

# More-than-Verbal Tools: Making Participation Tangible and Embodied through Ad-hoc Design Tools When Working with Migrant Women

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**Abstract** *This paper illustrates the process of developing dialogical artifacts and addresses the reflections on approaching complexity when working with migrant women for a social innovation project. The project aims to support women's empowerment in their social, economic, and professional achievements through a year-long training program. The interdisciplinary team's role was to monitor and evaluate the women's satisfaction and integrate their needs and wishes into the project. Since the women have different cultural backgrounds with different language skills and some have low literacy, using traditional verbal-based tools such as interviews, surveys, and questionnaires was very challenging and did not lead to a deeper understanding of the participants' needs. In order to make this process more inclusive and open to More-than-Verbal expressions, we developed several ad-hoc tools that helped us to facilitate participatory processes and get valuable insights from the women. To enable communication and gather information, we developed a card set for facilitating a questionnaire, a performance-like activity involving body, movement, and making, and created a field notes template for the participatory observation that helps the observer to include women's lived experiences. Our paper addresses our case study while explaining the challenges when working with migrant women and the ad-hoc solutions we developed to tackle the emerging crises.*

**Author keywords** *migrant women; empowerment; crisis; social design; design tools*

## 1. Introduction

This paper addresses a case study based on a project called DIL (District Innovation Lab) in which dialogic tools and methods were developed and adapted to reveal the needs, wishes, and desires of migrant women as project participants. DIL was created within the historical socio-cultural action of the non-profit social cooperative OfficineVispa (OV), operating since 1993 in the urban neighborhoods of Bolzano,

South Tyrol, Italy. OV develops and manages various community development spaces and projects with particular attention to predominantly social housing neighborhoods. Their interventions offer the inhabitants physical, relational, and collaborative contexts and spaces. OV aims to develop a critical and civic sense, to create links between the individual, the community, the territory and the socio-cultural network, stimulate participation in public life and value urban spaces as a common good. These objectives intend to reduce the sense of dependency and vulnerability, the risk of solitude and isolation, as well as the risk of neglect and lack of responsibility to the community network and space. In such a context, the project DIL—designed and managed by OV in partnership with a training agency, CiEffe, and the Faculty of Design and Art of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (unibz)—offered an experimental framework for social innovation and focused on migrant women, living in Bolzano, Italy, of working age and in a situation of fragility. In their long-standing work on community development and training courses, both OV and CiEffe have developed experience in working with the target group while unibz brought to the consortium expertise in participation. In the project, OV, as project leader, oversaw the entire project, identifying and engaging participants, adjusting methods, contents and processes to emerging needs and expectations and allocating space. In addition, they worked on connecting the training program to the broader local socio-cultural network. CiEffe had an organizational role for the training courses while the role of the interdisciplinary academic team from unibz (design and social sciences researchers) was to monitor and evaluate the women's satisfaction with the project and map and highlight their needs and wishes so that they could be considered in the planning of the training activities. The women who participated in the project are at risk of cultural marginalization as they are severely constrained in their social environment due to language barriers, lack of knowledge about the local context, and lack of a sense of belonging. The project aims to support women's empowerment in their social, economic, and professional achievements, attuning women to the territory and supporting them to become more independent. It aims to ensure social inclusion and to help women develop skills and knowledge in order for them to start a working life and provide them with individual and social means for their personal development and civic actions.

The women of the DIL project come from different cultural backgrounds, have different language skills, and some have a low literacy level. Using traditional verbal-based tools such as interviews, surveys, or questionnaires was therefore very challenging and did not lead to a deeper understanding of their needs and experiences. In order to make this process more inclusive and open to More-than-Verbal expressions, we iteratively prototyped several ad hoc tools that facilitated the assessment processes and helped us to gather valuable insights from the women.

This paper introduces three main tools and methods developed and adapted during the project. The first one is a “visual talking-cards” set, which is used in a playful and tangible way to facilitate a survey-like questionnaire with visual representations that enable communication between the researchers and the women. The second is a field note template that includes an empathy map for participant observation that helps observers assess and record women’s lived experiences. The last one is an activity based on “body mapping” that helps with conducting focus group sessions through the use of the body as a medium to stimulate women to express themselves in a more embodied way.

Our paper addresses the development of More-than-Verbal Tools (MVT) and explains the challenges behind working with migrant women. By developing tangible and embodied tools, our aim was to support the involved women to express themselves in a more equal and inclusive way. We have used the “say, do, make” model (Sanders, 2002) to describe the tools as “boundary objects” (Star & Griesemer, 1989) used for engaging with women.

## 2. Coping with Crises

In the DIL project, there were many crises that encouraged the researchers to take action and develop strategies. In the paper, we define crises as “disruptions” that occur when we, as researchers, join situations which were contested, contingent, and contradictory and thus require us to sharpen our sensitivity to the contextual problematization of our own knowledge-construction and research practices (Akama, Stuedhal & van Zyl, 2015). The first one was the positioning of the researcher. In such projects, a “designer from outside” (Winschiers-Theophilus et al., 2012) enters into a community that has its own peculiarities and complexities. The first encounter with this external figure can therefore bring friction, rejection, or a shallow dialogue. We can define the first encounter in the community as the first crisis that needs to be faced to build consensus, trust, and an empathetic relationship. Building trust needs time and designers should “set aside enough time to understand the local culture and use this understanding when engaging with participants” (Hussain et al., 2014). Therefore, we started with participant observations, in which the researchers became part of the group of migrant women participating in some learning activities (e.g. a tailoring course). The observations were participatory, either by being part of the group, actively taking part in the activities, or observing the course from a distance. This transitional phase was necessary to nurture a situated mindset about the training course and its participants (Raman & French, 2018) and create a relational base for the researchers and women. In addition, shared leisure activities such as teatime or cooking together helped to strengthen this relationship and build intimacy.

Another crisis was overcoming the language barrier that emerged once we were able to develop a situated mindset toward the project and its participants who have diverse origins and language skills. Most migrant women were from Morocco, followed by Nigeria, and from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Paraguay, Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq, and the Ivory Coast. In some courses, teachers used visuals and gestures to explain certain terms, as some women had low literacy levels, which made communication in a written format difficult. Besides language, Byrne and Sahay (2007) highlight the importance of the “capacity and skills of the participants” when working with diverse communities. Therefore, not only language skills but also other types of skills, like technology usage, drawing skills, etc. should be considered. Moreover, when we entered into the context we acknowledged that it was important to take women's differences into account without falling into standardization when identifying their needs, as they come from different cultural backgrounds. Zinn and Della Rocca (2021) underline the need to be aware of the risk of ‘cultural relativism’; for instance, the different ways of understanding things including women's rights can be influenced by cultural contexts. For this reason, we did not pre-define the tools to employ for our evaluation but ad-hoc tools emerged from our growing understanding and experience of the project context and participants. Additionally, tools remained open for interpretation by the researchers and the participants in the process of getting to know and interacting with each other over time. Hence, we acknowledged the importance of developing tools and ways of communicating that are emergent, situated, open-ended, and specific to participants. Considering all these challenges in the project, the researchers responded with care and sensitivity in collaboration with other stakeholders and developed tools and strategies iteratively. The crises became the outlet for new ideas to tackle these challenges and let researchers be creative and situated in finding solutions.

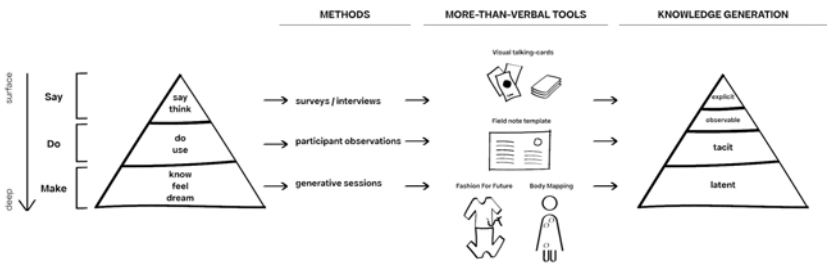
### 3. Designing the More-than-Verbal Tools

When working with marginalized communities, researchers often develop ad-hoc tools and methods in order to answer the specific needs of the community and engage with them in a proper way. While art-based approaches involve embodied experiences and narratives to enable participants to express themselves in alternative and creative ways (Sarantou et al., 2017), making and constructing things as a way to express themselves is also a common method (Tang et al., 2019). In co-design processes, generative tools are used to bring people together to express themselves visually and verbally (Sanders, 2000). Sanders (2002, p. 1) highlights that people “can be both articulate and creative when given appropriate tools with which to express themselves.” These tools become mediators of dialogue, kind of a “boundary object” (Star & Griesemer, 1989), between groups of people who come from different social

worlds. Ehn (2008, p. 96) situates the concept of boundary object in design processes and defines it as “weakly structured as to achieve flexibility and allowing transference and commonality, but strong enough to be used in individual use or use in a uniform environment”. Moreover, these objects can be considered as “contextual tools” (Aguirre et al., 2016) revealing different kinds of knowledge that are embodied, tacit, and experiential (Shubert et al., 2021).

The More-than-Verbal Tools aim at aiding verbal communication that is limited due to the diverse language skills, cultural backgrounds, and low literacy levels. By focusing on embodying the women's lived experiences and expressivity, the tools try to make the women's expressive capacities and thus their agency tangible and to validate them (Raman & French, 2022). We use the Say-Do-Make model (Sanders, 2002) in order to retrospectively reflect on the three generated More-than-Verbal approaches based on their function and ability to reveal knowledge that ranges from explicit to tacit to embodied (Figure 1). In our understanding, More-than-Verbal tools are not merely objects or artifacts, they emerge in the course of the project as a result of the developing situated mindset of the researchers and their relationship with the participants. They can thus take multiple forms, from tangible tools to situated collective rituals, interventions, and workshops. More-than-Verbal tools try to support meaningful engagement by attuning approaches and methods to the quality and dynamics of a particular collective of actors involved in a project (Raman & French, 2018).

Figure 1: Illustration showing More-than-Verbal tools adapted in Say-Do-Make diagram from Sanders (2002).



### 3.1 More-than-Saying

Traditional surveys and questionnaires are the common tools to assess participants' satisfaction. In our project, the complexity of the things to be assessed led to a com-

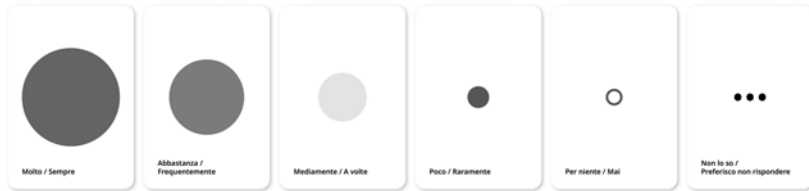
plex language and vocabulary which made the more standard questionnaire unable to give voice to the perspectives, positions, and needs of the women. Therefore, we had to develop mediating tools to facilitate communication with women and give voice to their experiences with an eye on attuning to the women's individual and collective assets (Raman & French 2022). Initially, we thought of combining the training courses with monitoring and evaluation activities in collaboration with the teachers. To give an example, the initial idea was to collaborate with the tailoring course to monitor participants' satisfaction with embroidery. However, this was time-consuming and not all women had the same embroidery skills. Therefore, we decided to measure participant satisfaction with visual representations that we designed to assist verbal communication to supplement the traditional survey and questionnaire. In our initial participatory observation, we realized that participants were mostly engaged with their smartphones, and therefore we decided to use visual emoji-like expressions as visual representations for facilitating the survey. In particular, using visual face emoji representations that were inclusive and non-monotypic to represent the diverse types of women allowed us to address all participants on the same level while tapping into and making tangible their existing expressive capacities. We decided to run play-like sessions in pairs as shown in Figure 2.

*Figure 2: Participant satisfaction evaluation activity using visual talking-cards for the first time. Photo: Merve Bektaş, 2023.*



The session enabled us to evaluate women's involvement and motivation as well as their perspective on different aspects of the training courses (e.g. teachers, contents, teaching approaches). Making these opinions tangible facilitated the project's actors to become more aware of the development of the project including its challenges. Although we used these cards to measure participant satisfaction, they could also become a tool for the course teachers to teach several topics like civic education. The use of colors and shapes help make the meanings represented on the cards more concrete. Once women become familiar with the cards, communication becomes more fluid and the interactive experience gives women more power in their expression.

Figure 3: Some of the visual talking-cards. Design by: Merve Bektaş, 2023.



### 3.2 More-than-Doing

For the participatory observations, we designed a field note template to help the observer embed the lived experiences of the participants. The template includes monitoring and evaluation of frequency, motivation, social interaction, engagement, and satisfaction. Moreover, an empathy map canvas (Gray et al., 2010) helps the observer to move beyond solely describing the participants' actions towards "corresponding" with them to listen and respond to the unfolding of events in an open-ended and careful way (Gatt & Ingold, 2013). Empathy maps (developed by Dave Gray) are used to sensitize designers to users' needs, motivations, and emotions. Therefore, we included it in our templates enabling the researchers to foster empathy with the women and to reduce bias, and misunderstandings related to language and modes of communication. Here, the observers immerse themselves in the situation and translate the quantitative and qualitative data into insights. This template was a result of the time spent on previous participant observations that "contextualize(s) insight of local values and practices within wider local significations" (Howell, 2018, p. 2). Beyond data related to the frequency of the participants, the canvas enabled us to tangibly document aspects about the environment of the courses and more importantly the contextual social dynamics and interactions so that they could be considered in the ongoing shaping of the training program.

Figure 4: Participant Observation Template. Design: Merve Bektaş, 2023.

MODELLO DI OSSERVAZIONE DEI PARTECIPANTI

Data di osservazione:

Nome dell'osservatore:

Posizionamento dell'osservatore:

dalla distanza/partecipando/entrambi

Corso:

Durata del corso:

Docente:

Attività:

Setting:

Frequenza del corso dei partecipanti:

In totale ci sono 17 partecipanti, quindi 17 cerchi per ogni ora. Riempire i cerchi per le presenze di ciascun partecipante ogni 15 minuti. Ad esempio, se alle 09:30 sono presenti 2 persone, riempire solo 2 cerchi, se c'è un nuovo partecipante per l'ora successiva, riempire 3 cerchi e così via. Non riempire nessun cerchio se non c'è nessun partecipante per quell'ora.

17

16

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12

11

10

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2

1

09:30

10:00

10:30

11:00

11:30

12:00

12:30

13:00

13:30


Motivo dell'uscita anticipata dal corso:

Libera Università di Bolzano X Progetto DSI, 2023

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3.3 More-than-Making

Making was an important part of the project in which women used their practical skills not only to create textile artifacts but to manifest their existence and capabilities in society as migrant women. The first edition of Fashion For Future (Bolzano, 2023) hosted a public intervention carried out collaboratively by migrant women and design students, which was then brought into the public sphere to echo their voices. The workshop was developed starting with the crowd-sourcing of used t-shirts, followed by collaboratively cutting them into patterns and sewing them into a manifesto artifact for a public flash mob in Bolzano. The process of making was pre-

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ceded by a critical reflection on the textiles industry being one of the most polluting realities infamous for its mass-production of cheap clothing and unethical labor practices. The hands-on process of making not only allowed the diverse participants to share their skills and make them visible, but it also generated an intimate and respectful space allowing personal discussion and cultural exchange. The workshop artifact resulted in an oversized t-shirt dressing and connected participants in their demonstration for better working conditions for the people who make our clothes—mostly women—in a public protest contributing to the “Good Clothes, Fair Pay” campaign during the worldwide Fashion Revolution Week. The workshop was not per se developed as an evaluative activity. However, when considered as a More-than-Verbal tool, it enabled us to reflect on the potentials of DIL as a social innovation project to create opportunities for the involvement of the participants in the social life of the city. This, as aforementioned, is by creating a concrete space for women to express themselves in More-than-Verbal ways, such as making, in a public context and interacting with other actors in the city.

*Figure 5: Workshop at ZIPLAB with migrant women and design students.  
Photo: Aart van Bezooijen, 2023.*



Figure 6: *Fashion For Future* public intervention in Bolzano. Photo: Alexandra Frühstorfer, 2023.



Besides the *Fashion for Future* workshop, a participatory mapping activity was conducted to reflect on the women's learned skills and future wishes and dreams. In design research, body maps are used as visual representations of the human body that are drawn on paper in order to express experiences that cannot be communicated verbally (Cochrane et al. 2022). They can also be used for reflecting on discourses that have an influence on bodies, "shaping perceptions, imaginaries, and meanings of social roles of sectors or communities" (Ares & Risler, 2016, p. 29). In our participatory mapping activity, we used body mapping to trace and reflect on the capabilities and the know-how that the women acquired or would like to have in the future. The activity involved drawing real-size body silhouettes for mapping certain aspects of a person and/or group in relation to both the internal (tacit experience and know-how) and external (desired experience and know-how) parts of the self. The women started drawing outlines of their bodies on papers hanging on the wall with the help of another participant. They were informed about the 5 different parts of the body and their associated meanings. The head is associated with theoretical and cognitive skills; the mouth with communicative, expressive, and linguistic skills; the heart and belly with emotional and caring skills, the hands with practical and manual skills; the feet with territorial and cultural skills and a sense of belonging. The activity started with a reflection on acquired skills and knowledge and concluded with future desires and visions. These visualizations enabled the researchers to understand the capabilities that women were able to acquire compared

to those foreseen by the training program. Concurrently, it helped to bring light to those competencies that, while not foreseen by the training program, were considered fundamental by the participants in order to achieve the overarching ambition of the program to support the women's empowerment in their social, economic, and professional life and their independence. Nevertheless, the visualized body maps became more than an instrument for monitoring and evaluating the training courses. It helped the women to recognize their competencies individually and collectively and see themselves as competent individuals. It was an alternative way for communication and reflection in which the body became an essential medium to embrace and reveal the women's voices. Moreover, as the activity was a collaborative making process, it facilitated interaction between women, teachers, and researchers.

*Figure 7: Body mapping activity showing the collaboration. Photo: Merve Bektaş, 2023.*



*Figure 8: Body mapping activity. Photo: Merve Bektaş, 2023.*



## Conclusion

This paper presents a case study of designing More-than-Verbal tools as an approach to deal with the challenge of involving the voices of migrant women in situations of fragility in the ongoing evaluations and shaping of a social innovation project in Bolzano (Italy). It addresses the potential of More-than-Verbal tools to use crises as triggers for the researchers to attune to the participants' contextual capacities and needs for expression rather than downplaying them. In this way, it has shown that participants' empowerment and crises are closely intertwined and not mutually exclusive and linked to situatedness, where pains and gains are embraced together. In the DIL project, we interpreted crises as “disruptions” of the researchers' perspectives and practices when entering into situations which are contested, contingent, and contradictory (Akama, Stuedhal & van Zyl, 2015). These situations need to be confronted by constantly and carefully attuning pre-existing perspectives and practices, including the methods and tools, to the emerging expressive needs and capacities of the participants which often evade what can be known in advance of the process of developing trust and mutual learning. To enable expression, these More-than-Verbal tools move beyond predefined methods and towards their iterative development, based on unveiling and interacting with the crises emerging from situated encounters between researchers and participants. Additionally, by being open-ended they enable re-interpretation by researchers and

participants together and over time. Furthermore, the focus on More-than-Verbal expressions and on making them tangible helps move beyond verbal language as main avenues for voicing needs, opinions, and desires. As such, the tools have proven to be a valid approach for empowering groups who experience marginalization due to different language backgrounds and capacities. In particular, the “visual talking-cards” set helped the researcher to convey to the involved women complex concepts (motivation, engagement, social interaction between participants and teachers, satisfaction with spaces, tools and services offered, etc.) while facilitating them to express their opinions concerning such concepts. The participatory observation canvas managed to document intangible aspects of the training course, such as environmental aspects and contextual social dynamics and interactions which brought further understanding to the women's lived experiences. Finally, the body mapping activity helped to concretely visualize the capacities that women felt to embody at the end of the course and those that they considered fundamental—even if not achieved in the training—in order to improve their social condition and to achieve empowerment. Thus, the More-than-Verbal tools supported the creation of a space for the women to give their own feedback to shape the project and made it possible for them not only to communicate their needs but also reflect upon them in a collective manner. In doing so, the tools also helped to balance inequalities and power dynamics between all actors involved in the project, in our case women, teachers, researchers, and tutors in relation to the assessment of the project's effectiveness and potential for social innovation. As such, the paper can be seen as a contribution to the need for supporting “genuine participation” of marginalized groups in social innovation projects. Finally, the More-than-Verbal tools presented in this paper can also become open-source and be shared with similar initiatives to be used in future projects. Nevertheless, additional exploration of such tools in different contexts and groups of people would be required in order to assess their potential for replicability and adaptability.

### Statement on compliance with ethical standards

The participant women, who were kept anonymous in the surveys, had signed a consent declaration according to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) standards on privacy and data treatment in the ESF service agreement at the very beginning of the project, after the selection process.

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