


# Coproducing a film resource for asylum seekers in the UK—A field reflection

Petra Mäkelä <sup>1,\*</sup>, Zoe Given-Wilson <sup>2</sup>, Kenan Al Berkdar<sup>3</sup>, Zaina Aljumma<sup>4</sup> and Rahman Mostafanejad<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Health Services Research and Policy, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 15-17 Tavistock Place, London, WC1H 9SH, UK

<sup>2</sup>Centre for the Study of Emotion and Law, Royal Holloway University of London, 11 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3RE, UK

<sup>3</sup>Life Seekers' Aid, 69 Hollybush House, Hollybush Gardens, London, E2 9QT, UK

<sup>4</sup>Department of Education, University Of South Wales, Usk Way, Newport NP20 2BP, Wales

\*Corresponding author. Department of Health Services Research and Policy, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 15-17 Tavistock Place, London, WC1H 9SH, UK. E-mail: [petra.makela@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:petra.makela@lshtm.ac.uk)

## Abstract

In this field reflection, we critically explore our experiences of coproduction, as a group comprising people with lived experience of seeking asylum in the UK, and clinical academics. We collaboratively developed a film resource for people facing the challenges of the asylum system and for professionals who support them. We aim to (1) reflect on how this collaboration came about and how it led to both planned outputs and unanticipated outcomes, (2) identify a range of personal, organizational, and system factors that enabled or constrained our collaborations as researchers and asylum seekers or refugees in the UK, and (3) explore our own assumptions about ways of working together to enable partnership and equality of engagement. We reflect on our experiences in relation to four conditions of coproduction: combining knowledge and experience, commitment to the project and each other, flexibility in our ways of working together, and our valued achievements.

**Keywords:** coproduction, asylum-seekers, refugees, lived experience, film

## Introduction

There has been a growing interest in the coproduction of public services with people who have lived experience of asylum-seeking (Mulvale and Robert 2021; Pincock and Bakunzi 2021). These voices have typically been excluded from decisions that directly impact their lives, with implications for disempowerment, uncertainty, loss of control, and distrust in asylum interactions (Essex et al. 2022). In this article, we reflect on our intentions to use principles of coproduction to bring people together who have different experiences and perspectives, in a purposefully designed set of interactions, to work together using creative and collaborative approaches (Fitzpatrick et al. 2023; Ruebottom and Auster 2018). Through collaboration, we created a resource (a short film that is publicly available online), for people seeking asylum in the UK and

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those working to support them. We consider our experiences in attempting to share decision-making, and identify enablers and constraints within our interactions, institutions, and the overarching socio-political system (Bandola-Gill et al. 2022).

The use of the term ‘coproduction’ suggests a desire for participatory processes and power-sharing, yet this often remains aspirational or risks ‘under-scrutinized tokenism’ (Williams et al. 2023, p. 2). There are persistent ambiguities in the use of the ‘co-terminologies, with a lack of consensus on meanings and applications (Pearce et al. 2020). We do not directly address the issue of taxonomy in this article. Instead, through shared reflection, we seek to demonstrate our experiences as researchers and people with experience of seeking asylum, working together as equal partners with collective ownership of processes and decisions. We think that this approach helped to ensure that both the processes and outputs took account of the needs and experiences of asylum seekers and led to more impactful outcomes.

The construction of this field reflection was also shared between the project coproducers and encompasses our varied positions and roles. We were broadly guided by questions from Rolfe et al.’s (2001) reflective framework: What happened? So what? Now what?. First, we introduce the context, team members, and activities, before presenting our reflections on what enabled or constrained our ways of working together.

## Project context

The consequences of persecution and violence, including having to flee one’s home and lose personal support, can be significantly worsened after arriving in a destination country (Scoglio and Salhi 2021). Asylum seekers must then navigate foreign systems and languages to build a new life, including accessing accommodation and finance, managing health, and establishing community (Kang et al. 2019; Tomkow 2020). When making a claim for protection, people are often required to give accounts of past traumatic experiences to UK border officials and healthcare or other professionals. Asylum processes are confronting and there is little supportive advice on how to manage these (Abbas et al. 2021; Chaffelson et al. 2023). The impact on mental health and asylum seekers’ own strategies for coping have received little attention to date. Forms of support do not specifically address the effect of such interactions, nor promote the voice of those with lived experience of these challenges.

In coproducing a short film, we wished to convey those issues deemed most important to people who have experienced them, in ways that they thought would be helpful and accessible for others navigating asylum processes in the UK (Salmi and Mattelmäki 2021). Our intention was to include those questions which clinicians or researchers would not necessarily ask and to facilitate a space where people with lived experience of seeking asylum could ‘select the fragments of their reality they deem significant to document’ for others facing these challenges (Elder 1995, p. 94). Our intention was to address a gap in the current provision of guidance to newly arrived asylum applicants and to those recently granted refugee or protected person status. We wished to create supportive content informed by lived experience, as a supplementary resource to the official ‘induction’ briefing people receive when entering Home Office accommodation.

## Project team members

The core team comprised two researchers (Petra and Zoe) and one project co-facilitator (Kenan) with lived experience of seeking asylum in the UK. The team developed organically through professional connections. Petra and Zoe, who work in the field of supporting people who seek humanitarian protection, shared a view about a lack of resources available to support people through the processes of seeking asylum in the UK, particularly in languages other than English, or deriving from others’ knowledge and lived experience. Petra and Zoe initially developed ideas for a potential resource but recognized that, without personal experience of seeking asylum, our perspectives were limited.

Petra and Zoe sought potential collaborators who had previously applied for asylum protection in the UK and could speak and understand sufficient English not to require an interpreter,

as our limited funding did not enable translation. We attempted to find potential contacts through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. We arranged brief 'screening' interviews online, with those who had expressed interest. However, this strategy was not productive in identifying potential collaborators. We eventually made contact with Kenan, who has lived experience of asylum-seeking in the UK, and circumstances that enabled him to be involved in the co-facilitation of the project. We were put in touch through an established charity. Kenan co-ordinates a separate, grassroot charitable organization, supporting people seeking asylum in the UK. Through this network of contacts, Kenan invited further collaborators, including Zaina and Rahman.

A total of five additional individuals with lived experience contributed to the workshops, and a graphic facilitator also participated in the first workshop. For the filming, we worked with five contributors with lived experience, a film maker, and the film maker's assistant. Zaina contributed to both workshops and to the filming, editing, and translating, and Rahman contributed to the filming, editing, and translating. We also sought guidance from senior research staff and professionals from non-government asylum organizations.

The unique quality and benefit of the project team was that it included former asylum seekers, now refugees, living in the UK. Consequently, we (Kenan, Zaina, and Rahman) 'speak the language' and 'understand the voices' of newly arrived asylum seekers and those granted refugee or protected status. We have lived those same experiences and have understanding of asylum-seeking at these critical stages. Our diversity as a project team enabled us to communicate about these complex issues, without barriers of language or culture.

## Project activities

The core project ran from June 2021 to May 2022, when the film was launched. The initial phase included planning and development, an application for funding, and recruitment of contributors. As a team of three co-facilitators (Petra, Zoe, and Kenan), we met to plan the two online workshops (which each ran for ninety minutes). We shared ideas around ground rules, how best to aid facilitation, and the intended brief for the discussions. Alongside these task-focused actions, we were developing working relationships and building trust; crucial steps for the success of this coproduction work, as we explore in the reflective discussion that follows.

At the first workshop, contributors shared challenges, strategies, and insights relating to their asylum-seeking experiences, which the graphic facilitator captured visually. The intention was to stimulate and capture our exchanges by conveying key points in an artwork that would enable ease of access for later stages of film development, and for dissemination in its own right (Figure 1).

The core team then reflected on the themes from the workshop discussion and collaboratively synthesized them. The second workshop built on the first, by seeking group members' reactions to the themes and ideas presented, considering if anything was missing, and exploring views on how to approach the filming. Two contributors took part in all stages, while others joined for one or other workshop. Following this, Kenan, Zaina, and Rahman were joined by two further contributors with lived experience of seeking asylum, for the filming stage. Table 1 shows an overview of the distribution of project activities.

Priorities determined by participants in the workshops informed question prompts for Petra and Zoe to use, as the film contributors each talked through their insights and strategies for managing the challenges of seeking asylum. These included timescales and delays in asylum processes from arrival through to determination of claims; dealing with uncertainties; anticipated challenges in asylum interviews and how to prepare for these; handling interactions with solicitors, accommodation staff, interpreters, and other professionals; and guidance on asylum seekers' rights in the UK and how to navigate them.



**Table 2.** Summary of factors enabling and hindering coproduction, identified through shared reflection.

	<b>Synergy of inputs</b>	<b>Flexibility</b>	<b>Credible commitment</b>	<b>Appropriate incentives</b>
Enabling	Personal and professional contacts and networks Access to university resources; e.g. space, funding Connecting clinical, research, advocacy, and lived experience Importance of co-facilitator in connecting and supporting inputs	Frequent checking in with group members, adapting to preferences over time Range of activities to enable contributions Online meetings for accessibility across geographical locations	Agreeing on shared goals and approaches to working together Building relationships and trust over time Finite timeline creating a pragmatic focus on a tangible output	Time invested leading to a valued output based on lived experience and varied perspectives Financial reimbursement for those with refugee status Personally contextualized but potentially 'hidden' non-financial incentives
Constraining	Researchers' coordinating roles and accountability for funding: potential impact on power dynamics	Possible exclusion through need for personal resources and a private space to enable online participation Finite project budget limited inclusion factors (English speakers only; insufficient funding for interpreters)	Researchers' organizational processes, requirements, and academic agendas 'Gatekeeping' of charity/advocacy organizations when seeking contributors Time and resource constraints of charity/advocacy organizations; impact on reaching potential participants	Financial reimbursement not permitted for asylum seekers' time and expertise in coproducing

- 4) Appropriate incentives, which may be financial, but may also be an opportunity to forge new relationships, or enable an opportunity to drive change that connects with the values and experiences of contributors (Durose *et al.* 2014).

Table 2 presents a summary of enabling and constraining factors identified through our reflections, grouped according to each of these four conditions. We expand on each of these below.

### *Synergy of coproductive inputs*

Discussions to make sense of what we hoped to achieve, and how we might approach the work together, were essential to create something of value through the 'synergy' of our contributions. We shared a desire to improve lives for people seeking asylum, and familiarity with the UK context. Additionally, we each brought our own unique perspectives and motivations for participating. Petra and Zoe initially conceptualized a project direction and believed that validity and value of any potential resource would be limited, if it was created without input from people with lived experience.

Kenan, Zaina, and Rahman have lived experience and a strong desire to create positive change in the area of asylum but had less time and financial resource to develop or organize



such a project. Aware of [Shivakoti and Milner's \(2021\)](#) warning that asymmetries of power can condition collaborations in conscious and unconscious ways, Petra and Zoe considered whether we reproduced the unequal power relations that this initiative sought to reverse. Our research organizations afforded resources in terms of time and money and were accountable for its expenditure; hence, there was potential for power asymmetry between us and the other members of the group. While the core team met regularly, Petra and Zoe had additional meetings to oversee administrative tasks, which may have led to the project being steered in directions of our interests. To address this, we attempted to be transparent in our communications and to explain any 'behind the scenes' decision-making processes. Kenan, Zaina, and Rahman also steered the direction of the project. For example, Zaina brought her position as an educator, activist, and parent, enabling a strong focus on sharing information about educationally related processes and support.

Stories are a part of everyday life and a means through which we express, negotiate, and share experience ([Eastmond 2007](#)). It is recognized that stories around seeking asylum can be personal, exposing, and traumatic. There was the potential for this to influence the dynamics of our coproduction. For example, if there was an uneven sharing of personal events—researchers without lived experience always remaining silent while those with lived experience are required to speak—this could lead to feelings of exposure, or perhaps of shame. The graphic facilitator used an exercise at the opening of the first workshop, to promote equal participation through sharing of stories. We each described something about ourselves while presenting an object of importance or something symbolic, for example, an object from our home countries, which evoked values of support and connectedness, or an object highlighting the passing of time and moments of interaction. This enabled a collaborative space in which we each could choose what we would share.

As co-facilitators, Petra, Zoe, and Kenan explained at the beginning of the workshops that there was no expectation to share stories of traumatic experiences prior to arrival in the UK. However, the telling of stories can also be healing, and we questioned whether people felt able to share as much as they would like to. Strong emotions may accompany these stories and can be an important aspect of power in communicating, by emphasizing what should be prioritized ([Burgoon et al. 2021](#)). It is important to consider who determines these boundaries, who speaks and how much, and who decides. When considered in the wider socio-political context, such stories enable insights into ways in which asylum seekers make sense of their own experiences and would wish to inform others facing similar challenges. In planning and co-facilitating the discussions, Kenan supported the complex weaving together of stories and sharing of insights through the workshops.

### ***Flexibility for coproducers***

Coproduction projects are more likely to succeed with a degree of flexibility, optimizing opportunities to contribute. Flexibility in how people participated was supported by technology, particularly as the workshops and film production were conducted in a period of uncertainty due to the coronavirus pandemic (late 2021). Using technology to meet online allowed flexibility for people to join despite geographical distance, and to fit around busy schedules (e.g. work, study demands, childcare) and possibly comfort levels, in contrast to meeting face to face. To ensure effective communication, contributors needed access to reliable wifi, and a device with a working camera and a microphone. We may have inadvertently obscured participation for those who did not have these means for connection, and this is likely to have influenced who was able to contribute. We asked people to join from a private space, which may have inhibited those living in shared accommodation without access to seclusion.

Ongoing discussions about when flexibility might be needed, and in which ways, enabled tailoring of individual contributions while maintaining a sense of shared momentum through our collaboration. Providing the option to engage in one or multiple activities enabled a diversity of contributions over the whole project, while allowing continuity between parts (see [Table 1](#)). The

three core project team members offered time after the focus groups where contributors could speak with a facilitator individually if they wished to discuss anything privately; this was taken up by one contributor.

Our limited funding led to a decision to only include those who could speak in English without the aid of an interpreter. This presented a dilemma, in terms of excluding people from the film. However, the need to offer support in languages other than English was acutely emphasized by the group. This led to our development of the resource in Arabic and Farsi (as well as in English), through translations of the video by Zaina and Rahman.

### *Credibility of commitment*

Reflecting on processes since our project initiation, we identified that it was important to have time to develop a relationship to build the trust required for credible commitment to each other, alongside determining goals deemed credible by all.

Connecting to organizations and accessing potential coproducers was challenging. Our reflections highlight the central role of credibility, in establishing the relationships that create the coproductive foundations. Initially, Petra and Zoe approached human rights' charities supporting survivors of torture, trafficking, and other forms of mistreatment. Several organizational barriers were reported, including lack of time to support external projects and limited staffing. Some organizations wanted to 'protect' their clients from our approaches, portraying a uniform perception of them as vulnerable and in need of safeguarding from the potential exploitation or re-traumatization that involvement in an external project may incur. Some seemed to be wary of the risk of adding to their clients' burden by offering involvement in extra activities. Restricted time and finances are recognized as limitations throughout many organizations working with refugees and asylum seekers. This may reflect structural inequalities in how asylum seekers are positioned in UK society, in terms of financial support and prioritization, leading to overloaded systems and individuals working without adequate resources, such that anything 'extra' becomes unmanageable (Clayton *et al.* 2016).

The attempts to reach potential contributors via social media were also unsuccessful. This seemed too wide an approach to target people with a true interest, experience, and capacity for this project. Ultimately, working with co-facilitator Kenan and his charitable organization was crucial for the project, as the relational aspect, and underpinning trust between members of his network, facilitated involvement. Building participation through these personal connections enabled rapport and credibility, which was less possible when Petra and Zoe worked alone as researchers to directly contact organizations seeking collaboration with people with lived experience of asylum-seeking.

We also hold in mind that those seeking asylum must interact with many different professionals and organizations within a confusing system, as one of the many challenging aspects of the asylum-seeking process. This may be particularly pertinent in the UK context of a hostile environment, and may mean relationships and trust are an important prerequisite to engagement. Asylum seekers may be understandably wary of researchers due to past experiences of exploitation or mistrust; hence, we took time to establish relationships based on mutual respect and understanding. Recruiting a number of contributors who had existing social relationships, and knowledge about shared experiences in the asylum system, promoted commitment to the goal of creating a supportive resource for others facing similar challenges. Reassurance was also given about confidentiality within the workshops, as a protective and promotive measure.

A constraining factor for contributions was linked to the political and stigmatized aspects of seeking asylum in the UK. Some contributors were anxious about being identified in the film, fearing judgement, or persecution. Some selected pseudonyms, while others chose to contribute to the workshops but not to appear in the film. It is possible this reflects the wider political turmoil around immigration in the UK, with the potential to erode feelings of trust and safety when discussing issues or sharing experiences of asylum-seeking.

## Incentives

It was not possible to reimburse people who did not have refugee status, without placing them in a position of breaking the legal conditions of their asylum-seeking status. Government guidance states that asylum seekers in the UK are not usually allowed to work during consideration of their claim (Gov.uk 2022). The guidance states that asylum seekers are encouraged to volunteer. However, this is based on the assumption that people will have the means, capacity, and connections to work without payment. In this project, the policy created a 'double bind', whereby seeking asylum uniquely qualified contributions to this project; however, that very qualification (and its implications for payments) obstructed many potential contributors' involvement. We propose that this policy contributes to a subjugation of the voices of those with lived experience of seeking asylum, in the coproduction of supports that hold meaning for them.

It is important not to assume that financial initiatives for participation necessarily provide an 'empowering' experience for asylum seekers and refugees (Doná 2007). Many contributors in this project made it clear that their primary incentive was improvement of experiences for people in the asylum system, and that financial incentive did not influence their involvement. Creating a resource with the beneficiaries in mind was an important incentive. Primarily, the intended beneficiaries were newly arrived asylum seekers, but also the asylum seeker and refugee community, as the experiences and insights have relevance for universal human rights and for the future of UK society. This altruistic motivation is pertinent, particularly in the context of 'demonization' of asylum seekers by politicians and the media in the UK (Cemlyn and Briskman 2003).

Gaining experience, skills development, recognition, acknowledgement, and providing a platform to share insights were all considered to be valuable incentives by coproducers, in addition to networking opportunities. Collaboratively working on this project, combining skills, talents, professionalism, and the passion of sanctuary seekers enabled and extended our meaningful contributions. We were excited by the multimedia possibilities and what we could create, by bringing together an inspiring and diverse mix of experiences and skills. The final output highlighted that every skill matters; for example, Zaina had experience of seeking sanctuary, as well as being an award-winning podcaster, which helped greatly in audio development of the resources. The multilingual complement of the group allowed us to create a more accessible film, which is publicly available in multiple languages (accessible here: <https://csel.psychologyresearch.co.uk/resources>).

We have identified ways in which 'incentives' may be unpredictable, as they are identified or created by coproducers in uniquely contextualized, iterative, and emergent ways. For example, Zaina found that the use of art in this project opened her eyes to the possibilities of employing visualizations and infographics as a method in her Master's research, which she found helpful in emphasizing the primary concepts (Yi et al. 2007) and to improve understanding of the findings (Smatt et al. 2020).

## Conclusion

When considering factors that enable successful coproduction, Ostrom conceded that designing them is 'far more daunting than demonstrating their theoretical existence' (1996, p. 1080). In this article, we have explored a range of these factors and reflected on the ways they unfolded in the coproduction of a film resource for people seeking asylum in the UK. We identified that the building of relationships and trust was key to promoting authentic coproduction. Close attention to social relations was needed, with adequate time and consideration to persevere through crucial stages of connecting with potential coproducers, building a committed group, jointly making sense of the project, and determining how to work together. This relational commitment allowed our joint production of a multi-layered and rich product, hinging on the insights of contributors with their own experiences of seeking asylum in the UK.



Needs for social support among resettled refugees encompass practical, emotional, attachment, and informational components (Wachter et al. 2022). We hope that the coproduced output from this project may contribute to social support for those who view it. In addition, we found that the processes of coproduction themselves became a source of social support for group members, in personally contextualized ways. The film content focuses on practical and informational support (such as guidance on navigating services) but its development also created emotional and attachment support between the coproducers, and indirectly to those who will access the film.

Representing lived experiences through the film required a collaboration that was ethical and reciprocal. The final product has been described as ‘powerful’ and ‘touching’ by those who have watched it, and felt compelled to give feedback. We hope that it has successfully conveyed pertinent aspects of surviving the asylum process in the UK. The project has been an iterative and relational process, which has had a powerful impact on us. Successes came about through small adaptations in collaborative processes over time, with activities that continued to evolve as decisions were shared, while responding to organizational contexts and system constraints. It required flexible communication to maintain mutual awareness of personal preferences, time and capacities to contribute, and a shared goal that represented a tangible and valued output. This mutual commitment has allowed for our genuine exchange and growth of understandings.

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