step dissemination cycle consisting in: (a) a conceptualization phase,

where the societal needs driving the research are identified; (b) a design phase, focusing on the “product” to be disseminated and its format; (c) an active dissemination phase, in which the knowledge is adapted and delivered considering contextual and cultural variables; and (d) an impact phase, where the effectiveness and resonance of the dissemination strategy are evaluated. In following these phases, the absence of reliable and engaged partners may not only hinder the project’s effectiveness but also perpetuate epistemic exclusion—denying older adults the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to decisions that affect their lives (Fricker, 2007, 2013).

Professional and research experience of stakeholders

Mahoney et al. (2020) highlight that successful programs relied on selecting not only committed partners but also those with proven professional and research experience. A screening process to evaluate potential community and academic partners should be based on their goals, skills, and ability to form long-term collaborations. In contrast, projects that failed to reach completion or to achieve their goals often involved partners who lacked commitment or failed to fulfill their roles. Sabir et al. (2006) similarly emphasize partner competence as essential. As an alternative to this screening method, Estabrooks & Glasgow (2023) propose the Implementation Research Logic Model. This framework helps assess dissemination outcomes by identifying barriers and facilitators, tailoring local implementation strategies, uncovering mechanisms of change, and evaluating the impact of dissemination efforts. This model also offers a valuable opportunity to embed epistemic justice criteria within the process, asking not only whether implementation works, but also for whom and whose knowledge is being legitimized. As Fricker (2013) notes, hermeneutical injustice occurs when marginalized groups are unable to make sense of their experience due to a lack of shared conceptual resources: ensuring that older adults are included in defining the “what” and “why” of knowledge creation and dissemination can mitigate this structural disadvantage.

Role of context

Another important aspect is the role of context. One of the central concepts of dissemination and implementation science is that the context is not static but changes over time (Estabrooks & Glasgow, 2023) and represents a key factor in determining whether to implement a given result in healthcare practice or not (Cammer et al., 2014). Research conducted in the field of long-term care highlights that the context is often overshadowed or hidden when considering how knowledge is integrated into the elder care process, while it should be addressed as a key factor to facilitate or prevent the implementation of recommended care practices; this implies that developing a knowledge dissemination phase that is effective and supportive of sector workers is crucial to offer the best possible service (*ibidem*). Mapping the context in which one operates should therefore be performed to determine whether the current situation is open to knowledge dissemination, and the context is favorable despite the requirements imposed by health and specific aging services (Ellen et al., 2017). From an epistemic justice perspective, this mapping is not only instrumental but also ethical: contexts that restrict interpretative possibilities or silence older people’s perspectives may perpetuate structural

hermeneutical marginalization (Fricker, 2007, 2013; Carel & Kidd, 2014). Hence, the dissemination phase must be constructed to adapt to the context in which it will be adopted and implemented, as well as the message and distribution methods must be specific to the audience being addressed (Kwan et al., 2022).

Problems in the creation and dissemination of results and knowledge

Lastly, three common problems encountered when dealing with the creation and dissemination of results and knowledge should be considered (Farkas et al., 2003). First, the goals of dissemination are often confused with the goals of knowledge utilization. The two terms are not interchangeable, as knowledge utilization is a more complex process of applying the knowledge that is disseminated. Researchers use dissemination methods (e.g., speaking at conferences, publishing research findings) to reach utilization goals (e.g., adoption of a new evidence-based technique into clinical practice) (Altman, 1995; Morrissey et al., 1997). The second problem is that dissemination practices are not organized or planned to achieve a comprehensive impact, due to several factors. For example, researchers' career advancement is driven by different criteria, including bibliometric ones, such as the number of publications in peer-reviewed journals (Lim et al., 2025); (Prohaska et al., 2000) and major presentations made at professional meetings. Finally, a major limitation in the field is that most dissemination and utilization efforts still rely on a mechanistic, linear model—where research findings are simply transmitted from researchers to users, with the expectation that they will be adopted as-is. This approach overlooks the complexity of real-world contexts, where implementation requires complex multicomponent strategies; namely, iterative processes, co-adaptation with stakeholders, and continuous feedback mechanisms to ensure that knowledge is not only shared but meaningfully integrated into practice.

Case study: the Age-It research program

In such a context of increasing attention towards dissemination and implementation science, the Age-It Program is an interesting case study to report as it has represented the ideal sandbox to test the adoption of the above-discussed strategies and approaches for user engagement and knowledge mobilization on a large scale. The mission of Age-It is not only to address immediate challenges but also to promote a structural and lasting change in Italian society. This Program stands out for its holistic approach, integrating various dimensions—from public policy reform to innovation in industrial sectors, and developing new services for citizens. Each action taken is designed to be interconnected, contributing to an overall framework that not only meets current needs but also prepares society for future challenges. This comprehensive and long-term vision requires a combination of innovative initiatives, rigorous experimentation, and continuous evaluation to ensure that the objectives are achieved effectively and sustainably. Such ambition calls for an exceptional effort in how to best implement co-creation, dissemination, and implementation strategies, before, during, and after the Research Program implementation. The Age-It Research Program has tried to do so, using a step-by-step process, gradually increasing the number of stakeholders involved, their commitment, and developing a variety of interrelated initiatives.

This section presents the dissemination and stakeholder engagement strategy of the Age-It Research Program, outlining its development across four key phases, coherent with the four-step dissemination cycle suggested by Kwan et al. (2022). The Preparatory Phase describes the initial top-down approach used to design the project and engage high-level stakeholders. The Inception Phase recounts the co-creation process that culminated in the refinement of strategic objectives. The Implementation Phase details the finalized Dissemination and Impact Plan (DIP) and the tools for monitoring and transparency, including the WikiAge-It platform and real-time dashboard. Finally, the Impact Maximization Phase highlights ongoing efforts to enhance outreach, dialogue, and knowledge transfer through events, training, and international collaboration.

Preparatory phase: early engagement with stakeholders and creation of the boards model using a top-down approach

The Age-It design phase was conducted within a limited time frame in early 2022 using a Logical Framework Approach (LFA) (European Commission, 2004). This is a planning and management tool widely used to design, monitor, and evaluate projects, especially in development and donor-funded contexts. In its call for proposals, the Ministry of University and Research sought to fund at least fourteen large research and innovation programs—including one on aging—through collaborations between universities, research centers, and businesses. Each program was required to promote citizen engagement and transfer technology and skills to local communities, enterprises, and public administrations, thereby strengthening Italy's technological sector and its role in European and global value chains. Responding to these requests, the consortium founders mobilized to bring together a highly qualified and diverse set of national actors—spanning universities, research centers, private firms, public institutions, and civil society organizations—selected for their proven expertise and strategic relevance to the program's objectives. The Research Program identified 10 main challenges related to aging research and structured them as “Spokes,” i.e., research centers, focused on thematically relevant research streams, where researchers from different disciplines and institutions collaborate for common goals.

Given the limited timeframe, the researchers needed, at least in the first phase, to adopt a top-down approach in terms of stakeholder engagement. The environment of stakeholders (Mahoney et al., 2020) was screened, and those with the highest visibility at the national level and existing collaboration were invited to join the initiative. This may have caused a selection bias, leading us to involve the most visible and possibly “powerful” stakeholders, thus not including the small and most vulnerable organizations. Eighteen organizations sent a support letter to the Research Program, confirming their interest in Age-It activities and agreeing to support the Research Program formally. This choice has also been made based on the competencies of both organizations and people involved in them (Sabir et al., 2006). Once the program has been financed, a Stakeholders and Dissemination Board (SDB) was formed, comprising representatives from all 10 spokes, with different expertise and competencies. The aim of SDB was to coordinate and promote activities with

stakeholders both at the local (i.e., at the level of each project) and national levels.

Inception phase: co-creation and validation of the DIP

Once the Research Program was funded, it became clear that the stakeholder engagement had to be taken to a higher level if the successful implementation of the Research Program had to be achieved. For this reason, the SDB promoted the further development of the Age-It website and the creation of new information sections (www.ageit.eu), available both in English and Italian to ensure accessibility for a wide range of Italian stakeholders. In parallel, the SDB launched a broad dissemination campaign to announce the start of the Age-It Research Program, leveraging national media outlets, press releases, and social media channels. A key initiative was a dedicated launch event held in Florence on September 15th, moderated by a professional journalist and accessible both in person and via web streaming. Several associations of older people were also invited, and they, in turn, engaged their senior members. These coordinated actions helped raise awareness of the project and successfully attracted additional stakeholders interested in participating in the co-creation activities. As a result, the stakeholder portfolio expanded significantly, growing to include over 50 organizations. One limitation of the approach used up to that point was raised by the attending umbrella organizations, who highlighted the importance of ensuring stronger bottom-up involvement of grassroots organizations.

Then, the SDB decided to gather all the key stakeholders in a kick-off event to discuss and refine the main strategies and goals of the Research Program itself and better match them with the needs of stakeholders and partners. On October 25th, 2023, the Age-It network met with key stakeholders for a workshop in Milan focused on dialogue and exchange. The meeting provided an opportunity to present in detail the 10 priority challenges/spokes of the Age-It Research Program and to gather ideas and proposals from additional organizations, with the aim of better guiding the network's future activities and maximizing its potential impact on society. The workshop was held using the World Café methodology and its seven design principles (Brown & Isaacs, 2005), and about 50 stakeholders were recruited to contribute to the discussion with the leaders of the 10 spokes, supported by facilitation experts in participatory research design (<https://www.codiciricerche.it/en/>). An artist was present during the meeting to create visual representations of the main challenges of each spoke, thus facilitating stakeholders' understanding and supporting their participation in the discussion (see Figure S1 in Supplementary Material).

Following the outcomes of the Milan workshop (Codicì & Age-It Consortium, 2023), the objectives of the original Research Program were refined to reflect a clearer and more targeted direction. A central aim became the development of innovative welfare policies to support reform and sustainability in an aging society. Another key objective was identified in stimulating innovation within markets that serve older populations, which involved advancing sectors such as Bio and Pharma to better meet shifting healthcare needs. In addition, stakeholders stressed that the Research Program should focus on creating and promoting services and products genuinely responding to the realities of aging. This includes reshaping public services, enhancing the efficiency of healthcare systems,

strengthening the integration of social and health services, and pushing forward the digital transformation to ensure technologies are usable across all generations.

Finally, we understood from stakeholders that the program should emphasize the importance of promoting a positive and empowering image of aging. It should inspire a cultural shift that views aging as a valuable and enriching stage of life, while encouraging stronger intergenerational connections and mutual understanding.

According to these updated objectives, the Steering Committee of Age-It approved a final DIP, whose objectives are functionally coherent to Age-It's mission, namely to: (1) Build the reputation of the Age-It Research Program in the wider community, beyond the merely academic word; (2) Position Age-It within the research and policy system for aging in Italy and worldwide; (3) Identify the main challenges related to aging and foster a culture of cross-cutting interdisciplinary interventions across the Research Program's areas of activity; (4) Strengthen the Partnership's relationships with Italian and European institutions, policymakers, industry, civic society and citizens (including—but not limited to—older adults).

The DIP itself was built on this updated LFA (see Figure 1), which identified the main activities of the Research Program (e.g., the Spokes), the main Outputs, the expected Outcomes, and the desired Impact. Research Program's outputs were categorized into four main groups: contribution to the production of new scientific evidence (e.g., articles, books, scientific reports, conference proceedings); development of new prototypes/inventions; creation of new products/services and businesses in the market; contribution to the development of new policies in the various policy areas affected by the demographic aging process. The four categories reflected the transdisciplinarity of the Research Program and the different traditions of the disciplines involved. The DIP was placed right at the core of the Research Program outputs generation, as it contains a wide range of measures and instruments for maximizing the Impact of Age-It, the transferability of its results into practice, but also for ensuring the participation and transparency of the Research Processes, e.g., giving the opportunity to the Age-It stakeholders to monitor real time the current status of the activities (see *infra*). The final version of the DIP was shared at last with stakeholders in a dedicated workshop in Venice, May 2024, for final testing and validation.

Measures for transparency and monitoring the performance of the research program

Based on the DIP logic, several measures have been undertaken during the Research Program Implementation for monitoring its progress and ensuring the highest transparency standards. These measures were strictly intertwined with routine Program Management activities, creating synergies in terms of program performance and goal achievement. The main measures described here are the “WikiAge-It” initiative, the “Age-It Real Time Dashboard,” as well as the “Network Analysis of Collaborative Synergies and Gaps.”

As already stressed, knowledge mobilization and accountability of actions are a social responsibility, an act of transparency, and a way to build a community (Grenier et al., 2021). For this purpose, a virtual Age-It community has been built to connect and inform stakeholders and all citizens and decision makers on the process, by means of a WikiAge-It platform

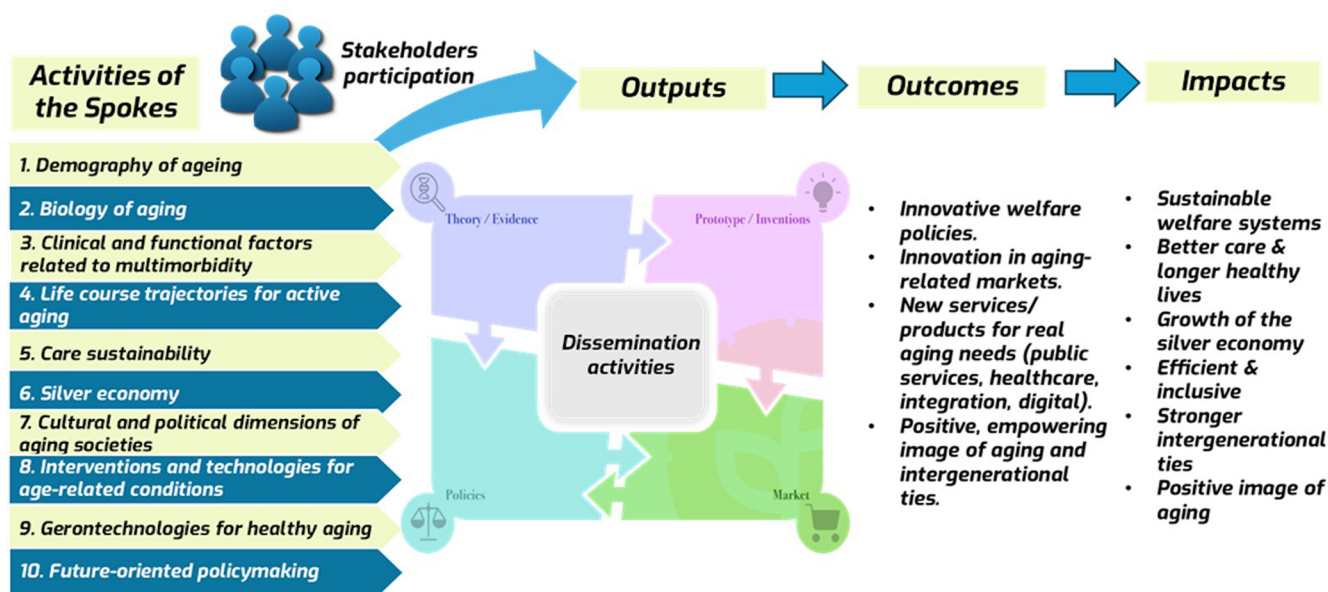


Figure 1. Age-It DIP and research program intervention logic.



Figure 2. WikiAge-It splash screen (accessible at <https://wiki-ageit.tech4care.eu>).

(<https://wiki-ageit.tech4care.eu>), that has been conceived as a transformative tool, designed to replace the traditional methods of periodic scientific activity reporting (see Figure 2). Instead of merely fulfilling an administrative requirement set by the Funding Agency, WikiAge-It transforms this obligation into a dynamic platform for updating and sharing information with the broader public. By doing so, it bridges the gap between scientific research and public engagement, making complex data and findings more accessible.

WikiAge-It is a comprehensive repository that consolidates project outputs, deliverables, reports, and other resources into a single, user-friendly platform. For stakeholders and citizens, it offers transparent, continuously updated access to scientific

findings in a clear and structured way, enabling them to track progress, identify relevant outcomes, and engage with the knowledge community. Its innovative wiki-based design, with TAG-based search and hyperlinks, facilitates discovery, reveals connections across Spokes, Work-Packages, and Tasks, and supports an integrated understanding of research areas. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, improving internal communication, and serving as a training resource for new researchers, WikiAge-It strengthens both knowledge sharing and collective learning within Age-It. Transparency and accountability are another key element of knowledge mobilization. In this respect, the Age-It program has implemented an advanced real-time monitoring system designed as a Real Time Dashboard to ensure full

transparency and accessibility of information regarding the progress of its activities. While researchers are filling in their activities report, this dashboard system allows stakeholders to continuously track the Research Program's implementation status, with performance evaluated against a set of performance indicators. The Dashboard provides an overview of the main output statistics, e.g., number of publications, events, licenses, and patents generated during the Research Program. Indicators are grouped in the four categories shown in Figure 1 under the "outputs dimension," i.e., the area of "evidence generation," "prototypes/inventions," "market," and "policies" impact. At the core of these four areas, indicators related to dissemination activities can be read. These include, for instance, the number of dissemination events organized, the users involved, as well as metrics derived from social media activities. The latter can provide timely evidence of reach, engagement, and cultural resonance, making them a valuable tool for assessing the performance of dissemination in aging research.

The comprehensive indicators of Age-It are readily accessible on the Program website (<https://ageit.eu/wp/dashboard/>), where users can select specific areas or Spokes of interest to gain detailed insights. This Dashboard has allowed the Research Program's outputs to be assessed in real time, providing an up-to-date overview of its achievements and areas for improvement. The access to the Age-It website by users is further stimulated by a series of activities, such as newsletters and social media. This approach reflects the commitment to ensure the highest standards of transparency and scientific rigor, ensuring that its contributions and outputs are accurately measured and validated.

Another measure to monitor implementation and improve performance, the Research Program leveraged Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Network Analysis to map semantic relationships and collaborations. Using workshop papers and publications from Age-It researchers, we applied word embeddings to represent topics in a high-dimensional space, capturing semantic relationships and uncovering hidden thematic connections (see Figure 3). This approach enabled us to quantify similarities, identify overlaps, and gain a clearer picture of the intellectual landscape of aging research within Age-It, ultimately supporting stronger synergies across the network.

In addition to mapping the semantic relationships between topics, we constructed a graph-based network of authors and their research topics. This graph visualization enabled us to explore patterns of collaboration across disciplines and institutions. By linking authors based on their shared research themes, we were able to identify key areas where interdisciplinary collaboration is occurring and areas where expected collaborations are underdeveloped. Overall, this approach offered a clearer view of thematic concentrations and underexplored areas, ultimately guiding strategic interventions to enhance the overall impact of research in this field.

Beyond visualizing thematic clusters, the NLP exercise shed light on the intellectual structure of aging research within Age-It. It highlighted consolidated areas like biomarkers and Alzheimer's, as well as emerging domains such as care dynamics and migration, where collaboration remains limited. The author–topic network further showed dense interdisciplinary

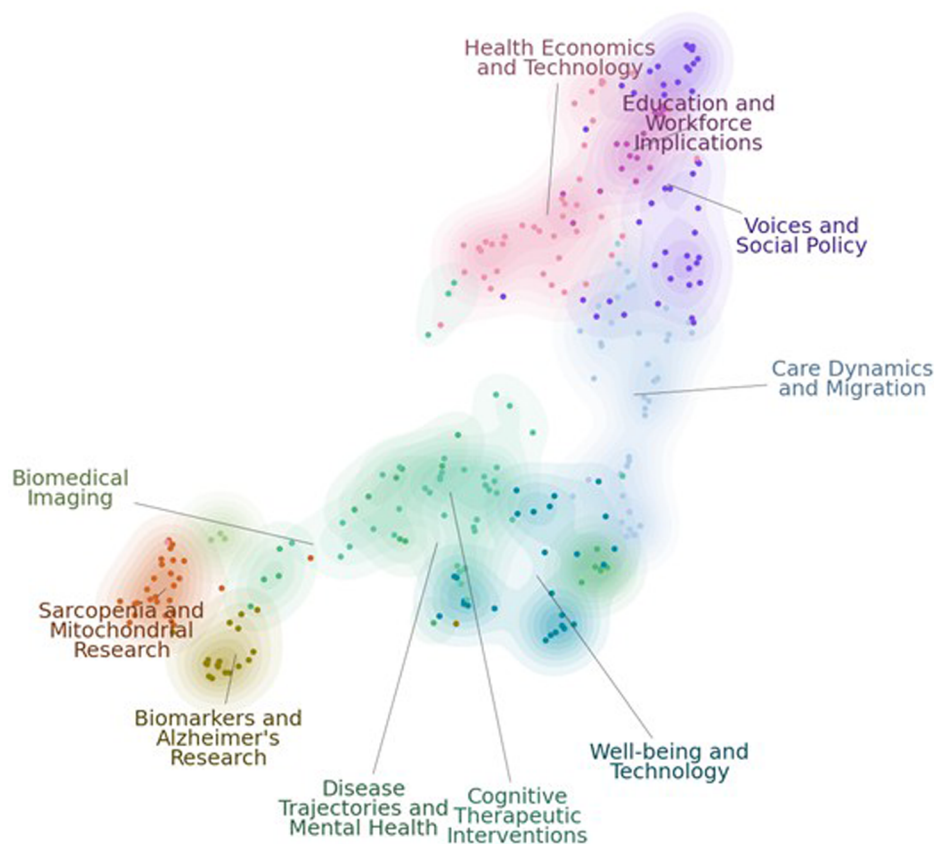


Figure 3. Clustering of 768-dimension vectors into 2-dimension using UMAP (McInnes et al., 2018). Each point shows a paper, and each color indicates an identified cluster.

links in fields like well-being and technology, but greater fragmentation in areas such as cognitive health and social policy. These findings point to both the strengths of the current ecosystem and opportunities to build new synergies, offering guidance for researchers and policymakers.

This approach also benefits broader stakeholders. For institutions, it supports coordination and recognition of emerging strengths; for civil society, it increases transparency on how aging research addresses societal challenges; and for external researchers, it provides an overview that fosters collaboration and reduces duplication. In this way, NLP and network analysis can advance scientific understanding while reinforcing ties between research, policy, and society. Moreover, the use of NLP can play a crucial role in the dissemination phase, as it translates complex and fragmented research landscapes into accessible maps and narratives that can be more easily communicated to non-specialist audiences, policymakers, and civil society stakeholders, thereby fostering broader understanding and uptake of scientific knowledge. The results of the NPL exercise will soon be publicly accessible on a new platform under construction, which will be one of the main legacies of the Program (<http://age-it.data.eu/>).

Measures for maximizing research program impact during its implementation: from scientific reports to the dialogue with the public

To maximize the impact of the Research Program and ensure active engagement with stakeholders, Age-It has developed and is currently implementing a range of complementary initiatives. These efforts are designed to enhance outreach, foster dialogue, and promote the integration of research findings into society via policy and practice.

One of the flagship initiatives is the Age-It Roadshow 2024–2025, a nationwide tour that brings cutting-edge research and innovation on aging directly to local communities. By encouraging direct interaction between scientists, policymakers, and citizens, the Roadshow aims to spark dialogue, raise awareness, and promote a deeper understanding of aging-related challenges across Italy.

Another key element is the Age-It Talk series, a collection of interactive webinars and public events featuring leading experts in aging, healthcare, and social policy. These discussions are intended to demystify complex scientific topics, making them accessible and relevant to people's everyday lives.

Ongoing communication with stakeholders is further supported through a dedicated newsletter (now reaching over 1,400 subscribers) and active social media presence, offering regular updates on program milestones, upcoming events, and opportunities for involvement. These channels play a crucial role in keeping the community informed and engaged. The Age-It Academy adds an educational dimension to the program, offering workshops, training, and online courses aimed at professionals, students, and the broader public. Its goal is to enhance knowledge and foster professional growth in the field of aging studies.

As outlined in the introduction, most dissemination and co-creation activities take place within the individual Spokes or cross-cutting Boards, where stakeholder engagement is stronger and more direct thanks to the close alignment between research topics and civil society practices. We highlight here two examples of participatory approaches within the Age-It Research Program:

one from the Learning, Education, and Active Ageing (LEAA) Board and one within Spoke 4. The LEAA Board has served as a genuine interdisciplinary laboratory on lifelong learning and educational pathways in the context of population aging. Through sustained dialogue across disciplines, experiences, and local contexts, it has mapped, collected, and systematized good educational practices aimed at fostering active aging throughout the life course, with particular emphasis on the value of local resources and existing networks. The picture that emerges is one of broad diversity, reflecting a rich array of initiatives implemented across different territories. The activities of LEAA are further detailed in [Boffo and colleagues \(2025\)](#).

Within Spoke 4 (Trajectories for Active and Healthy Ageing), participatory engagement was exemplified by a long-lasting collaboration with local patient associations. Specific meetings and workshops provided an overview of several use cases and scenarios that will inform future pilot projects, focusing on patients with multimorbidity. Discussions highlighted the importance of multidisciplinary and multi-professional care, integrating psychological assessment, nutrition, and adapted physical activity to improve patient engagement, clinical outcomes, and quality of life. Digital tools, including teleconsultation and apps, supported remote monitoring and enhanced adherence to complex therapies. The co-creation activity of Spoke 4 also emphasized life-course and environmental considerations, such as accessibility and living conditions, alongside the need for coordinated, integrated care supported by nursing coordination. This example illustrates how Spoke 4 operationalized participatory, co-creative strategies to design actionable, patient-centered interventions while fostering collaboration among researchers, clinicians, and civil society stakeholders. All meetings have been documented through dedicated lay summaries available on the Age-It website. A similar approach has been followed also by other Spokes that have organized a series of stakeholder meetings to co-create research activities and discuss the societal implications of emerging scientific results.

Finally, to strengthen its European dimension and contribute to policy dialogue, Age-It has established a strategic partnership with Population Europe, the network of leading demographic research centers. This collaboration ensures that Age-It's insights feed into European policy debates and extend its impact beyond Italy. Together, the two organizations launched a series of High-Level Expert Workshops bringing together international experts from research, policy, business, and civil society to discuss empirical evidence and policy solutions on Age-It's key interdisciplinary themes. A major dissemination event is also planned in Brussels in December 2025 to present Age-It's main outputs to EU policymakers and stakeholders, reinforcing its role in shaping the European agenda on aging and intergenerational solidarity.

Discussion

This paper has addressed the role of co-creation and dissemination strategies within the context of aging research, with a specific focus on the participatory and transdisciplinary approach adopted by the Age-It Research Program. The findings from this case study underscore the critical importance of early stakeholder and citizen engagement, continuous co-creation processes, and adaptive infrastructures for

knowledge mobilization aimed at addressing complex demographic transformations.

The theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature, which we summarized under the idea of epistemic justice and knowledge co-production—with tools ranging from participatory research models (Israel et al., 1998; Kwan et al., 2022) to implementation science approaches such as the Implementation Research Logic Model (Estabrooks & Glasgow, 2023)—find empirical confirmation in the Age-It experience. The participatory orientation of the Research Program, although sometimes not fully realized (cfr. the concept presented above of incremental participatory research), and structured initially through a top-down approach due to procedural constraints and later evolving into a collaborative governance structure, shows the feasibility and benefits of combining both models when time-sensitive contexts demand rapid coordination, without endangering the collection of the perspective of those stakeholders who are most likely to provide an informed, in-depth feedback (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). The subsequent refinement of DIP, based on feedback from the World Café co-creation workshop in Milan, highlighted how stakeholder-driven validation mechanisms can enhance not only the legitimacy but also the effectiveness of strategies in dissemination and implementation science.

The Age-It experience builds on existing approaches for stakeholder involvement and knowledge mobilization, while innovating through the integration of tools and techniques enabled by digital transformation. It aligns closely with the four-step dissemination cycle theorized by Kwan et al. (2022). These steps mirror the Age-It methodology, which emphasizes continuous and iterative evaluation to ensure relevance and contextual alignment.

This strategy was particularly evident in the hybrid (online and offline) dissemination mechanisms employed. The Research Program not only capitalized on the reach and versatility of digital technologies—as emphasized by Farkas et al. (2003) and Ellen et al. (2017)—but also responded to concerns about digital exclusion. WikiAge-It and the Age-It Dashboard exemplify innovative uses of digital platforms for real-time transparency, accessibility of outputs, and horizontal communication among researchers and stakeholders. In line with the arguments of Kwan et al. (2022), these tools leverage the Internet's unparalleled dissemination potential, while being mindful of the risks related to misinformation and unequal access to digital infrastructures.

However, Age-It's strategy deliberately included offline and community-based dissemination methods, recognizing that digital tools alone are insufficient. As demonstrated by Doran and Buffel (2018), interactive and localized events can foster inclusive and meaningful community engagement. Similarly, Age-It employed face-to-face workshops, roadshows, and public discussions, thereby avoiding the systematic exclusion of older stakeholders who are less confident with digital media. This multifaceted strategy ensured a broader spectrum of engagement and helped democratize the dissemination process by ensuring that the diversity of groups involved in it could have positive effects on the range and depth of the collected information.

By targeting primarily stakeholders and associations instead of citizens directly, the Age-It Research Program also started its dissemination activities through an offline event. As done by other successful initiatives, including those undertaken by

Doran and Buffel (2018), during this event, an artist was present to transform the main challenges of the Research Program into visuals that could effectively convey strong yet immediate messages to the audience.

The dissemination initiatives undertaken during the Research Program—including the use of NLP and network analysis, the Age-It Roadshow, editorial plan, talk series, and educational Academy—converge toward a holistic and mission-oriented dissemination model. This model positions dissemination not as a terminal phase of the research cycle, but as a strategic and embedded component aimed at maximizing scientific, social, and political impact.

Limitations

Despite the achievements highlighted above, some critical reflections are warranted. The initial stakeholder identification strategy, although effective under time constraints, may have limited the inclusion of some socially less visible but still relevant grassroots actors and underrepresented communities. Moreover, the reliance on sophisticated digital tools, while innovative, necessitates sustained investment in digital education and literacy, particularly among populations less skilled in information and communications technology. Future implementations would benefit from balancing technological ambition with inclusivity and accessibility, ensuring that all voices can be meaningfully included.

A structural limitation also lies in the sustainability of stakeholder engagement itself. Despite the multiple measures put in place to track and stimulate an active dialogue, fostering genuine co-creation requires more than initial participation only. It demands a continuous and structured exchange of information, feedback, and joint problem-solving, a process that is both time- and resource-intensive. In this light, a significant share of the project's budget should be devoted to stakeholder engagement activities. This includes funding dedicated personnel, communication tools, facilitation processes, and capacity-building efforts. Without such resources, there is a tangible risk that researchers who are pressed by academic timelines and deliverables may prioritize other activities, leading to a passive rather than an active role for stakeholders. True co-creation is not a side activity, but a core pillar of research design and implementation, and should be properly funded and staffed accordingly. For these reasons, we deliberately frame our work as an *incremental participatory approach*. Age-It explicitly involved relevant stakeholders from the outset, despite the considerable challenges of coordinating such a large research program. The concrete, continuous connections with stakeholders, ranging from policymakers and practitioners to civil society organizations and, in some cases, patients, are primarily realized within the Spokes. Each Spoke acts as a large research center that brings together several institutions and an average of 100 researchers, including academics (tenured researchers, post-doctoral fellows, and PhD students) and private sector representatives. This structure allowed for broad yet differentiated forms of participation, while recognizing that a fully participatory approach (from question specification to dissemination) was not always feasible given time and resource constraints.

Conclusion

The Age-It Research Program contributes to debates on the institutional responsibilities of academia in the face of

demographic change. It shows that when dissemination is participatory, digitally supported, and context-sensitive, it can drive innovation in policy and societal narratives on aging. Yet, these processes are complex and uneven, challenged by varying stakeholder engagement, limited time, and the difficulty of translating research into action. Dissemination should therefore be seen not as a fixed success but as a dynamic, evolving element of the program, requiring ongoing reflection and adjustment. Despite these limitations and challenges, to our knowledge the Age-It Research Program represents in Italy and abroad one of the most ambitious, theoretically grounded, and methodologically complex initiatives to promote interdisciplinary research on aging, pursued also through structured and systematic stakeholder engagement. In addition, looking ahead, the possible transformation of Age-It into a permanent network (e.g., in the form of the first “Italian Institute for Aging”) could provide a permanent space where participatory approaches and dissemination practices are not only applied in specific projects but embedded as core principles, contributing to ensure that research on aging remains closely connected and pragmatically responsive to Italian societal needs, by systemically including the voices of older people themselves.

Supplementary material

Supplementary data are available at *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* online.

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Conflict of interest

C.C. serves as the Programme Research Manager for the Age-It Research Program. D.V. served as a co-editor for the supplement in which this article is published. Neither author was involved in the review or decision for the article. All other authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability

Data and materials related to the Age-It Research Program are publicly available through the program’s official website and wiki (<https://wiki-ageit.tech4care.eu/>). The analyses presented in this manuscript are not based on preregistered studies.

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