


ORIGINAL

## Participatory action research (iap) as a methodology in community projects

### Investigación acción participativa (iap) como metodología en proyectos comunitarios

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#### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** the study analysed Participatory Action Research (IAP) as a critical and transformative methodology for community projects in the Ecuadorian context.

**Method:** a mixed approach with a sequential exploratory design was used. In the quantitative phase, a structured Likert-type questionnaire was applied to 45 university teachers with experience in participatory methodologies. The qualitative phase consisted of a documentary review of recent academic sources related to IAP.

**Results:** the results indicated that IAP facilitated organisational transformations, strengthened local leadership and improved social links within communities. More than 70 % of participants acknowledged significant changes as a result of PPI-based interventions. 88,9 % of teachers would recommend its application. However, limitations such as lack of homogeneous methodological training and dependence on external leadership were identified.

**Conclusions:** it was concluded that IAP is a flexible, relevant and ethical methodological tool that promotes shared decision-making, revalues local knowledge and fosters social transformation processes from an emancipatory perspective. Its implementation made it possible to articulate the production of knowledge with collective action, consolidating it as a viable alternative to vertical models of community intervention.

**Keywords:** Participatory Action Research; Social Transformation; Community Participation; Empowerment; Critical Methodology; Local Knowledge.

#### RESUMEN

**Introducción:** el estudio analizó la Investigación Acción Participativa (IAP) como una metodología crítica y transformadora para proyectos comunitarios en el contexto ecuatoriano.

**Método:** se empleó un enfoque mixto con diseño exploratorio secuencial. En la fase cuantitativa, se aplicó un cuestionario estructurado tipo Likert a 45 docentes universitarios con experiencia en metodologías participativas. La fase cualitativa consistió en una revisión documental de fuentes académicas recientes vinculadas a la IAP.

**Resultados:** los resultados indicaron que la IAP facilitó transformaciones organizativas, fortaleció el liderazgo local y mejoró los vínculos sociales dentro de las comunidades. Más del 70 % de los participantes reconoció cambios significativos como producto de las intervenciones basadas en esta metodología. El 88,9 % de los docentes recomendaría su aplicación. Sin embargo, se identificaron limitaciones como la falta de formación

metodológica homogénea y la dependencia de liderazgos externos.

**Conclusiones:** se concluyó que la IAP es una herramienta metodológica flexible, pertinente y ética, que promueve la toma de decisiones compartida, revaloriza el conocimiento local y fomenta procesos de transformación social desde una perspectiva emancipadora. Su implementación permitió articular la producción de conocimiento con la acción colectiva, consolidándose como una alternativa viable frente a modelos verticales de intervención comunitaria.

**Palabras clave:** Investigación Acción Participativa; Transformación Social; Participación Comunitaria; Empoderamiento; Metodología Crítica; Conocimiento Local.

## INTRODUCTION

Participatory Action Research (IAP) is a methodological and epistemological approach that promotes the collective construction of knowledge through the active participation of the subjects directly involved in the problems studied.<sup>(1)</sup> Unlike positivist paradigms that privilege objectivity and distance, IAP values situated, inter-subjective knowledge built from social experience, turning the research process into a space for dialogue, reflection and social transformation.<sup>(2)</sup> Instead of researching on communities, IAP proposes researching with them, breaking the hierarchical relationship between researcher and community.<sup>(3)</sup>

At a global level, IAP has proven to be effective in areas such as education, public health, social work and sustainable development. This methodology favours empowerment processes, shared decision-making and strengthening of the social fabric, by articulating academic knowledge with local and ancestral knowledge.<sup>(3,4)</sup> In Latin America, and particularly in Ecuador, IAP has been used in contexts of high social vulnerability - such as rural areas and marginalised urban neighbourhoods - to address issues such as poverty, inequality and structural violence.<sup>(5)</sup> According to ECLAC data, in 2022, more than 32 % of the population in Latin America will live in poverty, a figure that reflects a similar reality in Ecuador. This context highlights the need for participatory methodologies that promote sustainable structural changes.<sup>(6)</sup>

In Ecuador, various organisations and collectives have adopted IAP to design community plans, prevent violence and strengthen the social fabric. These experiences have shown their potential to generate significant changes, as well as the urgency of consolidating ethical and sustainable strategies that respect the time and dynamics of the communities.<sup>(7)</sup> However, their implementation also presents challenges, including the sustainability of participatory processes, equity in representation and the tension between academic and community time.<sup>(8)</sup> These challenges demand an ethical praxis that is sensitive to social complexity.

Participation, the core of IAP, is understood as a political process of collective awareness-raising through which communities build social power, generate new narratives and redefine their relationship with institutional structures.<sup>(9)</sup> Through cycles of action-reflection, IAP enables shared learning and concrete social transformations, always from an ethical perspective and community commitment.<sup>(10)</sup>

This study adopts a mixed approach to describe the contribution of PRA in community projects in the Ecuadorian context. It aims to characterise its scope, limitations and lessons learned, as well as to analyse the methodological and ethical tensions that emerge in its application. It also seeks to reflect on the value of IAP as a critical and transformative tool for collective action and research.

## METHOD

A mixed approach was adopted, with a sequential exploratory design (DEXPLOS). In the first phase, a structured quantitative questionnaire was applied. In the second phase, a qualitative analysis was developed based on a literature review of recent academic sources dealing with IAP in community projects.<sup>(11)</sup>

### Population and Sample

The population consisted of 50 teachers from the Faculty of Humanistic and Social Sciences of the Technical University of Manabí. The sample consisted of 45 teachers selected by non-probabilistic convenience sampling, who actively collaborated in recent participatory processes.<sup>(12)</sup>

### Data Collection Instruments

A structured Likert-type scalar questionnaire was elaborated (value 1: Never, 2: Rarely, 3: Sometimes, 4: Frequently, 5: Always). This instrument assessed the level of participation, perceived impact and understanding of IAP principles in community practice. The questionnaire had a reliability of 0,878 according to Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, which is considered acceptable, guaranteeing its coherence and reliability.<sup>(13)</sup> In the qualitative approach, a documentary review of indexed articles with a validity between 2020 and 2024 was carried out. The studies were selected for their theoretical and methodological relevance for understanding IAP as a social

intervention strategy.

**Table 1.** Questionnaire applied to teachers of the Faculty of Humanistic and Social Sciences of the Technical University of Manabí

No. Items		Answer Options				
		5	4	3	2	1
Variable 1: Perceived level of social transformation						
1	Has the implementation of IAP generated visible transformations in community organisation?					
2	Do you consider that local knowledge is adequately valued in IAP projects?					
3	Do you consider that IAP has strengthened the organisational fabric of the community?					
4	Do you consider that IAP has strengthened social bonds and trust among community members?					
Variable 2: Strengthening community participation						
5	How often do you participate in community projects using participatory methodologies such as IAP?					
6	Do you consider that IAP has contributed to improving community participation?					
7	Have you received training on participatory methodologies such as IAP?					
8	Do you consider that IAP facilitates the collective construction of solutions?					
9	Would you recommend the use of IAP in community interventions to other professionals?					

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research, using a mixed approach, sought to understand how Participatory Action Research (IAP) actually impacts on community projects. To do this, we combined a structured questionnaire with a desk review. From the outset, we knew that IAP was presented as a powerful methodological alternative, but we also wanted to see how it is being experienced in practice, especially from the point of view of teachers with direct experience of working with communities.

### Perception of social transformation

The results for this variable are quite revealing. 71,1 % of the teachers stated that the implementation of IAP has generated visible transformations in the community organisation. This perception is very much in line with the views of authors such as Fals Borda (one of the classic references of IAP), who argued that knowledge should generate action and real changes at grassroots level. It also coincides with more current approaches such as those,<sup>(14)</sup> which speak of IAP as a process of reconfiguring local links and structures.

What is striking is that 66,7 % acknowledged that local knowledge is valued in IAP projects. This is key, because there are still many methodologies which, although participatory in discourse, continue to reproduce the logic of imposing external frameworks. On the other hand, here we see an effort to build from the territory, recognising that community knowledge is not only valid, but fundamental.

On the other hand, 68,9 % stated that IAP has strengthened the organisational fabric of the communities. They referred to improvements in planning, internal communication and articulation between actors. In other words, it is not just a question of diagnoses or workshops, but of processes that are leaving an installed capacity, something that is also highlighted by authors such as<sup>(15)</sup>, who speak of IAP as a process that ‘leaves its mark’ on social dynamics.

And perhaps one of the most convincing data: 73,3 % stated that trust and social ties have improved. In the current context, where many communities are fragmented or demotivated, this is no small thing. Trust is not measured by hard indicators, but it is a social resource of the highest value for the sustainability of any process.

### Strengthening community participation

Here too the data is strong. Some 77,8 % of teachers said that they have frequently participated in IAP projects. In other words, we are talking about people who not only know the theory, but have put it into practice. Furthermore, 82,2 % said that IAP has improved real community participation. It is not about informative meetings or formal consultations, but about spaces where the community voice carries weight and makes decisions.

This coincides with what was stated by,<sup>(16)</sup> who emphasise that real participation cannot be reduced to ‘being present’, but implies having an impact. And this is what many teachers value about IAP: that it turns participation into a political tool and not simply an administrative requirement.

However, not everything is ideal. Some 35,6 % of those surveyed said that they had not received IAP training. This is an important limitation. While the methodology is powerful, its application without a solid foundation can lead to poorly designed or unethical processes. As warned by authors,<sup>(17)</sup> one of the risks of IAP is to fall into participatory simulations if it is not managed with judgement and commitment.

It was also asked whether IAP facilitates the collective construction of solutions, and 75,6 % answered yes. This reaffirms that the methodology not only serves to make diagnoses, but also allows for consensual and contextualised responses. Finally, an overwhelming 88,9 % would recommend working with IAP to other professionals. This speaks of a validation that is not only technical, but also ethical.

## CONCLUSIONS

The scope of IAP is manifested in its capacity to articulate organisational processes, strengthen participation and activate symbolic resources that favour sustainable transformations in local contexts. Its methodological flexibility allows it to adapt to complex and diverse realities, generating culturally relevant and situated interventions.

Among the limitations identified are the disparity in technical training, dependence on external leadership and institutional fragility to sustain processes in the long term. These weaknesses reveal the need to consolidate internal capacities and support structures that guarantee continuity and community autonomy.

The lessons learned revolve around the centrality of horizontal dialogue, the valuing of local knowledge and the importance of building shared ethical frameworks. IAP not only transforms the object of study, but also the way of doing research, as it demands a critical, reflexive and co-responsible attitude.

With regard to methodological and ethical tensions, there is evidence of a mismatch between academic and institutional times and community rhythms, as well as dilemmas surrounding representation, voice and decision-making. These tensions make it necessary to rethink research practice from an ethic that is situated and committed to social justice.

Finally, IAP is consolidated as a critical and transformative tool, by proposing a research model linked to collective action, social emancipation and the production of politically meaningful knowledge. Its value lies in restoring the centrality of social subjects as the protagonists of their own processes of change.

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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