

PARTICIPATORY VISIONS:

REDESIGNING RESEARCH FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Calls to equalise knowledge-production have become increasingly strong as policymakers, educators and academic institutions face the mounting consequences of inequitable research structures. Yet, significant barriers to socially just and equitable research still persist. Drawing on 21 semi-structured interviews with research facilitators, community partners, and researchers from a range of disciplines, this report summarises the practical barriers to participatory social justice research (research approaches such as co-production, citizen science, and participatory action research, that adopt equity, diversity and mutual benefit as critical values). In addition, we provide concrete recommendations for change, based on interviews and workshop conversations with community partners, researchers, and funders.

A) RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING IS UNDER-VALUED

1. **Limited investment in pre-grant relationship-building and tight funding deadlines:** make it difficult to co-produce research proposals and

CHALLENGES TO PARTICIPATORY SOCIAL JUSTICE RESEARCH

engage in research inquiry with communities. This leads to tokenistic research that fails to meet community needs or worse, community partners being involved without compensation.

2. **Short-term funding and a lack of continuous investment:** makes it difficult to build long-term, beneficial relationships

- 1 Re-designing Research for Social Justice with communities. Communities often feel extracted from or abandoned when researchers are only funded to gather knowledge for a short duration, failing to continue with engagement, follow-up or programme development due to a lack of funding.

3. **Education tends to be competitive rather than participatory and justice-oriented:** assessments and assignments are overwhelmingly based on individual achievement and competition rather than collaboration and co-production. Universities also lack core modules that discuss issues of equity, diversity and reciprocity.

4. **Academic practices value publication prestige over community collaboration:** performance measures and appraisals prioritise publication authorship, disincentivising researchers from equally recognising community partners or producing outputs that are relevant and accessible to communities.

5. **Leaders in university and funding organisations are rarely experts in participatory social justice research:** this leads to the systemic undervaluation of relationship-building in funding directions and overall investment. Some academics, funders, and university administration even expect that community involvement should be compensated for in vouchers, at a lower cost, or should be voluntary.

B) COMMUNITY PARTNERS AREN'T VALUED

1. **Funding structures exclude community partners and researchers from low-to-middle income countries (LMICs) from being lead grant recipients:** their subordinate position to UK academics is especially problematic when funding calls are aimed at global issues or are specific to LMICs.

2. **Authorship and intellectual property is unequally distributed:** important publications are often not co-authored and even when they are, community partners are often included in a tokenistic way without genuinely allowing them the opportunity to shape outputs. Legal contracts and intellectual property agreements also tend to favour larger organisations (universities, funders) by default.

3. **Lack of investment in community partners' long-term development:** community partners

are rarely given opportunities to gain research skills and develop their careers, often lacking guidance and mentorship.

4. **Onerous and prejudicial payment requirements** (e.g. requiring partners to provide lengthy paperwork, passports, right to work checks): are especially traumatic and prejudicial to marginalised communities, making it difficult for them to equally engage in research.
5. **Inappropriate ethics processes:** the certainty required by ethics processes and fact that they are approved before research begins, makes it difficult for university researchers to respond flexibly to diverse communities and changing situations. Committees sometimes also fail to appreciate that community partners are fellow researchers rather than participants. This can result in over-protective or paternalistic ethical policing.
6. **Ill-suited research outputs:** publications are not easily readable or accessible to members of the public, tend not to encourage diverse contributors, or meet the practical needs of communities. Yet, universities and funders continue to value publications more greatly than alternative outputs (e.g. intervention programmes, policy papers, videos).
7. **Every-day, exclusionary ways of working:** everyday practices that academics take-for-granted can often make community partners feel inferior or alien, making it difficult for them to feel confident or comfortable enough to voice their thoughts (e.g. holding meetings at institutional offices and university buildings, using academic language and titles in conversations, communicating only via email).

C) SILOED WAYS OF WORKING

1. **Barriers between sectors:** limited opportunities for dialogue and mutual understanding between community partners and researchers as well as researchers and funders, prevents a common understanding of the value of participatory research and the challenges each group faces in conducting it.

2. **Barriers within sectors:** a lack of common understanding and coordination across different academic disciplines that practice participatory social justice research makes it difficult for them to mutually learn from each other and collectively advocate for the value of participatory social justice research.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

1. **Co-develop a set of core values with community partners**
2. **Place communities at the centre of decision-making:** allow community organisations and LMIC partners to be lead funding recipients and place community members in decision-making roles over funding and research directions.

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3. **Foster responsibility:** implement community-centred reporting procedures such as regular check-ins with communities to identify if funded projects adhere to their participatory commitments.
4. **Ensure funding is more 'relational':** make applications more accessible (e.g. posting funding calls in local languages, providing training or support for community partners to apply) and ensure funding is more flexible (e.g. agreeing different ways 'impact' can be demonstrated, allowing for contingency funds, being open to changes in funding utilisation).
5. **Offer diverse and longer-term funding:** Different funding timescales and models are needed to meet the diverse needs of participatory projects. This includes funding for idea development and exploration (e.g. "test and learn" models, pilots), capacitybuilding (e.g. training programmes), and further relationship-building (e.g. engagement funds, network funds). Various funding timescales are also needed, in particular, longer-term funding to support sustained partnership-building.

6. **Support community research careers:** Provide funding for community partners to work in collaboration with universities to develop their careers, not only through training and upskilling but also dedicated scholarship programmes (e.g. community research fellowships).
7. **Form a cross-sectoral change network:** to think practically about how to enact institutional redesign and facilitate learning and mentorship between researchers, community partners, and funders.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES

1. **Co-develop a set of core values with community partners**
2. **Place communities at the centre of decision-making:** e.g. having community steering committees in research and innovation, education, building design, and planning.
3. **Design a principle-based ethics process that centres equity and justice, is relational, and is locally-relevant**

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4. **Ensure finance processes are flexible & relational:** allow for one-off payments, flexibility in disbursing funds, remove requirements for onerous documentation and fast-track payments to community partners.
5. **Ensure legal processes are mutually beneficial:** fairly value community partners' contributions and share intellectual property in agreements.
6. **Recognise impact & value more broadly:** academic recognition, teaching, and leadership opportunities should assess individuals based on their contributions to impact markers that are co-defined with communities, beneficial to all, and iterative. This also means enabling "braided" or community research careers by offering educational and career opportunities.
7. **Facilitate participatory approaches in university learning and teaching:** teach students approaches to participatory social justice research, create opportunities for student-community participatory projects, and invite community partners to teach in seminars, conferences, and as lecturers.
8. **Form communities of practice:** to think practically about how to enact institutional redesign and create mentorship programmes for participatory social justice research

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