

# Shared life, solidarity action, inter-knowledge research: A narrative of three processes in Mexico that question Participatory Action Research

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**Abstract:** This article raises some questions about Participatory Action Research (PAR). The author analyzes in the first person three processes in which she has been involved: processes of shared living, solidarity action, and inter-knowledge research. These include daily interaction over 16 years in a Nahuatl indigenous community; knowledge construction with a young migrant moving from a rural community in Puebla to New York; and the author's connection and reflection on the Zapatista movement 30 years after the uprising.

**Keywords:** PAR – Indigenous community – Puebla/New York migration – Zapatista uprising

## **Vida compartida, acción solidaria, investigación inter-saberes: Narrativa de tres procesos en México que interrogan a la Investigación Acción Participativa**

**Resumen:** El artículo plantea algunas interrogantes sobre la Investigación-Acción Participativa. La autora analiza en primera persona tres procesos en los que ha estado involucrada: procesos de vida compartida, acción solidaria e investigación intersaberes. Dichos procesos incluyen la interacción cotidiana durante 16 años en una comunidad indígena náhuatl; la construcción de conocimiento con un joven migrante que transitaba de una comunidad rural de Puebla a Nueva York, y la vinculación y reflexión de la autora con el movimiento zapatista a 30 años del levantamiento.

**Palabras clave:** IAP – comunidad indígena – migración Puebla/Nueva York – levantamiento zapatista

## Introduction

From what position should we view Participatory Action Research in a global context where cruelty seems to be the organizing axis of political action, and the environmental crisis threatens human life? From where should we view this approach in a national context—Mexico—where violence stems from intricate links among criminal organizations, transnational companies, and state sectors? Recent scenarios raise questions about PAR that I did not ask myself in the same way in the years I was involved in the processes I will recount.

PAR is grounded in a fundamental epistemological and ethical substrate: that knowledge relevant to human dignity is built collectively, integrating diverse types of knowledge and favoring horizontal human relationships. In countries like Mexico, where the logic of modernity/coloniality remains more prevalent than is often acknowledged, PAR has entailed—at

least for me—significant cognitive and emotional challenges, as well as an awareness of the tensions between the temporalities of academic institutions and the logic of organizations and communities.

I will share my experience with Participatory Action Research in three different settings, each distinct in form and in the temporality of my commitment to the social actors involved:

- The daily interaction over 16 years (1973–1989) with the Nahuatl indigenous community of San Miguel Tzinacapan, in the Sierra Norte of Puebla (Mexico), where life, action, and research were intricately intertwined.
- The co-construction of knowledge from 2009 to 2011 with a young migrant transitioning back and forth from the rural community of Coyula, Puebla (Mexico), to the Hamptons in New York.
- Engagement and reflection 30 years after the Zapatista uprising.

## 1. Daily interaction over 16 years (1973–1989) with the Nahuatl Indigenous Community of San Miguel Tzinacapan

When I completed my studies in Paris, my main concern was not so much research as engaging in socially transformative actions. So, in 1973, I moved to the community of San Miguel Tzinacapan (Cuetzalan, Puebla), a Nahuatl indigenous community of 3,500 inhabitants. Upon arrival, I was taken in by a well-known local healer, Doña Rufina Manzano, who introduced me to a broad universe of pre-Hispanic roots, previously unknown to me, revealing how the civilizational matrices that clashed in the 16th century remain in tension in my own country. That first year was one of pure listening—immersive listening that placed me deeply in the context of a “Deep Mexico” (Bonfil, 1990), previously invisible to me or stereotyped through my reality, and structurally antagonistic to my world. My perspective was shaped by the imagery of Indigenous peoples constructed by the National Indigenous Institute—an imagery disconnected from a highly complex history and reality (López Caballero, 2015).

Oral tradition tells us that the ancestors of San Miguel Tzinacapan’s current inhabitants gradually climbed from some lowland part of the Sierra in search of water and a suitable place to settle (Taller de Tradición Oral, 1994). They named each spot and corner of the land. Eventually, they found a spring in a cave filled with bats, which gave the town its name: *Tzinacapan*, which means in Nahuatl “Spring where there are bats”.<sup>1</sup> Saint Michael the Archangel, “The one who can do everything”, became the patron and the colonial-era complementary name.

The colonial period, the era of the Reform, and the Mexican Revolution had represented for Tzinacapan and the entire region an intense and eventful historical process, something difficult to perceive at first glance (Pare, 1975; García, 1987; Thomson, 2011). “To survive and to celebrate” seems to be the motto of San Miguel Tzinacapan, if not a summary of its cultural traits. Survival depends on corn, coffee, and migration. It also rests on the *compadrazgo* system and the hierarchy of civic-religious offices (Carrasco, 1961). Healers and

1 The language that preserves the final “t” and is spoken in the Sierra Norte of Puebla is older than the language with “tl” of classical Nahuatl according to Michel Launey (1981).