

Safe(r) Spaces and participation



1. Safe(r) Spaces - Intro: what is this framework?

As facilitators, hosts and co-designers of processes of participation and co-creation, we feel that fostering spaces that are aware of and actively tackle issues of identity, power, privilege, oppression and legitimacy it's part of our responsibilities.

This document outlines a framework for Platoniq to assess its own projects and be accountable in its work to an ongoingly improved set of principles and practices. Our goal is for participants to engage with no harm to their safety and wellbeing but also for participation processes to happen in a radically just way as much as possible. Since Platoniq is often a designer of methodologies that are implemented by external partners and collaborators, we have also developed this set of resources to support their own planning, implementation and evaluation.

This framework has been developed thanks to the inputs of a multitude of people and collectives. Apart from building on Platoniq team's years of experience and reflections on creating offline and online spaces for co-creation, collective intelligence and participation, we have taken inspiration from the work of many feminist and anti-racist groups and materials of organizations such as [Altekio](#), [Art + Feminism Wikipedia](#), [Beautiful Trouble](#), [Black Lives Matter USA](#), [Cibermujeres](#), [Civitas](#), [Crea](#), [Creative Reaction Lab](#), [Design Justice network](#), [El Camino del Élder](#), [Filalagulla](#), [Gendersec / Tactical Tech](#), [New Economy Organisers Network](#), [Seeds for Change](#), [Tactical Tech](#), [The Barefoot Guide connection](#), [Training for Change](#), etc.

As (at Platoniq) we increasingly aim at developing practices centered on social justice in the methodologies we develop and in the projects we design, we believe it is fundamental for us to set ourselves accountable in the first place to the impact our work has and to reflect critically on who is affected by it, and how. This understanding inspires us to adhere to the [principles](#) developed within the Design Justice network and to work towards developing a Mediterranean adaptation and practice.

2. What to use this framework for?

We use this framework:

- To help evaluate and monitor participatory spaces in their inception and design phases and the aftermath of such projects, processes, or events;pace that aims at being more inclusive;
- To think more creatively about how to organize across race, class, gender, nationality, and beliefs.
- To check in on the health of a project and process;
- To reflect on some possible aspects to take into account when co-creating with different communities.

Note about this framework's creation and use:

This framework was created and ideated by Elena Silvestrini and Nadia Nadesan from the Platoniq team with the idea of organising, strategising, collaborating, and co-creating within organisations, communities to even wider spaces of collaborative governance. This does not account for spaces meant for therapy or spaces where the primary purpose is conflict management.

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3. Spaces safe(r) from what?

“Safe(r) spaces” supports the creation of respectful environments for participants. This framework aims to reduce harm and importantly aid to create a space where participants can feel comfortable and express their views and themselves. How a

person understands a space safe (or safe enough) is as varied as human experience: what may be perceived as safe for someone, might not be true for someone else with a different lived experience and vice versa.

In this document, we suggest ways to support participation that are cross cutting and broad. However, we strongly advise each group to develop their own safe(r) space policies and discussions. The framework is centered on the following principles:

- **No harm** - a space that aims to reduce as much as possible the chance of physical and psychological harm to participants attending (this can relate to causing violence and conflict, triggering trauma or mental health issues.)
- **Centering the experiences of those usually marginalised** in connection to the area of the project or its themes
- **Supporting the creation of spaces for marginalised communities and actors** so that they have a seat at the table or the resources to construct their own spaces for collaboration and co-creation
- **Redesign participation** to eliminate or reduce barriers that marginalise or make spaces exclusive due to normative ideas of bodies and capacities
- **Acknowledge and address** social and contextual power in participation processes
- **Use what already works** by utilizing established good practice on site and being conscientious of imposed methods of participation that organizers and facilitators might be bringing (Design justice)

4. Why are we using the term Safe(r) spaces?

As mentioned in the previous section, what is safe for someone, might not be as safe for someone else. Different lived experiences co-exist and intersect in a shared space and group set up. We are aware that promising an absolute safety in a

space or group set up would be false. This is why this framework and many other resources out there, instead of talking about “safe” spaces, uses the term “safer” spaces. Although a collective dimension might never be 100% safe, we think that a lot can be done to strive and support everyone’s comfort. This will be a shared responsibility with the aim of each participant being mindful of their interaction with others and, at the same time, taking the initiative of maintaining their own boundaries. It will also be up to the group as a whole to sustain itself and defend its members.

We are aware that the security and control that is linked to this concept can affect the level of risk, courage and creativity that many times need to be promoted in the processes of innovation and collaborative design. Finding the balance is one of our challenges. In this sense, this framework is a prevention and self-evaluation tool that can be used throughout (before, during and after) participatory processes.

Some pieces of feminist and anti-racist work use the term “[brave](#)” spaces, instead of “safer”. To our understanding, this refers to groups being brave enough to understand and sustain the challenges of dialogue between and within diverse groups. It also criticises the concept of “safety” as too often conflated with “comfort” (especially in groups with mixed experiences of privilege), rather advocating for the need for courage and bravery to sustain being challenged in social justice environments. Whilst the writers of this framework do share such views in the context of educational settings and social justice trainings, we believe that the term “brave” does not apply equally as well in participatory spaces of different kinds, where such concept could put the burden of not being [triggered](#) or hurt on those that need safety the most.

5. Participation from what approaches?

This framework contains questions and contributions that are relevant to a multitude of fields and processes. However, we use it (and believe it is particularly relevant) to:

- **Cultural Heritage**-related participatory processes and activities;
- **Collaborative governance** where state and non governmental actors, communities, organizations work together to address local goods, services, and spaces;
- **Urban regeneration** where various actors and entities strategize and execute plans for neighborhoods to revive and reuse abandoned or semi abandoned spaces;
- **Inclusion processes through cultural heritage** where actors and entities come together to create narratives that sustain heritage as well as build bridges across language, history, and tradition for more inclusive or diverse communities;
- **Mapping and addressing societal issues** surrounding for a given project that affects marginalised communities and actors;
- **Supporting the organising of activist and social justice spaces**;
- **In person facilitation** and organizing. Future versions of this guide will be expanded with references to participation in digital spaces.

6. Glossary of terms structuring this framework

Over the course of the work that has been done at Platoniq, we have developed five different pillars we believe are important to consider when creating or framing a safe(r) space: accessibility, no harm, participating and sharing space, self - rganisation.

Accessibility

Accessibility is assessing the material barriers that participants may or do face and evaluating their impact on the presence of each participant.

No harm

No harm applies to participants and the space. In terms of participants, no harm refers to the care of each participant's mental health and well being as collaborators within a group. As a group, exclusionary practices and prejudices need to be acknowledged and addressed for wider participation and a safer space for more vulnerable participants. Working towards "no harm" also means not relying only on anticipated risks of harming but also actively anticipating unknown risks or unintended harm and beforehand clearing of potential risks with community members/experts.

With reference to no harm to space, the environmental footprint needs to be a consideration for the organisers. No harm intends to care for the space both during and after its use.

Participating & Sharing space

The ideal indicator of individual participation is when the most vulnerable or marginalised within a group feel that they can speak freely and closer to their own voice. As a group, there should be a shared agreement and commitment to an ongoing growth and response to change so that there can be wider participation. Ideally shared values and practices align with

inclusiveness and care. Individually participants should reflect on their own behaviors and be willing to adapt to create a more egalitarian space. However, when safeguards and design cannot mediate a conflict, sharing space is also about deciding how to address accountability within a group.

Purpose

The aim behind sharing a space and creating a process with different actors and communities. The aims and goals of coming together should be agreed upon and ideally co-created with participants involved.

Self - organisation

Self- organisation describes when participants take initiative to develop their own dynamics and goals outside of the parameters set by the organizers. When participants can reshape a project or space to fit their needs they are exercising their power as civic actors. Developing self-organisation allows groups to communicate, self regulate, and self correct, cultivate resilience enabling them to problem solve and become invested in an action, process, or space independent of the convener.

7. Summary table

In the section 9 below you can find questions for facilitators and organisers to monitor and evaluate the participatory spaces and processes with a Safe(r) Spaces Lens. There you will find the main content of this framework, which includes questions and inputs for organisers of participatory spaces. The table included in Section 7 summarises the main key words and concepts you will find further on.

	<i>Pre</i> ◇ Design phase	<i>During</i> ◇ Process phase	<i>Post</i> ◇ Evaluation and accountability
Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Practical needs ❑ Accessibility checklist ❑ Familiar location 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Document digitally ❑ Space physically accessible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Get feedback ❑ Process feedback
No harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Express needs in advance ❑ Others sharing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Express needs ❑ Space cleanliness ❑ Support team visible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Participants reflecting on their participation

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> space <input type="checkbox"/> Internal safe(r) space policy <input type="checkbox"/> Exclusionary expressions <input type="checkbox"/> Cultural competence <input type="checkbox"/> Triggering <input type="checkbox"/> Facilitators' triggers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Participants pausing <input type="checkbox"/> Environment <input type="checkbox"/> Cosy space <input type="checkbox"/> Food and refreshments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Your accountability
Participating & Sharing space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Engagement activities <input type="checkbox"/> Design choices <input type="checkbox"/> Diverse participation <input type="checkbox"/> Diverse team <input type="checkbox"/> Care responsibilities <input type="checkbox"/> Meet in advance <input type="checkbox"/> Relationship building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Roles and expectations <input type="checkbox"/> Doing vs Deciding <input type="checkbox"/> Decision making <input type="checkbox"/> Multiple speeds <input type="checkbox"/> Respectful communication <input type="checkbox"/> Conflict management <input type="checkbox"/> Group agreements <input type="checkbox"/> Diverse contributions <input type="checkbox"/> Group self managing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Satisfaction with sharing space <input type="checkbox"/> Conflicts <input type="checkbox"/> Learning curves

Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Build trust ❑ Your power ❑ Goal setting ❑ Learn what is already working 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Plans into action ❑ Do not reinvent the wheel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Change of purpose ❑ Empower own processes
Self - organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Build in extra time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Shifting the programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Create an autonomous identity

8. Time and length of the process

The framework presented below is relevant for multiple situations, from one off workshops and facilitations to longer term participatory processes. Some of the reflections this document centers and some of the tools and resources provided, however, require groups to be together for a longer period of time in order for cohesion, purpose and collective dynamics to take place and evolve. This could refer to comfort between participants and facilitator(s) and between participants themselves, to the creation of a participatory process with evolving goals and outcomes and to the possibility for the group to sustain working on internal power dynamics and roles.

In our experience, the work that can be carried out with groups in the short term or in a one off workshop is quite different from what can be done when trust and familiarity between participants are developing or when common objectives are set and agreed upon. In order for readers to find the framework more practical and useful, each tip below is accompanied by the

symbol of a watch (🕒) for when we consider the question relevant for both short and long term processes. When the reflection or tool is relevant for longer term processes, we have included two symbols of watches (🕒🕒).

9. DIVE IN: The framework. Questions for facilitators and organizers to monitor and evaluate with a Safe(r) Spaces Lens

These questions are directed at conveners, organisers, and facilitators who are often tasked with designing, monitoring, and evaluating spaces for participation rather than participants themselves. However, the content is definitely relevant for both roles.

Design Phase (The Pre)

Accessibility	<p><u>Practical needs</u>: Have the practical needs of the participants in the space been assessed and addressed so that all participants can access the space without issue? (E.g. does someone need wheelchair access?)</p> <hr/>	🕒
	<p><u>Accessibility checklist</u>: Have you run an accessibility checklist of the spaces you are planning on using? You can find more resources here and here.</p> <hr/>	🕒
	<p><u>Familiar location</u>: Have you considered setting up the meetings in a location that is familiar to the participants?</p>	🕒

No harm

Express needs in advance: Have you given participants an opportunity to express **needs or concerns prior to the start of the process**?






Others sharing space: The level of safety of the space for your participants will depend on the groups and individuals you are working with. However, you might want to reflect on: **who else is sharing the venue** at the same time of your activities? How safe is the area you are in?

Internal safe(r) space policy: Have you considered co-creating a **safe(r) space policy with the group** you are facilitating? You could accompany this process, allowing participants to express their needs and preferences

Excluding expressions: Have you consciously considered ways in which the **structures, images, language and attitudes** you use in your work serve to include or exclude people? What measures as an individual and as a larger group can you do to acknowledge and address them?

Cultural competence: Research to learn more about struggles and histories of the place and assess **your team's level of cultural competence** (what knowledge, skills, and resources can you build on? Where are the gaps?) Who or what organizations can you reach out to to be partners or provide resources?



	<hr/> <p><u>Triggering</u>: If you are working with vulnerable groups or topics that can be particularly triggering (see here), what kind of support for your participants can you plan in advance? Could it be a separate quiet space? Could it be the presence of a professional or someone from participants' support network?</p> <hr/> <p><u>Facilitators' triggers</u>: As a facilitator, you are part of the group context where your workshop or process takes place, although from a different position. What are your triggers that could be activated in a group set up? Is there anything from your personal history you might want to work through before engaging in such activities?</p>	<hr/>  <hr/> 
<p>Participating & Sharing space</p>	<p><u>Engagement activities</u>: What on-the-ground engagement activities have you carried out to invite participation from those who are often excluded from decision-making processes?</p> <hr/> <p><u>Design choices</u>: What kind of process or space design choices can you implement to support empowerment of people who may be on the margins, to participate fully in the group and in the process? E.g. A single member of a minority/diverse group may not feel safe in a group. Including at least two members of a diverse group can help prevent any single person from feeling isolated, or having to feel like a representative of a whole group.</p> <hr/> <p><u>Diverse participation</u>: Are you foreseeing ways to participate that are diverse? This refers to times of the</p>	  <hr/>  <hr/>

day, mixing online and offline interaction, types of contribution to the project, intensity and rhythm of participation.. etc



Diverse team: Build a **diverse organising and facilitation team**: it is invaluable to have a team composed of different genders, backgrounds, cultures and facilitation styles. A wider representation in the organising team can also support the level to which different people can feel comfortable in a shared space.



Care responsibilities: Have you taken into consideration the needs of participants with **care responsibilities**? What can you plan in order to support their involvement? (e.g. child care provision for the face - to - face moments or adapting the time of meeting not to clash with child-friendly routines)











Meet in advance: Sometimes people who are not confident of their own power need some space to **meet together to prepare before** they meet with confident people or groups, so that they can engage on a more equal footing. Have you considered this possibility in the design of your processes?






Relationship building: **Relationship building** can be really key to the creation of a safe(r) space for participation. Could you consider allocating time in the agenda you have in mind (if any) for relaxed



	<p>informal exchanges and conversations between people in the group, without set objectives or structured activities?</p>	
<p>Purpose</p>	<p><u>Build trust</u>: How can you build relationships with the people you (will) work with, so that they trust and understand you?</p> <hr/> <p><u>Your power</u>: As an organiser, what power do you hold over the community being impacted by the project? What can you do to be mindful of this privilege whilst facilitating or/and setting the goals and steps of the process?</p> <hr/> <p><u>Goal setting</u>: What are the goals of the participatory process or conversation? Have the goals been identified and agreed upon by the group or only by specific parts of it?</p> <hr/> <p><u>Learn what is already working</u>: What space is there in the process to address existing good practices participants are bringing to the encounter? Learning from what is already working locally (i.e. not reinventing the wheel) is key to a successful process and it's important in order for participants to feel valued</p>	<div style="display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center;"> <div style="display: flex; gap: 10px; margin-bottom: 10px;">   </div> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <div style="display: flex; gap: 10px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <div style="display: flex; gap: 10px; margin-bottom: 10px;">   </div> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <div style="display: flex; gap: 10px;">   </div> </div>

Self organisation	<p>- <u>Build in extra time</u>: It's important to build in extra time in the programme to allow for shifting the programme if participants have strong feedback about the programme's direction or for participant reflection. It's important to gage if participants want to offer their own time, skills, or ideas outside of a set format to develop their group or the course of the programme.</p>	
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Process Phase (The During)

Accessibility	<p><u>Document digitally</u>: How can you make the participatory process accessible to the people that want to engage but are not present? E.g. you could track it digitally, documenting processes, meetings, decisions... (For example using Decidim)</p> <hr/> <p><u>Space physically accessible</u>: Is the space physically accessible to all participants? Is the space digitally accessible (is there a way for participants to see what's happening online during or post the event) to all participants? If not how and why? How might this be adjusted during the duration of the collaboration?</p>	 
No harm	<p><u>Express needs</u>: Invite participants to think of things they want to ask the group in order to feel more comfortable and safe. Try to phrase statements as "positive" instead of a long list of 'no'. You might want to be aware that not everyone (and not always) will feel like they can express this or request it to the group. This could be an iterative process.</p>	

Space cleanliness: How is the space's **cleanliness and accessibility** maintained? Who is in charge of this care responsibility? Reflecting on this aspect is important if you want to be mindful of power dynamics in the group and with external people. What often happens in mixed groups is that people who have been socialised with being in charge of care responsibilities (e.g. women) will carry out this task whereas others will not consider it to be something for them to reflect on. You might want to remind the group that this should be a shared responsibility, one that helps everyone be in a pleasurable space.



Support team visible: **Make your support and safety team visible**. If you are able to, it might be helpful to identify members of the facilitating team appointed to supporting participants that need talking, help, comforting.. You might want to make the team visible, for example by having them wear a special pin or symbol.



Participants pausing: What spaces exist **for participants to take a minute to themselves**? Sometimes collective moments can overwhelm or tire participants, even more so when the group is working on emotionally charged topics, reliving traumatic experiences or when introverted participants are invited to interact with others for a long time. You might want to foresee pausing or individual moments in your schedule to support all types of participants or moments.



Environment: How can you be reducing harm to the **environment** during your activities? (E.g. reducing plastic consumption, recycling, lights.. etc)



Cosy space: **Making your meeting venue a pleasurable one** helps participants feel more comfortable, can you make the space cosier? (Eg. plan activities in the surrounding nature, use cushions, flowers, cloths..etc)



Food and refreshments: **Food and refreshments** are an important, but sometimes overlooked, part of creating a space where participants feel relaxed and comfortable. Try and remember catering for these and be mindful of bringing things that can be eaten / drunk by all those present (E.g. Check dietary requirements with regards to meat, alcohol etc).



**Participating
& Sharing
space**

Roles and expectations: Clarify **roles and expectations** of participants in terms of contributions to the process. Who is doing what?



Doing vs Deciding: Who is **doing**? **Who is decision making?** Who is setting the agenda? Are the roles of those leading these different facets of the space being taken by those with more authority within the project/ space? If participants are interested in better facilitating their meetings, you can point at facilitation resources like [this](#).



Decision making: What are the **dynamics around decision making**? What could make it more open and egalitarian? What decision making methods could you point the group to?














Multiple speeds: Have you foreseen the possibility of **multiple speeds of intensity of involvement** of participants? E.g. if some parts of the group can only take on a more limited amount of work and others can contribute with more intensity, how does that work? What can you do to make this combination smoother and fairer?





Respectful communication: Can you support participants in creating a space where to **communicate respectfully** their different views? E.g. You could mention [Active listening](#) or point at [Nonviolent communication](#) resources.












	<hr/> <p><u>Conflict management</u>: Have you thought about conflict management practices, methods and tools? What can you do if a conflict arises between participants in the group?</p> <hr/> <p><u>Group agreements</u>: What are the common guidelines, expectations, and limits set by the group as a whole? Has the group addressed the idea of harm, accountability, and conflict? If so how? Who has spoken the most and the least concerning these themes? You can find a useful resource on group agreements here.</p> <hr/> <p><u>Diverse contributions</u>: Value and recognize the knowledge and strengths of each participant without boxing them into a specific field or task.</p> <hr/> <p><u>Group self managing</u>: The most successful exchanges are often not facilitated by outsiders, because it is then more likely that participants discover their own best way of sharing, working and learning. Have you considered ways for you to be on the sidelines and for the group to self-manage (while you are present and available if things become problematic)?</p>	<hr/>  <hr/>   <hr/>   <hr/>  
<p>Purpose</p>	<p><u>Plans into action</u>: How can you assist participants in turning their intentions and plans into actions and achievements? How can you help them clarify this without imposing external agendas?</p>	 

	<hr/> <p><u>Do not reinvent the wheel:</u> An important part of participative processes (especially when you are planning on innovating or creating new ideas) is to avoid “reinventing the wheel”. What can you and the group do to discover and value what has historically and recently been working in the same context or in a similar one?</p>	<hr/> 
<p>Self-organisation</p>	<p><u>Shifting the programme:</u> Have participants voiced a need or objective that wasn't part of the plan? It's important to prioritize time for the organising team to make adjustments and create spaces for dialog and collaboration. These shifts and changes can often be taxing on the organisers, so it's important to prioritise and set yourself a deadline to end the work day.</p>	

Evaluation (The Post)

<p>Accessibility</p>	<p><u>Get feedback:</u> Getting feedback from participants on what could have made their participation smoother or to avoid excluding people it's important. How can you involve group members in this process? Can it be a survey to ask feedback and suggestions? Could it be something more creative?</p> <hr/> <p><u>Process feedback:</u> Was there a space for participant feedback throughout the process or you are only getting to discussing this in the final evaluation phase?</p>	 <hr/> 
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<p>No harm</p>	<p><u>Participants reflecting on their participation:</u> Try and find ways to reflect on the following: how was the space left by the participants? How do the participants understand their participation within the process? Was it extractive or empowering? Did it reinforce feelings of exclusion or inclusion?</p> <hr/> <p><u>Your accountability:</u> Is there anything you need to be accountable for in the process? Did you cause any harm to anyone (even if without meaning to)? What can the next steps look like to avoid pretending nothing happened? What can you do differently next time?</p>	 <hr/> 
<p>Participating & Sharing space</p>	<p><u>Satisfaction with sharing space:</u> How can you ask participants how satisfied they were with sharing and listening within the space and how what allowed them to speak more or less within the group?</p> <hr/> <p><u>Conflicts:</u> Did conflicts arise? How were they addressed? Next time, could there be something you could do as an organiser to prevent them? (For example, support different feelings and needs to emerge earlier in the process thanks spaces dedicated to emotional communication)</p> <hr/> <p><u>Learning curves:</u> What good practices were established during this process? What learning curves were important to the progress of discussion and dialog in terms of group dynamics and interpersonal communication? How were participants accountable to each other and their shared space?</p>	 <hr/>   <hr/>  

Purpose	<p><u>Change of purpose:</u> Did the purpose of the process change? If so, why and how?</p> <hr/> <p><u>Empower own processes:</u> Did the process empower participants to facilitate their own reflections and learning processes?</p>	 <hr/> 
Self organisation -	<p><u>Creating an autonomous identity:</u> Did the participants find ways to self regulate, develop their own values and priorities as a group? Did the space allow for this self expression? How?</p>	