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RIECS-Concept: Conceptualizing a Pan-European Research Infrastructure for Citizen Science

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Citizen Science (CS) is evolving rapidly, driven by digital technologies that make data collection and public participation more accessible. However, these technologies also introduce challenges such as complexity and fragmentation. Many projects addressing similar research questions use inconsistent methodologies, making it difficult to compare and integrate results. Fragmentation is worsened by budget constraints, limiting data management to individual projects and reducing the overall effectiveness of CS.

To address these issues, the European Commission has launched RIECS-Concept (Towards a Pan-European Research Infrastructure for Excellent Citizen Science 2025–2027). The initiative aims to establish a unified research infrastructure that can be integrated into the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI). RIECS will provide services and resources to bridge gaps between CS communities, fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration and improving data quality. Co-designed over the next decade, this infrastructure seeks to prevent further fragmentation.

RIECS-Concept is led by Ibercivis and co-coordinated with ECSA, bringing together a consortium of 12 partners, including key organizations such as Citizen Science Global Partnership, IIASA, and CSIC. The project will last three years and aims to build a strong foundation for the future of Citizen Science in Europe.

RIECS-Concept has three key objectives. The first is to assess the feasibility of developing this infrastructure by addressing current challenges and opportunities in CS. This includes creating an open inventory of technological components—services and resources—that will form the foundation of RIECS. The catalogue will then be refined and interconnected to address both technological and scientific challenges, linking with other Research Infrastructures like EOSC. Additionally, a unified model for integrating data and metadata from diverse sources will be developed to ensure consistency and interoperability. The focus will initially be on three domains: environmental observations, health, and climate change.

The second objective is to create a strategic roadmap for the infrastructure's future lifecycle. This roadmap will provide actionable steps for decision-makers, focusing on governance, sustainability, and long-term viability. It will be co-designed with stakeholders, including funding agencies and end-users, to ensure the infrastructure meets their needs.

The third objective is to promote an open, participatory approach to governance. RIECS-Concept will engage diverse stakeholders from science, technology, policy, and society in the co-design and roadmapping processes, ensuring the infrastructure is shaped by those who will use it and serves the broader CS community.

In conclusion, RIECS-Concept represents a critical step towards creating a unified Citizen Science infrastructure in Europe and globally. By addressing fragmentation and ensuring long-term sustainability, the project will foster cross-disciplinary collaboration, improve data quality, and help CS projects achieve meaningful societal and scientific outcomes.

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