Participatory visual methods and the mobilization of community knowledge: Working towards more equitable research processes

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The Global Health Network

Published on: Jun 16, 2023
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21428/3d48c34a.34c18e04
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Top-down practices have been dominating health research for decades. As a consequence, the process of understanding health challenges and generating effective interventions against them often lacks the knowledge of those who directly experience the health challenges under investigation.

Our paper will use the ‘Water and Fire: 15 Best Bets to reduce risk and enhance capacity for transformative adaptation among vulnerable residents on the Cape Flats’ project as an example of a research process undertaken to mobilize community knowledge on disaster risk management and resilience. Through ‘Water and Fire’, we have worked with groups of co-researchers who live in three marginalized areas of Cape Town that are regularly and severely affected by the environmental disasters of fire, flooding, and water shortage.

Firstly, we took a participatory visual methods approach - which included digital storytelling, community mapping and photovoice - to differentially demonstrate how these environmental disasters are experienced at household, neighbourhood, and community levels from the perspective of our co-research partners. The layering and triangulation of these visual methods enabled the co-researchers to describe and show what they can and cannot do to counteract fire, flooding, and water shortage, identify where assistance is available and pinpoint key gaps in responsiveness and support.

Secondly, we facilitated a process of participatory analysis and democratic decision-making amongst the co-researchers through which they selected the stories, maps and photographs they wanted to present at engagement events and developed their ‘best bets’ including a compilation of potential interventions for environmental disaster risk management.

Thirdly, we supported a process of narrative development and event design with the co-researchers in preparation for three community and stakeholder engagement events which they led in their respective communities between April and June 2022.

Our paper will describe the key opportunities, most significant challenges, outcomes, and central points of learning generated by the ‘Water and Fire’ research process. We will offer suggestions for the uptake of the approach in global health research to foster the mobilization of local knowledge, and to further ethical and equitable possibilities for health research in every health care setting.