Re-InVEST Policy Brief

Vulnerable citizens as co-researchers on social policies in Europe: Participatory Action Human Rights and Capability Approach

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'Sometimes silence can be a tool of oppression; when you are silenced …it is not simply that you do not speak but that you are barred from participation in a conversation which nevertheless involves you' ( )

Re-InVEST, a H2020 funded project involving 20 organisations (universities, research centres and civil society organisations working with vulnerable groups) aims to investigate the philosophical, institutional and empirical foundations of an inclusive Europe of solidarity and trust. It draws on capability- and human rights-based participatory approaches to enable the voice of the vulnerable express how the EU Social Investment Package can be strengthened. Our collective studies critically investigated the impact of the financial crisis on vulnerable groups, their experiences of labour market and social protection and their experiences of social investment or disinvestment in social services as well as the marketization of that social investment.

Re-InVEST welcomes the focus on citizen participation in Horizon Europe (FP9), the successor to H2020, and the creative three stage model of generation, refinement and face-to-face deliberation . As an Alliance against Poverty we have experimented with forms of deliberative democracy . We agree targeted support activities are necessary to enable an equality of participation where all voices can be heard. Inclusive language including 'residents' as well as 'citizens' of Europe is also necessary. We have learned that participatory research with vulnerable citizens and residents needs realistic time frames and adequate resources for equal participation (training, travel, transport, mediation, opportunity cost etc) as well as a change of mindset for many academics and researchers.

This paper explores our Participatory Action Human Rights and Capability Approach (PAHRCA) approach to research and knowledge construction which we implemented in 13 countries over the 2015-2018 period. We briefly outline key concepts underpinning the PAHCRA approach, discuss how it was operationalised, and then reflect on the degree to which co-construction of knowledge is a form of 'enabling research' that enhances the

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collective agency of vulnerable groups in their fight for a more equitable society. Our specific social co-construction of knowledge illuminated how policies and practices can produce distinct experiences from the perspective of the most vulnerable (Lynch 1989).

Capability approaches[1] provide a comprehensive and flexible theory of wellbeing and justice that capture the multiple, complex and dynamic aspects of poverty and how it impacts on how individuals can convert resources to achieve functionings to live a life they value. Capability values such as freedom, choice, individual and collective agency and autonomy, informed our research design as did our holistic anthropological understanding of all humans as doers, receivers and judges capable of reflecting not only on their own experiences but on wider policy. **Human rights** are the basic rights and freedoms that belong to everyone, they form a common European basis of values and describe core elements of well-being and a good life.   **Human Rights Based Approaches** (HRBA) based on principles of voice, accountability and participation have informed this research as have various approaches to research that champion collaboration, co-production and co-creation. The **Merging of Knowledge** approach[2] in particular understands scientific knowledge on social inclusion as constructed from three parts: the knowledge of academic researchers; experiential knowledge of the vulnerable; and professional knowledge of those who work among and with the vulnerable.

We understand **knowledge** as an analytical concept or 'a framework to identify explicit and implicit assumptions or conceptions concerning social relations and the norms which support them'[3]. Such knowledge bridges and links macro and micro level approaches to policy analysis implementation. Lam[4] insists that interaction between *explicit knowledge* (formal study or deduction), and *tacit knowledge* (intuitive and acquired through experience) is vital for influencing social change. We seek to create bottom up understandings that are nested within a political economy approach so structural economic and power inequalities are not individualised but seen as a problematic capitalism[5]. Gender, race, age and other economic, spatial and welfare state stratifications prefigure deeply uneven and unequal systems of social

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[1] Nussbaum M.C (2011) Capabilities, Entitlements, Rights: Supplementation and Critique, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities: A Multi-Disciplinary Journal for People-Centered Development*, 12:1, 23-37

[2] Godinot, X and Wodon Q 2006. Participatory Approaches to Attacking Extreme Poverty: Cases Studies Led by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, World Bank Publications,

[3] Cavaghan R 2010. Gender Knowledge: A Review of Theory and Practice in Young B. and Scherrer C (Eds.) Gender Knowledge and Knowledge Networks in International Political Economy Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden pp18-36 p 18

[4] Lam 2000 cited in Shucksmith M (2016) *InterAction: How can academics and the third sector work together to influence policy and practice*? Carnegie Trust, Dunfermline

[5] Farruga D. and Gerrard J. 2016. Academic Knowledge and Contemporary Poverty: The Politics of Homelessness Research *Sociology* 2016, Vol. 50(2) 267–284

reproduction causing different forms of vulnerability. **Participatory Action Research** (PAR) [6] views participants as co-researchers who have special knowledge about their own situation. Hence they are not only 'interviewed' but are **co-researchers** engaging in, examining, interpreting, and reflecting on their own social world in a research process that offers space for both learning and action[7] . PAR creates 'new knowledge' in a more inclusive way that breaks silences. As enabling research it offers possibilities to reposition 'the researched' from being a 'social problem' to become 'a community of valorised and normatively legitimate subjectivities' [8] Rather than mine data for extraction it seeks to create egalitarian and reciprocal meaning making approaches, it does not conduct a study "on" a group of people, it is research "with" a group of people[9]. This disrupts embedded, or implicit, knowledges or deep assumptions about poverty and exclusion or inequality employed in social and economic policy.

In this process, people rupture their existing attitudes of silence, accommodation and passivity, and gain confidence and abilities to alter unjust conditions and structures. This is an authentic power for liberation that ultimately destroys a passive awaiting of fate"[10].

Peer research is used here to describe a specific process where some but not all of the vulnerable group undertake core aspects of the research work including drafting, this can shift the power base and ownership of the research process to 'non experts' and reduce the 'academicism' of research, helps ensure participation is real and not tokenistic, and reduces hierarchies. PAHRCA aims to influence and change policy and practice by co-development of policy alternatives. Challenging the prefigurative elements of knowledge processes can occur through a **'policy dialogue'** which seeks to generate a merging of knowledge between different actors: academics, NGOs and people living in poverty and empowered to present to, and educate, policy makers, politicians and 'experts'. The extension into policy learning and dialogue offers not only voice, but also new forms of expertise (and by extension empowerment) outside of formal academic research. **Action** can also include more overt political campaigning and protest, national or local media dissemination and ongoing dissemination and promotion of the new knowledge in different public, political and policy spheres (local or national parliamentary committees, seminars, NGO or business conferences).

The PAHRCA[11] framework evolved through an iterative process of action and reflection, into an innovative approach to co-investigate how austerity and marketisation policy impacts on the rights and capabilities of vulnerable groups. The PAHRCA approach requires a number of steps including, sessions with the vulnerable participants that focus on collective processes to enable trust building, development and mutual learning, joint data collection and analysis and policy dialogue. The approach is a prefigurative form of developmental socialisation – where the capacity of all actors is enhanced in a collaborative way using trust building exercises including information sessions, discussions, role play, visual methods and dialogue, all of which enabled co-construction of new and important understandings related to crisis impacts and policy responses.

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[6] Olshansky, E. et al. (2005) *Participatory Action Research to Understand and Reduce Health Disparities*. Nursing Outlook; 53:121-6.

[7] Kemmis, S., & Wilkinson. M. 1998. 'Participatory action research and the study of practice', Pp.21-36 in Atweh B, Kemmis S. and Weeks P (Eds) *Action Research in Practice: Partnerships for Social Justice in Education,*. London: Routledge

8 Farruga D. and Gerrard J. ibid

9 Ledwith M. 2007. On being critical: uniting theory and practice through emancipatory action research, *Educational Action Research*, 15:4, 597-611

[10] Freire, P. 1974. *Education: The Practice of Freedom*. London: Writers & Readers Publishing Cooperative.

[11] Murphy M and Hearne R. 2016 *Participatory Action Capability and Human Rights Approach Draft Methodological Toolkit*, Maynooth Reinvest

Transformative participatory methods implemented over multiple sessions enabled the co-construction of these insights in empowered processes enabling action and dialogue.

Prefigurative politics with a bottom up lens generated a genuine empowerment of vulnerable groups. Mutual learning sessions evolved into dialogue and action, built on participants' experience to express their views in the public sphere and policy documents. The process offered the opportunity to understand better the gaps between experiences of specific forms of social exclusion and the explicit and implicit knowledge about the vulnerable that informs policy responses. Drawing out such implicit assumptions illuminates policy contradictions, policy failures and underlying tensions in policy discourses.

A few words of warning.

This process is challenging for the academics, partner NGO's and the vulnerable participants and requires significant personal input, research resources and time. The short time frame of H2020 (and other funded research) can limit the ability to achieve the level of deep participation and empowerment required to fulfil the full aims of PAR, even in pre-existing partnerships. Predetermined research questions (a requirement for funding proposals) limit capacity to engage vulnerable groups in all aspects of the research design. Often when research is finished, unless the researchers or partnering NGOs commit themselves a priori to pursuing the follow-up with other resources, further work with the vulnerable participants is not guaranteed.

The PAHRCA aim of bringing the voice and reality of vulnerable groups into the public sphere did translate into enabling the concerns and experiences of socially excluded participants to be taken seriously within some local and national political and policy spheres. This new co-created knowledge now exists in the public sphere as a benchmark for assessing policy into the future and can be effectively drawn on by various stakeholders and civil society campaigns. Participatory research at EU-level is even more demanding, as it necessitates larger investments in preparation, travel, translation, and guidance – but also advocacy about EU-level policy recommendations of the research. In the case of Re-InVEST, we can rely on the (informal) 'Alliances to Fight Poverty' in which the research was embedded, to carry forward the policy lessons.

PAHRCA research proved challenging for academics, challenging our own biases and motivations, forcing us to re-examine notions of empowerment and to question the boundaries of our own commitment to this form of research. Our own gender, ethnicity and age also influenced the process of research, we were not always equipped to manage practical cultural and linguistic challenges or have time to really adequately explore or unpack intersectional experiences. Research ethics which can only guide prefigurative research processes which define research questions with the active participation of research participants.

Dominant policy knowledge can disguise, sometimes intentionally, the reality of the impact of policy on the wellbeing of the vulnerable and justify the structural violence embedded in policy failures and inherent in marketised forms of social investment. We hope we have contributed an 'unruly, critical' or 'an alternative politics of research',[12] one that challenges assumptions underpinning hegemonic or orthodox research. We suggest the PAHRCA research co-creation of new knowledge is at least a 'potential' power (Gaventa and Cornwall 2003)[13]. A strength of the research is how the participants' lived experience, knowledge and world view is discussed and understood in the context of the political economy of the state and market as duty bearers. Gowan (2010[14]) has described such political contestation of policy in terms of 'sin talk', 'sick talk' and

12 Farruga and Gerrard ibid

13 Gavanta J and Cornwell A (2008) Power and Knowledge in Reason, P. & Bradbury, H. (Eds.) (2008). *The SAGE handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2nd edn.). London: SAGE p 70-80

14 Gowan T 2010. *Hobos, Hustlers and Backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco*. Minneapolis, MN: UMP

'system talk' where discourses lay the causes of exclusion at the feet of moral culpability, pathological incapacity or structural inequality respectively. This research situated experiences clearly within 'system talk' and demonstrated capacity to reveal new insights, priorities, and definitions and created a more democratic and inclusive form of knowledge.