Professor Bridget Anderson, Director of Migration Mobilities Bristol, interviewed by Tesfalem Yemane on the relationship between research, policy and practice.

This is a full transcript of the interview, which was pre-recorded for the Yorkshire and Humber migration research network event on 14 October at the University of Huddersfield.

Tesfalem Yemane: Hello my name is Tesfalem Yemane and I am a Community Researcher here at Migration Yorkshire and a PhD candidate at the University of Leeds. Today it's my great honour to welcome Professor Bridget Anderson of Bristol University to share with us knowledge, expertise and experience on the relationship between research, policy, practice and I

might say politics in migration and mobility. Professor Bridget, welcome and thank you so much for making the time to sit with me today. So, to start off, as I said the conversation today is about the interplay between research, knowledge production and synergy between research and policy in migration and mobility, so it would be good if you can start by sharing your experience, and the question I want to ask is to what extent does academic research translate into policy and practice, and if any, and relevant, what could be some of the barriers that hinder the transfer of, or the translation of academic research on migration into policy and practice?

Professor Anderson: Yes, thanks very much, and thanks very much for inviting me to speak. I think this is a really interesting question, and I suppose the obvious example is, you know, academic research can translate into policy and practice when it matters in a direct and day-to-day way. You talked about politics and I think that that also is really important. I mean, the politics of research and the politics of the context within which we are doing research, I think, has a very direct effect on the ways in which it can translate into practice. So, I think that, generally, research reports on their own don't change things, they are parts of a process and, I think, seeing it, sort of understanding research as a contribution to a process really matters, so, you know, even if the Home Office doesn't change its policy as a result of the research, the research process can bring people together, it can open up new ways of working, it can, you know, develop new alliances and certainly, in my experience, very often research participants, particularly kind of grassroots

interviewees, if you say ‘Oh well you know the point of this research is we're going to produce a report’, they don't really care about reports, but what they do care is, you know, hey this is, you know, lunch and a chance to learn new things and meet new people. So, I think kind of recognising that that research process is valuable in itself and trying to ensure that research participants can get something out of the research process, not simply a kind of product at the end, I think, can really help the translation into practice.

You were asking about difficulties. I suppose I can think of two off the top of my head. So one is, I think it's important to agree on the nature of the problem. So, you know the problem or the kind of dilemma, or whatever it is that's being investigated because quite often we can use words and think that we agree on something and actually, we don't, so I'll give you a really concrete example where there used to be a lot of research, much less now, I said, but there still is, which is trafficking. OK so we've got research to do it, we’ve got money to do research on trafficking but what is the problem of trafficking? Is the problem a problem of undocumented migration? Which is what the Home Office says. Is the problem a problem of labour exploitation? Which is what often trade unions and migrants’ organisations might say. Or is the problem a problem of prostitution and sex workers? Which is what feminist organisations might say. So you have this single word trafficking, but I think if you're going to try and research trafficking without really understanding what you think the problem is you're trying to solve, then you can get into very problematic ground quite quickly. And the second issue, I

think, that kind of can be a barrier in the translation of academic research into policy and practice, is time. Academic research, as you know, you're a PhD candidate is, you know, it operates along quite long timeframes whereas NGOs and activists often want to know the answer in the next three months, and that's a very different kind of research, actually a different kind of research practice, and doesn't necessarily fit with the ways that academics work, you know, they both have their value but they're just different. So I think those kind of timeframes and understanding whatever the problem is, what do you understand the problem to be, I think are the key things and making sure that you've got clarity of expectations on both sides about that I think it's important.

Tesfalem Yemane: Thank you, thank you. So, drawing on your work or the work of others in another context that you might be aware of, could you give us an example from your work where research has directly influenced policy and practice?

Professor Anderson: Well from my own work, I think the obvious example is the work that I started off doing with migrant domestic workers, which was actually how I came to be an academic in the first place, which was quite instrumental. I was working organising undocumented migrant domestic workers in the 80s and realised, you know, there is actually a need for doing research here. And so that was, you know, and we campaigned to get the visa, my book was part of a campaign to get the visa changed, I was very proud when, when we won the campaign and there was a religious celebration included in this

in the kind of celebrations and my book was taken as an offering to the altar and I felt that was my, probably, my finest moment. Well, I suppose that's an example of where, you know, it was part of a much broader campaign and it was really kind of integrated into that very kind of longstanding work. Just to say that now the Government has reversed that policy and now workers are back to being tied to their employers, so that's, you know, can't be too proud too long there's always work to be done.

Tesfalem Yemane: Thank you, thank you, again, if I, if I may take you to, to Bristol, and so from their perspective your location where you are, in Bristol for example, or another context, could you describe any collaboration, partnership or synergy that exists between academia, practice and all other communities working in the frontline, or any other similar examples where we have collaboration working, whether in the in the UK or in other contexts and in other countries?

Professor Anderson: There's lots of really fantastic examples, actually. So you asked about Bristol and I think a really obvious example that I think is quite interesting, is there is a project called the Everyday Integration Project, that is a research project that collaborates with more than 40 organisations in Bristol, and I think what's interesting about that collaboration is that the collaboration is principally not with migrant and asylum seeking organisations. I mean obviously migrant and asylum seeking organisations are there, but because of the kind of project stance that, you know, integration is not only about migrants

and asylum seekers, you know, it's about the building of different kinds of communities and neighbourhoods so, you know, there are participants from homelessness organisations, from disabled people's organisations, from community centres, anti-racism, so it's actually kind of quite a forum for a conversation between those different groups about, you know, the kinds of neighbourhoods and challenges that people have in kind of working together. So I think that's a good example and the reason why I highlighted it is because I do think that making connections between migrants, asylum seekers and other organisations, you know, learning from disability groups, for example, disabled people's groups, and also disabled people's groups, learning from migrants, particularly learning from disabled migrants, just as an example. I think kind of not siloing migration and asylum, but seeing how it's kind of interconnected in everything we do, I think, is something that can be really valuable.

Tesfalem Yemane: Thank you and my final question is, looking into the future, what are your hopes for how researchers, academics and migration sector could work together in the future?

Professor Anderson: Ok, so I've got two thoughts with respect to that. I think it's a really great question so thank you for it. So one, is really the importance of, I talked about joining up. I do think that academic researchers can help join up questions of migration with questions of anti-racism and anti-colonialism and I feel that that’s something there's been quite a lot of thinking

about, and that actually we need to kind of translate that into alliances and understandings on the ground. So I think that's something where maybe academics can, you know, will have something to say and I suppose that then connects with my other more kind of general point which is, I mentioned the issue of timing, you know, and the different timeframes that policy and practice work to as compared to academia. I also think that, actually, one of the challenges for people like on the frontline is that they don't have time to think, you know, it's just like oh we've got an urgent problem, somebody is homeless, got to find place, you know, we've got to do something about it. I think that academics do, still, though it's hard fought, have time to think and that actually that's something that we can offer to activists. And I think that's not because we are cleverer, and it's not because, you know, we know better. I quite often use the example of the university as a kitchen. Everyone cooks, some of us are trained chefs, some home cooks are better than trained chefs, so everyone thinks, you know, I think, in this country increasingly there's a kind of negative attitude to intellectual work. There's nothing to be ashamed about or embarrassed about doing conceptual work, we all do it, it's not just something that happens in the ivory tower. So I think making the university a space where, as I said, a kitchen where we can come and cook together, where we can work conceptually together, where people can think about the conceptual tools that they use, look at other possibilities, sort of think if there's other ways of thinking about a problem, I think, if we want to, if you want to have a kind of long term kind of perspective, I think that's

something that academics can help with.

Tesfalem Yemane: Thank you. In recent years you're very aware there has been, or should I say, maybe a mainstreaming of some critical migration work, maybe not an emergent but more as centre of the conversations and discourses in especially maybe in academia, about linking migration and mobility with history, colonialism, international political economy, for example. Do you see there is hope that this emerging critical literature being translated into praxis and policy, or what should be the way forward for example in the context of your final remarks?

Professor Anderson: Well, I think exactly the kind of thing that we've been talking about. I think that this is precisely the sort of area that actually we need to get researchers, activists, and NGOs together to really have kind of open conversations about this. And I think with a recognition that, you know, I have to come out, I don't believe that you can ever have just border controls, no. I think, however, I recognise that firstly, if we end border controls now then it will be in our capitalist society it will be a race to the bottom, but also that people are struggling for their immigration status, they are struggling for citizenship, so, you know, it's, so I think kind of thinking about how you respond both to those immediate needs and recognise the context that we're in, without losing a kind of aim for justice, and without, kind of, without feeling like we, we can move on beyond the immediate demands. And, actually demand more, and I think that maybe that's where we can start consolidating those

conversations, which isn't to say that we then have to leave behind the very important kind of practically based work about, you know, about actual kind of specific visas, about experiences of asylum, and so on and so forth. But I think, adding to that, is, yeah, I think that's a step where I think we, we all have responsibilities.

Tesfalem Yemane: Thank you, thank you very much on behalf of Migration Yorkshire so I would like to say a big thank you. So I think that our conversation comes to a conclusion. So, thank you, bye.

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