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“It has been a beautiful journey”: Reflections on participatory action research from the Rights in Action project

**Dr Paul Pearson and Dr Laura Robertson,
The Poverty Alliance, February 2025**





The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together with our members, we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty. Our members include grassroots community groups, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

The Poverty Alliance is recognised as a charity by the Inland Revenue. Reference No: SCO19926

Disclaimer

The views in this report are those of the researchers and opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Poverty Alliance or our members.

Funders

Rights in Action is funded by the Scottish Government's Equality and Human Rights Fund, managed and supported by Inspiring Scotland.



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Overview

In June 2022, the Poverty Alliance launched two participatory research projects, as part of our Rights in Action (RIA) programme, funded by the Scottish Government Equality and Human Rights fund and supported by Inspiring Scotland. To begin, we recruited two groups of four community researchers, with the support of two Poverty Alliance members: Maryhill Integration Network (MIN) and Saheliya.

The projects aimed to empower these community researchers, each of whom has lived experience of the asylum system, by enhancing their knowledge of human rights and rights-based approaches. Following this, both groups received training to develop their research skills, enabling them to conduct research in their chosen areas—the right to education and the right to health. As part of this process, the researchers also received training in policy and media, with the collective aim of empowering them to name and claim their rights, carry out research on issues important to them and their communities, and take meaningful action.

These topics were selected because the community researchers identified them as human rights issues for people navigating the asylum system. This led to research projects utilizing methods such as interviews, focus groups and photovoice, and the creation of outputs including research reports, a learning event for stakeholders, and a touring photovoice exhibition.

This report provides an overview of the projects, detailing the processes followed, the approach to participation, and the training provided. It also discusses the outputs of the project and offers broader reflections from the Poverty Alliance researchers who supported the projects. The invaluable feedback provided by the community researchers regarding their experiences further informs the content of this report.

Key reflections from supporting the participatory action research projects as part of our Rights in Action programme include:

1. Ensuring clarity of expectations of community researchers and the Poverty Alliance researchers and the aims of participatory action research projects at the outset, but also throughout, is essential to ensure community researchers feel supported and empowered.
2. Exploring any training needs, including around skills gaps beyond conducting research, such as public speaking and policy awareness, should take place at the beginning of a project and in 1:1 conversations so community researchers feel comfortable to share any knowledge gaps or training needs.
3. Supporting participation and removing barriers to full participation is a key part of conducting participatory action research projects. Choice and flexibility around vouchers received for their participation, food and travel received positive feedback from the community researchers. However, reflections on the process for providing laptops and wi-fi to community researchers included the need to identify any individual needs around development of IT skills at the outset of the project.
4. Opportunities for building ownership and empowerment should be explored throughout the participatory action research process. One key reflection from the process was that the community researchers could have been further supported to lead the delivery of sessions/activities, which we have built into the next stages of this project.



Our approach to participatory action research

The participatory research approach was developed using the 'Participatory Action, Human Rights, and Capability Approach' (PAHRCA) as the guiding research methodology, drawing on a previous project that adopted participatory action research alongside human rights and capabilities approaches and included research of lone mothers' experiences of the recession in Scotland.ⁱ The key stages of PAHRCA - development and capacity building, inquiry/data gathering/analysis, and voice/action/outcome – in addition to the underpinning principles of co-construction of knowledge, participation, and empowerment, served as a useful framework for planning the RIA participatory action research projects.

A variety of resources were employed to develop plans for the sessions and activities, including the PAHRCA toolkitⁱⁱ, resources from the Re-Invest projectⁱⁱⁱ, the Knowledge is Power toolkit developed by the Scottish Community Development Centre and the Poverty Alliance^{iv}, and Durham University's Participatory Action Research Toolkit^v. The plan for the first five sessions focused on building relationships, providing introductory training on human rights and research skills, and creating spaces for discussion.

Supporting participation

The eight Community Researchers (CRs) were provided with support and resources to facilitate their participation in the project. This included essential equipment such as laptops and internet access, which were available for the duration of the project. The CRs found the equipment to be both helpful and sufficient, meeting the project's requirements effectively. The laptops proved particularly useful for tasks such as preparing presentations and reviewing the report. Additionally, they served purposes beyond the project, such as studying and assisting with children's homework. However, one CR mentioned that more time could have been dedicated to utilizing the laptops during the sessions.

Participation vouchers were provided, and whilst the choice and flexibility to select between different vouchers was welcomed, it was also highlighted that an option such as a pre-paid card would be beneficial. This would enable the CR's - some of whom were subject to Home Office restrictions - to use their vouchers as and where they wish. Whilst the voucher process was not able to be changed during the process, it was reported that a positive feedback loop was established and that "everything I said was taken into account."

In evaluation interviews, CRs shared reflections on how different aspects of supporting participation had been considered (i.e. going beyond just providing transport expenses which is their experience often in other projects). One CR said that she felt that their time had been valued by the Poverty Alliance and that it was important that she could think about her children (with the choice of participation vouchers).

Developing the project focus

Both groups began by identifying human rights issues that were important to them. Through a series of activities, we explored specific areas of human rights relevant to each member. The discussions revealed significant concerns about the lack of choice and the barriers to participation in society faced by people navigating the asylum system.

One group chose to focus on the right to education, identifying it as an area where asylum seekers encounter specific challenges in realising their rights. The other group selected the right to health, with a particular emphasis on mental health and wellbeing. They highlighted this as a critical issue among asylum seekers, noting that it is another area where rights are often not realised.



The appendix to this report provides an overview of the sessions that structured the projects, illustrating the journey participants underwent to enhance their skills and understanding of the research process and human rights, and to then put this knowledge into practice.

Community researchers' experiences

Skills, knowledge and experience gained

The training was designed to build and enhance a wide range of skills and knowledge in both research and human rights. These sessions were interactive, fostering a collaborative environment where the researchers "worked as a team." The CRs emphasized the value of the training, particularly in research methods, ethical practice, human rights, and media and communication. Human rights training, a central element of the project, was especially impactful; it "helped make more sense... it enables you to see the difference between what the law says and what is happening in practice." While this training informed their research practices, it also had a personal impact. One CR reflected that the human rights training helped them better understand their own rights: *"The session was very informative and knowledgeable for me to understand my rights as I am living in Scotland."*

Photo from session on economic, social and cultural rights



The media and communication training provided by the Poverty Alliance's Communications Officer was singled out as being excellent, and part of a development of "new skills that I will use for my whole career." The CRs highlighted that this was of particular value when framing the research and presenting the research findings and recommendations to the Scottish Parliament. This training was delivered by Lydia Murphy, the Rights in Action Development Officer, and David Eyre, the Communications Officer at the Poverty Alliance. Training on human rights was identified as essential, and this took place during the second session. The CRs all gave positive feedback on the human rights training.

In the evaluation interviews, CRs generally expressed positive feedback regarding the content of the sessions. However, one CR noted that not everyone felt equally involved, as some members of the group were more confident in participating than others. Reflecting on her experience with another project that offered courses such as confidence building, she suggested that similar support could have been beneficial in this context. Despite this, the sessions were praised for their facilitation. The CRs emphasized that the skills and knowledge they gained significantly enhanced their CVs and future employability. One CR specifically appreciated the research officer's approach, saying, *"She hears us, gives us time, and is very kind. I love the way she is with us; she gives everyone the time to speak."*



Another way that some of the group felt empowered was through new knowledge about the education system (e.g. scholarships for asylum seekers vary between universities), and strategies to support mental health and wellbeing that they could use to support others.

A CR shared the research report with her college lecturer who then asked her to give a presentation to the class on the findings. Her college then used their discretion enabling her to move full-time, meaning that she would now complete her college course in three rather than four years and go onto university. Another CR submitted the project report that they had authored as part of a successful university application. We were able to signpost another CR to get advice and support on college course options and they have since started a college course.

Wider staff role

The sessions were typically delivered by 1-2 members of staff, with additional support for training. The CRs praised the welcoming environment and the wider team for a general atmosphere that was “calm and nice, the staff are lovely”, with the CRs each wishing to thank “all the team”, including “the Poverty Alliance and the funders.” The welcoming and inclusive environment created by the staff helped to provide an unintended benefit of the project as highlighted by one CR who highlighted that “it has enabled me to understand workplace environments and culture in Scotland.” This led to a call to increase the interaction with other organisations during the project to enable CRs to grow this knowledge and forge wider links and networks.

“You give your time, and you get something, and it helps you and it makes you mentally relaxed and confident. The staff, Laura and Fiona, always there for help and to facilitate.”

Positive impact on mental health and wellbeing

The CRs each highlighted the positive impact that taking part in the project had on their own mental health and wellbeing. The environment was described as “very relaxed, we laugh, we eat, we talk.” One CR highlighted that the project had been a space that “was therapeutic, being able to talk about things that I have been holding on to.” This was highlighted by another CR who highlighted that taking part in the project had helped improve their own mental health and had been “a safe space to share my experience, no judgement.” One CR discussed how this had eased their fear of sharing their own experience and helped them regain their confidence and “feel like I am another person today.” Whilst some of the CRs had been friends and colleagues prior, it was remarked by one member of the group that the project had helped to form a “stronger unit with my peers” and was a space where they had “enjoyed every moment, every minute.”

Outputs and impact

The right to education group

The right to education group produced a research briefing on the right to education^{vi}, informed by the focus groups they had carried out. This output was shared widely and was informed by a meeting with Professor John McKendrick in his capacity as Commissioner for Fair Access to discuss some of the emerging findings from the research. Following this, a launch event was held in person which was attended by a range of stakeholders from across the education sector.

The launch event received a lot of positive feedback from attendees. Attendees shared that the research findings had really increased their awareness of the barriers asylum seekers face. Through the event, the group were invited to speak at the College Development Network conference in June. A few of the attendees said they would like to see a



network for college and university advisors to bring greater consistency to asylum seekers' experiences and to share knowledge.

The dedication and time that the CRs invested in preparing for the event was central to the success of the event. Each of the CRs wrote their individual contributions for the presentation, and made some revisions based on the feedback from the wider Poverty Alliance team. For one of the CRs, this was the first time that she had delivered a presentation in public. In the evaluation interview, one of the CRs said that she hopes that the project is a game changer. She said that asylum seekers are the 'unseen' and believed that the project could help a lot of people. She said that the process "was wonderful for making change".

The right to health group

The project produced two main outputs: an in-depth research report^{vii} and a photovoice exhibition. The project's impact has been widespread and is ongoing. The project exceeded the expectations of the CRs, with one CR highlighting that they had "never expected it to go to this level." The budget available enabled the CRs to offer participation remuneration to participants which in turn enabled the photovoice element of the project to take place. This also enabled the creation of the exhibition, and indeed of the engagement with stakeholders such as the Scottish Government. The building and maintaining of positive relationships with the partner organisation, Maryhill Integration Network was also central, giving their own campaigning experience and role as Secretariat of the Cross-Party Group (CPG) on Migration. Furthermore, the group had access to the wider expertise of the organisation, with colleagues in various departments offering training and support at various stages of the project. Expectations may also have been set considering prior experiences with other organisations where support for participation was inconsistent. This underlines the responsibility, particularly when working with groups who are marginalised and furthest from right realisation, that participation costs and remuneration are comprehensive and enable a dignified environment for all involved.

Photo from analysis session with the community researchers



The report was launched on the 23rd of May 2023 at the Scottish Parliament following the CRs presentation of the findings as evidence at the Cross-Party Group on Migration. This involved the CRs and Paul, the research officer from the Poverty Alliance who had been working alongside the group as part of the project, delivering a presentation that



included an overview of the research in addition to recommendations before taking questions from Paul Sweeney MSP, the Chair of the CPG on migration and a prominent campaigner on issues relating to people seeking asylum in Scotland, and stakeholders who were present both in person and online. Copies of the report were distributed following, and time was taken to discuss the research and wider project following the conclusion of the CPG meeting. Following this, the Chair Paul Sweeney MSP contacted the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport as well as the Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees to share the report and highlight its findings and recommendations.

The photovoice exhibition appeared for one week as part of the Festival of Politics, an annual event held at the Scottish Parliament. Alongside this, the research garnered newspaper coverage, raising awareness and stimulating public discourse on mental health challenges during the asylum process. More recently, the photographic outputs of the project were exhibited as part of the Mental Health Arts Festival hosted at the University of Glasgow. A reception event took place as part of this which included a variety of stakeholders including research participants and people with lived experience, academics, and individuals and organisations working in the field. Meetings to discuss the findings have also taken place including a meeting with Colleges Scotland.

Finally, one CR has partnered with the Poverty Alliance to engage in political summits aimed at addressing poverty with the First Minister of Scotland. This has further elevated the issues highlighted in the research, and those faced more widely by people seeking asylum, and given a platform to voices that are routinely hidden in society. Following this meeting, the then First Minister Humza Yousaf referenced the case of the CR who attended the summit at First Ministers Question Time, in response to a question from Paul Sweeney MSP, remarking “I met an asylum seeker who has been in the asylum system for 12 years—12 years—without the right to work. That is an absolute disgrace”. This recognised the inhumane conditions under which a member of the group had been forced to live under and chimed with the data and indeed recommendations within the research, the need to grant the right to work and to process asylum claims more quickly. This evidences that the group and the project have had significant impact across the political divide in Scotland. Furthermore, this underlines the commitment of the Poverty Alliance to empower people who are furthest from rights realisation to advocate for a Scotland that is dignified and rights respecting.

Reflections on the process

Organisational impact

Both projects have helped to inform the Poverty Alliance’s own organisational thinking and focus, as seen by the sustained involvement of the CRs beyond the research project itself. Following the culmination of both projects, members of each group came together to deliver a conference presentation at the Poverty Alliance’s annual conference that focused on the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG), highlighting the need and opportunity to include people navigating the asylum system when developing this potentially transformative policy. Furthermore, all members have been invited back to form a collective group for the final phase of Rights in Action, with an aim to contributing to build on the previous research and experience of both groups.

The depth of learning that has taken place between the CRs and the Poverty Alliance as part of this project has been significant, and speaks to the commitment, knowledge and willingness of the CRs and of the Poverty Alliance to work together. This further illustrates the range of potential impacts that engaging in such projects has for both our and other organisations.

Relationship building

Relationship building was key. Attending prior events at the partner organisation enabled the Poverty Alliance researcher to get to know the community researchers. This was also a key learning process for the research staff at Poverty Alliance who had little prior experience and understanding of the asylum process and the challenges faced by



those forced to navigate it. Engaging with the community outwith the formal research process enabled us to listen and gain a better understanding of the group and some of the challenges they faced. It also provided a space where people (both community researchers and wider group members) could discuss the research and the organisation in a comfortable, relaxed fashion.

We attended several events held at Maryhill Integration Network during the course of the project. These included both groups such as the MIN Voices group, and wider ticketed events such as the Burns Supper. We made an effort to arrive early and leave late, and to help with setting up and cleaning up afterwards. The events were fun, warm, and culturally rich, and we enjoyed them all. It did, however, require some stepping out of my comfort zone, one example being ceilidh dancing at their Burns supper event. It is a simple thing to do and part of the job but avoiding the temptation to sit at the back or solely talk to people that you know and instead fully participating in events was important to build rapport and understanding.

Team building

The group had introductory meetings at both the Poverty Alliance and at one of the partner organisation. At the beginning of the project, we carried out an in-depth ice-breaking exercise called 'The river of life'. This exercise encouraged each person to open up and discuss their key life events, but was an exercise where people were able to choose what, and the extent to which, they wished to share. This included the facilitators. There are similar exercises that can be used, but this felt important in building what was a safe space to explore an emotionally demanding research process and support each other.

Going for group meals at the beginning of the process, and at the Parliament event helped build the team spirit (which was already strong prior to the group meeting), and was a space where people just chatted, rather than solely discussed the research process, or related issues.

Participation vouchers and expenses

Participation voucher options that were offered were comprehensive in terms of the range of high street shops and supermarkets available. The admin team offered CRs the option to change which voucher they received during the project which participants did regularly. Transport expenses were also covered in keeping with the wider Poverty Alliance participation policy. This was vital to participation as the cost of a daily First Bus ticket, which was the mode of transport used by participants, is roughly equivalent to the daily allowance granted as 'asylum support' for each CR from the Home Office at the commencement of the project.

The Poverty Alliance provided snacks for each session, including fruit, cereal bars, and biscuits. These were selected by the community researchers which again ensured they met the groups individual preferences and requirements. An individual lunch budget was set at £10 per person, which is in keeping with the expenses policy of the Poverty Alliance. This enabled the researchers to pick the food that they wanted, and food which met any dietary or religious requirements they had. This further supported the Poverty Alliance's commitment to fostering a fully participatory process and one in which the CRs were treated with respect and equality.

Location of sessions and communication

The sessions for both groups largely took place at the Poverty Alliance office in Glasgow city centre. This location was chosen by the community researchers and was experienced as a positive location as discussed in the evaluation interviews. The role of the wider staff team was crucial, as exemplified by the establishment of warm relationships between them and the community researchers. This environment also helped when navigating sensitive areas such as the claiming of expenses and discussions over vouchers, where the admin staff in particular deserve warm praise for



their approach. Having a separate member of the organisation to manage these processes also allowed the Poverty Alliance researchers to be able to fully focus on supporting the delivery of meetings.

The group communicated through a WhatsApp group chat and through email. The group-chat was more informal and used for reminders and logistics. The email was used for highlighting when a meeting was on, recapping the previous session, and what we had chosen to cover in the next session.

Timetable and length of sessions

Whilst a rigid schedule was not possible due to the changing timetables of each CR, having a more structured timetable would be advantageous to ensure the momentum is maintained, and a clear plan is available for everyone involved. Periodic review of the logistics of the project, including location, equipment, learning took place during this project, and it is advisable to ensure that the project is accessible, worthwhile, and engaging for those taking part.

Initially sessions were four hours long, taking place within office hours. This began to change towards two-hour sessions as the project unfolded, due to the nature of the sessions we were carrying and to remain accessible in light of the CRs often demanding timetables at university and college.

The project also took place during Ramadan, which was being observed by some of the group. Efforts were made to ensure those who were felt supported during Ramadan. This involved a check-in to see if there was a particular time in the day that worked better, and what else could be done to support their participation during this holy period.

Use of human rights language and research knowledge

Whilst the human rights training was well received and utilised by the group, a key reflection included that human rights language could have been further embedded from the outset by ensuring it was used in delivery and in practice in activities to increase the group's practical understanding and confidence. This could be enabled further by having the group lead on the following session or by creating an activity where their knowledge is further put into practice. The training sessions provided by colleagues on human rights, policy and media were invaluable and well received. It highlights the value of a wide range of expertise amongst colleagues.

The sessions should remain flexible and respond to the needs and experience of the community researchers. Our groups all had a high level of education, which alongside other experience ensured that concepts and some methods regarding research were familiar. This was an undoubted advantage but did bring some issues, specifically the belief amongst some of the group that quantitative research was more reliable and scientific and was needed to provide rigor to the research.

Wider support

Traumatic past events, and challenges faced as a result of the asylum system, were frequent topics of discussion during the sessions. This was to be expected given the research topic, but it also highlighted the need for access to support in this area. The partner organisation was able to provide a counselling service and provision of support. The Poverty Alliance were also able to signpost to member organisations to ensure that the CRs were given the appropriate advice and support. A key reflection here is the importance of wider networks of support when working with marginalised groups who may have experience of trauma. As was shown by the incident at the Festival of Politics where a panel discussion was disrupted by a member of the public who was subsequently ejected due to his xenophobic and antisemitic comments, negative experiences may come from attendance at events also, and space to debrief following any such incident is important.



What could be improved and taken forward in future PAR projects?

- **Transparency/clarity:** One of the CRs felt like there was a lack of understanding about what the project was about at first. Greater clarity on scope of budget for research and dissemination activities from beginning of project.
- **Support and recognition of barriers to full participation:** More sessions with laptops for people who do not have experience including a laptop induction session. Pantry and food products for asylum seekers in the office. Internet use that lasts for longer periods. One of the CRs had issues with their access to WIFI and laptop but later informed us that they had not wanted to raise this as an issue.
- **Inclusive approaches:** Most of the group were quite confident about public speaking and writing and other skills (e.g. IT) so we did not need to focus on these core skills. However, it is important that we consider how we can support full participation (e.g. training on public speaking) in the next project.
- **Skills development:** Building in a more peer-led approach over time e.g. CRs chairing a session or leading on an exercise. We also reflected that more time factored in at the latter stage of the project for CRs to contribute to writing outputs would have been beneficial. Lastly, organising 1:1 meetings with the CRs during the project could help to identify any gaps in knowledge and training needs.



Appendix

Right to health participatory action research project sessions

Sessions	Overview of focus
1: Introduction to research and to each other	• Introduction and project overview • Building relationships with the group • Exploring the role and skills of a researcher • Discussing expectations and identifying important research topics
2: Topic development and methods training	• Group presentations of research topic ideas • Human rights training • Introduction to research methods and techniques • Emergent research themes and the researcher's subjective role • Overview of required resources for research methods
3: Selecting research topic and methods exploration	• Selection of research topics • Development of research aims • Discussion of possible research methods • Crafting the overall research methodology
4: Research topic setting	• Finalising the research topic • Exploring the research process • Photo data training • Ethics training and considerations in the field • Photo data collection task training • Data analysis and presentation of findings from the task
5: In-depth methods training	• Training on semi-structured and biographical interviews • Background on elite interviewing and budget diaries
6: In-depth methods training	• Budget diary method training • Thematic analysis training • Fieldnotes training
7: Interview preparation and data presentation	• Interview preparation, including question formulation • Presentation of personal photo data and analysis • Planning the remaining sessions
8: Data management and review	• Review of data collected to date • Mapping out further data collection • Assessing project progress, time remaining, and planning



9: Logistics/planning	• Review of data collection processes • Preparation and logistics for upcoming data collection
10: Data analysis and exploring outputs	• Data analysis of photo and interview data • Discussion of research outputs and dissemination strategies
11: Interview analysis and session	• In-depth interview analysis
12: Media training	• Training on media and framing
13: Policy training and parliament presentation preparation	• Training on policy making and influencing
14: Evaluation meeting	• Reflecting on the project's impact and progress • Evidencing transferable new skills and knowledge in CV context • Evaluation Interviews



ⁱ Hearne, R. and Murphy, M. P. (2019) *Participatory Action Research: a Human Rights and Capability Approach – Part 2 The Practice* (online). Available at: https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/13435/1/MM_mussi_participation.pdf (accessed 6.11.24).

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} <https://www.knowledgeispower.scot/toolkit-home>

^v Durham University (2022) *Navigating participatory research: a visual guide* (online). Available at: https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/departments-/sociology/Navigating-Participatory-Research_A-Visual-Guide.pdf (accessed 6.11.24).

^{vi} Rights in Action Community Researchers (2023) *“Education is supposed to be free for all”: Asylum seekers’ experiences of accessing further and higher education in Scotland* (online). Available at: <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Asylum-Seekers-Right-to-Education-Briefing.pdf> (accessed 6.11.24).

^{vii} Rights in Action Community Researchers (2023) *“The life of Glasgow pigeons is more certain”: mental health and wellbeing amongst people navigating the asylum process* (online). Available at: <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Rights-in-Action-Final-Report-Mental-Health.pdf> (accessed 6.11.24).