



COmmunity-based Management of
EnviromenTal challenges in Latin America



Briefing: Participative approaches to characterize socio-ecological systems and analyze governance of natural resources

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1. Introduction

Generating collective action to manage natural resources has been, in recent years, a concern and a challenge for academia, international cooperation, the state, non-government organizations, and the communities. Many development and research projects seek to establish strategies from the characterization of the socio-ecosystems for the conservation and adequate use of resources.

However, no methodological processes are available from external entities that enable implementing participative approaches that generate real appropriation by the communities, making joint decisions regarding the different conservation strategies. The projects continue being imposed and with partial participation of the communities and players.

In the Colombian case of the COMET-LA Project, we have developed a methodological strategy from the participative approaches, adding the experience the team of researchers from the Faculty of Environmental and Rural Studies, Department of Rural and Regional Development at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana has had in participative research processes and in the use of participative tools to analyze collective action in the management of natural resources (Maya *et al.*, 2001; 2002; 2003a; 2003b 2006; 2008; Maya, 2007; Maya and Ramos, 2010).

2. Participative approaches

In speaking of participative approaches, it is necessary to resort to qualitative research and participative research (PR) as part of their origin and their theoretical foundation. Qualitative research refers the investigation of qualitative aspects of the social characteristics, which determine the relationships, functioning, and real conditions of the human groups studied (Chambers, 1997). With qualitative research,

we obtain information on the feelings, perceptions, "realities" of the human groups and the social context is more closely exemplified. Participative research as the setting in which practice and ethics, academic knowledge and popular wisdom, and the rational with the existential are combined. It is inspired on a pluralist democratic concept that favors living with differences and which introduces gender perspectives, popular classes, and pluri-ethnicity in the projects (Fals Borda, 2008).

Within the framework of PR and qualitative research, a methodological and instrumental framework emerges denominated the Participative Rural Appraisal (PRA) "*a systematic, semi-structured activity performed on the terrain by a multidisciplinary team and focused on obtaining rapid and efficient information and new hypotheses on resources and life in rural environments*" (Schonhuth and Kievlitz, 1994). PRA has a participative approach, implying that what is sought when using it is to generate appropriation of knowledge by the communities. Participative approaches have four basic functions (Salas, 1997):

Cognitive: Refers to the generation of knowledge (for the community and researchers). General knowledge is obtained from direct relation with individuals, with the different players and according to their perceptions of reality.

Social: Refers to the satisfaction of the community's basic needs, its expectations, and its future perspectives.

Instrumental: Refers to the use of techniques and tools that enable participation from everyone without regard to their level of education or without restrictions to their participation according to their position within the community (Visual techniques like those of PRA and mobile visualization).

Political: To articulate the strategies proposed by the communities with those proposed by the State.

Among the discoveries or points in favor that have been recognized from the use of the PRa within social research, we can identify (Chambers, 1997):

1. Recognition of the skills of the local inhabitants of mapping, modeling, observing, quantifying, estimating, comparing, and describing their geographic, social, environmental, and economic contexts.
2. Sympathy and the form in which diagnoses are developed permit, upon having better relations with the community, the generation of situations of trust in which the whole community can participate; diminished possibilities of the cultural "shock" from impeding the development of the objectives.
3. The tools and the form of mobile visualization permit debating on what must be included among the discussions, permit those who cannot read to identify what is being discussed, and the results are checked during the process.
4. The instruments permit having a sequence. Each of the tools used can be refined from the information coming from others, which in turn enables reaching agreements and more closely recognizing the reality studied.

3. The Methodological process

With clarity on the implications of addressing research processes from participative approaches, we need to identify the stages of the process' implementation. As in every research process, and for this specific case of characterizing socio-ecological systems, it is important to know from theory the different analysis currents. Upon identifying the socio-ecological variables, it is imperative to define the methodological route for the field work.

3.1. Stages

3.1.1. Training of the University team of researchers

Management of participative tools requires the learning and practice of certain skills. This is why the researchers from the University group who did not have much experience in PRA management, moderation, mobile visualization, etc., were trained by the researchers with greater knowledge and experience in this participative methodology.

3.1.2. Selection and training of the local team: Denominated team of co-researchers

Since the formulation of the project, it was considered necessary that throughout the whole process (formulation of the project, characterization of the socio-ecological systems, foresight planning, design of scenarios, etc.,) training would be carried out that would permit active participation of local players in the process. For said purpose, several training sessions were designed and implemented in the following themes: concepts like gender, socio-ecological systems, governance, and prospective planning; in participative methodologies (group work participative approaches, moderation and facilitation techniques, and PRA tools, systematization and analysis), survey design and implementation. *Training a local team is vitally important in these processes, given that it enables the generation of local capacities, greater depth and closeness to reality during the analysis.*

The PRD tools to be implemented during the workshops were discussed with the team of co-researchers; they moderated the workshops, systematized and analyzed the results along with researchers from Universidad Javeriana; they participated actively in workshops to identify the variables of foresight planning and are active, reflexive, and critical part of the research process. The PRA tools selected were: historical diagrams; productive profiles; maps of yesterday, today, and tomorrow; matrix of conflicts; Venn diagrams; problem trees, and transects.

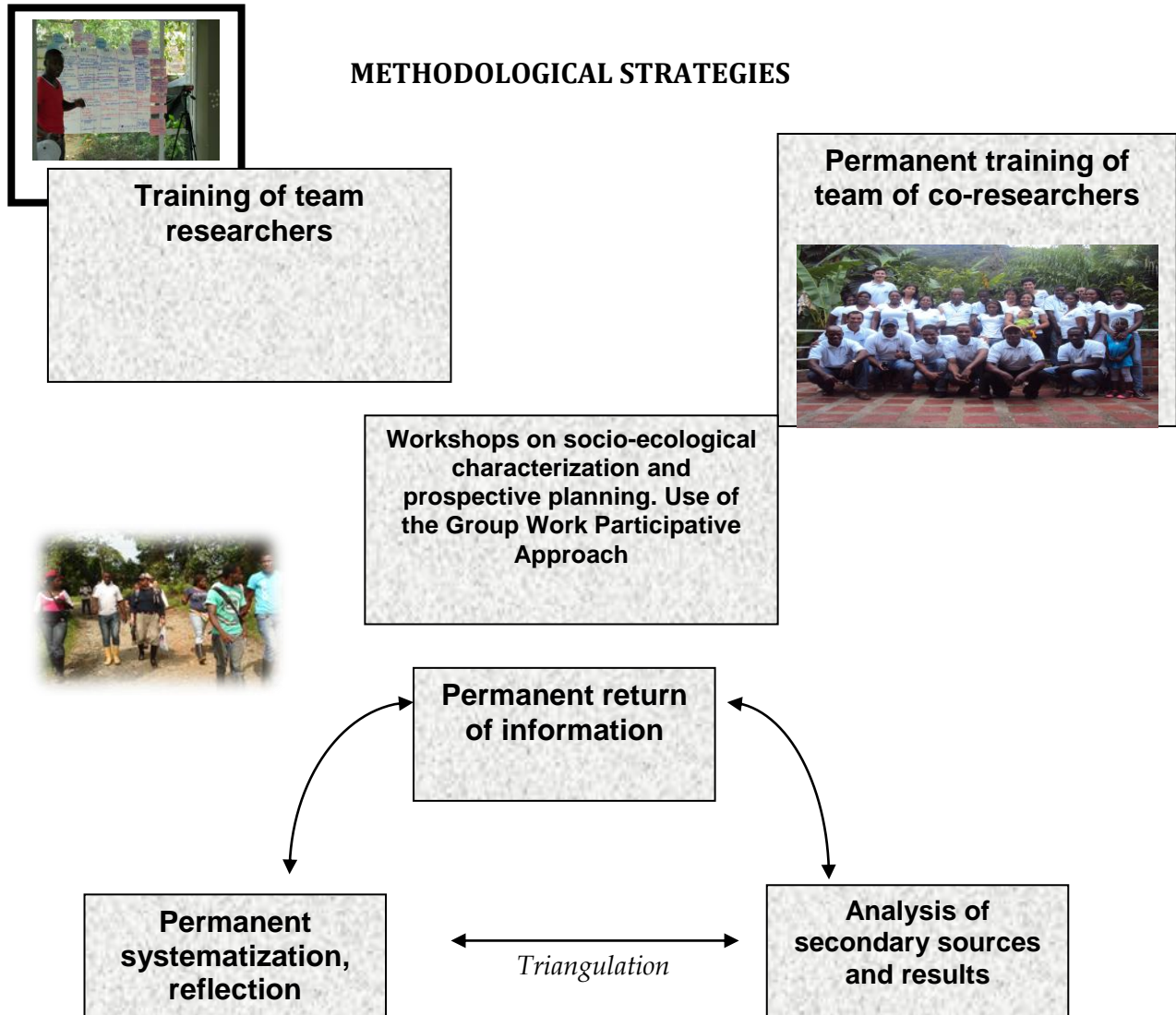
3.1.3. Permanent process of information return

Application of participative methodologies in projects of this type, not only implies participation from the population when gathering information, but also in its analysis and qualification.

3.1.4. Triangulation of information

The results obtained are systematically and permanently triangulated with secondary sources (theoretical triangulation); intra-methodologically (qualifying the information obtained during workshops and interviews), and inter-methodologically (qualitative and quantitative). The local team of co-researchers, along with the team of researchers from the University and the rest of the members from the consortium working on the project participate throughout the whole process.

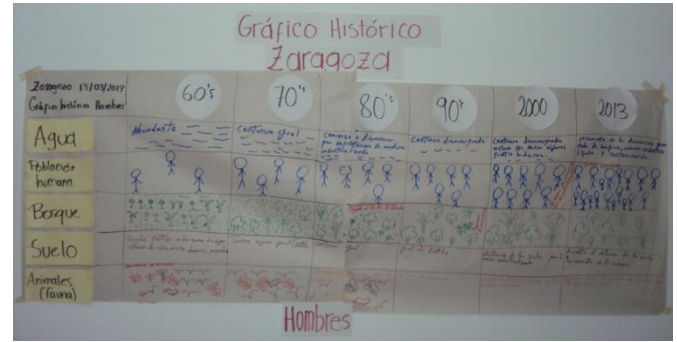
With the COMET-LA project and the process implemented we have constructed "a learning arena" for both researchers and members of the community councils and the community in general. The communities and organizations have been strengthened and generational relays are being made possible in the boards of directors with respect to the formation and training of the young co-researchers.



Some PRA tolos for characterization of socio-ecological systems



Productive Profile (Economic Dependence from natural resource)



Historical Graphs (Perception on resource condition)



Organizational Diagrams (perception regarding the institutions in charge of regulation of natural resources and about community organizations)



Social Cartography (Yesterday, today and tomorrow maps)

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