

**Collaborative problem-solving through PhotoVoice: helping
community organizations move from network building to action
in Havana, Cuba¹**
John Vertovec

Abstract

Questo articolo descrive il passaggio dalla costruzione della rete all'azione, nel quadro di ricerca partecipativa a livello comunitario. In particolare, descrivo lo sviluppo di una rete di organizzazioni comunitarie all'Avana (Cuba), e in che modo è stata utilizzata la metodologia del PhotoVoice come strumento collaborativo per scoprire e affrontare alcune sfide comuni, rimaste anche dopo la creazione della rete. Il nostro progetto PhotoVoice ha inteso 1) formare un legame più coeso tra le organizzazioni partecipanti e 2) fornire loro un 'linguaggio condiviso' per comunicare alcune delle loro esperienze, identificare e iniziare a risolvere alcune circostanze di fondo o trascurate. Il progetto PhotoVoice è culminato in una esposizione di 21 foto e didascalie che hanno descritto le maggiori opportunità, sfide e obiettivi di ogni organizzazione. Il processo – dai nostri primi workshop alla mostra finale – ha messo in luce alcune considerazioni chiave per le organizzazioni partecipanti e per molte altre organizzazioni della rete.

This article describes the movement from network building to action within a Community-Based Participatory Research framework. Specifically, I describe the development of a network of community organizations in Havana, Cuba, and how we utilized the PhotoVoice methodology as a collaborative tool to discover and address some common challenges that remained even after the network was established. Our PhotoVoice project sought to 1) form a more cohesive bond between the participating organizations and 2) give them a 'shared language' to communicate some of their experiences and identify and begin to resolve some underlying or overlooked circumstances. The PhotoVoice project culminated in a gallery of 21 photos and captions that described each organization's greatest opportunity, challenge, and goals. The process – from our first workshops to the final exhibition – revealed some key considerations for the participating organizations as well as many other organizations in the network.

Parole chiave: PhotoVoice; Community-Based Participatory Research; organizzazione di comunità

Keywords: PhotoVoice; Community-Based Participatory Research; Community Organization

1 This research was supported by the Dissertation Evidence Acquisition Fellowship from Florida International University (FIU), the Morris and Anita Broad Fellowship, the Elena Rivero Cuban Studies Scholarship from the Cuban Research Institute at FIU, a special events grant from the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center at FIU, and numerous research travel grants from FIU's Steven J. Green School of International Affairs and the Department of Global and Sociocultural Studies. I am very grateful for these vital sources of funding. Finally, I also thank the Cuban social entrepreneurs who participated in this research. Without them, this research would not have been possible.

Introduction

In the past 25 years, Havana like the rest of Cuba has undergone significant political economic transformations, including the proliferation of market-oriented sectors and increased possibilities for foreign investment. These are historic shifts for such a strict state socialist economy, but they have also revealed reemergent socioeconomic rifts (see, e.g., de la Fuente, 2001; Espina Prieto, 2013). This is a complicated phenomenon because these transformations at once ignited different sectors of the economy, drew support for local development projects, and became important sources of personal income; while also fueling social and economic disadvantages that led to macro-economic dependency issues and micro-level inequities and inequalities. Consequently, certain areas in Havana or certain groups of Cubans have flourished while others have not (Mesa-lago, 2002).

In this context, social entrepreneurship has become a pathway for converting some of the positive transformations into tools to try to mitigate or reverse the negative socioeconomic outcomes described above, and many social entrepreneurs have formed community organizations to address these circumstances. However, Havana, with a population of roughly 2 million people, is made up of a wide range of sociocultural diversity. So, like many other urban contexts, each neighborhood or each sociocultural sphere has unique histories, local and global connections, and codes of conduct (see also Pardo and Prato, 2012); meaning there are also nearly infinite ways to attend to community needs.

Despite operating in separate urban spaces, on different issues, and with a wide variety of styles or approaches, many community organizations have experienced similar challenges regardless of their sociocultural diversity. Indeed, while I conducted ethnographic research with seven unique organizations in Havana from 2018-2019, the organizations' leaders repeatedly described similar difficulties accessing material or financial resources and challenges navigating bureaucratic hurdles. At the time, however, there lacked infrastructure for these organizations to communicate their experiences with one another. So, even though they would all likely face similar challenges throughout their individual trajectories, they had difficulties sharing their thoughts on potential or already successful solutions to their problems.

With the help of Gilberto 'Papito' Valladares, an experienced community

organizer and social entrepreneur in Havana, and someone who has since become my close friend and mentor, we established a network of community organizations with the goal that they would help each other solve their common challenges and support one another through community (inter)action. The network, titled *La Red de Proyectos Socioculturales* (The Network of Sociocultural Projects), referred to here as *La Red* for short, immediately helped the separate organizations discover new volunteers, new opportunities to access resources, or increased attendance to their individual community initiatives and events. However, as I continued to work between the different organizations, I noted that there were potential challenges that I observed in one community but were perhaps overlooked in another community and therefore could not be communicated to the rest of the group. Since this was a fundamental goal of *La Red* (i.e., identifying and resolving common challenges) it was imperative to find a tool that could help the participating organizations see the underlying challenges that they shared.

This paper examines how PhotoVoice – a participatory photography methodology that integrates narrative construction, photography, and exhibitions intended to support critical dialogue around a social issue, in this case the experiences of different community organizations in Havana – helped members of *La Red* identify and reconceptualize some potentially overlooked challenges in their own communities, and created a mechanism for them to act on them. It traces how we moved from network building to action through a collaborative problem-solving framework via the PhotoVoice methodology. I draw from the process of executing *La Red's* PhotoVoice project– from our first workshops to the final gallery exhibition – to argue that the PhotoVoice methodology is an effective tool in terms of supporting community organizations in reframing and relating changes within their organizational logic. To achieve this, I first describe the development of *La Red*. Then, I describe the participants, methods, and procedures of our PhotoVoice project. Third, I explain how we adapted the PhotoVoice methodology to meet the capacities of the participants as well as facilitate critical dialogues between the participating organizations. Fourth, I give some examples from the PhotoVoice project to describe how it helped catalyze some key considerations and organizational changes. I conclude with a discussion of how shifting the gaze of 'the participant observer' was critical in discovering opportunities for improvement, even if some challenges still remained.

Background on *La Red*

On May 27, 2019, we hosted *La Red*'s first gathering. Community leaders from 13 community organizations in 9 municipalities of Havana attended. Though there were no official criteria for participation, all the members were legally recognized grass-roots organizations. The goal of the first meeting was to introduce the participating organizations to each other, with the hopes they would then use each other's experiences to help solve their greatest challenges. Papito also provided mentorship to the other organizations, offering his knowledge so the other leaders could apply it in their home communities as they saw fit. *La Red* had immediate success. Within the first month, the group produced three successful events. First, they hosted an obstacle course race on the local streets of Havana Vieja to raise awareness about fitness and exercise. Then they hosted an Olympics of local traditional games (e.g., jump-rope, *chivichana* cart races, hop-scotch, etc.) which attracted more than 100 participants (roughly aged 5-80) from 10 separate neighborhoods in Havana. A few weeks later, *La Red* hosted a beach cleanup with roughly 150 people from 8 neighborhoods in attendance.

While the organizations undoubtedly generated support for one another in their individual events, they still found it difficult discovering the underlying challenges that they shared. Three factors contributed to this barrier. First, the different organizations were so diverse in their goals and processes that it was often difficult for them to 'see eye to eye'. For example, some organizations operated based on evangelical Christian values while others operated without any religious identification. The other organizations often disparaged the Christian organizations for their religiosity, while the Christian organizations often found it unsettling that the other organizations worked closely with polytheistic religious practitioners.

Second, the community leaders had such disparate experiences running a community organization that it was sometimes difficult for them to communicate where to look for a challenge and how to resolve it. Some of them had decades of experience, others only a few months. Some had quick success while others faced insurmountable barriers during their 25 years of operation. The group thought that perhaps some of this success was due to «luck» since many of the successful organizations were located in tourism zones where there was a regular influx of tourism money or they

were located in parts of the city with better conditions. At the same time, some of the leaders from these wealthier areas, and who were often looked to as mentors in the group because of their success, sometimes had difficulties thinking beyond financial challenges or solutions.

Third, the community leaders came from different backgrounds – some were former street hustlers, others were college professors, some were Christian, while others were members of syncretic religions (e.g., *Santería*). They also came from different locations in the city – some in tourism zones, others in peripheral areas, others in shantytowns, and some in dense central spaces. Therefore, they embodied a diverse continuum of sociocultural experiences which hindered their interpersonal interactions. The participants often joked about this. For example, in a group meeting some of the older, more «refined» participants (half-jokingly) suggested that another participant – Rafa² – likely knew what the general public wanted because he was a ‘*toro*’ (bull), using the same word Rafa regularly used to describe his savviness in the streets. Later, when Rafa and I were talking about the interaction he laughed and said, «well, they wouldn’t know what they’re talking about because they’re old professors».

A key point we discovered was that building a network and sharing and supporting within that initial framework was not necessarily enough to create the kind of connection necessary to bridge the diversity among these organizations (despite the common challenges we had already identified). Something more was necessary. Thus, we initiated the PhotoVoice project with two primary goals in mind: 1) form a more cohesive bond between the participating organizations and 2) give them a ‘shared language’ to communicate some of their experiences and to search for, identify, and begin to resolve some underlying circumstances (Hergenrather *et al.*, 2009). From August to October 2019, we executed the PhotoVoice project, which culminated with a gallery exhibition on October 21, 2019.

Participants, methods, and procedures

La Red’s PhotoVoice project consisted of seven organizations who I had already been conducting research with and who volunteered their participation when I discussed the opportunity with them in individual meetings. Per my request, each organization sent

² All names besides Papito’s are pseudonyms.

two leaders, effectively forming a team for each community organization. Of the fourteen participants, 50% were women, 50% were black or mixed-race, and they ranged in age from 19-61 years old. Like *La Red* as a whole, the different organizations were also diverse in their makeup. One organization used art to attend to mental health disparities; there were three local development organizations from vastly different neighborhoods (one shantytown, one rural periphery area, and one lower-income neighborhood in a wealthier municipality (*Plaza de la Revolución*); one organization preserved local religious traditions; one organization used sports to shield young people from drug or alcohol abuse and/or domestic problems; and the last organization provided vocational training for young people without work or who did not go to school.

During the PhotoVoice project, we were also fortunate to have the expertise of Mitra Ghaffari, a U.S. born, Havana based photojournalist who helped cultivate the participants' photography skills as well as worked with the participants to edit and process the photos³. Together, we (the community leaders, Mitra, and I) worked through two months of weekly meetings and participatory workshops (described below). Each team took a total of 25-35 photos of a wide range of scenarios to communicate three primary themes: 1) the greatest challenge(s) facing their organization; 2) the greatest opportunities their organizations had in terms of working with or improving their communities; and 3) the primary goal of their community organization. Each organization had to choose one photo for each of the project's three themes, making a final gallery of 21 photos.

While each organization determined their final set of photos for the gallery, each photo and its caption was discussed collectively to facilitate outside interpretations, observations, and develop action-based responses. The captions were comprised of a title, analysis or description of the photo's contents, and a suggestion for how to improve the circumstances being depicted. Sometimes, the analysis and suggestion were brief inspirational messages, other times they were more direct ideas for instigating change (see Figures 1-4 for examples). The participants were encouraged to be concise to allow future audiences time to think through all the photos, titles, analyses, and suggestions in the gallery.

³ We did not allow anyone to doctor the photos. Rather, the editing and processing that took place was basic and focused on cropping the image and enhancing lighting so as to create the best possible photo with what we had.

Adapting the PhotoVoice methodology to address obstacles in moving from network building to action

PhotoVoice is a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) methodology focused on empowerment and critical analysis. Critical theories – like Freirian approaches to pedagogy and «praxis» (Freire, 1993) – underpin the process and encourage community members to think critically about their experiences both within their own communities and in broader society. In their seminal article on the methodology, Wang and Burris (1997) describe the three main goals of PhotoVoice as: «1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, 2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small scale group discussions of photographs, and 3) to reach policymakers» (ivi, 370). The methodology has been used across an array of topical themes including community rebuilding, health promotion, living with disabilities or illnesses, among others (see Hergenrather *et al.*, 2009).

PhotoVoice is often used as a needs assessment tool and to reach policy makers, as described above (see also Pauwels, 2015). However, the community leaders expressed to me during informal conversations that they were not interested in taking *La Red's* PhotoVoice project to policy makers in part because they were not convinced their voices would be heard politically. This was a common theme across many civilians I spoke with in Cuba. Additionally, a few of the community leaders also hinted at their nervousness of being caught 'documenting' Cuban society. This was a valid concern since other artistic representations of Cuban society – whether through film, music, or still image – have sometimes been considered too critical and, in some extreme cases, legally prosecuted (Fernandes, 2006). Though, the leaders did reassure me that the themes they had chosen would not be too controversial.

Rather, the PhotoVoice project's participants decided to use the process to instigate intercommunity conversations about their opportunities and challenges and to illustrate the ways they could improve or maintain those narratives themselves. During the planning portion of the project (i.e., before the formal project began), the community leaders decided that this project would be an invaluable way to document local experiences as well as allow them to curate an archive of contemporary issues. Based on my previous experiences using the PhotoVoice methodology I also knew that

this was an opportunity to create non-hierarchical knowledge and messaging (Padilla *et al.*, 2019; see also Enria, 2016).

We made several adjustments to fit the schedules of the participants and to account for some structural circumstances that hindered the project's completion. First, most the leaders had multiple responsibilities – like families and outside employment in addition to their director roles in their organizations – so they could not commit more than two months of their time. As such, we decided to host collective group meetings each weekend and 'one-on-one' meetings between me and the organizations during the week to revisit topics covered in the collective meetings. The benefit of these individual meetings were two-fold: 1) they helped improve the narrative focus of the submissions in order to critically and more concretely convey their central messaging; and 2) they allowed us to move the project forward despite the limited capacities of the participants (see also Cameron, 2007).

During our first meeting, it became apparent we had to make further adjustments to accommodate some broader structural issues in Cuba. Specifically, a few of the participants had severe difficulties travelling to the meetings because the Cuban government had significantly reduced public transportation due to an acute fuel shortage (Cubadebate, 2019).⁴ So, we decided to separate the participating organizations into two groups based on geography: one with organizations from the eastern side of Havana (n=4) and the other with organizations from Havana's center and west (n=3). To ensure that there was still a degree of collective engagement with the separate groups, I took detailed notes of all our meetings and presented them to the other group at the start of our meetings. This permitted the participants to contribute analyses across the groups and maintained thoughtful interactions between everyone involved. Eight formal meetings took place over the two-month period. Our first meeting – before we split into two groups – introduced the project and gave time for the community leaders to decide on the three themes their photo and caption combinations would address. As a group, we decided they would focus on their greatest challenges, opportunities, and primary goals. This was a shift from other PhotoVoice projects that allow for themes to emerge organically, often prioritizing a mission of social and policy change

⁴ It took one group over four hours each way to get to and from this first meeting, a trip that would have normally taken 30 minutes to an hour on public transport.

(see, e.g., Padilla *et al.*, 2019). We also used the first meeting to discuss the importance of group cohesion, describe the ethical aspects of the project, as well as outline the project's timeline. In the separated second and third meetings, we did hands-on training on the technical basics of photography as well as the construction of concise written narratives (captions). After the indoor workshops, the participants went to the 'field' (i.e., their own neighborhoods) and took photos for each of the project's three themes. Their assignment was to take as many photos as they could, and then choose 10 to present back to the group (roughly three per theme). Though not everyone adhered to this restriction, it still encouraged them to think through their photos and their meanings, instead of presenting many photos that were under analyzed. During the fourth and fifth meetings, the collective group – including the community leaders, Mitra, and I – analyzed the photos to make sure they attended to the projects' three themes and to critique them for photographic and analytic quality. The participants were then given time to refine their photos and captions before meeting again for the sixth and seventh time to analyze the captions and curate the final gallery.

We exhibited the gallery (our eighth 'meeting') at one of the participating community organization's headquarters. Per a recommendation from one of the participants, we placed a flap over the captions, artists' names, and community organizations' name in order to let the audience take in the photo first before seeing what the author was thinking. This strategy had two advantages. First, it discouraged bias in case the viewer already knew the artist or community organization. Second, it helped facilitate meaningful discussion between the community members (audience) and the community leaders (artists). These two groups were often from different places, further diversifying the exchanges between audience and artist, and which also encouraged new lines of inquiry for the community organizations to consider. For ethnography's sake, I held follow up interviews with each of the community organizations the week after the exhibition to talk about their experiences with the project as well as write notes on the discussions that emerged around the hidden captions.

Throughout the project, I tried to cover all costs in order to ensure that money did not affect anyone's participation. I lent a camera and cable charger to each team for the duration of the project. I also provided lunch at each workshop meeting. I offered a small stipend to pay for public transportation to and from our meetings, but no one

accepted this offer. For the gallery exhibition, I paid for high-resolution prints, purchased catering from a participating organizations' café, and rented a 25-seat bus to shuttle the participants, their significant others, and some community members who needed transportation to the exhibit.

Discovering potentially overlooked considerations through La Red's PhotoVoice project

In this section, I present 4 of the 21 images selected by our PhotoVoice group. Here, my focus is on the processes that led to the selection of the photos for the gallery, as well as some of the action-based work that came out of the process as a whole. As I detail below, the comprehensive process led to changes in the rationalities that the different organizations employed in their day-to-day initiatives, including, in some cases, important reconfigurations of their core identities.

I selected all the photos used in this article and while I wrote this article alone, the contents and analyses emerged from the interactive workshops, the detailed notes I shared between working groups, and personal interviews that were part of the PhotoVoice project; as well as the participant observation I conducted with each community organization before and after our PhotoVoice project. During the creation of this article, I had regular contact with most the community leader-participants who provided invaluable feedback on its contents. For brevity, I provide the titles in both English and Spanish but only include the English translations of the Spanish captions written by the participants.

Images depicting disenchantment and disconnection

In representing their greatest challenges, many of the community leaders submitted photos and captions that coalesced around circumstances of detachment or indifference, particularly with regards to how some community members felt about the community organization's efforts. In Figure 1, entitled *En el borde del camino hay una silla* (At the edge of the road there is a chair), a young person looks out of a dilapidated building towards *el malecón*, a seawall that borders Havana. In the distance, we see the ocean's infinite horizon. Figure 1's title refers to a song by the famed Cuban singer songwriter Silvio Rodríguez. The song – *Historia de las sillas* (History of the chairs) – promotes pursuing one's dreams even if there are obstacles in the

way. The chair in the song is a metaphor for the temptations in life that urge you to stop and take a break.



Figure 1: At the edge of the road there is a chair

Theme: Challenges.

Analysis: The options of life in our neighborhood oscillate from violence as a relational discourse to emigration as a solution.

Suggestion: Help build new paths of economic management with Cubans as protagonists.”

The leaders who submitted this photo explained that the ocean – or what is beyond the ocean in another country – is the metaphorical chair for many young Cubans. They expressed that the photo is a representation of the young people who are disenchanted or disconnected with Cuban society, and who often think of leaving Cuba in search of better prospects in another country.⁵ This represents a big challenge for many community organizations in Havana; that is, that they work for many Cubans who are considering leaving and are therefore apathetic to the notion of participating in or helping develop local community initiatives. This photo, and its caption, illustrate how without significant economic development in Cuba, young people will continue to feel detached from Cuban society and will remain a challenge for community organizations to engage.

⁵ This photo was taken close to the place where thousands fled Cuba in hand-made rafts during the Cuban rafter crisis in 1994. According to the photographer, this young man was supposed to be thinking of leaving Cuba.

Figure 2 shows a similar reframing of disconnection, entitled «*Apatía*» (Apathy), which makes explicit connections between the material deficiencies in Cuba and expressions of disinterest in «integrating and participating». During one of our workshops the photographer presented the photo and focused on the flower in the foreground, revealing that the impetus of the photo was to illustrate how the flower was metaphorical to the neighborhood they lived in. They said, «we should imagine that the flower is an allegory for our community. With a little attention, we can turn our situation right side up». Another participant from a different organization suggested that perhaps the real subject of the photo was the person walking away. The person, as this participant interpreted it, perhaps did not know the flower existed and for that reason was apathetic to the interests of the community leaders; maybe even unaware that the community organization existed. The organization that submitted Figure 2 thought that this analysis was more powerful and decided to use it.



Figure 2: Apathy.

Theme: Challenges.

Analysis: The context of a society with material deficiencies and spiritual needs expresses disinterest in integrating and participating.

Suggestion: Enough, don't detain yourself, don't stop dreaming!"

Apathy and disenchantment were common themes for many community organizations. For the organization from Figure 2, there were indeed many people in their neighborhood who simply did not know the organization existed or were uninterested in the goals laid

out by the community leaders (see also the analysis for Figure 4, from the same organization). While the reasons for this were certainly varied across all the community organizations, material deficiencies or growing socioeconomic inequalities had driven many people to focus on their own familial unit to manage their hardships. That is, many people did not find value in participating in community-level stewardship because they faced their own problems at home. The other participating community leaders expressed that this was a pertinent analysis for their organizations as well, even if some admitted to overlooking it. During our gallery exhibition, other organizations from *La Red* – who did not participate in the PhotoVoice project but came to support the exhibition – also identified with this challenge, revealing that this was likely a common challenge for many other community organizations in Havana.

Images revealing the search for a coherent identity and the promotion of organizational services

During the workshops it became apparent that some of the community organizations had potentially overlooked the importance of developing a coherent identity. While some of the organizations were formed around a specific topic – like teaching young people how to be barbers and hairstylists or using art to address mental health disparities – some of the other organizations discovered they were perhaps too broad in scope. The creation of Figure 3, entitled *Una luz en la oscuridad* (A light in the darkness) helped illuminate this challenge for the leaders who submitted it.

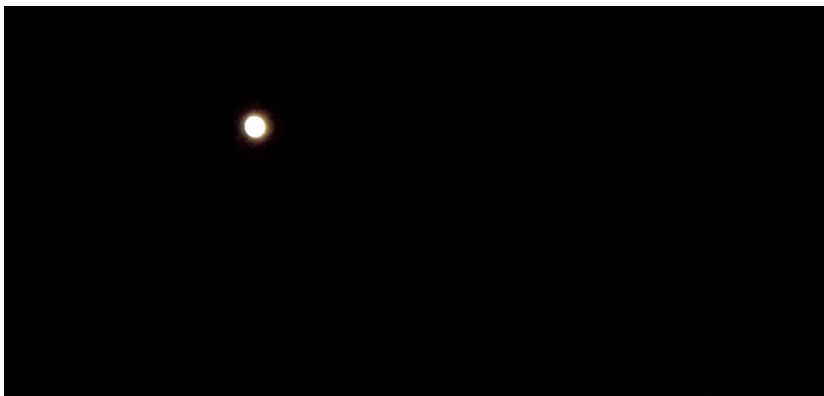


Figure 3: A light in the darkness.

Theme: Primary Goal.

Analysis: We want to be, in this society that is in darkness submerged in conflicts and problems, a light that illuminates with solutions.

Suggestion: Light a light and let it shine.

The first day the community leaders from Figure 3 presented their photos, they brought in nearly 15 photos just for their primary goal. Some of them were of flowers or children, others of the inside of their home. When the other leaders asked them what they wanted to communicate, they responded «this is our house and we want to always have a door open to our community. Or, we can say that 'flowers grow and so do children. We want our children to grow healthy and strong like these flowers.'» Seemingly a bit confused, one leader asked, «well, what is it exactly that your organization does?» The leaders gave a brief synopsis of their activities:

«We have been operating for over 20 years. We help young people find work because there are few opportunities in our neighborhood... We also help community members with drug and alcohol addictions as well as victims of domestic violence. Through these activities, we realized some of our 'clients' lacked access to nutritious food and clean water so we started giving courses on healthy lifestyle practices, like permaculture and the importance of boiling water. More recently, we also began programming for elderly people who suffer from boredom or depression».

When they finished, the other participants stared at them wide-eyed until one of them slowly raised their hand. “And you have the resources to do all this?” the participant asked. The director of Figure 3’s project replied, «we rely on partnerships with other entities – like gardeners, doctors, or the university– but in terms of other resources [like money or material items], we could always use more». Later, the community leaders admitted that they felt overextended and that resources were indeed a problem. Another participant said, «It seems like you have too much going on. Perhaps focusing more directly on one or two initiatives would help you better utilize your resources». When I presented this interaction to the other group, they agreed. «Yeah, and if it was my organization, I’d need to know how I would generate income to fund my initiatives» one participant said, recommending that they find a business activity to finance their organization.

While this community organization was unable to heed the other participants’ feedback in the time it took to curate the gallery and decided to submit what they admitted was a very broad goal for Figure 3, in the months that followed the exhibition, they began reconceptualizing their approach. First, they created quadrants in their neighborhood and appointed two leaders in each one. Those leaders were made responsible for finding resources for their community members, giving more space for the organization’s core

management group to focus on other tasks. Second, they decided to focus the organization on permaculture, integrating older and younger people into discussions and activities around the usage of already existing land and ecological resources. Third, the organization performed market research in their community and discovered that a day care center for children would be the best opportunity to finance their organization as well as attend to a community need.⁶ Together, all these adjustments gave them more notoriety, allowing for the organization to grow as a recognizable feature of the community. For any community organization, being recognized by their community is fundamental for future growth. Some of the organizations that participated in this PhotoVoice project were new and used their photos as an opportunity to promote their initiatives. The main objective of the organization from figure 4, entitled *Fuerza* (Strength), was to promote socio-cultural spaces for the members of their community, and to build the development and social transformation of their neighborhood. The organization's director also owned an auto-restoration workshop which financially supported his organization.



Figure 4: Strength.

Theme: Primary Goal.

Analysis: The union of the neighborhood is proposed through a natural symbol of tradition, identity, respect.

Suggestion: Get out of the shade! Join the neighborhood.

⁶ At the time of this writing, they were in the midst of opening that business though they were somewhat delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the auto shop was well-known in this small neighborhood, the community organization was not. They had hosted some small events, with 50 attendees each, at most, though when I spoke with residents in the neighborhood, most had never heard of the organization, let alone their goals for the community. Relatively speaking, this organization was new. The owner of the auto shop had moved into the neighborhood a few years back and, in just the past three years, focused on improving the neighborhood. Of note, he wanted to work with the government to install a Wi-Fi internet park on a corner that was usually full of trash. He also wanted to turn an alleyway into a weekend fair space where vendors could sell items and residents could enjoy music and activities. In order to achieve those goals, though, they needed support from the people in their community.

Figure 4 was an important opportunity for this organization to showcase their goals. They wanted commitment from the residents and the photo was an explicit call to action. Furthermore, the director of this community organization offered his auto shop to host the gallery for our final gallery exhibition. He told me it was an opportunity to invite the community to participate in a unique cultural event, and to learn about the initiatives of the community organization in their own neighborhood⁷.

His participation in the PhotoVoice project – including the large role he played in making the gallery exhibition special⁸ – also consolidated him as a central figure within *La Red*. This helped his organization mobilize resources to achieve some of their primary objectives. In the year following the gallery exhibition, they hosted at least three events with over 100 attendees each. They also brought in (volunteer) muralists from other organizations in *La Red* to paint large murals on the central walls of the neighborhood, and they began discussions with another member organization to build (and donate) benches and tables for the Wi-Fi park they were negotiating with the government. Unfortunately, COVID-19 paused this last endeavor, though the organization's director assured me that the relationships with key stakeholders already existed and they would achieve their Wi-Fi park.

7 The art/mental health organization created frames for all the photos for precisely the same reason: to promote their organization's initiatives.

8 He worked tirelessly cleaning the space and hanging up lighting, as well as finding a model troupe to do a runway show during the middle of the event.

Conclusion

While we had initially hoped that *La Red*, by itself, would create the necessary infrastructure for the different organizations to draw from one another's experiences/expertise to resolve their individual problems, it became evident that *La Red* was initially just a web of resource support. While this of course helped with problems of physical support, like finding volunteers for big events, it did not necessarily resolve other common challenges, like the member organizations had initially strived for. At first, there was little I could do to help address this because I was a participant observer as opposed to someone helping facilitate CBPR when we first founded *La Red*. According to Cartwright and Schow (2016):

«A fundamental and critical difference between participant observation (PO) and CBPR is that in PO anthropologists are supposed to spend their time trying to learn how to participate in communities and cultures that are often very different from their own. The researchers are the learners — they are the participators. In contrast, practitioners of CBPR want community members to learn how to participate in the research culture and investigative work – [i.e.,] the community members are the participators» (Ivi, 136-137).

The PhotoVoice project encouraged community leaders to critically analyze their opportunities and challenges in a workshop setting, where they could discuss and better conceptualize these circumstances together. Furthermore, it created the conditions for the participants to use a shared language – in this case photos and captions – to instigate critical debates around the situations, circumstances, or actions being «investigated» (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2014: 5). As a whole, the PhotoVoice process helped some of the original members of *La Red* reconceptualize some potentially overlooked challenges in their own communities, and to search for ways to manage them.

With this sort of participatory research, though, it will be a challenge to maintain their momentum (see also Cameron, 2007). Though, since the end of the PhotoVoice project, *La Red* has implemented a few initiatives to catalyze a continued search for and resolution of common challenges. The first was a commitment to meet twice a year in a conference like setting, where the different organizations have time dedicated to present their key issues as well as participate in smaller breakout sessions to facilitate group cohesion. The first conference took place on February 3, 2020. Unfortunately, 2020's second meeting never occurred because of COVID-19.

During the February 2020 meeting, the group decided to adopt the utilization of social media applications (Facebook and WhatsApp) to continue facilitating meaningful interactions. They also changed the name of *La Red* to *La Red de Acciones Comunitarias* (The Network of Community Actions) in order to be more inclusive of projects with predetermined end dates (carried out by separate individuals or small groups) and to account for organizations that help facilitate festivals or individual actions across Havana. It remains to be seen whether these adjustments will promote inclusivity or, as some of the founding members have wondered; will it push *La Red* back to facilitating individual community actions as opposed to meaningful interactions geared towards the discovery and resolution of common challenges?

La Red's usage of social media could also be rife with inequities and inconsistencies. On one hand, they successfully used the WhatsApp group to generate material and financial resources to help one member organization recoup their livelihood after a fire destroyed most their property. Some of the less well-known organizations have also found some success in publicizing their own initiatives on Facebook and have begun to discover new support both inside and outside Cuba. On the other hand, the majority of the communications within *La Red's* Facebook and WhatsApp groups have celebrated past accomplishments with photos and videos of different events, as opposed to calling for and garnering support for future events. Moreover, some of member organizations do not have funds they can devote to actively participating in the group chat. These two latter points will be critical for *La Red* to address, especially if they hope to continue their momentum as well as keep discovering and resolving common challenges across communities.

To see all the images and captions exhibited in *La Red's* PhotoVoice gallery please visit <https://jvertovec.wordpress.com/photo-voice-project-havana-2019/>

References

Cameron J. (2007). «Linking Participatory Research to Action: Institutional challenges». In: Kindon S., Pain R., Kesby M. (eds.), *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods*. New York: Routledge.

Cartwright E., Schow D. (2016). «Anthropological Perspectives on Participation in CBPR: Insights From the Water Project, Maras, Peru». *Qualitative Health Research*, 26: 136–140. Doi: 10.1177/1049732315617480.

Cubadebate. (2019, September 11). «Presidente Díaz-Canel informa medidas coyunturales ante situación energética de Cuba». Text available on the website: <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2019/09/11/presidente-diaz-canel-informa-nuevas-medidas-ante-situacion-energetica-de-cuba/#.X1wKQWhKhPZ>. Date of consultation: September 12, 2019.

de la Fuente A. (2001). «Recreating racism: Race and Discrimination in Cuba's 'Special period'». *Socialism and Democracy*, 15: 65–91. Doi: 10.1080/08854300108428278.

Enria L. (2016). «Co-producing knowledge through participatory theatre: reflections on ethnography, empathy and power». *Qualitative Research*, 16(3): 319–329. Doi: 10.1177/1468794115615387.

Espina Prieto M. (2013). «La política social cubana para el manejo de la desigualdad». *Cuban Studies*, 41: 20–38. Doi: 10.1353/cub.2010.0007.

Fernandes S. (2006). *Cuba Represent!: Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Freire P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Continuum Publishing Company.

Hergenrather K. C., Rhodes S. D., Cowan C. A., Bardhoshi G., Pula S. (2009). «Photovoice as Community-Based Participatory Research: a Qualitative Review». *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 33(6): 686–698. Doi: 10.5993/AJHB.33.6.6.

Kemmis S., McTaggart R., Nixon R. (2014). *The Action Research Planner: Doing Critical Participatory Action Research*. New York: Springer.

Mesa-lago C. (2002). «Las crecientes disparidades económicas y sociales en Cuba: Impacto y recomendaciones para el cambio». *Cuba Transition Report*. Miami: Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami.

Padilla M., Matiz-Reyes A., Colón-Burgos J. F., Varas-Díaz N., Vertovec J. (2019). «Adaptation of PhotoVoice methodology to promote policy dialog among street-based drug users in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic». *Arts and Health*, 11(2): 147–162. Doi: 10.1080/17533015.2018.1444647.

Pardo I., Prato G. B., eds. (2012). *Anthropology in the City: Methodology and Theory*. Burlington: Ashgate.

Pauwels L. (2015). «'Participatory' Visual Research Revisited: A Critical-Constructive Assessment of Methodological and Social Activist Tenets». *Ethnography* 16: 95–117. Doi: 10.1177/1466138113505023.

Wang C. C., Burris M. A. (1997). «Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment». *Health Education & Behavior*, 24(3): 369–387. Doi: 10.1177/109019819702400309.

John Vertovec, Global and Sociocultural Studies, Florida
International University, Miami, FL 33199, USA.
jvert001@fiu.edu