

Co-construction of territorial and sociodemographic data in a poor informal neighborhood with high socio-environmental vulnerability in the city of La Plata, Argentina

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Abstract This paper presents the results of a census carried out in the largest of the 164 informal settlements currently in existence in the city of La Plata, capital of the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The objective is to define territorial and sociodemographic data of this poor informal neighbourhood with high socio-environmental vulnerability, paying special interest to the macro variables related to housing, education and work, as well as perceptions about the neighbourhood and future prospects. Therefore, the aim is to generate co-constructed scientific knowledge in tandem with the community, which in turn recovers knowledge and demands from the territory with a concrete potential for transformation. This work is part of a Participatory Scientific Agenda based on the interaction of the community, political, economic and scientific-technical actors.

Keywords: Poor informal neighborhood; socio-environmental vulnerability; Participatory Action Research; Participatory Scientific Agenda.

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Resumen El artículo presenta resultados de un censo realizado en el más grande de los 164 asentamientos informales que existen actualmente en la ciudad de La Plata, capital de la provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina. El objetivo es definir datos territoriales y sociodemográficos de este barrio popular con elevada vulnerabilidad socioambiental con especial interés en las macrovariables relacionadas a vivienda, educación y trabajo, así como percepciones en torno al barrio y deseos a futuro. Así, se apunta a generar conocimiento científico co-construido junto a la comunidad implicada, que recupera saberes y demandas del territorio con un potencial concreto de transformación. El trabajo es parte de una Agenda Científica Participativa basada en la interacción de actores comunitarios, políticos, económicos y científico-técnicos.

Palabras clave: Barrio popular; vulnerabilidad socioambiental; Investigación-Acción-Participativa; Agenda Científica Participativa.

1 Introduction

This article presents a Participatory-Action-Research process aimed towards the co-construction of territorial and sociodemographic data to nurture a Participatory Scientific Agenda and contribute to the development of public policies with high citizen participation. This paper is based on the results of a census carried out in the Puente de Fierro settlement in 2017. It is the largest of the 164 informal settlements currently in existence in the city of La Plata, capital of the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The survey has three distinctive characteristics. Firstly, its theoretical stance: that of a science that seeks to overcome the instances of diagnosis and criticism to intervene in phases of transformation. Secondly, its methodology, with the participation of the inhabitants of the neighborhood from the very design of the survey instruments. Therefore, both statistical data and perceptions about the neighborhood, its problems and prospects, are produced and interpreted with a comprehensive territorial approach from the very inception of the project. Third, its content, paying special interest to the macro variables related to housing, education and work, as well as knowing more about “identities, needs and dreams” of the inhabitants, by which the title of the survey is inspired.

The path of this dialogic research practice, with a territorial approach and with a strong coexistence of theory and praxis, began in tandem with an interdisciplinary team from the National University of La Plata (UNLP) and the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research of Argentina (CONICET). Since 2015, it recovers knowledge and the demands of the territory to nurture a Participatory Scientific Agenda which has been carried out since 2016. Said Agenda has its executing arm in what we call Permanent Work Table, a monthly meeting in the neighborhood with the participation of community, political, economic and scientific-technical actors so as to promote the generation and execution of different proposals and projects with possible solutions to the issues at hand.

During the six years of this currently ongoing Participatory-Action-Research process, social and environmental problems were addressed from a multidisciplinary and all encompassing management perspective of territory. Once the objective of a meeting per month over an extended period was achieved, in addition to dozens of inter-table and technical meetings, along with an attitude of respect and attentive listening, the stakeholders managed to build a fundamental bond of trust when it came to cooperative work with the inhabitants, grassroots organizations and their pre-existing networks. In recent years, within this process of participatory action-research, the study and intervention stages began to be carried out simultaneously since it became necessary to continue producing data that constitutes relevant input toward the initiatives and decision making process. Such is the case of the census presented in this article, promoted by the inhabitants of an informal neighbourhood who seek access to educational institutions and formal work as tools for integration and social progress.

La Plata is in the southern end of a metropolitan region with more than 14.5 million inhabitants (INDEC, 2012), that means this region concentrates 37% of the country's population in less than 1% of the national territory¹. This makes it the main urban agglomeration in the country, the second largest urban area in South America and one of the twentieth largest in the world (Fernández, 2011). Following the Río de La Plata eastward, we find the municipalities of Berisso and Ensenada which make up the Gran La Plata (Greater La Plata Area),

1 The Metropolitan Region of Buenos Aires is an operational regionalisation that since 2003 INDEC defines as the City of Buenos Aires and 40 districts in the Province of Buenos Aires, including the Greater La Plata (La Plata, Berisso and Ensenada).