

Co-creating costal adaptation plans through visual methods: the case of Durban in South Africa

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Abstract

Coastal adaptation planning is a complex endeavour with unprecedented overlaps in stakeholder interests and a multiplicity of high-ranking solutions, which are never completely right, but rarely completely wrong. Therefore guiding coastal cities on how to offset encounters with beach erosion, coastal flooding and other climatic impacts requires a positively transgressive approach to knowledge production –in the sense that academics and expert scientists ought to undo the expert tradition, and facilitate processes that allow non-academics to position themselves as co-creators of costal knowledge-production frames and networks, if the resultant data is to be not only valid from a scientific point of view but also useful to society and policy-makers. Transdisciplinarity, which focuses on problem framing and solution-finding through the integration of knowledge from various sources (bureaucratic, advocacy, expert and indigenous knowledge), has been recognised as an effective pathway for breaking the disciplinary walls that underpin the form and content of many research and policy enterprises, that traditionally govern the way we conceive and apply improvements in adaptation options for specific sectors as well as across sectors. While many a scholar have produced literature on transdisciplinarity in relation to sustainability science and climate change in general (Pohl, 2008; Brandt et al., 2013; Lang et al., 2012; Mauser et al., 2013; Klenk et al., 2015; Binder et al., 2015; Swilling, 2016), fewer publications deal specifically with climate change adaptation in a coastal city context; and yet coastal cities are ideal spaces for understanding complex interfaces between: i) 'natural' and 'anthropogenic' factors and processes; ii) interlinkages between expert science, policy-making and society; and iii) local-level actions that have incrementally reconciled the often conflicting ideals of social, economic, and environmental sustainability.

This paper presents lessons learned from using visual methods to co-create a coastal adaptation plan for Durban city in South Africa, after experiencing an extreme storm event in March 2007, which caused significant coastal erosion, damage to the coastline and large financial losses. The paper draws on the research moments of local residents, who used their mobile phones and digital cameras to conduct interviews and take images with municipal officials during a localized coastal vulnerability assessment. The interviews held revealed that visual devices can position households as co-researchers without necessarily offering them a modular training on co-production of knowledge. But for the academics and municipal officials involved, a framework agreement had to be drawn between institutions on the basis of mandates, and after a series of multi-stakeholder engagements on the pros and cons of producing knowledge with rather than for the Durban urbanites. Although stronger relationships among researchers and civil servants from public institutions emerged, the stakes were high at one time and yet decisions were agent, and it took both formal and informal administrative routes to garner institutional support from science, policy and practice. Three major lessons were learnt: i) visual methods can be a collaborative and empowering practice for the targeted local actors, especially in terms of revealing their inner selves, validating and aligning the research process to their lived experiences while identifying with the knowledge produced; ii) visual methods can position the local elite as the voice for the non-elite, thereby concealing the realities of certain under-educated individuals; iii) gender, class and level of education are key subjective categories with a powerful effect on the way local people engage in transdisciplinary processes. These lessons imply that expert researchers need to critically inspect the use of visual methods, in order to interrogate the knowledges, subjectivities and truths that are constructed in the process.

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