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Published in:
Scottish Affairs

DOI:
[10.3366/scot.2024.0484](https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2024.0484)

Publication date:
2024

Document Version
Author accepted manuscript

[Link to publication in ResearchOnline](#)

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Perez Portilla, K 2024, 'Equality, discrimination and inclusion: lessons learned, challenges, and positive notes along the way', *Scottish Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 13-26. <https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2024.0484>

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Equality, Discrimination and Inclusion. Lessons learned, challenges, and positive notes along the way

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Abstract

This is a reflective piece on my trajectory and contributions in the field of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in Scotland and beyond. I start with a highlight in my career and then reflect back in order to identify what helped me get there. I want to share some insights into EDI work that I have gathered along with others over the past 23 years or so.

EDI is a fertile career path and even an industry these days, partly as a result of the consciousness-raising of contemporary movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. Yet, the issues raised by these movements internationally, have been well-known locally for decades and a great deal of work has been done to respond to them. What does this seemingly novel interest in, for example, intersectionality, equality, diversity, inclusion, belonging, anti-racist approaches and the decolonisation of the curriculum mean?

I know where my interest stems from and, whilst sharing some reflections around these terms as buzzwords, I have rather focused in this piece on some lessons and on the processes that led me to learn them in my career in EDI.

Necessarily, in this piece, I will share my EDI experience as a Mexican in Glasgow, which includes migration's mark on my well-being, opportunities and safety in hostile anti-migrant environments. However, I also want to share what has become a life mantra of mine, a means of survival, my permanent wish to find in everything, a positive note.

Keywords: equality, diversity and inclusion; anti-racist approaches; institutional racism; migration; Police Scotland

I. Language is Power

Although EDI has become common currency, and many people know what it stands for – Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, I need to start by saying that, for me, the D stands for discrimination. Diversity is not an issue, it never has been; diversity is a fact. The problem to be named and addressed is Discrimination. The problem is the exclusion and/or unfavourable treatment that some people experience because, to put it simply, there is unchallenged prejudice against them. Choices in language can help reflect what we stand for and the issues we want to redress.

Language is power. In law, language has allowed us to give names to problems that we knew how they felt but for which we had no name. A clear example is sexual harassment (MacKinnon, 1979). Women knew how it manifested and how it felt, but there was no name for it; sexual harassment of women was a condition of work. There was no legal framework against it because the problem had no name, and what has no name can be more easily ignored. Similarly, this is what Crenshaw (1989) achieved by coining the concept of intersectionality in law. She addressed the injustice experienced by black women, not because they are women or because of their race, but because they are black women. Using clear examples, she unveiled a specific form of disadvantage, and the fact that feminists and anti-racist campaigners had overlooked black women by not accounting for the intersection of two categories that often put them at a distinct and higher disadvantage than white women, or black men. In giving the issue of intersectionality a name, she enabled clearer discussions and legal action.

Concepts, however, can become no more than buzzwords when people cannot explain them anymore, but use them anyway because they are trendy. In recognition of this, in an article I wrote about intersectionality (Pérez Portilla, 2023), I concluded that more than the word, it is the story and the process that led to its creation that is most useful to know and replicate. Intersectionality was created after seeing a problem with no name and caring enough about those affected to articulate it and make it clear for others. Listening to real experiences of discrimination is the method. Responding to actual claims is the test, and success is in caring about justice, as Crenshaw did.

In May 2023, Chief Constable, Sir Iain Livingstone QPM acknowledged that Police Scotland was 'institutionally racist', another meaningful term with a painful story behind it: the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence. The reflections that follow are based on my contribution towards this acknowledgement, on what got me there, and on what I have learned along the way.

II. Biting the bullet

In February 2021, the thought that Police Scotland would acknowledge that there was institutional racism in the force was unimaginable. Admitting to this would have seemed impossible inside and outside the force. The term is often used as a shameful description. It is widely used as an accusation. It became some sort of label from which public sector institutions would indignantly disassociate. However, an actual meaning of the term is not so often made explicit, and corresponding demands are not clearly understood by those accused. Yet, the media, former employees, public sector leaders and think tanks affirm the existence of institutional racism across major public sector organisations (Ali, 2021; Fox, 2023; Siddique, 2023).

Chief Constable, Sir Iain Livingstone QPM admitted in May 2023 that Police Scotland was institutionally racist and, indeed, institutionally discriminatory. He reflected on what has been done to address the problem and committed the force to becoming anti-racist (Police Scotland, 2023).

This is a significant event after decades of denial and silence in the police, and in many public sector institutions, all of which are bound by the Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010, s. 149) to be proactive and address discrimination at an institutional level.

Livingstone's admission has been received with expressions of disparagement and scepticism, but it has also been welcomed by many who feel validated (McCool, 2023). The admission was indeed a long-awaited statement for many.¹ Sentiments at both ends of the spectrum are necessary for positive change, and should be freely expressed. No public institution should be free from scrutiny, and critical views

should never cease. Quite the contrary, they should be actively sought; they should be sharp and permanent.

Thus, I take the view that such admission should be welcome, scrutinised, and built upon. Language is power and creates frameworks to make claims. Becoming anti-racist and acknowledging the existence of institutional discrimination are of course just a couple of steps of many that are needed, but they are essential.

I participated in the process of this admission. It took several candid conversations and the sharing of knowledge, experience, feelings, concerns and expertise of a Professional Reference Group (PRG) and senior members of the Police Scotland executive team. I am proud to have contributed, amongst other things, to the maturation of their understanding of institutional racism from a socio-legal perspective, and to embracing its definition as a blueprint for positive change. Indeed, the term, as explained in the Macpherson Report (Home Office, 1999), identifies what goes wrong, but in so doing, it also explains where actions need to take place, and what needs to change.

In February 2021, I received an email from DCC Designate Fiona Taylor QPM, the then Deputy Chief Constable, People and Professionalism. The invitation was to become part of a Professional Reference Group that would act as an advisory body offering challenge, discussion, and advice on equality, diversity and human rights matters pertinent to the Sheku Bayoh Inquiry (2020). Crucially for me, her expectation was that the Group would identify and support **learning** as we progress through the Inquiry.

The letter began explaining that I had been invited, given my knowledge, skills and experience. However, even though this was clearly set out, I had the not uncommon impostor syndrome that made me think, is this really for me? Additionally, I felt some sort of scepticism about working with the police, as my then relationship with the force was one of being critical from the outside without direct positive impact. Therefore, on reflection, I realised that precisely because of that, there were many good reasons why they needed me, and this was an opportunity for me to bite the bullet and do more by speaking to them directly than by being critical in the confines of the University walls.

Whether I had been called because there are very few academics of colour also crossed my mind. I hated the idea of being seen as a token when I have considerable experience in the third sector in Scotland in a range of prejudice reduction programmes, and in academia internationally in the field of equality and discrimination. Having to justify this in my head, and fearing being seen as a token, tends to happen to people like me. We frequently have to do a great deal more to get an opportunity, and when this arrives, many often see us as a token. Then, I thought, all the more reason to take this opportunity to defy cynical views and demonstrate the impact of my research and experience.

For me, the PRG has been an unparalleled opportunity to do something different. I have worked with grassroots groups and with activists, with committees of well-intended people, with professionals in the field of EDI and hundreds of students. I have been critical of institutional failures, including within the police, and this time I had a chance to work directly to make change happen.

Our role as PRG members is of course limited. Moreover, I cannot speak on behalf of anyone but myself. However, I do see positive change in acknowledging a problem, naming it, identifying points to address it and being accountable. It is not a small thing considering the still dominant denial of this issue across public and private sector institutions. It is something to build on. The work continues, is permanent, and so it should be.²

The details of the work of the PRG require a space and a level of detail that is beyond the scope of this reflection. However, I wanted to share this as a highlight in my career, because I arrived in this country as a student for an MSc in Equality and Discrimination, at the University of Strathclyde's Faculty of Education, back in 2004. This was followed by a PhD in Anti-Discrimination Law at University College London, Faculty of Laws. I got married soon after completing my studies, and it was then, once I stopped being a lucrative international student that my experience of migration fully started. I knew what it felt like not to have the same opportunities as others in academia despite having a prestigious degree, publications, and teaching experience. I sent countless applications for years until I gave up. I tried in the third sector, in grassroots organisations promoting equality, but I was not successful there

either, so, I decided to volunteer. It was then that I started to be noticed, and opportunities began to appear.

After a journey like this, I have managed to influence policy, training, learning and practice in a critical public sector institution in the UK. This means for me, having gone from a position of professional despair to one in which my advice and guidance are actively sought and valued at the highest level in a country where I was not born. It is a big deal for a migrant not even from the empire (Pérez Portilla, 2022).

To some extent, however, rejection helped me to understand the EDI field in a deeper and much more meaningful way than research alone. I began working in grassroots organisations, then in well-established national charities, and then on professional committees. Eventually, in the third sector, I went from volunteer to trustee, until finally, academia opened the door at Glasgow Caledonian University. I have accumulated holistic experience and met wonderful people along the way.

I am proud of what I have accomplished at a personal level. However, no learning or success is ever purely individual, and it has been in many different groups and with colleagues, that I have gathered the ideas I will reflect on below.

III. The essence, origins and vicissitudes of EDI work

I want to share some reflections about EDI work that stem from my time in the third and public sectors in Scotland as well as in academia. For many already engaged in EDI in one way or another this will not be something new, but I hope it will be validating. Some might, of course, contest these ideas, for EDI can be a controversial field and precisely for that reason, a range of views, approaches and experiences are essential.

How did EDI work start?

The rights that we have are not the gift of enlightened rulers, 'they are the outcome of struggles between different interest groups and competing ideologies' (Hepple, 2010: 11). Grassroots and social movements contesting dominant ideologies and

structures of power are the reason why women vote, homosexuality is not a crime, and people of colour can share public spaces with white people.

There would be no rights without these movements, and the consciousness-raising they generate, often at a great personal cost for those who take part in them. EDI work, although not always carried out with that name, is born out of those struggles. In Britain, before there was only one Equality and Human Rights Commission, there were various Commissions addressing different protected characteristics. These were often led by people with lived experience, as it tends to happen in grassroots organisations.³ This is a key lesson: without that critical lived experience, EDI work is disconnected from its origin and engine. Critical lived experience is like a courageous counter-hegemonic tonic that is only present when issues are critically explored and they really matter to those involved, not for fashion or professional gain, but because their very lives depend on it.

However, nowadays EDI has become almost an industry, with a myriad of companies offering training and accreditation standards and awards. This can be problematic because it can entail a shift of the focus. Instead of understanding and redressing a problem, the focus turns to achieving an award, a certification or a plaque for the wall.

For those engaged in anti-racist work and who are conscious of their lived experience of racism, the Black Lives Matter movement was not particularly enlightening. However, for many in the third and public sector with insufficient awareness and work against racism, it was a wakeup call, and they wanted or needed to be seen to be doing something to address racism in their lives and/or within their organisations. Many in the UK pronounced themselves about the injustice suffered by George Floyd. There was an element of trend and emergency in doing it, which is different from the fuel that powers the grassroots movements that historically have motivated change. Therefore, what we could anticipate is that when the fashion or pressure to act is gone, many will cease to act. On a positive note, grassroots movements will be there because conscious lived experience is the strength and substance that fuels change.

Challenges and opportunities in EDI work

Challenges in EDI work can be different, whether we are talking about the third, private or public sector. Distinctiveness can be found in relation to funding, expertise, and commitment of those involved; in the expectations there are from them, and in the support or lack of support given to the individuals leading the work. Often, this is work done by so-called champions, generally on a voluntary basis, and it does not necessarily come with influence or decision-making power. I could not comment in much detail here about what are important challenges requiring individual assessment and redress. However, I do want to highlight some specific issues that I have encountered regularly alongside colleagues doing some form of EDI work. I shall refer to these in general terms.

In the third sector, funding cycles and criteria can hinder progress. For example, for programmes tackling prejudice. Although individuals are committed to their work, projects are subject to success criteria required for funding applications. These may have a limited understanding of the issues they seek to redress and, thus, funders may be asking for more than is possible or, indeed, limiting potential. Many organisations, particularly at grassroots level find themselves competing for resources and their work may be unnecessarily duplicated. Moreover, funding may only be granted for a few months or a year, and even when longer terms may be on offer, the ability of individuals to remain in post can be compromised by their need to secure themselves more stable jobs. Retention can be an issue in the third sector, and when individuals depart, intelligence, continuity and momentum are lost. New projects addressing similar issues can, on regular occasions, begin from scratch. Existing materials and resources stop being used by new staff and it is difficult to generate meaningful, sustained change in this way.

Short-term funding also limits the potential for rigorous longer-term evaluation. We can often sense we are making a difference but the 'evidence' is not there.

For those who work as advisors, EDI leads, or champions, in the public or private sector, a whole range of other difficulties can emerge. The protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010 have relatively little in common. They have in common that there is exclusion and unfavourable treatment related to these characteristics, but for a variety of reasons. The evolution of the Equality Act 2010 helps explain this process. Race, sex, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, age, religion or belief,

disability, being married or in a civil partnership, and being pregnant or in maternity leave, are significantly different in terms of their historical background and contemporary context. The prejudices around them and the experiences of oppression they create widely differ. Moreover, there are intersectional experiences of disadvantage that fall through the cracks when a compartmentalised approach is taken.

Demands may be significantly different across protected characteristics and the level of support they receive from practice, policy, and legislation may also differ significantly in different contexts. However, those doing EDI work are often expected to know them all, and to address them all in the same way, with the same resources, etc.

A humble approach is necessary in this scenario where we can draw on the expertise of others, from grassroots organisations and from established charities. One should know whom to call for that support and knowledge exchange. This in turn credits those who know and are the essence of change.

Often, champions have protected characteristics. They may be the only black woman in the office, the only openly gay person, the only person with a visible disability, etc. This can be an isolating, uncomfortable and risky position to take. Trying to explain our oppression to others and seeking their support can be debilitating. Calling out the discriminatory actions of close colleagues and those we depend on to navigate safely every day in our places of work makes it very hard to do a good job. Becoming a troublemaker or an enemy within cannot be the most popular job advert around. However, EDI is work that benefits from both lived experience and knowledge of antidiscrimination policy and practice. Having a protected characteristic is not enough, however, because many people have learned to internalise their oppression and may participate in their own mistreatment. This can be for a range of reasons, be it to survive another day or indeed to gain benefits that would not be available otherwise.⁴

EDI work, then, demands a powerful yet perilous combination – lived experience, knowledge, and a will to promote change even when change is painful, uncomfortable, and unpopular.

How then can those doing EDI work be supported? One way is to do this work as an external consultant, without fear of saying things as they are. Many private consultants operate in this way. Having alternative sources of income together with a level of detachment that allows for candid conversations are significant advantages. When this is not possible, and even for those acting as private consultants, networks of support are paramount. Being in regular touch with like-minded people who understand the demands of the job, the obstacles and the struggles cannot be dispensed with. Along the way in my career in EDI, I have met wonderful people I often rely on for this kind of support.⁵ I am not sure there is a formula that outlines how to form such a network. It tends to be an organic process, but I guess the bottom line is that this should not be an isolating job; there are many doing it, and being in contact with them can be validating, and it is indeed necessary for our well-being.

EDI training, solutions in two-hour sessions

A significant part of EDI work is training procurement, design, and delivery. Like any other learning process, meaningful change or learning will not happen after a single two-hour session or so in an individual's lifetime.

Some time ago, while trying to explain the learning process in EDI, I came up with an analogy. EDI training is similar to learning to play the guitar. This will never be accomplished in a session. It takes a lot more than that. It requires practice and a sense of achievement. It requires the support of those around us who have power. They need to be supportive; often they will need to pay the bill and allow time for us to practice. They need to be fully on board and value the music we are playing.

The environment also has a part to play. We need guitar music playing in the background regularly, including new rhythms and styles. We need some music sheets on the wall and other resources that suit different learners' styles. Images and messages on the walls can be paramount, just as they were in our nursery and primary schools. We learned to read and write through alphabet repetition in that way and because it mattered.

Learning the guitar requires practice, as our fingers may become clumsy after a while. Learning is a lifetime commitment but it should be fun and meaningful, yet challenging.

Learning about the injustice of racism, misogyny, ableism etc., and how to tackle them effectively requires a similar approach, as far as it is a permanent process that requires support and a range of resources.

EDI sessions can be quite emotive and controversial, for some validating, for others uncomfortable. A range of feelings can emerge in a group. This is a major challenge that trainers and educators address in various ways that I could not begin to explore in this space (Adams, 1997; Freire, 1970; Griffin, 1997). However, the bottom line is that people should leave the room thinking and with some resources to reflect upon. They should start thinking critically about something new to them. Learning can be co-produced when those delivering it actively listen and respond to the curiosity and concerns of the participants. EDI sessions are a fruitful space for co-production and action research (Griffiths, 1998: 20-27; Maher and Thompson Tetreault, 1994).

The co-production of materials with those with lived experience and, indeed, having a range of people delivering training is necessary. Individuals have different perspectives and backgrounds. Not all of them will have first-hand experience across protected characteristics. Therefore, many people, many voices, as many as possible, are desirable.⁶ Moreover, it is not the responsibility of people with protected characteristics to become vulnerable before us so that we can learn. This is a dangerous area and, for that reason, full awareness and disclosure about this conundrum should be in place when someone is invited and, indeed, when someone decides to share their personal story (Bell et al., 1997; Mirza, 1998; Rakhit, 1998).

EDI training thus cannot be a two-hour session once in a lifetime, and delivered by a single individual on one day. EDI is a set of values and it needs to be embedded into everything that institutions do as part of their functions. EDI needs to tackle all the levels at which discrimination exists and is made operational: structural, cultural, institutional and personal (Pérez Portilla 2016:61-70). The physical environment may need to change, the law may need to change, policies against harassment for example and complaint procedures might need to be transformed. The culture of the organisation needs revising, for example, are those who make discrimination

complaints supported during and after complaints are made? Who really makes everyday decisions in a department or team? Why? Who is in charge of recruitment and promotion, and what are their values?

Unwitting prejudice and stereotyping are crucial parts of the definition of institutional discrimination that have had relatively little attention (Pérez Portilla, 2016:81-101). Where do prejudices come from? How can they be challenged? (Pérez Portilla, 2018). Personal/individual acts of discrimination cannot be understood outside their structural, institutional and cultural context: all levels need to be acknowledged and tackled. Training is just a small part.

IV. Deconstructing privilege, the missing link

I felt I was exaggerating when I began my reflection affirming that, necessarily, my contribution was that of a migrant. I can see the many ways in which I am in a privileged position compared to many people who, like me, try to make a living in a country where their belonging cannot be taken for granted. I am, however, visibly from an ethnic minority and my accent gives away my Latin-American origins.⁷ Also, when I reflect and I recall the very many times when my job applications were ignored, I cannot help but conclude that what creates a pattern is not a coincidence. More so, this is the pattern experienced by many other migrants like myself, time and again.⁸ I don't want to forget about this now that I have a stable job and my skills are valued. I think that, quite the opposite, now that I am offered platforms, it is pressing to recall the helplessness of being overlooked, underemployed, and devalued because this is exactly what is happening to many migrants who, like myself, will need to wait longer or forever for an opportunity to demonstrate and use their hard gained and valuable skills. It is not about asking for more than anyone else, it is about seeking recognition of our skills and an opportunity to use them – this is an essential human need and what 'Inclusion' should mean.

Opportunities, well-being, and safety are often compromised within migrant communities. Mental health issues are well documented (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities 2017-2022).

Writing this piece, I felt at first that the point of safety was an overstatement in my case. However, I remember being afraid of speaking in my mother tongue with my son in the subway and elsewhere. I used to tell myself that I was being polite, I did not want others to feel excluded from my private conversations but why should they be part of them? The truth is that there was fear there, and this is a sign of safety compromised – no one should be scared of speaking in their mother tongue. Moreover, when we look at the discourse of (no few) politicians and journalists about migrants, we know we are all at risk of being seen as an enemy, as a swarm of invaders, as cockroaches (Pérez Portilla, 2018:7-12). Some migrants have it tougher, much tougher than me of course, but I have a platform, and therefore I should use it.

On that note, I believe that talking about privilege can really be the missing link in identifying discrimination and its redress. It can, for example, help unveil enablers and barriers to opportunities. Enablers, such as financial stability and traineeships may be transferable, and barriers such as nepotism should be removed. I got to the position where I am in because I had access to education in my home country and my mother wanted us to be able to speak English. I received scholarships all the way, from primary school to my PhD studies. I feel it was an advantage for me not to be from an indigenous community in Mexico, because of the racism towards indigenous people in the country. Being 'mestiza' was a relative advantage for me, a privilege that no one should have (Moreno Figueroa, 2010). I also had the privilege of not having to work while I was studying. This allowed me to only focus on my studies, and to make the most of the opportunity I had to be a research assistant during my undergraduate studies. This was an enabler that could be transferred to others through traineeships and other scholarships.

I know how it feels to have it easier, having had mentors and the likeability that comes with familiarity, which in turn makes our efforts more easily valued and our hard work praised. This is what I experienced in Mexico and what I have often felt absent in the UK. I have now, after a long wait, made it to academia, and my contributions are sought and valued (Gabriel and Tate, 2017). However, I know this is not the case for many who are still struggling to get in. To them, I want to dedicate this piece with the hope of seeing many more women of colour where, at present, I often can only see myself.

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¹ SEMPER is the primary staff association that exists to support and represent all minority ethnic police officers and staff on issues of equality and race. In a tweet on 25th May 2023, SEMPER said, 'We stand with OUR Chief Constable in his courageous acknowledgement of Institutional Racism within Police Scotland. We recognise that work needs to be done to create a truly equitable society and will support efforts towards that goal' (SEMPER, 2023).

² In her first day in the job, Chief Constable Jo Farrell backed the statement made by her predecessor Sir Iain Livingston. She said it was a 'difficult message', but she was determined to drive forward an 'anti-discriminatory agenda' (Cowan, 2023).

³ The EHRC was created by the Equality Act 2006. It began to operate in 2007, joining up the work of three previous equality organisations: the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), the Disability Rights Commission (DRC), and the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC).

⁴ See Fanon (1986). Even though Fanon's contributions to ideas about internalised subordination refer to a specific colonial context, they are still influential today. Using psychoanalytical theory to explain the feelings of dependency and inadequacy that black people experience in a white world, he speaks of the divided self-perception of the black subject who has lost his native cultural originality and embraces the culture of the mother country. As a result of the inferiority complex engendered in the mind of the black subject, he will try to appropriate and imitate the cultural code of the coloniser. The behaviour, Fanon argues is even more evident in upwardly mobile and educated black people who can afford to acquire trappings of white culture.

⁵ My soul sister, admired colleague, EDI specialist, artist and dearest friend Monique Campbell is a treasure in my life. We keep each other sane and inspired. Thank you!

⁶ For example, Adams et al. (2000), edited a collection of readings including 'personal accounts' from the targets of discrimination. This allowed them to bring together theory and lived experience, emphasising the interactions among racism, antisemitism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and

classism. Their selections call attention to the interconnections among these issues, as they are part of everyday lived experience.

⁷ My friend and colleague Soledad Montanez (2023) is a leading academic and practitioner working with Latin American communities in London and Scotland. One of her latest research projects is, *The Latin American Communities in Scotland: the hidden stories, the loud stories*.

⁸ Chapter Fifty of the novel *Small Island* by Andrea Levy (2004:448) strikes a chord with many migrants who, like myself, have felt ignored and devalued when opportunities to work and use our professional skills and experience are constantly denied. This was a common feeling amongst participants in a project in which I worked back in 2011-12. Physicians, teachers, scientists, architects, etc. expressed their desire to work and their despair about the many obstacles they encountered when their qualifications were not only non-recognised or difficult to convert but, indeed, doubted or looked down upon because of prejudices about our countries of origin. The project, *Finding Our Feet* supported Third Country National (TCN) women from outside the European Economic Area who were not asylum seekers or refugees. The project aimed to make positive changes for international women by supporting their integration, settlement and participation in local communities (WSREC, 2013:7).