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Rapid Visual Diagnosis

a rapid, low cost, participatory methodology

Applied in Montevideo

The local government of Montevideo, along with its citizens and civil organisations, is promoting baseline studies and action plans for the implementation of urban agriculture programmes. Baseline studies should identify the principal practices and their distribution in the city. The fieldwork allows for comprehension of the most relevant characteristics of the urban farmers, as well as experiences of public organisations (Municipality of Montevideo, schools, universities, etc.), NGOs, and producer organisations. In addition, it examines the nutritional state and the current normative and legal framework of the city.

In Los Bulevares, a neighbourhood located in the western part of Montevideo, Rapid Visual Diagnosis (RVD) was used as the principal methodology in a baseline study on urban agriculture including a study on pig-raising in the slums. RVD is a participatory methodology of diagnosis of urban agriculture, developed by the Latin American Centre of Social Ecology – CLAES (Montevideo, Uruguay). RVD allows for the incorporation of local groups and communities in a participatory process of knowledge development that takes place “from the bottom up.”

The RVD took place between November 1999 and January 2000. Its application permitted the identification of the human,

natural and constructed components of urban agriculture, the types of activities included and its relation to urban food security and environment, within a short period of time and with limited resources.

STAGES, OBJECTIVES AND TECHNIQUES

RVD uses a variety of techniques as part of its participatory process of developing and analysing knowledge. Its distinct stages combine fieldwork and academic research.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE THEME

Objective: Establish the local Research Team and the Interactive Group

Techniques: Informal meetings, Interviews with key informants, Assembly

In Montevideo, a Research Team (RT) and an Interactive Group (IG) were formed using interviews and informal discussions and meetings with key actors in the neighbourhoods.

The RT consisted of two sociologists, an agronomic engineer, and a small group of residents from the zone of study. This multidisciplinary team also received contributions and support from a veterinarian (professor of veterinary medicine at the *Universidad de la Republica Oriental* of Uruguay) and another agronomic engineer (member of the municipal administration of Montevideo). The IG was formed, consisting of the members of the RT and various residents of the Los Bulevares neighbourhood. The IG carried out the baseline study, and functioned as a local platform for reflection in all stages of the study. In this way, the residents contributed to the process of knowledge construction and brought distinct points of view on the table. Building confidence among the members of the IG is very important. The IG incorporated various local groups without taking sides among them.

Objective: Determine the zone of study

Techniques: Tour of the area, Participatory creation of a territorial map)

In Montevideo, the zone of study was defined in an intentional manner, as between 1993 and 1995 a gardening project for women developed, by a local NGO (Study Group on the Condition of Women-Grecmu) already existed in that area. With the participation of the community, a map was created, specifying the actual urban area and environment to be studied. Along with this map, digital cartographic information provided by the local government was used.

Objective: Define the typology of UA systems

Technique: Participatory workshop

The baseline studies start from a definition and typology which incorporate the mix of urban agriculture systems expected to be found in the field. In this process existing information and information collected during previous studies and during interviews and informal discussions with key informants is used. The typologies defined should be subject to revision throughout the process of elaborating the base study.

INFORMATION COLLECTION

Objective: Obtain reference information

Techniques: Revision of questionnaires, census, etc., Brainstorm/Cards, “Corn Kernels”, Cognitive map.

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Reference information was obtained from the Municipal Administration of Montevideo (maps, statistical data, and information on land use) and the National Office of Statistics (census information). Specific information was drawn out using participatory and constructive techniques such as “Kernels of Corn” and “Cognitive Maps” that allowed environmental and gender dimensions to be incorporated into the baseline study.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE CONTEXT

Objective: Obtain contextual data
Techniques: Venn Diagram, Cognitive map, Participatory workshop

For the identification of *contextual data*, various techniques were applied. For example, Venn Diagrams, Cognitive Maps, Brainstorming, and SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis. This information was complemented with statistical data and historical information obtained through bibliographic review, etc. The process of conceptualising the context allowed for the development of a matrix with social, cultural, and environmental data (on a local scale and with a historical view). During this stage, the organisational context, the strengths and weaknesses of the local group and the community, natural components (climate, soil-types, landscape, animals and plant species, etc.), type of constructions and distribution, and the urban infrastructure (bridges, streets, highways, etc) were identified.

VISUAL DIAGNOSIS

Objective: Obtain specific information
Techniques: Diagnostic Scheme, Plot Diagram.

The first stage of the Visual Diagnosis (VD) was the elaboration of a basic working scheme. A preliminary tour of the area produced a map of the most significant plots of land, taking into account the environmental and constructed components and the presence of urban agriculture activities. The species observed were listed and each was classified according to the typology that had been defined. The information collected had to be organised in a clearly identified manner on the map of each plot.

Plot Diagrams were made by using a representative model based on the informa-

tion obtained in the basic working scheme. The community was trained in the development of Plot Diagrams to facilitate participation. The plot diagrams permitted the collection of valuable information in a short period of time. The information allowed for the validation of the model to which the questionnaire would subsequently be applied.

The Plot Diagrams should be clear and easy to understand by other parties (especially when completed by members of the community), and it may be helpful to put together a small form containing the basic questions that the investigator should have in mind when making the diagram.

If there is not enough time and/or resources, the RVD may be finalised here, after completing the VD. All the basic information about urban agriculture is then identified.

REALISATION OF INTERVIEWS

Objective: Obtain specific information
Techniques: Semi-structured individual interview, Snowball.

Key informants were interviewed, providing information on their farming methods, the varieties and origins of the seeds used, the main species cultivated, and the incorporation of these species into their diets. The RVD requires a limited number of interviews with qualified informants. The interviews advance the identification and comprehension of themes that have not been brought to light yet. The results cannot be generalised however, without conducting a representative number of interviews.

PARTICIPATORY QUESTIONNAIRE

Objective: Obtain specific information
Techniques: Participatory creation of the questionnaire form, Brainstorm/Cards, Participatory application of the form.

In the Los Bulevares neighbourhood, both the process of elaborating the questionnaire form, as well as the application of the questionnaire itself, were carried out by members of the community incorporated into the IG. In a training workshop a form was created which addressed the principal themes of interest of the local actors, presented in simple, understandable language. The use of the questionnaire allowed the collection of quantifiable information. In

the participatory process of creating the form, techniques such as “Brainstorming”, and “Speaking with Cards” were utilised. Witness Groups were formed to identify the principal themes and questions to be incorporated into the form.

PARTICIPATORY PLAN OF ACTION

Objective: Processing and presentation of results / Preparation of the PPA
Techniques: Brainstorm/Cards, Participatory workshop, SWOT Analysis, Flow Diagram

Based on the information collected, and as the final stage of the RVD, a Plan of Action was constructed for urban agriculture with the participation of various local actors, who had or had not worked on the baseline study. In the city of Montevideo, a SWOT analysis was conducted, which was used to identify the strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats that confronted the local group or community in its work.

CONCLUSIONS

RVD is a methodology that allows urban agriculture baseline studies to be conducted in urban and semi-urban zones of Latin American and Caribbean cities with low or mid-level population densities and development. RVD is conducted on a small scale and determines the components that an observer should identify. The fundamental idea of the methodology is based on the Visual Diagnosis (VD), that allows for a rapid and participatory means of creating plot diagrams and collecting contextual information and basic data on the natural and constructed environment and the presence of urban agriculture activities. The information obtained through the application of the VD is complemented with that obtained through questionnaires, interviews, and the processing of secondary and historical information.

The incorporation of local groups or communities into the formulation, implementation, evaluation, and management processes makes use of popular knowledge and generates new knowledge. In addition, with the development of such participatory practices, it is possible to advance the construction of inclusive governance that incorporates gender, generation, and environmental perspectives into processes of urban management.