

You are kindly invited to the public defense to obtain the degree of

## **DOCTOR OF ADULT EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES**

of **drs. Toon Vercauteren**

Which will take place on the **21st of October** at 17h30 CET  
Building D, Room D.0.05– [VUB Main Campus Brussels](#)  
Pleinlaan 2 – 1050 Brussel

## **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN LATER LIFE: A MULTILEVEL EXPLORATION OF MULTIDIMENSIONAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF OLDER ADULTS**

### **JURY**

#### **INTERN:**

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You are also invited to the reception afterwards.

Please confirm your attendance before the 16th of October via [this form](#)

## SUMMARY

This PhD dissertation investigates the multidimensional civic engagement of older adults through a micro, meso, and macro perspective, integrating individual characteristics, the living environment, and broader societal structures. Civic engagement is widely recognised as a key factor in promoting healthy and active ageing and in mitigating social exclusion. However, existing research often focuses narrowly on formal volunteering and political engagement, and individual-level determinants, overlooking other dimensions such as informal help, associational and digital engagement, as well as the influence of contextual factors.

Three aims, therefore, guide the research:

1. To map civic engagement profiles of older adults.
2. To identify multilevel factors that shape civic engagement.
3. To integrate micro, meso, and macro-level factors to understand how they interact.

To address aim 1, the first study uses data from the European Quality of Life Survey to identify six profiles of civic engagement among older adults through latent class analysis. It shows that engagement is multidimensional as some people are active in several areas, while others focus on just one, often informal caregiving. Those with higher socio-structural resources tend to engage more broadly.

To address aims 2 and 3, three complementary studies examine how civic engagement is shaped by and embedded in context. The first study, a theoretical paper, applies an ecological framework to explore how civic engagement is influenced by factors at the individual (micro), neighbourhood (meso), and societal (macro) levels. It highlights how these levels interact and jointly shape older adults' engagement. The second study, a scoping review, focuses on the living environment. It finds that strong social networks, accessible infrastructure, and inclusive communities support engagement, while social isolation, poor accessibility, and fragmented neighbourhoods can hinder it. These social and physical factors are closely linked, and the factors vary depending on the context and the type of engagement. The final study uses multilevel analysis based on European Quality of Life Survey data to show how neighbourhood and national conditions shape civic engagement in later life. Older adults are more likely to engage when they have access to neighbourhood amenities like public spaces and services. In contrast, neighbourhood problems are linked to lower engagement. At the macro level, higher national development supports overall civic engagement and strengthens the positive impact of good local conditions, especially for associational and political engagement.

Together, these findings underscore two key messages:

- Civic engagement is multidimensional: not just in what older adults do, but in how they combine different forms of engagement.
- Context matters: civic engagement is co-defined by interacting factors at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

Hence, this dissertation contributes to a more nuanced and integrated understanding of civic engagement in later life. It calls for policy measures that recognise the full spectrum of engagement and address structural barriers through layered, context-sensitive interventions.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Toon Vercauteren obtained his Educational Bachelor's Degree in Secondary Education, with a focus on History, Dutch, and Economics, from Artevelde University of Applied Sciences in 2019. He continued his academic journey at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, where he earned a Master's degree in Adult Educational Sciences in 2021. That same year, he began his PhD at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, where he is currently affiliated with the Society and Ageing Research Lab (SARLab). During his doctoral research, Toon was part of the Belgian team of the transnational CIVEX project, which investigated the exclusion from civic engagement among a diverse older population, exploring its features, lived experiences, and policy implications.