

## PRACTICE POLICY BRIEFING

# Participatory Action Research

## Engaging marginalised communities in policy and practice

### Findings and Recommendations

- People affected by policymakers' decisions should be more actively included in policy design and policy application. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a methodology devised for this purpose. It offers a means of ensuring that the voices of those affected by a policy decision directly interact with those implementing the policy.
- PAR has a proven track record of improving the participation of marginalised communities. Public institutions should consider using PAR to engage these communities in the affirmation and protection of their rights.
- Government currently exercise control over immigration policy by adopting restrictive and punitive policies such as No Recourse to Public Funds. This can leave families destitute in situations where further restrictive policies affecting access to public services are already making them increasingly fearful of taking their children to schools and hospitals.
- Families with children living in the UK for longer than 7 years should be granted leave to remain.
- Families with children should not be designated as having No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

### Introduction and background

This briefing explains the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) with marginalised groups of people. In essence these were people who experience barriers in interacting with representatives of social policy and practice on a daily basis.

This briefing shares our experiences and gives practical examples of how we have used PAR with a group of migrant families who find themselves in a situation of having No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF).

For those who lack access to power, any opportunity to express their views and experiences is better than total silence and frustration. For example the Grenfell Tower responses demonstrate how a group of people reacts to not

just the tragedy, but to hearing themselves and their views represented in public for the very first time.

Listening and including the voices of those affected is directly relevant for contentious but crucial policy areas. Immigration policy has in general become more restrictive, with the message of 'control' at the heart of public and policy debate. The case of families designated as NRPF indicates how controlled, restrictive and punitive immigration policy has become in its current practices. Where once it was the case that newly-arrived migrants could be denied benefits, even if it meant making British-born children destitute, a protracted slippery slope has led towards restricting benefits for other migrants, and beyond that to restricting access to *public services* such as health or education.

Most people without recourse to public funds are ethnic minorities. From the time when the SS Empire Windrush landed in 1948, bringing much-needed workers from the West Indies to the UK, race and immigration have been directly linked, though more recently the link has been less clear if not broken, particularly when contrasting 'EU' with 'non-EU' migrants. While non-EU migrants clearly have fewer protections and remain vulnerable to Britain's more restrictive immigration policies, the rise in reported hate crime post-Brexit has shown how all people seen as 'the other' can be affected by a xenophobic narrative.

### PASAR – The Participatory Arts and Social Action Research project

Our project has involved working with migrant families who have been designated NRPF. They have been marginalised, and deeply affected by poverty and social isolation. They are also more likely to experience homelessness or insecure accommodation, and sometimes economic or sexual exploitation, as a consequence of their vulnerable position. This group and other marginalised communities are often seen as unable to engage in dialogues about the way we live together and how we organise the everyday processes of living in society.

We investigated how PAR can engage with marginalised and 'hard to reach' communities in order to generate new

insights. PAR methods were an important way in which to value the knowledge of these marginalised groups and help bring them into conversation with practitioners and policymakers (Erel et al., 2017; O'Neill, 2017).

## What is *No Recourse to Public Funds*?

[Section 115](#) of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (IAA) states that a person will have 'no recourse to public funds' if they are subject to immigration control; public funds include welfare benefits and public housing. In recent years, the definition of people who are not eligible for public funds due to their immigration status has been widening. Find more details at: <http://www.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/Pages/Home.aspx>

## Participatory Action Research in policy and practice

- PAR ensures policy and practice interventions are relevant, appropriate and inclusive.
- Participants become important social actors and agents for change.
- All voices are valued in finding solutions and outcomes within PAR.
- PAR allows participants to play a key role in knowledge production, finding solutions, researching or measuring wider social impact.
- PAR offers an inclusive, community-driven, grassroots and 'bottom up' approach to policy and practice development.

## Participatory theatre and walking mobile methods in the PASAR project

We used the PAR methods of participatory theatre and walking during weekly 2-hour workshops with a group of 20 mothers, all Black women (of African or Caribbean descent or origin) with young children. The workshops took place over a 4-month period and involved two partner organisations, [Praxis](#) and [Counterpoint Arts](#); and an independent videographer, [Marcia Chandra](#). The Runnymede Trust supported the project's dissemination, including the policy event and this briefing.

**Participatory Theatre** (<http://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/pasar>) is the method we employ to connect with the public, through emotional and embodied group storytelling and engagement with social exclusion, in order to reflect on and enact social change (Kaptani and Yuval Davis, 2008).

**Playback** is an original form of improvisational theatre, which engages directly with the audience and participants. Audience members are invited to tell stories about their lives and watch them being enacted by a group of professional actors, who play these stories back to them.

**Forum theatre** is where participants construct dramatic scenes of their choice, based on their personal experiences

of a difficult situation, conflict or dilemma. They perform the scene to the other participants, who intervene by taking the place of the main character(s) in order to develop strategies for changing the course of the action (Boal, 1979).



**Walking Methods/mobile mapping:** As a research method walking with research participants is embodied, relational and sensory and can also be revelatory (O'Neill and Hubbard, 2010). Walking facilitates a shared viewpoint and empathic witnessing (Hedden and Turner, 2012; Myers, 2010). It also facilitates a collective story/collaborative knowledge production to emerge about participants' connections to place and space and can also equalise power relations between the participants (O'Neill, 2017).



## From Margins to Centre: PAR brings marginalised groups into dialogue with policy and practice

A policy event brought together key actors (policymakers, practitioners, activists, artists/performers, researchers). It directly involved the people affected by NRPF policies in dialogue and in exchanging policy and practice ideas.

By using four distinct formats, the event maximised different modes of engaging and connecting participants, activists and practitioners. Beginning with keynote talks by politicians and legal practitioners we intended to raise the public profile of the issues.

The focal point of the event was a presentation by the group of women who live with NRPF of a performance that we created together, showing the impact of NRPF in their lives – allowing them to move from the margins to centre stage by sharing their experiences with policy and practice professionals.

What we did:	It was useful to:
<p><b>Playback theatre</b> recognised through artistic means the difficulties of living under an NRPF regimen not only on a cognitive level but importantly on an 'affective' level.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validate participants' experiences and to build a community, exchange information and resources, building their social capital.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Forum theatre</b> enacted scenes of conflict and the dilemmas mothers faced due to their exclusion as racialised, migrant mothers, often involving demeaning encounters with service providers, employers, social workers and teachers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflect on exclusionary policy and service practices.</li> <li>• Identify practical and policy-based solutions, individually and collectively as a group.</li> </ul>
<p>We undertook <b>visualisation</b> exercises using their everyday routes and places where they felt, for example: happy/unhappy; most at ease/most uncomfortable/fearful. Participants then drew individual <b>maps</b>. The maps were then used to facilitate the walks, defining a space for stories and voices to be heard.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show the mundane aspects of their everyday routes, for example, moving between their accommodation, the park, taking transport, going to school, to the supermarket and strolling with their children.</li> <li>• The commonality of experience shown here is useful for building empathy, connections and shared understanding with other social groups who do not experience exclusion.</li> </ul>
<p>Each participant did a <b>walk</b> taking along the maps they had drawn with members of the research team. During these walks they took video clips, and shared their thoughts and experiences about anything that captured their interest or aspects of their lives they wanted to share</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show the often difficult, time-consuming nature of the daily routes they are forced to navigate as a result of poverty, social exclusion and their status as marginalised citizens.</li> <li>• Highlight the inappropriate dwellings in which they are often cohabiting with others in circumstances full of difficulties and risks.</li> </ul>
<b>Both PAR approaches:</b>	
<p>Generate new knowledge on how marginalised groups, such as women living under NRPF, internalise self-blaming, anti-migrant, racist and sexist attitudes from services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build individual and group capacity to break isolation, build resilience.</li> <li>• Create social networks with the other women.</li> <li>• Connect with policy and practice stakeholders outside of stereotyped notions as 'scroungers', 'impostors' or 'illegal migrants', but as citizens who contribute and claim their rights.</li> </ul>
<p>Reveal the 'hidden' precarious and fragile lives of individuals from marginalised groups.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reveal the importance of generating an understanding of marginalised people's lives, to understand the 'feel' of people's lives and the pressures they experience.</li> </ul>
<p>Help participants to share experiences of exclusion in the workplace, at the children's school, with social workers, at social services and within the family.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show that for migrant families living under NRPF, issues of discrimination, exclusion and marginalisation are systemic, not individual.</li> </ul>
<p>As a social intervention tool, both methods facilitate the group's creativity and thinking around social action, change and policy development.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a crucial site for collective mobilisation and empowerment for women living under NRPF.</li> </ul>

A session of small-group discussions then saw the women engage in more detailed conversations with conference participants, including a wide range of activists and practitioners (on migration, families, arts, equalities).

During the final session, a roundtable with NGOs, charitable trusts and activists reflected on knowledge shared during the day. We also debated the way forward in both policy and practice for families with NRPF, and, more broadly, for marginalised families living in poverty.

## Two mothers reflect on the policy event

*That was really, really great because we tried to talk to them ... there was a man in [my] group – I think he doesn't really know much about what we are doing, ... he talked to me and another mother, and you know, he realised that people [living under NRPF] are really, really going through a lot. (mother 1)*

*It's good for them to see. I think when they [policy and practitioners] see, they know. Maybe they'll do something about that, so I think it's good. Yeah, I think it's good. (mother 2)*

## Key benefits of the PAR event:

- Community building
- Knowledge exchange
- Co-production of knowledge
- Transformative space
- Breaking social isolation
- Bridging the empathy gap

## Challenges for PAR

- 1. Financial costs:** PAR can sometimes be a costly process, taking into account staff costs of conducting research, the need to bring in a trained arts specialist to work with participants, and the wish to financially reimburse participants for their time attending sessions. Yet, by avoiding the social cost of extracting participants' experiences and knowledge for 'free', projects can contribute to democratising knowledge.
- 2. Power relations:** There is a danger of assuming that all actors hold equal status in the co-production of knowledge, as the power differentials between researcher and researched may be disguised.
- 3. Time and labour:** It is important to have the necessary time to build trust, skills and community enthusiasm for collaborative projects. Sometimes it can take months to undertake the work. Also the associated costs of emotional labour that go into much of this work (which is often disguised) can go unrecognised.

- 4. Managing expectations:** Researchers, policymakers and practitioners using PAR approaches to engage marginalised communities need to manage expectations, as they are having to tread a careful path between generating sufficient interest to encourage participation, valuing the contribution of the participants themselves, and not raising false hopes.

## Runnymede's Director, Omar Khan, reflects on the event:

*Listening to the women affected by NRPF revealed just how far Britain has pushed these families to the margins of our society. Personal stories were at times heart-breaking but the women had developed strong support networks among one another while the PAR method allowed them to express their experiences in a safe environment. If more policymakers listened to the people affected by policies – including NRPF – those policies would be more effective as well as more just.*

## Conclusion

Initiatives like PAR can and should run parallel with action to address inequalities and improve NRPF groups' access to services and eventually to benefits as a progression.

There is a potential to carry out activities like PAR in a variety of locales and situations where the appropriate personnel are already active. Theatre groups, amateur and professional, working in schools or youth institutions, could be encouraged to expand into these areas with local authority or national government support.

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