

Ways of Knowing in Left-Behind Places: Methodological and Theoretical Implications

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ABSTRACT

In the learning processes ahead of action within planning, it is common for stakeholders to face barriers to inclusion and we contend that these barriers have both procedural and epistemic dimensions. The research takes a step back from formal statutory consultations of planning to look for alternative ways of fomenting knowledge, in a way that is respectful towards those who do not feel legitimacy of voice within governance processes. This paper will reflect upon experiences from participatory research projects conducted in Dunkirk (France) and the Alzette-Belval border region (Luxembourg-France). We ask how different forms of knowledge can be assembled in contexts where both economies and local governance are in need of reform. Part of our approach is to develop participatory methods involving practitioners and citizens, in a way for them to learn with one another.

KEYWORDS

Knowledge, Spatial justice, Participatory methods, Local democracy

Générer des savoirs dans les territoires laissés pour compte : enjeux méthodologiques et théoriques

RÉSUMÉ

Les acteurs en charge des procédures de consultation publique en amont des stratégies d'aménagement sont souvent confrontés à des obstacles à l'inclusion des populations concernées. Nous formulons l'hypothèse que ces obstacles prennent des dimensions procédurales et épistémiques. Cette contribution mobilise plusieurs expériences de projets participatifs menés à Dunkerque et au sein de l'agglomération transfrontalière Alzette-Belval (Luxembourg-France) pour proposer des moyens alternatifs de générer des connaissances d'une manière respectueuse de celles&ceux qui ne se sentent habituellement pas légitimes à participer. Nous nous demandons comment différentes formes de savoirs peuvent être assemblées dans des contextes où économie et gouvernance locale sont en transformation. En prenant du recul par rapport aux procédures de consultation réglementaire, nous développons des méthodes participatives impliquant les praticien·nes et les citoyen·es, de manière qu'ils apprennent les un·es des autres.

MOTS CLÉS

savoirs, justice spatiale, méthodes participatives, démocratie locale

We are working with an interdisciplinary programme of “deep-place” research and studying how the knowledge in rich, historically grounded understandings of the long-term trajectory of a particular place relates to declining territories. The research focuses on local knowledge *in* places that have experienced economic decline. This links to a long-running debate in planning about the diverse forms of knowledge involved in the work of participatory governance, and a well-known tension between expertise and lay knowledge. Some researchers are developing techniques in associated disciplines, such as urban design (with urban rooms where local people can deliberate building layouts and designs) or social policy (with metrics to quantitatively capture well-being and belonging). While these are synergistic, for work in urban planning and development, we need a different method that can articulate the lived experience of places, and capture qualitative data on past, present and future development of a place. These connect to the knowledge challenges specific to urban governance and expectations of democracy.

Our research asks what if, instead of seeing places that have experienced decline primarily as difficult outliers, we instead saw them through the eyes of those who live there and are already working to sustain civic life in places? We use the term “ways of knowing” to indicate a subtle but powerful shift in thinking about how to understand development in places that have experienced economic decline. This means seeing the economy as a living social subject, rather than an abstracted material object. And it points towards co-production of knowledge and knowledge processes.

The research focuses on places where economies have declined and how it is possible to build knowledge of socio-economic activities that sustain civic life, through the participation of local actors with a view to planning future development. The work is part of the efforts to address geographic socio-economic inequalities and to establish participatory methods for understanding development at the urban level, such as can support efforts to tackle spatial and epistemic injustice (Byskov, 2021; Fricker, 2007). There is a recognised need for new approaches to knowledge of development (Tabačková, 2022). We offer a conceptual frame for building new participatory forms of evidence of socio-economic development within struggling places.

The proposed “ways of knowing in left-behind places” get closer to the lived realities of socio-economic development. Our work explores and evaluates them in relation to the (re)production of civic life rather than (e.g.) GDP. Mundane experiences are starting to be recognised as an important source of knowledge for those working in planning practice, and place governance (Lowe *et al.*, 2019). The work builds on history and planning expertise, and employs participatory methods that engage local community organisers and decision-makers in the research processes. We have successfully studied the phenomenon of generating knowledges (we use the plural in recognition of the diversity of focus and form) with communities in several regions and will focus on two of these, which are in France. The first step in our work was to test participatory methods to establish their potential for further study and now move onwards theorising, in relation to the new alternative means to co-construction and fomenting of knowledges, and the reflection on their value for planning research and development practice, and implications for reform.

This is an issue of justice. We live in a divided society, and the issue of knowledges has yet to be fully grasped in democratic governance arenas. For example in the UK the strategic agenda of levelling up seeks to rebalance the national economy, and is a priority objective for social justice and cohesion across the country. We contend that such governance agendas cannot simply be ‘delivered to’ communities but must be “produced with” stakeholders in places, which requires a participatory approach to planning for future development. This means that economic renewal and development strategies must be operationalised at the local level, with support for those that are struggling most. Research is needed to fully articulate how this might be done.

The presentation will draw on investigations about how to support participatory knowledge building on socio-economic development. This includes how local organisers who have strong bonding and bridging social capital might have the capacity to engage in the knowledge nexus of planning future development, and vice versa. Thus our research reflects on the knowledge nexus and how this might adapt. We engage with the changes that emerge within the praxis of governance and how they emerge. The work extends exploring how different actors develop and share their diverse ways of understanding urban areas and the knowledge processes.

We see uneven development is a two-sided problem. Firstly, historic sources of employment have declined in many places. Typically, large-scale manufacturing or carbon heavy industry have slowed down or stopped, and alternative local development activity is needed. The phenomenon of economic decline is a common experience internationally, including in many places in France, and presents a challenge for decision-makers across industry, enterprise, civil society, and government. Secondly, there is a disconnection between communities and policy-makers. This is often only noticed when new economic activity arrives but is out of reach of existing communities, for example where it is practically inaccessible or considered to be beyond current ambitions, but it is fuelled by the inability to speak about development collectively as a society. The most obvious example of this is when economically struggling places are labelled “left-behind” or “sunset” or “peripheral”, because these types of terms suggest that they are somehow failed places or intrinsically deficient. This fuels feelings of social alienation that are currently rife.

This is part of a wider agenda of looking for economic and development alternatives, and considering democratic process in respect of participative approaches to democracy. There is a growing frustration at the exclusion of “ordinary people” from decision-making. Our own research is a part of a surge of activity around the need for new economic models, and new measures that are closer to people. The work is fuelled by a recognition that GDP measures of decline merely point to where there may be issues –they cannot offer explanations or directly express the living standards or insecurity of those on the edge. Neither can they demonstrate the generative force and potential for development in local places.

We have been exploring how to better articulate everyday knowledge of development in places, and shed light on what works from the perspective of community organisers. The potential value of such a perspective on the economy and democracy is well anticipated. Every place has a unique socio-economic history and its own diverse set of current development activities, which holds promise as a rich source of evidence for planning future development –if it can be documented. In addition, we see an increasing demand for recorded stories of community development, and a burgeoning interest in seeing local patterns through the eyes of lay people. Themes of particular interest include: Activity to support social infrastructure and the green transition, and creating flexibility in work options post-pandemic.

Our participatory methods engage local organisers and decision-makers to uncover the everyday experiences in places, and the potential existing within ordinary places. Local organisers have a deep understanding of places and what would build resilience and capacities to sustain communities. They draw on insights from historical knowledge and lived experiences of socio-economic development, and an appreciation of the social value to their communities of the unique local patterns of infrastructure, networks, and social systems that support economic activities. For instance, when communities may be driving the redevelopment of vacant buildings to energise the locality.

We have developed new methodologies, which can build a structured set of qualitative data and engage local actors in constructing narratives of socio-spatial change. We explore detailed accounts of the lived realities of people's everyday experiences of the economy. For this, we often partner with local organisers and artists. These are the local volunteer groups and voluntary organisations, which run activities and programmes to supporting communities. They have unique insights through their local connections and place-based work. It is important to note that they carry a heavy load; they have been particularly burdened during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our work was designed in a way to provide support to these key actors. It is a form of participatory action research that brings together researchers with local organisers to produce locally owned knowledge resources.

We have completed a set of cases where we tested the feasibility of the participatory methods, and this demonstrated the potential value of next more theoretical step in the research. For example, we have been involved as a research team managing the research, with operational support from local partners who played a key role in enabling fieldwork and are now helping to disseminate and develop impact. We worked together to create a rich account of the past and present development of their place. Decline is situated alongside other social and economic changes, not all of which are negative or understood as such. The complexity of change is revealed through our research. "Loss and decline are an important part of the story, but so also is resilience, a strong sense of community and identity, new opportunities for some and the arrival of new people into the village" (Tomaney *et al.*, 2021). This work is gathering momentum and we continue to share and reflect, and would bring the emerging work to the conference.

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