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 (OEDC, 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' concept[1].

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".

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[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).

Figure 1. Action Research Spiral
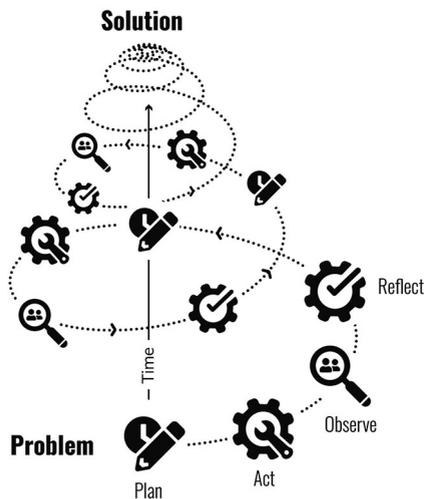
Source: Terstriep et al. (2021)

While acknowledging the limitations, there are several reasons for applying the concept in the context of the labour market integration of refugees. Following Greenwood (2007), we refer to action research as a practical strategic approach that engages (social) researchers and other experts with local stakeholders to make a change.

First, drawing on the basic understanding of action research (Lewin, 1946), scientific results can be turned faster into action, especially under extraordinary conditions (here, the high volume of immigration to Germany), which require fast solutions. Hereby, a strong focus is given to critical thinking (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001, Ram, 2019), explained as "[l]earning to become critical of information and forming an opinion […]" (LaPoint-O'Brien, 2013, p. 15).

Second, the participatory nature (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Reason & Bradbury, 2008) inherent in action research advocates for adopting this approach. Counteracting the exclusion of refugees from developing the measures for their labour market integration, participatory action research (PAR) recognises individuals as self-governing, engaged, re-flective, accountable and knowledgeable participants collaborating to bring about change (Greenwood, 2014; Adelman, 1993). According to literature (Cassell & Johnson, 2006; Harrison & Leitch, 2000; Whyte, 1991) it follows that groups whose perspectives are usually silenced have the opportunity to be given a voice. In so doing, these groups can express and actively participate in the context of power relations (Avelino & Wittmeyer, 2015).

Third, intergroup relationships, connecting refugees with company leaders, researchers, and intermediary organisations simultaneously, are considered essential to presenting recip-rocally how and why these groups behave according to their lived environment (Lewin, 1946).

Consequently, it is important to consider the refugees as co-researchers and experts in their situation. This procedure requires the greater engagement of society in research and innovation activities and direct access to research results in due consideration of the ethical dimension. In general, power relations are essential elements in action research, influencing

the dynamics and outcomes of the process (Kemmis & McTaggert, 2005). In line with Greenwood (2007), collaborators are involved in co-generating processes of knowledge, action design and evaluating outcomes.

In so doing, action research includes an ethical aspect in creating the possibility of participation (Terstriep et al., 2021; Whyte, 1991), being mindful of informed consent, and ensuring participants' rights and well-being are respected.

Fourth, including action learning (Raelin, 1999) allows all groups involved to come together and help each other to learn from their experiences. Generally, action learning can be described as a process involving working on real-world challenges, using the knowledge and skills of a smaller group of people. Accordingly, for Zuber-Skerritt (2001, p. 2), "[a]ction learning means learning from the action or concrete experience, as well as taking action as a result of this learning."

3   Explicating our action research approach

Acknowledging the distinct traditions in action research, we have deliberately chosen the participatory approach to action research, which places emphasis on the active engagement of individuals directly in the research process from the beginning. In the following, we exemplify the application of action research in the context of the labour market integration of refugees.

3.1   Background and scope of action

3.1.1   The German context

At the outset, our research aimed to enhance comprehension of the opportunities, challenges, similarities, and distinctions in refugees' labour market integration. Additionally, we sought to develop measures facilitating refugee employment in Germany. We focused on three sectors: information technologies (IT), geriatric care and construction as examples. These sectors have in common that they face a serious shortage of skilled workers. Besides, several factors supported the selection. The *IT industry* is known for its globalised work arrangements and its inclusive culture. It has exhibited a high degree of diversity and a willingness to facilitate employee mobility across various branches and positions. The *geriatric care sector* has significant prior experience in dealing with migration regarding employees and customer-patient relationships. Integrity and diversity in the teams are often well accepted but not always systematically exploited. Lastly, the *construction sector,* rooted in the longstanding German craft tradition, is acknowledged for its strong work ethic. Historically, the construction industry has demonstrated an incorporating of immigrants into its workforce. As will be shown in Section 4, these sectoral differences did not outweigh the common barriers refugees face in labour market integration.

Action research and data collection were conducted from January 2017 to December 2018 in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populated federal state, with over 18 million residents. The federal state has a long migration history that originates (after Warld War II) from the era of guest workers in the 1950 s and 1960 s.

3.1.2   The action research process

Scientists from three research organisations (hereinafter the 'scientific team'), including the authors, ten Syrian refugees as co-researchers, further interested refugees, companies and intermediary organisations such as chambers of commerce, economic development and employment agencies, and grassroot migration organisations (hereinafter referred collectively to as "actors" or "collaborators") engaged in the action research. They coordinated the iterative research process to develop measures for labour market integration. Drawing on Herr and Anderson (2015), we locate ourselves on the 'continuum of positionality': ranging from insiders (1) to outsiders (5): close to 4 as participatory outsiders collaborating *with* insiders. Accordingly, our main role was contributing to the knowledge base, facilitating collaboration, mediating conflicts and misunderstandings, and critically reflecting on established practices to improve them. This put us in a situation of continuous self-reflection of engagement and distance. Practical insights, individual and organisational experiences, and scientific knowledge were integrated to inform the research and its outcomes. Various modes or formats of interactive exchange and collaboration were employed throughout the process, as shown in the following.

In line with pragmatic PAR, which prioritises consensus-building (Greenwood, 2014, 2007), all participating actors initially underwent ethical sensitivity training before engaging in various exchange focusing on potential misunderstandings and unconscious biases (see Table 1). To circumvent power disbalance, members of the scientific team with expertise in intercultural communication and negotiation provided guidance to the involved actors, except the refugees; a grassroots migration organisation member: trained in trauma and ethical awareness, consulted with the refugees.

Second, mediated by the employment agency and grassroot migrant organisations, ten Syrian refugees acting as co-researchers underwent an *internship programme* at the participating research organisations. Through daily collaboration on action-related research, scientists and refugee co-researchers fostered mutual understanding, trust, and reciprocity. Diverse work cultures and perspectives have enabled the co-development of a multifaceted approach to improve labour market integration measures.

Third, the refugee co-researchers, the scientific team, intermediaries (e. g. migration organisations, employment agencies) and further interested refugees engaged in a series of "empowerment workshops" (s. Table 1). Subject to the respective topic, the ten workshops with ten units were organised as peer groups to share experiences and provide mutual support, encouragement, and guidance.

Fourth, organised in cooperation with the chamber of commerce, a matchmaking event facilitating the connection between refugees and companies, i. e. intergroup relations, was conducted (see Table 1). Participants identified common integration challenges faced by refugees, and exchanged ideas to develop solutions and mitigation strategies. This was followed by matching companies' needs and refugees' labour market aspirations, providing an opportunity to collaboratively identify shared challenges, gain perspective from each other, and devise solutions leading to successful recruitment.

Fifth, collecting feedback during these formats enabled an agile development in which improved approaches have been jointly designed repeatedly. Organising these events as open spaces allowed participating actors (mainly refugees and intermediaries) to take ownership of the process.

Sixth, six round tables gathered refugees, researchers, policymakers and representatives from intermediary organisations and companies to monitor and evaluate new insights stemming from our action research and its meaning for practice. Additionally, a project board of refugees, companies from the three sectors and intermediaries moderated by the scientific team and refugee co-researchers met five times to discuss lessons learnt in the process and their transfer into action.

Table 1. Interactive exchange and collaboration format utilised in the action research process

Format	Content	Number of events/units	Number of participants					
			R	CR	S	C	I	P
Awareness raising training	Two-day ethical sensitivity training	1 / 2	10	3	10	1		
Internship	Programme to provide practical work experience and training for ten refugees in the participating research organisations	continuously	10	3				
Empowerment workshops	Identification of own competencies and potentials; guidance for labour market; guidance for German education systems; compatibility of formally acquired competencies and their recognition; working cultures; empowerment tactics against ressentiment	10 / 10	15	10	5	3		
Matchmaking	Matching of refugees' labour market aspirations and capacities with companies' needs and expectations	1		10	5	10	3	
Open space events	Collection of feedback on the research process and joint elaboration of the further proceeding	12	10	3		4		
Round tables	Discussion of insights stemming from action research and its meaning for practice and improvement of labour market measures	6		10	5	10	5	3
Project board meetings	Critical reflection on the action research process	5		3	3	6	2	1

R = Refugees, not acting as co-researchers CR = refugee co-researchers C = Companies S = Scientists I = Intermediary organisation P = Policymaker

All formats were accompanied by at least two members from the scientific team acting as mediators in case of misunderstandings and discussing situations of discomfort by any participants.

3.2   Methodological approach and interim findings

The process of conducting our research followed the spiral model (see Figure 1) of:

- *Defining problems:* goal definition jointly with refugees in Nord-Rhine-Westphalia who arrived after 2015, companies in the three sectors, labour agencies and organisations supporting refugees[2].
- *Planning and doing research:* sector profiles, literature review, secondary analysis of measures, biographical interviews.
- *Interpreting results and designing action:* reflecting research results with refugees and further collaborators, facilitating intergroup relationships.
- *Evaluation of outcomes:* round tables involving refugees, companies, scientists and intermediary organisations.

Throughout this process, we applied different data collection techniques, encompassing (1) conducting qualitative interviews, (2) engaging in participatory observations, and facilitating (3) group discussions (see section 3.1.2).

3.2.1   Defining the problems

In the initial phase, the research goal has been defined with the help of the ten refugee co-researchers during their internship programme. To concertise the goal and act on a specific policy issue (Eden & Huxham, 1995), the involved researchers conducted a sectoral profile analysis and a literature review on identified barriers to the labour market integration of refugees. Ram's (2019) advice to develop measures only after a review of scientific work dealing with the subject, including critical scientific discourse, has been followed. Based on the analysis, the main barriers identified were categorised: using the critical thinking approach, as the so-called *hard barriers.* Examples of such barriers are high levels of bureaucracy, qualification recognition, or insufficient language skills, well-documented in previous research. These were supplemented by the observations of refugee co-researchers, which they experienced firsthand and classified as *soft barriers.* In the literature on refugees' labour market integration, soft barriers still receive less attention (David et al., 2019) as they are characterised, for example, by the habitus[3], work milieus[4], and work cultures: all of which are difficult to grasp, and different understandings of the terminologies. Before formulating measures, the feedback from collaborators emphasised the importance of conducting additional research on the underlying factors of soft barriers to gain a deeper understanding.

3.2.2   Planning and doing research

Drawing from this, the collaborators decided to delve more deeply into the factors underlying soft barriers. To compare the results of the literature review with real-life settings, 20 bio-

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2   To this end, stakeholders were addressed via regional institutions and intermediary organisations, businesses via chambers and associations. Refugees were approached via refugee initiatives, employment agencies and regional support organisations. Interviews were conducted in refugee shelters and in companies within the three sectors that already employed refugees or intended to do so.

3   In sociology, habitus refers to socially ingrained habits, skills and dispositions and how individuals perceive and react to the social world around them. Bourdieu (1996) explains habitus as the structures and generative principles of distinct and distinctive practices.

4   The term refers to a specific social, cultural, and organisational context in which people work, including social interactions, power dynamics, norms, values and practices that shape work experience.

graphical (employment) interviews with refugees (Bron & Thunborg, 2015) were conducted, including the refugee co-researchers. Refugees with different occupational and educational backgrounds were selected to account for the group's heterogeneity. It was important to include the refugees' views on the conditions of their labour market integration and to detect the soft barriers further. It made sense to uncover the potential and resources of the respondents, regardless of official qualification recognition. The survey sample, in the context of employment and educational biographical interviews and workshops on potential analysis and career orientation, is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Sample of interviewees
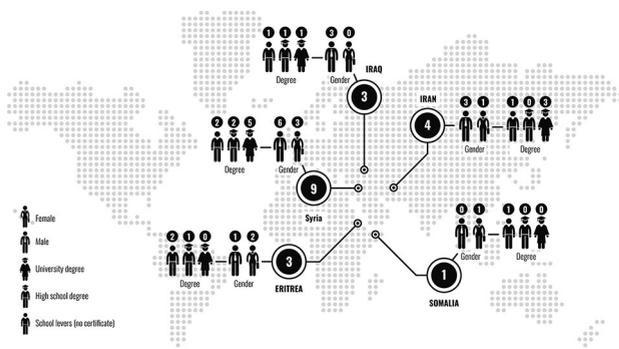
Source: own compilation

Based on the interview results, 15 expert interviews were conducted with diverse authorities from politics and administration, science, and intermediaries, as well as twelve interviews with companies from the three above-mentioned sectors (see Table 2).

Table 2. Sample of expert interviews and case studies

	Experts				Company/Sector		
Interviewees[1]	P	A	S	I	IT	Geriatric care	Construction
City of Gelsenkirchen	x						
Chamber of Crafts, Muenster			x				
Red Cross, Gelsenkirchen			x				
MHECA[2] North-Rhine Westphalia	x						
J. Oltmer, University Osnabrück		x					
F. Coenen, University Twente		x					
P. Sospiro, University Macerata		x					
NRW Centre for Talent Promotion			x				
Employment Agency, Gelsenkirchen	x						

Interviewees[1]	Experts				Company/Sector		
	P	A	S	I	IT	Geriatric care	Construction
Employment Agency, Essen	x						
Workers' Welfare Organisation		x					
Task Force, Gelsenkirchen (migrant organisation)		x					
Revier Ressourcen (NGO)		x					
Gafög (non-profit employment promotion)		x					
Economic Development Agency, Gelsenkirchen	x						
Care Service St. Gerion, Hückelhofen						x	
Residential facilities for seniors and disabled						x	
Family and nursing care Bochum						x	
Gantner Electronics, Bochum					x		
Cryptovision, Gelsenkirchen					x		
Adesso GmbH, Dortmund					x		
Neiko GmbH, Herten							x
ZINQ, Gelsenkirchen							x
IKKE, Duisburg (interview with three companies)							x
University Hospital, Bochum						x	

P = Politics A = Administration S = Science I = Intermediary organisation [1] Anonymised [2] Ministry of Health, Emancipation, Care and Ageing

3.2.3 Interpretation of results and designing action

The refugees and further practitioners critically reviewed the synthesis of measures and the interview outcomes, resulting in an empowerment workshop series with refugees, refugee co-researchers and the scientific team. As outlined in section 3.1.2, these activities were accompanied by a continuous reflection with the collaborators organised as open space events (s. Table 1) and laid the ground for the joint elaboration of a matching event that initially supported employers and refugees as potential employees separately in developing a mutual understanding and strengthening their cooperation skills. In a further step, both groups were brought together to develop a cooperation culture, common ideas and framework conditions.

Finally, the policy issues were defined from scratch based on the previous reflections.

3.2.4 Evaluation of outcomes

The results from the actions taken and the interpretation of findings fed into six round table discussions (see Table 1) with engaged policymakers, intermediaries, company leaders, researchers and refugee co-researchers to monitor and evaluate the actions taken. Each round

table was organised and hosted by a different collaborator resulting in distinct focus areas. For example, the round tables organised by the local chamber of crafts and the chamber of commerce centred on the needs and experiences of the companies in the three sectors. At the political level, missing or obstructive legal regulations took centre stage, as did bureaucratic procedures.

These discussions facilitated a deeper understanding of individual aspirations. Concurrently, the refugees had the opportunity to realise that what they perceive as discriminatory practices are often bureaucratic obstacles rather than intentional discrimination. This process helped comprehend personal attitudes and habitual decisions, highlighting that the concept of work, work ethics are cultural constructs that can be valued and interpreted differently.

The results were incorporated into transfer-oriented recommendations for action, improved measures developed, and research contributions.

4   Results

In the following, we present the results relating to (1) advancing the understanding of barriers, possible similarities, and differences in the labour market integration of refugees, drawing on the three sectors of IT, geriatric care, and construction, and (2) co-creating measures for labour market integration of refugees through action research.

4.1   Understanding of barriers to labour market integration

Our primary findings in understanding barriers to refugees' labour market integration can be condensed into two topics: refugees' residence status and qualification recognition and individual aspirations vs labour market requirements.

4.1.1   Residence Status and Qualification Recognition

From the process, the refugees have repeatedly emphasised the priority of individuals' residence status (can I stay, or can I go). A Syrian interviewee (R5) described:

"No company wants to invest in you if they don't know how long you can stay in Germany."

Accordingly, depending on the *appropriate* status, refugees, who cannot prove such status quo, are excluded from measures (OECD, 2017) and miss the first important connection to education and labour-related actions. In this regard, an expert on labour market integration posits:

"[…], the workplace is the best place for integration and language acquisition, and it is a pity if this possibility is missing from scratch."

Also, making it into integration and language courses, refugees experienced a disconnecting of the measures from practical labour market experience, excluding teaching technical language according to different sectors and competencies. A refugee (R17) commented thus,

"especially if I want to work in nursing or in the trades, I need to know technical terms to avoid mistakes with patients".

After the first step of status recognition is taken, the long-lasting recognition procedure of foreign qualifications remains slowing down the integration process. The refugee interviewees revealed a need for more understanding of foreign education systems by the German recognition system and a lack of commitment of the intermediaries involved in qualification recognition to refugees. An Eritrean refugee (R9) describes the process as follows:

"It depends on the employer, his mood, his knowledge, whether a qualification is recognised or not, and how long this takes. You completely depend on this person and his/her attitude towards you, the refuge and the migration."

One central finding from the collaboration with company leaders pertained to the recognition of formal qualifications, which highlighted the importance of competency development in the CoO and individual employment histories during displacement. A manager (C2) of a construction company highlighted the limited availability of structured mechanisms to assess informal skills stating,

"There are still few opportunities to assess informal skills systematically."

At the same time, all interviewed refugees, regardless of their formal educational qualifications, came to Germany with a wide range of work experience and informal skills. Some have even acquired the skills during migration in so-called transit countries such as Turkey (Dereli, 2022). An interviewee from Iran (R11) narrates:

"I did assistant work in Turkey for an Iranian businessman because I also speak Turkish. I have not dealt with such skills before. At the same time, I learned from him [the employer] how to act entrepreneurially."

Many of these skills are not perceived as relevant by refugees themselves and are challenging to grasp, so they do not mention it during a job interview in Germany. However, the interviews with the refugees show significant differences between the five countries of origin (CoO) being analysed in terms of the education systems.

To simplify, the education systems in Syria, Iraq, and Iran differ greatly from the refugees' point of view (a differentiated school system, vocational training, and higher education). They have fitted in relatively well up to the recent past but have a different character than the German system, so it is difficult to link the educational qualifications. According to the refugees, education is a high priority in Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Completing secondary school is self-evident for many young people in the cities and the subsequent university education. Vocational education and training (VET) are not attractive and are for many. On the one hand, VET has little social esteem (as in many European countries), and on the other hand, there are few opportunities for skilled VET graduates that promise the prospect of a well-paid job. An exception is Iran. Here one can find strong approaches for a functioning non-academic VET system. Before the embargo, Iran cooperated internationally to build up a dual VET system with strong links to the German approach of dual VET. Thus, the Iranian participants had some previous VET and an understanding of the importance and function of VET in Germany. Looking at the poor image of VET in CoO, academic careers were reported to be highly recognised and therefore desired to be achieved among refugees. An interviewee (R2) from Syria draws the following picture:

"Most people I know prefer occupations such as physicians, lawyers, and engineers – all in all, academic qualifications."

An expert on education (E3) reports that:

"[a] significant proportion of refugees, especially from Syria, have been self-employed before leaving the country. This would also be a desirable option for many in Germany."

In the sample, nine out of the 20 refugees from the three CoO hold university degrees, and two more have a high school diploma. Among the interviewees with a higher education degree or university degree, graduates in their CoO are seldom employed in the profession corresponding to their degree (keyword: deskilling). In all three countries, the education system has little relevance to the world of work. One Syrian interviewee (R7) reports:

"I studied English literature in Damascus, but then I worked in a bank and got a foothold in the financial industry."

And this is not an isolated case. An Iranian engineer who has worked as a cook in a hotel in Tehran and an Iranian physicist who has worked as an interpreter for an Iranian company because of his good command of English are further examples. A young female computer scientist with a university degree has already worked as a social worker in Syria and sees her competence and fulfilment as being in this area in Germany as well. This pattern of *discontinuous employment biographies* has also been confirmed in the narratives of the refugees about friends and acquaintances in their CoO. Examination of the competence profiles shows that formal degrees and certificates are meaningless regarding the refugees' actual work potential. Real work experiences are more helpful in most cases. They are often a 'hidden potential' developed in VET and in cooperation with companies in different sectors.[5]

Additionally, 16 out of 20 refugees from all five countries have had informal work experience in various jobs in their CoO. In Syria or Iran, for example, it is normal to take up gainful employment in addition to attending school or college. From the refugees' point of view, this is easier in their CoO, but also in the transit countries where they lived during their flight (e. g., Greece, Turkey, Italy) than in Germany. They explained this phenomenon concerning the *unbureaucratic* labour market, with only a few formal hurdles. Despite these difficulties, all participants have had a range of work experience and have acquired not only work-related skills but also soft skills (e. g., intercultural dialogue, conflict management, resilience) and, to some extent, foreign language skills. The individual development paths are very different but often relate to the previous career biographical experience. An Iraqi participant who has worked in car sales in Iraq has worked his way up to becoming an interpreter and assistant to a supplier in Turkey. An Iranian engineer, who has already worked as a Teheran cook, has managed a restaurant's kitchen in Athens for a year. The Syrian computer scientist, who has already cared for children with disabilities in Syria, has worked in Italy with a refugee support organisation.

For companies, the bureaucratic effort to employ a refugee whose residential status is still unresolved plays a major role in their decision-making. This raises the question of how many businesses are interested in training a refugee whom they may be deprived of after a couple of years. In addition to legal uncertainty, most companies have few resources to fully capture the informal qualification of refugees but rather concentrate on the recognised certificates. Consequently, it becomes challenging to effectively match refugees with suitable job opportunities. One company leader (C3) pictures:

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5   For example, employees with a refugee background in craft businesses often have technical expertise that is not common in Germany (a German tiler offers to lay mosaics with the support of his Iraqi employee). In care institutions, new customer groups can be addressed due to the intercultural competencies of the new employees; in IT, business relationships can be established in CoO or transit. These potentials can often come to fruition very quickly in a professional context, which shows the professional sector to be a positive field of integration.

"We need something formal like proof of qualification that we can rely on. As a medium-sized company, we don't have the capacity to find out the potential soft skills of these people. Time is money; I don't have the time and capacity for extra work."

Given the significance attributed to qualification recognition by the collaborators, it became a focal point of numerous discussions during the action research process. While the perspectives of collaborators varied based on their respective roles as employers, employees, policymakers, or intermediaries, a consensus was reached that there is a need for enhancements in the realm of qualification recognition.

4.1.2 Individual aspiration vs labour market requirements

Interviewees with higher educational qualifications revealed that they had developed definite career and life aspirations for their future in Germany. They often have clear expectations developed during the flight (lawyer, engineer). The sense of purpose and the feeling of doing socially recognised and important work play a major role. A young Syrian female refugee (R15) confirms:

"If I can start again here and build a life, then I would also like to do meaningful work, earn money, and have a qualification."

At the same time, the development of further competencies has shown to be very important. One Somalian (R18) woman explains:

"The focus here lies first and foremost on developing good language skills to better understand Germany and the people here and be understood by Germans."

The younger refugees, who had already started higher education in the CoO, expressed their desire to restart studies in Germany. Refugees with a lower education level are challenged to develop a concrete vision for their employment biography. Nevertheless, irrespective of their former qualification, the refugees desired to be gainfully employed as quickly as possible and earn a salary for a living.

Another aspect that promotes the mismatch between refugees' aspirations and labour market requirements is *deskilling*. The war in Syria, which has already lasted for more than one decade, has, in many cases, resulting in a devaluation of qualifications and gained knowledge since the refugees had less chance to pursue employment or training. This is an obstacle, particularly in sectors based on technical and digital progress. The IT sector especially relies on skilled workers and, according to the collaborators' perception, is one of the few sectors in Germany that still offers cross-access for employees. And yet, if the acquired knowledge in the areas of work is not sufficient or outdated, there is little hope for a quick labour market integration for refugees. This also applies to the construction industry, where company leaders often have high expectations.

"In Germany, everything is certified. In the construction industry, people work according to certain standards that should be adhered to. If someone does not know the standards, it will be difficult. It has tradition. Those who don't know the standards need time to get in. But I don't have the time to teach them the standards",

clarifies a manager from the construction sector (C1). These expectations are met only to a limited extent because work in the construction industry has taken place at a different level in the CoO. In the interviews, some refugees described that medium-term internships have proven to be useful in some companies in construction, which on the one hand, allow an

assessment of the individual and, on the other hand, slowly introduce the existing team to the newcomer. Further interviewees in the field report that the established workforce in the companies is much more open to *newcomers* when it comes to personal contact through personal bonding. Additionally, the entire team can decide on the way the skills and abilities of the candidate are to be involved. The matching event (see Table 1), which brought together companies as employers and refugees as prospective employees, demonstrated the potential for collaboratively developing tailored 'integration concepts' that harmonise the needs of both parties involved.

Most of the refugees applying for a job in construction, however, are candidates for VET and rarely for direct full-time employment. "*Furthermore, companies act primarily in a short-term profit-orientated manner ",* the manager (C1) explains. For instance, they only respond to intercultural adaption needs of working conditions[6] in individual cases and mainly to cope with their demands for skilled labour. Thus, diversity concepts in the workplace to adapt to the intercultural needs of the employees regarding their working conditions in Germany are still marginalised or surface. Yet, these could be relevant in sectors such as geriatric care. Collaborators reported that diversity plays a role and that it is intrinsically considered in companies, but that comprehensive diversity concepts are still missing. In this vein, C5 claimed:

"In care, we need diversity concepts for customer orientation and employee orientation. However, the employees organise themselves because there are still far too few concepts and hardly any time to implement them."

Another mismatch area is the divergent expectation of payment, which is difficult to reconcile with the refugees' expectations, especially in the geriatric care sector. Furthermore, through the open space and round table discussions, it became apparent that a significant number of refugees do not grasp the necessity for extensive training to work in the field of geriatric care. In their native cultures, the primary responsibility for caring for the elderly lies within the family and as a result, this line of work is not highly professionalised in their CoO. It follows that the acceptance of caregiving as a recognised profession remains low, leading to high dropout rates in this field.

4.2 Co-creating measures

With the increased migration of 2015–2017, there was a mass movement to Germany. This new situation also brought with it a new group of involuntary migrants that was different from the cohorts of the guest worker generation. Against the background, the lack of existing knowledge motivated the direct involvement in all research activities of the refugees from scratch. This created the opportunity to develop a common and profound understanding of the situation.

4.2.1 Actions addressing residence status and qualification recognition

In Germany, the residence status is legally regulated, as is the qualification recognition. However, as a result of the decentralised nature of the German federal state system, these

6   Concering diversity concepts consideration must be given to respecting and accommodating the religious requirements of staff in their working environment and addressing cultural disparities and personal challenges resulting from traumatic experiences among employees with a refugee background. Additionally, it is crucial to recognise the diverse skill sets and varying competence development needs of refugees, necessitating a joint analysis of their potential and requirements to tailor appropriate competence development strategies.

procedures are executed by regional authorities. Hence, the process of attaining status and recognition involves navigating through bureaucratic channels. The collaborators, including refugees and companies, noted that apart from established guidelines, it is ultimately the discretion of the state authority individual as the executing body to determine the duration of the recognition process and whether recognition will be granted.

Based on the formats depicted in Table 1, the participants have been invited to emphasise mutual trust and understanding of the other's points of view on the topics of qualifications, educational systems, migration history of refugees, and German legislation.

For example, participants told each other personal stories about their lives and the reasons for their escape. An Iranian refugee reported that he was shot in his car, shortly after marrying his wife, while she was pregnant. She lost the child. In turn, a German civil servant told how desperate refugees insulted and threatened him when he had to follow the rules and turn away some refugee qualifications. The willingness to embrace challenging circumstances in life has contributed to the establishment of trust.

In such ways, all experts were involved in the process of critical thinking. The events aimed at openness, tolerance, and co-working without prejudice. In addition to the group of refugees and state authorities, further groups of actors were involved in the process. The dialogue initiated among the involved actors identified further barriers to labour market integration, including gender aspects and the absence of profound network structures. This gave leeway for the different groups to critically discuss existing instruments and needed within a safe space: independently of their resident status and social roles. In evaluating these events utilising individual and group interviews, it became clear that the exchange resulted in an increased sensitivity to the needs of the other and a greater willingness to cooperate and accept. To adjust their daily work with the target group, especially regarding non-formal qualification identification, the state representatives collected keywords for a consultation to better identify 'hidden' skills. By bringing together the different actors from science, business, and practice, a common catalogue of measurements and a questionnaire for non-formal competence assessment was created, from which the other actors could learn. As side-effects, these activities reduced the insufficiency of existing parallel support structures at the regional level, such as dual counselling and promotion of identical preparatory training for labour market entrance.

4.2.2   Actions addressing individual aspirations vs labour market requirements

In response to the identified mismatch between refugees' aspirations and labour market requirements, the collaborators designed measures for the process of work integration, which would enable a sustainable entry to the regional labour market. In the first step, a workshop concept for empowering refugees was developed and pre-tested. Working groups comprising refugees and experts were established for each topic outlined in Table 1, engaging in detailed discussions and refine personalised approaches to address specific challenges. The outcomes of these working groups were then deliberated upon in a larger forum. A comprehensive list of recommendations was compiled for each topic to provide guidance when necessary. Being involved in such a process, refugees have become individually sensitised to Germany's work, sectoral, and company cultures. The co-design process prepared them for the expectations of the labour markets.

On the contrary, the involved companies were supported in developing a targeted transcultural *integration competence procedure*, which contributes to improving both the competence development of the new employee and the social integration of the employee into the established workforce. For this purpose, a matching workshop concept was developed to support the refugees, the companies, and intergroup relations (see section 3.1.2). These actions yielded innovative notions for potential remedies, including adopting a soft skills assessment framework by the regional employment agency. Rather than constituting a formal document, it functioned as an internal directive for labour market agents, complementing formal recognition schemes. In addition, proposals were elaborated, helping other companies successfully integrate refugees. As an illustration, tandems of employees with a migration background and refugees were formed to facilitate the onboarding process within the company. In addition, more informal actions were taken. For example, long coffee breaks were introduced in several companies in the construction so that the religious employees could pray and the others could rest or take time for other actions (e. g. sports). There was no control, but these actions were trust-based.

5   Discussion and conclusion

The paper aimed to answer *what action research approach adds to the co-creation of improved refugee labour market measures.* To answer this, the authors first introduced the concept of action research and its benefits for a real-time transfer of results into action. Second, the action research process for co-developing refugee labour market integration measures was discussed and exemplified. Based on the previous, results were presented and approached by the action research possibilities. In such a way, direct interventions by refugees and further collaborators were taken in the process.

5.1.1   Learnings from the process

In line with Greenwood's (2007) understanding of pragmatic action research, our findings suggest that the approach is valuable for collaboratively developing measures to integrate refugees into the labour market, as it recognises refugees as active participants who take ownership and responsibility for improving their own circumstances. In particular, the intensive collaboration with refugees during the internship has proven valuable. We engaged in ongoing critical dialogues with our co-researchers, questioning each other's perspectives and exchanging arguments for and against different actions.

Uninterrupted, we have had to ask ourselves as scholars, are we pushing certain views and actions because we think it is good for the refugees, or because the refugees think it is of importance for them. Trust has helped in this. We scholars have opened ourselves up to new perspectives that have not always conformed to our view of the western world. Meanwhile, the refugees have understood and surrendered to the democratic idea that our laws (even in the case of qualification recognition) imply.

Integrating these discussions into our daily work made the exchange process much smoother. After the process, four refugees found stable employment in companies and social institutions as well as in a bank. In addition, the involvement of the refugees as co-researchers

helped concretise the research questions. For example, identifying what our co-researchers termed "soft barriers" elucidates the ambiguities inherent in labour market integration measures resulting from socially ingrained habits, skills and dispositions shaping refugees' aspirations and perceptions of the labour market and companies' expectations of their employees.

Also, our results indicate the impactful role of employing action research in the realm of refugee labour market integration, particularly in the context of intergroup dynamics. This is evident from the collaborators' notable level of openness, active involvement, and willingness to share valuable insights, emphasising the positive difference made by this approach. The interdisciplinary collaborative activities led to a continuous exchange of experiences, perceptions and views, cultivating trusting and reciprocal relationships among the collaborators. Yet, considering relational ethics facilitated this process. Delving below the surface problems and identifying underlying roots resulted in mutual learning and elaborating meaningful solutions for labour market integration.

Hence, PAR facilitated a collaborative process in which we collectively examined the underlying reasons behind challenges in the labour market integration of refugees and identified potential trajectories to address them. Through this process, we developed a shared understanding of each other's circumstances, broadening the range of possible actions and compelling each party to actively address the situation. However, this journey was far from easy or straightforward in various instances. Instead, it was marked by diverse motivations, aims, thought patterns, and behaviours, leading to occasional setbacks and a continual necessity to re-engage with one another. Hence, in line with Cornish et al. (2023), we posit that jointly articulating a "theory of change": setting out a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen, as an initial step at the stage of "planning and doing action" would have helped to overcome the "black box" between what we are doing in our research (i. e. actions taken) and how this leads to desired outcomes and impacts. Backing the theory of change with qualitative and quantitative indicators would also facilitate ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the actions taken with a view to impacts achieved, including negative or unintended side effects.

In addition, the process revealed that vertical policies defined and implemented by the central authority at the level of the federal government (e. g. migration policies, regulations on refugee recognition) contradict horizontal policies emphasising collaboration and coordination among multiple actors and organisations at the same level of governance or within a specific sector. In essence, vertical policies tend to be uniform and standardised, disregarding contextual and individual factors. Conversely, horizontal labour market integration policies prove most effective when emphasising shared responsibility, collective decision-making, and implementation by various actors, including refugees, companies, policymakers, and intermediaries. Therefore, they require multidimensional approaches, as exemplified in PAR.

Moreover, taking into account Larrea's (2023) findings leaned upon Gustavson's (2017) assertion that a worldwide process of democratisation appears to have reached a standstill, particularly in relation to the obstacles hindering labour market integration, we contend that there exists a formidable barrier that is difficult to overcome unless the entire society engages in democratic discourse.

5.1.2 Limitations

Despite its usefulness, the action research approach also has its limitations. For example, successful interventions usually occur on a small scale within the individual sphere of those concerned. Attempts to scale them are often associated with insufficient consideration of this individual component. Hence, if the collaborators are no longer involved to the required extent, and their needs are not considered, the action research approach loses its meaning in real-time action transfer. Next to that, action research is often context-specific and aims to generate relevant and applicable knowledge within that particular context (Gustavsen, 2020).

To broaden impact, interventions and the active involvement of the refugees are needed at all spatial levels concerning politics, society, and the economy. In so doing, intergroup relations can be guaranteed by a direct transfer between the horizontal and vertical hierarchies. Policymakers, in particular, need to recognise that the impact of such jointly created measures is not tied to political election cycles.

With respect to the current mass migration of Ukrainian refugees to Germany, their access to the labour market has been facilitated compared to other refugee cohorts. This could imply that labour market integration is now easier for certain refugee groups, and measurements are obsolete. Yet, studies with the Ukrainian target group show (Giesing et al., 2022) that a systematic approach in the field of labour market integration is still lacking. Second, as each refugee cohort is different, there is still a lack of co-creative measures and approaches that consider the needs and resources of the target group.

From our point of view, only co-creation offers the possibility to adapt measures to new groups of migration, to heterogenous cultures inside these groups and to a specific gender perspective. In our experience, the needs of women regarding a successful integration into the labour market differ from men's in all three sectors due to, for example, distinct cultural socialisation and care responsibilities.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that the action research approach could add value to developing refugees' labour market measures. However, considering the current situation more action research and direct transfer of findings into practice are needed. In addition, accounting for the contextuality of refugees' labour market integration: concerning refugees' aspirations, labour market requirements, political, institutional, economic framework conditions, and societal climate, our findings do not allow for generalisation. Nonetheless, they provide meaningful guidance on how action research supports developing more tailored interventions that can be taken up by scholars and practitioners in other regions in Europe. This is especially true in cases when the described procedure can be detached from the respective context and adapted to new contexts within the framework of action research. We agree with Gustavsen (2020), who elaborates on this issue. To solve the problem of the single case consideration, we, therefore, propose a decontextualisation of the single case, combining it with multiple cases of similarity from multiple contexts to enhance the reliability and generalisability of the findings and to recontextualise for validity reasons.

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