9. Towards Evaluation-based Participatory Museum Work

In this final chapter, I reflect on the findings of this research and their implications. I set these findings against the backdrop of existing knowledge and the conclusions drawn in recent studies, so as to underscore the contribution of this investigation and of the individual perspectives that shaped my argument throughout. The reflection on former projects and their outcomes for museums and participants aims to serve as a starting point for shaping future approaches to collaborations with forced migrants. At the same time, this concluding chapter draws on my work as a museum practitioner and proposes ways for these findings to realistically be put into practice.

As pointed out by Ahmed, "too much research in this field is premised on findings that institutions *want found:* from toolboxes to good practice" (2012, 10). Many museums initiate participatory work with forced migrants out of a desire to engage with the issue, but implicitly they hope to be acknowledged for their inclusive work, or even admired for their courage to tackle such a complex topic. By involving participants in this research, I broadened the possibilities of what might be uncovered, even if this evaluation did not support the institutions' goals. This also required a focus that went beyond the outcomes and consequences for the museum; through the reflections of participants and practitioners, the study addressed the extent to which the goals of participatory work envisioned by institutions were achieved, both for the participants and for the institutions themselves. This research analysed different anticipated outcomes for museums, starting from what museums want to get out of participatory work (informed by a contributory logic), and assessing how this actually affects the participants involved, and whether the museums enacted a logic of care (see Morse 2021). Though these projects might have a direct impact on museum visitors or an indirect one on the

wider community (especially through the discourse deployed, for example), this study limits itself to analysing the immediate ways in which the projects affected those involved as practitioners and as participants.

At the start of this book, I set out to understand the ways in which participatory museum projects with forced migrants generate sustainable outcomes for the participants and the museum. To this end, I looked at the goals and processes that were most prominently mentioned by my research participants, I outlined potential outcomes and how these were or could be made more sustainable, and I discussed the infrastructures in place to support participatory work that might serve the participants rather than the museum. These aspects formed central discussion points in the previous chapter, where I addressed my findings about the potential outcomes of museum work in relation to the framework introduced at the start of this investigation. Studying the longer-term outcomes of museum work, I considered the ethics of the case studies within the sociopolitical framework of the present moment (and a potential future), and the role of museums in sustainably facilitating participation.

To conclude this project, this chapter addresses the main findings of my research and points to two possible and indispensable dimensions for participatory museum work with forced migrants. The first dimension responds to the understanding that participatory practices already foster long-term outcomes, but current museum infrastructures do not allow for sustainable practices to be maintained, evaluated and interacted with after a project's end. It emphasises the different outcomes and their presence in the museum and for the participants today. The second dimension highlights the need for a people-centred approach. Assessing the hierarchies in museums and the perceived superior position of the museum (and its practitioners), this dimension builds on the colonial framework that continues to mould museum work today. In this section, I draw on Morse's proposed 'logic of care' as a means of developing projects focused on the participants rather than the museum's aims and objectives, and provide further practical tools for supportive and ethical practices. These findings bring together the literature and the empirical materials from my research to confront contemporary museum practices. Through these findings, I conduct an initial assessment of what is needed to improve these practices and to expand their sustainable outcomes, thereafter providing more concrete steps for museum practitioners who want to engage with forced migrants or other marginalised people in a meaningful way. Finally, I point towards the limitations of this study and

potential avenues for future research, as I believe this study is merely a small step in what I consider the right direction.

9.1 Main findings

At the start of this research project, I posed the question: In which ways do participatory museum projects with forced migrants generate sustainable outcomes for the participants and the museum? In response to this question, I focused on the processes that led to the outcomes of participatory projects with forced migrants. To organise the processes that made up the participatory projects studied, I structured my investigation around the most commonly discussed goals for participatory work. These focal points were generated by an explorative study of the empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews, my personal experiences and observations at the MEK, and relevant project documents obtained from the different institutions. The study's structure aligns with the objectives referred to in research on participatory work, yet these have not before been studied in this context and by way of interviews with practitioners and participants. Throughout the chapters, I singled out many different aspects of museum practices to highlight the ways in which these benefit participants or the museum or both. To do so, I analysed the experiences of the different stakeholders as personal yet equally valuable accounts of the project. My research revealed that all of the participatory projects had some sustainable outcomes, yet not each museum or practitioner was able to (or willing to) maintain these outcomes, especially those that were the most meaningful for the participants.

As pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, the following sections discuss the necessary infrastructures, tools and planning that are required for maintaining a sustainable outcome, as well as the need to shift towards a people-centred approach that goes beyond setting goals that serve participants, but actually invites them to consider the (possibly shared) objectives of the project. Each of these dimensions point towards the importance of evaluation processes as part of participatory work, an aspect that will be further discussed thereafter.

9.1.1   Outcome-oriented museum work

Participatory practices already foster long-term outcomes, yet these might not be maintained or continued outside of the project, nor serve participants' (potentially very similar) goals. They are present in visible and invisible ways, but not sustainably. Outcomes, even if they continue to be present or engaged with, will not have the same impact in an ever-changing society, as became clear from the fact that some of the projects and practices seemed somewhat outdated just three years down the road. Sustainability, therefore, is not something that merely needs to be produced, it also needs to be enacted (or adapted) over time. A more sustainable practice, therefore, anticipates change and enables outputs and outcomes that might respond accordingly, as it focuses on the future as well as the present. A different approach, as addressed earlier, might require changes in the available infrastructures or how these are used, as well as an extended timespan for a museum project, which includes an evaluation process for the project and its outcomes. In this section, I conclude my study by outlining a new focus for a more sustainable museum practice. I draw connections between my findings and the practice of museum work, and consider how an outcome-oriented approach can be adopted by practitioners.

With the aim of considering the sustainability of these participatory practices, this investigation points to an outcome-focused approach as a potential step towards more sustainable praxis; it suggests that participatory projects should work towards outcomes that allow for sustainable, ongoing processes, in line with goals set by museum practitioners as well as by project participants. In keeping with the chapter structure of this book, it might seem that the goals reflected potential outcomes for both museums and practitioners. However, the project goals intended to support project participants were designed by museum practitioners, who anticipated that these and other outcomes would be relevant for participants, but they did not implement an evaluation process with participants to discuss these outcomes and their relevance for the people involved. The different chapters identified four related problems for participatory work and its capacity to generate sustainable outcomes: (1) museums' heavy focus on outputs, such as exhibitions or a museum catalogue; (2) the limitation of the participatory process to one aspect of a project and a set time line, precluding the possibility of engaging in collaborative work in the museum's spaces after a project; (3) a failure to evaluate processes and outcomes during or after the project, which

allowed for conflicts to grow and actively excluded participants from relevant conversations; and (4) a lack of resilience when it comes to the outcomes of participatory work, such as project websites or other discursive aspects, which are unlikely to stand the test of time. The temporal, spatial and financial limitations on projects are necessary, yet current praxis and infrastructures allow little room for extending a project even the slightest bit beyond its visible output. They actively obstruct ongoing benefits for participants and museums, as well as the possibility of enduring connections forming between the two. Participatory museum work needs to look beyond potential outputs and direct its attention towards potential outcomes of the processes.

An outcome-oriented approach first of all establishes the need to extend a project's timeline to include and continue outcomes (and consequences) of a project. As pointed out in the previous chapters, the institutional infrastructures – whether digital, organisational, spatial or financial – often place practical limitations on the projects, but they can be navigated and shaped by museum practitioners to facilitate participatory work and also (slowly) engender change within the institution. One of the main obstacles to a more sustainable practice is the limited financial support and the finite temporal frameworks for funded projects. However, setting goals is part of museum practice and is often required for funding applications, and these goals could transcend the outputs traditionally outlined by museums. Outcomes might encompass providing an ongoing benefit for the participants or the museum, such as additions to the museum's collection, expanding networks or creating job opportunities through a project, but also the emergence of friendships or contributing to a more positive discourse. It can also translate to ongoing processes, such as continuing to provide a space for participants to come together, maintained relationships between the museum and the participants, an ongoing digital presence, or the potential for continued online engagement. What is important is that the maintained outcomes are not based solely on the museum's goals, but consider long-term needs on the part of the participants as well. Some participants pointed to several aspects of the project that they had hoped would continue after the project's run-time. The aspects that were deemed especially relevant by the participants were least likely to be maintained as a result of a participatory process. This is partly due to the lack of related infrastructures, which do not suffice mainly because of the limited benefits of these aspects for the museum. So long as museums continue to rely on a contributory logic, their practices and infrastructures will not include work that is solely meant to

benefit the 'communities' they intend to serve; a more sustainable praxis requires frameworks that prioritise potential benefits for participants, and the shared understanding that these logics do not have to be mutually exclusive.

Secondly, an outcome-oriented approach requires an evaluation-based practice that engages participants in the assessment of a project and its outcomes. As has become clear from this research, participatory work with forced migrants is not straightforward, and outcome evaluations (or more broadly framed evaluations of impact) are not generally part of museum practice. This study demonstrated a clear lack of interest in, or a perceived unimportance of, evaluation processes as part of museum projects. Despite the importance of outcome-based evaluation having being addressed as far back as 2003 by scholars such as Stephen Weil, it has not yet become an integrated part of museum practices. None of the case studies included an evaluation with the participants as part of the project; the projects were initiated by the practitioners and did not involve a mechanism for inviting feedback from the participants throughout or after the collaborative process. Project time plans do not only fail to anticipate potential outcomes or ongoing processes, they also leave little time for a collaborative evaluation with practitioners and participants. Projects are limited to the time frame required to develop the envisioned output. However, in order to learn from previous projects, to develop participatory processes and improve museum work at large, museums need to seek ways to evaluate their processes and integrate the lessons learnt. However, what many practitioners and museums were lacking is a more streamlined evaluation practice and a guide or methodology on how to take on a collaborative evaluation process as part of a project with forced migrants. This requires an ethical approach and a 'safe space' – both central to the next section – and an evaluation method that is relevant for participants and practitioners alike.

9.1.2   A people-centred approach

In addition to the need for outcome-oriented museum work, this study outlined the relevance of understanding the individual and their role within a project, within an institution and within existing hierarchies. Grounded in the colonial framework of the institution, museum practices perpetuate colonial relations, and practitioners need to actively challenge the existing structures in order to effect change. Morse put forward her notion of a 'logic

of care' (2021) as a way to differently understand community engagement. According to this logic, rather than focusing on potential contributions to the institution, museums set out to fulfil objectives set by participants themselves. Building on this principle, I would like to propose a closer focus on the individuals involved, moving away from inviting 'communities' towards considering participants and practitioners as individuals. For museums to enhance their participatory practices and the sustainability of their work, they need to adopt a people-centred approach, much like the one I applied in this project. In this section, I explore the implications of such a people-centred approach, considering how processes can be more tailored and avoid assumptions about 'communities', applying a logic of care in practice, and outlining an ethical framework that starts from people's needs and supports the museum's potential to be and remain a 'safe space'.

Adopting a people-centred approach in this research, the study has been informed by a relatively small number of interviews, and an even smaller number of interviews with former project participants. Therefore, I cannot generalise their contributions to represent all experiences of participatory work with forced migrants, or even to represent the experiences of other participants from the same project. Rather than generalising my findings drawn from individual experiences, I build on these individual experiences and assess how these sit within the museum as an institution in order to propose meaningful (or necessary) steps forward. Through this approach, I highlight the importance of accepting the experiences of individuals as valid. Rather than dismissing different opinions, I take them as a measure of the diversity in perception and experiences between people. In line with this method, I have found it is vital for museums to recognise individual reflections as well, such as those that occur during the evaluation of the projects, but also much earlier in the process, when identifying the objectives and needs of the different stakeholders, including the individual participants and the museum practitioners. The people-centred approach I am proposing highlights the need for the museum to understand participants as individuals rather than communities, but also outlines that museums should not be seen as institutions that operate mechanically, or without personal influence, but rather as the people who make up the institution and define the museum's practices. This approach does not only enable a more ethical practice, it also diminishes the hierarchies between practitioners and participants, as their roles and personal reflections are considered equally valid.

To allow for such an approach, museums must move away from inviting 'communities', and especially from addressing forced migrants as a homogeneous community they can reach out to and represent. In this study, I addressed this concept as a means to gain insight into the potential of, and barriers to, creating a network with the participants. Networking seemed to be one of the most commonly shared goals. The museum views this potential outcome as a means of sparking and supporting future projects, though practitioners often apply the concept of 'community' here too, limiting the future possibilities of working with the former project participants, as was clear from the past and planned engagement with the participants who worked on the *Aleppo* project at the Tropenmuseum. For participants, however, a network is a means of remaining connected with the museum after having contributed so much of their time and effort, and it provides an avenue for keeping in touch with other participants (or potentially even connecting with participants from other projects). The related ambitions and the particular project outcomes should be tailored to the individuals involved, based on their ideas and needs, and not remain focused on a supposed 'community'. To do so, museums should review their invitation methods, finding ways to address people without stereotyping or pigeon-holing them as forced migrants (and nothing else). Using 'areas of curiosity' as a starting point, as discussed in this study, is one potential alternative approach that does not reduce people to their experiences but gathers people with a similar interest. Another way is to invite people that already function as a group, as seen in the example of *Museum Takeover*. Further ways of inviting and engaging participants on a more personal level need to be tested and researched (ideally, of course, in collaboration with potential participants).

In this and other aspects of museum work, the social responsibility of the museum as a public institution becomes more urgent, yet within this public role, the museum should still aim to remain a 'safe space', or to maintain a 'safe space' within its building. Ideally, it should offer a space in which the museum is conscious of its actions and their ethical implications, and is willing to collectively break down persistent hierarchies. Creating and sustaining this space and role requires the museum to move away from a 'one-fits-all-approach' when it comes to participatory work, as well as implementing thoroughgoing evaluation processes. I addressed the topic of evaluation earlier to highlight its relevance for an outcome-oriented practice, but it should also play an important role in ethical, people-focused work. Evaluation processes can and should be tailored to respond to the needs of

the participants, and reflect their goals as well as those set by the museum. The integration of evaluation processes into participatory practice provides the opportunity for practitioners to identify challenges and learn about the project's shortcomings, and for participants to reflect on the process so far and point out what they would like to do differently. In these evaluation processes, there could be room for individual feedback and group discussions, ideally led by a mediator who might also be involved in case of a conflict and who would be able to invite critical reflection. This could be someone from the museum who is otherwise not part of the project, or it could be an external mediator who comes in to facilitate discussion. These processes of evaluation within the museum's 'safe space' are central to the ethical framework that future participatory practices require.

This framework is based on existing guidelines for ethics in museums, but it goes beyond this, building on the findings of this study. Further outlined in the following section, this framework proposes a mode of practice that continuously demands that practitioners review and challenge their own perspectives, prejudice and privilege. It creates a space (a 'safe space', if you will) in which processes can be assessed and people can be challenged. This space should continue to exist after the project has come to an end, providing particular support to an ongoing reflection on the outputs and outcomes. In this sense, the success of participatory projects and their ethics is determined by their sustainability.

9.2   Implementing lessons

In this study, I have shed light on different processes in recent participatory projects working with forced migrants in museums. These projects revealed a number of larger issues, such as the limiting role of museum infrastructures when it comes to facilitating participatory and digital practices in the museum. Additionally, the case studies revealed that the hierarchies between practitioners determine the potential for participatory work to be understood and employed as a central approach, rather than being a mere add-on. In addressing my main findings, however, I teased out two key elements that are crucial for participatory projects with forced migrants, in the hope that they can become more beneficial for the participants in the future. I proposed a shift towards an outcome-based rather than an output-based practice, which requires a more sustainable participatory approach from museum

practitioners and allows for more relevant and ethical long-term outcomes for all involved (and for those engaging with the project at a later stage). I also emphasised the need for a people-centred approach in order to collaboratively develop and evaluate the processes and outcomes of museum work.

In essence, the central idea of participatory practice is that the work should not be isolated from people outside of the museum. However, being a museum practitioner myself, I am well aware of the limitations on both money and time for museum projects, whether these are participatory or not. However, one aspect of these limitations is exacerbated by practitioners themselves, as they underestimate the required budgets to initiate and maintain participation, and they often fail to integrate evaluation processes into their time plans (those outlined in the funding applications as well as their own time plans and the potential overlap with future projects). However, as addressed at the very start of this study, funding requirements do shift in response to museum practices, and vice versa. It has become clear that the provisions of funding bodies can be limiting, but many museum practitioners manage to find ways around these to make the envisioned work possible. Infrastructural limitations – such as the financial structures and the organisational divisions between different departments – can be overcome, but they also might be navigated and challenged by practitioners to make a people-centred and outcome-focused approach possible. The different reflections on each of the case studies point out that this requires practitioners to be flexible in their approach and to prioritise the needs and perspectives of the participants. But they also require the right tools to transform their practices or help them change the habits of the institution.

In the previous section, I suggested a revised ethical framework needed for achieving the necessary shifts in museum practice. A more informed ethical approach ought to draw on post-colonial studies and build on lessons from anti-racist practices and anti-discrimination training, enabling a process of continuous review of the practitioner's own perspectives, prejudice and privilege. It would invite participants into the process earlier on so that they can be part of this conversation, yet an ethical practice should not rely on participants speaking up about discriminatory practices and stereotypical representations. It demands a self-reflexive approach that, in turn, requires significant self-awareness and empathy from museum practitioners. Practitioners should create a 'safe space', much in the ways described in this study, which continues to be maintained once outputs 'go public'. The ethical framework indicates that this space can be sustained

as a publicly accessible space by preparing participants for encounters with press and audiences, and providing a space they can go to should they feel uncomfortable in a situation. As mentioned above, the process should involve someone who can mediate conflict if necessary, discuss critical reflections, and facilitate a shared evaluation. Most importantly, the framework has to be continuously revised and altered to ensure it supports an ethical practice with current and future participants of museum projects.

A more sustainable, outcome-oriented practice requires evaluation. As part of this study and the wider research framework, Cassandra Kist, Franziska Mucha, Inge Zwart and I developed a tool that can support such evaluation processes and assist with the planning of participatory projects.[1] The tool starts from a quote from a participant as a prompt for conversation about the needs, goals, interests and ideal circumstances for each of the individual participants and practitioners. Tools like this one provide a framework that goes beyond the museum's perspective and invites participants to put forward their own envisioned outcomes. Based on these perspectives, museum practitioners might not be able to make miracles happen, but at least the participants will be able to consider what role the museum could fulfil for them.

9.3   A proposal for future research

This study unpacks the potential sustainable outcomes of participatory work with forced migrants; it presents a careful analysis of personal experiences and institutional learnings that can support a more sustainable and ethical participatory praxis in the future. The study pointed to the need to integrate a post-colonial ethical framework in order to shift existing power structures within the neo-colonial institution that is the museum. For this project, I evaluated four case studies as exemplary participatory projects with forced migrants. Based on qualitative data gathered through interviews, official documents and museums' documentation of the different projects, I built an argument that carefully proposes alternative processes and outcomes that were shown to be meaningful to some of the participants. Throughout the

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1   The tool 'Why (NOT) participate?!' is a set of cards that can be printed by practitioners and institutions. It can be found on the website of the POEM research project: https://www.poem-horizon.eu/why-not-participate

investigation, I applied a framework that, rather than focusing on the projects individually, analysed commonalities in different aspects of museum work. In taking these four examples, the research addressed a few general challenges and experiences based on many individual perspectives on the processes. In this final sub-chapter, I outline the limitations of this study, and identify the aspects that require further research and practical experimentation.

This study is one of the first to take into consideration the personal reflections of the participants on the participatory museum projects they were involved in. Rather than conducting an ethnographic study of the projects as they were happening, this research found value in the reflection on, and evaluation of, projects in conversation with those who took part. This methodological framing limited the study to personal reflections on, and recollections of, participatory work, which combined with the project descriptions and related documentation provided a suite of personal lenses rather than a seemingly objective study carried out by me as a researcher. This is at once a limitation and an asset; the research is dependent on the interviewees truthfully discussing the projects, while at the same time pointing out that the experiences and related memories of those involved are inevitably more truthful than anything I could discern or establish from a distance. These experiences and their lasting effects are central to this study. The chosen approach, however, also limited the number of research participants and made it especially difficult to include many former participants' perspectives in the process. For the research into the participants' perspectives, I had to rely on museum practitioners and project facilitators to put me in touch with former participants for an interview. This limited the scope to those who remained in contact with the institution or project facilitators, or even those put forward by practitioners, possibly because they anticipated their reflections would be helpful or reflect positively on the museum. This may provide a one-sided perspective regarding some aspects of the projects. It also means that the personal perspectives outlined from the interviews cannot be generalised, but rather should be understood as individual reflections that are shaped by the personal circumstances of the research participants interviewed for this study.

The broad focus of this study has allowed for a thorough investigation of many different dimensions of participatory museum work with forced migrants. It has discussed many aspects that have been addressed before, but that require further practice-based research as well as processes of trial and error. Despite most of the project outcomes being in some ways manifested

in visitors' experiences of, and perspectives on, the project (such as how the discourse is interpreted or understood by the people who visited the museum), this study limited itself to the active project collaborators. For the purposes of this study, which focused on the outcomes and consequences for those directly involved, the focus on practitioners and participants sufficed to understand their experiences. However, the perspectives of visitors would be interesting to unpack, and the impact of these projects on museum visitors requires further research. Further research may also entail visitors' online reflections on project outputs and the engagement with a project's 'digital ruins' over time, especially in order to consider the need for, and potential of, sustaining projects in this digital realm. The potential of building a network and sustaining relationships with participants, for example, is addressed in this study, but further research needs to explore the infrastructure that would be required for this practice to become an integrated part of museum work, or to review the necessity of personal relationships for building sustainable connections. This is just one example, but each of the chapters reflect on aspects that are new to museum studies (or museums in general) and require further assessment. But the most important proposal I make is for further research into the experiences of participants and people's individual goals as a means of understanding the (potential) value of participatory museum practices, and to consider ways of integrating these into museum practice in the near future. These changes would help to create sustainable practices, which serve participants, practitioners and museums alike, both during the course of the projects and thereafter.