Moving into research

By *Katie Turner, senior research officer, Institute for Voluntary Action Research*

Just over a year ago, I decided to return to university for a part-time Masters in Social Research at Birkbeck College, University of London. Social research had always been a part of my academic and professional life, but it was not until recently that I took my first steps towards becoming a fully-fledged social researcher.

GIVING PEOPLE A VOICE

One of my first jobs was working in the policy and campaigns team at Leonard Cheshire Disability (LCD). The team's guiding principle was that our work must be informed and led by the voices and experiences of disabled people. Part of my role leading the organisation's national campaigns was to work with LCD's local campaigning groups across the UK; to gather intelligence on how national policies were affecting disabled people at a local level; and to get their take on what we should be campaigning on. Working with these groups gave me a sense of what it is really like to have decisions or policies made on your behalf and which often bear no relation to your day-to-day reality. However, it also showed me what could be achieved through a combination of rigorous research and enabling the right voices to be heard.

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THE REWARDS OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Despite recognising it as a vital component of advocacy and campaigning, I think that, up until this point, I still perceived research as something fairly static, produced and used at a point in time but then put on a shelf never to be referred to again. It was only when I got the opportunity to oversee a research project on the role of volunteering in sustainable development that I began to understand how research could be used to support participatory processes. This was a two-year participatory action research study across five countries and multiple sites run by Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) in partnership with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The study explored different aspects of volunteering, and looked at examples of local, national and international volunteering. My role was to oversee the process of collating, analysing and writing up the findings.

It was an incredible but also daunting process. We had to find ways to analyse and synthesise a vast amount of data, across many different contexts, and also ensure that we didn't lose the more nuanced findings. This experience taught me some valuable lessons about participatory research, not dissimilar from what I'd learned from my advocacy roles; for example, that ownership over the research has to sit with the research participants. Easy to say, not always easy to do. The in-country researchers approached this in a variety of ways, often taking an ethnographic approach. One became fluent in Nepali, and would spend several weeks at a time in the hill towns of Nepal. Another volunteered part-time for the local NGO involved in their research in Nairobi. All of the researchers trained groups of local participants to help conduct the research in communities. It was in this role when I looked at what the researchers were doing and thought, 'That's what I want to do!'

TAKING ON A RESEARCH ROLE

I now work at the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) where I get to work with some of the most passionate advocates in communities, voluntary sector organisations and public agencies, using research as a means to tell their stories and identify 'action(s)' that will help them build on their work. One of my challenges has been continuing to question how the word 'participatory' is used and applied in the context of research. Even when the stated object of research is to involve participants in its design and implementation, it's still easy to become absorbed in your own research methodology. Stepping back and asking questions such as, 'Who is benefiting from this research?' and 'How inclusive is it?' is the challenge I continue to set for myself.