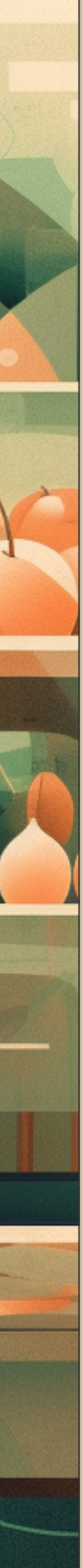

PICUM
For undocumented migrants, for social justice.

DIGNITY FIRM

Guidelines on Participatory Action Research (PAR) in the work with undocumented migrants

Author:

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DIGNITY FIRM

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Preface

The research project DignityFIRM included a work package on Participatory Action Research (PAR) for migrants working in food supply chain sectors to explore and reflect upon their living and working conditions, and take actions to address the challenges identified by themselves. Coordinated by PICUM, the Platform for Undocumented Migrants, three case studies were conducted in Amsterdam (The Netherlands), Seville (Spain) and Wroclaw (Poland) between 2024 and 2026.

The main outputs from this collective effort were collected in the following reports and resources:

- **PAR cross-country report:**

Legarda Dìaz-Aguado, I. (2025). Participatory Action Research (PAR) with migrant workers in farm to fork sectors in Amsterdam, Seville and Wroclaw. DignityFIRM.:
https://zenodo.org/records/17912330

- **Compilation of actions:**

Legarda Dìaz-Aguado, I. (2025). Participatory Action Research (PAR) Migrant led organisations. DignityFIRM.
https://zenodo.org/records/17912298

Case studies:

- **Flores, R., & Bauer, T. (2026). Participatory action research case studies. Migrant workers in food supply chain sector.** Wroclaw, Poland. NOMADA Asociation. DignityFIRM. https://zenodo.org/records/18802750
- **Rincón Barón, L. M., & Ávalos Torres, A. (2026). Participatory action research case studies. Migrant workers in hospitality.** Seville, Spain. Mujeres Supervivientes. DignityFIRM. https://zenodo.org/records/18939983
- **Salhein H., van der Vooren F. (2026). Participatory action research case studies. Migrant workers in food supply chain sector.** Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Here To Support. DignityFIRM.
https://zenodo.org/records/18401541
- **VIDEO**: The voices of migrant researchers: Participatory Action Research in DignityFIRM https://youtu.be/hlM78kSYlqA

BLOG POSTS on www.dignityfirm.eu:

- "We are here, we have rights and we can work". My experience as peer-researcher in the Netherlands – by Hamo Salhein
- "We don't want to revictimise ourselves, but rather transform our anger into political power and concrete responses." – Reflections from a community dining room in Seville - by Antonia Ávalos Torres and Lina Marcela Rincón Barón

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- "Organisation, information, and community as tools for labour dignity" – Migration story and origin of the Latin American Workers' Union in Poland - By Rocìo Torres
- "There is a deeply colonial idea that assigns to migrants certain jobs and certain places in society" - Working in hospitality and professional development in Spain - By Lina Rincón Barón

This document was originally written in October 2023 to guide the work of the three grass-root civil society organisations (CSOs) leading the work in the field. The document was revisited in 2026 after feedback from the peer researchers and the case studies after being implemented, incorporating a few tips and examples from practice to be disseminated to help guide future PAR projects. The previous work from many colleagues from CSOs and academia was key in the process of designing and implementing this PAR work. For this same reason we hope our experiences and collective reflections can be useful in the future for further action-oriented research that incorporates and recognises the diverse experience of undocumented migrants in shaping their own future, including migration studies and migration policies.

1. Introduction

This document outlines key aspects of Participatory Action Research (PAR) as an approach for working together with undocumented migrants on the study of their working and living conditions. The aim of the document is to promote interactions between researchers and migrants in which the latter are considered active partners, and to understand the challenges and potentials that this approach offers when working with this specific population. As a disclaimer, these guidelines use the term undocumented migrants. However, the DignityFIRM project adopts a broader approach by addressing irregularly employed migrant workers, who may or may not be undocumented themselves[1]. In the context of the DignityFIRM project, only the work package on PAR follows this approach. However, these guidelines can also be taken into account in broader migration research to prevent extractive practices and ensure a respectful consideration of the conditions faced by undocumented migrants. For the development of this document, input was gathered from the project partners during an initial online meeting to discuss their understanding, experience and questions related to the approach. Subsequently, these topics were further discussed and validated

[1] For more clarification on the terminology, check: Schweitzer, R. 2023. *Irregularity, Precarity, Dignity, and relevant Actors: A critical review of selected literature around key concepts and questions of the DignityFIRM project.* https://www.dignityfirm.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/SOTA-WP45-FINAL_ok.pdf

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with PICUM[2] member organizations led by migrants or closely connected with the community. The contribution of these organizations has been crucial, both due to their expertise in using participatory methodologies and their firsthand experiences when contacted by universities and other research actors. They have shared insights on best practices as well as mistakes to avoid, enriching the overall understanding of the topic. We would like to thank the following organisations for their contributions to these guidelines:

European Sex Workers Alliance

Belgium:

Confédération des Syndicats chrétiens

Czech Republic:

Association for Integration and Migration

Germany:

Ban Ying

Greece:

Generation 2.0 for Rights, Equality and Diversity

The Netherlands:

FairWork

Spain:

Asociación Rumiñahui

Mujeres Supervivientes

Red AMINVI

[2] For a broader collection of good practices: Faure Atger, A. & Legarda Dìaz-Aguado, I., PICUM (2025). *Enabling the meaningful participation of migrants with precarious status. Some lessons learnt and guidance* https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Enabling-the-meaningful-participation-of-migrants-with-precarious-status.pdf

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2. Definition and theoretical framework

Definitions

Participatory methods in research refer to a set of techniques that actively involve the participants in the research process. These methods emphasize collaboration, engagement, and co-creation of knowledge between researchers and participants. Participatory research methods aim to empower the participants, often individuals or communities affected by the research topic, by including them in the design, implementation, and interpretation of the study. However, the use of participatory methodologies does not imply that research is considered Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR implies a more holistic conceptualization of understanding the research practice, it is an overarching approach, within which all kinds of research methodologies can be applied, both quantitative and qualitative, even if some may be more easily implemented than others.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is defined as:

"a process by which members of an oppressed group or community collect and analyse information and take action on their problems with the purpose of finding solutions and promoting political and social transformations"[3].

This definition encompasses the three key elements of PAR:

1) Ideological position: It starts from the notion that the context of oppression reflects an ideological and political position in favour of minority groups or groups experiencing conditions of exploitation and/or marginalization[4].

2) Recognition of agency and various forms of knowledge: Members of these groups actively participate in the definition of the research goal and question, the collection and analysis of information as research subjects (active practice partners) and not merely as objects of study (passive subjects). This active participation is independent of the level of education or social position of practice partners, as it values knowledge derived from life experiences.

3) Action-oriented: The research includes a transformative objective in society, a call to action, aiming to find solutions and practical proposals beyond the mere generation of knowledge. It is

[3] Selener, D., 1997. *Participatory action research and social change.* NY: Cornell University Participatory Action Research Network.

[4] Balcazar, 2003. *Investigación acción participativa (iap): Aspectos conceptuales y dificultades de implementación*. Fundamentos en humanidades Universidad Nacional de San Luis Año IV - N° I/II (7/8) 2003 / pp. 59-77 https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/184/18400804.pdf

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common to still use the term participant in PAR, but as seen in these definitions, in this approach agents involved in the research are considered practice partners whereas in traditional research would be mere participants. Although we can find PAR in traditional academic contexts, it represents a different paradigm compared to traditional research in terms of conceptual knowledge generation; roles, hierarchies, and power dynamics; research objectives, and ethical considerations. Moreover, a genuine implementation of this theory requires an unusual level of flexibility and adaptability, which is not common in rigid and delimited academic institutions, including funding schemes, publication industry, and traditional methodologies.

Origins and Guiding Principles

The conceptualisation of PAR is not attributed to a single author as it has evolved historically with many different contributors. However, the prior work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin[5] in developing the concept of Action Research in the 1940s constitutes the main foundation, in the emphasis of the importance of involving participants in the research process, promoting collaboration between researchers and the people being studied. This participatory approach to research later evolved into what is now known as Participatory Action Research, when Marja-Liisa Swantz used the term for the first time in 1970 in a report produced in Tanzania[6]. Its main proponent was Fals Borda[7], who had been practicing PAR since the late 1950s. It was applied to different fields of social research with prominence in education and sociology, and authors like Freire, Vio Grossi, Cohen, Le Bofert de Witt, Gianotten, and Hall became fundamental references in the field as well. With a wide variety of applications and forms, PAR is considered one of the main responses to academic extractivism.

Academic extractivism refers to the practice in academia where researchers or scholars study a particular community, culture, or group of people without active participation, collaboration, or meaningful engagement with the members of that community, and without feedback or impact once the research is over. This one-sided approach involves extracting knowledge from the community for academic purposes without giving back or empowering the community in the research process. Academic extractivism can lead to the exploitation of local knowledge, perpetuate power imbalances, and disregard the context, values, and agency of the people being studied. From a decolonial perspective, academic extractivism refers to the colonial legacy where

[5] Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems. Journal of social issues, 2(4), 34-46.
[6] Hall B.L., 2005. *Inform the cold? Reflections on Participatory Research from 1970-2005*, Convergence, Toronto, Vol. 38, Iss. 1
[7] Ortiz, M., Borjas, B. 2008. *La Investigación Acción Participativa. Aporte de Fals Borda a la educación popular.* Espacio Abierto Cuaderno Venezolano de Sociología. Vol. 17. No. 4; 615-627 https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/122/12217404.pdf

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knowledge, resources, and cultural practices of colonized communities were appropriated, extracted, and exploited by colonial powers for their own benefit. This historical context of colonialism has deeply influenced academia, leading to the marginalization and devaluation of indigenous, local, and non-Western knowledge systems. PAR recognizes that different communities possess unique epistemologies, which are the ways of knowing, understanding, and interpreting the world that are specific to that particular community. These epistemologies are often deeply rooted in the community's culture, traditions, and lived experiences. PAR emphasizes the importance of respecting and valuing these diverse epistemologies within a broader framework known as knowledge ecology. Knowledge ecology acknowledges the interconnectedness and interdependence of various forms of knowledge, including academic knowledge and local or indigenous knowledge. It recognizes that different knowledge systems can coexist and complement each other, enriching the overall understanding of complex issues.

In the context of PAR, the active involvement of community members as co-researchers acknowledges their expertise derived from lived experiences and local epistemologies. By engaging in a collaborative and reciprocal manner, PAR facilitates the integration of diverse knowledge systems within the research process. This approach ensures that research is conducted in a culturally sensitive and contextually relevant manner, empowering communities to actively contribute to defining research questions, gathering data, analysing findings, and implementing solutions. By embracing diverse epistemologies and adopting a knowledge ecology perspective, PAR challenges the one-sided nature of academic extractivism and promotes a more inclusive, equitable, and respectful research approach.

Main critiques and concerns

PAR is a widely respected approach, but it's not without its critiques and concerns. However, some of the critiques to the approach are rooted in biases, particularly regarding doubts about the representativeness of the voices involved and the quality of the data collected in academic terms, or its lack of recognition by some academic institutions. It is important to note that PAR is confined to the specific context defined by the scope of the research, making it relevant only within that specific context and potentially not generalizable to a broader population. The practice partners in the process are representative to the extent that they represent themselves, and criticism of this representation can mask a lack of appreciation for their knowledge or experience. “A report on migrant-led advocacy by the European Programme on Integration and Migration (EPIM) notes that not being considered ‘representative enough’ is often used by mainstream civil society

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organisations and policymakers to challenge the legitimacy of migrant led organisations"[8]. This document delves further into potential solutions and advice for addressing concerns about the representativeness of practice partners in a participatory process involving undocumented migrants. Nevertheless, another and more legitimate questioning of the representativeness comes from the decolonial perspective, pointing at the fact that if the inequalities within the category of oppressed are not considered, only the privileged sector of the collective categorized as oppressed will get the benefits, thus increasing inequalities among the oppressed. That is why an intersectional perspective is necessary in the implementation of the approach, to ensure that power dynamics within a group are not being overlooked or that other possible axes of oppression are not being rendered invisible[9].

Moreover, a common and well-founded criticism is the adoption of participatory terminology for the legitimacy it lends to research without truly applying corresponding values throughout the entirety of the research, especially in decision-making processes. These guidelines specifically aim to prevent such appropriation of terminology merely for its trendiness, without genuine reciprocity and real value for the participating communities. It is unquestionable that while PAR possesses inherently democratic and transformative characteristics, it is an approach of complex implementation. It is not exempt from potentially falling into power dynamics or extractivist logics, despite originating from contrary intentions. Hence, it requires meticulous attention to the ethical challenges of research, continual self-assessment, and exceptional flexibility.

It is common for the flexibility required by the approach to conflict with academic structures, their timelines, and the criteria imposed by funding channels, as it can be seen in the following example: "The intervention timelines were not determined by the needs of the academy, but rather by the specific needs of Senegalese migrants and the moments of negotiation and tension with the municipality. These factors continuously defined and redefined the working timelines. It was not possible to formalize this Participatory Action Research process under a group research project because the objectives and timelines were highly dynamic and did not align with the presentation schedules set by various scientific and technical organizations. Furthermore, they did not align with the timelines of the fellow's research projects."[10] Regarding these conflicts, many organizations

[8] Saleh, D., PICUM, 2022. *Participatory methods: The inclusion of undocumented migrants in healthcare and beyond.* https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Participatory-methods_the-inclusion-of-undocumented-migrants-in-healthcare-and-beyond_EN.pdf

[9] Mutinga, M.; Bendien, E.; Abma, T.; Groot, B; 2023. *Participatory action research and intersectionality: a critical dialogical reflection of a study with older adults*

[10] Voscoboinik, S., 2021. *Procesos de IAP con migrantes senegaleses de la ciudad de La Plata (2018-2021)* Universidad Nacional de La Plata.

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working directly with undocumented migrants have reported difficulties when working on projects funded by the European Union. The provision of services funded by these projects often requires identification documents from the beneficiaries, even though the group most in need of these services may precisely be individuals lacking documentation. This inconsistency may also be present in certain cases in research projects. Lastly, it's worth mentioning that managing such complexity adequately demands both time and resources[11]. PAR demands a substantial commitment from both researchers and practice partners. Long-term engagement and the iterative nature of the process can be challenging to sustain. Long-term engagement can lead to participant and researcher fatigue and community burnout, especially if tangible outcomes or changes are not promptly realized. This is particularly important to consider when working with undocumented migrants due to their living conditions associated with potential vulnerability. Their precarious and highly demanding work environments require careful consideration of the time and involvement they can contribute to the research. These guidelines will delve deeper into this idea in the next section.

[11] Anang, P.; Gottlieb, N.; Putulik, S.; Iguptak, S.; Gordon, E.; 2021. *Learning to Fail Better: Reflections on the Challenges and Risks of Community-Based Participatory Mental Health Research With Inuit Youth in Nunavut* https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2021.604668/full

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3. Application of approach on the work on migration-related topics

Potential of PAR for migrant self representation

Undocumented migrants often face significant challenges in participating directly in policy and research on migration due to their migration status and fear of deportation, and in many countries, their lack of formal registration excludes them from formal political processes and decision-making platforms[12]. Following the extractivist logic outlined in the previous section, approaches to research on the living conditions of migrants rarely assign them a role that considers them as active subjects. Often, no feedback or return to the community occurs once the research is concluded. As a result, the positive impacts of this research do not reach the community. On the contrary, properly implemented PAR holds the potential to work not just on migrants but with migrants, sharing decision-making power about the research with those individuals who transition from being mere subjects of study to active members of the research team. PAR actively involves the undocumented migrant community in the research process.

This active participation is beneficial in several ways. On the one hand, this engagement ensures that the perspectives, experiences, and needs of undocumented migrants are central to the research, making the study more comprehensive and trustworthy. The inside knowledge provides results from a proximity to reality, and also leads to more relevant research questions, as they are formulated by those impacted by those realities. In addition, active participation in the research itself can be a benefit for migrants, as it prioritizes the learning of skills during its development that empowers practice partners to feel capable of being active agents of change. PAR can empower them by giving them a voice in the research process, and this participation can lead to a sense of ownership, helping them advocate for their rights and improve their living conditions. This also means that research has a higher likelihood of being actually translated into action and change.

Input from civil society organisations:

"When research comes from the top, from the hierarchy of academia, involving small entities or the migrant population, there exists a power dynamic and an extractive relationship of knowledge

[12] For instance, this was the reason behind using PAR with asylum-seekers in Israel in this research: Gottlieb, N.; Weinstein, T; Mink, J.; Ghebrezghiabher, H.M.; Sultan, Z.; Reichlin, R; 2017. *Applying a community-based participatory research approach to improve access to healthcare for Eritrean asylum-seekers in Israel: a pilot study*
https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s13584-017-0185-9

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where they have little interest in returning that knowledge and transforming it into awareness that prompts action. It's different when it's collaborative, and we are part of the entire process of debate and decision-making. We become active subjects, not objects from which information is extracted."

"This will enable us to consider ourselves political subjects, reclaim that humanity even if we don't have documents, and regain that dignity. Learning to politicize our needs and our responses. We may not have all the answers, but we will gain power in that knowledge and understanding, enabling us to form political alliances, strategies, ways of survival, and engage with the people to whom we demand rights."

"I cannot say that the people with whom we are together in the social dining hall are my subjects of study because I myself am my subject of study."

The approach of PAR does not imply that only the individuals who are part of the studied group have the legitimacy to investigate it. When research is conducted from an outsider perspective, it is easy to be unaware of biases and prejudices that might be perceived as neutral and objective approaches as a result of this otherness. In this regard, PAR requires a cultural humility, and that offers an advantage in terms of mutual learning, as different expertise, skills and experiences are valued, research partners get the chance to learn from one another. Moreover, contextual understanding is key. Undocumented migrants often live in unique and challenging circumstances. Through active participation, researchers can gain a deep, nuanced understanding of their lives that is only possible when peer research is conducted which involves individuals from the same community or group conducting interviews with their peers to gather insights and information on a specific topic.

Input from civil society organisations:
"For us it's been really important to get accurate data for persecuted groups or groups that don't have access to state protection, and we wouldn't have been able to collect that information if we were not a sex worker led organisation, because the interviewers were migrant sex workers themselves. They have an understandable mistrust of institutions, including academia, and research is seen as part of that."

Peer research is strategic not only for the mentioned contextual understanding but also to facilitate the trust building needed for a participant from such a vulnerable context to actively participate. Building trust between researchers and undocumented migrants is crucial for gathering accurate and sensitive information. Active participation fosters trust and rapport, as community members

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are more likely to open up to researchers who are perceived as equals. Finally, one of the key principles of PAR is to create positive social change; knowledge generation is not the ultimate goal. Being action-oriented can lead to practical solutions and policy recommendations that directly improve the living conditions of undocumented migrants, by collaboratively identifying problems and developing strategies to address them[13].

Input from civil society organisations:

"It was very nice that we had this close relationship with the communities that could easily translate the data research and the stories that we hear into activities and in this way, we engaged in far more meaningful ways. It felt more fair to not only ask people's stories and use them for your research or your NGO, but to immediately try to transform that into action."

Understanding the context and conditions of undocumented migrants

For the potential that is offered by PAR to be fulfilled, a deep understanding of the complexity and challenges that undocumented migrants face is required. In this regard, both objective and subjective matters need to be considered as conditions that may prevent undocumented migrants from participating. Objective matters would include material obstacles such as lack of time or resources, whereas subjective ones are related to perceptions such as not perceiving oneself with sufficient agency, not finding the message or a call to action appealing, or not finding it useful to participate.

Fears and trust

The main idea that needs to be understood before trying to implement PAR with undocumented migrants is the constant fear of detection by authorities, potentially resulting in deportation or other legal consequences. Undocumented migrants may initially be mistrustful of providing any information that could potentially be used by law enforcement. There is evidence that the stress caused by this state of mind has been proven to affect their mental health significantly, and the uncertainty about their residence status can be linked to depression, among other mental health problems. Irregular migration status is linked to other factors affecting health and well-being, such as post-traumatic stress, racism and discrimination, social exclusion or unwanted loneliness [14] [15].

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[13] Huschke, S., 2014 *Giving Back: Activist Research with Undocumented Migrants in Berlin* https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01459740.2014.949375

[14] Van der Vennet, L., Van den Bogaard, RM., and LeVoy, M., PICUM, 2021. *Navigating irregularity; The impact of growing up undocumented in Europe.* https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Navigating-Irregularity_EN.pdf

[15] Bonneau, L., PICUM, 2023. *Migration status: A key structural social determinant of health inequalities for undocumented migrants.*

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Taking this into account, undocumented migrants may have a general distrust of institutions, including research organizations, due to negative past experiences or fear of exploitation. They might fear that their personal information could be mishandled, leading to threats to their safety or the safety of their families. This lack of trust can make them hesitant to participate in any formal activity. In this regard, it is particularly necessary to have ethical codes and methodologies that guarantee the safety of the participating individuals, considering the protection of their privacy and anonymity, allowing secure participation. This not only has to be implemented but it is essential to explain to potential practice partners from the beginning, ensuring confidentiality, providing clear and accessible information on how their data will be managed, with what objectives and what are their rights in this regard.

Building this trust undoubtedly takes time and effort, so long-term, continuous relationship building and cultivation with the communities are key factors for a successful PAR. It is common for universities or research institutions to contact local NGOs trusted by the communities due to their prior relation to act as intermediators. However, extractivist logics also apply in this academia-third sector relationship, and it is common to encounter mistrust or fatigue on the part of organizations when they are approached by researchers.

Input from civil society organisations:
(on the topic of being approached by universities): *"I would suggest taking your own aims (as an NGO) and goals very seriously. If you feel that they don't combine with the ones of the research, I would be very critical in participating. If you want to do it well, it's a big investment, it doesn't make sense if it is only to please someone else, being always too busy. I suggest only doing this if it really benefits the goals of our NGO and/or direct group of migrants we work with."*

"Another type of relationship we have had with universities is that they finance small research projects on the causes of migration. Although it barely covers the logistical expenses, it has been a recognition of our capacity, and it has been very satisfying to participate from that position of enunciation with the ability to generate knowledge or understanding."

Even in the cases where a local NGO leads the research and/or when peer research is conducted, a lot of time is required to build this trust, and for practice partners to feel safe and be active. Previous relationships with the organisations can be helpful if they trust the people and the objectives and feel connected to them. They may be more likely to participate even if they don't

https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Migration-status_A-key-structural-social-determinant-of-health-inequalities-for-undocumented-migrants_EN.pdf

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fully oversee the research at the beginning. However, their willingness to be proactive or even to lead will take time anyway.

Input from civil society organisations:
"It takes time. I wouldn't trust a FPAR (Feminist Participatory Action Research) proposal that only lasts for a few months, because it's not possible to get people actively into participating. If I start a new sports club for example, at first, I will sit in the background, see how other people do it, and then if I feel comfortable, I will take some small tasks upon myself, but also not in a few months' time."

Time
Undocumented migrants also lack a crucial resource for engagement with researchers: time. Many don't have basic conditions and rights guaranteed, and their vulnerability and precarious working conditions, precisely the key elements for DignityFIRM that will define the participant groups, challenge participation.

Input from civil society organisations:
"Many undocumented migrants spend the week being exploited in the workforce by employers who take advantage of their irregular status, so they have very limited time. These individuals are very willing to participate when they see that you can help them with their regularization, but they won't waste their time with you if you have nothing to offer them."

Due precisely to this shortage of free time, understanding the utility of research is essential to encourage participation, both in terms of individual situations and the potential improvement for the entire collective. However, it is crucial to ensure that unrealistic expectations are not created. It is necessary to clearly explain the capacity for influence and social change that can be expected from the research, emphasizing the constraints that the involved agents may face. For example, making it clear that even if municipal administrations commit to collaboration, there will be limitations imposed by state-level legislation.

Examples from DignityFIRM PAR in the field

SCHEDULING:

Amsterdam: Since most participants were working, it was difficult to find a time that worked for everyone. In the end, we decided to host evening sessions and provide dinner, allowing participants to join directly after work.

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Seville: "Time is also conditioned by the specific context: the season, origin, religion, family circumstances, among other factors. Time should not only be considered in relation to the duration of activities, but also to the type of activity proposed. It is essential to allow for a certain degree of flexibility when conducting interviews and other meetings, so that they can be adapted to the realities and needs of the participants."

Nevertheless, there are ways in which practical solutions to individual situations can result from participation. Capacity-building is often a substantial part of PAR, and common reflection on individual problems can also benefit practice partners. Once again, the previous relationship with the community in this aspect will facilitate the process, as it is common for undocumented migrants to trust the judgment of organizations working in the field that offer services they perceive as useful. However, in these cases, it must be clear that these services are not conditioned by participation in the research, as the compensation offered, including support, should not disproportionately affect whether practice partners decide to take part.

Examples from DignityFIRM PAR in the field

CAPACITY-BUILDING:

Various skills were identified as necessary by the case studies for the goals of their action phase, and training sessions were held on these topics in the following cities:

- Campaigning and strategic dissemination (Amsterdam)
- Autonomous unionism (Seville)
- Political participation and collective care (Seville)
- Qualitative research in practice (Wroclaw)
- Storytelling and communication for community leaders (Wroclaw)
- Community Support Academy (Wroclaw), including:
    a) Tenants' rights and protection against landlord abuse
    b) Taxes and health insurance in Poland: practical basics
    c) Regularisation of residence and work in Poland: practical guide
    d) Labour law in Poland and protection against employer abuse

Financial compensation

A logical response to the question of valuing the time of participating individuals could be financial compensation, also considering that traditional researchers are likely not dedicating their time for free. However, this idea often sparks debate, and, in many contexts, is not allowed due to the conditions set by funding entities, and in the case of peer researchers the legal prohibition of employing an undocumented person faces a significant challenge as well.

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Even when compensation is an option, funding needs to be flexible in terms of what is accepted as proof of payment, or how it can be carried out. Practice partners may be reluctant to provide personal data due to fears of retaliation. As many undocumented migrants are unable to open bank accounts, alternatives could be e.g. food vouchers or pre-paid online cards that practice partners can download with a code and get the cash without facilitating personal data.

Input from civil society organisations:
"It is true that given the economic situations of people who have stopped working, for example, to participate in a focus group or an interview, if we have the resources, we could consider providing financial compensation. However, not necessarily before the research, but as an additional incentive. The key is for them to understand the research objectives and, above all, its usefulness."

"We were funded, and then we funded 15 members of our organisations, we gave them money and then they paid the participants in whichever way they were able to. We asked them to set up a budget for us, for example how much would they pay the participants, and we suggested a standard/average cost per interview considering the cost of living in different countries. We weren't directly paying the participants, but they would send us receipts or proof of those payments."

"They sign any name they want to check that we paid them already, we try to pay with cash when it is our organisation's money. If we couldn't pay them, we would buy some vouchers for them, like 50€ for a 1 ½ hour interview."

There are other alternatives that do not involve direct payment to practice partners. In some migrant led-groups, organized caretakers and domestic workers have a common financial fund called a 'resistance fund' that can be used for these kinds of occasions. If the participation of one of the members in a space they consider strategic could lead to an economic loss (for example, missing a work shift), they also organize to cover that shift so that the worker receives her full salary, and that cover can also be done by someone from a more privileged position.

Examples from DignityFIRM PAR in the field

COMPENSATION:

Wroclaw: *"We reflected on the need to consider compensation not only for participation in focus groups, but also for involvement in action-based activities. Many participants' time is closely tied to the need to earn a living – even if they are highly motivated to engage, economic conditions often prevent their participation. As a result, those in the most difficult situations are often excluded from the process."*

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Material obstacles

It is also important to have funding for travel expenses, no matter how minimal they may be. Local transportation costs can pose a barrier for people in precarious situations. Similarly, it should not be assumed that everyone has the necessary devices or internet connection if online alternatives are being considered. Related to these assumptions, a common mistake is often starting from "office logics" without considering whether the schedules and calendars are compatible with those of precarious migrant individuals. In this sense, providing options to reconcile participation with family life, such as childcare services, can facilitate the participation of specific profiles, especially those with other people depending on them.

Location and stigma

Even when material obstacles are anticipated in the planning, subjective issues should not be underestimated. These issues can manifest, for example, in reluctance to participate depending on the location. For instance, using the same venue where food distributions take place for people in need may lead to associations with stereotypes or situations of social exclusion. These types of reasons are often under-considered or even judged, especially when they involve "white saviour" type biases in the judgment of reluctance to participate in activities that may benefit the individual. But it cannot be forgotten that undocumented migrants face stigma and discrimination in society, and they may worry that participation in research could further stigmatize them or reinforce negative stereotypes, leading them to avoid participation. Consequently, some individuals might choose not to participate, or this association could affect their self-esteem or how society perceives them.

Examples from DignityFIRM PAR in the field

STIGMA AND CATEGORIES:

Seville: *"In the course of our research, we observed that many people expressed discomfort with the way they are often identified as 'undocumented,' 'vulnerable,' 'needy,' or 'victims.' This form of classification, although it may be based on an intention of solidarity, can end up reproducing stereotypes that reinforce symbolic inequality and limit the full recognition of people as active subjects.*

It is essential to understand that these people are not invited to participate because of their shortcomings or precarious situations, but because of their capacity for response, resistance, organisation and reflection in the face of their diverse realities. Even when locations are not linked to social stigma, other factors should be considered, such as the sense of security for individuals in irregular situations if public administration spaces are used, or if meeting places are symbolically

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linked to specific political parties or movements. All these issues being considered, it is suggested to link participation to a constant and defined location, as it helps consolidate engagement[16].

Examples from DignityFIRM PAR in the field:
COMMUNICATION CHANNELS:

Wroclaw: *"It may be worth considering the inclusion of alternative communication channels, such as secure messaging apps, which would allow participants to pause on specific topics and engage in deeper, asynchronous discussions. Such a solution would also enable the inclusion of individuals who, for various reasons, are unable to participate in live meetings. Another possible modification is to introduce an option for individual follow-up interviews after the group sessions with full anonymity and informed consent of the participants."*

Language

Another crucial subjective element is language. It is common for translation and interpretation needs to be considered, but the type of language used is equally important. Both third-sector organizations and academic entities tend to use complex and technical language with which participating individuals may not be familiar. It is not solely about facilitating understanding; depending on the language used, practice partners may not feel engaged or may believe that their knowledge about their experiences will not be considered valid enough. Some good practices in this sense are to proofread the main ideas and concepts that will be used in advance with someone not related to the field, to check constantly that when a new concept is mentioned so that everyone understands it, and to try to simplify unnecessary complexity.

For example, in Spain it is common for many NGOs to use the term Inserción sociolaboral (Social and labour insertion). This term may not be understood by those not fluent in Spanish, so the use of clear keywords such as Trabajo (Work) is suggested to be more approachable, if not to replace the complex concept, at least to complement it.

Examples from DignityFIRM PAR in the field:
UNDERSTANDING THE PROJECT:

[16] Emaús Fundación Social, SOS Racismo Gipuzkoa, 2022. *Egiazko Auzoa, Guía de Replicabilidad, aprendamos las unas de las otras.* https://sosracismogipuzkoa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/EGIAZKO-AUZOA-ESKULIBURUA.pdf

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Amsterdam: "During our initial contacts with networks of undocumented people—through WhatsApp or in person—we realized that not everyone understood the aim. Some people approached us hoping we could help them find work. Others were in asylum procedures and therefore legally allowed to work. Several people who initially showed interest withdrew once they understood the project involved speaking openly about their work experiences in a group setting."

4 . Implementation

Considering the collaborative nature of decision-making in PAR, the methodological design can vary considerably depending on the specific needs of the context or the approaches of the participating individuals. However, broadly speaking, we can define the usual phases as follows:

1. Consultation and first approach
2. Formation of the research group
3. Definition of the problem and the question
4. Designing of the study
5. Field work
6. Action and dissemination
7. Evaluation

Prior considerations

The decision to employ PAR as an approach requires careful consideration of both human and financial resources. It is indispensable to assess whether there are sufficient resources available to support the research endeavour effectively. PAR is acknowledged as one of the most challenging research methodologies due to the significant time investment it demands. The process involves extensive ongoing engagement, understanding of the communities involved, and the building of authentic long-term relationships. Even in the context where it is suitable as an approach, its appropriateness hinges on resource availability. The limitations of time and resources need to be critically evaluated. The decision-making process must delve into questions about the feasibility of genuine community participation, ensuring that the approach aligns with the intended level of engagement. Precision and clarity regarding the purpose of employing PAR are paramount. Understanding the "why" behind the research, specifying the goals, and determining the intended impact are fundamental.

a) Consultation and first approach

In the first stage of PAR, researchers initiate contact with the community or stakeholders they aim to work with. During this phase, the focus is on building relationships, establishing trust, and understanding the community's needs and concerns. Researchers consult with community members, listen to their perspectives, and engage in initial conversations to identify potential

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research topics. In order to get community engagement, explaining the purpose of this first approach and its potential benefits as clearly as possible is a must, in order to define together with the partners the purpose of the research. But being aware of the origin of the idea will determine if subconscious extractivist logics are in place. Does the question arise from a research logic which is distant from real-life experiences or from the daily lives of people on the field?

Input from civil society organisations

"The current research that we do with migrant sex workers comes from previous research in which the migrant sex workers themselves told us "We want more research into police, the way they treat us and how we are affected by the police." Listening to the kind of the needs of the community."

"In Sweden we really struggled to find participants because of the culture of fear, because of the way sex work is criminalised and socially moralised. We did posters for them, they will look for many ways to find them. (...) Why we cannot find people? One way can be to have a very specific research question that participants can easily understand and has a direct impact on their lives. In this case, have you had experience with the police? We want to understand more about it."

Listening sessions or focus group discussions are common at this stage to hear the community's concerns, experiences, and priorities. These sessions provide valuable insights that guide the direction of the research, but real active listening is required. This early stage will also serve to identify key stakeholders, as building relationships with influential community members can enhance the research process, but inner power imbalances within the communities should also be considered.

Examples from DignityFIRM PAR in the field:
FIRST APPROACHES

All three organisations relied heavily on their own and the peer researchers' knowledge of the communities and personal connections to invite participants, emphasizing comfort, familiarity, and credibility over formal engagement processes. Informal one-on-one meetings were incorporated in the three cases to build trust. Afterwards, a significant portion of the early meetings was dedicated to collectively establishing rules for working together, which helped build trust and create a safe space for discussion.

Amsterdam: *"These informal conversations created a space to build trust, better understand each participant's work experience, and allow space for personal stories. They also gave participants time to reflect on their experiences and begin thinking about the themes we would discuss in the*

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group setting. This preparation helped participants feel more confident and comfortable sharing during the focus groups themselves." "We used the month of Ramadan as an opportunity to meet people and expand our network. We hosted a community Iftar at the NGO office."

"Flyers were created in Arabic, Spanish, and English, and shared widely via WhatsApp groups and partner organizations. The flyer featured a photo of the peer researcher, to make the invitation more personal and trustworthy."

Seville: *"The first thing we considered before starting the focus groups was to hold a preliminary meeting with the potential participants, which we called 'focus group 0'. The aim of this meeting was to get to know each other, share refreshments and create an atmosphere of trust and closeness. This initial meeting helped to build trust, which was essential for the subsequent formation and cohesion of the groups."*

Wroclaw: *"Networks were built around trade union contacts, community leadership, and personal referrals, especially given the higher barriers to participation due to distrust and the complex legal environment."*

During the consult and first approach stage, the focus is on establishing a collaborative partnership, respecting the community's expertise, and laying the foundation for meaningful and ethical research collaboration in subsequent phases of the PAR process.

b) Formation of the research group

The selection and training of practice partners in a PAR group are crucial steps that significantly influence the success of the research process. For the selection of practice partners, inclusivity and relevance criteria should be followed. PAR emphasizes inclusivity, ensuring that diverse voices from the community are represented. Practice partners are typically chosen to reflect the demographics, experiences, and perspectives of the community being studied, but they are also selected based on their relevance to the research topic. They may include community members, local leaders, activists, or individuals directly affected by the issues under investigation.

Input from civil society organisations:

"In our case it was very practical that we were already working with cultural mediators from the communities who were also very willing to take part in research, so that makes life easier. Also because it takes them time to build these relationships, if you have time you better use it in a good way."

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The portrayal of undocumented migrants as a homogeneous group should be avoided. Working with multiethnic teams and paying attention to the diverse profiles of migrants coexisting in a territory are essential elements in this regard.

Input from civil society organisations:
"When working with migrant populations, it is important to ensure representation from various backgrounds. The migratory experience of a Latin American woman, for example, is different from that of an African woman. It is advisable to consider key elements or even specific participant profiles."

Different criteria can be considered for these profiles, such as country of origin, religion, time spent in the country of residence, studies, age, gender, representation of other intersectional minorities or proficiency in the hegemonic language of the region, but this does not mean that these criteria will always be adequate. If the participation only reflects a specific sub-population, which will be the case regarding specific topics, this can still be legitimate as long as the research itself is aware of this fact and the results are considered as such. This is very likely the case when peer researchers reach out to practice partners via personal contacts, which allows them to get deeper insights on their living conditions but is at the same time only representative of a particular group. Also, when groups are not accessible or participation lacks representation of a relevant profile on the topic, this should be considered relevant information as well, as it could be used to re-evaluate the ongoing approach and improve its methods.

Input from civil society organisations:
"Sometimes the topic and the research question concern a very specific group. For example, in strawberry production (in Greece): they will be men, mainly from Bangladesh, some from Pakistan or maybe a few Afghans. There are no women involved in this sector, not even in the area, (...) and if particularly groups are not accessible, you can explain the specifics on why they are not accessible".

Even if incentives are an option as discussed in the previous chapter, practice partners should join the research group voluntarily, demonstrating genuine interest and motivation to contribute to the research process. Informed consent is essential, outlining their roles, responsibilities, and the expected level of involvement. However, once again, great flexibility is needed in this regard, as many undocumented individuals may be wary of signing documents. If the framework of the project allows it, it is recommended to accept various methods such as the possibility of signing with a pseudonym or oral acceptance on recordings. PAR is an approach that requires a strong

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commitment and long periods of time to be effective, so it is necessary to be as clear as possible when explaining what participation in the research entails and to have a pragmatic and realistic planning in place. Offering various levels of commitment can be advisable, as even though the core values of PAR involve an active role as researchers for the practice partners, some individuals may prefer to participate on a more occasional basis without wanting to commit fully. This preference is understandable and still contributes significantly to the research. When this may be the case, the role of facilitators can be useful to lighten the burden of the practice partners with less availability, so that they can focus directly on their meaningful contributions and not in more administrative tasks. Although the objective of the approach is to include the contribution of undocumented migrant individuals as active agents, having people who facilitate participation streamlines the process and prevents overburdening of those who are involved in it.

There are different categorizations of possible levels of participation, but many of them describe a spectrum from being used, often described as tokenism in the context of migration, to community-led decisions. The following system by Wright, Block and Unger[17] describes individual levels of target group involvement.

[17] Wright, Block, Unger; Deutsche Aidshilfe; 2013. *Partizipative Qualitätsentwicklung in der HIV-Prävention Handbook* https://www.pq-hiv.de/en/levels-participatio.

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Levels of participation
by Wright, Block and Unger:

Non-participatory level:

Level 1 Instrumentalisation
Level 2 Instruction

Pre-stage of participation:

Level 3 Information
Level 4 Consultation
Level 5 Inclusion

Participation:

Level 6 Shared decision-making
Level 7 Partial delegation of decision-making authority
Level 8 Decision-making authority

Goes beyond participation:

Level 9 Community-owned initiatives

There are many similar classifications adapted to specific contexts: Hacker[18] describes a Community Engaged Research Continuum focusing on who drives the research; Anstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation[19] describes participation in the context of governance; while McMillan[20] applies it to the design of public services in the health and care sector; but all follow similar logics.

Input from civil society organisations:

"Sometimes we are very optimistic, OK we want to have the participation of the addressed groups, but sometimes we are not thinking on how we are going to offer this platform by demanding the minimum of their time. Sometimes it's too optimistic to have active participation from people for the whole project cycle."

[18] Commonwealth, V. 2008. *Looking at CBPR Through the Lens of the IRB*, in Hacker, K. 2013. *Community Based Participatory Research*, https://books.google.be/books?id=mB5dO5NUWLgC&lpg=PP1&hl=nl&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false
[19] Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216-224.
[20] McMillan, G. (2019). Participation: its impact on services and the people who use them.

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Another element that significantly affects the consolidation of a research team with undocumented migrants is the level of instability experienced by people who may be constantly changing jobs, housing, or even places they live based on where they can work or where they might find more opportunities. In the case of a project like DignityFIRM focused on specific labour sectors, a change of employment may not be a problem as practice partners can still discuss their previous experiences, but other changes play a significant role, especially administrative changes. For example, funding avenues that are specifically designated for asylum seekers are usually completely separate from any funding that might exist for undocumented migrants. Yet in many cases, undocumented migrants might initiate asylum applications as a strategy to gain more time or security, even though they are aware that their application will be denied. If in a PAR project, the status of being an asylum seeker excludes practice partners from the undocumented migrant community, these strategies can become problematic in the research development, but that would not be the case for DignityFIRM, as there are not restrictions about the status of practice partners. However, the aforementioned instability may face a challenge in practice partners' capacity to engage over a significant period of time.

PAR is an approach that pays special attention to training of practice partners, as the skills development of the participants is a valued output that will come out of the research, empowering them, and providing them tools to advocate for their own rights. Along with training, the safe space offered to participants is valued by itself, which also constitutes some of the main remaining benefits from PAR research besides of the impact on the action part.

Input from civil society organisations:
"(It was) important that we held a training session for the coordinators of the organizations involved, prioritized capacity building for sex workers alongside data for advocacy and fought back against legislation."

"Often participants would highlight the importance of talking about these issues, particularly for those who are isolated who aren't allowed to organize or to get really protected."

Practice partners are provided with an orientation session that introduces them to the goals, objectives, and methodology of the research. This session helps them understand the purpose of the study, their role in it, and what to expect throughout the research process. Depending on the research tasks, practice partners might receive training in specific skills such as conducting interviews, facilitating focus groups, data analysis, or other relevant techniques. Training equips them with the necessary tools to actively engage in the research activities, as well as ethical guidelines, including confidentiality, respect for privacy, and the responsible handling of sensitive information.

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Training emphasizes the principles of collaborative decision-making and encourages active participation. Practice partners learn how to contribute their ideas, opinions, and experiences effectively within the group dynamic, and on this topic, intercommunity conflicts should be considered and properly addressed. In the work with undocumented migrants the training phase also requires training on discrimination to be able to identify and address situations, as practice partners may not be aware of their own rights and the discrimination that they suffer, so properly identifying these issues by those conducting the interviews is a key factor. Some organisations reported that sometimes even traditional researchers lacked this capacity to identify situations of discrimination.

By carefully selecting practice partners based on relevance and promoting their active engagement through proper training, a PAR research group can create a collaborative and empowering environment. This approach fosters a sense of ownership among practice partners, leading to richer insights, more meaningful discussions, individual and collective empowerment and self-efficacy, and thus ultimately, more impactful outcomes in addressing the research objectives and the community's needs.

c) Definition of the problem and question

The definition phase in PAR is a critical stage where researchers and practice partners work together to gain a deep understanding of the issues, challenges, and opportunities within the community or context being studied. This phase is characterized by a collaborative and systematic exploration of the existing problems and their root causes, as well as an assessment of available resources and potential solutions. During this phase, the key problems faced by the community are identified. This process involves active listening to community members' voices, concerns, and experiences. Identifying these problems from the perspective of those directly affected is fundamental to the participatory approach of PAR.

Once the problems are identified, the research group delves deeper to understand the underlying causes and factors contributing to these issues. Root cause analysis helps in uncovering systemic issues, societal norms, economic factors, or policies that perpetuate the problems. Identifying root causes is crucial for developing effective and sustainable solutions. It is important to note that root cause analysis with undocumented migrants is particularly complex.

Input from civil society organisations:

"It is important in this planning and definition to have clarity about the objective, scope, and priorities. Sometimes, the realities they face involve intersectional violence, a culmination of situations in many areas; all areas are interconnected. At times, it is challenging to prioritize, but when conducting research, it is essential to establish those boundaries to avoid getting lost."

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Although delimiting the scope of action is necessary for a viable action plan, multifactorial issues can be included in the definition through quality-of-life indicators that encompass various forms of violence and discrimination (housing, employment, mutual support networks, etc.). If focus groups are going to be formed, these indicators provide firsthand information that can be extrapolated and related to other topics (education, access to health...). These indicators will also be useful if we are going to have a comparative approach between different geographical areas (countries or even regions inside the same state).

Alongside problem identification, the definition phase often involves mapping community assets. This includes identifying the strengths, skills, resources, and capacities within the community. Recognizing these assets is essential as they can be leveraged to garner (a sense of) collective efficacy, address challenges and foster positive change.

Data collected from various sources, such as surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions, is analysed collaboratively. Both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods may be employed to gain comprehensive insights into the identified issues. Analysing the data together enhances practice partners' understanding and ownership of the findings. This stage of data analysis should also be used to avoid over diagnosing, which may be common when researching this specific population:

Input from civil society organisations:
"Sometimes there are overdiagnoses. Realities that have already been analysed, and it is not necessary to repeat what we already know. There are research studies that already provide a strong foundation for this situation; we need to identify where we want to fill those gaps to have a greater impact."

However, known realities can be the focus if the aim is to get legitimate data that may be lacking for proper data-driven-advocacy.

Input from civil society organisations:
"It is the kind of general community feel that police are a real barrier to sex workers' access to justice - it's a common trope. We knew we had to focus on that specific experience. We were able to get strong data on what happens in that context, on what we suspected (that police treat sex workers badly) - but that data was found empirically and in an objective way."

Once the problems are identified, and data is analysed, the research group collaboratively prioritizes the issues based on their significance and impact on the community while at the same time being strategic, identifying the possible opportunities to realistically change something.

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Prioritization helps in focusing efforts and resources on addressing the most pressing concerns effectively. Findings from the definition phase are often validated with the community members to ensure accuracy and to gather additional insights. Validation sessions provide an opportunity for community members to confirm the identified issues and contribute further to the understanding of the problems

d) Design of the study

After the definition of the problem and the question, the designing phase is a crucial step where the research group collaboratively develops strategies and action plans based on the insights gained during the definition. In this phase, practice partners, along with researchers, work together to formulate concrete steps to address the identified issues and create positive change within the community. The research group outlines clear and achievable objectives based on the prioritized issues identified during the definition phase. Objectives should be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) to provide a clear direction for the research process.

Practice partners and researchers collaborate to develop action plans detailing the steps, activities, and resources required to achieve the set objectives. Action plans often include specific tasks, responsible individuals, timelines, and desired outcomes. These plans are developed collectively, ensuring that all voices are considered in the decision-making process.

Input from civil society organisations:

"I find it important to also consider the utility or impact we will have from this research. If possible, it's essential to address this aspect within the research itself, because sometimes we might obtain significant results, but the research remains stagnant. Due to not having considered its impact, we might fall short. I think it would be interesting to include how to use the results, what goals we want to achieve, which communication channels we want to explore, and how we plan to make an impact, whether locally, nationally, or internationally. If we also include this in the plan, we won't overlook it."

During the planning phase, the research group assesses the resources needed to implement the action plans. This includes human resources, financial support, materials, and any external support required. Allocating resources effectively is essential to ensure that the planned activities can be carried out successfully. In this assessment, the time required for transcription and translation is often underestimated.

Input from civil society organisations:

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"During the interviews we had translations for specifics needed, but afterwards transcriptions were so time consuming. Who can help you in these steps? You cannot do everything by yourself. Proper planning is necessary." "We had massive issues with translation and transcription. We did not foresee enough. We had to extend our budget massively and extend deadlines as well. It takes so much time and costs a lot of money. Hiring professional companies becomes difficult, because they don't understand community terms for example, but if you ask people within the community to help you there are issues around confidentiality."

"The budget for translation was huge, especially for languages for which there weren't as many options like Armenian. We did a little bit of community volunteering (trusted allies), we got free community translation, professional translation and paid community translation. Slang words, specific phrases... whorephobia (prejudices against sex workers in the language used) that needed to be corrected... Lots of corrections and revision too."

To reduce costs and streamline the process, some researchers[21] recommend relying directly on interpreters and recording their interpretation, instead of recording the person in their original language and then translating it afterward (which would require both interpretation and translation). However, this may not be possible in some cases, as interviewed individuals have the right to ask for the transcriptions of their participation in their original language. The planning phase may involve more training sessions or capacity-building workshops for practice partners. These sessions aim to enhance the skills and knowledge of community members, empowering them to actively engage in the planned activities. Capacity building ensures that practice partners are well-equipped to contribute meaningfully to the research process.

Clear mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the progress of the planned activities are established. Regular check-ins and feedback sessions are implemented to assess the effectiveness of the interventions when the chosen methodology allows it, mostly in the case of qualitative ones. Monitoring and evaluation allow the research group to make necessary adjustments, ensuring that the planned actions align with the desired outcomes. For those adjustments to be feasible, plans are often iterative and adaptive. The research group remains open to feedback and adjusts the strategies based on the evolving needs and challenges within the community. Flexibility and adaptability are key elements to respond effectively to unexpected situations.

[21] FLEX, 2021. *Experts by Experience: Conducting Feminist Participatory Action Research with Workers in High-Risk Sectors* https://labourexploitation.org/publications/experts-by-experience-conducting-feminist-participatory-action-research-with-workers-in-high-risk-sectors/

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e) Field work

During the fieldwork phase of PAR, researchers work directly with the practice partners or community members to collect data, conduct interviews, administer surveys, and engage in other data collection methods. This phase is characterized by a collaborative and iterative process, where researchers and practice partners share knowledge and insights. The specifics on the fieldwork will vary significantly depending on the research, but as mentioned before, in the case of undocumented migrants it is common to include peer interviews. When conducting them, pilot sessions are valuable to test initial plannings or research questions functionality:

Input from civil society organisations:

"We did a pilot study, each organisation conducted three interviews, peer interviews (...) and the pilot was really useful both as a practice for the interviewers/researchers but also for the staff, to see if the questions worked. We had a lot of feedback from the researchers, which questions made sense or not. Doing a short practice run, we are still using the data from the pilot studies, you don't want to get participants sharing quite possibly traumatic experiences for the sake of your practice run, you still want to make sure that the knowledge is being included and it's useful, to avoid being extractivist."

While conducting the interviews it is important to remind practice partners about the importance of active listening and that there are no wrong answers. The complexity of the living conditions of undocumented migrants and its many causes can lead a researcher to look for complex solutions, sometimes overlooking simple but practical approaches.

Input from civil society organisations:

"You just need to listen to them, and you accept what they tell. For me it was quite surprising that we asked for examples based on experience in Germany, what would they recommend to make other female migrants' lives better. They recommended very simple things, we implemented it, and it worked out great. (Our research) got a lot of attention and people coming to us."

Examples from DignityFIRM PAR in the field:

EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

For some participants, the meetings were emotionally intense, yet they also expressed a need to continue exploring the issues in depth. The three case studies therefore had to remain flexible, adapting to these emotional responses, particularly by adjusting timing and creating space for participants to share traumatic experiences and to recover from the process of reliving them.

Wroclaw: *"There was a very emotional response from the participants. They relived past traumas and we had to hold space, pause, and give support in the moment."*

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Seville: *"We work from a comprehensive perspective that articulates body, emotion and thought, building intersubjective relationships between participants, as a way of resisting the fragmentation caused by suffering and racism. We incorporate practices such as conscious breathing, biodanza (exercises used in group sessions to foster understanding with one's emotions and the ability to express them) and self-care as political dimensions of affections, necessary to create a safe environment of trust and collective belonging."*

The recovery of the experiences lived was carried out through personal narratives, framed in labor, human and migratory rights. This process allowed us to resignify our experiences, politicize them and transform them into a collective force. It was a liberating path that took us from the personal to the collective, and from anger and frustration to political power.

f) Action and dissemination

For the research not to be limited to mere knowledge generation, the action plan should be in place from the early stages of the design to have a clear action-oriented direction through the whole research. The final stage of PAR can take different shapes depending on the results of the research, but this should not prevent from trying to define the activities aimed at moving the research results into action and social change from the beginning in order to have a clear path. Even when aiming high, it is important to be realistic about the kind of social changes that can be achieved through PAR. Hyped expectations from practice partners should be addressed, as the capacity to interfere in the oppressive elements that undocumented migrants suffer and the elements affecting their living conditions is limited.

The approach itself has a very context-specific focus, so moving to action in research that includes geographic variety can be problematic[22]. This is the case of the DignityFIRM project, in which PAR is implemented in three different countries (Spain, the Netherlands and Poland). Although transnational or European-level actions can be established, it is necessary to anchor global or European strategies to the specific contexts of each territory for the action route to be truly effective. That is why specific actions are contemplated for each country. This is also the case when extrapolating lessons learned and conclusions drawn from the research. The lessons learned can be used in other contexts, but this requires territorial adaptation. In the field of irregular migration and living conditions of migrants, the "Action" in PAR can become mobilization actions, advocacy

[22] Federación SOS Racismo, 2021. *Del Maine a las RRSS: Una Investigación Acción Participativa sobre informaciones y desinformaciones en torno a la diversidad y las migraciones y su impacto en las comunidades migrantes y racializadas.* https://sosracismogipuzkoa.org/project/del-maine-a-las-rrss-2021/

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for policy change, legal support initiatives, establishment of programs, employment initiatives or awareness raising for the identified issues, to name a few[23]. These types of actions may seem similar to those of any organization working on advocacy, but they do not necessarily appear in traditional research methodologies that seek knowledge generation as an end in itself. The differentiating factor is precisely the participation of undocumented migrant individuals in this phase of the process as well. Training itself can be considered part of the PAR action, even if it is also an intrinsic element in previous stages. In the case of labour conditions of undocumented migrants, the empowerment of practice partners and skills training can lead to identifying other gaps in terms of skills or needs in order to be able to exercise and demand rights and be active agents of change. For example, it is common to find training elements in action formulas aimed at forming workers' unions.

Finally, enabling the results to be self-sustainable once the scope of the project is finished will also determine the success of the results. It is not uncommon to find participatory processes that give good results during their implementation phase, but do not reach their full potential once the project is completed, especially in the case of problems that are difficult to solve. The lack of foresight in this regard can generate disappointment in the practice partners, who may feel abandoned or instrumentalized once the project is over. To prevent this from happening, it is necessary to establish means and resources for the sustainability of the initiatives that may arise from PAR, or to seek new sources of funding during their execution that will allow work to continue in the same direction.

g) Evaluation

To be coherent with the whole approach of PAR, an evaluation to assess its effectiveness or impact shall also be participatory. Participatory evaluation can be conducted either during or after implementation, but it is desirable to have periodic ongoing check-ins that allow redirection measures to be taken. Even considering the constant flexibility required by the approach, impact indicators shall be set in the initial planning as much in detail as possible for the evaluation to be effective.

[23] Legarda Dìaz-Aguado, I. (2025). Participatory Action Research (PAR) Migrant led organisations. DignityFIRM. https://zenodo.org/records/17912298

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The evaluation can be led either internally or by external professional evaluators using participatory methods. There are two main frames to classify the participatory evaluation[24] depending on its aims:

- Practical participatory evaluation seeks to promote the use of evaluation for decision making
- Transformative participatory evaluation seeks to empower practice partners and mobilize social change. This is the case for the context of the DignityFIRM project.

Examples from DignityFIRM PAR in the field:

REASONS TO PARTICIPATE

Seville: *"The final aspect we propose including in future versions of a guideline like this one is the incorporation of a specific strategy or section that allows for identifying the reasons why people decide to participate in or withdraw from the research. We believe this information is key to understanding the dynamics of the process, adapting methodologies to the specific realities of the participating groups, and creating environments of trust. Furthermore, we suggest that this strategy be communicated to those involved from the outset, so that they can exercise their agency in an informed manner, understanding that their participation is voluntary, respected, and valued in all its forms".*

[24] Cousins and Whitmore, 1998. *Framing Participatory Evaluation.* New Directions for Evaluation 1998(80):5 - 23 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229812646_Framing_Participatory_Evaluation

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Examples from DignityFIRM PAR in the field:

REFLEXIONS FROM THE PAR EVALUATION

These guidelines have been drafted with the intention of being applicable to different contexts and following a general Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework. The reflections that follow are based on the experience of the DignityFIRM project, in which PICUM coordinated the work package dedicated to Participatory Action Research (PAR) and subcontracted three organisations responsible for training and supporting their peer researchers. The observations stem from the final evaluation of the process and are presented here as guidelines that may prove useful for similar initiatives, although the considerations set out below will only be relevant where the context so requires, as many PAR experiences do not involve formal subcontracting structures, governance by work packages, or the administrative requirements typical of projects funded by programmes such as Horizon Europe.

General considerations

In the case of complex coordination structures, such as those found in some European projects, the importance of maintaining a balance between guidance and autonomy was also highlighted. From the project coordination role – in this case, the role played by PICUM – it was necessary to strike a constant balance between providing methodological guidance and respecting the decision-making capacity of the organisations involved. This involves fostering monitoring and self-evaluation processes, whilst not shying away from providing clear instructions and methodological support where necessary.

Call for organisations

When using open calls to select lead organisations, certain elements can help streamline the process:

- Provide as clear information as possible regarding the type of organisation or approach sought. In the case of DignityFIRM, for example, proposals offering alternatives to traditional academic approaches were particularly valued.
- Use guided forms to structure proposals. Asking detailed questions helps clarify what information is required and reduces ambiguity compared to general instructions. Ways can be found to include guiding questions whilst allowing for flexibility and autonomy in the proposals.
- Where relevant, define a suggested profile for the peer researcher. In the specific case of research on political activation and mobilisation, involving individuals with leadership roles or recognition within the community can help generate a more lasting impact.
- Experience has shown that the profile and personal characteristics of peer researchers can have a significant influence on the direction and development of PAR case studies.

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Research design and timeline

Another important aspect concerns the timetable and design of the research. PAR processes typically take place in complex and changing social contexts, so planning must allow for a certain degree of unpredictability. Some useful considerations include:

- Designing timelines that allow for adjustments and possible deviations from the initial plan.
- Wherever possible, allow for a time buffer between the end of the action phase and the project closure, to consolidate learning and evaluate results.
- When a PAR component aims to validate or complement results produced by other work packages, it is essential to define from the outset which outputs or results need to be aligned, which deadlines need to be coordinated, and how this process will be integrated into the overall project.
- Bear in mind that the social realities being investigated may directly affect peer researchers. For example, during the project there may be a change in their administrative status, mobility or living conditions, including scenarios such as the deportation of a researcher.

Training

Finally, the experience also highlighted the importance of paying particular attention to the training and methodological support of those involved in the research. In this regard, it may be useful to:

- Provide clear written guidance on key issues, such as data management and ethical considerations, reporting, the logical framework used in the design of actions, the formulation of public policy recommendations, and evaluation methods.
- Incorporate regular face-to-face meetings between the teams responsible for the case studies, as these sessions often facilitate the exchange of experiences and collective learning.
- Anticipating potential barriers to the freedom of movement of some participants and providing tailored solutions where necessary. For example, if a partner researcher is unable to travel outside their country due to restrictions related to their residence permit, consideration could be given to organising face-to-face meetings in that country.

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5. Conclusions

Given its inherent ideological position to address various forms of oppression, recognition of the agency of actors and various forms of knowledge, and action-oriented nature, Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an apt and effective tool for fostering social change.

Examining the working and living conditions of undocumented migrants, PAR holds substantial potential due to its comprehensive and trustworthy nature rooted in inside knowledge, ensuring relevance and proximity to reality that may be only reachable with peer-research. There is power in the recognition that this knowledge fosters a dynamic mutual learning process between traditional researchers and undocumented migrants, that can also empower practice partners facilitating self-representation in relevant spaces where they are underrepresented. The action-oriented approach of PAR increases the likelihood of findings being translated into tangible changes, making it a potent methodology for addressing and transforming the challenges faced by undocumented migrant communities. However, the complexity of the approach should not be underestimated, especially when used for the study of a multifactorial and complex topic, such as the working and living conditions of undocumented migrants. In cases where there is insufficient time and resources, limitations imposed by traditional academic frameworks, a lack of necessary flexibility, or a reluctance to relinquish power, PAR may not be a suitable fit.

In any case, understanding the different contexts and conditions experienced by migrants in their day-to-day lives is essential to carry out the research. Material factors such as a lack of time and resources, along with subjective issues like fears, distrust, stigmatization, or a sense of belonging and relevance, can be decisive in the success of its implementation. Considering all these aspects, an appropriate implementation based on an intersectional perspective offers significant possibilities for the research to address real needs and allows those who are traditionally considered mere subjects of study to become active agents of social change.

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Guidelines on Participatory Action Research (PAR) in the work with undocumented migrants

About DignityFIRM

Towards becoming sustainable and resilient societies we must address the structural contradictions between our societies' exclusion of migrant workers and their substantive role in producing our food.

www.dignityfirm.eu

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