

Advancing Participatory Approaches in Global Migrant Research: A Roundtable Discussion

URIBE GUAJARDO, Maria Gabriela, DIAB, Jasmin Lilian, CURRY, Gwenetta, LAMARQUE, Muriel <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4149-2334>>, MAZARIEGO, Jose, BRIOZZO, Erica, STOJANOVSKI, Kristefer, VILLARROEL, Nazmy, KARADAG, Ozge, SLEWA-YOUNAN, Shameran and CRAVERO, Kathleen

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Abstract

Background

Researchers and policy-makers alike increasingly recognise the importance of engaging diverse perspectives in global migrant research. There is a shift toward more community-led, co-produced, and decolonial approaches that centre migrants as active collaborators in research design, implementation, and dissemination. The aims are to explore (1) the use of participatory approaches in global migration research; (2) genuine participatory approaches or ‘best practice’ in participatory approaches to migration research and (3) barriers and facilitators for participatory research at a global level.

Method

This study used a qualitative design in the form of a structured roundtable discussion. The roundtable was held virtually in 2024 with 16 individual participants from nine countries, with expertise in migration research and practice. The session lasted two hours and was moderated by two facilitators, with open-ended questions designed to elicit reflections on participatory approaches in migrant research. The themes were: use of participatory approaches, best practices, and barriers and facilitators to participation.

Results

Participants highlighted key participatory methods commonly used, including the ‘use of frameworks’, the use as ‘researchers as social agents’ or intermediaries to amplify migrant community voices and the use of ‘community-led direction’. Best practices included the prioritisation of measurable benefits for the community itself, ensuring sustained engagement, from inception to the completion of the project and beyond and avoiding the use of generalising methodologies. Limitations identified were discrimination faced by migrant communities, continued relocation, or misalignment with research funder expectations were also noted. Enablers were the building of community trust, the use of innovative and flexible research funding models, and the establishment of knowledge exchanges between communities and researchers.

Next steps

Future lines of action include addressing these challenges through innovative models such as trust-based philanthropy, and emphasising the need for genuine engagement and community agency — and the inclusion of frontline worker perspectives in research.

Introduction

Researchers and policy-makers alike increasingly recognise the importance of engaging diverse perspectives in global migrant research and practice (1, 2). While there is strong evidence demonstrating the importance of building trust and including ethnic minority communities in research—such as improved adherence to study protocols and reduced loss to follow-up (3-5)—only an estimated 7–10% of published global health and migration research employs participatory approaches (4, 6). Meaningful participation from migrants and refugees remains significantly less advanced compared to the involvement of general populations and consumers in health and social disciplines’ research.

To explore ways in which migrants and ethnic minorities can be meaningfully involved in research, the Global Research Network on Migrants in Big Cities organised a roundtable of stakeholders on this subject. These participants, who brought deep experience working with migrant and ethnic minorities across the globe (e.g, in Africa, Australia (AU), South Asia, United Kingdom (UK), United States (US) and the Middle East) agreed that greater collaboration and partnership with these groups requires unlearning and re-imagining how we construct, produce, and value grassroot knowledge (2).

Method

This study used a qualitative design in the form of a structured roundtable discussion under the Global Migrants in Big Cities (GMBC) Network initiative (Figure 1). The roundtable was held virtually in December 2024 and included 16 individual participants from nine countries, with expertise in migration research and practice. The session lasted approximately two hours and was moderated by two facilitators (authors), who posed a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit reflections on participatory approaches in migrant research. The questions were shared with participants in advance and structured around three thematic areas: *current use of participatory approaches, best practices, and barriers and facilitators to participation.*

About the Global Migrants in Big Cities (GMBC) Network

GMBC Network is a group of academic, researchers and experts from big cities across the world who collaborate to improve knowledge and policies related to migrant and refugee health. The network consists of 16 members, incorporating researchers and policy makers from Bierut, Copenhagen, Edinburgh, Istanbul, Lisbon, New York, Ontario, Sheffield and Sydney. The academic disciplines covered by the Network fall mainly into the areas of health and social sciences, with key health-related areas including structural and institutional racism, migrant health and mental health, LGBTQ+ health, maternal health, and public health policies. In their research, members cover populations including marginalised groups; migrants (e.g., labour migrants, undocumented migrants, and economic migrants); LGBTQ+ migrants and displaced persons, and refugees (e.g., Afghan, Congolese, Iraqi, Ukrainian, Palestinian, Syrian and Ukrainian refugees) and Refugee healthcare professionals) and refugee healthcare professionals.

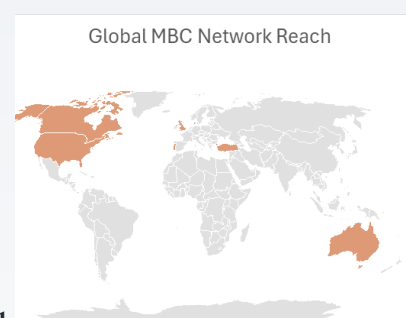


Figure 1

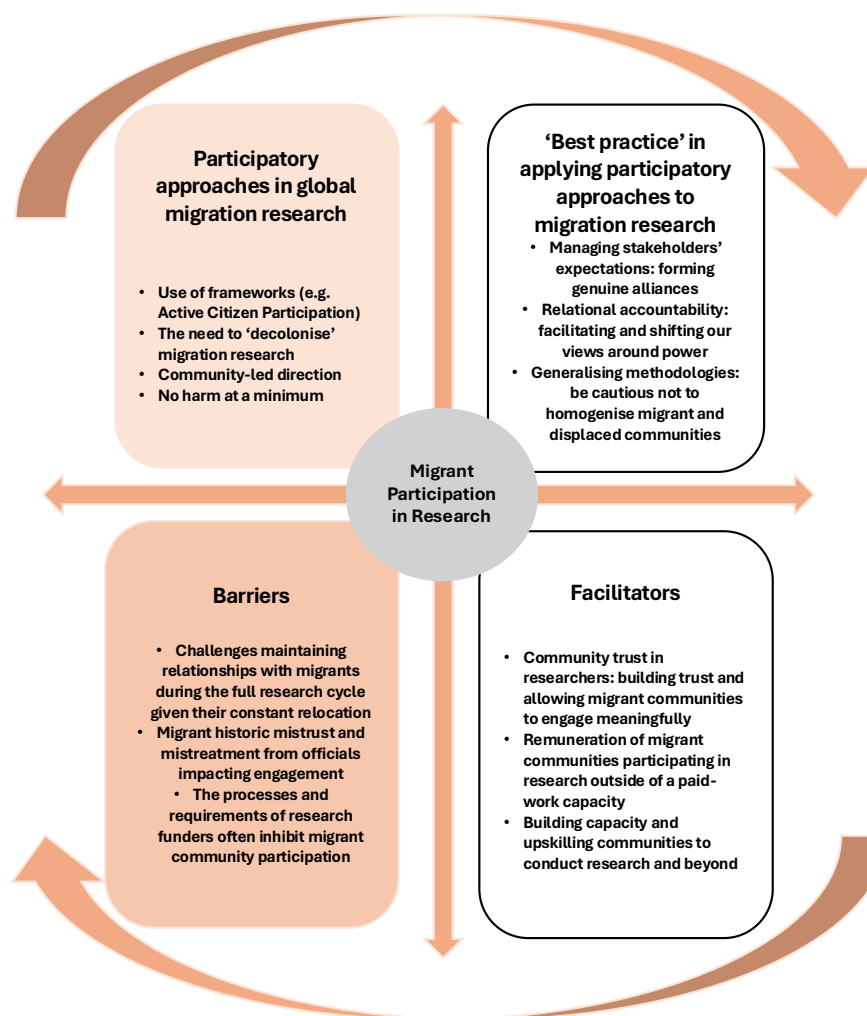
Participants were invited through professional networks, informed of the general aims of the discussion, and asked to reflect on their own research experiences prior to the session. The conversation was audio-recorded with participants' verbal consent, and detailed notes were also taken. No personally identifiable information was retained, and all insights are presented in an anonymised form.

While direct quotations were not retained or recorded, key insights were documented through detailed field notes and summary observations by the facilitators.

Results: key themes

The key themes are depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Overview of Themes



I. The use of participatory approaches in global migration research

Among the many themes raised in the discussion of participatory methods commonly used in migrant research, three are highlighted here.

Use of frameworks

A framework highlighted during the roundtable was the Participatory Action (PA) Framework. By using this approach, researchers are able to engage genuinely and to establish mutual respect in migrant participatory community interventions. The PA framework get researchers into the community with people with lived experience, i.e., people who consider themselves stakeholders in that community.

This framework enables researchers — including community co-researchers — to work collaboratively from the outset to identify the issues or problems to be investigated, often even before formal data collection begins. The participatory process continues throughout, including the co-development of solutions based on insights generated during data analysis.

Some felt that using Active Citizen Participation (ACP) Framework addresses more directly the need to ‘decolonise’ migration research; it helps establish mutual respect in migrant participatory community interventions. This is important, since even frameworks meant to be participatory can themselves be colonising by enforcing Western-centric views on how to conduct research.

Participants emphasised the role of researchers as social agents or intermediaries and the need to consider the positionality of research in health and social disciplines. Notably, several of the contributors who participated in the roundtable represented both scholars and individuals with lived migrant experiences, having themselves navigated the complexities of migration and professional work in foreign contexts. This dual positioning and experience enriches their insights, allowing them to bridge theoretical frameworks with embodied knowledge, thereby enhancing the rigour and reflexivity of participatory methodologies.

Community-led direction

Some participants had more cautious views on frameworks, believing that participation should not reflect rigid, pre-defined concepts imposed from the outside; instead, it must be shaped by the communities themselves, reflecting their own values, priorities, and ways of engaging. When participation is dictated by external frameworks, it risks reinforcing ‘verticalist’ approaches that undermine genuine agency and inclusivity. By allowing communities to define what participation means in their own contexts, participatory research can remain flexible, responsive, and truly co-owned, ensuring that it does not simply reproduce existing power hierarchies under the guise of inclusion.

At minimum, the ‘do no harm’ principle is key in all engaged research. Furthermore, migrant communities should be involved in research design from the beginning, including in the development of project and through implementation and evaluation phases and beyond, if possible.

Ideally, research should first and foremost have positive impacts for the communities involved. It should ensure ‘co-creation’ for creative problem solving, collaborative ‘co-designed’ solutions and the ‘co-production’ or implementation of solutions.

II. Genuine participatory approaches or ‘best practice’ in applying participatory approaches to migration research

When outlining best practices for participatory migration research, participants emphasised the power asymmetries between researchers, institutions, and the communities. Accordingly, effective practice requires:

Managing stakeholders’ expectations

Researchers must prioritise measurable benefits for the community and form genuine alliances (e.g., policy shifts in health access or education access for migrants) over grant requirements, research publications and/or the researchers’ career progress. Funding bodies requires a schedule of outputs to be produced and often, they do not align with communities’ expectations and/or capability to deliver these as expected by the funders.

Stakeholders should explicitly address structural constraints imposed by some research funders (universities and governments) that hinder transformative outcomes for migrant groups. This includes unreasonable metrics, short timelines and unnecessary, complex procedures.

Relational accountability

To foster genuine participation, researchers must move beyond tokenistic inclusion and instead cultivate relational accountability — a dynamic, reciprocal process in which all parties share responsibility for the integrity and outcomes of the research. This involves co-defining ownership of the research through sustained engagement by promoting long-term partnerships.

Researchers often occupy positions of privilege — in terms of education, institutional affiliation, research funding access, and mobility — that stand in contrast to the precarious and marginalised realities of displaced communities, such as Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Recognising this disparity is prerequisite for developing authentic partnerships that respect and elevate community knowledge and agency in a meaningful way.

Generalising methodologies

Researchers must be cautious not to homogenise migrant and displaced communities, as doing so risks erasing the complex, intersecting identities and social hierarchies that shape individuals lived experiences. Treating such diverse groups as monolithic not only diminishes the validity of research findings but also reinforces exclusionary narratives and policies. Researchers should adopt

participatory, grassroots-centered approaches that prioritise the experiences, knowledge, and priorities of community members themselves (and to include all the cultural nuances meaningfully). This requires moving away from top-down problem definitions and instead fostering co-creation of research questions, methodologies, and solutions from the ground up reflecting the realities of those most affected.

III. Barriers and facilitators to applying participatory research at a global level

There are several system and structural limitations and enablers to participatory research approaches participants highlighted:

Structural barriers

Migrant communities may be wary of researchers due to previous experiences with discrimination from formal health and social systems, including lack of understanding of their cultural experiences. These negative experiences can only perpetuate the historic mistrust and mistreatment from officials and government agencies as well as lack of access to services migrant communities have experienced.

System barriers

Some major challenges include maintaining relationships with migrants during the full life cycle of a research project, especially given the constant movement of these communities.

For example, LGBTQ+ in Kenya are often forced into internal displacement, and farmworkers in the US move frequently to avoid Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids which translate in high attrition.

In addition, the processes and requirements of research funders often inhibit participation. For example, in the UK, established research funding bodies and their structures are hindering participatory research, as researchers are experiencing issues with transferring funds to other universities within the same country and/or partner organisations from other countries, evidencing the lack of structures to facilitate those processes (e.g. bank and organisational/university systems in place). More accountability from institutions and research funding bodies should allow for this to happen effectively.

While there is emphasis on solidarity in participatory research, there is a misalignment with research funder expectations. It is understood that the organic co-creation processes central for enabling community participation, is often not aligned with how grant schemes and schedules are structured and what is requested as part of the research funder's agreements. Finally, there are concerns regarding rushing proposals and organising timelines in an intrusive way, especially with communities whose perceptions of time may not coincide with those of the researchers.

214 Enhancers for community participation in migrant research unpacked in this roundtable were:

215 *Community trust in researchers*

216 Building trust and allowing migrant communities to engage meaningfully is one of the most important
217 aspects when conducting migrant research. This is highly associated with the 'value' of research in
218 those communities. This is pivotal when breaking historical, systemic and structural barriers in migrant
219 research.

220 A second strategy that has been helpful is building a project team that is compromised by community
221 leaders as chief investigators. This involves elevating the roles of trusted members of a group, who have
222 been working with communities for over long periods of time (as clinicians, community workers, or
223 religious leaders).

224

225

226 *Emerging funding models*

227 There are some emerging, more positive research funding trends. In Australia, funding bodies are
228 increasingly recognising the importance of supporting ethical participation through genuine financial
229 recognition. Under these funding arrangements, any individual participating in research outside of a
230 paid-work capacity is remunerated under the Remuneration and Allowances for Holders of Part-Time
231 Public Office Determination, classified as 'Offices not specified'.

232 Moreover, the inception of participatory budgeting (e.g. trust-based philanthropy) where research
233 funding flows to community partners' organisations directly rather than to universities is a feasible
234 strategy to facilitate participatory approaches (power-sharing).

235

236 *Knowledge exchanges*

237 Building participatory budgeting can aid communities to gain valuable financial transferal skills led by
238 researchers with budgeting experience. This exchange can influence community members to connect
239 with higher education opportunities and scholarships from tertiary institutions (US-based).

240 Other strategies to promote participation have focused on building capacity and upskilling communities
241 to conduct research by providing research training, so community members can lead certain aspects of
242 the project (e.g focus group). Importantly, these new skills can be retained and used beyond the life of
243 a project.

244 It has been demonstrated that migrants have unique skills and a wealth of community knowledge that
245 can help researchers understand those communities better, highlighting the bidirectional nature of
246 knowledge sharing, as equivalent relationship.

247

248 **Discussion**

This roundtable offered a valuable opportunity to synthesise global insights on participatory migration research from both practitioners and researchers with lived migrant experience. The resulting themes speak to both the promise and persistent limitations of participatory approaches globally. In what follows, we contextualise these findings within broader academic debates and structural realities in the fields of migration studies, and participatory research.

Our study confirmed that while frameworks are useful starting points, they remain unevenly adopted across the migration field. This reflects existing limitations that migrant and displaced populations are often engaged as informants, not co-producers of knowledge (4, 6). Scholars have long pointed to the limitations of conventional research paradigms, particularly their tendency to frame migrants as passive subjects of inquiry rather than experts in their own lives (2). These reflections also align with broader decolonial approaches of knowledge production, which call for participatory models rooted in local epistemologies rather than top-down frameworks (7).

Discussions around the best global practices revealed a persistent tension between normative ideals of co-design and the institutional constraints researchers face. While co-creation, co-design, and co-production are increasingly used in migration and health research, they often lack operational clarity and are constrained by research funding cycles, institutional requirements, and risk-averse ethics review processes. This echoes critiques in feminist and decolonial literature, which argue that participation is frequently tokenistic (8, 9). The roundtable also affirmed that participatory methods require more than inclusive language — they require structural shifts that reallocate decision-making power and resources.

Participants from the UK and Lebanon emphasized systemic barriers such as migratory precarity, distrust of institutions, and rigid research funding models. These challenges are widely acknowledged in literature on participatory work with vulnerable populations, especially in humanitarian contexts where mobility and trauma impact engagement (6, 10). Encouragingly, participants also identified emerging trends like trust-based philanthropy, direct research funding to community actors, and capacity-building models — which hold potential for transforming researcher–community relationships. However, these remain the exception rather than the norm and require deliberate investment to scale.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Our reporting may not fully capture the total diversity of participatory approaches in migrant research, nor can it be assumed to represent all local systems or specific research contexts.

Conclusion

These findings highlight that the future of participatory migrant research requires more than methodological innovation by shifting the power dynamics that structure knowledge production. This includes rethinking research funding practices and frameworks, ethics protocols, authorship conventions, and the role of universities in facilitating or limiting genuine community engagement. Future research should explore how participatory approaches can be embedded in multi-site or transnational studies, and how intersectional lenses — including race, gender, sexuality, and legal status — shape the possibilities and limits of participation. In addition, potential future topics for additional roundtables might include voicing frontline worker experiences and their views (and angles) when implementing meaningful engagement from the community they serve.

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