



BOGOTÁ

27—30 APRIL 2025

From Research Participants to Research Collaborators: Participatory Action Research as a Tool for Emancipation

Rebeca Marques Rocha

Youth RISE & Central European University

Introduction



Stigma and drug use: Research perspectives from Europe

James Morgan & Marta Pinto (Eds.)

PABST

4

From research participants to research collaborators: Participatory action research as a tool for emancipation

Rebeca Marques Rocha, Rebeca Calzada & Isaac Olushola

This chapter explores the application of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in social drug research, focusing on two case studies conducted by Youth RISE with young people who use drugs (YPWUD). The studies aimed to understand the needs and challenges of young sex workers who use drugs and young people who use opioids. By employing participatory methods, the research sought to dismantle traditional power dynamics in research, promote inclusivity, and co-generate actionable insights for harm reduction and drug policy reform. Reflecting critically on our personal experiences, we discuss the challenges encountered along the research process, being accountable for our shortcomings and outlining lessons learned and recommendations for future studies. We conclude by underscoring the importance of meaningfully engaging affected communities as collaborators, rather than participants, in research processes. Ultimately, this chapter highlights the potential of PAR to foster coalition building, community empowerment and sustainable social change.

Keywords: participatory action research, young people who use drugs, harm reduction, stigmatisation, community engagement, decolonial approaches, sex work

Marques Rocha, R., Calzada, R., & Olushola, I. (2024). From research participants to research collaborators: Participatory action research as a tool for emancipation. In J. Morgan & M. Pinto (Eds.), *Stigma and drug use: Research perspectives from Europe* (pp. 53-75). Pabst Science Publishers. ISBN: 978-3-95853-956-3



Rebeca Calzada
*La Testería
& Youth RISE*



Isaac Olushola
*University of Oxford
& Youth RISE*

Presentation goals

- Critical reflection of our experiences using Participatory Action Research (PAR) with Young People Who Use Drugs (YPWUD)
- Share the lessons learned and recommendations
- Focus on methods, rather than the studies findings

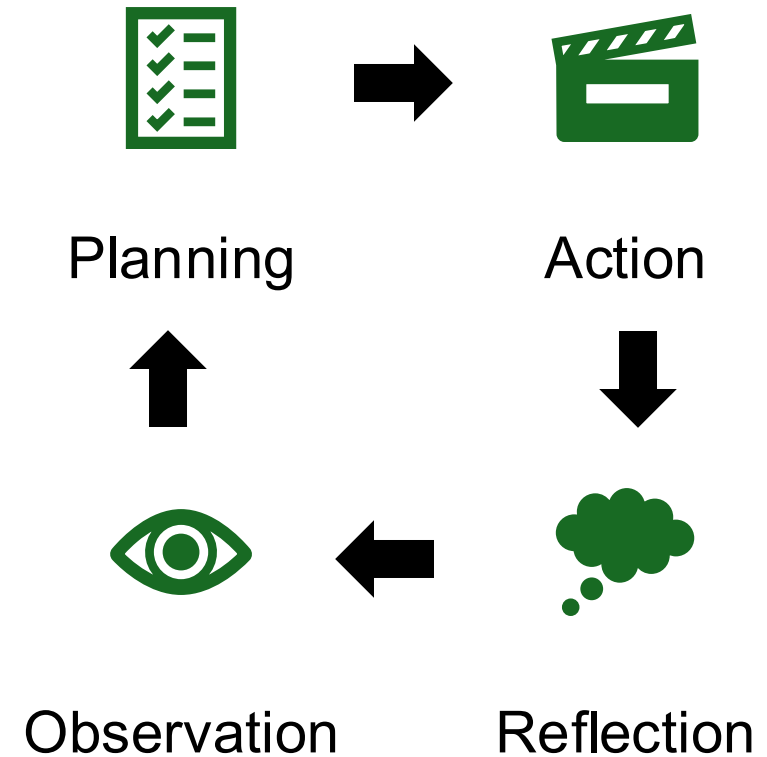


Youth RISE
(Resources, Information, Support
and Education)
is a global network of young
people who use drugs and young
people affected by drug policies.

We mobilize youth to engage in
**full-spectrum harm
reduction and drug policy
reform.**

What is Participatory Action Research (PAR)?

- PAR is a collaborative approach that actively involves affected communities in all stages of the research process
- **Key principles:** co-creation, empowerment of participants, and driving social change
- PAR processes connect research and action with the aim of addressing inequities to achieve social justice and societal transformation.



Iterative cycles of co-creation and adaptation

Why did we use PAR?

- Benefits of using PAR for research with stigmatized populations
 - Building trust and rapport
 - Provides authentic insights that reflect real-world issues
 - Challenges stigma and power imbalances
- PAR processes allows research collaborators to uncover the discourses and ideologies that normalize structural violence.
- By disrupting dominant notions of who holds expertise, PAR centers the situated knowledge of marginalized groups who are directly impacted by sociopolitical inequities.

Youth: overlooked, overpoliced and underserved

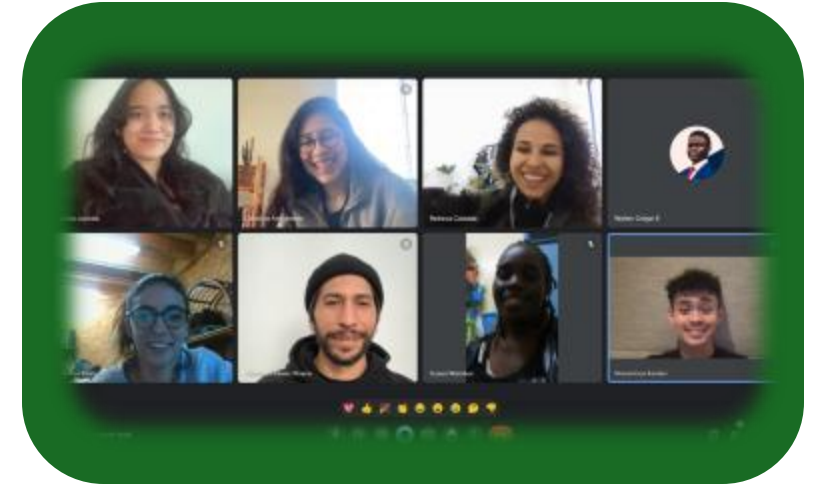
- While frequently invoked to justify punitive drug policies, youth is often excluded from drug policymaking and harm reduction design, which fail to consider their diverse and specific needs (Stowe et al., 2022; 2024).
- Lived experiences with drug use can be viewed as experiments that consolidate various ways of knowing (Race, 2017)

Research or exploitation?

- Conducting emancipatory drug research means embracing activist and decolonial research methods

Case Studies

- Flexible thematic framework
 - Internal process informed by our International Working Group members
 - Key areas of concern for YSWUD and YPWUO



Young Sex Workers who Use Drugs (YSWUD)

7 collaborators

- Prioritized lived experience with sex work and drug use
- Aimed for diverse global representation
- Collaborators received a compensation for their engagement

Young People Who Use Opioids (YPWUO)

8 collaborators

- Prioritized lived experience w/ opioids use and/or harm reduction service delivery
- Valued research/advocacy skills
- Collaborators received a compensation for their engagement

Working groups

- Online weekly meetings (English, a.d. 1h30min)
- Kick-start meeting → research process dynamics were discussed and agreed upon
 - No roles or hierarchies → one Youth RISE representative as research coordinator
- Identification of main themes over the meetings, with collaborators sharing their individual experiences and contextual insights

Challenges:

- Scheduling conflicts
 - negotiations to accommodate different time zones and scheduling needs
- Language barriers for non-native English speakers
 - Opportunities to share inputs through alternative venues beyond working group meetings, such as mobile chat apps, voice messages, or through pictures illustrating their realities.



From Theory to Action



“ [...] having the opportunity to participate in this forum totally opens one's vision and life experiences. There is a positive motivation to return to your community and share that the voices of many people were felt through your participation. [...] I felt the accompaniment of fellow organisers, neighbours, and family, including those who are no longer with us.”

Alfonso, YPWUO

“ [...] attending the CND was not just about presenting our findings. It was a chance to deepen our understanding of each other's perspectives, to share stories, and to reaffirm our commitment to advocating for those whose voices often go unheard. [...]”

Marie, YSWUD



Recommendations

Working Groups

- Employ strategies to foster intercultural understanding and dialogue
 - Dedicate time for collaborators to share personal contexts
 - Demonstrate interest in different forms of knowledge expression - emphasis on valuing all contributions equally
 - Build trust through a respectful atmosphere

Compensation

- Recognize collaborators' time and expertise
 - Compensate fairly, balancing financial capabilities with appropriate remuneration
 - Critically reflect on compensation limitations and transparently discuss with collaborators

Research Engagement

- Make decisions about research timeline collaboratively and collectively agree on the research output format
- Emphasize facilitating easier involvement for collaborator
 - Importance of flexibility in research engagement

Recommendations

Keep in mind...

- Be creative: PAR can accommodate different output formats such as photographic installations, films, documentaries and digital storytelling
- Acknowledge the need to balance academic rigor with inclusivity by making research outputs accessible



We need to talk about drugs (policy)

*Paradigma Coalition & Youth RISE
(UN Civil Society Conference)*

TRANSFORM 
Drug Policy Foundation University of
BRISTOL
Bristol Institute

BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCH AROUND DRUGS ISSUES

Transform Drug Policy Foundation (2024),
*Best practice guidelines for research
around drugs issues.*

Thank you!

Rebeca Marques Rocha

- rmarques@youthrise.org
- Find Youth RISE at <https://youthrise.org/>
- Contact us at info@youthrise.org

