

Participatory Research Realist Review



Participatory research project in a village in Bangladesh
© G.M.B. Akash/Panos Pictures.



REAL2 CORE TEAM

Sassy Molyneux
University of Oxford

Rob Vincent
Independent
Consultant

Geoff Wong
University of Oxford

Becky Wolfe
Independent
Consultant

FUNDED BY



- A new review of participatory research aims to systematically explore the literature and practice of participatory research to better understand the potential, and limits, of greater stakeholder involvement in research processes.
- In a scoping phase for the project, we will explore what can be learned from literature and practitioners' insights on participatory approaches to health research, drawing additional insights from participation in mental health, climate change and health research.
- We will then conduct a realist review focusing on some of the core mechanisms, influential contexts and patterns of outcomes of participatory health research identified in the scoping phase.
- Findings from the review project aim to support decision-making by researchers, funders and civil society organisations, and ultimately lead to greater community and public input within research agendas.

Background

A recent review of community engagement in health research has provided new clarity about how community engagement works in practice, highlighting the importance of negotiating precarious relationships between researchers and participants and the importance of attending to these relationships in engagement [Vincent et al, 2022].¹ The review underscored ‘collaborative partnerships’ between researchers and participants as an important means of addressing the ethical challenges inherent in global health research, touching on the intersecting field of participatory research.

Participatory research – where people affected by the issue being studied are involved throughout the research process - is playing an increasingly important role in health and social disciplines, and researchers and funders often express aspirations to be more participatory in their work. However, these aspirations are seldom matched in practice, complicated by the multiple theoretical conceptualisations of what participation is, a lack of practical guidance about how to achieve it and structural impediments (including time and funding constraints).

REAL2 will complement the initial review of community engagement, but this time centring participatory research as the topic of investigation. It will aim to address some of the conceptual inconsistencies in the literature and clarify the key analytical distinctions relevant to participatory research.

The realist review will enable a deeper understanding about the key components of participatory research in practice, bringing in perspectives from other thematic areas including mental health and climate change research. Together, the work aims to inform the development of both engagement and participatory research strategies and develop practical guidance that supports decision-making in research centres, funding organisations and social justice movements.

Realist review of participatory research

REAL 2 aims to carry out a Realist review of the literature and practice of participatory research to better understand the potential, and limits, of greater stakeholder involvement in research processes. The terminology and concepts in this field are used inconsistently across a variety of settings, so REAL2 will aim to clarify some of the key elements of participatory research processes and distinctions among different applications of participatory practice. The benefit of a Realist approach is that it will enable a deeper understanding of participatory research than a traditional systematic review, clarifying the central dynamics and influences at stake, how participatory research works and for whom.

Dimensions of participatory research

Participatory research - also described as community based participatory research, systemic action research, co-production and indigenous research - involves the active involvement of people affected by the research or issue being studied. It has been most prominent in HIV/AIDS, international development and social movements for health and social justice, but is an increasing aspiration across a range of different settings. How participation is understood and realised varies in several ways including:

- **Purpose:** What and who the knowledge generated by participatory research is for, and how it will be used.
- **Depth of participation:** The degree to which people have control and decision-rights in the research process – ranging from tokenistic consultation to management of the process.
- **Point of participation in the research process:** Participation may range from deciding on research priorities and themes, being part of the design and implementation of research, merely being the ‘subjects’ of research, being part of the analysis of the research and putting research findings into practice.
- **Terms of participation:** People may take part in research where the methods and processes have already been set, or have some say in what kind of research is done and how it is done, and what and whose knowledge is considered legitimate; the research may be externally funded and controlled or be more driven by local needs and priorities.
- **Relational infrastructure supporting participation:** Including the role of intermediaries, facilitators and partnership arrangements.

Contributing to theory and practice

The research aims to inform ongoing theory and practice around participatory research and to develop practical guidance to contribute to better planning and evaluation of participatory approaches. Such guidance will support researchers, engagement teams and research funders to be more critically aware of the way they are adopting participatory approaches, and to see community input better reflected in research agendas and throughout the research process.

More information about REAL1 and REAL2 is available on the Global Health Network MESH (Community Engagement Network) website.

<https://mesh.tghn.org/programme-hubs/>

1. Vincent R, Adhikari B, Duddy C et al. ‘Working relationships’ across difference - a realist review of community engagement with malaria research [version 1; peer review: 1 approved]. Wellcome Open Res 2022, 7:13 (<https://doi.org/10.12688/wellcomeopenres.17192.1>)