

Participatory Action Research for Urban Connectivity: Bridging Inequality in Metropolitan Monterrey

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Abstract: This paper argues for participatory action research as a potent method for urban connectivity, surpassing government or expert-led methods. It introduces two approaches: integrating dialogic interviews to foster reflexivity and adopting an Ecosystem mapping-based approach encompassing social, economic, physical, and cultural dimensions. Dialogic interviews promote inclusivity by enabling diverse perspectives to shape research outcomes. Ecosystem mapping visually captures intricate connectivity dynamics. By combining participatory action research, dialogic interviews, and Ecosystem mapping, a robust framework emerges to address urban connectivity challenges. Empowering communities and embracing diverse axes of connectivity, this approach transforms urban planning practices, fostering contextually relevant and sustainable solutions. A co-created, resilient urban future becomes achievable through engagement and active stakeholder involvement.

Keywords: Action Research, Dialogic interviews, Ecosystem map, Urban Planning, Monterrey

Investigación-Acción participativa para la conectividad urbana: Abordando la desigualdad en el Área Metropolitana de Monterrey

Resumen: Este artículo argumenta que la investigación-acción participativa es un método potente para la conectividad urbana, superando a los métodos liderados por el gobierno o expertos. Introduce dos enfoques: la integración de entrevistas dialógicas para fomentar la reflexividad y la adopción de un enfoque basado en mapa del ecosistema que abarca dimensiones sociales, económicas, físicas y culturales. Las entrevistas dialógicas promueven la inclusividad al permitir que diversas perspectivas moldeen los resultados de la investigación. El mapa del ecosistema captura visualmente las dinámicas de conectividad intrincadas. Al combinar la investigación-acción participativa, las entrevistas dialógicas y la cartografía del ecosistema, surge un marco sólido para abordar los desafíos de la conectividad urbana. Empoderando a las comunidades y abrazando diversas dimensiones de conectividad, este enfoque transforma las prácticas de planificación urbana, fomentando soluciones contextualmente relevantes y sostenibles. Un futuro urbano resiliente y co-creado se vuelve alcanzable a través del compromiso y la participación activa de las partes interesadas.

Palabras clave: Investigación-Acción, Entrevistas dialógicas, Mapas de Ecosistema, Planeación Urbana, Monterrey

1. Introduction

The main goal of this paper is to add knowledge to the action research literature about the use of action research in the entry phase of urban planning processes in vulnerable communities (Mitlin, Thompson, 1995; Wilson, 2019).

Using action research in this entry phase can be important because comprehensive plans or beautification projects often disregard public participation and inclusion of actors other than planners; consequently or architects, they tend to be rejected by residents. Hence, it is critical that people from diverse backgrounds are included in the planning process, especially if they live in the area that the plan or project comprehend. The importance of their participation rests on the future well-being of a particular place. Action research can help nurture this participatory dimension of the process.

Action research can help urban planners and public officials to understand and inform the coherence of spaces as they represent and form people's behaviours, livelihoods, agency, and political power. Moreover, it is important that the planner understands the critical significance of the participation of the society that produces their spaces, since its production cannot be replicated for others. As mentioned by Lefebvre:

Any social existence aspiring or claiming to be real, but failing to produce its own space, would be a strange entity, a very particular kind of abstraction unable to escape from the ideological or even the cultural real- It would fall to the level of folklore and sooner or later disappear altogether, thereby immediately losing its identity, its denomination and its feeble degree of reality (Lefebvre, 1974: 53).

Most of this paper is written as a first-person story because it focuses on the lessons that I, the author, learnt conducting the entry phase of his doctoral research. Costamanga and Larrea (2017: 85–86) indicate first-person action research is a method that can help the facilitator remain continuously open to the self-reflection process. This paper operates by stressing the awareness of one's own biases, such as preconceptions, assumptions and positionality in the process of establishing relationships of understanding, mutuality, parity, and equality. The importance of reflexivity on the fieldwork can be traced in Case (2017), Owen and Westoby (2012) and Wilson (2016; 2019). This article shares how to generate a new productive and collaborative conversation among internal community actors and external actors, such as government and scholars around different dimensions of connectivity. More specifically, this case focuses on the relationship between the community (internal) and the action researcher helping the planning process (external).

One inspiration to write this first-person narrative after conducting a second person action research process is the case of Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness (OBIC) in the Basque Country of Spain (Larrea, 2018). First-person AR has been used there to mediate between different positions on territorial development practices. The author describes the personal and institutional transformational process of OBIC, founded to study territorial development (TD). In her article, Larrea mentions how the OBIC changed their role of social researchers from a position primarily restricted to TD observers to the self-realization of territorial transformation actors/agents. I argue I could operate similarly in the contested relationship between planners, researchers, and community members in Monterrey, Mexico.

This paper is based on the experience of the author in the first stage of creating an issue ecosystem map through dialogic stakeholder interviews in La Campana (Mexico). It is an important step for social researchers starting their inquiry, to establish a comprehensive