



Participatory and Place-Based Socioeconomic Knowledge Generation: An Experience in Community-Based Research Pedagogy

ABSTRACT

This article uses fieldnotes along with student and practitioner feedback to recount the challenges, benefits, and broader learnings of engaging master's students in a participatory research seminar. The students developed research proposals about a real-world socioeconomic challenge with and for local practitioners. Proposals were consistent with the principles and practices of participatory action research (PAR). The planning, implementation, and assessment of this course was informed by feminist scientific philosophies of collaboration, situatedness, partiality, accountability, and a sensitivity to power dynamics. In line with both PAR and SoTL principles, there was an explicit emphasis on partnership, reflexivity, and broad forms of learning in both the classroom and practitioner meetings. The students were challenged by the unfamiliarity of the research approach, the need to navigate a new way of working directly with stakeholders, as well as the responsibility to the community that participatory approaches espouse. Despite the challenges, the students were eager to soak up local knowledges, reflect on their role as researchers, and contribute constructively if they could.

KEYWORDS

participatory action research, community-based research pedagogy, feminist epistemology, social economics

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses a firsthand experience involving a small group of students in a classroom- and field-based research cooperation with local community partners. The student learning goals concerned familiarising students with community-research partnerships and their application to a practical socioeconomic problem, with particular emphasis on critical reflection, active engagement, and researcher responsibility. This paper contributes to the SoTL literature by highlighting the challenges, benefits, and lessons that can be transferred to others interested in implementing similar projects.

The course acted as a trial or pilot study in using participatory research methodologies to gain insights into socioeconomic issues by collecting research ideas, testing participatory deliberation methods, and strengthening relations between the university and local partner organisations in the city of Duisburg. Duisburg, and the municipality of Marxloh in particular, have become the political poster child for inequitable post-industrial restructuring, socioeconomic disadvantages, the “undesirable” side-effects of migration, and the “left behind” people and places in Germany. The

objective of the course was to bring students closer to not just concepts and data but also to Marxloh itself; to enrich their understandings of local issues through dialogue, collaboration, and active learning rather than from behind a computer screen.

The paper is structured as follows: The first section outlines the practical and theoretical rationale for applying participatory action research (PAR) approaches in teaching social economics within the framework of feminist scientific philosophy. The second will briefly outline the local case, Duisburg Marxloh, and the solo and participatory planning that went into the master's course, followed by a brief overview of the course itself. The third and fourth sections will use students', practitioners', and my own reflections to discern the challenges and benefits of the course, respectively. The final discussion section will identify transferable lessons for other (participatory or otherwise) courses, and the broader implications of this approach for teaching in the economic social sciences.

Science with and for society

Key institutions such as the European Commission (2020a, 2020b) and UNESCO (2022a, 2022b) have recently called for "Science with and for Society," with universities under increasing pressure to provide useful knowledge and engage socially-excluded communities as potential agents of change (Benneworth 2013). Community-university partnerships can provide space to collectively reflect on local institutions, power relations, current social practices, and challenging or exclusionary dynamics (Moulaert, MacCallum, and Hillier 2013) to develop an evidence base for generating solutions that are more productive, sustainable, or just than the status quo (Kemmis, MacTaggart, and Nixon 2013). Such a cooperation is, however, rarely devoid of the ethical or logistical complications that coincide with dialogical, praxis-based learning.

PAR teaching seminars aim to disrupt hierarchical knowledge dynamics and challenge epistemic injustices through collective inquiry (Davis and Parmenter 2021), prioritising student learning alongside personal, practical, and pedagogic change. Building mutually-beneficial collaborations between students, teachers, and non-scientists involves an inclusive, equitable (Felten et al. 2013; Lawrie et al. 2017), and partnership-oriented (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2016) approach. The teacher must demonstrate a willingness to engage in authentic (Kreber 2013), reflexive, and socially-just (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2016) co-inquiry (Werder et al. 2016), with careful consideration of the potential implications for all participants. Thus PAR pedagogy is not only compatible with but explicitly incorporates many of the SoTL principles of good practice (Felten 2013).

Such an approach aims to contribute to the decolonisation of economic pedagogy (Boni and Walker, 2020) by challenging the ideals of neutrality, objectivity, and universality (Kvangraven, Harvold, and Kesar 2023), while promoting community engagement, critical thinking, methodological diversity, and the co-creation of "knowledges" (Agunsoye, Groenewald, and Kvangraven 2022). This is in line with similarly critical and co-creative courses from around the world that have, for example, focused on themes of reflexivity in political science (Krystalli 2023), decolonial international relations (Boer Cueva et al. 2023), transformative learning in theology (Klaasen 2023), and counters to hierarchical knowledge binaries in the field of environmental justice (Robinson, Walker, and Walter 2023).

Feminist social economics

My research employs a reflexive praxis based on a feminist mode of situated knowledge production (Peake 2016) to investigate the applicability of participatory research methodologies to

the study of socioeconomic problems. This involves emphasising the context and partiality of knowledge production, while fostering in research endeavours a sensitivity to power relations, ethical responsibility and accountability, and coalition-building across disciplines, social movements, and sectors (Haraway 1988). Such projects are rare in the study and teaching of economics, with pedagogical trends tending towards games and experiments, flipped classrooms, and especially quantitative skill development (Birdi et al. 2023). This reflects fundamental epistemological and methodological disagreements (Albelda 1995) and an exclusionary preference for deductive-positivist methodologies that creates a hierarchy of methods (Berik 1997; Pujol 1997).

Feminist critiques in the field of economics concern not only the over-emphasis of traditionally masculine economic activities (outside the home, market-based, paid; Waring 1988), but also the over-emphasis of traditionally masculine theories and methods that define what acceptable economic knowledge is (based on formalised rules of logic and mathematics, rigour, impartial objectivity; Nelson 1995). A feminist scientific approach rejects the imperative to separate the subject and the object of inquiry, seeking to dismantle the unequal and unnegotiable antipode of scientific and other knowledges, and to integrate theoretical and practical learning through “place-based practices of subjectivity” in order to produce generative knowledge (Peake 2016, 835).

The subfield of social economics embraces both ethical and practical arguments which allow more participatory- and action-oriented approaches. Social economics is problem-oriented, value-directed, and inherently transdisciplinary with ameliorative goals (Dugger 1977; Lutz 1990). Social economics aims to understand and correct previously unsatisfied needs, for which PAR can act an inductive means of generating social innovations (Estensoro 2015; Howaldt 2019; Moulaert et al. 2013a, 2013b) in the face of institutional failures. Some fundamental compatibilities between social economics and PAR are the prioritisation of critical reflection, human welfare, explicit value premising, and the ethical considerations and consequences of research.

Participatory action research

Action research was conceived by Kurt Lewin (1946) as a means for doing research with, rather than on, people in a critique of positivist scientific ideas of neutrality, impartiality, and the practices of natural sciences being applied to social science (Bradbury and Reason 2003; Cordeiro, Soares, and Rittenmeyer 2017). Lewin cited a need for social sciences to address social problems, pursue social development, and improve intergroup relations by 1) addressing practical problems, 2) being participatory and collaborative, 3) following a cyclical process of self-reflective, adaptive, and experiential learning, 4) generating knowledge, and 5) engendering and/or prompting a transformation of practices (Cordeiro, Soares, and Rittenmeyer 2017; Lewin 1946; O’Leary 2004;). In this article, I will generally refer to PAR in order to reflect the relative importance of participation rather than change (action) in this project. The seminar module discussed in this paper, however, used the term community-based participatory research (CBPR), to highlight the locality of Marxloh as the site for participatory research.

The approach intends to enhance the appropriateness of research by bridging the gap between knowledge generation and its practical application (Bradbury and Reason 2003) through experiential learning (Dewey 1938). Theoretical knowledge is considered to be useful in PAR when it is dialectically intertwined with and mutually informed by praxis throughout iterative phases of collaboration and learning (Cordeiro, Soares, and Rittenmeyer 2017; Loewenson et al. 2014). PAR is furthermore explicitly transparent in describing the ways in which the researcher’s ideological positions and values inform the research questions, methods, and interpretations (Ponterotto 2005). Rather than speaking from a position of scientific privilege, PAR seeks to co-produce knowledge by

posing questions, engaging people in conversations, and supporting them in changing their understandings, practices, and, eventually, the conditions under which they act.

RESEARCH PROCESS

The Covid pandemic created serious barriers and risks to meeting community representatives, let alone engaging marginalised groups in PAR, for which I had to weigh the potential costs and benefits for participants. Physical co-presence is generally considered an important factor in building engagement and connection between researchers and participants, with some participants better able to adapt to digital methods during the Covid pandemic than others (Guy and Arthur 2021; Walker et al. 2022). The notion of involving students in a research-based teaching endeavour emerged as a response to the challenge of how to conduct mutually beneficial participatory research (Israel et al. 2005) in unprecedented circumstances.

I decided to initiate research that perhaps could not be done by community members, but could be completed for and with local experts. Such a linking of research and teaching is a form of dialogical, problem-posing (Freire [1970] 2005), and active learning pedagogy in which students both learn about and practice PAR (Kindon and Elwood 2009). Community-based research, service learning (Giles and Eyler 1994), and community-engaged pedagogy (Coles-Ritchie et al. 2022) engage students in serving a need that is defined by the community (or some segment thereof) in an effort to positively affect social change (Strand 2000). While not without its shortcomings, the approach represented a relatively accessible and low-risk form of community-university partnership that could provide some short-term benefits and hopefully facilitate a longer-term cooperation.

Duisburg Marxloh

Through my outreach efforts to civil society, social service, and voluntary citizen organisations and associations (*Vereine*) in Duisburg, I began to attend online meetings of the Marxloh Forum¹, a community-based organisation (Kamal Prasad 2023) in the sub-district of Marxloh, in 2021. Duisburg is a city located in the Ruhr area (*Ruhrgebiet*), which has been industrially and economically significant for coal and steel manufacturing since the mid-eighteenth century. Since the 1970s, the area has experienced significant economic restructuring as sharp declines in demand for coal and steel led to increased unemployment (Deppendorf and Wicher 1980). Concentrated pockets of deprivation have emerged, especially in the northern Ruhr neighbourhoods such as Duisburg Marxloh (URBACT).

The Ruhr's industrial production has also made it a multicultural "melting pot" and locus for labour migration long before the so-called "guest workers" (*Gastarbeiter*) began to arrive in the 1950s (Berger, Wicke, and Golombek 2017). Since Bulgaria and Romania entered the EU in 2007, some German cities and municipalities have experienced a significant influx of workers from both countries. By the end of 2015, 20% of Marxloh residents were from one of these two countries (Böckler, Gestmann, and Handke 2018). Germany has also seen the steepest increase in low-wage employment of any European country in the last two decades—especially among migrant populations—in part due to less collective bargaining protections and more labour supply following expanded cross-border labour mobility areas (Krings 2021). Posted workers, that is those who are sent by their employer to temporarily work in another EU Member State (European Commission 2023), are in particularly vulnerable positions with limited protections, poor working conditions, low pay, uncertainty, and reduced upward mobility (Voivozeanu 2019). The practitioners who participated in the course reported that workers in Marxloh usually lack social welfare protections and often survive on wages far lower than German unemployment benefits, with a previously unseen level of poverty now arising.

Methodology

Action researchers collect evidence rather than data through documenting and monitoring the research process in order to learn how to generate solutions to local problems (Kemmis, MacTaggart, and Nixon 2013). Typically, they do so through the self-reflection of practices, understandings, and contextual conditions. The analysis should primarily centre on the process rather than the outcome, emphasising the importance of providing a potential blueprint that can be utilised, adapted, and further developed by others in diverse contexts (Kidd and Kral 2005). The evidence presented here is based on fieldnotes taken during the semester, three voluntary student feedback survey responses, an expanded written summary statement from one student, comments made by practitioners in meetings and emails, and practitioners' written feedback on the final student proposals.

The student survey comprised 36 Likert scale questions regarding the influence and value of the practitioner meetings, the extent to which new knowledge about Marxloh was gained, and the extent to which the course was thought-provoking, challenging, and motivating. There were a further seven open-ended questions that provided space for more in-depth reflection and feedback. These answers, along with the expanded written summary, provided the quotes referenced in this article, selected purposively for their clarity, representativeness, or reflexivity. An iterative process of thematic analysis took place both directly after classes and submission, as well as in later stages of synthesis and summary. Some of the student and practitioner quotes presented here use pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Participants

Four students from the sociology programme and one from the socioeconomics master programme, all in the second or third semester of their studies, took part in the course over one 15-week semester from October 2021 to March 2022. The majority of classes were held at the university campus, focusing on readings and class discussions. One student self-identified as being a second-generation migrant in Germany, with all students having grown up in Germany, albeit from various regions with none originally from the city of Duisburg or Marxloh itself. Marxloh is located approximately 11 kilometres, or 45 minutes by public transport, from the city centre and the University of Duisburg-Essen campus, making it geographically and socially peripheral for most students. In the first session we reflected on what we knew of Marxloh based on the media or personal experiences. Two students had visited Marxloh before, with one describing a negative experience of intimidation and violence, while most acknowledged that they had no personal or long-term relationship with the area. The students therefore were, and understood themselves to be, outsider researchers, which we further discussed in the fifth class on "researcher role and positionality" (see Appendix A).

Five representatives from local government and non-profit social service organisations took part in the planning and facilitation of the course. Prior to the semester, they participated in a focus group discussion that centred on the challenges, needs, and goals of a potential community research project. This discussion was recorded on brainstorming cards, which I later structured and categorised into core themes, questions, and goals. I then synthesised this information into a "call for research proposals" (see Appendix B for an English translation), which was reviewed, edited, and finally approved by the participants of the brainstorming focus group. It outlined the project's background information, scope and requirements, goals, some preliminary research questions, and the expected structure of student's research proposals. The task was designed as an exercise in

producing realistic participatory research proposals that could conceivably be implemented by a team of community and university partners.

COURSE REFLECTIONS

The master's seminar was designed as a kind of pilot study in which local issues, theoretical concepts, and research options could be explored and discussed by students and practitioners. The syllabus (see Appendix A) included a short introduction to socioeconomic theories about hidden and informal labour in the EU, with the majority of the course covering PAR principles, ethics, case studies, data collection and analysis methods, and critical reflection of the researcher role in PAR. The students were to combine this with local knowledge provided by practitioners throughout the semester in order to produce a participatory research proposal tailored to the needs of the practitioners. The students met with the practitioners four times over the course of the semester to a) learn about the migrant welfare challenges in Marxloh; b) understand the local organisations, initiatives and alliances set up to try to meet these challenges; c) tour the local area; and d) receive feedback on their research proposals.

All students were required to independently prepare research proposals and actively participate in class discussions in order to receive credits, with the course grade given (per departmental requirements) based on a final oral examination at the end of the semester. The students could choose to focus on any topic that had been raised by the practitioners throughout the semester and which aligned with the goals specified in the call for proposals. Two students chose to focus on the issue of migrant workers in the meat industry, while the remaining three chose young people as their target participants. These proposals considered the inclusivity and diversity of children's sports, the desire and need for opportunities to complete the final years of high school, and the linguistic diversity of young people as a resource in Marxloh.

Challenges

Formulating the problem

The question of where to begin formulating a CBPR/PAR project was a pertinent issue for the students, illustrating the initial dilemma of participatory research as cited by Kemmis et al. (2013): deciding what will be researched without knowing who will be doing the research, or deciding who will be target group for participation without knowing what they will research. This challenge is familiar to anyone who has attempted genuine PAR; however the case studies that we considered in class rarely, if ever, discussed the messy reality and compromises involved in initiating such a project. Even with the rich input and narrowed geographical, participant, and thematic scope provided by local experts, there was still the question of how to formulate the research problem and plan to address it without involvement of the target group.

Despite learning that PAR projects ideally include target group participation from start to finish, students had to accept that they themselves would need to choose a starting point to base their research proposals on. We therefore dedicated an entire class to brainstorming ways one could initiate the planning of a participatory research project, while explicitly leaving options open that would allow for the incorporation of and adaption to local insight. The issue of initiating contact led some students to focus on young people rather than migrant workers due to potential access and engagement. This discussion reiterated the importance of pragmatic and transparent decision-making in any (participatory) research project, as well as honestly addressing the complexity and uncertainties of such research with the students.

Dealing with uncertainties

I observed that the students were unsure of their own abilities and knowledge as researchers, despite their perspectives being well-received and valued by the practitioners throughout the semester. As junior researchers being thrust into discussions with seasoned professionals about a challenging socioeconomic context, they spoke of the role that senior researchers and professors had previously played in directing their studies and/or research and the security this provided. While research seniority itself may or may not be necessary in PAR, the students' reluctance to make decisions and direct their own research highlights the central role that clear leadership can have in facilitating a project. This uncertainty was compounded by the students' unfamiliarity with PAR compared to traditional approaches:

It might be difficult to get used to real, practical work and processes, due to students mostly learning methods that are too focused on theories. The insights and knowledge of the real life is a huge miss. (Sarah, student)

Students discussed in class how their previous studies had predominantly been theoretical in nature and detached from the practical considerations of planning and managing a research project. While students found the unfamiliarity of the PAR approach and its inherent uncertainty challenging, they also appreciated the new perspective as “. . . a welcome change to the usually rather theory-heavy curriculum” (Sarah, student participant). Students were challenged by not just the material of the course and their new proximity to it, but also by the new responsibility over the research process and of doing research with and for real people.

It was therefore imperative to critically assess the potential impact of course content and interpersonal interactions on the students at each stage of the process. Bringing students closer to socioeconomic adversity, and then asking them to imagine how to contribute to its improvement, necessitates actively and empathetically engaging with student discomfort. This meant creating a dialogical space in which such vulnerabilities could be honestly and respectfully discussed in a way that rarely occurs with traditional learning. Conducting a participatory course therefore requires instructors to ethically and proactively engage with students and other participants, while effectively managing the relationship dynamics between the two groups.

Managing expectations

In the final feedback meeting, the practitioners stated that the students' aims were rather high and that the proposals could have benefited from a reduced scope of inquiry. They admitted that the initial project goals were likely too ambitious and that the target group identified in the call for research proposals (migrant workers) would be difficult to reach due to social marginalisation, frequently moving, and mistrust. The practitioners highlighted the time required and central importance of finding the right institutional partner in order to engage with such research that was missing from the proposals:

The ambitions are very high and the target group is difficult to win over for the questions raised. There is too much mistrust due to bad experiences. Nevertheless, I think the work is very beneficial for everyone involved —local authorities, immigrants, students and researchers on these topics. I think it is all the more important to find suitable partners . . . [who] have excellent contacts with the target group and are also interested in the issues mentioned.” (Heidrun, practitioner, own translation)

This misunderstanding likely occurred due to students reading case studies and literature about participatory research that directly engages residents, with a lacking discussion in the literature of the central role that representative figures and local institutions often play in initiating and sustaining participant engagement in PAR.²

The practitioners knew from that start that the topic was broad and complex, and they found it difficult to narrow the scope and amount of information provided to students. In this sense, it was difficult to balance the community partners' expectations with the density and scope of information that they wished to share with students in the meetings and follow-up communications. Local experts have a knowledge that is both expansive and extremely detailed, with materials collected sometimes over decades.³ The practitioners involved in this course provided students with a large amount of secondary presentations, reports, studies, public media, statistics, and events.

I therefore had to decide for each of these inputs if the students could practically use the information provided or if the total sum would become burdensome or overwhelming. Even so, the students often expressed confusion regarding the breadth of the issues discussed during partner meetings, the amount of material that followed, and whether they were expected or even able to incorporate everything into one proposal. I also had to manage the partners' expectations of what could conceivably be covered within one semester and a research proposal by master's students. Given the amount of information available, it was unsurprising that the student proposals were overly ambitious and diverse, as they wished to address as many crucial issues and points of discussions as they best could.

Complying with a set timeframe and regulations

Without any previous learning or awareness of PAR approaches, the short time span of a single semester course was hardly enough to give the students a solid theoretical or conceptual introduction before drafting their research proposals. This reflects the difficulty cited by Kindon et al. (2009) for students to simultaneously learn about and do PAR. A one-year course, with one semester dedicated to theory and case studies and the following dedicated solely to community collaboration and conducting research (such as the University College Cork's 2021a CBPR module) would have provided a more appropriate amount of time and resources. This was directly suggested by one student in the final feedback survey:

I wonder if a potential course span over two semesters is more practical. It would allow the tutor and the students to dive in even deeper and to communicate with practitioners and others of the district more often. (Sarah, student participant)

A longer course would have therefore allowed more time for the theoretical, practical, and personal learning that such a course involves, and perhaps caused less worrying. Alternatively, a practitioner suggested that a stricter refinement of the target group and research topic may have provided a more realistic guideline:

Almost everyone sets themselves far too high expectations. It seems necessary to me to focus the research topic and questions on a specific, small setting (with which one becomes familiar) to conduct such research. (Karen, practitioner, own translation)

The students similarly expressed discontent at being unable to further apply their learning or pursue research within the community. They expressed a desire to see their research continue in Marxloh:

After learning so much about the people, the district, the problems and the work, I would love to continue working on a research project in Marxloh. It feels kind of incomplete, having the practitioners to “sacrifice” their time and the tutor to teach us CBR, without being involved in a real project in the long run. Also, I feel like investing more time to enter in this field even more would be very helpful to gather more information, as well as insights, and prepare a better proposal to match their needs maybe better. (Sarah, student)

There was a certain feeling within the group that something had only just begun, with some struggling with the short-term nature of the project. However, practitioners emphasized that the establishment of contact with the people living in Marxloh requires time, perseverance, patience, and staying power that could far exceed the timeframe of even a two-semester practical research project. There was, therefore, always a need to ground the students’ ideas and expectations of themselves within the context of the one-semester course and the narrowed requests of the call for proposals. Teaching a PAR course requires both time and a sensitivity towards students’ concerns about balancing the requirements of the course, practitioners, and community alongside their other academic commitments.

While not explicitly discussed, it was apparent to me from the beginning that there was a misalignment of PAR student learning aims with the official requirements of the university department’s examination regulations. Students could receive only one grade based on a final oral examination, meaning that classroom and excursion participation, as well as the research proposal, were not graded. I designed the oral examination to evaluate their knowledge of PAR and relevant socioeconomic theories from the weekly readings, how they applied and combined them with information from the community partners in their research proposals, and especially their degree of critical reflection about the engagement in Marxloh. However, there was always a risk that they choose not to actively participate in the other ungraded learning exercises. This was not the case, with the students exhibiting a notably high degree of motivation when interacting with practitioners and in developing the proposals for them.

Benefits

Motivation and responsibility

The course provoked apprehension but also curiosity and motivation to meet the practitioners, learn about the local situation, see Marxloh for themselves, and to contribute something constructive if possible. All students in the final survey responded that they would recommend the course to other students for its insightful and novel approach, and for gaining an increased awareness of the city surrounding the university. I observed that the students instantly took an interest in the local context and people, feeling a responsibility to act appropriately and avoid any possible negative effects of engaging with vulnerable communities, both directly and in the formulation of their proposals. More than once however, the students expressed that they felt confronted by the severity, complexity, and magnitude of intersecting issues they learnt about:

It was also important for us to process the positive and negative insights on a personal level and to become aware of the responsibility that the project entailed throughout the semester. We quickly understood that Marxloh is almost “wilfully” neglected by politics, and that the residents and practitioners face immense challenges every day. In the same way that the project had a formative influence on us, we hoped that we could also make a useful contribution . . . We were also always concerned about reinforcing feelings of disappointment in the district, due to our lack of experience. Furthermore, visiting Marxloh felt somewhat uncomfortable since we did not want to give the impression that we were consuming the precarious living conditions of residents for personal gain or enjoyment, or engaging in so-called “slum tourism.” (Sarah, student participant)

As mentioned above, these feelings were especially prevalent during and after the walking tour in Marxloh, which we reflected on in the following class discussion. The tour was suggested and led by the practitioners. We visited local institutions and the surrounding streets, some of which had visibly dilapidated buildings and excessive rubbish waste. The bustling shops, cafes, and restaurants, and the many children, and young people out and about in the area, as well as a large park (which the practitioners said was well-visited by families whenever the weather permitted) demonstrated a high level of social activity.

While students felt that it was insightful to visit and see Marxloh themselves, they were also acutely aware of the ethical and broader political implications of outsiders “sightseeing” disadvantaged communities. They referred to the “slum tourism” phenomenon, similar to what Zill (2022) calls “academic tourism”: visiting such areas for short periods in order to gain knowledge, without (re)investing anything over the longer term. While the academic or slum tourism critique was never suggested by the practitioners or myself, the students nevertheless demonstrated a notable degree of awareness about the complicated nuance of attempting research about, with, and in disadvantaged communities.

Self-reflection

The classroom discussions were designed to elicit self-reflection of their prior experiences, knowledge, or views about Marxloh, as well as their own positionality as researchers. I was surprised that none of the students had learnt about or considered how factors such as their social demographics, backgrounds, and settings might influence their scientific beliefs, values, or ideas about how to do research. As a group we therefore reflected on the ways in which our own subjectivities (shaped by social, cultural, geographical, linguistic, educational, etc. factors) both shape our understanding of research and interact with other people’s identities within a group setting. The students reflected on the relationship between participant and researcher roles, as well as the potential for change in the researcher that can arise through the interaction: “It is a great way of engaging communities and reflecting on your role as a researcher in the knowledge-generating process” (Lukas, student participant). Another student reflected:

Benefits are the problem orientation that automatically comes when thinking about a concrete community and engaging them. Also, allowing participants’ agency brings about a sobering effect to the researcher’s ego and perception of their skills and role. (Stephan, student participant)

The students quickly grasped the importance of researcher responsibility and reflexivity both within PAR and social research more broadly.

Broader skill and perspective development

In the survey responses, the students highlighted how the course provided new practical learning experiences, “grounding academic research in real world issues,” insights for future careers, problem-oriented learning, and meaningful interactions with practitioners. PAR courses can provide various benefits to students such as gaining practical project management experience, citing such projects in their CVs and job interviews, combining theoretical and practical knowledge to solve problems, and improving hard (methodological, technical) and soft (presentation, negotiation, teamwork) skills (Kindon and Elwood 2009; Pain et al. 2013; Strand 2000). These students expressed that the practical considerations and challenges of the course were beneficial in terms of their long-term career development: “Benefits: Lots to learn for our later career, seeing how the academic knowledge transfers into the real world. Challenges: Students have very little experience in the logistics and time/monetary costs of such research projects” (Lukas, student participant).

All students in the feedback survey “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that learning with and from practitioners was valuable for a) their academic development, b) their knowledge of the world, and c) university students in general. Multiple students remarked on the broader potential of PAR learning for other courses and the university: “CBPR theory and its focus on social change would be thought stimulating to students of all fields. The class also increased awareness of the surrounding city where the university is located” (Stephan, student participant).

The students learnt about accessible and collaborative research methods, with their proposals including such data collection and analysis techniques as photovoice, subjective mapping, problem trees, digital and social media techniques, participant-generated surveys, and walking tours (see Loewenson et al. 2014 and Lupton 2021). Their stated research goals focused on engaging participants in self-reflection, problem- and need-identification, social mobilisation, and strengthening inter-group cooperation, whether between people from different language groups, workers and unions, or vulnerable people and socio-legal service providers. All students highlighted the need for a long-term view toward creating spaces in which social cohesion, economic opportunity, and political engagement could be cultivated.

Praxis value

The practitioners remarked that the students were motivated, engaged, and creative, bringing fresh ideas and interesting concepts that allowed them to understand the situation in a new light. They stated that the student proposals provided useful theoretical and methodological ideas for practitioners interested in implementing participatory research. The course in a sense provided an opportunity for the “crowdsourcing” of research ideas⁴ from junior scientists which could then be adopted, adapted, or used for inspiration as the experts saw fit. Community partners can benefit from the scientific skills, knowledge, and enthusiasm that students and teachers possess, focusing on research tasks that might not otherwise be possible, as well as building and strengthening long-term community-university partnerships (University College Cork 2021b). The practitioners involved in this course reported that the experience was interesting and rewarding, and that further community-university partnerships could be both desirable and fruitful for all involved.

TRANSFERABLE LESSONS

In class and on the survey, the students commented that were challenged by the unfamiliarity of the research approach, the need to navigate a new way of working directly with stakeholders, as well as the responsibility that PAR studies espouse. The seminar confronted them with both a level of uncertainty and personal involvement which they had not yet faced in their studies, and had to acknowledge, accept, and assimilate to within a relatively short timeframe. They learned the concepts, principles, practices, and methods of PAR from literature that often neglected to discuss the inelegant realities or practical matters of the action research process.

This includes the importance of decisive leaders, logistical planning, pragmatic compromises, and “gatekeeper” individuals or organisations in implementing a research project with hard-to-reach groups. This disjunction between the readings and the students’ experience did however provide an opportunity to discuss the ways in which a “real” research process (even one following a more traditional trajectory) is far from the clean finished product that we usually consume and compare our work to. It also encouraged a longer-term, anti-perfectionist view towards social science research, the role that it can play in engaging local problems, and the students’ own ability to co-produce and lead such research now and in the future. These challenges, uncertainties, and their expectations about themselves as researchers needed to be respectfully discussed and sensitively managed.

Managing flexibility and certainty

The greatest challenge that I found was for students to synthesise the theoretical, practical, and personal learnings within such a short timeframe. If the course had been conducted over multiple semesters, there would have been opportunity for students to participate in data collection and analysis, both with and for practitioners or other community members. As expressed in the student feedback, they were motivated and prepared to engage in a longer research cooperation that could have generated further benefits for student learning and the practitioner’s goals, as well as potentially engaged a wider range of participants.

A one-semester course could have been made more manageable by, for example, precisely pre-defining one core topic with practitioners in advance or by requiring that all students focus on one given topic as a group. Furthermore, it would have been expedient to identify the organisations that can facilitate contact with the target participant group in the initial brainstorming exercise, clearly name them in the call for research proposals, and facilitate student’s engagement with them. This would limit the creativity and sense of control that students have over their research but may relieve some of the burden of uncertainty in where and how to start, as well as address the practitioners’ concerns about establishing contacts.

The tension between the students’ sense of control and uncertainty in the project reflects the importance of what Herr and Anderson (2015) refer to as managing the balance between flexibility and structure during PAR processes. The former allows the project to have adaptability in incorporating and responding to local actors and their knowledge in as many phases as possible. The latter allows for better accountability to overseeing bodies and the planning and realising of meaningful and scientifically valuable research. It also strengthens the transparency, credibility, and reproducibility of the research design. PAR courses require navigating an emergent, nonlinear, and unpredictable process pragmatically (Herr and Anderson 2015), while resisting bias toward traditional research methods, procedures, and roles that sometimes limit the full involvement and creative potential of community participants (Smith et al. 2010). This underscores the importance of acknowledging and communicating such tensions within the classroom and externally by providing honest and transparent accounts of PAR processes.

Teaching and practicing reflexivity

This course was designed to reiteratively engage the students in critical reflection on the role of the researcher in the (co-)construction of knowledge, as well as how to honestly and transparently communicate potential biases, complexities, and compromises. Being able to locate a researcher's power, interests, dilemmas, decisions, and position as an active research participant enables more rigorous, transparent, and accountable social research processes (Finlay 2002; Hertz 1996). Despite the increase of reflexive approaches and positionality acknowledgements in the social sciences (Holmes 2020), this was a new experience for these students and one that is, to my knowledge, not often replicated in economics.

Reflexive attentiveness to and acknowledgement of power imbalances, researcher subjectivity, and the importance of context could easily be applied to economic scholarship and teaching more broadly (see Economy Studies 2021) without the need to necessarily adopt participatory approaches. Feminist economists have argued that not just the content of courses should be updated but also the ways in which they are taught, with more opportunities to “do economics,” with a different relationship between teachers and students, “less distance and more dialogue,” and explicitly fostering an “ability to think critically, analytically and creatively about economic issues” (Nelson 1995, 145), all of which can be found within this course. Participatory research compels students to practice reflexivity alongside developing a range of hard and soft skills, encouraging social responsibility, and providing opportunities for personal, if not practical, transformation.

Integrating PAR into social economics pedagogy

Participatory research has many challenges that may be difficult for academics to accept and are particularly objectionable for economists, whose work is often characterised by mathematical logic, overly simplified models, and controlling variables. Instead, researchers need to let the research evolve dynamically (Smith et al. 2010) and accept unforeseeable, imperfect, and perhaps small-scale results, given the local context (Cancian 1993; Herr and Anderson 2015;). They may also face challenges in sharing power, of slower and more complicated research processes, and difficulties being accepted by colleagues and journals in their fields (Cancian 1993). However, Klocker (2012) claims that many of these challenges have been overstated, and that imperfect PAR can still provide beneficial learnings for students and researchers. This again encourages a view of humility for researchers, teachers, and students to admit and accept that social science research rarely follows a straightforward, uncomplicated, or morally impervious trajectory.

As this article has demonstrated, PAR research seminars present a diversity of benefits for students that, in my opinion, can be justified by the challenges, given fair preparation, planning, communication, and empathy. It also embodies the SoTL's principles of good practice in its focus on contextuality, broad student learning, partnership with students, and public collaboration (Felten 2013). Sharing the research and learning process with non-scientists can bring students closer to the reality of otherwise invisible socioeconomic marginalisation; in this case, one community's attempts to combat migrant exploitation. It will often not be possible to include the most marginalised individuals in a university-community partnership. However, I discovered that engaging even a few local practitioners in both the course planning and students' learning experiences greatly enriched their learning and fostered a deeper connection to the subject matter than would have otherwise been provided by myself, from a book, or behind a computer screen.

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NOTES

1. A neighbourhood participation committee (*Stadtteil Beteiligungsgremium*) founded in 2019 to facilitate networking and cooperation among residents and representatives from various administrative, community, and social service organisations and volunteer associations.
2. The difficulty in accessing, recruiting, and retaining informal workers for qualitative research, and the important role of “gatekeepers” in such processes, is however discussed by Afolabi (2021).
3. Access to such rich insight is also a key benefit of participatory research (Kidd and Kral 2005).
4. Which could itself be considered as a form of “contributory” citizen science (Cooper and Lewenstein 2016).

DISCLOSURE

ChatGPT 3.5 was used to edit this text.

ETHICS

The publication of this research was approved by the University of Duisburg-Essen’s ethical commission.

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APPENDIX A

**Community-based research in Marxloh’s “hidden” economy course information
Course Description**

Class discussions and readings will mainly be in English, while community partner meetings will be held in German. At least an intermediate proficiency in both languages is therefore preferred. However, students with less confidence in one or the other language will have the opportunity to practice and improve. The final oral examinations can be conducted in either language.

The objective of the module is to familiarise students with community-research partnerships and their application to a practical socioeconomic problem. Students will be facilitated in leading their own learning and how to develop a proposal consistent with participatory research of the principles, politics, and practices of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). CBPR aims for mutually beneficial collaboration between researchers and community members in designing and implementing research projects to meet local needs. The approach emphasises the value of experiential learning and critically exploring the epistemological reasoning for, and typical assumptions about, doing social research, how humans and social structures can be best studied, and who should control the process of how knowledge is produced. Students will gain both an introduction to CBR approaches and their implementation by responding to the research needs of local community partners and the socioeconomic issues surrounding migrant workers in the hidden economy of Marxloh.

Informal, “hidden,” or “shadow” economic activity and the socioeconomic marginalisation of migrant workers within the European Union (EU) have become major topics of academic, policy and public interest in recent years. Germany and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia especially has recently attracted attention, given outbreaks of the Covid-19 virus in communities of Roma, Bulgarian and Romanian workers, bringing previously hidden pictures of poor living and working conditions, as well as accusations of “systemic exploitation” and “modern slavery” into public view. Mobile migrant workers in Marxloh, some of which have limited legal rights and social welfare protection within the EU, are living and working within a socioeconomic context that is generally detached and obscured from the mainstream economy and society.

Critical reflection and active engagement form a key expectation of the course. Students prepare in the week before the class by reading, reflecting, answering questions and formulating key points on given texts to be provided on Moodle one week before class. Students are also expected to prepare a research proposal for the community partner’s tender call, while their understanding upon completion of the course will be assessed through an oral exam. The course will be conducted in person (Covid-19 restrictions permitting) and in both English and German.

Weekly Syllabus

Week/Date	Topic
Introduction	
Week 1 15.10.21	Introductions Topics: Research seminars, community partners, CBPR and terminology, transdisciplinary socioeconomic lens, informal labour Discussion: what do we already know or think about Marxloh?
Theory	
Week 2 22.10.21	Shadow Economy and Covid-19 Migrant workers in the moral economy

<p>Group 1: Williams, C. C., & Kayaoglu, A. (2020). The Coronavirus pandemic and Europe's undeclared economy: impacts and a policy proposal. <i>South East European Journal of Economics and Business</i>, 15(1), 80–92. https://doi.org/10.2478/jeb-2020-0007</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How common is undeclared work globally and in Europe? 2. What theories are given to explain working in the informal labour market, and which is most likely to be relevant during the Covid pandemic? 3. Who is shown most likely to participate in undeclared work in this study? 4. What policy is suggested? <p>Group 2: Lafleur, J.-M., & Mescoli, E. (2018). Creating Undocumented EU Migrants through Welfare: A Conceptualization of Undeserving and Precarious Citizenship. <i>Sociology</i>, 52(3), 480–496. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518764615</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who is affected by internal borders in the EU? 2. How is illegality produced and what function does it serve? 3. What are the hierarchies of deservingness and what options do migrants have to improve their claim to stay? 4. What is meant by 'the schizophrenic welfare state'? 	
Week 3 29.10.21	Socioeconomic theories of informal labour
<p>G1: Williams, C. C. (2011). A Critical Evaluation of Competing Conceptualizations of Informal Employment: Some Lessons from England. <i>Review of Social Economy</i>, 69(2), 211–237. https://doi.org/10.1080/00346764.2010.502829</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the different concepts of informal labour and what's an example given for each? 2. How does informal labour consolidate inequality? 3. How is informal labour in high- and low-income areas differently conceptualised? <p>G2: Shahid, M. S., Rodgers, P., & Williams, C. C. (2017). Evaluating the participation of an ethnic minority group in informal employment: a product of exit or exclusion? <i>Review of Social Economy</i>, 75(4), 468–488. https://doi.org/10.1080/00346764.2016.1269941</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the different theories of informal labour and which assumptions or normative ideas underly each theory? 2. What does this paper suggest about theories seeking to explain participation in informal labour? 3. How do you think the theories explaining informal labour market participation might differ in different areas e.g. in Germany and Marxloh? <p>All, in class: Each group chooses a concept that explains informal labour and outlines its applicability to Marxloh in a casual debate format.</p>	
CBPR Research Approach	
Week 4 05.11.21	CBPR intro and principles
<p>G1: Strand, K., Marullo, S., Cutforth, N., Stoecker, R., & Donohue, P. (2003). Principles of Best Practice for Community-Based Research. <i>Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning</i>, 9, 5–15.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In which stages of the research do the authors suggest that participation is non-negotiable? 2. What are the three defining features of critical pedagogy? 3. How does CBR necessitate researchers to conduct research differently than other approaches? 4. Why is incorporating both academic and non-academic knowledge valued in CBR? <p>G2: Cornwall, A. (2008). Unpacking 'Participation': models, meanings and practices. <i>Community Development Journal</i>, 43(3), 269–283. https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsn010</p>	

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are some possible problems with an ordinal, normative framework of participation? 2. What are the trade-offs between depth and breadth of participation? 3. What are some possible problems or participation? <p>All, in class: Do we always want as many people to participate as possible in every stage of a research project? How do we decide who should participate in which stages? What kind of participation might be most useful for each of the community partner goals?</p>	
Week 5 12.11.21	Researcher role and positionality
<p>G1: Finlay, L. (2002). Negotiating the Swamp: The Opportunity and Challenge of Reflexivity in Research Practice. <i>Qualitative Research</i>, 2(2), 209–230. https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410200200205</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why is reflexivity important in qualitative research? 2. Which form of reflexivity are relevant to our given project? 3. In what ways is your chosen form of reflexivity advantageous or problematic in this setting? <p>G2: Kinsella, E. A. (2010). Professional knowledge and the epistemology of reflective practice. <i>Nursing Philosophy: An International Journal for Healthcare Professionals</i>, 11(1), 3–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1466-769X.2009.00428.x</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which of the five central epistemological themes stand out to you and why? 2. What's the difference between reflection in action and reflection on action? 3. Why is it useful to make tacit knowledge, theories and frames explicit? <p>All, in class: How is research reflectivity and positionality regarded in your field of research? What social, cultural, educational, geographical, language or other factors likely influence your values, norms, worldview and ideas about research?</p>	
Week 6 19.11.21	Case studies
<p>Find a research article that applies a participatory, community-based, citizen science, action research, etc. approach in an empirical study. The topic can and should be relevant to your own research (e.g. masters' thesis) interests or to the given community project. Prepare a 5-10 min presentation/description of your paper based on:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The general weekly questions. 2. Why the case was of particular interest to you. 3. What you learnt that could be useful in preparing your research proposal for the community research call. <p>Collectively brainstorming research ideas for the community call for proposals:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Core themes of interest (work, apartments/living, access to information and claiming rights, project and institutional bureaucracy, local implementation of EU/National law, power dynamics of actors, political and institutional interests, ...) 2. Possible goals (building cross-organisational alliances/actions, gathering data for political lobbying, increasing education/training and information for individual migrants, ...) 3. Target participants (migrants, other residents, city administration and public service workers, volunteers, students, ...) 	
Community Meetings	
Week 7 26.11.21	<u>Community meeting</u> Migrant workers in the shadow economy
<p>All: Böckler, S., Gestmann, M., & Handke, T. (2018). <i>Neuzuwanderung in Duisburg-Marxloh: Bulgarische und rumänische Zuwanderer und Alteingesessene imAnkunftsquartier</i>. Springer VS research. Springer VS. Pages 17-27</p>	

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reflecting on what you've so far learnt about hidden economy theories, what are some key issues or questions that you expect to arise in discussion with the partners? 2. How does the Böckler reading influence your ideas about planning and implementing a research project in Marxloh? 3. What questions do you have for the community partners regarding the call?
Week 8 03.12.21	<p><u>Community meeting</u> Local engagement and social change All: Review the call for proposals</p>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reflecting on what you've so far learnt about CBPR, what are some key (ethical, logistical, research) challenges that you expect relating to a possible project in Marxloh? 2. How would your positionality and role as a researcher affect any possible CBPR project in Marxloh and connection to hidden economy workers? 3. What are some ethical issues this research might bring up? 4. What questions do you have for the community partners regarding the call?
Methods in Participatory Research	
Week 9 10.12.21	Participatory methods
	<p>All: Loewenson, R., AC, L., C, H., D'Ambruoso, L., & Shroff, Z. (2014). <i>Participatory Action Research in Health Systems: A Methods Reader</i>. Lupton, Deborah. (2021). <i>Doing fieldwork in a pandemic (crowd-sourced document)</i>. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/edit?usp=sharing</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which participatory methods listed in the table or the Lupton resource stand out to you as most appealing for answering the community partner's research questions? (Keep in mind that different combinations of methods could be used in different phases to build upon and check evidence from previous phases). 2. When may more formal, traditional or quantitative methods be appropriate to incorporate into a PAR process? 3. What challenges and opportunities are there to utilising digital technologies in PAR? Which methods stand out to you as particularly interesting for your own research interests?
Week 10 17.12.21	Data collection & analysis case studies
	<p>All: O'Neill, M., Erel, U., Kaptani, E., & Reynolds, T. (2019). Borders, risk and belonging: Challenges for arts-based research in understanding the lives of women asylum seekers and migrants 'at the borders of humanity'. <i>Journal of Migration & Culture</i>, 10(1), 129–147. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc.10.1.129_1</p> <p>Additional: Budig, K., Diez, J., Conde, P., Sastre, M., Hernán, M., & Franco, M. (2018). Photovoice and empowerment: Evaluating the transformative potential of a participatory action research project. <i>BMC Public Health</i>, 18(1), 432. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5335-7</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the benefits of creative participatory methods for migrant projects? 2. What are some similarities between the experiences of these migrants and what we've learnt about migrants in Marxloh? 3. What is the author talking about when they say "necropolitics" and "necropower"? 4. What motivates the authors to engage in this research?
20.12.21 – 02.01.22 CHRISTMAS	
Week 11 07.01.22	Participatory writing First draft Research Proposals due

<p>G1: Braithwaite, R., Cockwill, S., O'Neill, M., & Rebane, D. (2007). Insider participatory action research in disadvantaged post-industrial areas. <i>Action Research</i>, 5(1), 61–74. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750307072876</p> <p>G2: Pain, R., Finn, M., Bouveng, R., & Ngobe, G. (2013). Productive Tensions—Engaging Geography Students in Participatory Action Research with Communities. <i>Journal of Geography in Higher Education</i>, 37(1), 28–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2012.696594</p> <p>All:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does the paper incorporate and reflect on the perceptions of multiple actors? 2. What are some strengths potential issues with the way the paper is compiled? 3. How could potential issues be anticipated and prevented, and how could strengths be better utilised? 4. Is participation in the writing phase of research always desirable? What situations or participant groups may it be (in)appropriate for? 	
Week 12 14.01.22	<u>Meeting: Marxloh walking tour</u>
Reflection	
Week 13 21.01.22	Internal research proposal feedback
<p>Read the other group’s proposal, answer the following questions about it and use your answers to improve your own proposal:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is there a logical link between the research objectives, theories given and proposed methods? 2. Was the proposal easy to read and understand from a non-academic perspective? Consider e.g. the use of language, jargon, hyperbole, discursive sentences, how interesting and relevant it is for practitioners. 3. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the other group’s proposal? 4. What could be improved? 	
Week 14 28.01.22	<u>Present proposal to partners for feedback</u> Presentation of final proposals
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How have you incorporated the feedback provided by the other group? 2. What are the remaining questions, gaps, limitations or uncertainties? 3. How can you acknowledge and prepare for these within the proposal? 	
Week 15 04.02.22	Final brainstorm then reflection on the course
<p>Outro brainstorm: what do we know or think about Marxloh?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are some practical issues and possible solutions to community-based research courses? 2. What are some ethical problems inherent to doing a participatory action research seminar class? 3. Is a participatory research approach appropriate for answering the research questions/addressing the problems posed by the community partners? Why or why not and in which stages of the project? 4. What do we think went well in this exercise and what could have been different or better? 5. How did we feel about meeting with community partners? About navigating misunderstandings or challenges? 6. Which principles of CBPR have you noticed as relevant over the course of the semester? 7. What are some limitations or problems of a potential participatory research project in Marxloh? 	

APPENDIX B

English translation (own) of the call for research proposals

Marxloh call for proposals 2021: Migrant workers in the informal economy and community-based research solutions for integration

Issued: 30.09.2021

Deadline: 25.02.2022

Background

The problem of the increasing informal, “hidden” or “shadow” economy and the marginalisation of migrant workers within the European Union is of growing social concern. Germany, and in particular North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), has recently attracted international attention due to outbreaks of Covid-19 virus in communities of Roma, Bulgarian and Romanian workers. Previously hidden experiences of poor living and working conditions have been brought to light, with accusations of “systemic exploitation” (BBC News, 2021) and “modern slavery” (Deutsche Welle, 2020).

Since the expansion of the EU borders and the implementation of Brexit, more south-eastern European workers are coming to neighbourhoods like Marxloh. Such affordable neighbourhoods, with high vacancy rates and/or dilapidated buildings, a high proportion of socially disadvantaged residents, and existing socio-economic problems, are the targeted arrival destination of migrant workers. This creates an increased need for integration services and infrastructure that are major challenges in already disadvantaged neighbourhoods, for municipalities and their residents.

This has led to many real and some imagined problems in the integration, acceptance, and security of the new migrant workers, and it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between the two. Outsiders often see migration in Marxloh in a negative light, but not much is known or portrayed about the real experiences of labour migrants and the actual barriers to integration that they face.

Project scope and needs

The problem manifests itself across three interconnected levels:

- Individual (micro): Migrant workers face precarious living and working situations, discrimination and exclusion, and limited access to information, services, and legal rights. Local practitioners are often constrained within institutional and organisational boundaries.
- Organisational (meso): bureaucratic complexity and limited resources; business, institutional, political, and civil society interests and power dynamics; short-sighted funding, implementation of programmes and limited building of support on the ground, resulting in repeated project abandonment and renewal. Financial dependencies influence the actions of institutions and individual practitioners, in the worst case hindering them.
- Structural (macro): EU and national-level politics dictate the laws which create the [labour migrant] situation and provide limited support in the actual implementation or for the protection of human rights during the [integration] process.

The local practitioners must therefore continuously respond to complex requests with elaborate documentation. They have only short-term and limited instruments available to implement in the face of multiple problem areas, which originate from the higher systematic and structural set-up.

The project therefore aims to work with local active people to identify and communicate analytically, from the bottom up, what is currently working in Marxloh (and how) and what is not, and how this information can be used constructively. The main objectives are therefore to:

- Understand how the local bureaucratic and socio-legal processes are experienced by new migrants and professionals.
- Engage migrants so that they can participate more in local projects and development and better communicate their needs, and engaging civil society partners and external researchers to shed light on previously hidden economic activities and communicate them openly.
- Support social mobilisation, cultural change and political advocacy for the protection of disadvantaged residents.

Research questions

How can South Eastern European residents become an (accepted) part of society? Which hurdles are present? How do they experience the “integration process”? What do they know about their living and working rights? Do they have access to information and advice about their rights? How can practices at the micro level be better coordinated so that they can be extended to the higher levels?

These are just some of the many questions asked by professionals who want to help migrant workers in the informal economy. But how can this information be gathered in a way that respects the interests of migrant workers and does not further isolate or marginalise them?

The main preliminary research questions for the project are therefore:

1. What information is needed from migrants, residents and/or practitioners in Marxloh to build an evidence base that supports the achievement of the project objectives?
2. What concepts, theories, (data collection and analysis) methods, and international case studies are relevant for producing a better understanding of migrant workers in the “shadow economy” of Marxloh?
3. Which participatory research methods can be used to create useful knowledge and solutions together with the affected residents?

Requirements

Individuals or small teams will submit short research proposals (5-12 pages). The district partners will provide feedback towards the end of the semester before the final proposals are submitted and presented to the local stakeholders for consideration.

Proposals should be concise and contain only the necessary information that practitioners would need to know if they were to adopt the proposed research plan.

1. title (1 sentence)
2. formulation of the research problem, context and significance (~1 - 3 page)
3. objective and research question (~0.5 page)
4. selected theory, relevant literature and case studies (~1 - 3 pages)
5. proposed methods of data collection and analysis (~1 - 3 pages)
6. ethical considerations (~0.5 - 1 page)
7. logistical considerations, e.g. timing, costs, Covid 19 arrangements, materials, premises, staffing levels (~1 page)



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