

Using participatory mapping to explore participation in three communities

“Maps are more than pieces of paper. They are stories, conversations, lives and songs lived out in a place and are inseparable from the political and cultural contexts in which they are used” (Rambaldi, 2005)

Introduction

The [Pathways through Participation](#) project is a 2.5 year qualitative research project exploring how and why individuals get involved and stay involved in different forms of participation over the course of their lives. The project is a partnership between three organisations with different perspectives on participation: the National Council for Voluntary Organisations ([NCVO](#)), the Institute for Volunteering Research ([IVR](#)) and [Involve](#). It aims to explore how participation begins and continues, if connections and links exist between different forms of participation and what triggers movement between them. We are interested in a very broad range of participatory activities, including voting, fundraising, campaigning, volunteering and ethical consumption¹. The research is exploring people’s stories of participation in three contrasting communities in England to provide a range of different social contexts for participation: an inner-city area of Leeds, a suburban area of the London Borough of Enfield, and a rural area of Suffolk.

We used participatory mapping as part of the fieldwork and the experience has provided both useful data and an opportunity for the project team to reflect on the strengths and limitations of the approach. This paper introduces readers to participatory mapping as a versatile research tool and then illustrates our approach to mapping within the Pathways through Participation project, discussing the emergent findings and our reflections on the method.

Participatory mapping in context

Participatory mapping is an interactive approach that draws on local people’s knowledge, enabling participants to create visual and non-visual data to explore social problems, opportunities and questions. Participants work together to create a visual representation of a place using the tools and materials at their disposal. Whilst the drawing of maps by local people to enhance cultural knowledge and develop a sense of place and identity can be traced back centuries, social and spatial mapping as a participatory exercise, often facilitated by “outsiders” as a means for research and knowledge creation, has only really developed over the last 20 years (Chambers, 2006: 2-3). In the development literature, mapping is identified as having many different sources – from social anthropology to participatory action research and popular education (Chambers, 2008: 299).

Participatory mapping has been widely used across the world, and its ‘pandemic spread’, over other visual methods, is attributed to the ‘versatility and power of participatory mapping, the relative ease with which it can be facilitated, the fun, fulfilment and pride which people derive from it, and its multiple uses by so many stakeholders’ (Chambers, 2006: 2). Mapping crosses a number of disciplinary boundaries and is developing a growing body of theory, principles and practical experience. The general aims and specific objectives of participatory mapping initiatives vary significantly depending on the use to which maps will be put and who will view and make decisions based on the content of the maps (IAFD 2009: 4).

¹ For a more detailed outline of the research process and the different phases of the project, please visit the ‘*Research Approach and Methods*’ page of the website, found [here](#).

Using mapping in the Pathways through Participation project: aims, process and findings

The Pathways through Participation project used participatory mapping to:

- identify the range of places and spaces for participation in and beyond the three fieldwork communities;
- gain a better understanding of the local context for participation in each area;
- get a better understanding of participants' perceptions and understandings of participation;
- provide a collective, open and informal introduction to the project in the three fieldwork areas; and,
- to start to build relationships with local people to provide access to potential individual interviewees for the following phase of the project, in which over 100 in-depth interviews are being carried out.

Two 'mapping workshops' were carried out in each fieldwork area and were attended predominantly by residents from the area, but also attracted a small number of people who live outside but participate in activities within the fieldwork area. After several introductory exercises, participants were asked to draw a map of the local area on a large blank piece of paper and to populate it with the sites and places where participation occurs.



The facilitators emphasised that there was no "correct" way to draw the map, and that geographical scale and accuracy were not important. Following the map creation process, the groups within each workshop reflected on one another's map and discussed similarities, differences, noticeable inclusions and omissions. The workshops yielded some rich findings and reflections, which are outlined below.

A tangible outcome of the workshops was the development and production of large paper maps which indicated specific **physical locations**, or sites, where people participate – for example, schools, churches, businesses, and community centres - as well as examples of the activities and users of these sites. The number, range and concentration of sites of participation varied across the fieldwork areas, and included intangible (not site-specific) and decentralised sites such as campaigns and online activity. The maps also included important annual events as well as places, highlighting the role that episodic events can play in supporting participation.

The maps highlighted the institutions, organisations or groups that operate, manage or control the sites and spaces of participation. These included: local authorities (identified in all three fieldwork areas) and other statutory bodies (schools, the police, local authority maintained parks/green spaces, hospitals); private companies and commercial shopping complexes; faith-based organisations (mosques, churches, temples and synagogues); voluntary and community organisations; other community

hubs and centres, and informal networks ('gossip' being noted in one workshop). Often these can be physical sites themselves, for example a school or a hospital, as well as a body, group or institution that facilitates participation (Parent and Teacher Associations, and hospital fundraising for example).

The discussions in the workshops raised questions about how **perceptions of a place** may have implications for the way participation is organised and the degree to which opportunities are taken up by local people. In some workshops, the maps (and accompanying discussions) revealed that residents in some of the fieldwork areas have a strong sense of their collective identity as residents of that place, and a common idea of where its boundaries begin and end. This has prompted the research team to question whether this sense of identity with a place affects residents' participation either within or beyond their immediate environment.

Workshop participants raised several issues relating to the **accessibility and inclusivity** of local sites. Barriers to participation can range from the practical - like the lack of frequent, reliable, and affordable public transport or the absence of certain types of sites, like MPs' surgeries, in some areas - to the highly personal, such as the feeling of discomfort a newcomer to an area can have when joining a group that does not present itself as welcoming. Physical space - its availability, whether it is accessible to people with disabilities, and whether it feels safe and inviting - was also identified as an important factor in the accessibility of participatory activities.

All of the workshop groups identified '**hubs**' of participation which support a wide range of activities, events, and organisations, and through which diverse groups of people access opportunities to participate. Common hubs included community centres, places of worship, schools, pubs, and parks and green spaces.



Reflections on the methods used

After drawing on their existing knowledge and doing some further research into participatory mapping methods, the project team devised an approach to mapping that was considered most appropriate to the project's needs and constraints. The elements of the method that attracted the project team were that it was visual rather than text or number based; that it was interactive and collaborative; it facilitated local people to articulate local knowledge; and that it fed into the research methods planned for later in the project.

Visual method

The visual, creative prompts in mapping were expected to encourage participant dialogue at this early stage of the project and to start to develop the research team's relationship with local people. The project team found it an engaging way to elicit the information needed at this stage of the research and it resulted in a tangible

representation of local participation (i.e. the paper maps) which the research team were able to take away, reflect on, analyse and use for the following project phase.

Interactivity and collaborative working

Mapping is a community-generated process of knowledge creation; it invites dialogue and enables the reflection of individual and shared experiences. This exchange of ideas was generated both during the mapmaking process and afterwards, when the groups reflected on one another's maps. These conversations provided insights related to the context and quality of participation in the local areas, and brought a broader interpretive dimension to the workshops.

Although attendance at the workshops was through an open invitation, some sessions attracted groups of people from a particular participatory activity or interest, which had the potential to affect the group dynamics during the mapmaking process and unbalance the content of the final map. This relates to a wider challenge with participatory mapping: the maps created will always to some extent reflect the knowledge, world-view and experience of the participants involved in their creation.



Mapping as part of the wider research process

The project team were clear that a technique was needed to identify places and spaces for participation locally - 'sites' of participation where potential interviewees could be recruited. We also hoped that the mapping approach would start to build relationships with individuals and groups to facilitate the snowball sampling to identify interviewees later.

Mapping was in line with the project's wider commitment to participatory research processes. In addition, the visual element in the mapping workshop led into further development of the team's planned use of a creative, visual element in the in-depth interviews in the form of a 'timeline'. Finally, the team were keen to use an inventive and collaborative approach such as participatory mapping as a fun, interesting and eye-catching introduction of the project to local community members in the hope that this would encourage subsequent participation in the project.

Conclusion

Mapping has a long and rich history, yet mapping facilitated by outsiders as part of a development, change and/or research processes has become increasingly popular and prominent across the world in the last 20 years. Participatory mapping has developed a range of principles and methods that can be used in a wide variety of contexts and for many different research purposes and questions. The Pathways through Participation team found that the principles suited their aim of participatory research, and decided to use this method at a key stage in the project. The team developed a specific approach that was relevant to the project, the contexts and the groups of people they were working with, and found that the method provided real benefits.

The strengths of mapping as a method in helping to facilitate local people to work collaboratively to draw on their local knowledge cannot be overemphasised. Valuable data was collected that has helped ground the next stage of the fieldwork and started to build relationships with residents in the three fieldwork communities. This helped the researchers to identify people to invite for interviews for the next, and primary, phase of the fieldwork. The limitations of mapping, particularly that the data mapping generates and captures reflects only the views of the people in the room, is a limitation that can be found in most in-depth, qualitative approaches. Through careful and balanced recruitment, and ensuring that mapping is used alongside other methods (in the Pathways through Participation project, it has happened alongside stakeholder interviews, desk-based research and local walkarounds), this limitation can be addressed.

Participatory mapping, in all its different guises and forms, is a valuable social research method, as we hope to have illustrated through the use of mapping in the Pathways through Participation project. We hope that this report will feed into the continuing development of this valuable approach, and welcome readers' comments and feedback about how you have used mapping in your work – please comment on our website, where you can also find the full version of the mapping report:

<http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/2010/06/using-participatory-mapping-to-explore-participation-report>

References

Chambers, R. (2006) 'Participatory mapping and geographic information systems: Whose map? Who is empowered and who disempowered? Who gains and who loses?', *The Electronic Journal on Information Systems in Developing Countries (EJISDC)*, 25 (2): 1-11.

Chambers, R. (2008) 'PRA, PLA and pluralism: practice and theory' in P. Reason and H. Bradbury, *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice, Second Edition*, Sage, London.

IAFD (2009), *Good practices in participatory mapping. A review prepared for the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)*, IFAD.

Further information

About mapping

Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place, S. Kindon, R. Pain and M. Kesby (Eds), Routledge, New York, 2010.

The SAGE Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice, Second Edition, Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (Eds), Sage, London, 2008.

Special edition of the IIED journal, *Participatory Learning and Action* on participatory mapping and GIS containing 17 articles: 'Mapping for change: practice, technologies and communication', *Participatory Learning and Action* (54), April 2006. Available at: <http://www.iied.org/pubs/pdfs/14507IIED.pdf>

Landscapes of participation: findings and lessons from community mapping, Brodie, E. and Cowling, E. NCVO/VSSN Research Conference, Sept 2010

Online development and communication publication, *The Drum Beat* 322, published a special edition on Participatory Mapping and PGIS with a lot of links and resources:

<http://www.comminit.com/en/node/341/307>

The international online journal PLA Notes has many articles on participatory mapping:

http://www.planotes.org/pla_backissues/54.html

Integrated Approaches to Participatory Development (IAPAD) – online gateway to community mapping, PGIS and PPGIS: <http://www.iapad.org/>

Useful resources on mapping, including a PDF on how to do participatory mapping:

<http://www.participatorytraining.co.uk/How%20to%20do%20participatory%20mapping.pdf>

NOAA Coastal Services Center, 2009. Available at:

http://www.csc.noaa.gov/cms/human_dimensions/participatory_mapping.pdf

About the Pathways through Participation project

For more information on the project or to subscribe to our newsletter visit the website

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