

Action Research: A Participatory Approach to Improve Measures of Labour Market Integration of Refugees

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Abstract: This paper illustrates the benefits action research adds to successfully co-creating measures for the labour market integration of refugees. Germany has become one of the most popular immigration countries in the world. In addition to current refugee flows from Ukraine, migration from third countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Turkey again increased in 2022. Compared to Ukrainians, who are subject to a special measure granting immediate and temporary protection in the event of a mass influx and direct access to the labour market, third-country representatives still have a limited path to the world of work. Following these events, this paper is motivated by the early research on developing measures for the labour market integration of refugees in Germany. It was conducted shortly after the so-called European “refugee crises” during 2015–2017. Due to increasing refugee movements, the findings are highly topical and thus make a renewed contribution to integration policies and action research as a participatory approach.

Keywords: participatory action research; refugees; labour market integration; pragmatic approach

Investigación-Acción: Un enfoque participativo para mejorar las medidas de integración laboral de los refugiados

Resumen: Este artículo ilustra los beneficios que la investigación-acción aporta para co-crear medidas exitosas para la integración laboral de refugiados. Alemania se ha convertido en uno de los países de inmigración más populares del mundo. Además de los flujos de refugiados actuales de Ucrania, la migración de terceros países como Siria, Afganistán y Turquía aumentó nuevamente en 2022. En comparación con los ucranianos, que están sujetos a una medida especial que les otorga protección inmediata y temporal en caso de un flujo masivo y acceso directo al mercado laboral, los representantes de terceros países aún tienen un camino limitado hacia el mundo laboral. Siguiendo estos acontecimientos, este artículo se motiva por la investigación temprana sobre el desarrollo de medidas para la integración laboral de refugiados en Alemania, llevada a cabo poco después de la denominada “crisis de refugiados” europea durante 2015–2017. Debido al aumento de los movimientos de refugiados, los hallazgos son altamente relevantes y, por lo tanto, hacen una nueva contribución a las políticas de integración y a la investigación-acción como enfoque participativo.

Palabras clave: Investigación-Acción Participativa; refugiados; integración en el mercado laboral; enfoque pragmático

1 Introduction

The huge influx of approximately 1.1 million refugees from Syria and the Middle East to Germany between 2015–2017, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, created a need for speedy labour market integration (David et al., 2019). Former studies for Germany (Kosyakova, 2021; IAB, 2015) show that 40% of refugees continue to face difficulties in entering the labour market, also ten years after the arrival of previous refugee cohorts. In response, quick measures have been taken in the case of the Ukrainian newcomers. Those of working age were immediately provided with a work permit, but relatively few work in permanent jobs (Giesing et al., 2022). It must be reflected that several Ukrainian refugees consider Germany as a stopover. However, as the war progresses, the situation is subject to change. Distinct from Ukrainian refugees, third-country refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Turkey (OECD, 2022), in most cases, envisage and strive for a stable social and economic future in Germany. Yet, these groups often are excluded from the German labour market due to their residence status. A reason to revisit German labour market measures and the effectiveness of the approaches between 2015 and 2017 to consider lessons learned. Multiple studies indicate that these measures were mainly designed and implemented without prior consultation with the refugees, leading to their failure (Siebert, 2019).

Contemplating the above, we ask *what the action research approach adds to the co-creation of improved refugee labour market integration measures*. Opening the research process allows refugees to bring in their aspirations and concerns and shape the outcomes (Ataöv et al. 2010) as part of the European ‘Science with and for Society’ concept¹.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: In the next section, we introduce the action research approach used in this paper and its benefits for the transfer of scientific findings into action. The research design following the action research spiral is introduced in section 3. Section 4 presents our findings and the actions taken in response to making a change. We conclude by discussing our findings for future interventions supporting refugees’ labour market integration and its meaning for action research (Section 5).

2 Bringing action research into play

Originally, Lewin (1946, p. 35) defined action research as “[...] comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action.” Based on the argument that “[r]esearch that produces nothing but books will not suffice,” Lewin (1946, p. 35), at the core, developed the methodology to study social psychology in the framework of field theory. Since then, the concept of action research has become increasingly popular to justify applied research, especially when undertaking consultation (Rowell et al., 2015; Koshy et al., 2011; Parkin, 2009; Cassell and Johnson, 2006). Leand on Bradbury (2015: 1), all of the action research approaches are based on the “[...] pragmatic co-creation of knowing with, not on, people”.

1 Science for and with Society (SwafS) is a Horizon 2020 programme that aims to build effective cooperation between science and society, recruit new talent for science, and pair scientific excellence with social awareness and responsibility (https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2018–2020/main/h2020-wp1820-swfs_en.pdf).