

**The Deliberative Nature of
London's Civic and Democratic Participation Sector.
The Uses of Lived Experiences in the Advocacy NGO's Rhetoric**

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ABSTRACT. Starting from an applied research project and its findings, we develop a broader discussion about the uses of lived experiences highlighted through applied research in the advocacy NGO's rhetoric. As emphasised by many scholars having researched rhetoric and political communication, lived experiences of marginalised community members are being increasingly included in the organisational communication that aims to foster civic and democratic participation. Having actively collaborated as an external consultant for a research project funded by the Trust for London, on behalf of the Citizenship and Integration Initiative, and the UK Democracy Fund, a Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust initiative, we explore the role of applied research projects as mediums of lived experiences in public deliberations around civic and democratic participation.

Keywords: deliberative democracy, political communication, civic and democratic participation

1. Introduction

London Voices – the journey to full participation is an applied research project conducted between March – December 2021 by the3million, an advocacy UK-based organisation supporting European migrants' rights in UK. The funders of the project were “the Trust for London, on behalf of the Citizenship and Integration Initiative, and the UK Democracy Fund, a Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust initiative. All these organisations have come together to support comprehensive research into the mechanisms that can facilitate equal, inclusive, representative civic and democratic participation as part of the London Voices project. The Greater London Authority (GLA) has supported this research and its wider aims. The report has been drafted independently of the GLA and the Mayor of London and as a result makes recommendations for both”.¹

The *London Voices* research project comes in a context where, as it has been highlighted by the project's final report (Bulat et al., 2021), the Greater London Authority works towards its 2025 institutional strategy of making London a more equal and

¹ <https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/publications/london-voices-the-journey-to-full-participation/>, accessed on 10.12.2021

inclusive city post COVID-19 (the GLA's Building Strong Communities, 2021). The strategy has been designed due to the evidenced dramatic impact of COVID-19 on an already increasingly disenfranchised and underrepresented London communities. Before pandemic, in 2019, according to the Atlas of Democratic Variation, London had "one of the lowest voter registration rates across the UK".² Approximately half of the 13 local areas with the lowest Registration Proportion could be found in London, and had values varying between 68% and 79%. The study also showed that "there is a statistically significant negative correlation between the Registration Proportion and the relative concentration of people from BAME backgrounds, which means that as the concentration of people from BAME backgrounds living in an area increases, the Registration Proportion of the electoral registers decreases". Therefore, the underrepresented categories of publics were young people, who are more likely to be recent home movers; social and private renters; Black, Asian and ethnic minority (BAME) and migrant Londoners (including Commonwealth and EU Londoners, in line with current voting rights). During COVID-19 pandemic, many of these groups have been further disproportionately impacted, from a civic and democratic participation perspective; GLA's constantly updated data pointed towards a dramatic situation of underrepresented groups becoming even more disengaged from the civic and democratic life (see GLA's Building Strong Communities, November 2021).

More research was deemed to be needed in order to understand the dimension of the phenomenon as it impacted the civil society organisations and their beneficiaries, meaning the underrepresented Londoners. As recognised in many methodological studies (e.g. Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Hamlet, 2017), the research of underrepresented communities or groups has to emphasise the role of lived experiences of those who are at the margins of society. Such underrepresented groups - especially young migrants - are often overlooked in academic literature, especially in terms of their engagement with local and national authorities, as well as democratic institutions. An extensive data collection process has then been undertaken, using inclusive, participatory quantitative and qualitative methods. First, a wide survey with civil society organisations of various sizes from across London was conducted between early July and mid-August 2021. 109 organisations took part in the survey and self-reported a total of 4087 full-time employees and 5611 volunteers. In-depth follow-up interviews were conducted with 21 organisations. Seven focus groups and eight community interviews were co-designed and led by five different young and migrant Londoners, and disabled people-led organisations to provide further community voices and lived experience perspectives. This provided a rich and robust evidence base for insights into current best practices and challenges that civil society organisations and their beneficiaries face in terms of their civic and democratic engagement. These lived experiences informed the recommendations on how and who should support equal, accessible, representative civic and democratic

² https://trustforlondon.fra1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/London_Voices-the_journey_to_full_participation_December_2021.pdf, accessed on 10.12.2021

participation in London.³ As part of our *London Voices* research, our aim was to fill this gap in the literature, while also contributing with effective policy solutions.

As it is the case with applied policy research projects conducted by advocacy NGOs, the aim is to inform local and central governments of their recommendations, but also to build a discussion and debate around the issues highlighted by the project (Bryman & Burgess, 2002). As Masefield et al (2020, p. 2) pointed out, “the lower estimate of the number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs; non-profit groups formed voluntarily) in the world is 1 million, but there may be as many as 10.3 million (based on the number of registrations of .org and .ngo domain names).” According to Bulat et al (2021, p. 8), our research report also identified the fact that, for UK, the democracy/participation sector in the UK involves a large number of organisations and groups and that it is very difficult to count how many organisations conduct civic and democratic participation activities. Other scholars (e.g. Buyse, 2018) also recognise the fact that many manifestations of civil society are not formally organised groups.

Increasingly in the last decades, applied policy research projects have also been instrumentalised as tools for public engagement with the organisations’ publics and stakeholders (Lewis & Kanji, 2009), becoming important moments of an organisation’s advocacy rhetoric. Being one of the funding requirements of a research project, the ‘dissemination’ stage of the findings and recommendations has acquired new dimensions in the last years, transitioning into a more public engagement and deliberative model of communication. Ranging from education to call to actions, the purpose of applied policy research projects has changed in the last years, aiming for public engagement as well as policy changes. However, not all civil society organisations have the same organisational capacity to apply for policy research funding and to conduct such research. Complementarily, as pointed out by Buyse (2018) and van der Borgh and Terwindt (2012), funding sources, access and funded topics are politicised, therefore many civil society organisations are submitted to administrative restrictions, such as the legislation on NGOs and civil society that restricts fundamental rights. As we also highlighted in the *London Voices* report, legislation bills such as the Lobbying Act (2019) do restrict the civil society organisations’ administrative and, henceforth, deliberative capacity in the public sphere.

Taking all these aspects into consideration, the present essay aims to discuss the use of applied policy research projects and their role as amplifiers of lived experiences and marginalised voices in civil society organisations’ public engagement. Drawing from the *London Voices – the journey to full participation* applied research project as a case study, we initiate a timely broader conversation which raises critical questions about the uses of lived experiences in applied policy research and the value of such research for civil society organisations’ public engagement and deliberative role.

³ The information about data collection is retrieved from https://trustforlondon.fra1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/London_Voices-the_journey_to_full_participation_December_2021.pdf, accessed on 10.12.2021

2. Concept and terms

2.1. The deliberative nature of civil society and participation sector

In the academic literature, the words ‘civil society organisations’ and ‘non-governmental organisations’ are “often used interchangeably to identify the key collective actors in civil society” (Buyse, 2018, p. 968). This concept has emerged during the European Enlightenment to denominate a sphere of autonomy, separate from and many times even opposite from the state. As Habermas (1962) shows, in the next centuries in Europe, the civil society came to represent a diversity of “social spaces and associations of citizens that were neither part of state institutions nor of the business world or the family” (Buyse, 2018, p. 968). The civil society starts to define more and more what Habermas conceptualised as the critical entity in a democratic society, whose role is to represent citizens’ rights and voice. One important point of distinction from Habermas’s view on a homogenous public is made by “many contemporary scholars who have emphasized that there are really many different publics, each with their own norms of deliberation, spheres of influence, and temporal and institutional characteristics (Emibayer & Sheller 1988; Fraser 1990; Perrin 2014).” (Stewart & Hartmann, 2020, p. 2).

Again, from an idealised and normative view, the participation sector is vital for any democratic society, as it maintains the plurality of voices and ideologies that have to be made public in a free, accessible-to-all way and holds accountable the state and its institutions for their role in a good society (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2014, pp. 24-5). Recent studies have also pointed out that this separateness between state and civil society and market and civil society proves to be challenging in practice. Jenkins’s (2012, p. 468) definition of civil society brings forward both the civil society’s continuous overlapping with the other spheres and its ethical embedded nature, that included notions of civility, tolerance, non-discrimination and non-violence: “a capacious framework of civic values encompassing the space, the set of institutions, the organizations, the networks, and the behaviors situated between the state, the business world and the family. Civil society facilitates exchanges among citizens, enables communication channels between citizens and the state, promotes civic action, and advances common interests based on civility.”

More recent research on the contemporary public sphere (e.g. Stewart and Hartmann, 2020) discusses the impact of more recent socio-cultural shifts and identifies three new features: “(1) new media and technologies of communication; (2) the proliferation and professionalization of social movements; and, (3) the rise of new institutions dedicated to the management of the public sphere itself”. The point that interests us is the second characteristic, by which Stewart and Hartmann point out that civil society has broaden its borders from organisations to formal and informal movements and that these movements have become professionalised: through a logic of efficiency and efficacy (Lee, 2015), formal and informal social movements have the capacity of changing policy. This feature of the new public sphere does support the previous point about the fact that today, when we talk about the civil society, the concept

does not exclusively cover the organisational formats of advocacy charities, but also the formal and informal social movements and activist groups. However, for our study, we will focus on the charity sector and its role in the deliberative nature of the civil society, bringing forward marginalised issues and voices.

A specific dimension of the civil society in the UK is discussed by Cronin and Edwards (2021); referring to the charity sector in a neoliberal political context, the two scholars elaborate on the way austerity has been socially constructed as a solution to social problems and the impact of this political project on the charity sector in the UK. The language of austerity that emphasises “the collective responsibility for recovery and economic sacrifice for future gain” has been associated with economic policies that have reproduced systemic inequalities: “They contribute to the construction of austerity ‘as a mood’ that pervades culture (Forkert, 2017), but are also deeply political in their effects, reducing or removing power and voice from some groups while others are more protected.” (p. 5) How did austerity as a discourse distinctively shape the UK charity sector? The governmental austerity policies have made citizens and residents more dependent on the charities’ services, as the funding has been withdrawn from state grants and public donations. This is a neoliberal capitalist phenomenon, as both scholars point out, the charity sector being shaped as a market; the competition between charities increases and, in these dynamics, the organisations must build a distinctive brand. The broader effect can be then seen into the way in which charities are today drawn into politics, whether we are talking about party politics, national politics or embedding particular political ideologies.

2.2. Deliberation, democracy and PR

If we do understand the civil society’s configuration as an increasing market and charities as service providers, then their communication is more shaped towards brand objectives than their mission to build and construct a publicness of the issues they put forward. This reality does not impede on the fact that civic and democratic organisations enact changes and impact local and central government’s policy agenda by deploying advocacy efforts. The deliberation of issues in the public sphere is an essential and vital dimension of their existence; however, we do have to enquire about the quality of deliberation, its purpose and, in the increasingly competitive context, its social value.

In the communication literature, the public deliberation has always been discussed in terms of dialogue; Habermas’s work on theory of communicative action (1984) has led to more recent studies where the public nature of dialogue and the role of dialogic deliberation represent essential elements of deliberative democracy. According to Dutta and Pal (2010), the social value of dialogic deliberation is the constitution of the sense of community, creation of public rationality, development of public opinion and formation of the public sphere (Hauser, 1999; Heidlebaugh, 2008; Kim & Kim, 2008). The maintenance of the public deliberation represents a manifestation of a healthy democratic society; by deliberating, citizens can influence those who govern and hold

them accountable.

The great majority of deliberative theorists, as pointed out by Edwards (2018a), adopt a ‘talk-centric’ view of democracy (Dryzek, 2000; Chambers, 2012); following the Habermasian normative features of the dialogic deliberation in the public sphere, the democracy is ideally performed through rational, reasonable, open and inclusive debates among citizens. This free access and non-conflictual nature of the deliberation leads citizens to make and take legitimate decisions on how policy and modes of governance should develop (Cohen, 1989). “Thus, deliberation is truly effective only if there is a means by which the content and results of the deliberation are communicated to policymakers and have some kind of impact (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Chambers, 2012).” (Edwards, 2018a, p. 87).

However, in the case of marginalised communities and publics, there is a dialectic symbolic violence due to the unbalanced power dynamics (e.g. Dutta and Pal, 2010). As the ideal conditions for deliberation include equal access and status for all those entitled to participate, for marginalised communities such as refugees, migrants etc, there is an obvious unbalance due to an unequal status and lack of access in dialogic deliberative spaces. Hence, the dialog and deliberation are forms of engagement between state institutions and marginalised communities, but they are deeply and organically unbalanced due to systemic inequalities and systemic forms of exclusion. Theorizing the dialectical tensions inherent in dialog, Hammond et al. (2003) discuss how power is central in determining the possibilities in dialogic communication, “examining the role of dialog in the context of marginality and raising questions about the role of dialog in transformative politics” (Dutta & Pal, 2010, p. 364). The long-standing myth of dialogue, inherently helping marginalised individuals and groups to become recognised and ultimately more powerful, is being critically assessed, as the dialogue in itself cannot guarantee such outcomes. Hammond et al. (2016) mention the necessity of a prior power base before the dialogue can help with providing marginalised communities with “attentive audiences in the public sphere” (p. 127); it is most necessary, as marginalised communities and exploited groups do not feel confident or safe to join a dialogic deliberative space dominated by elite and dominant groups (Farson, 1978; Young, 1990, 1996). This point is being reinforced by a second one: public forums do not ensure maximum fairness to all participants. Being assertive and highly verbal in public dialogic deliberative spaces is a feature of culturally predominant groups; marginalised and even exploited groups need to feel safe and that their voices are heard and respected.

2.3. PR as a deliberative force

The civil society and participation sector organisations need to communicate, as it is in their nature and mission to discuss and debate, to introduce new ideas or issues into the public sphere and to generate more knowledge around the object of their activity. The public affairs and public engagement dimension is not in itself sufficient for supporting a healthy democratic society, but publicity is a very important element to

deliberation as a means of disseminating ideas and arguments; “Publicity must be actively generated by using media, events, social media and other forms of communication to reach relevant audiences, secure their attention and engage them in debate. Public relations is an important tool through which organizations of all kinds generate publicity for their position using a wide range of tools, as part of their participation in societal debates (Ashra, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Demetrious, 2013).” (Edwards, 2016, p. 71)

As we previously discussed the role of plurality of voices in public communication, for preserving the balance and equity in the public sphere, there is a distinction to be made between the normative and idealised image of the public sphere and the critical theoretical infused version, where the public sphere is a space submitted to the same power dynamics norms as the society itself. From this last perspective, in a dialogic deliberative situation and in the public sphere, there is a risk that the public relations might function as a mechanism of reproducing existent inequalities. This is the case when organisational bias is highly likely to amplify institutional voices, networks, knowledge and expertise in debates over the voices and preferences of individual citizens. This risk is even more common in unbalanced and unequal situations, where marginalised communities and individuals do not feel represented and see their position disregarded. More than that, voices of marginalised audiences and organisations are excluded from the communicative environment by enabling organisations and elite individuals to occupy powerful nodes in communicative networks, as programmers and switchers that frame and direct debates.

An approach that might help understand the deliberative nature of PR is a systems approach (Edwards, 2018a); this take on the role that PR has in political communication, mostly, looks at how PR, through different types of discourse, builds deliberative spaces between different types of actors. At this macro-level, it is more important to see how “public debates circulate, evolve and change across public spheres (Mansbridge, 1999; Parkinson, 2004)” (Edwards, 2016, p. 12). Here, rhetorical communication becomes more important and relevant, imbricated with storytelling, testimony and advocacy; these diverse types of discourse bring forward “identities and positions of the different groups involved in deliberation”, which leads to a better representation at the level of the public sphere (Mansbridge, 2003; Dryzek, 2010; Bohman, 2012). As Edwards (2018a, p. 90) points out, “Dryzek (2000) allocates a particular role for rhetorical communication in the process of deliberation, because it is able to help groups reach others – including policymakers – whose positions may be very far removed from their own. (...) He points out that rhetoric is frequently deployed in public debates, and that rhetorical arguments can and should be evaluated using rational criteria (for example, seeking concrete evidence of the speaker’s claims to credibility, or considering whether an emotive message has any basis in reality).” This perspective completely excludes emotions and affect from the organisational rhetoric; however, as Edwards also emphasises, the pathos and ethos are two dimensions of rhetoric that PR develops at large extent.

Independently of the types and variety of discourse, the necessity for inclusivity and civility in the public deliberations is a norm that is emphasised by all deliberative theorists; equal representation and voice are subsequent concepts that make the norm more palpable. The voice in communication is conceptualised as socio-cultural value (Couldry, 2010; Edwards, 2018a; “effective voice exists for groups and individuals if their narratives are valued in the material organisation of our social, political and economic worlds, which links it directly to the openness and respect required of public relations campaigns claiming to be deliberative.” (Edwards, 2018a, p. 95)

In order for PR activities to be considered having a deliberative nature, Edwards (2018a) introduces the condition of genuine engagement as a prerequisite; here, the multiple voices are fostered through consultation with audiences, the building of response mechanisms into the communicative tools used in the campaigns and inclusion of “all audiences affected by the issue at hand, including those who are geographically distant or less immediately useful to the organisation’s purpose” (p. 96). The conceptualisation of voice as value emphasises the importance of listening; speaking and listening are considered by deliberative theorists to be the components of voice as value.

Our paper will explore and investigate all these dimensions by taking the *London Voices – the journey to full participation* policy applied research and its output, the research report, as a case study. Our participation as an external consultant and active researcher within the research team provides the present essay with an endemic focus and perspective; also, it gives us the possibility to theorise some of the report’s findings, as well as to discuss its role as a medium for London voices, as it is titled. Therefore, we will first present the project, describe and explain its highly original methodology and then, discuss its findings and the public engagement activities conducted during and after the launch of the report. In this way, both main concepts we covered so far, dialogic deliberation and voice, will be followed in the case of a research project that aimed to amplify those marginalised voices in the interaction with local and central government authorities, for improving Londoners’ civic and democratic participation.

3. The case study⁴

Conducted between March-December 2021, the project *London Voices – the journey to full participation* has been delivered by Young Europeans Network, the youth wing of the 3million, the largest grassroots organisation in UK for EU citizens, formed after the 2016 EU Referendum to protect the rights of EU migrants. The project has been funded by the Trust for London, on behalf of the Citizenship and Integration Initiative, and the UK Democracy Fund, a Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust initiative⁵. The Greater

⁴ Some of the findings presented in this study are to be found in the research report - https://trustforlondon.fra1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/London_Voices-the_journey_to_full_participation_December_2021.pdf, accessed on 10.12.2021

⁵ <https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/publications/london-voices-briefing-paper-voter-id-and-electoral-reform/> accessed on 10.12.2021

London Authority (GLA) has supported this research and its wider aims. The report has been drafted independently of the GLA and the Mayor of London and as a result makes recommendations for both. As mentioned in the research report, “the report complements research conducted by the GLA in 2019 with the Survey of Londoners (8) and the GLA’s Building Strong Communities recovery mission, including the London Civic Strength Index (9) and the Festival of Ideas. (10)” (Bulat et al., 2021, p. 5). The research team was composed by researchers with various expertise areas; this diversity helped the project tackle many dimensions at the same time.

The objective of the applied research project was to explore the practices of civic and democratic participation that London’s civil society organisations developed to support various underrepresented communities in London. Identifying the priorities and needs, looking into how civil society and stakeholders work together and coordinate on civic and democratic reform and advocacy were subsequent objectives. To achieve this, the research team used a mixed-methods approach to answer the questions as identified by the tender (Lieberman, 2005; Sale et al., 2002). This approach allowed the research team to leverage the strengths of both quantitative data analysis and qualitative methodologies. The former allowed us to identify patterns of democratic participation in underrepresented communities, while the latter explained the causal mechanisms behind the lack of involvement of these communities with the authorities and democratic institutions in London. The qualitative element has been used to collect case studies from the communities in collaboration with partner organisations.

The first stage of the project was dedicated to an extensive literature review, that comprised a variety of secondary and tertiary data; from survey reports, online media articles, case studies and academic papers, these sources have been identified and thematically reviewed. A first theme we identified was represented by successful civic and democratic participation projects and programs that took place in London prior to the pandemic; our findings were structured on three levels: borough and grassroots. Two relevant contributions of this point of the literature review were 1) to identify the most underrepresented groups of Londoners and 2) to outline the main barriers to civic and democratic participation that have been highlighted by relevant studies so far. In this way, from the first step of our project, we have recognised which groups and communities will be the focus of our primary research stage and we also understood what the main issues are, an understanding that fed into the design of the interview and focus groups guides. The other themes we identified were the impact of social events on civic and democratic participation, mechanisms and tools to promote civic and democratic participation and innovative models on civic and democratic participation. The key points of the literature review will be discussed in the next part of our paper. This first stage made us aware of the fact that our project has to focus and highlight Londoners’ voices; the focus would be on organisations’ and their beneficiaries’ experiences. This awareness has shaped the survey questionnaire design, the organisational follow-up interviews and the peer research.

The second stage of the applied research project was represented by the

quantitative survey. This is the first study of its kind to survey more than 100 civil society organisations of various sizes from across London and it was conducted between early July and mid-August 2021. The three objectives of the survey were to understand how civil society organisations across London contribute to civic and democratic participation, what challenges they face in terms of civic and democratic participation and what funders, local and national governments can do to support their work. Believed to be one of the first of its kind, the survey asked organisations what an inclusive, accessible, representative vision for civic and democratic engagement might look like.

The survey was answered by 109 organisations, comprising a total of 4087 full-time employees (or equivalent). Amongst their main areas of activity, the organisations were providing health, wellbeing and mental health services, equalities and human rights services and advice and support services. Other areas comprised social justice advocacy campaigning, community development and cohesion and civic participation. Their beneficiaries were, just as our literature review also pointed out, the most underrepresented groups; around 44% focused on supporting Black and minority ethnic Londoners, more than 40% reached out to the general public, without a specific target group and around a third focused specifically on Londoners with financial needs; women; migrants, asylum seekers and refugees; disabled Londoners; young or older Londoners.

The survey highlighted many challenges that civil society face in order to be able to represent their beneficiaries' needs and voices; drawing from the quantitative data, the 20 follow-up in-depth organisational interviews provided us with useful and valuable insights that helped us understand much better how do organisations embed lived experience into their own practices and what needs and challenges civil society confront themselves with. This stage has then been continued by peer research; we tried to create a safe and 'open space' (Wright, 2005) for our interviewees to feel encouraged to participate. The peer research stage had a very clear purpose; through peer researchers, our study touched the grassroots level of the organisations' beneficiaries and tapped into individuals' lived experiences of civic and democratic participation at community level. The reason for which we have opted for a mediated form of research is that "Peers are often perceived as more approachable due to their insider status, local knowledge and shared experiences; therefore, they are viewed as valuable members of the research team as well as local experts (Nettles & Belton, 2009; Schatz, Angotti, Madhavan, & Sennott, 2015; Woodall, White, & South, 2013) and 'become intermediaries between the research team and their own community, able to access community spaces and translate community knowledge' (Guta, Flicker, & Roche, 2013, p. 442)." (Vaughn et al., 2018, p. 770)

4. Discussion⁶

We saw how the project has been shaped and designed, with all the stages described and explained. The applied research project was a context for deepening the knowledge on deliberative democracy and its structures. We understood that such projects are relevant and essential for the civil society's existence, as they provide updated information about the participation / charity sector and generate awareness about the sector's wellbeing, in connection with the health status of the democracy. For this reason, we will look into more depth on the project's main findings highlighted in the *London Voices – the full journey to full participation research report*. We will structure our discussion on two main parts: the configuration of London's civil society or civic and democratic participation sector, with a specific focus on its deliberative capacity; the second part will look at underrepresented groups and marginalised communities, with a focus on the ways in which the research has co-opted and then amplified their voices.

4.1. London's participation sector and civil society organisations

The research project depicted a clear image of London's participation sector: a large number of organisations and groups, with limited capacity and coordination. In terms of the number of employees, most surveyed organisations relied on few employees. On the other hand, the median number of volunteers per organisation was 15. Between them, these organisations mobilised 5611 volunteers across London in the last 12 months (p. 16). What is of utmost importance for the London's participation sector's deliberative capacity is the fact that in almost 50% of organisations, the overwhelming - if not totality - of volunteers and staff have lived experience, that is, they are or were previously beneficiaries of the type of work that these organisations currently conduct. This aspect is of vital and distinctive relevance; as we have mentioned in the literature review of the present paper, lived experiences are central to the civic and democratic participation system. Individuals who have benefited from organisations' projects, services and campaigns have become supporting volunteers, which puts civil society organisations in a unique position to design and provide services, events, social action and participation opportunities that will meaningfully engage and benefit other underrepresented Londoners (p. 18). It is also a way of increasing inclusion and it enhances the sense of belonging for more marginalised community members.

In terms of main areas of activities, the organisations focused on a multitude of activities and policy areas; the most common areas of work were health and well-being (e.g. medical health, sickness, disability, mental health); equalities, civil rights (e.g.

⁶ Some aspects of the discussion are to be found in the research report - https://trustforlondon.fra1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/London_Voices-the_journey_to_full_participation_December_2021.pdf, accessed on 10.12.2021

gender, race, disability); advice and support services; social justice advocacy campaigning; community development and mutual aid and cohesion and civic participation. A more detailed look into the types of civic and democratic participatory activities highlighted in the research report shows a great emphasis on civic participation; from mentoring or training opportunities, raising awareness about campaigns, or organising a local community event to directly participating in local policy making, signing a petition, participating in a local government consultation, or contacting their local MP. The survey identified a major gap between the amount of civic participation initiatives organisations provide and specific activities on voter registration rights and the process, as well as voter awareness (p. 20). These findings are not unique and constitute an effect of the neoliberal policies, as we already showed in the first part of the present paper.

London's civic and democratic participatory organisations and groups have to fight against an acute lack of funding, a need for better connections in the political areas and growing pressures and restrictions on advocacy work, as we also have mentioned earlier in this paper. However, the research report points out the London's participation sector's highly informal networked nature; the report also mentions the need for formalising this trait through a better public engagement, an up-to-date map of the actors in the field and effective physical and digital network hubs in the democracy sector (pp. 7-8). Specifically for London's participation sector, the project formulated specific recommendations for funders, to support the civil society in its ability to campaign; three areas have been considered as barriers for civil society organisations: politicians, funding and media (p. 21). Local authorities and political institutions have also been called for their responsibility in supporting the civil society; as we already pointed out, strengthening and creating platforms where civil society organisations can exchange and build cooperation is therefore key for improving civic and democratic participation (p. 22).

As we have presented the London's participation sector deliberative nature through its organisational capacity and activities, it is very important, as we have already mentioned earlier in our paper, to present the data regarding the civil society organisations' impact and influence on policy agenda. Here, as the research report points out (p. 24), a majority of organisations said that they feel they are able to influence decisions affecting their local area or borough (60.5% of organisations tended to or definitely agreed with this sentiment). Over half of organisations also said they felt able to influence decisions affecting London or the UK as a whole. As we mentioned before, the gap between local and central governance levels can be seen in these results too. At the same time, London's civil society organisations support more deliberative democratic mechanisms and structures, including civic, media and political literacy in school curricula (46%), as well as having more representative political parties and candidates (46%). The earliest involvement of civil society organisations in the activity and reforms aimed at addressing barriers and increasing the currently low civic and democratic engagement among marginalised communities is a prerequisite of a healthy democratic

society. As the research has shown in the literature review, the local authorities and institutions have already begun to implement deliberative democratic projects (e.g. citizen assemblies etc), however the organisations have stressed out the importance of early involvement in the decision-making and consultation process in order to redress the power balance.

4.2. Underrepresented groups and marginalised communities

The *London Voices* research project focussed, in the second part, on the civil society organisations beneficiaries' lived experiences in relation to civic and democratic participation. From the start of the project, as we already pointed out, the research team has identified the main barriers to a greater participation in these areas for London's underrepresented and marginalised groups. The sense of belonging has been intensively discussed in the research report, as it becomes extremely important and vital for groups such as migrants; due to insufficient language services, lack of buy-in and social isolation, policing and surveillance and a low socio-economic status, migrant communities do not feel safe and welcomed in London and in the borough they reside. For Black and ethnic minorities, the research has identified that such issues are exacerbated by discrimination, institutional racism and policing, and potentially lower socio-economic status, leading to disenfranchisement from political processes. Young people find political system alienating, while unstable housing conditions make participation very difficult, with high mobility resulting in disconnection from local & larger political processes (i.e., private renters, the homeless, and low income).

These barriers are general and they have been previously highlighted by other studies; what the *London Voices* research report brings new is the emphasis on lack of knowledge and lack of trust (p. 25). The surveyed civil society organisations have mentioned that these are the main causes for their beneficiaries' low voting turn out percentage; these results underline how some of the most under-registered and underrepresented Londoners do not have access to advice and resources around their civic and democratic rights, but also have low expectations about what political representatives and institutions can do for them.

At the same time, the major contribution the *London Voices* project brings is represented by the richness of qualitative and interpretative data. From lived experiences to voices, the research report presents various and different angled micro-case studies. Extracted from interviews with organisations, interviews with beneficiaries and focus groups with different communities, the second part of the report is more narrative as it retells both individuals' and communities' stories. The main note that can be extracted after reading these micro-case studies is the intersectional nature of beneficiaries and organisations' issues; however, as a major point of distinction with other similar studies or research reports, *London Voices* project covered areas yet unexplored, in a non-biased way: faith and non-faith young Londoners, faith communities, Black and minoritised women and girls, Southwark's Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, Black & Young

Londoners, migrant and refugee Londoners and deaf and disabled Londoners.

Each micro-case study gives voice to individuals and communities, through storytelling; from young people's sense of disenfranchisement and faith communities' take on democratic participation (Christian Anglican, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish etc) to young / Black and minoritized women and girls, there is a wide sense of politics being made not for them, not representing them and their issues or needs. Also, all the underrepresented and marginalised community members mentioned the policies that are consciously and voluntarily designed to exclude them and the groups they represent from the civic and democratic participatory life; from the Elections Bill in conjunction with other bills under consideration, such as the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill work toward increasing police powers, which in turn often disproportionately target Black and minoritised communities.

Also, many organisations and their beneficiaries have mentioned the marginalisation through language; the language used in policies and the government's and media rhetoric have both been described as polarising and aggressive. At the same time, not only the language, but also the communication structures used by the central government to engage with them, as underrepresented groups, have proved a voluntary lack of inclusion, empathy and respect. The case study about Southwark's Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and Windrush generation reflects how these communities are more than aware of the sense of exclusion being inbuilt in the very language, access options and processes available to these communities. The dimensions of disenfranchisement, mistrust and low level of belonging were echoed by other marginalised communities, complemented by references to the toxic political rhetoric around major events such as Brexit and the 'Race Report'.

The final part of the research report concludes with a series of detailed and practical recommendations for local authorities, Greater London Assembly, the Mayor of London, Central Government, funders, civil society and political parties. These were co-designed with underrepresented Londoners (through input in the survey, peer-led focus groups and in-depth interviews) and an Advisory Board.

4.3. 'London Voices' report in an organisational context

As we already mentioned, the applied research project has been delivered by the Young European Network, the youth wing of the3million. The3million is a UK grassroots organisation, formed after the 2016 Brexit referendum, with the aim of protecting the rights of EU migrants in the UK (see <http://www.the3million.org.uk/>). Since its beginning, the3million had acted in alliance with other organisations, depending on their campaigning focus, and is supported by all the major organisations of British citizens living in other member states. Its activity has attracted a considerable attention in both traditional media and social media. Also, the3million's public affairs actions have impacted UK's public policy in many respects; since December 2016, when the first action was taken by the3million (the letter sent to Theresa May, the prime-minister of the

UK), the3million succeeded to achieve the retain of EU citizens' rights after Brexit, the waive of the application fee for the settlement scheme and, more recently, they have been campaigning for residence-based voting rights.

Applied research projects constitute a valuable resource for advocacy and grassroots organisations; they inform their decisions and actions, as well as providing them with essential information about their beneficiaries' lived experiences. The emphasis on the lived experiences is more and more predominant in the advocacy and grassroots organisations' and pressure groups' rhetoric (Edwards, 2018a); besides statistical data, such applied research projects bring forward, as we already highlighted, important voices, with lived experiences that personalise and individualise hard, scientific data. For the3million, the lived experiences have always been embedded, as evidence, in the campaigning storytelling. An example is the campaign for physical proof of pre-settled and settled status for EU migrants where organisation's beneficiaries and publics have been asked in 2021 to use the3million's online report-it tool to tell all about the problems they were experiencing when applying for pre-settled / settled status or when trying to prove their status.

The response to this listening mechanism has been very positive, as the organisation wrote in their Facebook post: "Many of you gave their time to do detailed interviews with our team, so we could identify trends and put across our collective experiences through three comprehensive reports to the Independent Monitoring Authority (IMA), letters to the Home Office, to Ministers and to MPs across all parties, as well as raising these issues in meetings with organisations we are working with. You can see it all on our publications page: <https://www.the3million.org.uk/library>." (Facebook post, 24.12.2021). Then, these personal experiences have been included into the organisation's advocating rationale for a physical document to prove the settlement status (see <https://www.the3million.org.uk/physical-proof>). Also, the3million have produced or collaborated on research projects since 2017, with academics, researchers and partner organisations. The research is used as a listening mechanism; it feeds into the organisation's public affairs activity, through position papers, legal analyses, evidence submissions, letters to UK and EU authorities and more, but it also builds response mechanisms into the communicative tools of the3million's campaigns, as we have already pointed out.

London Voices applied research project has given the opportunity to enlarge and broaden the perspective on lived experiences of marginalised groups; through this project, the3million has created a safe space where multiple voices were fostered and where the sense of belonging was experienced differently by various underrepresented groups. However, as the3million is a grassroots organisation advocating for EU citizens' rights and, more recently, for residence-based voting rights, the *London Voices* research project brought more in-depth understanding on how migrant and refugee experience democratic participation, what are their barriers to the full journey. As per the research report, these underrepresented groups felt their sense of belonging was highly dependent on their status of 'second-class citizens' due to the Election Bill; many Londoners of

migrant and refugee background do not have democratic rights in the UK. In England, only British, Commonwealth and Irish citizens can vote in general elections. In local elections, EU citizens can also vote. However, the Elections Bill will only preserve the right to vote and stand in local elections for EU citizens who arrived in the UK before 1 January 2021 and have pre-settled or settled status. Unlike the more inclusive, residence-based franchise in Scotland and Wales, Londoners with refugee status also cannot vote in local elections. The focus group that was conducted in the second part of the applied research project highlighted many more barriers to democratic participation (p. 34): access to information, a higher migrant representation in politics and local government, as well as more information about opportunities beyond elections, such as how to volunteer for social justice causes, how to participate in consultations and meet local representatives.

The research project has also fuelled, through its results and findings, another organisational public affairs activity. After the first stage of the project – the civil society organisations' survey – a briefing paper has been drafted and made public as a response to the Elections Bill and, specifically, to the proposal of introducing voter ID; supported by the Greater London Authority, the briefing paper presented some of the survey's highlighted results, such as the fact that 63% (69 civil society organisations) surveyed for the *London Voices* research project disagreed with the introduction of photo voter ID requirements. The briefing paper has been sent to relevant stakeholders in order to enact a public debate around the legislative proposals; some of the effects have been immediate, such as the briefing paper being presented during one GLA meeting.

5. Conclusions

Our paper started a timely theoretical discussion about the use of lived experiences in policy applied research projects conducted by charities. We were interested to broaden the conversation towards concepts such as deliberative democracy and voices in the civic and democratic participation sector. To do so, we have developed a case study by using an applied research project that we have been involved as external consultant. The main findings of the research project helped us outline the key features of London's civil society sector and the ways in which the project highlighted the various and diverse voices of underrepresented groups and communities. We broadened the perspective with integrating the project in the3million's rhetoric and discourse.

Our main findings were that the overall deliberative activity that the3million currently undertakes focuses on building listening mechanisms and safe spaces for their beneficiaries to feel safe and confident to speak and share their experiences; the listening stage is then complemented by a representation step, where the lived experiences and shared stories are transformed into voices. By building response mechanisms into the communicative tools used in the campaigns, the3million ensures the inclusion of all audiences affected by the issue at hand, including those who are geographically distant or

less immediately useful to the organisation's purpose.

At the same time, the3million, as well as other civil society organisations (e.g. Edwards' case study on YouthVoice, 2018b), give communication an intrinsic value of social action in itself, as it brings forward campaigners' voices. Its beneficiaries become volunteers who can then become supporters, campaigners, embrace its causes and campaigns; as we have already pointed out, a lot of the public affairs actions and activities draw from lived experiences and empower various and diverse voices, with equal representation. This distinct feature of the deliberative communication model developed by the3million allows the organisation to build of a new public image of the 'immigrant', a more complex and nuanced narrative than the UK mass-media has built for the last decades. In a highly polarised environment, where immigrants have been used and are still being used as scapegoats in political and government communication, building a counter-narrative is most necessary, especially from a human rights' perspective. The deliberative activity that the3million develops through the use of communication and public affairs contests patterns of discursive domination, challenging the stereotypical and negative rhetoric that vilifies already marginalised and underrepresented groups and communities.

London's civil society public discourse, as it can be seen from the report's main findings, is more focused on bringing forward intersectional issues and embedding progressive forms of actions, such as social justice. The participation sector starts to build more networked links to support each other's initiatives and programmes; different types of collaborative work emerge on grassroots level, but also in actions that target central government and parliamentary electives. Through the3million's example of deliberative communication model, we could also see that contesting dominant narratives and, informed by research, building counter-narratives can enact changes at both policy and public agenda levels.

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