

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

starting point, which in turn, contributes to guide future research. An Ecosystem map is a research tool that helps establishing an initial stance about the research issue by a synthetic representation capturing all the key roles that influences an organization or an environment.

The main contribution of this paper is to illuminate the action researcher's own process of self-awareness in conducting the interviews and building relationships of mutual understanding with multiple stakeholders. Using first-person action research, the paper documents the experience of the author working at the intersection of urban informality and local government. This is a journey of the process, but also of the researcher who begins working with a community and the challenges that can be encountered along the way.

The research question that inspires the paper is: how can informal communities be approached in productive and successful ways? The answer is based on the experience of the author working with an informal community in Monterrey, Mexico. The findings are relevant because fortunately, there is an increasing interest in working with informal or low-income communities. However, even with the theoretical information and the extensive practical experience on the subject, urban interventions in Northern Mexico are traditionally top-down approaches; therefore, the success of such interventions are null or limited, as the communities never feel identified with such interventions.

The paper shows that it is important to consider that for an intervention to be successful, it must come fundamentally from the society that will be benefited or affected by any project. The challenge is to generate bonds of trust and an adequate process so that these relationships navigate in a productive and just way.

The main finding from the self-inquiry process based on the eco-system mapping and stakeholder interviews is the clear feasibility of including scholars as a point of equilibrium between the government and the community. This role of researchers offers the opportunity to bridge the efforts that public officials, as well as scholars, are doing in the field of social inequality and urban connectivity in informal settlements. Scholars bring two things into the equation: trust and legitimization in the process.

In the first part, I present the research problem regarding the profound disconnection between planning and planners and informal communities in Monterrey, Mexico. In section 2, I explore the conceptual framework within which this paper operates, focusing on the exploration of participation in planning literature. In section 3, I introduce the case study of La Campana, providing contextual information about the study site. In section 4, I outline the Action Research methodologies used in this paper. In section 5, I describe the interviews and Ecosystem Mapping. The Discussion section follows, providing an overview of the process as well as initial findings. Finally, in the Conclusion section, I summarize the main findings of this research.

2. Conceptual framework

This paper is based on an experience where the author experimented with action research to integrate participation in the context of planning.

The topic of participation has been largely explored in the planning literature. For Sandercock (2000; 2004), the incorporation of new actors is crucial to overcoming planning

challenges. Nevertheless, in the neoliberal context, participation can be manipulated, especially in spaces of poverty like informal settlements or other undesirable places from the capitalist point of view. Caution about participatory processes has its origin in the 1960s, as is reflected in Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), in which she distinguishes public participation as an 'empty ritual', and one with real power to affect the outcome. More recently, both Bayat and Biekart (2009), and Miraftab (2009), warn us about public participation in the neoliberal era. For Bayat and Biekart, concepts such as decentralization, citizen participation, and anti-corruption, are operative concepts and vehicles used by imperialist domination. They go further by asserting that NGOs do not represent communities, instead, they "play the role of contracted State agents" (Bayat & Biekart, 2009: 819). This argument aligns with Miraftab's (2009) discussion of democratic discourse being used as a vehicle to legitimize neoliberal goals through a perception of inclusion, all in the pursuit of hegemonic power (Miraftab, 2009: 33; see also Mehta, 2016; and Novoa, 2018). Miraftab (2009) makes a distinction between 'invented' and 'invited' spaces of citizenship; the former are real counter-hegemonic spaces of change, whereas the latter is designed to maintain the status quo. Nevertheless, this idea has been challenged by Sletto and Nygren (2015), as they argue that even in these contradictory spaces regulated by the State, researchers can act as change agents by reshaping the conceptualization of dominant structures (p.980).

Participation has to do with the importance of inclusion of diverse voices into planning. To this respect, the case can find roots in Lefebvre's (1974) "production of space" concept. A society produces their own spaces in a process known as spatial practice, consisting in a degree of cohesion, competence, and performance from the specific groups that participate in the creation of such spaces. After a certain spatial practice has been developed, a social space exists with certain features and cohesiveness (Lefebvre, 1974).

Finally, the case focuses on participation and diversity of voices in informal settlements. These are a result of their own self-production without governmental regulation, they are each original and unique, responding to specific, local stimuli. These distinctive characteristics of spaces in urban informality cannot be imitated by planners, as the originality lies in these spaces which are self-produced.

3. Case study: La Campana

The community of La Campana is located in what once was agricultural land on a central area of Metropolitan Monterrey. In an interview on June, 2018, Mrs. Blanca, a local resident, shared that people used to sow oranges, corn, and *nopales* (cactus) in La Campana. Few people lived there when Mrs. Blanca moved there in the 1970s, but it rapidly populated as people searched for opportunities. Most of the original settlers moved in from other Mexican states such as San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, and Hidalgo (Cedillo, 2018). Many of them believed Monterrey was a temporary stop on their way to the United States of America, but stayed when they found industrial jobs in Monterrey.

For the last five decades, the people of La Campana organized their own land use and distribution and mediated internal problems. Services such as water, sewage, and electricity that the community managed to get (in some areas of La Campana) took years of struggle and

negotiations with the municipal and state governments. Being widely ignored by the authorities changed in 2012 as a result of drug violence. In the last decade, La Campana has had the attention of local media, government, and the private sector.

The problem addressed through action research is that planners in Monterrey have fallen short regarding the understanding of informal settlements and conducting planning processes and projects that include local communities. This has often led to problems such as manipulative processes (Arnstein, 1969), expulsions (Sassen, 2014), gentrification (Clark, 2005; Janoschka et al., 2014), and power imbalances (Forester, 1982).

Thus, the use of Action Research for a novel exploration of a contested site, such of La Campana begets the design of a new approach to planning in contexts of informality respecting the processes in place.

My introduction to La Campana was the result of an academic exploration conducted during my doctoral studies. Initially, my intention was to illustrate the dichotomy between traditional urban planning carried out by urban planning departments and the informal approaches to planning. Leveraging my contacts from my previous experience as a practitioner before pursuing my doctoral studies, I was able to quickly establish connections with colleagues to delve into the formal side of urban planning. However, it proved to be a more significant challenge to locate representatives from the opposite end of the spectrum since, in the realm of urban informality, having a gatekeeper is crucial. In this particular case, I reached out to an urban sociologist I had met in 2014 during my collaboration with the Municipal Institute of Urban Planning (IMPLAN). I was aware that following her tenure at IMPLAN, she had conducted research in the informal settlement of La Campana. Therefore, I contacted her for an interview. To my surprise, her involvement with the community had escalated to the point where she had assisted a group of concerned residents in formalizing a non-governmental organization (NGO). Through a series of interviews, my interest in the subject grew, and after discussions with my advisor, we decided that approaching research with La Campana presented a significant opportunity to explore the contrasts within urban planning.

4. Methodology

4.1 A critique of traditional urban planning methodologies in the Global South

In the Global South, both governments and urban planners follow design and discursive models inspired by the Global North. Governments, regardless of their political orientation, pursue such long-awaited development, incorporating in their normative framework technocratic values and concepts associated with functionality, efficiency, and a very specific idea of order. Meanwhile, urban planners are charged with shaping a city that enables the efficiency of its inhabitants' activities. This vision of city and urban planning has meant both obliviousness and oppression of a range of ways of living outside this idea of order established by the economic and social powers.

The hegemonic power involved in traditional urban planning has produced and reproduced a homogeneous image of the city corresponding to bourgeois aesthetics and functionality. This contrasts with the image of informal neighbourhoods, where the production of the built environment does not come from an aesthetic idea or rules established in texts,

treatises or academic reflection. Urban informality is born out of the enormous need for shelter and is regulated based on the constant interaction with the elements and resources within the reach of the residents, in addition to the endless community deliberation. This article argues that values behind informal settlements have gained an unquestionable validity, and should be seen as an important teacher in the processes of urbanization and urban research.

Top-down planning approaches have been particularly harmful in contexts of urban informality, as they have failed to support the communities' agency, skills, and resources. This story of neglect has left many residents hesitant to work with researchers, planners or authorities. However, this article also explores possible avenues for fostering an emerging relationship between community members in an informal settlement and planners, articulating the diverse knowledge available through the lens of participatory action research methodologies.

Development oriented practices have become hegemonic in many parts of the Global South, and indeed this is evident in cities and urban areas. These ideas reflect and shape how society values what is good and desirable, or bad and undesirable. Many governments have opted to make invisible the subaltern populations; that is, all populations which are socially, politically, and geographically outside the hierarchy of power (Green, 2002). Thus, I argue that the planning practice should find co-generative knowledge that fosters vulnerable informal populations.

4.2 Action research and the methodological proposal in this paper

As action research methodologies have a transformational component, this article explores finding creative paths to improve the relationship between the municipalities and their precarious communities to maximize well-being, understanding, and mutual working relationship, beyond a traditionally vertical governmental power.

Greenwood and Levin (2007) argue for action research as a methodology that action researchers can enact using different methods. This section reflects on two methods designed to achieve a successful entry phase with the planning environment in Monterrey, Mexico, at the intersection of formal and informal planning processes. The use of these methods enabled pursued not only obtaining a competent knowledge of the planning practice in regard to urban informality, but also establishing a long and fruitful relationship with diverse actors in place for long-term research.

One of the methods used was ecosystem mapping, the other stakeholder interviews. These are iterative and non-linear processes, in which the information is continuously tested and where there is no preconceived fixed answers. Although this work engaged differing stances and points of views, the main intention of this inquiry was to find a common ground from which to initiate a collaborative process with the community members, with the strength and structure provided by the involvement of other actors with voice and decision-making power in the process.

4.3 First, second, and third-person Action Research

As previously mentioned, this article is based on first-person Action Research (transformation of the action researcher) in the context of a second person action research process (participatory planning process).

AR methodologies provide a solid relationship among actors. Although this research is based on first-person AR, second and third-person AR are also present. In this section I provide the definitions and boundaries between them. However, the reader should note that the methodology employed is the first-person AR.

First-person action research responds to the forms of inquiry-practice by individuals into their own research process. The goal is to help individuals develop an inquiring attitude toward their own lives and act in an informed, aware, and purposeful manner (Gearty and Coghlan, 2018). First-person AR is a method of benefiting from the researcher's self-awareness in the research context to understand how they observe their own thinking, process data, come to negotiations, judgments, decisions and actions (Costamagna and Larrea, 2018). This paper shares the self-inquiry process of the author in his attempt to begin a closer and co-generative relationship with members of a population living in a context of urban informality.

In addition to first-person AR, there are collaborative actions between the different actors involved in this research that exemplify second-person AR and collective learning from doing. Second-person AR entails the researcher's ability to engage in face-to-face communication with others in a context of authentic mutual concern. It is a collaborative practice involving multiple stakeholders, which requires participants learning from each other (Coghlan, 2007). This research prompts this engagement by encouraging others to take action and evaluate others' actions.

Third-person AR stems from the work at the first and second person levels and represents the contribution of the study to an impersonal audience through dissemination of the knowledge produced in this research. Third-person action research aims at creating communities of inquiry, involving people beyond second-person AR. Third person is impersonal and is reached through dissemination by reporting, publishing, and extrapolating from the concrete to the general (Coghlan, 2005). This paper represents the third person dimension of this process.

5. The process to generate a stakeholder map through interviews

The Ecosystem Map originates from diverse viewpoints and approaches. Nevertheless, through the facilitation of dialogic interviews, the process becomes more humanized, which subsequently impacts the fluidity of community work. Humanizing the process opens up a wide spectrum to address the problem, but it also introduces a unique complexity. During fieldwork, the role of the researchers is not to direct the conversation but rather to observe and understand the pre-existing conditions. This initial assessment serves as a foundational platform for future work, identifying areas where different actors can reach agreements. The researcher's task is not to dictate methodologies, but rather to comprehend and analyse existing processes and their current functioning. By assuming this role, researchers gain

insights into the dynamics at play, paving the way for informed and contextually relevant interventions in the future.

5.1 Overview of the process and its tangible result

Urban planners in Northern Mexico, including Monterrey, have not traditionally fostered a history of collaboration with communities. This isolated working attitude is particularly pronounced in informal settlements.

This part of the process aimed to be aware of the different actors present in the local planning sphere, as well as understanding the different knowledge, interests, and motivations in place. The main objective of this part of the research process was to learn about the myriad of information around the contested intersection of informality and urban planning, as this provides clues as to how a researcher can effectively navigate at the beginning of an investigation.

The aim of this section is to show how the stakeholder map was not a static structure created by the researcher, but grew due to the interactions with the actors.

The intention was to generate a fluid process starting from a common ground and not from the conflicting spaces that may exist. It is necessary to emphasize that in this part of the process, research was conducted based on my prior knowledge and experience, as I had worked as a professional and academic in the city for several years before embarking on the doctoral studies, although it was strengthened and enriched during the investigation.

It is intended to maintain the stakeholder map, not as a static structure but as something that must be growing constantly as a consequence of the interactions with the object of study.

The participants in this initial stage came from several existing spheres; first, scholars and researchers who have worked on the issue of informality and were interested in participating in the formulation of new processes; second, by residents, advocates, and non-governmental organization members, who worked in informal communities and serve as a bridge with local authorities; the third were government officials; and fourth, both the private sector and Tec de Monterrey who are financing small projects in the community and organizing efforts for the ongoing process of Distrito La Campana-Altamira. The following is the composition of the group:

- *Academic.* Four academic researchers were selected based on their academic production, 1) A local professor at the University of Nuevo Leon; 2) A second professor from the same university whose research is focused on socio-spatial inequality from different perspectives; 3) A third professor from the University of Nuevo Leon, who has also worked closely with this informal settlement in the city of Monterrey, which gives them a different vision and stance than the other scholars interviewed; and 4) A researcher from the University of Arkansas, who from his perspective of landscape, has worked on the integration of landscape and city. Much of his work has been done with local governments in Mexico.
- *Non-Governmental Organizations.* The director of a non-governmental organization “Barrio Esperanza” who have built a strong rapport with the local community.
- *Government.* At the Federal level, a planner from the National Agency for Urban Development (SEDATU). At the State level in Monterrey, the director of urban spaces, who

works in the project development area, was interviewed. At the Municipal level, the director of the Urban Development area of the San Pedro Municipality, was interviewed.

As the interviews unfolded, I generated an evolving Ecosystem Map, in which a variety of topics related to informality and community work could be seen from differing perspectives, both institutional and personal.

It is important to mention that the interviewees were either people that I knew, or people referred to me by acquaintances. Most of the individuals interviewed were people I had encountered during my practitioner phase in Monterrey. Given that I was teaching at the School of Architecture and Urbanism while working in the City Planning Department, I engaged with a broad spectrum of perspectives on urban planning. Thanks to this, it was easy to make the first contact, and schedule the conversations over the phone and future in-person encounters.

This way Participatory Action Research (PAR), which is community-led (as opposed to outsider-led) orientation committed to a democratic and collaborative approach (Reardon, et al, 1993), offered an alternative to the mainstream ‘expert’-driven, quantitative, extractive approaches by introducing a process that challenged existing power structures, inequalities, and knowledge(s), placing the decision-making power in the hands of those most impacted groups.

I, the author, had my first visit to the community in the Summer of 2018 following my request for a meeting with the urban sociologist I had previously interviewed, tried to maintain an open heart and mind (Wilson, 2019), facilitating a safe and creative space for all involved to express and develop their ideas. In no way did I control the process by projecting my opinions as a “specialist” onto the community or assume to know more about local conditions, practices, and dynamics. This made me feel vulnerable, without a plan and with more questions than answers, but it was essential for a true community-led participatory processes. Recognizing this vulnerability and seeing it as an asset, despite the fear it provoked, increased the potential of what we achieved.

The goal with this mapping was to establish a comprehensive starting point, which contributed to guiding future research. The tangible result of this process is represented in Figure 1. In the next sections I present features of the process that help understand the richness behind it.

ization of the process gave us a broad spectrum of concepts to address the problem, and adds nuance to the process. The work in the field was not to guide the conversation but to observe the existing conditions that would guide the research process. It also provided hints of where the different actors could generate agreements. At this point, I did not formulate conclusions.

From the beginning of this process, it was clear that the interviews were not simply instrumental means to obtain information, but to explore topics, listen to their stories, experiences, hopes, and concerns, and to establish mutual respect and rapport. The dialogic interviews with stakeholders helped me to know different perspectives about the same issue, and then, to understand how from those perspectives, people have different ways to respond to the same phenomenon. Regarding the incorporation of knowledge from residents of informal settlements into urban planning, scholars were the group that openly recognized the inhabitants of these settlements as bearers of a legitimate way of living. Consequently, scholars acknowledged the existence of a set of skills that should be taken into consideration when working in such neighborhoods (Patel, Barlett, 2009). On the other hand, public officials were also concerned but focused on the established legal procedures available to them to assist the community.

5.2 The lived experience of participants. Importance of an authentic approach with the community.

Beyond the map represented in Figure 1, there are lived experiences of participants that give meaning to the process. In this section I share some of them, which serve as samples.

Relationships of planners with urban informality are traditionally top-down, which result in shallow approaches entailing dissociation between the population living in these communities and the government entities or civilians living outside. In other words, there is not an acknowledgement of the differences that exist in such diverse urban and social entities, nor of the tangible and intangible plethora of resources and values in these communities.

Community members have increased distrust of processes brought to their communities by external actors. That is what Beatriz, a community member of La Campana, mentioned in 2018 when she was asked about her opinion of an organization sponsored by a local cement company was conducting projects in the area.

“Antes de hacer cualquier cosa tienen que sondear, no *no* mas llegar y poner las cosas. Oí que querían hacer un proyecto de murales en el barrio; entonces yo lo primero que le dije a la persona que estaba con eso fue que teníamos que hacerlo con la comunidad porque aquí ya todos nos conocemos: Cuando la comunidad lo hace, la misma comunidad lo apropia.”

“Before doing anything, they have to sound things out, not just arrive and arrange things up. I heard that they [referring to a community project led by a local cement company] wanted to do a mural project in the neighborhood; so the first thing I said to the person who was communicating it was that we had to do it with the community because we all know each other here: When the community does it, the community itself appropriates it.”

Beatriz, community member, 2018.

Conducting effective participatory processes with the community can lead to better results, says Beatriz, who relied on the approach once the local cement company conducted more sessions to get the pulse of the community. The first time they approached to her, she said “*otra vez pan con lo mismo*” [again, these people coming with the same things], “at first, I thought they might come with a hidden agenda, but after a few meetings I said to my *comadre*:

Aquí va a pasar algo bueno [something good is going to happen here]”. This is a good example of how good communication can potentially bring trust into the process.

In contrast, other group of neighbors had a very different experience with a group of researchers from a local private Architecture school.

Figure 2. Photograph of the space done with collaboration of a student group. Source: Author.



The project in collaboration with the architecture school aimed to enhance one of the stairways in the community, addressing an area known for difficult access within La Campana. The project involved a professor and his architecture students who participated in designing the stairway. However, the initial design received lukewarm reception from the community, prompting modifications to incorporate the preferences, needs, and resources of the local population. An instance highlighting the disconnection between the proposal and the users emerged when neighbors shared an unfavorable experience with the student group. The incident appeared to reveal a lack of contextual understanding on the part of the students. For instance, during the construction phase, one student visited the site and, with limited sensitivity, instructed the removal of recently built concrete steps due to minor discrepancies between the stair riser and tread measurements and the plans. While the students’ intentions were commendable, this incident underscored the significant gap between two parallel realities – that of the students and the local community. This experience reinforces the urgent need for improved approaches to engaging with communities through effective collaboration and co-generative knowledge. It emphasizes the importance of a more empathetic and contextually informed methodology that empowers communities as active contributors in shaping projects that truly meet their needs and aspirations.

This story is an example of the mistakes that we, as society and government, constantly make in comparing the circumstances of a community with others, especially when it reflects such contrasting realities, with the use of the same parameters and measurement methods in

circumstances where the conditions clearly do not apply because of cultural, technical and economic differences.

Figure 3. Photograph of a graffiti done by the initiative *Open Muro*. Source: Author.



Another good example was one of the projects that community members began to carry out as a community were some corridors for the *Open Muro* event; a project in which the neighborhood walls were conceded to local artists to paint graffiti art on them. As a parallel project, they created bridges and corridors to improve the interconnectivity of these murals. This intervention is outstanding not only for the elaboration of the high quality artistic murals, but the feeling of belonging generated with this type of projects. The community chose as the theme “birds in the neighborhood”, so those are the images distributed throughout the walls of La Campana. It should be mentioned that, although the murals were made by artists who live outside the community, the murals are being respected to the point that they have not been modified in five years. Martha explains it by saying that “the community decided when they wanted the murals, and the theme they wanted the murals to have”. There was never imposition in any step of the process.

5.3 The self-inquiry of the author

This first-person reflection in the context of a second-person action research about ecosystem mapping with dialogic stakeholder interviews shows how I, the researcher, became more aware of the complexity of the ecosystem surrounding the issue of informality in Monterrey, Mexico, and the opportunities it offered. It also shows how dialogic interviewing can build understanding and relationship with the ‘other’, thus setting the stage for collaborating across political, cultural, and philosophical differences to focus on practical solutions.

But more than that, this first-person action research reveals the transformational impact on the researcher in becoming comfortable with uncertainty and not knowing, and trusting the unfolding of process. Here is how I interpret it:

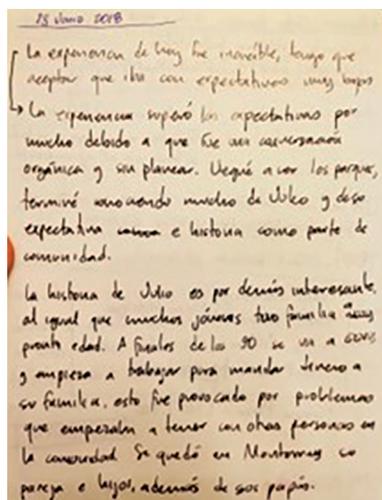
Having as a background being a professor of architecture and urbanism, my solutions and approaches were driven by the modification of the physical space, and always as an “educated” response, through urban design projects, to community issues. This process taught me how to get rid of these structural limitations (Case, 2009; Martin, 2011; Kur, DePorres, Westrup, 2008; Wilson, 2015; 2019), to be aware of them, and what I must do to replace them with openness. If I had to summarize it in one sentence, it would be: to be okay with not knowing what could or has to happen.

Source: Reflections from field work.

Trusting the process is to trust the outcome. The interview process started from my critical “I” giving way to my curious “I”, from the “I” that has the solution, to the “I” that has the genuine interest of listening and only listening to understand the whole panorama. At first, this seemed difficult for me to understand, I put up resistance to it because of my background and training that made me keen to seek for something that must be tangible and measurable. I now know that what is required to discover is the Ecosystem itself and to identify all the elements around it. The most important thing is the process, even more than knowing where the project is going to end. This process and the methodologies used taught me a panorama that shows how the success of a project has to do with how well the problem is diagnosed, and the importance of the voices involved in the diagnosis.

Another significant finding was to understand the thin line between work and socialization. On one occasion, I was conducting an interview to Carlos, a community leader in an informal settlement placed on a hill. The site where the interview took place was impressive by itself: the edge of a cliff with view to a contrasting landscape, where the low-income settlements and rich neighborhoods merged on the horizon. In this place, Carlos answered all the questions on my semi-structured script. From the most basic information such as the time when his family moved into this settlement, to interesting information about his intentions to organize a semi-vigilante neighborhood group specialized in talking with young people. We talked for about an hour. However, as soon as I closed my notebook and considered the interview over, Carlos and I started chatting about meaningless things or topics unrelated to the research. For instance, when I mentioned some aspects of my life in Austin, Carlos told me about the almost 15 years he lived and worked in San Antonio, Texas. Later, when we briefly talked about soccer (we are both fans of the same club), Carlos slowly started changing his face expressions, his voice tone became solemn, and his eyes locked in an imaginary spot in front of him. I did not know how important that instant was at that moment, but I knew I was witnessing something significant. He then talked about how one of the first activities he and others organized with kids and teenagers was a soccer tournament on an improvised soccer field. He told me that tournament was very important to the community because it was a historic weekend activity suspended in a time of gruesome violence in Monterrey in 2010 (Villarreal, 2015). As soon as he remembered the violence on his neighborhood, he started crying with his eyes still locked on that same imaginary spot. He kept talking about his reasons for organizing community work, the kidnapping and further assassination of his brother, the traumatizing time for his mother, and ultimately, his intentions to participate on the pacification of the area through community organization. After that heartbreaking moment, I realized about how significant that conversation was. Notably, as soon as we dropped our interviewer-interviewee caps, a new kind of conversation was possible.

Figure 4. Research journey reflecting on how the process started challenging my believes.



In my notes (Figure 4), I reflect on how one of my visits to La Campana was approached with low expectations. I had planned to conduct an interview with one of the community leaders about the history of a residual space that the community had intervened in. Initially, this didn't evoke much excitement, as I assumed the information would be anecdotal at best, providing only contextual details. However, this visit turned out to be an opportunity to delve into the neighborhood's history through the personal narrative of an individual, infusing profound meaning into the place on various levels. In my notes, I described it as “*una conversación orgánica y sin planear*” [an organic and unplanned conversation]. In other words, what gave this dialogue its significance was the mutual trust, which allowed it to unfold into deeper topics. This process changed my entire perspective about how to approach an issue. I have always considered myself someone open to face complex topics, so I figured that the process was going to reaffirm such openness. In contrast, I learned to be immersed in the issue, specially to be engaged with the community, embedded within the group, and knowing that the process involves me as much as the group. This translates into co-producing with the community as opposed to just extracting information, the process is about creating new information-knowledge together.

6. Discussion

6.1 Overview of the process

My research process was guided by a graduate action research seminar called “Deep Dive: Exploring Issue Ecosystems,” from the UT Graduate Program in Community and Regional Planning at UT Austin. In this course we learned how to initiate contact with interviewees and start the process of an Ecosystem Map, among other things. Within the methodology, it was

very clear that dialogic interviews are not simply instrumental means to obtain information from the interviewees, but to explore topics, listen to their stories, experiences, hopes and concerns, and to establish mutual respect and rapport. In addition, we were advised to share our issue Ecosystem maps with the interviewees and engage them in making it richer and more wide-ranging. To be fully present with my interviewees required me to be aware of my own judgments, opinions, and goals. I also needed to identify the right time to keep silence or to express my positionality, since the main objective was to hear and understand the other. I had to be aware of my own communication and listening skills.

The dialogic interviews with the ecosystem stakeholders helped me first to learn different perspectives about the same issue and then understand how, from those perspectives, people have different ways to approach similar issues, sometimes from radically different positions. The dialogue interviews were carried out in a fluid way. One of the interesting things that happened during the interviews was the perception of openness and sincerity from interviewees, which can be attributed to the prior contact I had with them. Notably, the interviewees were cautious to use certain language, especially those working at the government level.

The preparation for conducting these interviews consisted of anticipating responses that could trigger a reaction in me due to my personal beliefs. Being self-aware of my reactions and how they might manifest in gestures was crucial in maintaining equanimity. A significant learning experience was realizing that the purpose of these interviews was to deeply understand the perspectives of the interviewees. This approach ensured that my perspective on the subject would not bias the opinions of the interviewees, thereby preventing any limitations on the information they chose to share.

Thanks to this approach, I managed to establish more enduring connections with the interviewees, even offering follow-up interviews in the future, which contributed to the consolidation of the research in subsequent stages. Had I not been mentally prepared in this manner, my interactions with the interviewees would have been more limited, and it would have been challenging to grasp the underlying logic behind certain public policy decisions.

6.2 Discussion of the second-person process

The dialogic interviews conducted with stakeholders of the Ecosystem provided valuable insights. Firstly, they allowed me to comprehend diverse perspectives on the same issue, shedding light on the varied ways people approach these matters, sometimes from vastly disparate standpoints. In comparison to the other interviewees, scholars exhibited a higher degree of open-mindedness in their willingness to consider the informal settlement population through an unrestricted and co-creative lens. Conversely, public officials, while expressing concern, tended to focus on utilizing established procedures governed by either governmental authorities or scholars. In essence, their approach emphasized the desire to exert control over both the process and outcomes of interactions.

Overall, these dialogic interviews proved to be instrumental in uncovering the complexities and divergent approaches among stakeholders, providing a nuanced understanding of the issue at hand. The openness displayed by scholars and the inclination towards control exhibited by public officials underscored the importance of inclusivity and flexibility in addressing the challenges within the Ecosystem.

The contrast in participants' arguments was evident. While scholars advocated for the validation of settlements as they represented a distinct identity, public officials presented a pragmatic vision constrained within the functions of the State. For them, residents of informal settlements deserved infrastructure improvements; however, as one public official mentioned on an interview, "they [the residents] should "be open to government solutions without resistance, as, at the end of the day, they are breaking the law." While the notion of justice was present in both academics and public officials, the nuances lay in opposing views on the means and motivations driving these perspectives. The researchers invited to participate in the Exploring Issue Ecosystems course brought a diverse range of professional expertise, offering valuable insights from various fields. This broad exposure to different approaches enabled me to pinpoint the specific situations in which issues emerged.

Dr. Deidre Mendez's perspective on Culture Solutions proved particularly impactful, highlighting the significance of comprehending the cultural and behavioral context within the Ecosystem map. According to Mendez (2017), cultural or institutional contexts shape attitudes toward certain issues. Given the considerable gap between academia and governmental roles, it becomes imperative to seek innovative approaches in order to transform practice.

This understanding is essential for effective collaboration and proactive engagement with individuals. Throughout the entire interview process, I remained mindful of this approach, recognizing that the objective was not to persuade or change the opinions of participants regarding an issue. Instead, the emphasis lay in delving into the origins of their ideas and identifying shared principles and common ground among stakeholders. The overarching aim was to forge alliances and cooperation to address tangible challenges rather than solely identifying philosophical adversaries (Mendez, 2017). This approach fostered a more collaborative and constructive environment, ultimately enhancing the potential for finding innovative and sustainable solutions within the Issue Ecosystem.

The interviews conducted were primarily aimed at comprehending the contextual intricacies of informal settlements through the diverse perspectives of various stakeholders. Participants shared insights regarding the origins, development, and consolidation of these settlements, underscoring the resourceful endeavors made by informal residents to effect improvements despite limited resources. Another focal point of the interviews was to explore the attitudes of the interviewees concerning the dynamic between authorities and community members. These approaches were predominantly paternalistic and often oblivious to the strengths and capabilities of residents in informal communities. On the other hand, within the community, there is a pronounced distrust of the government due to decades of neglect.

The interviewing process made possible great diversity in perspectives among the interviewees that provided a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of informal settlements and shed light on the multifarious factors shaping these urban environments. It allowed for a nuanced exploration of the complexities inherent in informal settlement dynamics, offering valuable insights for further research and potential policy interventions.

Through the interviews, a distinct posture emerged among the public officials, reflecting their earnest desire to drive progress while being mindful of practical timeframes. It became evident that uncovering the various perspectives offered a pathway to establishing common objectives that could accommodate the constraints faced by each group involved. For instance, the interviews revealed that government officials were particularly concerned about

time and cost limitations. With this knowledge, targeted mechanisms for public participation could be devised to address these specific issues.

As Scharmer (2016) pointed out, effective communication reaches its zenith when participants achieve a state of communion. At this juncture, a profound recognition of shared objectives arises, leading to interactions and conversations that emanate from a place of deep connectedness. Essentially, communication serves as the guiding axis in this process, and the channels of communication must be adapted to suit the unique circumstances of each situation. In this case, the willingness displayed by public officials to explore methods of inclusive participation based on respect and horizontality opened the door for future interactions on my part. As a result of this initial engagement, not only did my relationship with the governmental urban planning ecosystem grow, but also the interest of decision-makers in this subject matter increased significantly, to the extent that the Monterrey Planning Department asked me for an assessment on how to approach vulnerable communities (Staines-Díaz, 2022).

This process taught me that by fostering a sense of connectedness and shared purpose, fruitful collaborations and solutions can be achieved, while addressing the practical limitations faced by the different actors involved.

6.3 Discussion of the first-person process

The interview process provided me with a valuable lesson in testing my endurance and objectivity regarding the topic at hand. Throughout the interviews, I consciously refrained from interrupting, passing judgments, or imposing my opinions on the discussed issues. Instead, I adopted an attentive and open-minded approach, actively listening to the perspectives offered by the interviewees and making a concerted effort to comprehend their positions fully.

This experience reinforced the significance of setting aside personal biases and allowing space for authentic dialogue to unfold. By demonstrating a sincere interest in understanding others' viewpoints, I was able to forge meaningful connections and create a conducive environment for constructive exchanges of ideas. Such an approach not only enriched the quality of the interview process but also laid the foundation for ongoing collaborations and engagement with the stakeholders in the Issue Ecosystem.

The research approach adopted in this study emphasizes the vital importance for researchers to engage actively when working within an informal settlement context. It challenges the traditional notion of having a predefined "question" guiding the research process and suggests a different perspective. Instead, the approach advocates for embracing the idea that a significant part of the research involves genuinely listening and comprehending the underlying needs expressed by the community. In this context, the research process extends beyond merely relying on verbal expressions from the community members. Rather, it encourages researchers to attentively observe and analyze the actions, behaviors, and non-verbal cues exhibited by the community. By doing so, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the unspoken realities and concerns that shape the community's needs. In certain disciplinary fields, like urban planning, this is not the mainstream role of researchers and, in order to play it, researchers need to transform too. First person action research helps in this transformation.

Citing Wilson (2016), an Action Research approach underscores the value of being receptive and attuned to the community's lived experiences and challenges. By adopting this mindset, researchers can better appreciate the nuanced complexities within the informal settlement, leading to more insightful and meaningful research outcomes. Ultimately, Action Research promotes a more empathetic and participatory research process, fostering a collaborative and respectful relationship with participants. By letting go of rigid preconceptions and embracing a holistic understanding, researchers can contribute to a more comprehensive and contextually relevant study that addresses the genuine needs and aspirations of the people residing in the informal settlement.

This section illustrated the action researcher's own process of self-awareness in conducting the interviews and building relationships of mutual understanding with multiple stakeholders, using first-person action research at the intersection of urban informality and local government. My involvement in this research process resulted in immersion with community members of La Campana, as well as the three levels of government; municipal, state and federal, which is crucial for transforming the urban planning system in Monterrey.

7. Conclusions

The research approach employed in this paper emphasizes recognizing subaltern social groups in Planning, valuing their perspectives and struggles in generating knowledge. Fals Borda (2013) stresses breaking asymmetry between researchers and the researched, empowering people as thinkers and enabling them to conduct their research. This inclusive approach enriches decision-making and empowers marginalized communities.

This paper constitutes an exercise of self-reflexivity that can be inspiring for others researchers who are starting the early stages of a research. The action researcher must be able not only to 'see' the problem, but to 'sense' it (Scharmer, 2016)—i. e. to perceive an issue from the perspective of the whole social field, and at the same time from the different perspectives within the social field. Also, for the action researcher, the social field, or issue eco-system, is not 'out there'. The action researcher is part and parcel of it. As I began to sense the eco-system, I saw that I—as a privileged resident of Monterrey and now an international academic-in-training—was part of that ecosystem. The role that I could play began to crystallize: bringing together the polarized players into a new conversational field, a generative field that can perceive the city, its neighborhoods, its apparent dichotomies, as part of a connected living organism in need of healing.

As a result of this process, I became more aware of the complexity of the ecosystem surrounding the issue of informality in Monterrey, Mexico, and the opportunities it offered. It also showed how dialogic interviewing could build understanding and relationship with the 'other,' thus setting the stage for collaborating across political, cultural, and philosophical differences to focus on practical solutions. But more than that, this first-person action research revealed the transformational impact on me, the researcher, in becoming comfortable with uncertainty and not knowing and instead trusting the unfolding process.

This process taught me to search for new research paths. Having been trained as an architect, the training was geared to be an answer bearer. Bringing questions to the table was

seen as weakness of the project process, and any attempt to incorporate other actors in the process was seen from a simplistic and superficial stance. Being present *in* La Campana and getting involved in a learning processes through in-depth interviews, which usually took place while walking through the neighborhood, gave way to a new access to information, no longer from an extractive stance, but in a co-generative way that helped me to position myself *in* place and not just looking *at* the place.

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