



# Enabling the meaningful participation of migrants with precarious status

Some lessons learnt and guidance

## Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

PICUM is a network that brings together organisations united by a shared commitment: defending the rights of undocumented migrants. Within its diverse network, the structures, approaches, and levels of migrant participation vary widely—from migrant-led grassroots groups to larger NGOs that work in solidarity. This diversity is not only a source of richness but also a strategic strength, allowing different experiences and perspectives to inform collective action.

PICUM's commitment to social justice, anti-racism and equality has increasingly brought us to reflect on our contribution towards a decolonial approach to migration which can contribute to dismantling the hierarchical dichotomies that exist across migration frameworks and our very own organisations. To this end, we are convinced of the importance of taking all possible steps to ensure that undocumented migrants can be agents of their own rights, playing an active part in the delivery and design of policies and programmes which affect them. In our experience, enabling participation requires enabling contributions and involvement at all stages of the decision-making processes that impact people's lives and well-being.

We recognise the need for the inclusion and representation of undocumented people in all areas of our work. As part of our [2026-2030 Strategic Plan](#), we intend to increase and mainstream meaningful representation and participation of people with lived experience of precarious or insecure status across all PICUM's policy, research, membership and communications related work.

In this process, PICUM can learn from both its own experience as well from the significant expertise within its network. PICUM has, over the years, been working on how best to put this to practice in different areas of work, particularly in the context of labour and health, in relation to youth participation, in communications and in participatory action research (PAR). Specific efforts have focused on amplifying the voices of undocumented migrants as experts by experience by creating opportunities to connect and engage in policy spaces, with the media, as well as by supporting actions designed and led by migrants themselves. This experience has evidenced the importance, relevance as well as necessity of fostering the meaningful participation of people with lived experiences of undocumented and precarious status.

Besides empowering all those involved, meaningful participation contributes to interests and perspectives being voiced by people themselves, resulting in a more direct expression of needs and experiences. Undocumented migrants' perspectives can contribute to more informed programming and policy making processes, hereby strengthening the link with actual needs and intended outcomes.

This requires implementing specific measures to overcome the many obstacles to participation which prevail. In the case of undocumented migrants these are primarily caused by the residence status and living conditions, which are usually associated with invisibility and exclusion. As migrants with irregular residence status, undocumented people are barred from taking part in the general elections where they reside. In addition, they face a dense web of systemic, legal, social, organisational, and political barriers to inclusion and participation.

## PICUM resources highlighting participatory methods across different thematic areas of work

### Migrant-led initiatives in Andalucía, Spain - Learnings from the self-organization of migrant workers (PICUM, 2024)

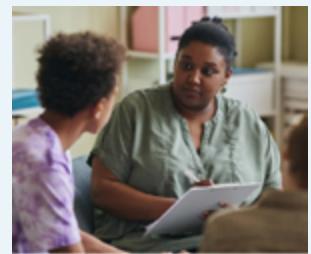
In the context of PICUM's work on labour rights and labour migration, a learning exchange between migrant-led initiatives in Andalucía, Spain, and PICUM members was co-organised in 2024, together with Andalucía Acoge and Mujeres Supervivientes.



A series of key reflections on self-representation, resource allocation, the role of different actors and extractive practices to avoid were discussed during the workshop. The [publication](#) provides an overview of these discussions and of the practices that were presented.

### Participatory methods: The inclusion of undocumented migrants in healthcare and beyond (PICUM, 2022)

This [policy brief](#) explores how participatory research and practice can strengthen both the design and delivery of services for undocumented people. Focusing on healthcare while drawing lessons from other fields, it examines how participation can shape advocacy, communications, governance, and organisational culture in groups supporting undocumented migrants. The briefing does not aim to provide definitive answers; instead, it seeks to encourage reflection within civil society and migrant-led organisations, recognising their diverse contexts, capacities, and perspectives, and inviting a deeper conversation about how to advance meaningful inclusion.



PARTICIPATORY METHODS:  
THE INCLUSION OF  
UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS  
IN HEALTHCARE AND BEYOND

PICUM  
UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS

### Stepping up: A collection of projects and practices helping migrant children transition into adulthood (PICUM, 2024)

This [publication](#) presents a collection of past and present policies, practices and projects supporting migrant children and young people transitioning into adulthood. It highlights the variety of practices that

exist and addresses different aspects: mental health, peer support, mentoring, formal care and aftercare, legal aid, 'figuring things out', regularising one's stay and cross-border exchanges.



Stepping up:  
A collection of projects and practices  
helping migrant children transition into  
adulthood

PICUM

### Lessons learned in supporting undocumented young people advocating for change (PICUM, 2022)

For the past two decades, PICUM members have worked with and supported young undocumented people advocating for change. This [toolkit](#) collects some of the lessons they have learned in the hopes of informing other organisations and young people doing, or wanting to do, the same work. The text is based on discussions at a two-day workshop 'Supporting and working with young undocumented people in advocacy' that took place in September 2022, in Brussels, Belgium. Participants at the workshop included youth advocates and PICUM members, including migrant youth-led organisations.



LESSONS LEARNED IN  
SUPPORTING UNDOCUMENTED  
YOUNG PEOPLE ADVOCATING  
FOR CHANGE

PICUM  
UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS

Our experience shows that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to enabling the meaningful participation of people with lived experience of undocumented or precarious status. Individual circumstances, processes and the fast-evolving general context require case by case, contextualised approaches.

The development of this guidance stems from a growing demand to systematise and streamline strategies that promote meaningful participation across all levels of our work. It is the result of internal discussions and consultations with PICUM members including migrant led organisations and persons with lived experience of undocumented or precarious

status. The goal is to foster ongoing reflection and self-analysis, enabling us to evaluate and transform existing dynamics and power relations. This approach applies at multiple levels: within the PICUM Secretariat, across PICUM as a network, and as a potential model for member organisations that are undertaking similar processes.

**By articulating common principles and frameworks, this guidance aims not only to strengthen our collective practices but also to inspire deeper organisational change throughout the broader movement for migrants' rights.**

## Methodology

### PICUM Task Force on Meaningful Participation

A new Task Force on Meaningful Participation was created in 2025 within PICUM, building on two years of reflection and coordinated work across the network. The group was formally launched during a two-day session in October 2025, where its initial priorities and operational framework began to take shape. The task force aims to be a space for defining and fostering safe, meaningful and responsible participation within PICUM. The objective is to build upon the existing experience and expertise within the PICUM network to increase the participation of people with lived experience of being undocumented at different levels of the organisation including at governance level. The experience of PICUM members and the discussions held in the lead up to the establishment of this task force up have significantly shaped the content of the present guidance on meaningful participation.



# Components of meaningful participation

## Whose participation?

Being undocumented is an *administrative situation*, not an identity. However, the impact of living with an irregular residence status often extends far beyond the period of irregularity itself. People with lived experience of being undocumented, or of navigating precarious statuses, carry with them insights and memories that remain deeply embedded in their personal and collective life course. These experiences shape people's understanding of migration systems, rights, and access to justice in profound ways. Recognising this means **acknowledging that lived experience is a form of expertise**—one that should inform how organisations and networks like PICUM approach advocacy, research, and decision-making.

The voices of people who are currently undocumented should remain a priority in any effort to strengthen participation. Their perspectives provide an immediate understanding of the realities, constraints, and strategies of survival that accompany life without regular status, insights that can easily fade once regularisation or stability is achieved. A peer researcher for [DignityFIRM's Participatory Action Research](#) in the Netherlands reflected on this difference during a focus group discussion. As a formerly undocumented person, he

suggested the idea of going on strike, but this was quickly challenged by another participant currently living without papers:

*"You think about that because you have the paper — that is the thinking of those who have paper. Now I can stop this because I have this. But believe me, somebody that has no paper, when you wake up in the morning, you're like, okay, where am I going to get 50 euros from today? You understand?"*

At the same time, it is crucial to recognise that people who are undocumented may not always have the time, emotional space, or stability to participate fully in processes. Still, this does not mean that they do not engage or organise. Movements such as RegularizaciónYA in Spain have shown the collective strength and mobilisation capacity of undocumented communities themselves. While in many cases the voices of formerly undocumented people may take a leading role, efforts should always be made to include the perspectives of those who remain undocumented, without turning participation into an additional burden or risk.

## Representativeness in spokesperson roles

### RegularizaciónYA migrant-led movement, Spain

[RegularizaciónYA](#) is a migrant-led movement in Spain that brings together collectives, human rights organizations, and allies to demand a comprehensive regularization for all undocumented people since 2020. It gathered more than 700,000 signatures in support of a [Popular Legislative Initiative](#)<sup>1</sup> for regularization. The movement's spokespersons are organized around five key labour sectors where most migrants excluded from existing regularization paths work<sup>2</sup>: hospitality, street vending (called 'top manta' in Spain), sex work, domestic work, and agriculture — along with an additional geographical representation from the Canary Islands, reflecting the specific migration dynamics on the archipelago.

Participation also raises important questions about **representativeness**. The knowledge held by people with lived experience of migration is invaluable, but it is not homogeneous. Each individual story reflects unique circumstances, and generalisations must be avoided. Furthermore, the expertise of people with lived experience extends well beyond migration policy itself—it includes education, housing, health care, labour rights, and more. Ensuring diverse participation means reflecting the multiplicity of cultural backgrounds, experiences, motivations, and perspectives that exist within undocumented and formerly undocumented communities.

Finally, participation should be considered context-specific, designed from the earliest stages of each process with the people most directly affected by the issue at hand. This means, for example, involving:

- Undocumented young people in the advocacy for children and young people's rights, as the good practices and examples collected in [Lessons learned in supporting undocumented young people advocating for change](#).
- Household workers when addressing rights in the care and household sectors—as seen in the work of [SOS Racismo's group of household workers](#);

- Children and young migrants when focusing on youth protection and inclusion as implemented by Defence for Children International Italy as part of its [GATE project- Guardians Against Trafficking and Exploitation](#);
- Sex workers when dealing with labour rights and safety in the sector, as exemplified by [ESWA, the European Sex Workers Alliance](#).
- People closest to the struggle depending on the action and campaigns supported by the [Migrants Rights Centre](#) Ireland.

People impacted by injustice and exploitation are at the centre of organising, campaigns, projects and strategic advocacy, ensuring the work is led by people affected by the very issues they fight against – restaurant workers, au pairs, undocumented young people and more.

**Meaningful participation requires proximity and relevance: those most affected must help shape the agenda from the start, not be consulted after it is defined.**

1 Proposición de Ley para una regularización extraordinaria para personas extranjeras en España (corresponde al número de expediente 120/000026/0000 de la XIV Legislatura). (120/000004). [https://www.juntaelectoralcentral.es/cs/jec/ilp/legislaturas/Legislatura?idDocNumExp=4&p=1379061558559&template=ILP/JEC\\_DetalleBD](https://www.juntaelectoralcentral.es/cs/jec/ilp/legislaturas/Legislatura?idDocNumExp=4&p=1379061558559&template=ILP/JEC_DetalleBD).

2 These sectors concentrate a high number of undocumented migrant workers engaged in undeclared labour. Because current *arraigo* pathways require registered employment, formal contracts, or verifiable work histories, workers in these sectors face structural barriers to meeting the eligibility criteria. Activities such as street vending, domestic work, sex work, or seasonal agricultural labour often cannot be formally registered, placing workers outside existing regularization channels.

3 Although in English the term "domestic" is widely used, the group of workers consciously avoids its Spanish equivalent, "domésticas," due to the negative connotations they associate with it, particularly its proximity to the idea of being "domesticated." Instead, they prefer the term "trabajadoras del hogar" ("household workers").

## What do we mean by meaningful participation?

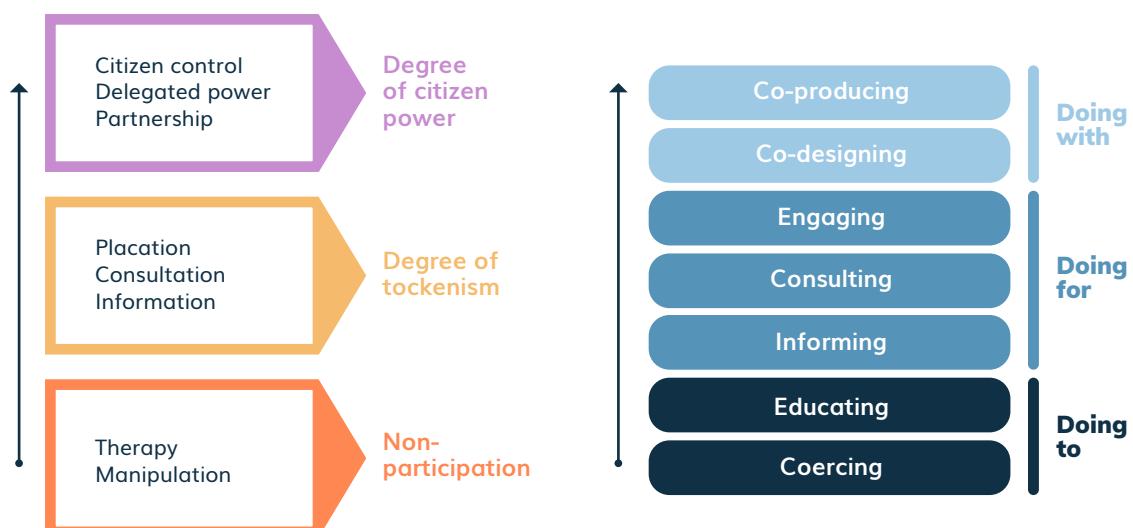
Meaningful participation occurs when individuals or groups are not merely present or consulted but have genuine influence over the decisions that affect their lives. It involves access to information, the ability to express perspectives freely, and actual power to shape outcomes. Participation becomes meaningful when it moves beyond symbolic gestures or formal procedures and leads to shared ownership, accountability, and transformation.

In the context of citizenship, this means citizens are recognized as active agents rather than passive recipients of policy or charity, when participation builds empowerment, not dependency. Different models have been proposed to categorize levels of participation, the most well-known being

Arstein's *Ladder of Citizen Participation* (1969). This framework ranges from *manipulation* and *therapy*, where participation is only a façade, to *tokenism*, where people may be heard but lack real influence, and finally to *citizen power*, which includes *partnership*, *delegated power*, and *citizen control*. Similar frameworks exist in education, describing a shift from "doing to" (coercion and control), through "doing for" (guided participation or support), toward "doing with" (co-production and shared agency).

**Both typologies highlight that genuine participation demands a redistribution of power, whether in civic or educational settings, so that people move from being subjects of decisions to becoming co-creators of them.**

Table 1: Arstein's ladder of citizen participation (left)<sup>4</sup> and ladder of participation (right)<sup>5</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Ladder of Citizen Participation, Sherry Arnstein (1969), as illustrated by Angela Rodgers in: <https://simplystakeholders.com/ladder-of-participation/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ladder of Participation by McMillan, 2019 as represented in: Cifter, Abdusselam & Dong, Hua & Cook, Sharon & Olgun, Inci. (2021). Inclusive Design + Social Innovation: A Methodology and Case Studies // Kapsayıcı Tasarım + Sosyal İnovasyon: Metodoloji ve Örnek Çalışmalar.

When discussing meaningful participation of people with lived experience within civil society, tokenism deserves particular attention. In the case of undocumented migrants, participation often remains symbolic, used to signal inclusivity rather than to genuinely share power. Many migrant women, for instance, describe being invited to stand at the forefront of feminist events "for the picture," while their intersectional claims and specific struggles are largely ignored throughout the rest of the year. Their visibility serves to legitimize the movement's diversity, yet they remain excluded from real decision-making and structural influence. Addressing this requires more than symbolic inclusion: it calls for honest reflection on internal practices, resisting defensiveness, and confronting the systemic dynamics that reproduce exclusion.

Positive examples exist, such as when feminist movements in Spain integrated the demands<sup>6</sup> of the migrant-led campaign *RegularizaciónYa!* for the regularization of thousands of undocumented people, acknowledging that precarious status

enabled systemic gender-based oppression, or when 'mainstream' feminist organisations have embraced the specific claims of migrant domestic workers' organizations within broader spaces (Chudoba Suarez, 2023). These cases show that moving beyond tokenism involves active listening, structural change, and a willingness to redistribute both space and power within movements.

Another useful framework for understanding levels of participation is offered by the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI)'s *Continuum of Participation*. This model outlines a gradual process of engagement, moving from being *disconnected* to *connected*, then *participating*, becoming *part of the collective*, taking on *responsibility*, and finally *organising*. Each stage represents a different degree of involvement, influence, and ownership within collective action. Rather than seeing participation as a simple binary between active and inactive, this continuum acknowledges the diversity of experiences, capacities, and personal circumstances that shape how people engage in social movements and advocacy efforts.

**Table 2: Migrants Rights Centre Ireland's Continuum of participation**



<sup>6</sup> The coordination of the March 8 in Spain incorporated a [commission on migration and antiracism in 2018](#), since then the movement has incorporated the claims of migrant and racialized women <https://hacialahuelgafeminista.org/migracion-antirracismo>

MRCI's approach aims to support people in moving from one level of participation to the next, while also recognising that not everyone will, or should, reach

the same stage. For many undocumented people, there are real and legitimate reasons to limit their visibility or involvement.

### Participation is not only a question of empowerment or trust but also of safety

Fears of deportation, workplace retaliation, or exposure within communities are not imaginary; they are grounded in concrete risks and different layers of violence. Meaningful participation must therefore remain flexible and responsive to these realities, respecting each individual's agency in choosing how they wish to engage, and ensuring that no one feels pressured to participate beyond what feels safe or sustainable for them.

However, maintaining a meaningful approach to participation requires continuous self-reflection. Movements and organisations must regularly ask why some groups remain underrepresented and whether structural obstacles are being addressed. The "burden dilemma" is particularly important: for the most vulnerable, participation can itself become an additional burden, both emotionally and economically. To counter this, those in more privileged positions must take responsibility for redistributing that weight. Within domestic workers' self-organised collectives, for example, it is common practice to collectively compensate a migrant worker for the income lost while she participates in advocacy or training, or in some cases for non-migrant members to temporarily take over her work so she can attend.<sup>7</sup> These practices embody solidarity in action, ensuring that participation is not extractive but empowering, and that collective care sustains collective struggle.

PICUM's intention is to focus on the ways undocumented people can shape and resist the policies and practices that affect them. For our network, internal consultations have clarified that any starting point for meaningful participation should be humanity, human rights, diversity, solidarity, respect, cooperation, safety, trust, non-discrimination, and the desire to create connections. It requires placing the lived experiences and social processes involving undocumented people at the center of decision-making and sharing power from the very beginning, through an action-oriented and purposeful process for undocumented migrants, while remaining transparent about the limitations of both the process and the individuals involved. It implies ensuring the consent of all those involved and seeking consensus as well as considering mutual caring as a foundation, even if this can be a lengthy process. It is about enabling a political voice for undocumented migrants, which is an indispensable step for any organization working on the rights of migrants.

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<sup>7</sup> Domestic and household workers is rendered in the feminine because domestic work is a highly feminised sector. Using the feminine makes visible the gendered nature of exploitation in this field and reflects a conscious political choice within workers' movements.

# Existing barriers to participation

Various aspects characterising the lives and situations of undocumented migrants amount to obstacles to their participation. These can be considered barriers as they effectively limit opportunities for people to take part in social, administrative and political

processes associated to participation. While some of these are structural, others are context specific or circumstantial and may be more relevant depending on the context.

## Residence status

The first dimension to consider is residence status. The criminalisation of irregular migration across the EU has led to the development of policy frameworks which frame undocumented migrants as a potential security threat and irregular migration as a crime. Undocumented migrants are exposed to criminal sanctions for irregular entry or stay, and can be arrested, detained and ultimately deported. Participation may attract more visibility and may be perceived as a risk for undocumented migrants

and their family members. The constant fear of detection by authorities may undermine the trust in participatory processes as the information provided could be mishandled and potentially be used by law enforcement or lead to detection. Irregular residence status may also bar people from specific locations such as official buildings (e.g. the European Parliament) and international travel, in this way hindering advocacy or coalition building efforts.

## Absence of institutional recognition

Other systemic barriers which limit opportunities for participation are associated with the lack of official recognition of the presence and existence of undocumented migrants. Except for Spain, which allows local registration to facilitate access to some services,<sup>8</sup> undocumented migrants are usually not formally registered as residents in local

municipalities and experience institutional exclusion. Local governments often invite inhabitants to give input on certain decisions (e.g. public amenities, etc) but usually send invitations to registered inhabitants. This means that no procedure nor formal mechanism for facilitating their political participation exist.

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<sup>8</sup> Spain allows undocumented migrants to register in the town hall in order to gain access to health care and education services. However even if undocumented migrants may officially be registered as local residents, they do not obtain regular status through registration (empadronamiento). For further information, see Box 6, p. 25, <https://cmise.web.ox.ac.uk/files/cmise-migrants-irregular-status-europe-guidance-municipalitiespdf>. While municipalities in Spain have a legal obligation to do so, many registration requests by undocumented migrants get denied. For example, the Andalusian Ombudsman has urged the Níjar City Council to register migrant seasonal agricultural workers in the census: <https://www.defensordelpuebloandaluz.es/recomendamos-al-ayuntamiento-que-de-de-alta-en-el-padrón-a-los-temporeros-migrantes-tras-conocer-que>

## Discrimination and xenophobia

In addition to status-related stigma, other aspects linked to gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ageism and/or (internalised) patriarchy reinforce marginalisation and exclusion. Discrimination and xenophobia further narrow participation opportunities. An intersectional approach to diversity and equity is key to ensure that the broadest possible

range of experiences are considered and valued, with particular emphasis to the needs of the most marginalized. This requires not only creating safe spaces, but also, importantly, meaningful efforts to include undocumented people acknowledging the other sources of exclusion they experience.

## Psychological barriers

Some people with irregular migration status experience deep-seated fear—of deportation, of the unknown, of being “outed” by their community, employers, or others, and/or of further discrimination or stigma. This fear of exposure is compounded by the lack of trust toward institutional actors. When people do not feel a sense of belonging or safety, they may see no purpose in taking part in actions or initiatives meant to seek their views. For those who have endured past traumatic experiences—such as time spent in detention, trauma along their journey, and/or if they experienced exploitation or abuse—

the desire to avoid painful memories can further discourage participation. Criminalisation in the country of residence creates a mental health barrier, which adds to the trauma of past experiences (pre or during migration). Advocacy which may focus on advocating for better support for people who experienced similar past trauma is emotionally draining and can be retraumatising. These layers of insecurity, lack of a safe space, and emotional strain combine to create powerful impediments that prevent engagement and empowerment. This desire is completely legitimate and should be respected.

## Financial and logistical constraints

Financial insecurity, limited resources, and the time investment associated with long-term participation are also barriers. Those working in low-paid and insecure employment may have long working hours with shifting schedules which oftentimes limit availability during office hours. Competing priorities may co-exist, such as work responsibilities, engagement in administrative procedures linked to residence rights, or urgent personal needs, leaving little time or energy for additional commitments.

Limited free time coupled with the need for sustained commitment may further discourage engagement. Precarious and oftentimes demanding work environments often lead to careful consideration of the time and involvement in initiatives whose objectives may seem secondary. Those who are parents, carers or have health needs will have limited time and opportunity to engage.

## Accessibility considerations

The location of consultative processes or the unavailability of online options add to the above challenges, especially for those residing in remote or underserved areas. In addition, limited access to reliable information as well as different language or alphabetisation levels prevent individuals from making informed decisions or from fully benefiting from available opportunities. When channels for participation do exist, their inclusivity may thus be limited.

Enabling meaningful participation requires addressing these dimensions and making the associated investments yet resources are often insufficient to meaningfully address them. Material, organisational and communicational considerations should be factored in from the design phase of any participatory project and lead to reconsidering and possibly adapting language, formats, timing, travel and other practical aspects of participatory processes.



# Enabling participation

The strategies included below set out essential considerations and associated methods aimed at overcoming some of the barriers to participation highlighted in the previous section. They are further

illustrated by corresponding examples of projects and initiatives implemented within the PICUM network.

## Creating safe spaces

Well-being should be considered from the outset of an intervention by ascertaining safe physical and social preconditions as well as anticipating and addressing possible issues that may emerge.

Creating a safe space requires taking into account the different risks and potential adverse impacts of participation including the risk of reprisal and of retraumatisation.

### Comprehensive approach to safeguarding

#### **Focus on Labour Exploitation, UK**

Using a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) approach, the 3-year project "[Experts by experience](#)" explored labour abuse and exploitation with workers from the cleaning, hospitality, and the app-based courier sectors. To conduct this research, FLEX worked with a network of paid peer researchers who were workers from the sector being researched.

One of the key reflections from this research, and especially when working with higher-risk groups, is the need for researchers to be prepared to, at a minimum, be able to signpost individuals to relevant support services and to maintain up to date safeguarding practices. Peer researchers should therefore be trained on safeguarding and signposting. Further, researchers that have limited networks or experience with working with vulnerable groups should ideally partner with frontline organisations that have relevant experience and/or can provide support.

So that participants could be signposted to organisations that could provide professional, long-term and ongoing support, where needed, FLEX developed a signposting guide that was tailored to the specific groups that were taking part in the research. Peer researchers also received ongoing training and regular debriefings from FLEX staff.

## Anonymising testimonials

### **Red Aminvi - Report on Migrant women facing domestic violence in Spain**

Red AMINVI produced a [report in 2021](#) on migrant women facing domestic violence. One major challenge was enabling women to contribute to the research as fear was a significant barrier for them to come forward and share their experiences and stories. To overcome this, the organisation considered how best to avoid retraumatisation and revictimisation and to ensure their contributions were valued and respected by acknowledging their boundaries and demonstrating flexibility. Both physical and virtual spaces for participation were offered and experts helped in providing clear, accessible information with interpretation and translations from several languages to Spanish.

## Emotional and mental health support provision

Mental health needs and well-being are two key components of enabling participation. Ongoing stressors linked to people's residence status and new and/or ongoing residence procedures must be taken into account and addressed, as are possible stressors at school, work or at home. Possible trauma

linked to experience of living undocumented and linked to the migratory route should be addressed as participation may entail a risk of re-traumatisation (secondary victimisation). It is important for civil society structures to make adequate support available.

## Acknowledging the emotional dimension

### **DignityFIRM**

During the focus groups with migrant workers for the DignityFIRM research (conducted by [Mujeres Supervivientes](#) in Spain; [Nomada](#) and the [Trade Union of Latino migrant workers](#) in Poland; and [Here to Support](#) in The Netherlands), migrant workers participating had strong emotional responses when sharing their lived experiences on labour exploitation and discrimination. The three NGOs adapted their initial timeline and process in order to be able to appropriately address these painful moments, in some cases adapting the original research design to enhance more privacy, or using dance and alternative methodologies to recover from the pain, acknowledging the importance of emotional support when lived experiences are being shared.

## Rotation of spokesperson

Exposing one's lived experiences in public can lead to reliving traumatic experiences. Many organisations thus establish rotating roles in sharing their stories and actively seek for new spokespeople so individuals who are engaged do not find themselves constantly repeating their lived experiences.

## External monitoring of volunteers' well-being: social mentoring

### **SOS Racismo Gipuzkoa, Spain**

[Social mentoring](#) aims to facilitate the creation of informal, supportive social networks so that the people with vulnerabilities can reap the benefits associated with them, including language practice, social networks and job search assistance. SOS Racismo Gipuzkoa coordinates two mentoring projects, one called [Urretxindorra](#) with children with a migration background and another called [Izan Harrera](#) with adult refugees and migrants. What differentiates social mentoring from other volunteering activities is that a technical group of professionals follow the cases, constantly checking on the well-being of both the mentors and the mentees, providing emotional and psychological assistance if required and monitoring for complex cases that require a different kind of psychosocial intervention.

## Overcoming language barriers

Allowing people to express themselves in their own language is important to ensure the process is truly inclusive and for understanding the nuances of someone's experiences. Language considerations

are also key to ensure that people fully understand what they engage in and that there is informed consent. In some instances, this may also require enabling contributions in different formats.

## Rap Lab

### **Defence for Children International Italy**

[The project](#) engages young people in a creative and participatory process that combines storytelling, writing, singing, recording, and interviews to produce podcasts and multimedia content. Participants develop technical, artistic and personal skills while reflecting on their experiences and sharing their voices. Through the independent music label Rap4Rights and social media, the project reaches young people from diverse backgrounds across Italy, amplifying their stories and fostering wider engagement.

## Informed participation

Participation should be voluntary and only secured only after informed consent is expressed. All parties involved should thus have a full understanding of the scope of the participatory process they are involved in. Literacy needs to be considered and communication should ideally take place in mother tongue. Information should not only be delivered but rather discussed and be part of an exchange where there are opportunities to ask questions, challenge and influence the scope of participation. Providing clear, timely and informed understanding of how

participation takes place, its scope, purpose and potential impact is essential. In particular, clear and accessible information should be provided on how data - especially personal data - will be managed, retained and protected; why it is collected; and also what are the rights of the individual who provides their data in this regard. Confidentiality should be offered for safeguarding purposes as well as for building trust. Transparency in the process and expectation management are essential.

## Mentoring HuB

### **Defence for Children International Italy**

The mentoring HuB supports young people with lived experience of migration through personalised mentoring relationships with trained volunteer citizens who accompany them in their social, educational and economic integration. The initiative is strengthening and systemising mentoring practices across Italy, engaging organisations, communities and young people previously involved in mentoring, and increasingly welcoming new participants referred by peers who value the experience. The model builds on trust, clarity and open dialogue from the first contact, ensuring that young people can explore the programme, understand its purpose and shape their own level of engagement. Through regular meetings, thematic workshops and cultural events, mentors and mentees co-create meaningful pathways that enhance autonomy and wellbeing.

## Training, coaching and professionalisation

Capacity building is crucial to enable participation bearing in mind levels of knowledge of the dominant language spoken in the country as well as uneven understanding of and acquaintance with some of

the concepts. Training and coaching also include processes and terminology with a view to developing confidence and ensuring technical input is also made possible.

## The Migrant Media Ambassador Programme

### **Migrant Voice, UK**

[The Migrant Media Ambassador programme](#) by Migrant Voice is designed to empower migrants to take control of their own narratives and become confident spokespeople in the media space. The programme provides training and mentoring that help participants develop skills in storytelling, public speaking, and engaging with journalists, while also ensuring that they feel safe and supported throughout the process. Rather than speaking on behalf of migrants, the programme focuses on enabling them to speak for themselves—sharing their lived experiences, insights, and expertise in their own voices. Through workshops, peer learning, and hands-on media opportunities, participants learn how to craft impactful messages, challenge negative stereotypes, and influence public conversations about migration. Central to the programme is the belief that migrants have agency and that authentic, self-represented stories can drive meaningful change in how migration is understood and discussed in the UK.

## Ensuring participation is relevant to needs and expertise

Requests for participation and topics for consultation and input should be aligned with people with lived experience's interests, needs and expertise. While the inclusion of migrants' voices is oftentimes considered in the context of integration policy design, it should

not be constrained to this policy domain. There are many other issues of interest, priority and relevance to people with lived experience as well as many areas of expertise.<sup>9</sup>

## Forum for the Political Participation of Migrant Women

### **Por ti mujer, Spain**

Since 2021, Port Ti Mujer has implemented group practices focused on political participation and leadership for migrant women. The goal is to transform lived experience into political knowledge for advocacy. Faced with what they perceive as limited adequate representation, the goal is to ensure that the women are not just participants, but decision makers and creators. [The forum](#) generated collective public policy recommendations. It has also significantly strengthened the confidence of the women who took part. In recent years, the forum has focused on highlighting the barriers to social, political and community participation (2021) and migrant women weaving citizenship, emphasizing their contributions and leadership (2022). The forum has also looked at challenges and strategies for a plural Europe. In 2025 the forum focused on climate justice, following the disaster created by the DANA storm in Valencia, Spain in 2024. The organisation believes it is vital to create safe spaces where migrant women can speak and lead.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance PICUM, [Lessons learned in supporting undocumented young people advocating for change](#) and PICUM, [Participatory methods: the inclusion of undocumented migrants in healthcare and beyond](#).

## CALL Advocacy Youth Living Lab

### **CEPAIM, Spain**

[This project](#) aims to foster the political participation of young people including but not limited to those with lived experience of being undocumented. The project aims to create spaces for youth to come together, share their needs and reflections and be active agents of change. The project functions as a "Living lab" acknowledging that there isn't one size fits all approach but rather that this is a process with constant adjustments. While outreach is a key dimension of the project, ensuring that access is universal and actively seeking out communities not yet reached, participation is never mandatory. Participation is voluntary and non-binding and people can leave at any time.

## Ownership and control

Building ownership and commitment is essential to sustain processes over time and manage expectations. Achieving change takes time, and it is crucial to be clear about the timeline, its potential pitfalls and risks, as well as the potential outcomes of the project and its limits. Sufficient

resources should be allocated to support longer-term engagement, including factoring in a feedback phase, giving control over the overall product and result. Participation should be ensured throughout the entire process, including during the initial design and the final evaluation phase.

## Steering and co-creating

### **Migrant Voice, UK**

The Migrant Voice motto is 'Speaking for Ourselves' – and this is the driving force behind all its work. Migrant Voice creates opportunities for its members to speak out publicly, to tell their stories and to be heard. At Migrant Voice, every campaign has a steering group made out of people impacted by the issue at stake in the campaign. They are also the ones telling their own stories. Co-creation is a key aspect of the methodology followed as the content is created together.

## Mobilisation and intentional engagement

Efforts are needed to ensure that the same people are not systematically involved in every participatory process. Those most affected by the issue should be mobilised to ensure representativity.

### Justice for the Undocumented campaign

#### Migrant Rights Centre Ireland

[This campaign](#) is a grassroots initiative advocating for a clear pathway to regular status for all undocumented people living in Ireland. The campaign employs a community-led approach, empowering individuals to share their stories and engage in collective action, including marches, public demonstrations, and media interviews to raise awareness and influence policy change. Proactive outreach efforts have been key to expanding the campaign and building a stronger, more connected community. By making themselves visible and speaking out publicly, participants were able to attract more people who shared the same goals. Information sessions were organised across Ireland, meeting individuals and connecting local leaders. These face-to-face conversations have not only helped explain the safety measures and how to get involved in the campaign but also created a vital network of trust and solidarity among communities that had long felt invisible.

## Adequate compensation

Remunerating people with lived experience for dedicating their time and effort is crucial. Payment should reflect the value of their expertise, and the time commitment of participants. Such retribution

should be fair and not create a power imbalance, avoiding instrumentalization and considering actual needs of the persons involved.

### Giving options for compensation

#### Le monde des possibles, Belgium

Le Monde des Possibles is an intercultural association dedicated to welcoming and empowering people of foreign origin. Acknowledging the need to adequately compensate participants in its activities, it has looked for innovative ways to compensate undocumented people for their contributions. To circumvent structural barriers such as the impossibility to have a bank account, volunteer allowances may be paid in cash, and other in kind benefits may also be granted, such as the purchase of bus passes.

## Vouchers and financial compensation

### **European Sex Workers Alliance (ESWA)**

Even when compensation is an option, funding needs to be flexible in what is accepted as proof of payment, or how it can be carried out. Some people may not have access to internet and smartphone or laptops, and cash may be the most versatile. Participants with irregular migration status may be reluctant to provide personal data due to fears of retaliation. As many undocumented migrants are unable to open bank accounts, [alternatives proposed by ESWA](#) include food vouchers or pre-paid online cards that can be downloaded with a code so that individuals can get the cash without transmitting personal data.



# Positive experiences of meaningful participation

The following section provides an overview of different positive experiences aimed at enhancing meaningful participation in distinct areas of work.

They incorporate the strategies mentioned in the preceding section to mainstream participation in different aspects of an organization's activities.

## Governance and human resources

Streamlining participation within organisations requires developing structures that create space for participation.

### Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in governance

#### **PICUM**

To ensure more equal participation, PICUM began dedicating resources in 2024 within its budget to enable interpretation from French and/or Spanish to English at board meetings (as previously board meetings had only been held in English). An open call was made to members to apply to become board members, particularly encouraging migrant community led members who may have not considered board membership previously due to the fact that the meetings were only held in English. Four new members were elected, including some from migrant-community organisations. PICUM's board meetings are now held in Spanish and English and translation and interpretation have allowed enhanced diversity within the board membership.

### Inclusive hiring policy

#### **European Sex Workers' Alliance (ESWA)**

ESWA's commitment to [community leadership](#) is reflected in its hiring practices. The alliance prioritises employing sex workers - especially those with community organising and grassroots experience - whenever possible. Lived experience is valued as much as formal qualifications, and ESWA provides opportunities for people to grow into their roles. The network also maintains a roster of sex worker freelancers to support communications, research, and campaign work, ensuring a wide diversity of expertise across different forms of sex work—such as full-service, online, or performance-based work. While sometimes it is necessary to hire allies from outside the community, this is always done with a clear understanding that leadership remains sex worker led.

## Advocacy

Undocumented migrants' voices and experiences can help inform policymaking processes at different levels. Political participation and practices to embed participation in the design and evaluation of policies are a prerequisite for inclusive decision making. An

important prerequisite is fostering representative and empowering spaces for undocumented people to engage in discussions and influence policies and decisions which affect their lives.

### Amsterdam City Rights

#### Here to Support, the Netherlands

Since 2018, the [Amsterdam City Rights](#) coalition has sought to establish a community of activists with and without documents working for justice. The platform aims to amplify the voices of undocumented migrants and strengthen local solidarity to make undocumented migrants part of city-level decision-making. Everyone can join the network, regardless of status. Here to Support has also developed the Amsterdam City Rights app and the City Rights Radio podcast to provide a platform for voicing the realities of undocumented lives. The objective is to centre local and municipal discussions around the voices of those with lived experience. The group has now become a "sounding board" for the municipality of Amsterdam and meet monthly with the municipal administration.

Political participation and reinforcing migrant-led influencing efforts are also powerful initiatives which can contribute to informing policy processes.

### In My Name Platform

#### Ciré, Belgium

The [In My Name platform](#) involves several undocumented migrants' collectives. The objective is to bring together stakeholders on the issue of regularisation and a humane migration policy. Aware of the urgent need for progress for undocumented migrants and the total political deadlock, different collectives and organisations continued to work tirelessly in 2023 to rally other actors, particularly Dutch-speaking ones, with the aim of building the broadest possible national movement in Belgium before the 2024 national elections. The platform is calling for a structural reform of procedures to put an end to irregular residence situations as well as a new regularisation campaign based on clear and simple criteria.

## A spokesperson for undocumented people

### **Maison du Peuple d'Europe, Belgium**

The Maison du Peuple d'Europe (MPEVH) is a Brussels-based association that supports undocumented people in Belgium, with a particular focus on fostering "citizen advocacy". MPEVH provides a platform for undocumented individuals and those undergoing regularisation to co-create advocacy strategies aimed at both EU and Belgian institutions. This includes training in public speaking, media engagement, and policy advocacy. In addition, MPEVH organises elections to select a European spokesperson for undocumented people, enabling them to voice their demands and defend their rights within European political life.

## Communication activities

Engaging people with lived experience of migration and advocacy work with authenticity and depth. in communications work enriches campaigns, media,

## Participation in communication efforts

### **Convive Fundación CEPAIM, Spain**

[The foundation](#) seeks to promote the active participation of all its members, involving service users. Participation is a key dimension of its communication efforts and it prioritises reporting on real life stories to support inclusion and combat stereotypes. Its communications department evaluates on a case-by-case basis which stories could be published to avoid instrumentalization and tokenism. Considerations include whether the publication may inadvertently cause harm to the subject, whether the testimonies should be made anonymously and when is it relevant to mention that the person is undocumented. This evaluation is carried out in consultation with the person involved. Ultimately, the foundation strives to tell stories that reflect the full complexity of people's lives -their aspirations, dreams, and experiences- rather than reducing them to their migration journey. It does so by mentioning their administrative status only when deemed relevant to the story, for example, in those cases in which it represents an obstacle to realizing their full potential.

## A podcast with and for undocumented household workers

### **SOS Racismo Gipuzkoa, Spain**

[The Insumisas podcast](#), directed by journalist Oneyda Sáenz and produced by SOS Racismo Gipuzkoa, is an initiative that seeks to give a voice to household workers, predominantly migrant and undocumented women. Through this platform, the workers share their experiences, struggles, and demands regarding their labour and social rights. Insumisas is not only a media project but also a tool for empowerment, contributing to making the injustices faced by household workers visible, while protecting the identity of speakers and respecting their stories.

## Organising and unionising

Organising together is a powerful way for workers to provide each other with mutual support and take collective action to improve labour conditions. Collaboration with unions is often instrumental for facilitating legal assistance, access to safe meeting spaces, offering training on labour rights, supporting job security initiatives, and documenting cases of exploitation or abuse. Undocumented workers organise both within and outside of mainstream trade union structures and unions can serve as platforms for migrant workers to organise, self-represent, and claim their rights within pre-existing

institutional structures.

However, power asymmetries and structural inequalities exist within unions themselves. Migrant workers often remain underrepresented or excluded from leadership and decision-making spaces. Therefore, while collaboration should be strengthened, it must avoid replicating institutional hierarchies or side-lining grassroots voices. This can lead to either the creation of specific trade unions for migrant workers, or migrant workers organising and mobilising in different types of structures.<sup>10</sup>

## ODT-I Branch of trade union to defend the rights of migrant workers

### **Organisation Democratique du Travail ODT, Morocco**

[ODT](#) is a generalist trade union in Morocco whose objectives are to defend and promote the social, cultural, economic, moral, professional, individual, and collective interests of all categories of salaried and self-employed workers, with or without papers. It seeks to improve the situation of migrant workers and defend their interests. Over the years, Morocco has shifted from being a country where many migrants transited through to a place where many now remain, with many undocumented migrants working in various sectors. To address the exploitation and rights violations which migrant workers are exposed to, especially women in domestic work and given undocumented people cannot form their own unions, ODT created a specific branch to defend the rights of migrant workers. They have established the structure ODT-I, a section of the union focused on the rights of migrant workers in Morocco. Recently [ODTMRF](#) was created, a section of the union for Moroccan migrant workers living in France. ODT has led two successful regularization campaigns, resulting in 50,000 undocumented people gaining status.

10 PICUM, 2025, [Migrant-led initiatives in Andalucía, Spain Learnings from the self-organization of migrant workers](#).

## Domestic workers group

### **Confédération des Syndicats chrétiens (CSC), Belgium**

[Undocumented workers can join the CSC trade union as members](#). Many are active in the trade union's domestic worker group, which has long been engaged in campaigning for decent work, the right to file a complaint while being protected throughout the procedure, the right to vocational training, the right to decent permits and working conditions, and access to residency through clear and permanent criteria such as the regularization of informal work. Advocacy endeavours have also highlighted the value of migrant workers, especially through a feminist lens.

The group has used innovative ways to make undocumented migrant women more visible in the public space. These include using singing, art, storytelling and theatre to express their vision for change and make their case to the public and to politicians. In protests, when the undocumented women do not wish to be recognized, they wear colourful masks which ironically allows them to be better seen. Other creative ways include exhibitions, events, and demonstrations.

## Grupo de Trabajadoras de Hogar

### **SOS Racismo Gipuzkoa**

[A self-organized group of household workers](#) was born as a section of the NGO SOS Racismo Gipuzkoa. It is currently in the process of defining its own structure and functioning after trainings on political activism. They are in the process of deciding if becoming a union is the structure that works best for them.

## Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a research approach aligned with the values and understanding of meaningful participation. Unlike traditional research methods that often extract information from communities without ensuring their involvement or benefit, PAR emphasizes co-creation, empowerment, and collective knowledge production. In contexts where undocumented migrants are excluded from

civic and political participation, PAR can become a powerful tool for political activation, amplifying marginalized voices, and challenging extractive academic practices. By involving undocumented migrants as co-researchers and decision-makers, PAR not only generates richer and more relevant insights but also contributes to social change and collective agency.

## DignityFIRM

This [research project](#) aims to improve conditions for migrant workers experiencing (multiple) irregularities in selected countries promoting dignity through safe and healthy working conditions. It includes PICUM members Here to Support and Mujeres Supervivientes in its work on participatory action research, training former undocumented migrants as peer researchers to lead focus groups on the living and working conditions of migrant workers in the food supply chain. (See [blog post](#), [video](#), and PAR guidelines<sup>11</sup>.)



11 forthcoming

# Concluding remarks

A decolonial perspective on civil society in the field of migration invites us to critically examine how power, knowledge, and representation operate within our own movements and organisations. It calls attention to the persistence of Eurocentric frameworks and to the ways in which even well-intentioned advocacy can reproduce hierarchies between those who "speak for" and those who are spoken about. This perspective does not reject the value of long-standing solidarity work, but rather asks civil society to reflect on whose voices are centered, whose experiences are legitimised, and whose perspectives continue to shape the narratives around migration.

These conversations often generate discomfort. Many actors who have been deeply committed to

defending migrants' rights for decades may feel that their work or intentions are being questioned. They rightly point out that the defence of human rights should be a collective objective, one that mobilises everyone in the face of injustice, regardless of identity or background. However, framing the discussion in this way can create a false dichotomy. Acknowledging cultural hegemonies, eurocentrism, or the whiteness of many civil society spaces, and working toward organisational change that genuinely centers the voices of those most directly affected by migration, does not devalue the contributions of others. On the contrary, it strengthens our collective struggle by making it more just, inclusive, and reflective of the diverse realities we seek to transform.

**"Organisations—especially NGOs and civil society networks—can play a key enabling role, but must do so with care and reflection. Their involvement should focus on creating space, not occupying it. This requires shifting from a service-delivery logic to a cooperation-based and solidarity-driven approach, where migrants are not passive recipients but protagonists in shaping and leading the work."**

*PICUM, 2025, Migrant Migrant-led initiatives in Andalucía, Spain Learnings from the self-organization of migrant workers.*

Ensuring that meaningful participation is truly put to practice requires constant attention to the question of power. How can we make sure that power imbalances are not being reproduced, even unintentionally, within our structures and partnerships? Migrants are not beneficiaries; they are people with lived experiences and, therefore, with expertise on their own lives as well as migration frameworks. Their perspectives must shape migration policy and advocacy at every stage. This conviction has long been a core value within

PICUM and is reflected across all areas of our work. However, there is a growing need to systematise this commitment, to ensure it is not only upheld in principle but embedded meaningfully in practice. This guidance aims to provide a shared framework, with common definitions and reflections, that can guide our collective efforts toward participation that is both genuine and transformative.

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