



AVAIL Project

Operating in the UK, Ireland, Latvia and Italy, the Amplifying the Voices of Asylum seekers and refugees for Integration and Life skills—or AVAIL—project has been exploring new ways to support integration of refugees, asylum seekers and host communities by testing participatory approaches.

What are participatory approaches?

At their core, participatory approaches are about the sharing of power with people with lived experience. Participatory approaches can take many forms, ranging from consultation to co-design and co-delivery. Participants in projects are viewed as active agents of change rather than passive recipients of support. Through participation and engagement, people's unique knowledge of their circumstances and the systems they encounter is capitalised upon.

Research

To test this approach, research was carried out on the AVAIL project. Mixed methods research incorporated 51 interviews, nine focus groups and 246 questionnaires across four states, aiming to answer the following question: What are the benefits, challenges and impacts of participatory approaches to refugee and asylum seeker

integration? The research was carried out with three Peer Researchers, who employed their lived experience of seeking refuge in Europe.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCH FIND?

Skills Development and Knowledge Exchange

'Yes, I improve my skills. Before I came I was working with the United Nations World Food Programme ... That makes me feel happy.'—Peer Mentor, Italy

As doctors, teachers, NGO workers or administrative staff, participants had a range of skills which had been left unused due to their circumstances. Projects such as 'Peer Education and Peer Mentoring' (UK/Italy) or 'The VOICES Network' (UK) offered the opportunity to utilise some of these skills. Additionally, adopting participatory approaches within service design enabled skill development through training, and to practice these skills in activities such as public speaking, writing media articles, and course delivery.

Using peer-to-peer exchange systems, Peer Educators and Mentors were able to share their knowledge gained

from lived experience on health and legal systems, practical information, culture and education. The research indicated participants most appreciated a mix of advice from those with professional expertise and lived experience. The ability to use their experience and help others in similar situations was the most cited reason for Peer Educators and Mentors to take part in projects.

Improvements to Confidence, Self-esteem and Mental Wellbeing

‘Before taking the course I felt that I lost my confidence, like I’m useless, but with the [Peer Educator] training the hope came back again to me’—Peer Educator, Wales

This research found significant evidence that participants who experienced agency and responsibility through participatory approaches also reported increased confidence, self-esteem and self-worth. Many participants directly linked involvement in projects with improved mental wellbeing. Being given a place to share issues and gain solutions with others who listen and can relate, was seen as beneficial to many. Likewise, sharing their personal or collective experiences either through the media or directly to people in positions of power, was repeatedly cited as valuable. For others, the ability to use their skills and knowledge was very influential. As highlighted in the project’s literature review, mental wellbeing and self worth are core components of successful integration.

Influencing Policy, Practice and Public Opinion

‘And that was a brilliant meeting really, really powerful, because each one of them had a very different story. But each one was very powerful in its own way ... it makes it much more real’—Ruth Jones, Member of UK Parliament

Primarily through the VOICES Network (UK), VOICES Ambassadors (refugees and asylum seekers) received media and advocacy training. They spoke in the UK, Scottish and Welsh Parliaments, met with policy makers, and spoke to the public either at events or through the media. Parliamentarians reported the impact of enabling participants with lived experience to contribute, bringing credibility, insight, and passion to the issues.

Having a supported network of participants with lived experience enabled consultation responses to draw on their knowledge and expertise more easily. For example, work with the UK Home Office resulted in changes to a Home Office Accommodation Induction Pack. Having a supported participatory infrastructure

also created opportunities with both the UK Government and devolved governments to co-design certain projects, which led to tangible changes such as the Welsh Government’s ‘The Sanctuary’ website.

Fostering of Resilient and Supportive Social Networks

‘I would hope that he always knows that we’re there ... if anything were to happen, that we are one of the people he would contact’—Local Buddy, Ireland

The benefits of social connections or networks for integration are significant, as evident in the project’s literature review. Evidence from all countries studied showed that participatory approaches assisted in the development of social connections, with refugees and asylum seekers directly reporting reduced social isolation. In the ‘Buddy’ projects (Ireland/Latvia) these networks were more likely to expand into host communities. In addition to social connections, examples were given of these networks leading to employment and education opportunities as well as the establishment of a safety net in cases of crises.

Cultural Exchange and Changing Perceptions

‘Actually meeting a person I had this chance to explore my stereotypes, understand them, face them, realise that maybe they are not true and for me, refugee is just a word now.’—Local Buddy, Latvia

The research found that participatory approaches improved cultural knowledge with strong evidence emerging from ‘Buddy’ projects (Ireland/Latvia). For some refugees, this led to greater feelings of belonging. For host society members, this frequently led to increased or similarly positive perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers.

Requires Space and Effective Support

Where participants took on responsibility, staff and participants stated the need to allow space for skills and confidence development at the start of participants’ involvement. This is a reflection of multiple challenges facing refugees and asylum seekers. Having staff or volunteers who can facilitate effective participation, provide emotional support and manage relationships was also seen as very important for successful outcomes by participants of all projects.



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This project is funded by the European Union