Deepening Democratic Capacity through Collective Inquiry: Community-led Research at PalmasLab

by

Jenna Ann Draud Harvey

Bachelor of Arts, Global and Development Studies
University of California at Santa Cruz (UCSC)
Santa Cruz, California (2010)

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master in City Planning

at the

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

June 2016

© 2016 Jenna Ann Draud Harvey. All Rights Reserved

The author hereby grants to MIT the permission to reproduce and to distribute publicly paper and
electronic copies of the thesis document in whole or in part in any medium now known or hereafter
created.

Author

Signature redacted

Department of Urban Studies and Planning
May 16, 2016

Certified by

Signature redacted

Dr. Gabriella Carolini
Assistant Professor, Department of Urban Studies and Planning
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by

Signature redacted

Associate Professor P. Christopher Zegras
Chair, MCP Committee
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
DEEPENING DEMOCRATIC CAPACITY THROUGH COLLECTIVE INQUIRY: COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH AT PALMASLAB

By

Jenna Ann Draud Harvey

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning on May 10th, 2016 in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master in City Planning

ABSTRACT

In 2015, research and innovation group PalmasLab developed their inaugural research project: a “wealth and poverty map” meant to provide a multi-dimensional picture of community development. PalmasLab is located in, and serves Conjunto Palmeiras, a neighborhood on the periphery of Fortaleza, Brazil that is often stigmatized as being poor, marginal and violent. The team at PalmasLab, made up primarily of young people from the community, seek to use research as a means to push back on these toxic narratives and as a tool for affecting change in the neighborhood. This thesis recounts the development of the research project, which transpired through a participatory action research (PAR) process between the MIT Community Innovators Lab (CoLab) and PalmasLab. Having engaged in observation, reflection and discussion as an active participant in the process, I describe how a research concept and survey methodology were created through a process of collective inquiry grounded in territorial lived experience. Subsequently, I recount how the PalmasLab team led a group of 35 local youth in the implementation of their survey in the community, a process that led to the articulation of trajectories for future action. Borrowing from Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) concept of projective agency, I argue that through the process, the PalmasLab team both exercised and strengthened their collective capacity to reflectively distance themselves from the constraints of the present in a way that enabled the development of future aspirational projects. Furthermore, drawing from the perspectives of John Dewey, Paulo Freire and Arjun Appadurai, I argue that projective agency should be understood as a democratic capacity that cannot be transferred from “capacity-builder” to “recipient,” but rather that it is strengthened through collective social inquiry. Based on my experience in this process, I argue that PAR has the potential to contribute to a new culture of practice within fields such as international development and planning where “problem-definition” has historically been the purview of “experts.”

Thesis supervisor: Dr. Gabriella Carolini
Title: Assistant Professor of International Development and Urban Planning, MIT

Reader: Dayna Cunningham
Title: Executive Director, Community Innovators Lab
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis represents a collaborative effort in multiple ways. Not only is it the result of a process of collective inquiry that I had the pleasure of being a part of, but in the process of writing it I received emotional and intellectual support for which I can’t fully express my gratitude in words. Nevertheless, I will try!

To the DUSP community, it has been an incredible gift to be a part of such an engaging and dynamic group of students, staff and faculty for the past two years. In particular, I am immensely grateful to my advisor Gabriella Carolini, for her mentorship and kindness, and for her constant encouragement to all of her students to focus on problems before solutions.

I can’t thank Dayna Cunningham enough for her brilliant insight, encouragement and excitement about this project, which energized and inspired me in moments when it was sorely needed. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Aly Bryson of CoLab, and Rosabelli Coelho from MIT Brazil for providing me with the incredible opportunity to work with PalmasLab and for the ongoing support.

This thesis would not have been possible without the friendship of an inspiring group of people at DUSP, among them Arianna, Rida, Anisha, Ellen, Anthony and Isa. Anthony’s own relentless curiosity and determination have inspired me to ask more questions, believe in myself, and to “keep the bad guy in my sight.” Isa’s warmth, encouragement and humor have given me força through my most difficult moments, for which I am deeply grateful.

To my lifelong friends Megan, Lauren and Mia, for grounding me, encouraging me and for always listening—I don’t know what I would do without you.

To my undergraduate advisor Ben Crow who believed in me long before I believed in myself, I am endlessly appreciative for the confidence at a time in my life when I needed it the most.

I would not have gotten here (or anywhere for that matter) without the eternal support of my family—my brother Blake and my parents Wendy and David. To my Dad, thank you for instilling in me an appreciation for the power of imagination. To my Mom, the fiercest woman I know, you are my source of strength.

Last but not least, thank you to Alison and the team at PalmasLab. Alison, your mentorship, brilliance, patience, and most importantly your friendship, are what has carried me through this process. To Luiz, Erberson, Asier, Heitor, Luana, Mateus and Elias, thank you for a profound and thrilling learning experience. Your efforts have shaped my own aspirations, and continue to inspire me. This thesis is dedicated to all of you.
“Se você não conhece a sua terra e quer conhecê-la, por favor não vá atrás de compêndios nem se entregue à orientação de algum frio guia. Não se fie em dados estatísticos, porque as estatísticas não passam de manipulação de algarismos; e muito menos acredite em mapas, mapas não chegam sequer a ser retratos, são meros perfis caricaturais onde só um elemento tem valor, a linha – e tudo o mais é desprezado. Escute o poeta, é ele que lhe dará da sua terra uma imagem viva.”

“*If you don't know your terra and you want to know it, please do not go after textbooks or surrender to the guidance of some cold guide. Do not rely on statistics, because statistics are nothing more than the manipulation of figures, let alone believe in maps; maps are not portraits, but rather mere caricatures where only one element has value—the line—and everything else is ignored. Listen to the poet; it is he who will give you a vivid picture of your terra.*”

- Rachel de Queiroz (1967)

“*Theory should be something we construct with others and carry with us to make sense of our worlds. Like poetry, theory is representational work; it tells stories. It is never neutral, always tangled up with and implicated in projects of power. What stories are celebrated and what stories are silenced tells us a great deal about the present moment and reminds us that the audience is never innocent.*”

- Emma Shaw Crane (2015)
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**CHAPTER 1: THE RIGHT TO RESEARCH** ................................................................................................................................. 8  
Claiming the Right to Research ......................................................................................................................................................... 10  
Knowledge Co-creation at PalmasLab ........................................................................................................................................ 12  
   Organizational identity and values .............................................................................................................................................. 13  
   Collaborative research process ................................................................................................................................................... 14  
   Summary of arguments .............................................................................................................................................................. 16  
Conceptual Foundations .................................................................................................................................................................. 17  
   Epistemological, ontological and methodological orientations of PAR .................................................................................. 17  
   Clarification of terms ................................................................................................................................................................. 19  
Methods ....................................................................................................................................................................................... 20  
Thesis Organization ........................................................................................................................................................................ 21  
Accountability, Voice and Limitations ........................................................................................................................................ 21

**CHAPTER 2: WHO’S THE EXPERT HERE?** ................................................................................................................................. 24  
Imposing “Expertise:” Scientific-rationality and Modernity .................................................................................................... 25  
   “Expert” as reformer ............................................................................................................................................................. 25  
Re-distributing Expertise? Participation and Development .................................................................................................. 27  
   “Expert” as capacity-builder ................................................................................................................................................ 27  
Reclaiming Expertise: Knowledge as Regulation to Knowledge as Emancipation ................................................................... 29  
   Participation vs. co-production .............................................................................................................................................. 30

**CHAPTER 3: FORTALEZA, CONJUNTO PALMEIRAS AND INSTITUTO BANCO PALMAS** ................................................................. 32  
A City Divided .............................................................................................................................................................................. 33  
   Urban development and migration ........................................................................................................................................... 33  
   Displacement and mobilization .............................................................................................................................................. 35  
Origins of Conjunto Palmeiras and Instituto Banco Palmas ....................................................................................................... 36  
   Creation of a community bank ............................................................................................................................................... 38  
   Scaling-up ................................................................................................................................................................................. 41  
Autonomy to Partnership: the Professionalization of Instituto Banco Palmas ........................................................................... 42  
   Expanded scope of work, reduced space for local dialogue ................................................................................................. 42  
   Professionalization in political and national context .................................................................................................... 44

**CHAPTER 4: WEALTHS, POVERTIES, DESIRES, ASPIRATIONS** ......................................................................................................... 47  
Background ................................................................................................................................................................................ 48  
   Co-created Space: Problem-definition ................................................................................................................................ 51  
      An expanded vision of production and consumption .................................................................................................. 53  
Building a Framework: Ecosystem of Production and Consumption .......................................................................................... 55  
   Process design .......................................................................................................................................................................... 55  
   Weaths and poverties ............................................................................................................................................................ 56  
   Desires and aspirations .......................................................................................................................................................... 59  
Focus Groups ............................................................................................................................................................................. 61  
Survey Design and Testing ........................................................................................................................................................... 64  
Reflection .................................................................................................................................................................................. 66  
   Reflections on process ......................................................................................................................................................... 66  
   Articulation of new possibilities for change ......................................................................................................................... 68

**CHAPTER 5: SURVEY IMPLEMENTATION AS A CATALYST** .............................................................................................................. 71  
Introducing Consultores to the Research .................................................................................................................................... 72
FIGURES

Figure 1 - View of Fortaleza city center from the periphery ................................................................. 8
Figure 2 - Map of Fortaleza, Conjunto Palmeiras highlighted ............................................................. 9
Figure 3 - PalmasLab Team .................................................................................................................. 13
Figure 4 - Cast of Miolo ....................................................................................................................... 32
Figure 5 - Map of Fortaleza showing rational planning model in the city center, 1859 ......................... 34
Figure 6 - Original building of the Residents Association of Conjunto Palmeiras (ASMOCONP) .......... 37
Figure 7 - Residents of Conjunto Palmeiras working on early construction projects .............................. 38
Figure 8 - Instituto Banco Palmas in 2015 ............................................................................................ 41
Figure 9 - PalmasLab team during a focus group .................................................................................. 47
Figure 10 - Instituto Banco Palmas production and consumption mapping graphic showing increase in local consumption ........................................................................................................... 52
Figure 11 - External focus group discussion ......................................................................................... 62
Figure 12 - New framework reflecting expanded vision of production and consumption ....................... 64
Figure 13 - Survey outline ..................................................................................................................... 65
Figure 14 - Luiz leading the consultores comunitários group ................................................................. 71
Figure 15 - One of the consultors comunitários reads the wealths and poverties ................................. 73
Figure 16 - Consultores comunitários conducting the survey with community resident ........................ 74
Figure 17 - Consultores comunitários conducting the survey with community resident ........................ 75
Figure 18 - Reflection session with consultores comunitários ............................................................... 77
Figure 19 - Luiz supporting consultores comunitários with analysis .................................................... 79
Figure 20 - Consultores comunitários working on analysis .................................................................... 80
Figure 21 & 20 - PalmasLab team missing Alison (picture in IPad photo), exhausted after a hard day of logistics preparation ........................................................................................................... 81
Figure 22 - Consultores comunitários turno 1 ...................................................................................... 83
Figure 23 - Consultores comunitários turno 2 ...................................................................................... 83
Figure 24 - Aplicativos Humanos participants, Asier, Mateus and Erberson after a day of workshops ................................................................................................................................................ 98
CHAPTER 1: THE RIGHT TO RESEARCH

"Conjunto Palmeiras is the neighborhood with the worst development index within the 119 neighborhoods of the capital." – O Povo, February 2014

"Conjunto Palmeiras registers a small percentage, 0.60% of the working age population with higher education completed, one of the factors that is reflected in the social conditions of the neighborhood." – Diário do Nordeste, March 2016

"Together, the neighborhoods of Jangurussu and Conjunto Palmeiras are at the top of an unfortunate ranking: the number of homicides registered in Fortaleza in the last six months." – O Povo, December 2012

"We are the closest to the problems." – Luiz Fernandes

The Portuguese word *periferia* is used in Brazil to denote the myriad communities that make up the outskirts of urban areas, the periphery. The *periferia* as both real and imagined space, has been constructed and maintained over time through a particular set of political, social and discursive practices in Brazilian cities. In Fortaleza, the periphery has its spatial origins in practices that literally constrained movement—the establishment of camps where drought refugees from the state’s interior were prevented from entering the city center. Today, the delineation of the periphery takes more of a rhetorical form, but continues to be effective in producing a separate category of neighborhoods that are associated with the stigma of violence, poverty, and marginality.

*Figure 1 - View of Fortaleza city center from the periphery*  


4 Source: author’s own photo
The notion of *periferia* is central to this thesis, both as it relates to the specific context of Fortaleza, and in addressing the question of *who has the right to produce knowledge and from where*. Specifically, this research explores the work of PalmasLab, a research and innovation group that seeks to contest dominant representations of Fortaleza's stigmatized communities by producing knowledge about the periphery *from the periphery*. PalmasLab is located in Conjunto Palmeiras, a neighborhood that is often profiled in the media as having the lowest Human Development Index (HDI), and one of the highest rates of violence in the city of Fortaleza.

![Map of Fortaleza, Conjunto Palmeiras highlighted](image)

The team at PalmasLab believe that data like this have power, and can shape the way that people view themselves, their communities and their capacity for change. Through conducting their own community-led research, PalmasLab hopes to reclaim this power, and in the process, assert their ability to be the protagonists in the identification of the problems facing their community. As Luiz Ernandes from PalmasLab explained:

---

3 The Human Development Index is a composite measure of indicators in the areas of: life expectancy at birth, mean years of schooling, expected years of schooling and GNI per capita (PPP $). For more information see: “Human Development Reports,” 2016.

6 Source: Google Earth, modified by author
We are the closest to the problems. We understand better than anyone what’s happening here. We’re capable of best identifying the problem; we’re capable of communicating best with our community because we’re a part of it.²

As part of a collaboration between the MIT Community Innovator’s Lab (CoLab) and PalmasLab over the past year (2015-2016), I worked with the PalmasLab team on the development of their inaugural research project—a “wealth and poverty map” aimed at providing a multi-dimensional picture of “development” in the community of Conjunto Palmeiras. I place development in quotes because it is precisely the notion of the community as under-developed that PalmasLab seeks to call into question through their research. Our process unfolded in two phases: first, a CoLab colleague, Alison Coffey, and I engaged in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) process with the PalmasLab team during the summer of 2015 to develop a research concept and survey methodology. Second, during January of 2016, I returned to PalmasLab to support the team, made up of young people from the community, in leading a group of 35 local youth in carrying out the survey in over 200 households across Conjunto Palmeiras. The project is currently ongoing; the team plans to do another round of data collection in summer of 2016 before initiating a process of collective analysis that will be open to the community.

**Claiming the Right to Research**

The title of this chapter is a reference to Arjun Appadurai’s (2006) argument that research should be seen as a “capacity with democratic potential,” rather than a technical activity reserved for specialists endowed with training and “expertise” (167). This capacity, he argues, is intimately linked to the “capacity to aspire,” or to imagine and enact positive social change through the systematic acquisition and generation of new knowledge (2006, 176). Recognizing the right to research means acknowledging that full citizenship and democratic engagement require individuals to have the tools and opportunities to engage in disciplined inquiry about their lives and the world around them (Appadurai 2006, 168). Appadurai explains that this engagement allows individuals, and young people in particular, to approach the “city and their lives as objects of study, and as contexts susceptible to change.” (2006, 175).

In claiming their right to research, the young people of PalmasLab aim to challenge entrenched negative stereotypes about Conjunto Palmeiras specifically, and of the periphery in

---

² PalmasLab team video, November 2015
general. The team resents the reports and maps produced by the municipality that continually rank Conjunto Palmeiras the lowest on multiple indicators, including HDI, average income, and educational attainment. They seek to complicate the narrative created by these ubiquitous figures, by communicating a more complex and nuanced picture to the outside. As Mateus Henrique from PalmasLab explained of the research project:

I think it shows what we are capable of. It moves away from the mindset that ‘the periphery can’t do good things, the periphery needs help to do everything, everyone needs government benefits to survive’—it’s not true. It shows that from the periphery we can do good things, and we do good things.  

In addition, by producing their own information about the place where they live, they hope to provoke residents themselves to begin to see the community as a “context susceptible to change” at a moment when frustrations stemming from increasing violence and national economic and political crises are high, and forums for internal dialogue are limited. They believe that the research can be used to reflect information about the community back onto itself, catalyzing dialogue about challenges and potentialities in the process. They hope this will facilitate reflection on both individual and collective capacity to bring a vision for change to fruition. As Luiz explained:

I think that what this knowledge can give us—why the diagnostic is valuable—is that it brings us closer to solving problems. If you have this diagnostic and its results, you can have influence, possibly even in public policies. And even if not, we ourselves can still make things happen.

The question of what it takes to animate individuals in the community to recognize their ability to be an agente de mudança (agent of change) and “make things happen,” has consistently come up in the research process at PalmasLab. My own research focuses on the ways in which the PalmasLab team members are acting as agents of change themselves. Specifically, this research is guided by two questions, first: How has the community-led research process at PalmasLab created conditions for social change? Second, what does this process tell us about the role of “expertise” in producing credible knowledge?

The rest of this introduction is divided into three broad sections. In the first, I will provide a brief description of the origins of the collaboration between CoLab and PalmasLab and the content of the research process we started together, which will be expanded upon in subsequent chapters of this thesis. I end the first section of this introduction with a summary of arguments that speak to the two research questions above. The following section is dedicated to a discussion of the conceptual

---

8 PalmasLab team video, November 2015
9 PalmasLab team video, November 2015
foundations and ideological underpinnings of participatory action research and how these informed not only our collective approach to research, but also my individual approach to the writing of this thesis. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a review of my research methods, an explanation of thesis organization, and a discussion of limitations, accountability and voice.

Knowledge Co-creation at PalmasLab

PalmasLab is situated within Instituto Banco Palmas (Banco Palmas Institute), an organization widely known for pioneering the community bank model in Brazil. From its grassroots origins as a project of the local resident’s association, Banco Palmas\textsuperscript{10} expanded to become an umbrella institution that now contains several semi-autonomous initiatives in addition to its original credit program; PalmasLab is the institute’s newest program.

Now in its third year, PalmasLab began as a center for IT learning, open to community residents, and has recently developed into a project incubation space. The initial idea for a research and innovation group within the larger organization was put in motion by Asier Ansorena, a volunteer from Spain who arrived at Instituto Banco Palmas in 2007 for a six-month stay and never left. Interested in providing resources for local youth to develop IT skills, he recruited additional volunteers to teach classes in a range of areas related to computer literacy and application design and development. The initial PalmasLab team was formed in 2013 when Asier, 32, was joined full-time by two of these volunteers, Alberto Crespo, 30, and Alejo Alfonso (both from Spain), and Luiz Ernandes, 20, from Conjunto Palmeiras. Alejo eventually left, Alberto became lead developer and Luiz took on a communications role. Over the next year, Luana Clarice, 22, was hired to offer programming support, followed by Erberson Lino, 19, and Mateus Henrique, 21, (all of whom are from Conjunto Palmeiras). The PalmasLab team is also supported by Heitor Calixto, 18, who interns at the lab while he finishes secondary school.

\textsuperscript{10} Throughout this thesis the name “Banco Palmas” refers to the organization before 2003, and “Instituto Banco Palmas” refers to the organization after 2003 when the original community bank expanded to become the Banco Palmas Institute. The terms “the bank” and “the organization” are also used interchangeably to refer to Instituto Banco Palmas throughout this thesis.
Since PalmasLab was formed, several interns (both international and domestic) have come and gone, but the core team of Asier, Alberto, Luana, Luiz, Erberson and Mateus remains. A mix of ages, nationalities, community insiders and outsiders, the PalmasLab team considers themselves to be a family. The work environment at PalmasLab is highly horizontal and dynamic, with team members collaborating on a range of different tasks at any given time, including programming, graphic design, project planning, outreach, and teaching. In 2015, Alberto, with support from Luana, finalized the development of PalmasLab’s surveying application PalMap. It was during this time that the team began to develop their ideas for a community-led research program.

Organizational identity and values

Central to the organizational identity of Instituto Banco Palmas is the belief that alternative models for economic production and consumption are possible, and that communities on the margins of society can be the architects of these. The bank has a mutually influential relationship with the solidarity economy movement in Brazil and its principles of cooperation, self-management, and shared wealth generation (NESOL 2013). This overarching organizational emphasis on democratic economic alternatives and community protagonism has shaped PalmasLab’s motivation for, and approach to, community-led research. At the same time, PalmasLab has forged their own

---

11 Source: Author’s own photo
unique identity that integrates the larger organizational values of social and economic justice with an element of “research justice,” that is uniquely their own.

These institutional values are closely aligned with those of MIT’s Community Innovators Lab, a center for community development and planning within the Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP). Through engagement with a network of affiliated students, faculty and community-led partner organizations, CoLab has accumulated knowledge and experience in areas including shared wealth generation, democratic engagement, and urban sustainability. Central to CoLab’s approach to work in all of these areas is “co-production,” or the collaborative, horizontal generation of knowledge and solutions between practitioners and community groups. This approach is based on CoLab’s belief that “marginalized communities possess critical experience, insights and knowledge for addressing systems failures and driving innovation.” In other words—those closest to the problems are best positioned for crafting solutions.

Lily Steponaitis, a CoLab post-graduate research fellow, first met Asier when she interned at Instituto Banco Palmas as an undergraduate. She later returned in 2013 to conduct thesis research as a student at DUSP, and has been in contact with Asier ever since then to discuss potential areas for collaboration based on the overlapping values and interests of the two organizations. With the finalization of PalMap, Asier expressed his interest in receiving support from CoLab-affiliated students in building out the burgeoning community research focus at PalmasLab. It was in this way that Alison and I connected with Asier, and in the summer of 2015, traveled to PalmasLab with support from MISTI Brazil.

Collaborative research process

Our work with PalmasLab began with a discussion of an existing survey tool that Instituto Banco Palmas periodically uses to obtain an economic profile of the community. This methodology, called “production and consumption mapping,” collects information on income, consumption habits and local supply of products and services. In reviewing the existing method, the team agreed that the neighborhood had changed dramatically since the survey had first been developed almost twenty years prior, and that new forms of wealth and poverty existed in Conjunto Palmeiras today that the existing survey’s questions could not capture.

---

14 MISTI (MIT International Science and Technology Initiatives) is a program that provides funds and support for MIT affiliated staff and students to do research, teach or collaborate with international partner organizations.
Underlying this discussion was the team’s question: What do wealth and poverty mean to us? In exploring this question, the team was adamant about embracing a more holistic conceptualization of production and consumption in the neighborhood that included material and immaterial forms of poverty and wealth. Through brainstorming, dialogue and debate as a team, complimented by focus groups with representatives of different facets of community life, they identified a contextualized set of wealths and poverties for Conjunto Palmeiras. These included: knowledge, health, infrastructure, mobilization, identity, leisure, economy, culture and security.

As they considered examples of these—such as the production of knowledge, cultural production, and the “consumption” of leisure, or public space, for example, they observed that wealth and poverty should be understood as multidimensional and dynamic concepts. The absence of, or lack of access to, each wealth they identified could also represent a form of poverty. They reasoned that wealths and poverties could enable, constrain, unite or motivate community members, which in turn shapes individual desires and aspirations. Based on the team’s new framework, we created a survey to assess how residents experience wealths and poverties and to identify individual desires and aspirations.

The team’s ideas evolved through the structure of a PAR process, in which Alison and I facilitated group discussions and provided brief trainings in research methods. While PAR is often understood as existing on a spectrum and has no single, concrete definition, it generally refers to the coming together of different groups, (often community groups and external researchers), to collectively produce new knowledge through research, reflection and action (Ayala 2008, 71). In contrast to mainstream academic research, which often takes shape based on abstracted theories of social reality, PAR centers on the local knowledge and lived experiences of the participants involved.

PAR is an approach to research; every PAR process is different and can involve a number of different methods, depending on the research objectives identified by the participants. Our collective research process, for example, involved conducting two focus groups—one with Instituto Banco Palmas staff and one with representatives from other community groups and organizations—to test the team’s ideas about the research concept before developing the survey. The principal research method was the survey itself.

The efforts of PalmasLab have been shaped by a long history of community organizing and self-determination. After two decades of fighting for basic services, the Residents Association of Conjunto Palmeiras (ASMOCONP) created Banco Palmas as a way to catalyze wealth generation from within the neighborhood. When the bank began to circulate its own social currency, called the
Palma, the Central Bank of Brazil attempted to shut it down for using a “false currency” (NESOL 2013, 25). Banco Palmas ultimately won its right to continue circulating the Palma, making it an exemplar of grassroots resistance.

The identity of PalmasLab is closely tied to this history of resistance, and their vision for social innovation from the margins is in line with the larger organizational philosophy. At the same time, PalmasLab pushes back against Instituto Banco Palmas’ status quo at a moment when professionalization and expansion have increasingly distanced it from its grassroots origins. By articulating a new vision for understanding production and consumption in terms of material and immaterial forms of wealth, the team is evolving the bank’s longstanding approach to generating information about the neighborhood it serves. As will be described in subsequent chapters, the research process at PalmasLab has already started to open up a space for local dialogue that had been reduced as the bank scaled up.¹⁵

**Summary of arguments**

Having engaged in observation, reflection and discussion as an active participant in the collaborative research process at PalmasLab, I describe how collectively asking questions and theorizing about and in place, opened up spaces for engaging and imagining future possibilities for community and organizational change. I show that through these discursive spaces, the PalmasLab team innovated upon existing organizational knowledge (production and consumption mapping), to articulate a new, contextualized framework for understanding their community’s development in a holistic way. In my analysis of this experience, I draw upon Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) concept of “projective agency,” which can be understood as the ability to reflectively distance oneself from the constraints of the present, to imagine new trajectories for future action (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). I argue that in addition to the tangible change that the new framework represents as an evolution of the organizational status quo, the research process at PalmasLab has created intangible—but no less significant—conditions for change by strengthening the team’s collective projective agency. Drawing from the perspectives of John Dewey, Paulo Freire and Appadurai, I argue that projective agency should be understood as a *democratic capacity* that cannot be transferred from “capacity-builder” to “recipient” but rather that it is strengthened through collective social

---

¹⁵ For more information on Instituto Banco Palmas history and scaling-up process see CoLab colleague Lily Steponaitis’ thesis, “Too Legit to Quit: Exploring Concepts of Legitimacy and Power in Scaling-Up Community Development Work"
inquiry. I conclude this thesis with an argument for the re-conceptualization of “expertise,” and a discussion of its implications for theory and practice in fields that seek to affect social change.

**Conceptual Foundations**

**Epistemological, ontological and methodological orientations of PAR**

By its very nature, the act of engaging in inquiry about some aspect of social reality in order to generate credible, truthful knowledge entails a set of assumptions (Morgan and Smircich 1980, 491). Specifically, such inquiry rests upon both ontological assumptions about the nature of reality, including how individuals are situated within it, and epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge and what it means “to know” (Morgan and Smircich 1980, 491). These assumptions inevitably influence what techniques or methods individuals use to generate credible knowledge within social reality—thus epistemology, ontology and methodology are intrinsically linked (Morgan and Smircich 1980).

A positivist ontological orientation or worldview holds that social reality is external to individuals. In other words, reality is a concrete, tangible entity that individuals react to but do not actively create (Morgan and Smircich 1980, 493). It follows that an objective, controlled approach to research that mimics the experimental design framework of the natural sciences is required to generate knowledge from objective reality (Morgan and Smircich 1980; Flyvbjerg 2001). Thus, the positivist epistemology espouses the “empirical analysis of concrete relationships in an external social world,” as the means to producing credible knowledge that is generalizable across contexts (Morgan and Smircich 1980, 493).

With the dissolution of the “modernist consensus” over the past several decades, the notion of knowledge as socially constructed has emerged within a range of social science disciplines (Rydin 2007, 54). This perspective rejects the notion of knowledge as tangible and objective, and rather views knowledge as a construct that is generated through social practices that are situated in time and place. The constructivist epistemology follows from a subjective view of the world where, rather than reacting to reality, individuals actively create it, making meaning from what is subjectively available to them (Morgan and Smircich 1980, 497).

The differences in these paradigms have led to a long-standing debate in the social sciences regarding the use of quantitative versus qualitative methods in the generation of “credible” knowledge. My aim here is not to engage in this debate or defend my use of methods, but rather to
highlight how action research represents an entirely different orientation to social inquiry that
dismisses these debates as largely misguided and unproductive (Greenwood and Levin 2007;
Flyvberg 2001). Action research takes as a given that knowledge and meaning are socially
constructed and expands on this to argue that action, together in an iterative cycle with reflection, is
critical for the generation of new knowledge. In other words, AR favors knowledge in and from
action—“transcending the chasm between intellect and experience in which Western consciousness
has placed value on ‘thinkers’ at the expense of ‘doers,’ dividing theory from practice” (Ledwith
2005, 78).

Action research (AR) situates problem-definition with the groups that are affected by, and
have an investment in, taking actions to solve issues of importance to them (Greenwood and Levin
2007, 94). Thus, Greenwood and Levin argue that the aim of AR processes is “workability,” the
generation of knowledge, which is conducive to the solution of these problems. (2007, 68). The
methodological implication of this praxis-oriented approach is that any method or combination of
methods that is determined by the groups involved to be required to facilitate action on the issue at
hand, is what should be used (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 98).

For the use of these methods, AR practitioners aim to uphold the same rigorous standards
as conventional social science researchers. However, unlike much of conventional social research,
AR does not pursue methodological rigor with the aim of achieving generalizability. AR rejects the
notion that the results of any research effort can be generalizable across contexts on the basis that all
knowledge is necessarily context-bound and situated (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 66). Instead, AR
offers the concept of “trans-contextual credibility:” that knowledge resulting from AR processes can
be useful across contexts, but only in a way that is not abstracted and disconnected from the
particular context within which it was produced (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 70). AR researchers
believe that social science research cannot produce universally true abstracted theories—in other
words, there can be no “view from nowhere” (Flyvberg 2001, 61).

Finally, while mainstream researchers are primarily concerned with external credibility, or
validation from groups not involved in the research process, AR prioritizes internal credibility.
Greenwood and Levin define credibility as “the arguments and processes necessary for having
someone trust research results” (2007, 67). The results of an AR process are said to have internal
credibility when the members of a community or group involved find the research results relevant
and are able to connect the knowledge generated to their reality (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 67).

PAR is one of a range of approaches to action-oriented inquiry that fall under the umbrella
term AR, although the two are often used interchangeably. An important distinction between PAR and AR, however, is that PAR has its roots in the global south, particularly from the popular education teachings of Paulo Freire (Abraham and Purkayastha, 2012). In addition, PAR is explicitly concerned with power, and aims to produce information that can be used by participants to counter structural injustice (Ledwith 2005; Torre et al. 2012). PAR is inherently participatory and ideally aims to involve all participants in every stage of the research process from problem-definition, to data collection and analysis. However, the PAR literature does not specify parameters that define the practice in hard and fast terms. Rather, it is often described as a “stance” that shapes research processes and can involve varying levels of participation depending on the context (Ayala 2008, 71). Put simply, “PAR is an ethical stance about where knowledge lies, how and with whom it should be produced, and how it should be used” (Torre et al. 2012, 4).

Clarification of terms

This thesis centers on a multi-faceted effort, which involves different processes, products and facilitators at different moments. The PAR process that Alison and I facilitated with the PalmasLab team constitutes one specific part of this larger effort. The team’s initiative to spearhead a community-led research effort began before Alison and I arrived and continued after we left. As such, throughout this thesis, I use the term “community-led research” when referring to their larger effort, and “PAR” when referring to our specific part in the process during the summer of 2015.

While the PAR literature is useful for situating our respective organizations’ shared “ethical stance” about research generally, it is important to note that we did not introduce the PalmasLab team to the set of values associated with PAR. Through our PAR process, we did provide the team with exposure to facilitative and methodological skills that they may employ in future research endeavors, however, the values and ideological motivations underpinning the process were present before our collaboration began. Through our collaboration, we mutually influenced and contributed to the evolution of our respective organizations’ approach to and thinking about the practice.

Throughout this thesis, I integrate literature on AR and PAR to ground my description of our process. However, I also argue that classifying PAR as a specialized approach to research can limit our realization of the practice as having more general application for practitioners in fields where “problem definition” has traditionally been imposed on communities by outside “experts.” I approach this thesis as a student and practitioner at the intersection of two of these fields—
international development and planning. As a result, I am not solely concerned with how a PAR approach challenges expertise within the academy of inquiry, but also how it can contribute to a new culture of practice within these fields of action.

**Methods**

In this thesis, I do not analyze the results of the collaborative research methods (focus groups and survey), except as they relate to the evolution of the participants’ ideas throughout the process. The data collection phase for our “wealth and poverty map” is currently ongoing and evolving and is being led by the PalmasLab team. They are the ones who will ultimately decide how best to make sense of, and strategically use the resulting data from this effort.

Instead, my research centers on my work as participant-observer: the extensive notes that I took, the dialogue I engaged in, and the insights I shared with my co-researchers throughout my own participation in the project with them during nine weeks in 2015 and three weeks in January of 2016. In particular, my analysis draws heavily on audio recordings of group reflections and individual interviews with PalmasLab team members and youth surveyors. This includes a PalmasLab team reflection with Alison and I in August of 2015, a reflection activity with the youth surveyors in January of 2016 led by the PalmasLab team, and my individual interviews with the PalmasLab team members in January of 2016. As my analysis involves my individual insights as well, I invited my co-researchers to ask me questions in our interviews, which ultimately ended up taking the form of informal conversations. To supplement these, I draw heavily on notes I took, and journaling I conducted at different phases of the process.

For descriptive purposes, I draw on Alison and my extensive documentation of working sessions with the PalmasLab team during the PAR process in summer of 2015. These sessions were not recorded. Because I feel strongly about integrating the voices of my co-researchers into my description of the PAR process in this introduction and in chapter four, I use excerpts from the team’s video recorded responses to a series of questions that Alison and I posed to them in November of 2015 for a presentation we made on the collaborative effort.

For the purpose of providing historical and organizational context, I conducted semi-structured interviews with community leaders in Conjunto Palmeiras and Instituto Banco Palmas staff. I also referenced archival materials, including a historical text produced for the Instituto Banco Palmas’15th anniversary, and a documentary about the organization. I conducted all of these
activities and methods in Portuguese, and transcribed and translated audio recordings to English. It is important to note that Alison translated and transcribed the team reflection from August of 2015.

**Thesis Organization**

In this introductory chapter, I have provided a brief overview of the motivations for and content of the community-led research process at PalmasLab. I also introduced how PAR represents an approach to research that challenges conventional notions of where knowledge is situated, who has the capacity to produce “credible” knowledge and how. I expand upon this discussion in the following chapter, by reviewing the implications of the imposition of “expert knowledge” in practice.

The knowledge produced in our collaborative research process is intrinsically linked to place—the community of Conjunto Palmeiras—and the larger city that it is situated within, Fortaleza. It developed from a shared past, and in reaction to the challenges and opportunities of the present moment within this context. As a result, I seek to provide detailed contextual information on urban development in Fortaleza, the role of Instituto Banco Palmas within Conjunto Palmeiras, and how this has evolved over time in chapter three.

In chapter four, I turn to a description of the PAR process with the PalmasLab team in summer of 2015, and chapter five details the subsequent process of survey implementation in January of 2016. In chapter six, I analyze how through the process of community-led research, a collective projective agency at PalmasLab was exercised and strengthened, laying the groundwork for organizational and community change. Chapter seven concludes this thesis by revisiting how this experience speaks to the argument for the “right to research” and the role of “expertise” in producing credible knowledge.

**Accountability, Voice and Limitations**

This thesis attempts to recount and reflect upon what was a highly collaborative, iterative, messy, and at times confusing endeavor. In writing about the process, I have struggled with anxiety about misrepresenting a story that is not exclusively mine to tell and the prospect of trying to summarize the complexity of the work we did together. I initially found myself overwhelmed by the desire to address a number of concerns at once, principally: How could I stay accountable to my co-
researchers, avoid oversimplifying or romanticizing the process, and be reflective of my own positionality within it?

In the chapters that follow, I attempt to remedy this unease in several ways. First, I recount the different components of the process with the PalmasLab team in a narrative style. As Greenwood and Levin suggest, narrative is important for transparency in writing up participatory action research, as it allows for the expression of the dynamic, dialectic nature of the knowledge creation process (2007, 10). The authors also stress that narratives facilitate the identification of connections between different elements in the process, such as individuals, the organizations they are situated within, and the events that shape their actions (2007, 10).

In addition, narrative more easily facilitates the communication of the individual identities and voices that participants bring to a PAR process. For this reason, I have complemented my own descriptions and reflections with quotes and written excerpts from the team members wherever possible, not only for analysis, but also for descriptive purposes as described above. The richness of the ideas that emerged from our collective research process were a direct result of the team’s deep knowledge of, and passion for their community. If Alison and I provided a structure or frame for the process, the young people of PalmasLab filled it with an approach to understanding “development” in the community that was entirely unique and entirely their own. No one can communicate these insights better than the team members themselves.

At the same time, it is important to note that the questions, arguments and debates that the team engaged through this process are situated in a particular political, historical and regional context. While I have aimed to provide some of this context in chapter three, the scope of this thesis does not allow me to provide sufficient background for situating all of the issues that were raised in this process. For example, to fully appreciate some of the discussions around violence, it is important to consider Brazil’s history of police brutality, racism and structural oppression that has disproportionately affected marginalized communities. The inability to provide this kind of rich context is one of the limitations of this thesis.

Finally, I have attempted to discuss the case in a way that is reflective of my role as an outsider in Conjunto Palmeiras. I attempt to avoid a pitfall that Emma Shaw Crane describes as characteristic of much poverty scholarship, as the narrators or “non-poor” “disappear entirely,” obscuring “the work they—we—do as we construct and legitimate theories of poverty” (2015, 347). I approach this thesis from the perspective that as planners, development practitioners, or
researchers, we are never “outsider-beyond,” but always and irrevocably implicated in each other’s stories. As such, I attempt as possible, to place myself within my own analysis, and highlight my own tensions, biases and reflections throughout this thesis.

My motivation for this is not only ethical, but also practical; in describing my involvement, I hope to highlight my own learning process throughout. I did not come into the process with PalmasLab with extensive knowledge of PAR or facilitative experience, and my insights about research generally and about the process with PalmasLab specifically have developed and evolved significantly in the process of writing this thesis. In contrast to the way conventional social research is traditionally performed, PAR researchers do not claim to have had full knowledge of and control over all aspects of the research process at the outset. In the same way, I do not seek to obscure my inexperience, but instead use it within my description of the research process in this chapter to highlight moments of tension or confusion that ultimately contributed to my learning and development as a student and as a practitioner.

Inevitably, I fall short of fully resolving the aforementioned concerns and at the same time providing an account of the collaborative research process in all of its thrilling, frustrating and rich complexity. Although this thesis centers on a collective experience, I am personally accountable for the analysis undertaken and the conclusions drawn.

---

16 Term used by Crane (2015, 347)
CHAPTER 2: WHO’S THE EXPERT HERE?

“The youth of Conjunto Palmeiras are poor, disempowered and lack the skills to become active problem solvers.” – “Problem statement” from report produced by students from a top US graduate program in international affairs and development.

The statement above resulted from the application of a problem mapping analysis carried out in the community of Conjunto Palmeiras by a group of graduate students from one of the world’s top programs in international affairs and development. The stated purpose of this analysis was to “develop a common understanding about life in Conjunto Palmeiras” through observation and discussions with community members. The resulting information was used to identify the “problem statement” above.17

In the first chapter of this thesis, I provided a brief overview of how different ontological and epistemological orientations influence mainstream approaches to social science research. I reviewed how PAR stands in contrast to these as an approach that puts the power of question definition in the hands of those who are best positioned to determine the answers, and applies them to issues that affect their lives. This chapter turns to the question of how “who defines the problem” has historically played out in practice.

In the following section, I draw on critical ethnographies of development, and texts from the sociological and urban planning traditions that problematize the notion of “expert knowledge” and its relation to hegemonic epistemological and economic paradigms. Subsequently, I describe the arguments for and against participation as a means for re-distributing expertise in development discourse and practice. This chapter ends with a review of the theoretical and practical arguments for a re-conceptualization of democratic participation rooted in collective social inquiry and the re-distribution of power.

Our collaborative research process was deeply informed by PalmasLab and CoLab’s respective organizational values and identities that speak to, but are not directly derived from, the academic literature highlighted below. The goal of this chapter then, is not just to provide an overview of the literature relevant to this study, but also to situate our respective organizational identities within it, setting the stage for how we approached our work together.

Through this thesis, I aim to articulate my own critique and re-conceptualization of the role of the outsider “expert” that I have developed through my participation in the collaborative effort

17 Quotes taken from internal report produced for Instituto Banco Palmas: “Three-year roadmap for an innovation school in Conjunto Palmeiras”
with PalmasLab. As students of international development and planning, we often assume that the critiques of technocratic “expertise” outlined in the chapter below are relics of the past, and that our fields have moved into a new, more inclusive space. In contrast, I argue that often behind the rhetoric of “bottom-up, participatory and inclusive” practice, many of the same historic mistakes and power imbalances can be found. In addition, I argue that attention to micro-practices and the use of methods (such as problem or asset mapping analyses) matter enormously for truly inclusive practice. Like a host of others before them, the “experts” who produced the statement that opens this chapter got it wrong. It will become clear just how wrong they were in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

**Imposing “Expertise:” Scientific-rationality and Modernity**

“Whose knowledge counts? And what does this have to do with place, culture and power?” – Arturo Escobar

**“Expert” as reformer**

In the modernist tradition that dominated much of 20th century development and planning, knowledge was seen as a neutral object, derived from discoverable facts by technical experts and applied to social problems defined by them (Rydin 2007; Escobar 1995; Scott 1998). This tradition was characterized by the belief that the accumulation, improvement and deployment of scientific and technical knowledge over time would lead to economic progress and social order (Escobar 1995; Scott 1998). In this context, the “expert” as reformer was charged with improving societal conditions through the numerating, ordering, and “developing” of people and places.

Writing in the post-modern tradition, scholars such as Arturo Escobar (1995) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) problematize the notion that any single epistemology can be “universal.” Rather, as de Sousa Santos argues, the Euro-centric “monoculture of scientific knowledge” is like any other form of knowledge—a particular cultural construction produced in a specific time and place (2007, xx). Against the claim that scientific-rational “expertise” is neutral, the perspectives below highlight how it has acted as a kind of “machine,” homogenizing, de-politicizing and entrenching capitalist market values everywhere it operates (Escobar, 1995; Dobbin 1994; De Sousa Santos 2007; Ferguson 1994).

---

18 Escobar 2008, 4
Escobar argues that the “problematization of poverty” in the post-World War II period resulted in the deployment of a “development discourse” which grouped together diverse countries, cultures and social groups to form one homogenous entity: the “third world” (1995, 21). The problems of the “third world” were conceived of as technical problems “to be entrusted to that group of people—the development professionals—whose specialized knowledge allegedly qualified them for the task” (Escobar 1995, 52).

The false dichotomy that the development discourse created between “expert” and “local” knowledge associated the former with the objective authority and the latter with traditional, indigenous or alternative subjectivity (Escobar 1995; De Sousa Santos 2007). In his study of World Bank development programs in Lesotho, Ferguson (1990) finds that by defining the inherently political issue of poverty as a technical, objective problem, “expert knowledge” serves to eliminate issues from the public sphere that should be subject to debate and dialogue. In turn, this de-politicization perpetuates the same social and economic ills that “development” purportedly alleviates, as it tempers possibilities for lasting, structural change (Ferguson, 1990).

Escobar argues that the tools of “experts” in this context take the form of statistics, maps and theories based on a Western notion of progress, that deprive entire populations of autonomy over their own representations (1995, 215). As Escobar explains, these apparently neutral narratives are inherently political: “Statistics tell stories. They are techno-representations endowed with complex political and cultural histories” (1995, 215). These powerful narratives and the actors and institutions that perpetuate them have shaped the way that individuals, institutions and entire countries begin to identify as “under-developed” (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990).

The reproduction of development expertise relies on the science of economics, which Patricia Williams describes as “a structure in which a cultural code has been inscribed,” rather than a universal truth (Williams apud Escobar 1995, 91). As Escobar argues, economics is like any other cultural construction that could be “anthropologized and shown to be made up of a peculiar set of discourses and practices” (1995, 59). This view is nicely summed up by Frank Dobbin: “When the denizens of modernity study modernity, by contrast, they presume that social institutions reflect exogenous economic laws, and hence don’t treat such cultural artifacts of neoclassical theory as part of an institutionalized meaning system that shapes policy solutions and individual behavior. Instead, analysts take neoclassical theory to be true in a way that ethnographers do not take indigenous theories of the relationship between spirits and harvest outputs to be true” (1994, 11).
"Expert" as capacity-builder

In the wake of the proven failures of modernist planning and top-down development practices to improve human conditions (through urban renewal, agricultural interventions in the global south or high-modernist design, for example), many of the previously outlined critiques of “expertise” are widely accepted (Scott 1998). Amidst calls for greater democratization and decentralization beginning in the mid 1980’s, participation began to move to the forefront of development discourse and practice (Hickey and Mohan 2004, 3).

Within mainstream development circles, participation became closely associated with empowerment, and was promoted as a way for previously marginalized groups to exercise “popular agency in relation to development,” or to actively make claims and opine about projects, policies and issues that would affect their lives. (Hickey and Mohan 2004, 3). The development of new participatory exercises has varied widely in structure, scale, and format, and have been variously described as serving to capture local knowledge in order to make interventions: more responsive to citizen needs, build participant capacity, and resolve public conflicts, among others (Mansbridge 1999; Fischer 2012). In this context, as participation proliferated into mainstream development discourse, theory and practice, the role of the “expert” shifted from that of “reformer” to “capacity-builder.”

Since its inception in the 1980’s, mainstream participation has received a range of criticisms. One of the most severe critiques comes from Cooke and Kothari in Participation: the New Tyranny (2001). The authors point to cases that they argue demonstrate how participatory exercises have served to reinforce, rather than reconfigure structural inequalities through de-politicization and obfuscation of power (Cooke and Kothari 2001). For example, the authors argue that participatory processes often manipulate local knowledge to support the existing agendas of development organizations or to allow these organizations to “check the box” necessary to secure donor funding (Cooke and Kothari 2001).

In addition to manipulation, the authors highlight the de-politicization that occurs through participatory planning and evaluation schemes, such as the participatory rural appraisal (PRA) approach that was adopted widely in the 1990’s. The PRA approach is critiqued by the authors for

---

19 The stated aim of the PRA approach, (which was adopted by a wide range of actors including international institutions such as the World Bank in the 1990s), was to involve local stakeholders in the analysis of development
how it "'cleans up' local knowledge through mapping and codification and marginalizes that which might change the status quo or is messy and unchangeable" (Cooke and Kathari 2001, 12). Glyn Williams summarizes the Tyranny critique saying, "if development is indeed an 'anti-politics machine,' participation provides a remarkably efficient means of greasing the wheels" (2004, 557).

Mainstream participation has similarly been criticized as emphasizing the "local" and "self-help" as a way of obscuring conflict and power-imbalances within communities (Mohan and Stokke 2000; Ledwith 1997). Finally, as is the case for the vast majority of development interventions, participation has largely been evaluated in short time frames, with quantitative indicators, and in terms of outcomes, rather than process (Rowe and Frewer 2000). This has detracted from efforts to design processes that meaningfully engage participant knowledge and has resulted in the increasing technicality of these efforts.

As the perspectives above highlight, power relations shape the nature of participatory spaces—determining how they are formed and what can occur within them (Gaventa 2006, 26). John Gaventa argues that looking at spaces through a power-oriented analytical frame allows for examining "the preconditions of participation in order for new institutional spaces to lead to change in the status quo." (2006, 29). Gaventa classifies three different types of spaces, existing on a continuum: closed (exclusive, decision-making behind closed doors), invited (outside actors are invited in to a space for consultation), or created (created autonomously by less powerful groups) (2006, 26). While the critiques above largely center on "invited spaces," it is important to consider the potential of co-created spaces to result in more generative processes. As the last section of this chapter will highlight, a PAR approach to practice represents one way to move from "participation" to "co-production."

---

programs as partners. PRA involved a range of practices including surveys and mapping exercises (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Mohan and Stokke 2000).

20 The author is referencing James Fergusons' book critiquing development expertise in Lesotho, "The Anti Politics Machine" (described in previous section of this chapter).
Reclaiming Expertise: From knowledge as Regulation to Knowledge as Emancipation

The theoretical foundations for an inquiry-based approach to democratic participation can be found in the writings of John Dewey, who described democracy as a ‘way of life’ rather than a set of institutions and practices (Dewey 1946). Specifically, Dewey saw democracy as an evolving process constituted by citizens at all levels of society actively participating in social inquiry through action and communication (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 60). Dewey argued that thought and action are intrinsically linked, and that true knowledge cannot be entered into or transmitted in a static way. Rather, it is actively created by “experimentation” or acting in the world as a means of making sense of it (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 60). As Dewey explains, “experience in its vital form is experimental, an effort to change the given; it is characterized by projection, by reaching forward into the unknown; connection with the future is its salient trait” (Dewey apud Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 988).

Dewey argued that “effectual observation, reflection and desire” are capacities that are fundamental in allowing individuals to break from constraining habits and undesirable current conditions to project ideas for new possibilities (Dewey 1927, 25). He suggests that these capacities are strengthened through communication and active engagement in society (Dewey 1927). As this “projection” is at the heart of change processes, the advancement of democracy and improvement of society depends upon active participation in social inquiry (Dewey apud Mische 2009, 697). Democracy, Dewey explains, will “have its full consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication” (Dewey 1927, 184).

Dewey’s ideas about communities provide an interesting contrast with mainstream theories of participation that homogenize the “local” as described above. Dewey did not shy away from focusing on local communities, precisely because he viewed them as sites of conflict and division. Specifically, he viewed communities as “schools of democracy” where the capacities described above could be developed, preparing individuals for participation at different levels of political life (Dewey apud Caspary 2000, 10).

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire also provides insights on the importance of social inquiry, though with a more explicit focus on power. Writing during the dictatorship in Brazil in the late 1960’s, Freire critiques the “banking model of education” as a form of oppression through which...
students are treated as “empty bank accounts” which teachers can deposit knowledge into (Freire 1970). Like Dewey, Freire argues that knowledge about the world can only be obtained through engaging in dialogical inquiry and action. As he explains: “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire 1970, 72).

Freire and Dewey converge in their argument for engagement in social inquiry as a way of creating change in society (Abdi 2001, 196). However unlike Dewey, Freire focused explicitly on social inquiry as a tool of liberation from oppression. For Freire, engaging in inquiry and reflection with others was critical for the development of conscientização, or a critical awareness of reality as a process subject to change (Freire 1970, 92). As Freire explains, this awareness is necessary to "enable people to discuss courageously the problems of their context and to intervene in that context, which would lead them to take a new stance towards their problems" (Freire 1973, 36). Freire promoted social inquiry as a way to return to the oppressed a right that had been systematically taken away, in a historical process that he argued constituted a form of violence. As he explains, “any situation in which some men prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence; to alienate humans from their own decision-making is to turn them into objects” (Freire 1970, 85).

**Participation vs. co-production**

Taken together and applied to the current context, the ideas of Dewey and Freire point to the need for processes where knowledge can be co-created through critical, social inquiry. Their ideas, especially those of Freire, have been hugely influential for the development of PAR as an approach to research that seeks to not only challenge conventional notions of who has the right to produce knowledge, but that also aims to advance the specific goals and projects of marginalized communities. These ideas have not, however, been incorporated into mainstream planning or development practice. Despite a first step towards co-production with more communicative approaches within the field of planning described below, a PAR approach remains on the sidelines of practice.

The ideas of Dewey were influential in the “communicative turn” within the planning field that occurred in the 1980s and 90s (Innes and Booher, 2014). Communicative planning theory (CPT) challenged the previous rational model by emphasizing that more just and even more rational solutions to practical problems could be derived from deliberative processes (Healey 1997; Hoch

---

22 Communicative planning was also, primarily influenced by the ideas of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas
CPT took a constructivist perspective to understanding communication; it held that "deliberation shapes understandings, giving meaning to potential actions, which in turn motivates players" (Innes and Booher 2014, 4). Proponents of communicative planning argued that through properly structured deliberative processes, actors could debate knowledge claims and come to better outcomes and agreements through the use of rational arguments (Rydin 2007, 53). Unlike the mainstream model of participation in the development field, the "communicative action model" was highly focused on process—emphasizing the skills of the planner in listening, reflective learning and exercising judgment based on context to structure more just and effective deliberative arenas (Innes and Booher, 2014, 4).

However, what the communicative model and the model of mainstream participation have in common is a framework for dialogue based on a Western epistemological paradigm. The communicative model, for all of its emphasis on process, still did not provide a sufficient means for accommodating a multiplicity of ways of knowing and communicating (Rydin 2007, 54). The model largely ignored power and failed to explicitly challenge structural inequalities and advance the interests of marginalized groups (Harvey 1997; Fainstein 2010).

The argument for approaching planning practice from a standpoint of epistemological multiplicity can be found in the writings of Leonie Sandercock (2004), who highlights PAR as a means to deepen democratic planning practice. However, views such as hers remain on the margins of the field of planning, and have not even begun to proliferate discourse or practice in the field of development. In line with Sandercock, I argue that to move from participation to co-production, it is critical for discursive spaces and processes to be structured in a way that does not impose an external epistemological framework. A truly co-productive approach to inquiry and dialogue should accommodate multiple ways of knowing in a way that is grounded in the lived experiences of participants. As an approach that employs a co-productive framework and seeks to counter structural inequality, I argue that PAR as an approach to practice, offers a way to move from knowledge as regulation to knowledge as emancipation. I will expand on this argument in the conclusion of this thesis.
CHAPTER 3: FORTALEZA, CONJUNTO PALMEIRAS AND INSTITUTO BANCO PALMAS

"Eu quero ver esta cidade cirandar!"

"I want to see this city dance!" is the concluding cry of Miolo, a play written and acted by a group of youth thespians about the urban experience in Fortaleza, the fifth most unequal city on the planet and the most violent in Brazil. Through the play, the young Fortalezenses paint a picture of a city in crisis—deeply divided along socio-economic lines and paralyzed under the dark shadow of increasing violence. They weave dream-like anecdotes about the city they want to see with a harsh social critique of the city they inherited.

Fortaleza translated means fort. As the play illustrated, characteristics associated with the city’s name—closed off, guarded, isolated—have physical and social manifestations in urban life. This rich narrative and its associated visual, oral and musical elements helped me to situate my own frustrations and confusions in trying to navigate the city and its seemingly disparate enclaves during

---

24 Cirandar is a type of Brazilian dance that is done side by side in groups, often holding hands.
my initial time there. While the darker elements of the play resonated with much of what I had seen and heard about violence and inequality in the city, the performance as a whole reflected a more positive phenomenon that I experienced during my time in Fortaleza. The hope and energy of a new generation to create the kind of place where they would like to live was undeniably present from within the city center, the periphery and the myriad spaces forged in-between.

**A City Divided**

In this chapter, I review what has been written about Fortaleza’s historical and regional context as a way of situating the deeply divided urban landscape that persists in the city today and that resulted in the formation of communities such as Conjunto Palmeiras. I then provide an overview of early mobilization efforts in Conjunto Palmeiras that culminated in the creation of Instituto Banco Palmas, followed by a description of the bank’s scaling up process and current state. In this process, I draw upon oral histories of community leaders, archival documents, and my own observations in community meetings in other parts of Fortaleza’s periphery and Conjunto Palmeiras.

**Urban development and migration**

The coastal capital of the state of Ceará, Fortaleza is located in Brazil’s Northeast. In the national imagination, Northeastern regional identity is intimately linked with poverty and drought, as the term “Northeast” first came into being as a way to demarcate the areas of concern for a newly created federal drought response entity in 1919 (Albuquerque 2004, 44). The first images and discourse that circulated in the more densely populated southern region of Brazil about the Northeast were of the drought and the rural populations affected by it (Albuquerque 2004, 45). The characterization of the Northeast as one of the country’s poorest and most “backward” regions continues to proliferate popular discourse today (Albuquerque 2004, 52).

Within the Northeast, Ceará has a distinct history. Unlike other states in the region, Ceará was not a major center of sugar production and did not begin to significantly grow until demand for cotton increased in the mid-nineteenth century. It was not until this period that the city of Fortaleza consolidated and emerged as the principal urban center of the state (Gondim 2004, 63). Early urban development in Fortaleza is characterized by a tension between ordered, “rational planning” influenced by the Parisian model, and spontaneous population growth as a result of periodic droughts (Garmany 2011, 48). The first major wave of migration occurred in 1877, when a
catastrophic drought brought an estimated 114,000 refugees from the rural interior to the coastal city (Gondim 2004, 64). Written records from historians and journalists of the period accuse the drought victims of damaging the urban fabric and character and of causing a variety of social ills (Gondim 2004, 64).

To prevent refugees from entering the city center, campos de concentração (concentration camps) were established during subsequent droughts of 1915, 1932, and 1942 (Gondim 2004, 64). These camps were set up on the periphery of the city to contain the refugees and constrain their movements under the premise of providing aid in a centralized location; effectively laying the foundation for the intensely divided urban landscape that persists today. It wasn’t until 1975 that any planning strategies were directed to urbanizing or managing the areas left behind from forced and spontaneous settlement at the periphery (Garmany 2011, 48). Much of the current periferia—the low-income, partially informal belt of neighborhoods that radiates from the dense city center—has its origins in the original camps.

*Figure 5 - Map of Fortaleza showing rational planning model in the city center, 1859*

22 Source: IPLANFOR archival documents
The history of rural-urban migration to Fortaleza differs from many other Brazilian cities such as São Paulo, which possessed more diversified urban economies and stronger industry. In Fortaleza, environmental crisis was the principal factor driving migration to the city, rather than the “pull” of industrial jobs (Garmany 2011, 48). The lack of a strong industrial base and the dependence on an agricultural sector weakened by constant drought drove Ceará’s economy into a sharp decline in the 1950’s (Gondim 2004, 65). During this period, rural populations started to organize and support populist and nationalists groups in applying pressure to the federal government to promote industrial development and address the diverse problems in the region (Gondim 2004, 65). The federal government responded with two measures—the establishment of the Agency to Promote the Development of the Northeast (SUDENE), and the Bank of the Northeast (Banco do Nordeste) (Garmany 2011, 48). Both would play an instrumental role in developing Fortaleza, and indeed the region, through investment and industry. At the same time, these newly created entities facilitated the entry of monopolistic enterprises which had the effect of further increasing Southeastern control over the Northeastern economy (Garmany 2011, 48).

**Displacement and mobilization**

Fortaleza benefited from the growth of the Brazilian economy in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, however the benefits of growth largely benefitted the existing middle and upper middle classes, many of whom were working in the capital city’s growing public sector (Gondim 2004, 68). During this time, the municipal government began to promote the city as a vacation destination and implemented new legislation that re-zoned coastal areas for high-density use to facilitate the development of tourism infrastructure (Gondim 2004, 67). As new developments began to take shape, an east-west highway was constructed to provide access to previously insulated coastal areas. Any communities located in the path of the highway, or other new developments, were systematically removed by a municipal agency called the Fortaleza Social Service Foundation (Jayo, et al. 2009, 121). Many of the displaced residents from these communities were re-located in unserviced conjuntos or subdivided plots of land disconnected from the city’s infrastructure and transportation network. It was through this process that Conjunto Palmeiras was created in 1973, named by a group of founding residents for the patchwork of palm trees and palmettos that matted its swampy landscape.

As the city became increasingly polarized, marginalized groups were becoming more organized. The increase of community mobilization in Fortaleza and across Brazil coincided with the
growth of social movements during the *abertura* (opening) in the mid 1970’s that marked the end of the military dictatorship (Garmany 2010, 911). During this time, many communities banded together to form entities such as the “Union of Greater Fortaleza Communities,” to resist displacement, occupy land and fight for services (Gondim 2004, 66). These efforts were often supported by progressive Catholic priests, influenced at the time by the tenets of Liberation Theology\(^{28}\) (Garmany 2010, 911). Many of the neighborhoods that now make up Fortaleza’s periphery are characterized by distinct stories of resistance and leadership that are often invoked by older residents in community events and commemorated in the naming of landmarks. Together, these stories form pieces of a shared identity across the periphery that persists today.

**Origins of Conjunto Palmeiras and Instituto Banco Palmas**

“God built the world in the seven days, but we built Conjunto Palmeiras”

As with any story that is passed down and circulated, the “story of the construction of Conjunto Palmeiras,” as it is often referred to, can take slightly different forms depending on who is doing the telling. As Banco Palmas has grown in size and reach, for some, the community’s foundational narrative has become synonymous with the story of the organization. For others, it is the story of a larger community effort that spanned decades, of which the creation of a community bank is one small part. Here I provide a concise summary of the major events that mark a complex, fascinating and at times, contested, history.

**Fight for services**

When the first residents of Conjunto Palmeiras were relocated there in 1973, the area lacked running water, electricity, streets or basic sanitation, and was disconnected from the amenities of the city center approximately fifteen kilometers away (NESOL 2013, 21). To make demands on municipal authorities for the provision of basic services, a core group of community leaders founded the Residents Association of Conjunto Palmeiras (ASMOCONP), as the community’s principal organizing body and decision-making forum. Starting around 1979, ASMOCONP embarked on a process of *luta* (struggle) with the municipality that spanned almost twenty years (NESOL 2013, 22).

---

\(^{28}\) Liberation Theology began as a religious movement in Latin America in the 1950s. The movement arose as a “moral reaction” to injustice, poverty and oppression. Priests within the movement became involved in political and civic affairs in solidarity with oppressed populations (Berryman, 1987).
One of these leaders and community founders, Sr. Augusto, describes the early mobilizing efforts in the following way:

We would meet in the association (ASMOCONP) that was a clay barraca (structure, shack), we would meet in the streets, and through this we created a new mentality, a new consciousness that we weren’t going to accept what we had been given. We made demands on the energy company and then transport and then water…. We went to CTC (transportation company) and we said if you don’t connect a route to Palmeiras we will break all of the buses that come out to the periphery. And we did that, we broke 6 busses.29

Community leader Izodorio Galdino echoes Sr. Augusto’s description of the coordination that led to the success of these early organizing efforts:

These are the people that stayed, people full of anger and outrage at the circumstances. But also people able to find spaces to exchange and think collectively. They found the appropriate conditions to organize themselves and channel that shared rage that led to shared change and justice.31

29 Personal interview, Sr. Augusto, January 20, 2016
It was not until the early 1990’s that through a combination of concessions from the municipality, financing from international donors, and the residents’ own labor, the community became fully urbanized\textsuperscript{12} (Jayo et al. 2009, 121). The saying “God built the world in the seven days, but we built Conjunto Palmexiras” became famous in the neighborhood in recognition of the residents’ collective efforts.\textsuperscript{33}

![Figure 7 - Residents of Conjunto Palmexiras working on early construction projects](image)

**Creation of a community bank**

In the mid 1990s, having achieved significant physical gains in infrastructure, community leaders were troubled by why, after so much struggle, the community was not developing economically. The decision was made to dedicate the next phase of organizing efforts to the promotion of socio-economic development in the neighborhood. At this time, efforts were still led by a core leadership team at ASMOCONP and supported by Joaquim de Melo Neto Segundo, a former seminary student who had moved to Fortaleza from Belém in 1984. Joaquim spent his first ten years in Fortaleza teaching and engaged in diverse social movements across the city. During this

\textsuperscript{12} In Brazil to say that a neighborhood was “urbanized” (urbanizado) refers to the ordering of urban space and provision of services
\textsuperscript{33} Personal interview, Sr. Augusto, January 20, 2016
time, he supported organizing efforts in Conjunto Palmeiras as one of the Padres da Periferia (fathers of the periphery), a movement of liberation-theology inspired priests. He was also directly involved in the organizing efforts that led to the creation of Instituto Banco Palmas, and has been president of the bank since its founding in 1998. As he explained of the “turning point” that ultimately led to the creation of the bank:

Just two months afterwards in another assembly we asked the question that became a turning point for the community, ‘Why are we poor?’ To which most people would reply: ‘we are poor because we have no money.’ The response was so obvious it could not be true.

To better understand the issue, ASMOCONP carried out a community survey to assess the economic profile of residents that collected information on income, occupation and consumption habits (Jayo, et al. 2009, 122). The results revealed that about 1.2 million reais (approximately $500,000), was being spent by local families each month. However, 80% of these families were spending their income on goods and services outside of the neighborhood. These results were presented at community meetings, local schools, and even on the streets (NESOL 2013, 24) to catalyze dialogue among residents about the potential of local production and consumption for generating shared wealth and autonomy (NESOL 2013, 23). Posters were created with figures and graphs from the survey along with messages like the following:

We are not poor, but rather we become impoverished because we lose our savings, and we lose our savings because we buy most of what we need, outside of the community. When we buy outside the neighborhood the money stops circulating locally, and this slowly weakens the local economy, reducing the amount of jobs and income it can generate for the community.

It was from this initial exercise of collective inquiry—collecting information about the community and making sense of it within the community—that the idea emerged to create Banco Palmas in 1998, the first community development bank in Brazil. The mandate of the bank was to strengthen the local economy through the promotion of local production and consumption and also to provide a source of income generation for ASMOCONP. The bank initially offered “productive credit” (credito produtivo) to residents to develop activities for income-generation in the neighborhood using a small seed fund of 2000 reais (approximately 1000 dollars) (NESOL 2013, 24). Subsequently,
the bank opened a line of credit to incentivize local consumption through the circulation of a social currency, the *Palma*.\(^{38}\)

In the early days of Instituto Banco Palmas, loan eligibility was determined based on local networks of trust. As Instituto Banco Palmas’ first credit analyst, Dona Marinete explained:

> The credit analyst (which was me at the time) would go around the homes of those who asked for the loan. Back then there was few people asking for loans because we only had a little bit of money to start—just 2000 reais. When someone asked for a loan it was me who would go to the house to talk to the person and to talk to the neighbors to get an understanding of whether he/she could be trusted to pay back the loan... we tried to know about the person’s life in order to be able to approve or refuse the loan. \(^{39}\)

The bank received its first round of funding from a local NGO, *Cearah Periferia*, and soon afterwards, was able to collect additional funds from a mix of international organizations including Oxfam and the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ) (NESOL 2013, 25). In addition to the credit program, the bank would go on to develop several business incubators starting with PalmasFashion, a women’s sewing cooperative and PalmaLimpe, a cleaning product cooperative run by local youth.

From its genesis, Banco Palmas has been a locus for youth empowerment and leadership development. The program *consultores comunitários* was launched in the early 2000’s to educate local youth in the history of neighborhood organizing efforts, solidarity economy principles and to provide practical skills in the operations of the bank.\(^{40}\) Many early participants in this course would go on to work at the bank, including Financial Manager Jaqueline Dutra, Director of Trainings Elias Lino and Credit Analyst Nayara Sousa.

The first seven years of the bank’s operations were characterized by a constant struggle for funding and legitimacy as an organization with an alternative model of microfinance that was not widely understood or accepted. From 1998 to 2003, the *Banco Central*, Brazil’s Central Bank, unsuccessfully sued Banco Palmas twice, alleging that it was illegal to be circulating a “false currency” (NESOL 2013, 25).

---

\(^{38}\) The Palma was accepted at a range of local businesses, and was pegged 1-1 to the national currency, the *Real*.


\(^{40}\) Personal interview with Elias, January 25, 2016.
Scaling-up

The 2003 election of President Lula da Silva of the Partido de Trabalhadores (PT, Worker’s Party) marked the beginning of a new era of progressive government and social policy in Brazil and the end of the bank’s struggle for legal recognition and a steady source of financing. In the same year, Banco Palmas expanded to become Instituto Banco Palmas (The Palmas Institute), and two years later, began to receive support through the newly created National Secretariat of Solidarity Economy (SNEAES). SNEAES contracted Instituto Banco Palmas to provide support to other communities across Brazil in replicating the community bank model, which had become a cornerstone of the new national solidarity economy agenda adopted under the PT administration (NESOL 2013, 25). Still situated within ASMOCONP, the original bank would continue to provide

---


42 Personal interview with Asier, January 24, 2016

43 “Solidarity economy” in Brazil takes the form of both a grassroots movement and an institution-SENAES. SENAES projects have four major characteristics: self-management, cooperation, solidarity and have some economic dimension. SENAES provides support to work principally in several areas including: community banking, revolving funds, cooperatives, business incubators, and cooperative waste management. (Economia Solidaria, http://www.fbes.org.br/).
services to the community of Conjunto Palmeiras while the institute was responsible for expanding the community bank network.44

Further contributing to the transformation and scaling up of the organization was a 2010 loan from the National Bank of Economic and Social Development (BNDES), of 3 million reais (NESOL 2013, 26) to greatly expand the bank’s credit portfolio. Also in the same year, Instituto Banco Palmas established a partnership with Caixa Economica Federal, (the second largest federally owned financial institution in Brazil), to act as an intermediary (banking correspondent), for Caixa transactions (NCEO 2013, 26). The partnership with Caixa was a major advance in increasing the financial inclusion for Conjunto Palmeiras, as it meant that residents were able to pay bills, submit deposits and withdraw *Bolsa Familia*5 stipends without leaving the neighborhood.

As the institute’s recognition, funding, and reach increased so did tensions with ASMOCONP. Disagreements over funding allocations and management eventually led the two organizations to split in 201246, as Instituto Banco Palmas moved in to a new, larger space two buildings away.47

**Autonomy to Partnership: the Professionalization of Instituto Banco Palmas**

*Expanded scope of work, reduced space for local dialogue*

Nineteen years after its creation, Instituto Banco Palmas is now a national symbol of local agency and economic solidarity, and its organizational mandate has significantly expanded as a result.48 In recent years, Joaquim spends most of his time traveling—providing support for the expansion of the national community bank network, lobbying for community bank legislation in Brasília, and speaking about the bank in various national and international engagements.49 He is also president of the recently created *Banco Nacional das Comunidades* (National Community Bank), a civil

---

44 After the expansion, Joaquim de Melo Neto Segundo remained president of both entities, and these remained in the same physical space—the ASMOCONP building.
45 *Bolsa familia* (family grant) is a conditional cash transfer program that extends direct payments to families living below the established poverty line. It was started under president Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s administration (1995-2002) and extended under the PT administration to become a pillar of social policy. By 2005 the program accounted for 0.5 percent of GDP. Currently, approximately 12 million Brazilians are covered under the program (Hall, 2008).
46 Joaquim remained president of Instituto Banco Palmas, and Socorro remained president of ASMOCONP when the two entities split.
47 Personal interview, Sr. Augusto, January 20, 2016
48 Personal interview with Joaquim, January 23, 2016
49 Personal interview with Joaquim, January 23, 2016
society group composed of eleven community bank leaders and their associated networks. As acting president, Joaquim continues to provide leadership at Instituto Banco Palmas, but is less involved in day-to-day operations at the organization.

In the past few years, the bank has steadily been developing a focus on technology, and in 2015, launched the mobile payment platform E-dinheiro in partnership with the Brasília-based tech company MadeApp. With the launch of E-dinheiro, which is often referred to as the “digital social currency,” efforts to promote the use of the Palma have ceased. However, the program for productive credit remains at Instituto Banco Palmas. It is currently stabilizing after a particularly difficult period in 2014-2015 when defaults on loans reached an all time high and lending operations had to be temporarily shut down. It was during this time that BNDES required Instituto Banco Palmas to hire an external micro-credit specialist, Lucia Spinola, to restructure the credit program. Lucia described the restructuring process as creating a “new culture” around credit at Instituto Banco Palmas, where prospective clients would begin to undergo rigorous credit analysis before receiving a loan.51

The programs that continue to operate locally as sections of the institute are Projeto ELAS, (an empowerment group that periodically offers professional courses, informal meetings/talks, and other activities for local women), the credit division, E-dinheiro and PalmasLab.52

As the organization has solidified its position as a thought leader on community banking, internal dialogue with residents of Conjunto Palmeiras has decreased. A monthly “local economic forum” (FECOL), that was previously held to provide a platform for residents to discuss neighborhood issues and opine on bank decisions was discontinued around the time that the bank split from ASMOCONP. ASMOCONP and Instituto Banco Palmas had established a division of responsibilities, and as bank staff made clear, political mobilization and organizing had always been under the purview of ASMOCONP and not the bank.53 When the two split, Instituto Banco Palmas did not take up this role.

At the time of the split, Instituto Banco Palmas leadership intended to keep ASMOCONP involved in decision-making at the bank through the establishment of an advisory board of community members that included several founding residents—community leaders who had been instrumental in establishing both ASMOCONP and the bank. However, in recent years, the board

50 Personal interview with Asier, January 24, 2016
51 Personal interview with Lucia, July 25, 2015
52 Discussions in this thesis center on this continued work at Instituto Banco Palmas in Conjunto Palmeiras, and not on the national extension of the portfolio of the Institute.
53 Personal interview with Asier, January 24, 2016
has not been contacted by the bank as decisions are made primarily by the bank management. Part of the justification for this has been the increasing technicality, scope and urgency of decision-making. As Asier explained:

'It’s emergency-based, a lot of times we have to deal with very basic needs in communities, so we always, there is always a dilemma in being effective or being sustainable. To be sustainable you have to involve more people but to be effective you have to make quick decisions. I think sometimes we go from very open or very effective where one or two people make decisions and we aren’t striking a balance right now.'

Asier also attributes a decline in participatory spaces at Instituto Banco Palmas to their limited capacity to take on initiatives beyond their mandate from SNAES (spreading the community bank model) and their obligations to BNDES (in the area of credit). Increased bureaucratic procedures have resulted in less time to pursue funding for, or organize initiatives that do not fall into these areas. As he explained:

The government wants numbers, they want to see people trained, loans delivered, services provided, but the work that we do where Instituto Banco Palmas was tremendously innovative is not what they support.

The projects with the government got bigger and bigger and our space to innovate got smaller and smaller, within those projects. Outside of them we could, that’s where we have Projecto ELAS, Emancipadas, Palmaslab, Mil Jovens Dez Ideas—initiatives about discussing, creating, outside of the projects that we have with the government, which is opening community banks and churning out reports.

Professionalization in political and national context

The professionalization of Instituto Banco Palmas reflects a national trend that has coincided with the establishment of new institutional arrangements under the worker’s party. As Touchton and Wampler argue, the increased offer of service contracts to civil society organizations from all levels of government in Brazil has caused organizations to shift their orientation towards the state from one of “autonomy” to “partnership” (2015, 13). As civil society organizations like Instituto Banco Palmas begin to take on new activities, such as providing state services and engaging in policymaking, organization leaders like Joaquim are “induced to play multiple formal and informal roles” (Touchton and Wampler 2015, 13). The divisions between these roles are often fluid, meaning that “in some venues, community leaders represent the state, in other venues, a political party, and in others, the interests of their community organizations of social movements” (Touchton and

54 Personal interview, Sr. Augusto, January 20, 2016
55 Personal interview with Asier, January 24, 2016
56 Personal interview with Asier, January 24, 2016
Wampler 2015, 14). In many cases, the transforming nature of state civil society engagement has provided formerly oppositional organizations like Instituto Banco Palmas with unprecedented resources and networks. At the same time, it has posed new challenges for organizing and collective action (Touchton and Wampler 2015, 28).

However, in the case of Instituto Banco Palmas, the reduction in local dialogue and organizing can be attributed to several additional factors beyond the changing nature of the organization’s relationship with the state. One of these is the organization’s split with ASMOCONP, which as previously mentioned, always served as the bank’s organizing arm. Another is the overall decrease in participation in local forums that has also emerged as a trend across Brazil. Even within grassroots groups, such as residents’ associations that remain autonomous from the state, local participation has declined steadily since the early 2000s.

This national decline in local participation has been attributed to a range of factors including the institutionalization of participatory processes within Brazilian society, and changes in social policy that have contributed to a changing culture of citizen-state relations that emphasize individual rather than collective action (Cornwall and Shankland 2013; Cornwall and Gaventa 2000). Specifically, Cornwall and Shankland argue that cash transfer programs like Bolsa Familia, “play into an emerging dynamic that emphasizes… transaction-based rather than claim-based access to services – and thus, potentially the pursuit of rights and voice as a consumer rather than as a citizen” (Cornwall and Shankland 2013, 313).

ASMOCONP is still active in Conjunto Palmeiras, but the nature of their work has completely changed from the organizing that took place the 80s and 90s. Dona da Silvia, the current president of ASMOCONP, describes the shift away from a collective action mentality as a major barrier in current organizing efforts. She attributes this to a decreasing amount of problems in common, particularly basic needs:

We had 2500 associates when ASMOCONP was founded 35 years ago because people needed everything, houses, food, everything, right? Today the people have health post, they have schools, they have a little bit of everything so there isn’t as much demand anymore but of course there are still people who are committed to the struggle right? So when we do a meeting with socios the most people that we get is 50 people, but still we think that’s a good number.57

In this context a major priority for both ASMOCONP and for Instituto Banco Palmas is youth engagement. As Elias explained,

57 Personal interview with Dona da Silvia, January 26, 2016
These youth that we have here today, despite the structure and the gains that we have today, if we could just show them that we do still have problems in common. Few opportunities for youth, the lack of a feeling of belonging to a collective effort, that is a common problem. So if we can just show people that alone we aren't going anywhere, its got to be in collaboration.

As the history of production and consumption mapping demonstrates, research can serve as a powerful mobilizing tool within communities. In the current context, as participation in local forums is declining, and the relationship between grassroots organizations and residents is changing, community research has the potential to serve a different function as well. In my conversations with Dona da Silvia, and with many staff members at Instituto Banco Palmas, they continually raised questions about what residents want today, and whether being part of a collective effort is even desirable to the new generation. In this context, research has the potential to serve as a critical tool in supporting organizations like ASMOCONP and Instituto Banco Palmas in remaining responsive to the desires and concerns of the populations they serve, engaging youth and starting a conversation around a collective vision for the future of the neighborhood. In the next chapter, I will describe how the research at PalmasLab has already started to create a space for this conversation to take place, albeit in a different form than in the past.

---

58 Personal interview with Elias, January 25, 2016
CHAPTER 4: WEALTHS, POVERTIES, DESIRES, ASPIRATIONS

“Doing research is intellectually empowering. It empowers the community, it generates even more protagonism for engaging the community and for making demands about what the state should provide, but doesn’t.”
— Erberson

Figure 9 - PalmasLab team during a focus group

In the following chapter, I provide a narrative account of the PAR process that Alison and I engaged in with the PalmasLab team from June to August of 2015. As will become clear in my description of the origins of our partnership, we did not come in to the experience expecting to facilitate PAR with the team. When our work eventually shifted in that direction, it was not because of foresight or planning on our part. Rather, our PAR process began as the different ideas, perspectives and experiences of the team members coalesced around a problem—the existing organizational method for producing knowledge about the community was no longer capturing the complexity of the local reality.

---

59 PalmasLab team video, November 2015
60 Source: author’s own photo
The problem was collectively defined and our process proceeded through dialogue. In contrast to conventional social science research, where research design is largely an individualistic endeavor involving extensive literature reviews and consultations in closed spaces within the academy, our process was entirely dialogical in nature. Specifically, through the identification of a common concern, Alison, the PalmasLab team and I co-created a discursive space within the organization where we were able to bring our experiences and knowledge as practitioners within our respective organizations, as students, and as community members into conversation with each other to problem-solve, debate, hypothesize and ultimately innovate upon the existing organizational method (production and consumption mapping).

In the following chapter, I describe each distinct component of the time Alison and I spent at PalmasLab in the summer of 2015, starting with our initial struggle to define partnership objectives and ending with a reflection that we engaged in with the team to close. In between, I describe the PAR process that resulted in the creation of a new framework for understanding production and consumption in Conjunto Palmeiras. It is important to note that this process did not unfold in a clean, linear fashion. Here I attempt to provide a description that mirrors the dialogical, reflective dynamic that characterized our process, while maintaining a chronological flow. Inevitably, in the process, I simplify and synthesize what was a much more complex, iterative endeavor.

Background

Two memories in particular provide me with benchmarks for the first and last of several distinct phases that I experienced during my work with PalmasLab over the summer of 2015. The first was at the end of my initial week, during which it had become readily obvious that my individual research question on the Instituto Banco Palmas microfinance model was not appropriate or relevant to the current organizational context. In my confusion, I wrote to myself:

It is clear that my original research question isn't the question that I should be asking, but what is? And how was I expected pursue any question in a rigorous way without already knowing elements of the answer?

The second memory is of our last week at PalmasLab, as Alison and I were reflecting with the team on our work together. By this point, it had become clear to me that my original research attempt had been unsuccessful because I had developed it in a way that was largely disconnected

---

61 Personal notes, June 2015
from the local reality in Conjunto Palmeiras and the organization. The failure of this approach had been thrown into sharp relief for me through my participation in our collaborative effort—which was deeply grounded in context, and had taken shape from the convergence of the situated knowledge and lived experiences of the team members. At the time I shared with them:

I learned that research can be an exploratory process, a creative process, and above all a collaborative process. It was amazing to see how you all constructed something with each other's ideas. In the university we criticize a lot, and it's important to critique, but it's also important to construct. I'm excited about research again, and what research can be—it can be so much more than I thought.62

I begin my discussion of the research project with PalmasLab by providing these two windows into my state of mind in different moments of the process, as a way of highlighting the learning that I experienced as a participant in dual roles—that of co-facilitator of a collaborative research effort and student pursuing my own research objectives. Here I provide a brief description of these roles, as they shaped my experience with PalmasLab, and as a result, also influenced the way that I recount our process of knowledge co-creation in this chapter.

The first role I occupied in this process was that of “student researcher.” Before arriving, I had been transparent about my intentions to carry out individual thesis research, while at the same time, collaborating with PalmasLab, and Asier did not object with my doing so. However, as I struggled to reconcile my academic interests in the organization with the local reality, I became painfully aware of what Appadurai describes as the “strangeness” of research as it is traditionally performed in the academy (2006, 161). My first reflection above brings to mind his question about the inherently iterative, inductive nature of the research process, specifically, “how you can have a systematic means for getting to what you do not know?” (2006, 161). For the PAR process at PalmasLab, “what we already knew,” was our starting point. Through my participation in this process, my approach to and understandings of research shifted, as is evident in the second reflection above. This enhanced understanding ultimately resulted in my approach to this thesis, a departure from my previous academic training in social science research.

In my dual capacity as co-facilitator, Alison and I worked together on the planning and design of the PAR process with PalmasLab, as will be described in greater detail throughout this chapter. In this endeavor, we were in learning roles relative to each other in different moments. Specifically, Alison was more knowledgeable about and familiar with CoLab’s approach generally,

---

62 PalmasLab team reflection, August 13, 2015
and PAR specifically, after having worked with the organization and taken classes on the theory and practice of PAR during her last year at DUSP. In turn, Alison cited my knowledge of microfinance and microfinance organizations as being particularly useful to her in moments when organizational context was needed.63

Throughout the process, I found myself often looking to Alison for strategic direction, while at the same time constantly debriefing, reflecting and collaboratively planning for next steps with her in a horizontal way. Our working dynamic as co-facilitators reflects Donald Schöns’s (1983) ideas about reflective practice. Specifically, Schöns (1983) posits that practitioners with varying levels of experience and strengths can learn from each other and enhance their respective understandings of practice through observation and mutual reflection. Our consistent “reflection-on-action” allowed us to both engage in mutual learning, and remain flexible and adapt to the dynamic environment at PalmasLab where objectives, activities and schedules were often changing.

Before arriving at Instituto Banco Palmas, Alison and I had developed a work plan together with Asier that centered on supporting the team in the development and planning of the community research program. We planned to spend several weeks at the organization to learn about PalmasLab, PalMap, and their objectives with the research program. We discussed the possibility of offering the team a workshop on research methods that they could use to compliment their future work with PalMap. While we intended to use our work plan as a guide, we also knew that the content of our work together was subject to change. As the development of a community-led research program at PalmasLab was in its very initial stages, it was still unclear when we arrived exactly what our most valuable contribution to PalmasLab could be.

The next month would be a process of exploring that question collaboratively, and often confusedly. Over the first month we developed eight separate iterations of our initial work plan, based on evolving discussions with Asier, Elias (director of trainings and E-dinheiro specialist), and periodically Joaquim around what the main focus of our work with PalmasLab should be. During these discussions, we navigated tensions between prioritizing efficiency over depth of content, and outcomes over process. Specifically, Asier and Joaquim preferred for us to focus our efforts on fieldwork and data collection. They hoped that we could lead the team in implementing a pilot survey about a priority topic that we could produce initial results from by the end of our time together. They explained that this was important both for the team to gain practical experience in

63Notes from informal reflection with Alison, April 2016
the field, and also to gain initial insight into troubling trends they had recently identified in the neighborhood.

For example, Joaquim highlighted the need for survey research to better understand the factors behind increasing poverty in the neighborhood, which he saw as linked to recent difficulties the organization had experienced in the credit division with business closures and loan defaults. Alison and I wanted to respect and address these organizational priorities while at the same time building in the time and space for the PalmasLab team to engage with different elements of research design beyond practical survey fieldwork. In this initial planning phase, we often struggled with how to effectively strike this balance.

We eventually developed a plan that involved using an existing organizational asset—production and consumption mapping—to ground a capacity-building process in research design and methods. Elias and Asier both felt that the production and consumption methodology needed to be revisited and updated for reasons described in the following section. We proposed carrying out modifications to the existing method with the PalmasLab team as a way to teach about research more generally. Specifically, we planned to modify the survey, determine how it might be complimented by qualitative methods, and carry out an initial fieldwork exercise. To start our process, we coordinated with Elias to provide the PalmasLab team with an in-depth orientation to the existing method. The information provided by Elias in this initial orientation session is summarized below.

Co-created Space: Problem-definition

"Instituto Banco Palmas itself came out of a research project, production and consumption mapping, so research and data collection has a huge potential."⁶⁴ – Luiz

Production and consumption mapping originated with the initial survey developed by ASMOCONP to obtain a socio-economic profile of Conjunto Palmeiras in 1997. As explained in the previous chapter, the initial problem identified by the leaders of ASMOCONP was lagging economic development in the neighborhood despite significant gains in physical development. The question guiding the original research effort was: "Why are we poor?"

In his presentation to the PalmasLab team, Elias explained that since this initial effort, the bank had carried out the survey exercise six additional times, approximately once every three years.

⁶⁴ PalmasLab team video, November 2015
In the process, the survey questions had expanded to include a range of detailed inquiries about consumption habits, including the brand and quantity of everyday products that residents purchase, and from where. A complimentary survey for local business owners was added to gauge local supply of products and services. In the past few years Elias had led several groups of youth participants of *consultores comunitários* in the surveying effort.

![Image of a graph showing the percentage of residents shopping inside and outside the neighborhood over time.](image)

*Figure 5: Where Conjunto Palmeiras Residents Go Shopping*


As Elias explained, the overarching objective of the exercise was to inform the bank’s work in strengthening local economic development. Specifically, Instituto Banco Palmas used information about local consumer demand to orient their lending activities. For example, for residents wanting to start a business, loan officers would reference mapping results to inform about gaps in the local market. For existing businesses, detailed information about resident preferences for product brands was used to assist them in catering their individual businesses to meet local demand. The results were also used as an evaluative tool for the bank. Specifically, the “share of residents consuming within the neighborhood,” was used an indicator of whether or not the bank was achieving their overarching mandate of fostering local networks of production and consumption.

However, Elias explained that in recent years the production and consumption mapping process had changed significantly. While results were previously shared in community meetings and

---

65 Source: Filho et. al.2012
even divulged through local media outlets, there was no longer an organized system for dissemination, and the results were going underutilized. The length of the survey had also been an issue in recent years, as many respondents were unwilling or unable to take the time needed to respond to the extensive questions. The complexity of the survey and level of detail needed also raised questions about validity. This was complicated by the fact that as Conjunto Palmeiras rapidly expanded, increasing numbers of residents were unaware of the history and mission of the bank. Without a clear connection between the survey and community benefits, residents had become less willing to participate.

After Elias framed the discussion of production and consumption mapping by providing background information about the history, objectives and results of the method, we opened up a discussion about new opportunities for its use. Within the discussion recounted in the following section, the team began to consider the changing context of the neighborhood since the survey had first been developed, and the evolving role of the bank within it.

An expanded vision of production and consumption

The Bank has done a lot of research, and uses the results to figure out where it's going. The research was always focused on production and consumption, with a financial lens. But it ended up in the heads of the young people working here—me, Luiz, Erberson, Luana, Heitor, Alberto—that yes, money and income are important, but folks aren't worried about just money. Today it goes well beyond just interest with the financial side of things. It's also public space, opportunities for leisure. It's also dreams and aspirations. - Mateus66

When the production and consumption mapping was first developed, the institutional mission of the bank was to address local poverty as it related to basic needs. Bank staff often reference the fact that residents during this period were passando fome (going hungry). However, as the team explained, food security had been replaced with novas pobrezas (new poverties) that demand the attention of the bank today. They suggested that these new poverties were not necessarily material or easily quantifiable needs, but instead included issues such as increasing violence or lack of opportunities for leisure. At the same time, they explained that novas riquezas (new wealths) could be found in the neighborhood as well, including increasing numbers of youth with higher levels of education than in the past and expanded access to information.

66 PalmasLab team video, November 2015
The team also started to discuss new opportunities for using mapping results. It was during this discussion that the team began to name some of the motivations for the research project that are described in the introduction of this thesis, namely: influencing public policy, better understanding and addressing community demands and pushing back against negative stereotypes of the periphery, among others. One of the strongest themes that emerged was the importance of using information to coordinate with actors both inside and outside the community on actions and projects for community benefit.

Consensus around a problem was coalescing from this initial discussion: that there were new types of wealth and poverty existing in Conjunto Palmeiras today that could not be measured through an analysis of economic production and consumption dynamics alone. The team argued that it was necessary to go beyond an economic perspective to understand these, as they could be material and immaterial. As energy around the discussion built, we wrote novas riquezas and novas pobrezas on a piece of poster board, stuck it to the wall and called a break to assess what our next steps should be.

Alison and I had approached this initial workshop planning on modifying the existing organizational research method and identifying new opportunities for using results. However, through the team’s discussion, we realized that they were signaling the need to develop a new approach altogether, one that would better address the new challenges and opportunities facing the community and the bank. Although at the time we weren’t sure of where the discussion would lead, Alison and I met with Asier during the break and decided not to go ahead with the modification of survey questions during the second half of the workshop as we had planned. Instead, we brought the group back together and continued the conversation of new wealths and poverties.

Through the articulation of their own “problem-definition,” the team was opening up a new space through which they exercised control over the direction of our process. The way this space came into being reflects Gaventa’s description of created spaces as emerging “out of the identification of a shared concern by actors with common objectives” (2006, 27). In addition to agreement around the “problem” being articulated through the evolving dialogue, I felt that the start of the process with the team was also facilitated by the relationships we had started to develop with the team at this stage. Greenwood and Levin explain that, “one never knows exactly when AR project starts and ends, it emerges out of social relationships and concludes when these are dissolved” (2007, 113). By this point, Alison and I had been with the team for about a month, and had established an initial basis of trust and familiarity that facilitated more fluid discussions between
us. In this process, we had become more perceptive of team dynamics and energy, which allowed us to identify a noticeable shift from polite participation in an earlier workshop (which could perhaps be more appropriately described as an “invited space”), to active engagement in the discussion about new wealths and poverties. Thus the space that emerged was co-created in that it emerged both as a result of the team’s energy around problem-definition, and our decision as facilitators to switch gears and design a new process for channeling this energy into a series of discursive sessions where the team could develop their ideas further.

Building a Framework: Ecosystem of Production and Consumption

Process design
Greenwood and Levin describe action research as consisting of two categorically distinct, (albeit ongoing and overlapping), phases: problem/research question definition and a subsequent process of “social change and meaning construction” (Greenwood and Levin, 93). These two phases take place through a co-generative structure, which can involve a variety of and techniques (methods), and communicative arenas (spaces for dialogue), depending on the context and demands of the group (Greenwood and Levin, 93). A key challenge within AR or PAR then, is designing these spaces appropriately to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and development of techniques needed to solve the problem at hand (Greenwood and Levin, 95). As Greenwood and Levin explain, there is no one-size-fits-all approach or set of requirements for designing a PAR process, only that it take a co-generative form (Greenwood and Levin, 93).

In deciding how to design our process, Alison and I had several concerns. We wanted to create spaces for open, unstructured discussions about the concepts the team was articulating, while maintaining a consistent focus on action-oriented research objectives. We were also conscious of Asier and Joaquim’s desire for the team members to gain practical experience with fieldwork and produce tangible outcomes. Finally, we were committed to a co-generative framework, and ultimately designed our process with this as a guiding principle.

Based on these concerns, Alison and I decided to structure the rest of our time with the team into a series of “working sessions.” These sessions, which Greenwood and Levin would classify as our “communicative arenas,” integrated three principal focus areas: conceptual development, mixed method design, and planning for action. Through these semi-structured sessions, we discursively evolved and expanded upon the concept of wealths and poverties while
linking this to clear research objectives. We used techniques such as individual journaling and group brainstorming to start discussion, which usually transitioned into free-flowing dialogue among team members. We also integrated skill-building activities in research planning and methodology design into this process to apply to the project at hand and to gain experience for undertaking future research projects.

Our own participation in the team's dialogue usually took the form of summarizing and posing questions. We would synthesize key points from free-flowing conversations by scribing in front of the team. During discussions, we would often ask them to qualify their thoughts in more detail, or prompt them to take their ideas a step further. Finally, throughout the process we consistently emphasized the need to “zoom in” and “zoom out,” (terms for which we never found a Portuguese equivalent, and instead usually ended up gesturing wildly), to make sure we were working in a way that was aligned with the our research objectives.

During our first two sessions described below, distinct intellectual interests within the group began to take shape, which together formed a unique conceptual framework that would guide subsequent phases of the research process.

Wealths and poverties

Today the needs here go beyond addressing hunger, which was important in the past. Today the types of poverty we experience are also intellectual, cultural. And these can also be wealths—they can represent both poverties and wealths, right? It's important for us to map these, because in many cases, wealths like intellectual and cultural wealths don't necessarily rely on money to develop. - Luana ⁶⁷

Underlying our initial session was a provocation from Erberson to think critically about the notion of poverty. As he explained, when we think about desafios (challenges) to local development, it is implicit that we mean poverty. People in Conjunto Palmeiras are told—and often tell themselves—that they live in poverty. “What is poverty for us?” he asked, “we live in poverty but we don’t reflect on it.” ⁶⁸

Our consensus about what poverty in Conjunto Palmeiras was not (purely economic), formed the foundation for the idea of a holistic vision of production and consumption. We described this expanded vision as an “ecosystem of production and consumption,” containing

⁶⁷ PalmasLab team video, November 2015 ⁶⁸ Documentation from working group sessions, July 2015
multiple, material and immaterial wealths and poverties. Over the course of the first two sessions, we began to unpack this concept, through the articulation of examples of wealths and poverties. Violence, in particular, was identified as one of the most urgent and destructive forms of poverty facing the community. Luiz encouraged us to think about violence as related to a series of factors, which could be social, economic or educational. For example, he explained that access to education and economic opportunities and social influences could all lead people to, or away from violence. Violence then, was a manifestation of the presence or absence of other forms of wealth and poverty. Since how people access economic and educational opportunity is related to public policy, he suggested that an objective of the group's research should be to understand and be critical of the way that public policies can lead to violence.

Another form of poverty that was highlighted early on in our discussions was a lack of opportunities for leisure in the neighborhood. Mateus emphasized the importance of leisure in influencing the day-to-day lives of individuals in the community. Like Luiz, he drew connections between a lack of leisure and other social problems that affect community life:

A large part of the problems that occur stem from social inequality, but the lack of things for people to do is also a strong factor. I know people that didn't have any involvement, that didn't have anything to do and that ended up in the street, talking, and ended up doing foolish things. I am sure that if we had areas for soccer—as people really enjoy soccer and theatre—we would have people participating in these projects and maybe younger kids would get involved and it would prevent them from doing foolish things. I think leisure is so important.69

We also discussed other, more tangible forms of wealth including transportation, basic infrastructure and services including electricity and sanitation. We discussed how in the context of Conjunto Palmeiras, these represent more than just material wealths as they were hard fought and won through a long history of community struggle. These material wealths then, also symbolize one of the neighborhood's richest immaterial wealths—a history of mobilization that has formed the basis for a strong community identity. As Luiz explained, "identity is one of the greatest wealths; when everyone feels the same pains, indignations and sense of pride, we are able to be united in the development of the neighborhood."70

Through these initial discussions about wealths and poverties, we created multiple lists and grouped similar items together into larger categories. We discussed how each wealth could represent a form of poverty and vice versa, in the sense that a lack of a wealth represents a need for it. We also

---

69 Personal interview with Mateus, January 20, 2016
70 Documentation from working group sessions, July 2015
engaged in critical reflection about for whom some wealths are indeed wealths and for whom they represent poverties. We discussed internal divisions within the community that divide and define how different groups of residents access, engage or experience different wealths and poverties. For example, while shared history and identity is a wealth for some within the neighborhood, for others who are unfamiliar with the rich history of Conjunto Palmeiras, or for recent arrivals who have fewer social networks, identity can represent a poverty at an individual level which in turn, affects development at a communal level.

One of the first activities Alison and I proposed to expand on the idea of wealths and poverties was for each person to make a list of these to share with the larger group. We participated as well, and I drafted a list of local institutions, public spaces and businesses—assets. It became clear to me however, that the group’s notion of wealths was distinct from my idea of assets, and that this distinction was of critical importance to understanding the diverse factors and interconnections between them that make up the “ecosystem” of Conjunto Palmeiras.

My conceptualization of assets comes from my training in asset-based community development, an approach that rejects deficits to emphasize existing local strengths. However, within our process, employing a multi-dimensional view of wealths that allowed us to also consider deficits was highly productive in illuminating the ways that these can have crosscutting impacts in the community. For example, lack of security affecting the use of public space, lack of knowledge about community history affecting youth leadership, or lack of shared identity affecting mobilization and collective action.

It was also effective in providing us with a political frame of analysis for examining structural inequality and the way this impacts the neighborhood. The teams’ discussions of poverties often led them to critique the political and economic systems that their community exists within. Furthermore, focusing on the ways in which different groups access or experience wealths, was critical for problematizing the notion of their community as a homogenous place. It allowed them to identify and reflect upon divisions within the community as described above.

This approach stands in sharp contrast to the de-politicizing effect that mainstream approaches to community “self-help” and “empowerment” can have by essentializing the local and obscuring the ways that communities are shaped by external forces. Our approach, in contrast, allowed us to situate a “zoomed-in” detailed analysis of local conditions within a larger, critical view of the economy and the state. This realization caused me to reflect on the ways in which conceptual frames (such as asset-mapping), that are often used to facilitate participatory processes can actually
limit the potential of local groups to develop their own means for making sense of the places they
live. If Alison and I had led the team in an asset-mapping session, we would have arrived an entirely
different outcome. Instead, the PalmasLab team were acting as architects in the design of their own
conceptual frames.

Desires and aspirations

Understanding desires and aspirations is important because we’re often limited in doing what
we hope to achieve because of some type of barrier—income, the place that you live—and if
we can change these variables, we can move closer to achieving our desires and aspirations.71
— Luana

In our expanded vision of production and consumption, we agreed that the ability to
produce and consume within the neighborhood is enabled or limited by the wealths and poverties
that we identified. However, we took this idea a step further to discuss how individuals are more
than passive producers and consumers—they act in ways that shape the ecosystem as well. As we
began to consider the role of individual agency and capacity for taking action to drive community
change, the team expressed interest in exploring desejos and perspectivas (desires and aspirations) with
our research.

In Portuguese, the word perspectiva literally translates to perspective, but the team understood
the word as having a meaning that lies somewhere between goal and aspiration.72 They found the
word perspectiva particularly useful because it is associated with longer-term wishes and dreams as
opposed to deseo, which they associated with concrete, shorter-term desires. One of the motivations
to explore both aspirations and desires with the research was to examine the difference between
what people want, and what they feel they can realistically achieve. The gap that often exists between
these is a challenge that can inhibit both individual and collective action for change. As Elias
explained, “(the gap) between the desire and the aspiration—that’s where the poverty is.”73

The team was also particularly interested in what factors shape desires and aspirations to be
individualistic or community-oriented. We had discussed the changing nature of mobilization and
leadership in the community, and we were left with the question of what makes individuals want to,
or feel that they can be part of a collective effort. In this way, exploring the desires and aspirations

71 PalmasLab team video, November 2015
72 The term “aspiration” is used to refer to perspectiva throughout the rest of this thesis
73 Documentation from team meeting on January 15, 2016 discussing the framework
of community residents became an action-oriented piece of our puzzle, critical we concluded, for thinking of solutions.

The idea of including desires and aspirations in our framework also reflected the team’s overall objective to move away from economic indicators as a way of assessing the well being of a community and the individuals within it. As Mateus explained, “This decision was an important element to understand how people really live in the neighborhood. Not just to know what people have or don’t have, but also to know what people are, and what they want to do.” They concluded that desires and aspirations add a nuance that can’t be captured by the statistics that are often used to describe the neighborhood. As Asier explained:

Maybe the Human Development Index shows greater amount of poverty, but we see in our day-to-day that residents want to stay in the neighborhood, invest in the neighborhood, imagine their future in this neighborhood. So it’s clear there are elements of life here that the Human Development Index doesn’t capture. Different forms of wealth and of poverty, and desires and aspirations don’t appear anywhere in any research—which are essential for thinking about the development of a community.

Finally, underlying much of our discussion about aspirations and desires was Asier’s idea that the development of these is directly related to the ability that individuals have to make mistakes and to dream. Specifically, Asier expressed his belief that when individuals have room for error to be able to try things and fail, aspirations and desires are able to more fully evolve over time. This value on flexibility and experimentation is part of the organizational culture at PalmasLab and was mentioned by all of the team members in my interviews with them as one of their favorite aspects of working at the lab. As Erberson explained, “In PalmasLab whatever we want to do, we do it; he (Asier), just says ‘if you want to do it ok, go do it!’ If it doesn’t work out we’ll just try to do it again in another way.” I found this kind of flexibility particularly impressive given the resource constraints of the lab. This adaptability is part of the larger organizational culture of Instituto Banco Palmas as well. As Elias put it, “here we do the impossible every day.”

In the sessions described above, I often found myself struggling with the feeling that our open, broad discussions were taking us off track from our goal to establish an actionable research question and objective. While to me, the team’s ideas about multiple wealths and poverties represented a clear evolution of production and consumption mapping, I initially had a hard time

---

74 PalmasLab team video, November 2015
75 PalmasLab team video, November 2015
76 Personal interview with Erberson, January 27, 2016
77 Documentation from informal conversation with Elias, July 2015
understanding how desires and aspirations made sense within our effort. When it was first proposed to include desires and aspirations in our research question, my first thought was that it didn’t fit.

After each of these sessions, Alison and I would compare notes, and attempt to organize the team’s ideas in a way that we could present back to them in a synthesized form. After desires and aspirations were first discussed, we both recognized the richness of the ideas, but still didn’t see how they all fit together. It wasn’t until we sat down and compared all of our notes from the previous sessions that we began to piece together all the different elements of the discussions and identify an emergent pattern. In this process, we realized that the team was describing wealths and poverties and desires and aspirations as having a symbiotic relationship with each other within the “ecosystem” of local production and consumption. After reviewing notes individually to try to unpack what the team was trying to do, we stopped, looked at each other and agreed: “oh, they are building theory.”

Focus Groups

Through the initial two sessions described above, we developed the following research question and objective:

**Objective:** Promote sustainable and integral development through the identification of the wealths, poverties, desires and aspirations that exist within a community or ecosystem, coordinating between the various sectors and actors that intervene in that space.

**Question:** What are the wealths, poverties, desires and aspirations in the community, and how do they affect the ecosystem of production and consumption?

We determined that our next step would be to bring in other Instituto Banco Palmas staff and community residents outside of PalmasLab to test our emerging hypotheses about wealths, poverties, desires and aspirations. Specifically, we wanted to know if our assessment of the type of wealths and poverties existing in the community would hold up with different community members. We also wanted to get information on what people would answer when asked about their desires and aspirations, with an eye towards the “gap” that we had discussed (as constituting a form of poverty), and whether these would be individual or community-oriented.
To do this, we carried out two focus groups—one internal session with staff members from the larger organization and one with a group of individuals representing different facets of community life. This “external” group included the current president of the ASMOCONP, a community health worker, the head of the community dance group Cordapes, the leader of a local women’s group, and a local youth. Elias led the focus group discussions, while the other team members played supporting roles, including scribing, synthesizing and subsequently presenting back the resulting information to the team. We decided to ask three questions to both focus groups that would allow us to learn about the kinds of desires and aspirations community members have, compare our ideas about wealths and poverties, and gain insight into how people were experiencing these in their everyday lives:

- What do you identify as wealths and poverties in the community?
- How do these wealths and poverties affect your day-to-day?
- What are your desires and aspirations?

The team considered that the focus group discussions largely validated their ideas about wealths and poverties. Many of the same opinions and concerns were raised, including increasing violence, lack of opportunities for leisure, and the need for better coordination between local actors. The

---

78 Source: author’s own photo
discussion of wealths included a strong emphasis on cultural wealth, and the sentiment that in Conjunto Palmeiras *tem pouco mas quase de tudo* (there’s a little, but some of everything).

The focus groups also expanded upon the team’s discussion of divisions in the neighborhood and how these cause, and are caused, by different poverties. Specifically, they attributed *linhas imaginárias* (imaginary lines) that divide residents and inhibit collective action, to social, economic and physical disparities. They discussed the need to respond to these challenges through engaging new leadership, and teaching about community history and existing assets.

As for desires and aspirations, we noted that even when these were individually focused, they were linked either directly or indirectly to community-oriented goals. These included obtaining a higher education to teach others in the community, starting a business in order to offer employment to community members or running for office to represent the community. While it was not surprising to us that the community leaders had desires and aspirations that were oriented towards larger community benefit, we asked ourselves what factors could contribute to the development of community-oriented aspirations in others who were not already in leadership roles. Focus group participants suggested that familiarization with the community’s rich history could provide access to a collective identity for those citizens in non-leadership roles; this new awareness might ultimately drive these individuals to valorize existing wealths and work for the betterment of the community.

In our analysis of the focus group discussions, we listed and discussed the wealths and poverties that had been named. We combined these with our original lists, and finalized a set of categories that we thought encapsulated all of the themes that had been discussed up until that point. Our final list included: knowledge, health, infrastructure, mobilization, identity, leisure, economy, culture and security. We also included three cross-cutting themes that had been solidified for us through the focus group discussions: solidarity, agency and public policy.
The focus groups were helpful for a number of reasons. They validated and added to our framework of wealths and poverties, and they also helped us to begin to see the relationship between these, and desires and aspirations more clearly. Specifically, the focus groups solidified our idea that wealths and poverties and desires and aspirations influence and feed into each other, and that understanding this relationship is critical for promoting community development in Conjunto Palmeiras in a holistic way. The team concluded that understanding existing wealths and poverties would provide a window into the present moment, while desires and aspirations would provide insight about the community’s future.

**Survey Design and Testing**

We chose to develop a survey for several reasons. First, we saw our project as an evolution of production and consumption mapping, and we wanted to maintain the same methodological approach. Also, we wanted to cover a large and diverse sample by conducting the survey in different parts of the neighborhood. Finally, gaining experience with the use of PaIIlap to facilitate research had been one of our goals since the beginning. However, we were faced with the challenge of trying to translate qualitative, experiential questions that we had about community wealths, poverties,
To jump-start the process, Alison and I drafted an initial series of questions based on our framework for the team to react to. Using this as a starting point, we developed the following survey format:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Economic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Experiential</strong></td>
<td><strong>Desires &amp; Aspirations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information</strong></td>
<td><strong>Profile</strong></td>
<td><strong>Questions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Aspirations</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Personal Experience**
- *How people experience, access, or engage the themes identified*

**Community Life**
- *How people engage each other and the community around them*

**Needs**
- *How people perceive the factors that impede and enable development*

**Cross Cutting:** *Agency • Solidarity • Public Policy*

In the categories of personal experience and community life, we asked questions about satisfaction with public services such as health and education, participation in community groups or mobilization efforts, and knowledge of community history, among others.\(^8^\) Within the category of needs we asked about the factors that residents consider as impediments to socio-economic mobility and to improving quality of life in general. We left questions about desires and aspirations open-ended, and followed these up with a series of questions that spoke to our interest in agency and action, specifically:

---

\(^8^\) Graphic created by Alison Coffey
\(^8^\) Full survey is available in the Appendix 1
- If you could change one thing in your neighborhood what would you change?
- Do you think the community has the capacity to contribute in the solution of this problem?
- What would you do in the solution of this problem?

After developing a first draft of the survey, the team carried out several tests in the community. They were surprised by how much some of the questions seemed to resonate with people’s experiences and concerns. Often the surveying process would spark a larger conversation about politics, the community or the bank. After the initial tests, we wrapped up the survey development phase of our process by summarizing some of the initial results and presenting these to Joaquim, who expressed his approval of the team’s efforts. When I asked him in a subsequent interview how he felt about our efforts, taking into consideration what he had originally wanted us to do (survey research on increasing poverty in the neighborhood), he replied:

I think the research that you are doing is interesting because it isn’t just a numerical diagnostic, indicators of poverty going up or down etc.; it is also a little bit more about what people think poverty is and how people view themselves within this context. This is very important for finding solutions to poverty, because the big producers of research in Brazil, these big studies show the economic numbers but what do they have behind this? How do people see themselves within this and how do they interpret this? That’s what you all are doing.

After our presentation to Joaquim, we returned to a discussion of our research objectives, mapping out the different actors that we could strategically engage in the analysis and dissemination of our results. We ended our time with the PalmasLab team in summer of 2015 by reflecting together as a team on the process up until that point. It was through this reflective space that we began to imagine new possibilities for the research initiative.

**Reflection**

**Reflections on process**

To end our time with PalmasLab, we reflected together about the experience, discussing what we had found valuable and challenging, and sharing our hopes for the project moving forward. The team emphasized transparency, clarity, and direction as valuable elements of the process. As Asier explained, “we had a line that we were following and that you were coordinating.”

---

82 PalmasLab team reflection, August 13, 2015
process with its associated steps (question definition, conceptual development, methodology design), moved us forward while at the same time providing a flexible enough frame for open dialogue and iterative conceptual development. As Luiz explained, “I think that what I learned with this methodology [PAR], it’s a horizontal methodology but it’s not exactly straight—we were able to turn here, go there, come back, get off track and discuss more about the topic.”

Alison and I were constantly challenged to maintain a balance between structure and flexibility. We struggled at times with moving the process along, (especially given time constraints and scheduling changes), while creating the space for ideas to evolve. However, as is evidenced by my earlier reflection and Alison’s below, this was an enormous learning process for us, one that influenced the way that we think about how we might approach research and practice in the future:

For me, one of the most valuable elements was to see and listen to and participate in this dialogue with all of you, and see how each of your experiences, through this dialogue, came together to basically construct a theory for understanding the neighborhood, but in a larger sense it’s a way of understanding the world, and development. And for me it was amazing to think that this started through our conversations, with everyone bringing in their experiences—personal experience, what you have observed here, through work, what you have done, and all of this came together, and grew into a framework that you can use to understand, and from there, to act.

In the process of trying to take on all of these different roles, facilitate, engage myself in the conversations, do research, understand the context here, I learned that collaborative research can provide much more valid results. I already had an idea of this, and that’s why I came here to work on this project, but in the moment of actually doing it through the process, I never would have imagined how much better the outcome would be. I learned that going forward in my career, I want to continue to engage in this kind collaborative research, because you learn so much more than you would by doing this in the traditional format used inside the academy.

The direction provided by the process was somewhat of a contrast to the day-to-day dynamic, and often chaotic, work environment at PalmasLab. While this dynamism (team members taking on multiple tasks at a time, jumping between projects, hosting interns and visitors), is something that makes PalmasLab an exciting place to work, it can also prevent the team from carving out space for reflection or strategic planning. Our process took the team members away from daily pressures and allowed them to channel the same energy that they bring to their work into dialogue with each other. This contributed to a forward-moving momentum to our sessions, despite some days when everyone became tired or confused (including Alison and I). Erberson references this momentum, “inside of the process,” in his comment below:

---

83 PalmasLab team reflection, August 13, 2015
84 PalmasLab team reflection, August 13, 2015
The public education system here in Brazil doesn’t encourage people to sit and think, to be a critical citizen. When you have these activities that cause this mental exhaustion, it gets hard because we aren’t used to that, so we end up tired, it seems as if we worked harder than if we were doing physical labor. But as we were inside of the process, it was constructive and it instigated us to continue, to not give up on the process.85

Erberson’s comment also highlights another valuable element that the team brought to the process—a strong critical perspective. While many PAR cases highlight the development of a critical consciousness (Freire’s conscientização), our experience was unique in that this was something the group was in the process of developing before the start of the project. As explained previously, the research concept was driven by the desire to think critically about the notion of poverty. In this sense, Alison and my role was more facilitative than pedagogical. We contributed to the momentum of the process by providing a strategic direction and structure for the team’s existing critical consciousness and ideas to develop and take shape within.

Articulation of new possibilities for change

Throughout our process, we maintained a consistent emphasis on action. During all of the discussions described above, we would return to and elaborate on our research objective, or think of new ways to leverage, share or use research results. However, during our reflection session the team began to articulate additional, new ideas for using the research. These were less concrete than some of the previously identified actions; they were often longer-term, more personal or more aspirational. While there are many common themes that cut across their individual ideas, by this point it was becoming clear that each team member had developed specific interests in, and aspirations for the research project. Here I provide excerpts from the team reflection that closed our PAR process in August of 2015 that I think reflect each of these individual projects. I compliment these with my own interpretations and impressions of their ideas based on my own observations. It is important to note that despite being very involved in the process throughout, Luana was not able to participate in this reflection.

For Mateus, a principal interest was to motivate others within the community to think beyond economic wealth to valorize social wealth. He consistently emphasized his belief that one of the most important of these social wealths is leisure, both for the value that it brings to a community and for the ways in which it can prevent poverties such as violence. He expressed a particular

85 PalmasLab team reflection, August 13, 2015
interest in using the research to find ways to satisfy community demands in this area and others. As he explained:

It would be a dream, almost impossible, if this project turned a milestone that everybody would stop just thinking about the economic, and start thinking about the social, that we would stop growing up asking for money, money, money, money without caring about inclusion within the community at large. It is very difficult for this to happen. But it doesn’t cost us a thing to think that it can. To think that the government could look here with different eyes, not just as a violent periphery where everyone is on drugs, but that they could look here to see what good we have, and that they could bring leisure, better structure in the schools, that we could benefit from public policies.86

From the beginning of the process, Erberson was interested in de-constructing and problematizing the notion of poverty. In his comment below, he links this interest to the larger solidarity economy movement that Instituto Banco Palmas is a part of. He is pointing to the fact that the production of knowledge and the “production” of the economy are inherently linked. The question he raises of how one can articulate alternatives using the vocabulary of the system they seek to push back against is a deeply important one for the solidarity economy movement, and indeed for any groups involved in resistance movements:

So, we are solidarity economy. We’re on the other side of the process. It does not follow the traditional model of economy. Our economy is another process. So one thing I would really like to see happen is that, as the traditional economic model has its definitions of wealth, poverty, things like that, we could do the same, do research, make a theory in our own areas and articulate our own meanings, our own dictionary. Because I find it very difficult that we want to leave the scope of the traditional economy, but that we only have as reference what they say is true, you know? So I think we could take it from here and say, lets define what poverty is for people of the solidarity economy, let’s define what wealth is, what is desire, what are aspirations? I wish very much for that to happen. That we create not only a questionnaire but also to create our own identity, you know?87

Erberson also articulated a clear vision for the community-led research program at PalmasLab moving forward, beyond our specific research project:

I imagine having a space where we can develop research. I would prefer if we could do something independent but connected to PalmasLab—let’s say independent areas of PalmasLab. And then if I could be a facilitator, to take positions in relation to what I think poverty is, what I think wealth is, that’s what I’ve got to do. That’s my aspiration now, after this process that we started. It’s that.

Finally, for Luiz, changing destructive mindsets and stereotypes was a major concern throughout the process. Luiz was consistently provoking the team to think about what it takes to make people change their ways of thinking to valorize their wealths and act collectively in the

86 PalmasLab team reflection, August 13, 2015
87 PalmasLab team reflection, August 13, 2015
resolution of their problems. Also, when talking about the future of the project, Luiz regularly emphasized the importance of the past—community history and leadership as a catalyst for future action:

I want this project to turn into, well it’s on the way to becoming, but I would like a lot that our project became not just a survey, but a total project of PalmasLab and Instituto Banco Palmas. That it would get more force, disperse, disseminate. What we could reach in an effective way, the community, society, influence public policy, teach histories, make people valorize leadership, make people recognize their wealths, make people recognize their poverties, and just like that, recognizing their poverties, they could fight to resolve their problems. It’s a magical thought right? It’s not going to happen from today to tomorrow, but I think that the project that we are doing, it is more or less on this path. I think that PalmasLab is this path.88

Like Erberson, Luiz discussed his vision for PalmasLab in the future. He situates his own aspirations within this vision, aligning these with a commitment to bringing about community change:

I would like to learn how to contribute more, to be a multiplier. I’m speaking personally but within the project, using the project, using PalmasLab, I hope that PalmasLab could one day manage to walk on its own legs and bring improvements to the neighborhood. And that Banco Palmas can reach the whole neighborhood. I think that Banco Palmas and PalmasLab entered in my life in a way that has allowed me to see that this is what I want for my future. If I could work here in PalmasLab... I think it’s like this, even if I had an opportunity out there, [outside the community] if I could harmonize it with my work here in the community, I would do that. I don’t want to leave here, because I think this idea of marrying the social with technology and the social with the economy and to fight to change this reality, I fell in love with it. The idea that it matters, that we matter, right? So I think that my vision for the future of this project is an aggregate of things that is going to contribute to change reality.89

---

88 PalmasLab team reflection, August 13, 2015
CHAPTER 5: SURVEY IMPLEMENTATION AS A CATALYST

"Banco Palmas was born out of a research project. '400 years BC' they did a research project here in Conjunto Palmeiras to know why people were poor. They asked 'why are we poor? Because we don't have money right?' So they did a research project and they realized 'pow!' we do have money, people get Bula Família, people get a salary, people work; but then why don't we have money? Because people leave and spend their money outside the neighborhood, that makes the community wealth drain out of the neighborhood. So, Banco Palmas was born from research. They discovered the cause and they came up with the social currency to make the economy more local. This was what characterized the ecosystem in Conjunto Palmeiras at that time—the financial poverty, people not having money—that was the focus. Conjunto Palmeiras developed because of this. So now advancing in the future, Conjunto Palmeiras has developed—there is a large contrast between different areas in the neighborhood—but today Conjunto Palmeiras isn't affected just by the economic factor. So, we discussed and we developed this new survey, which is broader than before. We did focus groups, we talked between us, residents of Conjunto Palmeiras, because as residents we know our problems. This is the idea of PalmasLab. We work on solutions from the bottom up. So we talked to community agents that know the problem and that fight to resolve the problem, community leaders, people who have fought for the community since the beginning. We arrived at these four words: wealth, poverty, desires and aspirations that affect the ecosystem."—Luiz

Figure 14 - Luiz leading the consultores comunitarios group

When I returned to PalmasLab in January of 2016, Mateus, Erberson and Luiz were assisting Elias and Asier in the coordination of a new group of consultores comunitarios. They were working with two turnos (groups): a group of 15 youth in the morning, and 20 in the afternoon. The consultores (aged from approximately 17-20 years old) were all residents of Conjunto Palmeiras or nearby

---

90 Consultores comunitarios orientation session, January 12, 2016
91 Source: author’s own photo
communities. Through the course they were being introduced to Instituto Banco Palmas' mission and community history, while also doing promotional work for the organization.

Over the three weeks that I spent with the team in January, we introduced the consultores to our research concept, led them in the implementation of the survey, de-briefed with them throughout the process, and carried out a reflection activity with them to close. During this time, I was able to observe the PalmasLab team members moving into facilitative leadership roles. While I provided support with the planning of activities, and particularly with the logistics of the surveying process, it was primarily the team and Asier who led the consultores in substantive discussions throughout.

The first of these was an initial orientation session to explain PalmasLab's motivations for carrying out community-led research, introduce the research concept and engage the consultores in a discussion of its potential to generate community benefit. I include the above excerpt from Luiz from this session as it reflects the overall pattern of how the team was beginning to describe and take ownership over the process, while consistently situating their efforts within community and organizational history.

**Introducing Consultores to the Research**

For this first orientation session, the PalmasLab team suggested we provide the consultores with an opportunity to engage with the research concept first-hand. Specifically, the team decided to take them through the exercise of naming wealths and poverties in the neighborhood and discussing their own desires and aspirations.

As before, the wealths and poverties named included a mix of material and immaterial elements, including: individuals rich in culture, community history, unemployment, lack of public investment, stereotypes, lack of courses/projects, public transportation, local organizations, health, and Instituto Banco Palmas, among others. All but two of the desires and aspirations mentioned were community-oriented, including: reduced number of kids out of school, diminished violence, music classes offered at the high school, and a library.
The activity provoked a discussion that was unique to each turno, but that also highlighted many of the same themes that we had been grappling with throughout the process. As an observer, it was exciting for me to see the team using their own framework to structure participation with the consultores. The consistency and evolution of themes and debates that were emerging from the use of the framework (through the focus groups, and now with the consultores) highlighted its relevance to the local community. The ease of the session was also facilitated by the fact that the PalmasLab team members were friends with many of the participants in the consultores group—they had gone to school together or knew each other from the neighborhood.

The final component of the orientation involved asking the consultores to take the survey. We wanted them to become familiarized with it, and also to be able to provide us with feedback on anything that they thought should be included or changed. From both groups, much of the feedback we received was in the area of community security and policing. As one participant argued, the PalmasLab team was right that economic poverty shouldn’t be the main priority of the research. If people used to think of Conjunto Palmeiras as a poor neighborhood, now the problem was that it was labeled as a violent neighborhood, a label that residents had begun to identify with. The consultores wanted to know what made residents feel most unsafe and why. Specifically, they proposed the inclusion of questions about resident perceptions of police, and whether community policing made residents feel more or less secure.

---

92 Source: author’s own photo
Fieldwork

After finalizing the survey, inputting it into PalMap, and conducting a test round, we set out for the rua (street) with the consultores. We divided up the neighborhood into sections and chose a different section to conduct the survey each day. For sections of the neighborhood that we were less familiar with, we went accompanied by Katiana Oliveira, a community organizer affiliated with Instituto Banco Palmas who is particularly active in advocacy work for Conjunto Palmeiras 2, the most recently settled and physically precarious part of the neighborhood. The team conducted the survey in pairs, and the PalmasLab team and I accompanied and observed a different pair each day.

![Consultores comunitários conducting the survey with community resident](image)

Figure 16 - Consultores comunitários conducting the survey with community resident

Overall, the consultores were surprised and pleased at how warmly they were received by residents. They were welcomed into homes where they would conduct the extensive survey using PalMap, a process that generally took about 20 minutes. Not only did the majority of residents agree to participate, but also they often continued to converse with the consultores after the survey was over. The exception was some cases where residents refused to participate, citing grievances with Instituto Banco Palmas.

---

91 Source: author's own photo
I was accompanying one group to a house where this occurred. The older woman who answered the door was willing to participate until she heard that the girls were representing the bank. She said she was angry at the bank ever since they had changed their credit program, making it impossible for her to take out a loan. When we left the house, I asked the two girls I was with what they had thought of the experience. “The people who don’t like Instituto Banco Palmas just don’t know the story [referring to the story of the bank’s creation],” she answered. “If only they knew the story, things would be different.”

After each day of fieldwork, we would sit down with the group to discuss their impressions of how well the questions were being understood, what difficulties they were running into with the tablet, and how they felt about the exercise overall. Initially, we had several technical difficulties with PalMap and the tablets. Also, despite being well received overall, the consultores were finding that some specific survey questions were not clear enough and were not being well understood. These included some of the more personal, reflective questions such as: “What is the factor that has contributed the most to your personal formation?” and “What is the biggest difficulty that inhibits your personal growth?”

Despite these initial difficulties, after the first few days of fieldwork, the consultores were becoming more comfortable with the process. They also became increasingly engaged in debriefing.

94 Personal documentation of informal conversation with consultores comunitarios participant, January 2016
discussions about the kind of responses they were receiving and what they were learning by conducting the survey in sections of the neighborhood they had never visited before. In particular, many of the consultores reported being impressed by the resolve and the warmth from residents of Conjunto Palmeiras 2, despite what they considered to be heightened economic hardship in that section of the neighborhood. Through these discussions, the PalmasLab team and I began to see that the surveying process itself provided valuable insights for our research effort. Each day, the consultores brought back a wealth of information about community demands and resident opinions of the bank, in addition to their own reflections about what they were seeing and experiencing.

Reflective Analysis in and on Action

At the end of the two weeks, the PalmasLab team and I were anxious to discuss and capture some of these reflections with the consultores in a more systematic way. We worked together to decide how to structure the final reflection session and ultimately settled on a two-part approach—the first section would be a space for personal reflection on the process, and the second would be an analysis and problem-solving session based on the initial results from the survey. For the first part of the session the team chose to ask the following questions:

- What do you think this process serves for?
- In the interviews (surveys) that you participated in, did you find anything or anyone particularly impactful?
- Did this process make you feel like an agent of change?
- Did your participation in the process change any pre-conceived notions you may have had about the community?

The PalmasLab team chose to include the second analysis-based part of the session because they felt it was important to show the consultores concrete evidence of their efforts in the form of initial statistics and graphics. They also wanted to learn from the consultores how they would interpret the emerging trends. We chose three different question groupings to provide initial results from—identity, economy and security.

In their personal reflections about the experience, many of the consultores said that they felt that the process had been valuable for learning about what residents want to see in the community. They found that residents were highlighting “poverties” in the two areas that most of the consultores themselves felt were major priority areas—lack of opportunities for leisure and lack of security.
Many of them expressed surprise that they held many of the same views with residents they had previously assumed to have little common ground with.

They also emphasized the importance of hearing individual stories. Many of them recounted specific conversations they engaged in that taught them something new, made them hopeful or angry, or challenged an assumption that they had previously held. As one participant explained, "it is important to get to know people’s reality; you see things that you aren’t used to seeing, so it’s good for changing your point of view."  

For the second part of the session, we broke the consultores up into smaller groups to discuss and interpret the findings in the three topic areas and asked them to think of some specific actions for addressing these. During this activity, the PalmasLab team moved from group to group, providing support and clarification and in some cases asking the groups to push their ideas further.

Among both consultores groups, the area of community security and policing provoked the most debate. The consultores were frustrated that there wasn’t a clearer consensus emerging on resident opinions of policing. As one participant explained, “the population is in doubt about whether policing makes the neighborhood more or less safe; it’s a tie.”  

95 Consultores comunitarios reflection session, January 28, 2016 (turno 1)  
96 Consultores comunitarios reflection session, January 28, 2016 (turno 1)
much of the discussion on security was: what is it that makes residents feel unsafe? Gang violence, police, the media, personal experience, and stories from neighbors were all named as factors that could be contributing to a feeling of insecurity. On this point, the consultores were clear about one thing: outside influences (media, stereotypes about the periphery) that shape the way that people begin to conceive of their neighborhood are toxic for collective action. As one participant explained:

Everyone says that it’s dangerous to go to Conjunto Palmeiras 2, but it’s dangerous everywhere. People think the periphery is dangerous—everyone robbing and killing, because the media gives people that idea; it demonstrates that people can’t go outside. It could be that it happens but it’s not quite like that. For example, when I told my friend that I was going to do surveys in the streets he asked if I was scared, he doesn’t go outside. I responded that I have to live my life.\(^{97}\)

In our discussions about community security, the consultores were not suggesting that the risk of violent crime in the neighborhood was not real; some of them had personal experiences with both gang-related violence and police violence. However, they were pushing back on the way that media stereotypes shape the way that people start to identify as living in a violent place, which ultimately shapes what they think they are capable of doing, as the quote above indicates. I thought these discussions drew an interesting parallel to some of the PalmasLab’s team’s initial discussions about the way in which resident’s subjectivities are shaped by statistics and media influences that classify the neighborhood as poor. For me, a clear message was emerging from both groups about the need to combat and break out of stereotypes that influence the way people identify and think about what is possible.

On the topic of community economy, participants were encouraged that the majority of people felt that they had a good quality of life and that the majority reported they are able to meet basic needs. To them, this confirmed that residents also had a broader conceptualization of well-being that encompassed more than economic factors alone. In their analysis of the “community economy” data, one group wrote:

Analyzing the graphic, the majority of people evaluate their quality of life as good, even with all of the difficulties. Some of them haven’t gone through difficulties but the ones who have say that they remain confident for one reason: faith that the situation can change and that even though inequality won’t disappear (because it’s not going anywhere), but that it will become less present in peoples lives. Even though the neighborhood offers people every reason to say that they have a bad life, they prefer to think that it could be worse and it’s just a minority that says that they have a bad quality of life. But it’s important that this minority be helped and visited so that this situation can be remedied.\(^{98}\)

\(^{97}\) Consultores comunitários reflection session, January 28, 2016 (turno 2)
\(^{98}\) Written excerpt from group work during consultores comunitários reflection session, January 28, 2016 (turno 1)
Conversely, the groups that took on analysis of community identity (made up of questions about participation in community life and familiarity with history) were frustrated that local participation was low, and residents seemed complacent. As it had during the initial PAR process, the argument for understanding collective identity as an enabler emerged consistently in the group’s discussions. When this was discussed, the group would often point to Instituto Banco Palmas as having a responsibility within the community to disseminate the community history and to assure that residents had access to it. The “community identity” group wrote the following:

The majority of the population doesn’t know the story of the history of the neighborhood, and the majority doesn’t participate in any group or community organization. Complacency has taken hold of the population. The people that know the community history are the oldest ones, and because they are so old they don’t participate in community groups, and some of them didn’t pass on their knowledge about community history to the younger generation.100

Both groups of consultores related this complacency to a lack of agency and motivation on the part of residents to take the lead in “starting something.” They were left frustrated with the fact that most residents did not express ideas about what they would do to address the challenges that they identified in the survey. Although they reported to believe in the collective capacity to create change,

99 Source: author’s own photo
100 Written excerpt from group work during consultores comunitários reflection session. January 28, 2016
when asked (in the immediate follow-up survey question), what their individual contribution might be to bringing about change, many residents chose not to respond, or responded that they would join an effort if it were already in motion. In reflecting on this after the session with the consultores, Erberson explained to me:

You ask people what they would do to change, what would YOU do and people say well if there was a movement I would participate. The first step is hard, but after the first step things are more fluid, people see that something is happening. But the first step is hard but I think that we are almost there, we aren’t there yet but almost. I think the research will help us in this aspect as well.\textsuperscript{101}

As a way to take the first step, many of the consultores explained that the process had taught them that individuals wanted and needed \textit{to be heard}, and that a key action moving forward would be for the Instituto Banco Palmas to find ways to reach people at an individual level in their homes, as a way of drawing them out to join a collective group. As one participant explained, “Some people just want someone to listen to them; family doesn’t always listen, but if you give them the opportunity to talk you might just understand what people want.”\textsuperscript{102}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Consultores comunitários working on analysis\textsuperscript{103}}
\end{figure}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{101} Personal interview with Erberson, January 27, 2016
\textsuperscript{102} Consultores comunitários reflection session, January 28, 2016
\textsuperscript{103} Source: author’s own photo
\end{flushleft}
As a way to draw people out, the consultores concluded that disseminating information about programs offered by the organization, and opportunities for engagement would be a key action going forward. Disseminating information was also highlighted as a way to address some of the misunderstandings and concerns around security, by informing residents about their rights to combat violations by police, for example. One participant described the way she had become informed about her rights as a way to defend against police abuses:

What did I do to resolve this problem? It was with information, knowledge. I started to get informed about my rights to be able to defend myself with them, when they [the police] do the wrong things. I was already stopped by the police, I didn’t like how they treated me and if I hadn’t had that knowledge they would have done whatever they wanted.104

Finally, given the fact that some residents had negative opinions of the bank, or reported that they were uninformed about services offered by the bank, the consultores also stressed the importance of spreading information, not just about services and rights, but also about the community history. Many of the consultores suggested that if people were more familiar with the history, they would view the bank more positively, and be more inclined to get involved. As one participant explained, “I think if people knew the story, they would wake up to move and fight to improve the neighborhood like before.”105

**Unexpected Difficulties, New Created Spaces**

---

104 Consultores comunitários reflection session, January 28, 2016
105 Consultores comunitários reflection session, January 28, 2016
106 Source: author’s own photo
In assessing our work, the team and I were excited about the rich ideas and debates that had emerged from our conversations with the consultores, but also frustrated with the aspects of the surveying process itself. The amount of energy and time that went into preparing the application and the tablets for the survey, and resolving technical difficulties was enormous. We also realized the survey had not functioned exactly how we had originally intended. Throughout our observations of the consultores in the field, we realized that some of the questions weren’t being fully understood by respondents, and that often the consultores weren’t prepared to address these moments of confusion.

We found that the best way to train the consultores in survey techniques generally and in the use of our survey specifically was by accompanying them in the field, observing them in action and intervening to help when they got stuck or ran into a problem. In retrospect we agreed that it would have been ideal to dedicate more time to field tests and training to account for the unavoidable learning curve for survey implementation.

Another issue with the survey was that we felt that the rich stories that were circulating back to the bank through the consultores were getting lost in the quantitative survey results. Capturing and valorizing individual experiences and stories with the research was as much a concern for the PalmasLab team as it had been for the consultores. As Luiz explained:

I think there are really good testimonies, that allow you to understand a little bit about the reality for those people. Because this data, about whether you feel safe, about the police, how much you make a month, it’s great but sometimes it’s the testimony, it’s an unburdening that helps you understand that case. Because there are really specific cases, but despite being specific, I think you see them reflected across many cases. I think many mothers here in Conjunto Palmeiras have lost a son to violence, more than one of them has lived with less than one salary, has been undervalued, has gone hungry, has been excluded from the financial system; they are very unique cases that I think its worth it, even if it’s a unique case. Imagine one person has a unique case and it is just her, but if we knew how to make that one thing never happen again, it would be great. Even if it was just one person who had gone through it, it’s important to know what is happening with everyone else too, but those unique cases are so important.107

At the same time, the survey had served a positive function that we had not anticipated. As described previously, the process itself had acted as a catalyst for dialogue, both between the consultores and residents, and subsequently between the consultores and the PalmasLab team. This was enabled both by a framework that had local resonance, and by the team’s facilitation of the process. Gaventa argues that “power gained in one space, through new skills, capacity and experiences, can be used to enter and affect other spaces” (2006, 27). The PalmasLab team was applying new

107 Personal interview with Luiz, January 18, 2016
facilitation and research skills to the work with the consultores. In this sense, they were instrumental in facilitating the co-creation of a new generative space through which the team and the consultores engaged new possibilities for action.

Figure 22 - Consultores comunitários turno 1

Figure 23 - Consultores comunitários turno 2

Source: author’s own photo

Source: author’s own photo
CHAPTER 6: INQUIRY, ASPIRATION AND CHANGE

"Forces of pressure pose and define a question. But it is the forces of aspiration which formulate and offer an answer." – Henri Desroche

Agents of Change

A common thread woven throughout the different phases of the research process at PalmasLab was the question of what it takes for individuals to recognize and exercise their ability to act as agents of change in the benefit of their community. Through this process, the PalmasLab team articulated a hypothesis that individual agency and aspirations are linked. In this chapter, I turn to an analysis of how the PalmasLab team and the consultores are acting as agents of change themselves by simultaneously re-grounding, and imagining new possibilities for the work of Instituto Banco Palmas in Conjunto Palmeiras. In my analysis, I apply the team’s own emergent hypothesis that aspirational thinking plays a role in provoking action for change.

When we began to theorize our framework in the initial sessions, the team suggested that desires and aspirations shape and are shaped by current conditions (wealths and poverties), in the sense that the different ways individuals access or experience these can enable or constrain their thinking about the future. Furthermore, the team hypothesized that the development of individual agency is linked to desires and aspirations—what people want for their lives, and what they aspire to do or be. We also discussed the importance of having a “margin of error” or space for acting uninhibited from the pressures of the present moment to try new things in a way that allows more ambitious desires and aspirations to develop for the future. Through these discussions, desires and aspirations were identified as the future-oriented, solutions-based piece of our framework.

The focus group discussions validated some of these ideas, while at the same time, pushing us further to consider the role of the past in shaping individual and collective visions for the community’s future. In particular, the focus group participants emphasized knowledge of community history as a key catalyst for the development of new leadership and future mobilization. This caused us to question, “Is it just that leaders or agents of change can see community wealths in a clear way? Does knowing the history of the community enable people to see their wealths?" As a result, we were motivated to include survey questions about knowledge of community history and

---

10 Quote from Henri Desroche taken from: Mische 2009, 694
111 Documentation from working group sessions, August 2015
past participation in mobilization efforts. We also included the series of questions described in the previous chapter about desire for community change and opinion about individual role in bringing that change to fruition.

In our initial analysis of the results of the first surveying effort with the consultores comunitários, they expressed frustrations about what they often saw as a lack of interest or will of residents to play a role in community change. While many residents responded with a number of things they would like to see, in the direct follow-up question about individual action, they often did not describe ways that they could contribute to bringing about the changes identified. Through a reflective space and initial analysis led by the PalmasLab team, the consultores began to channel this frustration into ideas for taking action to catalyze increased community engagement. These included a range of suggestions that largely fell into the two categories described in the previous chapter: get closer (reach people in their homes, provide a space for people to be listened to), and inform (disseminate information about what Instituto Banco Palmas offers the community, teach community history in local schools, assist people in informing themselves about their rights).

Tangible evidence of change has already resulted from the PAR process—the creation of a new framework that represents an evolution of production and consumption mapping. The creation and use of this framework has already served to open up new created spaces within the organization through which future possibilities and trajectories of action are being imagined and engaged. Evidence of this can be found in the ideas articulated by the PalmasLab team during the reflection that closed our PAR process (end of chapter four), and by the analysis and planning for action undertaken by the consultores at the end of survey implementation (end of chapter five). In the following section, I draw upon the concept of “projective agency,” and the theoretical perspectives of Dewey, and Freire, to argue that the imaginative engagement of new possibilities through these spaces has resulted in intangible outcomes that are no less significant in laying the groundwork for future organizational and community change.

**Projectivity as a Democratic Capacity**

The concept of agency has been defined and debated within a range of academic disciplines and theoretical traditions, and has been variously associated with terms including intentionality, will, choice, or initiative (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 962). Anne Mische and Mustafa Emirbayer argue

---

112 Throughout this chapter I use the terms “projective agency” and “projectivity” interchangeably, as does Mische (2009)
that historical conceptualizations of agency in the sociological tradition (largely within the rational-choice and structural-voluntarist camps), have failed to capture the concept in its full complexity (1998). Pushing back against these traditions, they argue for the re-conceptualization of agency as a “process of social engagement informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented towards the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 963). By disaggregating agency into temporal dimensions, it is possible to separate social action from structural context. This allows for a clearer understanding of how structural environments are “both dynamically sustained by and also altered through human agency—by actors capable of formulating projects for the future and realizing them, even if only in small part, and with unforeseen outcomes, in the present” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 964).

The authors classify the future-oriented dimension of agency as “projective agency” or “projectivity.” They define it as encompassing “the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears and desires for the future” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971). The authors point to “hypothesization of experience” as the core of projective agency, where actors reflectively distance themselves from undesirable present situations to constructively articulate alternative responses (1998, 984). This construction process “involves a first step toward reflectivity, as the response of a desirous imagination to problems that cannot satisfactorily be resolved by the taken-for-granted habits of thought and action that characterize the background structure of the social world” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 984).

The concept is derived in part from the perspectives of pragmatist philosophers such as John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. Specifically, the authors draw on Mead’s insights about the capacity for “imaginative distancing” (hypothesizing) as a key factor in the development of a “reflective intelligence, that is, the capacity of actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971). Similarly, they cite Dewey’s belief that the ability to articulate alternative futures based on reflective engagement with present, lived experience is central to democratic participation (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 988). Mische and Emirbayer emphasize how these pragmatist perspectives show “what projects are good for—that is, 113 My aim in this analysis is not to engage the concept of projective agency in its full theoretical conception. In its full conceptualization, the authors describe projective agency as having an internal structure characterized by three dominant tones (narrative construction, symbolic recomposition, and hypothetical resolution) and two temporal secondary tones: (identification and experimentation). My analysis does not employ this full theoretical framework, but rather draws from the authors’ overall description of the concept as involving “hypothesization of experience” and the “imaginative engagement of the future.”

86
how projective capacity is essential to problem solving within a community” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 988).

It is for this purpose that I employ the concept of projective agency in the analysis below. Specifically, I argue that projectivity—understood as the ability to “read the future in present ongoings” is a democratic capacity that is at the heart of social change processes. At its essence, projectivity is a reflective ability to see the present as a “context susceptible to change” in a way that shapes problem solving in the present, and enables aspirations for the future to develop. Furthermore, I argue that projectivity is not a capacity that can be transferred from “capacity-builder” to “recipient.” Instead, it is strengthened in dialogue and inquiry with others.

In the following section, I expand the concept of individual projective agency to the collective, training the development of a collective projectivity at PalmasLab through four “windows” that I feel reflect our unique experience: building from a foundation of shared identity, hypothesizing experience, imaginative engagement of the future and multiplying outcomes. In choosing these four windows to highlight, I do not aim to suggest that these are mutually exclusive or linear. Rather, I believe that each of these “windows” reflect mutually reinforcing, dynamic and ongoing processes. I provide a brief explanation for my modification and expansion of Emirbayer and Mische’s description of projectivity below:

1) **Building from a foundation of shared identity:** By describing agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, Emirbayer and Mische do not discount the role of the past in shaping projectivity. In their conceptualization, each dimension of agency (past, present and future) involves some level of orientation towards the other temporalities. However, in their discussion of projectivity, the role of the past is largely described in terms of habits that individuals break out of. In contrast, in our process I argue that it is critical to also highlight the role of the past as an enabler. As the team has discussed through the research process, collective identity rooted in knowledge of, and identification with community struggle is hugely empowering for residents of Conjunto Palmeiras. As a result, I begin my discussion of projectivity at PalmasLab with a description of the collective identity that the process took shape from.

---

114 Dewey apud Mische 2009, 697
115 This saying references Appadurai’s (2006) argument described in the introduction of this thesis.
2) **Hypothesizing experience:** This section describes how through the PAR process, the PalmasLab team was able to reflectively distance themselves in a way that facilitated innovation and creation of the new framework. I demonstrate that the hypothesization process in our case closely mirrors the description provided by Emirbayer and Mische, and that it was enabled by both physical and exploratory factors. Furthermore, I argue that the hypothesization process was enhanced by the strong critical perspective that the PalmasLab team brought to the experience.

3) **Imaginative engagement of the future:** The authors' conception of projectivity described previously does not separate “hypothesization” and “imaginative engagement of the future” as two distinct, consecutive processes. Indeed, at the essence of problem-solving in the present is the motivation to give direction to a new future. However, I highlight a separate “window” for imaginative engagement of the future here, because in the reflective space after our PAR process in summer of 2015, and in my individual reflections with the team in January of 2016, specific aspirations were engaged that merit separate mention. In fact, the difference between the kind of future-oriented thinking that took place within the PAR process as we built the framework, and that which took place within the reflective space afterwards, in a way mirrors the team’s ideas about the difference between desire (concrete, shorter-term) and aspiration (longer-term, more imaginative). Specifically, in the reflective spaces, I felt that the team was starting to think beyond the research, to larger projects that they wanted to put into motion from within PalmasLab.

4) **Multiplying outcomes:** Finally, through their protagonism in the process, I argue that the team was able to uniquely re-situate themselves within community history and identify more closely with the collective identity from which the process took shape. My aim in adding this last window is to highlight the ongoing leadership development that is taking place at PalmasLab.

In summary, the process at PalmasLab took shape from a strong, sense of collective identity, which participants were simultaneously enabled by, and able to step back from, to innovate upon the organizational status quo (production and consumption mapping). Subsequently, they acted as multipliers, catalyzing a similar process of “hypothesization” with the consultores, developing leadership capacity in the process.
Exercising and Strengthening Collective Projectivity through Inquiry

Building from a foundation: Shared identity

Erberson: What I think is interesting, sometimes I am alone in the house thinking or at Palmas, and I start looking around at PalmasLab: Mateus, Heitor, Luiz, me, Mateus, 20 years old. Heitor, 17, Luiz, 20. Me, 19. And we are able to do such immense things that sometimes I just think, “damn.” I don’t know how we ended up doing this. But our knowledge goes beyond that which usually is understood. That, you know, I think that’s why Asier said he did not want to lose anyone from PalmasLab we have now because he really trusts that we are capable, and we go even further than that. So sometimes I wonder, you know, ‘man, how did we imagine that?’ Because as we speak, the things we talk about are points outside the curve (outliers), right, they are unique things that we discuss.

And about that, too, in the beginning when we got into the course, Asier always asked us to think of new possibilities, and we thought it was a saco pra carabanda (super annoying). When Asier wanted to do an activity we joked around saying, ‘well I guess we are going to have to change the world now.’ Only now I understand where he was going with it, you know. That really helped us in the construction of this framework, the creation of wisdom and knowledge, it helped us to think of things that are almost kind of impossible, but that we go and we do.

Luiz: I think the beginning of all of that is friendship.

Erberson: Yeah I think the question of friendship helps a lot. As we always say here, PalmasLab is a family.116

Paulo Freire says “without a sense of identity, there can be no real struggle.” (Freire 1985, 186). From its genesis, a strong sense of shared identity has motivated residents of Conjunto Palmeiras to resist, innovate and act in the interest of the community. As a product of collective struggle that spanned decades, Instituto Banco Palmas is consistently described as an access point to community history and identity, and as a catalyst for personal empowerment. Through different projects, activities and especially through the consultores comunitários course that has been offered over the years, new generations in Conjunto Palmeiras have been exposed to community history, solidarity economy principles, and opportunities for personal growth. In the process, the organization has cultivated a new generation of leadership in individuals such as Katiana Oliveira (community organizer), Jaqueline Dutra (financial manager), Elias Lino (public school teacher, director of trainings and E-dinheiro specialist), Enio Marques (local dance troop leader) among others.

---

116 PalmasLab team reflection, August 2015
For the PalmasLab team, the mentorship of Elias in particular has been critical for their personal and professional development. Elias brought Erberson (his cousin), and Luiz to the organization to participate in consultores comunitários, which ultimately led to their involvement with PalmasLab. Elias himself started out as a student of the consultores course and subsequently went on to teach the course after completing a degree in philosophy. When asked about what had contributed the most to his personal development, Elias answered the following:

Without a doubt this here [referring to the organization]; in school we aren't taught this, or it's more theory-based, here it's practice. All of the processes I participated in here—meetings, getting involved, disagreeing, growing politically and giving talks, assuming the responsibility of the consultores and teaching them, that was tremendous, (the first five minutes with butterflies in my stomach but then I got going). It was so much more here than in the university.117

Elias believes that involvement with the organization is currently shaping the PalmasLab team members' trajectories as well. As he explained: "they want this, they went through a selective process and that changes your aspirations."118 Like the generations before them, this process has strengthened the team's identification with community struggle and sense of pride in place. As Erberson explained:

[Here] I am working to help the development of the community where I live, and the first moment that I got to know PalmasLab, I identified with that story of the community and it's something that is mine. If people talk bad about it, it hurts me. So I just want all of the knowledge possible to defend this community.119

Within PalmasLab, the leadership of Asier has also played a critical role in shaping the team's professional and personal formation. When asked what they like most about working at PalmasLab, the relationships they have formed are the first thing cited by Luana, Mateus, Luiz and Erberson followed by the flexible and informal environment.120 From my observations of the team's interactions, I feel that Asier strikes an unusual balance in treating the team members as partners in the lab, while also remaining attentive to their personal development. He consistently checks in about family life and plays an active role, along with Elias, in supporting all of the team members in enrolling in college and professional programs. As Luiz explained, "It's not the typical relationship between boss and employee, it's friendship too. We help each other with our problems, we support each other."121 In my observations and interactions at PalmasLab, it was clear that friendship,

117 Personal interview with Elias, January 25, 2016
118 Personal interview with Elias, January 25, 2016
119 Personal interview with Erberson, January 27, 2016
120 Personal interviews with Erberson, Luana, Mateus and Luiz (January 2016)
121 Personal interview with Luiz, January 18, 2016
mentorship, and a shared identification with, and commitment to place, formed the basis for a collective identity among the team.

Finally, in addition to providing a sense of belonging and empowerment, this collective identity has also contributed to the development of the critical perspective that the team brought to the process. Freire describes conscientização as being enabled by an awareness of individual identity and history, explaining, “the achievements of the past provide the only means at command for understanding the present” (Freire apud Abdi 2001, 191). In this sense, the past also acted as an enabler in that it prepared the PalmasLab team with “critical tools” that they applied to the hypothesization process.

**Hypothesization of experience**

While Instituto Banco Palmas has historically served as a catalyst in driving individual and community change processes, when we began our collaboration with PalmasLab in summer of 2015, the organization was going through a particularly difficult moment. It was clear, for reasons outlined in chapter three, that the bank was no longer responsive to the community in the way that it had been in the past. Accounts of the initial period of organizational history describe the bank as existing in a symbiotic relationship with the community—as Conjunto Palmeiras changed, the bank evolved with it, remaining responsive to community needs. National political and social trends, the break with ASMOCONP, the changing nature of the bank’s relationship to the state and community growth, all contributed to a steady decrease in local dialogue and contact that transformed this previous dynamic.

Within this context the bank was largely operating in an insular, reactionary way. As described previously by Asier, organizational decision-making had become increasingly “emergency-based” and was being carried out in closed spaces by management staff who were no longer active in community life the way they had been in the past. In addition, elements of the organization’s work that involved community dialogue and pedagogy (such as FECOL and educational workshops around the social currency) had ceased as resource constraints and obligations to SENAES, among other things, caused the organization to prioritize other areas.

---

122 Personal interview with Joaquim, January 23, 2016
123 Personal interview with Asier, January 24, 2016
124 Some of these “obligations” cited in interviews included spreading the community bank model and bureaucratic reporting procedures
This has caused a tension in organizational practice at Instituto Banco Palmas characteristic of many community-based organizations under pressure to perform multiple roles and negotiate new institutional arrangements. Margaret Ledwith argues that this tension emphasizes “doing at the expense of thinking; and action without critical reflection” (1997, 24). In this context, community-based organizations like Instituto Banco Palmas become vulnerable to a professionalization process that distances them from their stronghold—the populations they serve. In the process, the transformative potential of community action is diluted through an emphasis on managerialism and increased bureaucracy (Ledwith 1997, 24).

However, as Joaquim emphasized in my interviews with him, even if local dialogue has decreased, one of Instituto Banco Palmas’ biggest organizational strengths is that almost all of the staff are from the community themselves. Indeed, it was the ability of the PalmasLab team to bring their perspectives both as Instituto Banco Palmas staff and as community residents, that they were able to collectively identify and define a problem—the existing community diagnostic was not capturing the local reality anymore. As I have argued in previous chapters, this problem-definition emerged from a common concern grounded in a collective identity, resulting in a “co-created space.” Within this space, the team embarked on a process of problem-solving using their experiences, situated knowledge and critical perspectives as tools in the construction of a new framework.

As described in the previous section, Emirbayer and Mische describe projectivity as resulting from the ability of individuals to respond to the problems of the present by removing themselves from it in a way that allows the exploration of alternatives (hypothesization). The authors state, “as they respond to the challenges and uncertainties of social life, actors are capable of distancing themselves (at least in partial, exploratory ways), from the schemas, habits, and traditions that constrain social identities and institutions” enabling them to “reconstruct and innovate upon those traditions in accordance with evolving desires and purposes” (1998, 984). The “distance” that enabled the construction of the new framework at PalmasLab was constituted by both physical and exploratory factors.

First, as described in our reflections in chapter four, the PAR process physically distanced the PalmasLab team from the pressures and hectic nature of day-to-day work at the organization in a literal sense, through a series of sessions where we stopped everything, came together and engaged in dialogue with each other. Second, the nature of these discursive spaces, particularly the first two

---

125 Personal interview with Joaquim, January 23, 2016
sessions described in chapter four, provided exploratory distance to deconstruct the old method, and to begin to collectively build something new. Specifically, during these free-flowing discursive sessions the team was able to debate, discuss and question the changing context of the community and the role of the organization within it. As Erberson explained:

As we were inside of the process we saw that from one thing diverse ideas emerged, and this opened up even more possibilities. Today you take a topic that in the past they had more or less a systematic idea of and you are able to deconstruct this idea into various possibilities, various things that we can do with that, you know?126

The re-construction process that followed centered firmly on the team’s lived experiences as residents of Conjunto Palmeiras. The teams’ theorizing about the dynamics of the community’s “ecosystem,” was entirely grounded in an intimate knowledge of, and appreciation for place. This is consistent with the PAR approach that “researching with people means that exploration is based directly on their understanding of their own actions and experience rather than filtered through an outsider’s perspective” (Reason and Bradbury 2008, 9). Luiz explained the focus on lived experience in the following way:

An important element for the construction of what we are doing was the informality. We conversed as if it weren’t just work that we had to do, but rather we had a conversation about our own realities. We understand the problems, we named them, as no one else could have in my opinion. Because we live here, we know, we know the reality and we worked with things you wouldn’t have imagined.127

However, this focus on local conditions did not preclude an examination of the structural forces that shape them. Rather, the team examined their reality through a critical lens, mirroring Freire’s description of “naming the world” (Freire, 1970). As Freire explains, “provided the proper tools for such encounter, he can gradually perceive his personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his own perception of that reality and deal critically with it” (Freire 1970, 32). As I have argued previously, the team was already in the process of developing the “proper tools” for naming these contradictions at the start. As a result, they took a protagonist role in mutual “problem-posing” and engaging questions such as: What does poverty mean to us? What does it take for people to valorize their wealths? How can wealths also be poverties? How does public policy affect these? Who is affected most? What do people want? What does it take for them to act? As they discussed, the team proposed and engaged various hypotheses, the resolution of which is a dynamic, ongoing endeavor.

---

126 PalmasLab team reflection, August 13, 2015
127 PalmasLab team reflection, August 13, 2015
Finally, I felt that Alison and my positionality as outsiders played a role in facilitating this “exploratory distance” within the organization. Greenwood and Levin cite two major roles of the “friendly outsider” in PAR processes as “making evident the tacit knowledge that guides local conduct” and “speaking the locally unspeakable” (2007, 125). The authors are referring to the ability of outsiders to point out strengths and abilities that local groups may not readily recognize, and at the same time, to raise tensions that social groups may not feel comfortable discussing because of custom, relationships or shared history (2007, 125).

At its essence, the team’s problem definition was a critique of the organizations’ inability to keep up with changing trends in the neighborhood. The combination of an inquiry-based process, facilitated by two outsiders with no personal stake in Instituto Banco Palmas, may have allowed the team to distance themselves from the constraints of the organization in a way that facilitated critical reflection. In turn, through the space provided by the process, their critique was able to take shape and be amplified in a way that it might not have otherwise. Thus, Alison and I did not “speak the locally unspeakable” ourselves, but rather we created an atmosphere and facilitated a process where the team was able to comfortably articulate ideas for improvement within the organization and have these ideas heard by organizational leadership.

The insights about wealths, poverties, desires and aspirations that resulted from the team’s initial discussions were subsequently used as a catalyst in expanding the “hypothesization process” to incorporate other Palmas staff and community representatives. The focus groups both enriched the content of the research, and served a larger organizational function described by Asier below:

The fact of involving other people, whether focus groups with people talking about Palmeiras, inviting other people from the organization beyond the lab—Elias, Nayara, and others—that participated a lot in the process, that was a positive thing. Because one thing that we are missing here at Banco Palmas is that the different areas know each other better, with details about what we are all doing. Not just in events or community courses, but in the day-to-day, right? I think that we opened the door to this, and I think the door will be open for a time.\textsuperscript{128}

\textit{Imaginative engagement of the future}

Through my interviews with the team in January, I began to see consistency with the ideas that had been discussed in our initial reflection session in August of 2015 (highlighted in chapter four); clear themes had emerged in the way that Mateus, Luiz and Erberson spoke about their

\textsuperscript{128} PalmasLab team reflection, August 13, 2015
aspirations for the future of the project. They complimented these with mention of personal goals that they considered would enable them to contribute to the larger efforts of PalmasLab.

For Luiz, changing mindsets became one of his strongest aspirations with the research. In my conversations with him throughout the process, he often expressed frustration about toxic stereotypes and attitudes, specifically around violence, that inhibit collective action and perpetuate a vicious cycle. He would get frustrated talking about how people he knew, both peers and adults, were seemingly unwilling to look beyond the surface of social problems to see the root of the issues. In his earlier reflection, he mentioned using the research as a way of allowing people to perceive things more clearly in the community, (as he put it, “make people recognize their wealths and povertys”), and as a result, to be empowered to fight to resolve their problems. Similarly, in this reflection he emphasizes the importance of the research in facilitating a collective reflection on the source of problems, as critical for provoking change:

I don’t know if it [the research] is able to change people in this way, people have their own ideas. But at least maybe it will show them that it’s wrong, that there is a reason why this is happening, that it is not just that every adolescent that robs isn’t worth anything, that he has to die, that the police have to beat him, that he has to learn. They aren’t able to see that this is repeating itself a lot, this is a pattern, this is always happening with adolescents in the city, and why? Why is this happening? What is the root of the problem? They want immediate solutions; I do too of course, but solutions that don’t mistreat people. So the solution is kill or round up all of them, it doesn’t matter the age, if he kills someone he has the responsibility to die too. People want these types of solutions, but this doesn’t solve the problem, this is going to continue with more kids falling into the problem and it’s a vicious cycle. You have to get to the root of the problem and change it, but the people don’t get this, I would like for the research to help people understand this.

I want them to understand this: that it isn’t right or left—it’s in front. That we all have the same rights; that you have to help people. That it has to be horizontal, not vertical. It has to be round, not a pyramid.129

For Mateus, a major goal is for the research process to serve as a means for the community to make concrete demands on the state for social wealths. As he explained, “knowing that this research is going to have benefits for the community that won’t just be limited to more jobs or more money, but that we could have other things, more areas for leisure for us to use, more public space.”130 Related to this is Mateus’ concern for youth development in the community. As described previously, his interest in leisure directly stems from his belief that young people in Conjunto Palmeiras need opportunities for spending free time productively. In my interview with him in January, he also expressed his hope that the research process itself would benefit local youth. As he

129 Personal interview with Luiz, January 18, 2016
130 Personal interview with Mateus, January 20, 2016
explained, “I think the best thing that could happen with the consultores would be that through their participation in the research they will want to participate in other things, wanting to do something useful and not just going on living their lives as they were.”

Finally, when I returned to PalmasLab in January, Mateus was making the change from an IT management program to a statistics program at a local university, a decision that he says was influenced by his interest in the community-led research program at PalmasLab. As he explained:

I think that statistics is very cool, very cool. My professor described statistics as an art to predict the future using math and I thought that was awesome. And then I thought about statistics and I thought about research here at PalmasLab. I like working here and automatically I thought if I were to study statistics, we could have a statistician inside the lab, adding to the environment of social research. So that’s my aspiration. To study statistics and continue at PalmasLab.

In my interview with Erberson, he re-articulated his interest in using knowledge produced from the research to feed into the solidarity economy movement. Again, he emphasized the importance of articulating new concepts of poverty and wealth from within the solidarity economy as a way to push the argument for alternative economic models further. He also relates this directly to the need to be able to defend the neighborhood, and push back against stereotypes of the periphery:

My curiosity with this research is to finish it and see if everything that we were thinking about wealth and poverty—these consisting of more than just money—is that what the people think? Is that really in people’s minds? Because if so, the people that defend solidarity economy, community research, people that live in the periphery, we should create our own concepts you know... there are intellectuals that defend solidarity economy and I think it would be interesting to go and show the data and say look, why is Conjunto Palmeiras the poorest neighborhood? We don’t want to talk about money, we want to talk about quality of life. If people feel happy here, how is the neighborhood poor? A poor neighborhood is a place where people don’t want to live.

**Multiplying outcomes**

As I have argued previously in this thesis, the tangible result of the initial “hypothesization process,” (the framework/survey) had a multiplier effect when it was applied by the consultores in the community. Specifically, the survey implementation proved to be a catalyst for dialogue between the consultores and community members as described in the previous chapter. In this sense, putting the framework into practice put in motion a new process of “hypothesization.” Through this process

---

131 Personal interview with Mateus, January 20, 2016
132 Personal interview with Mateus, January 20, 2016
133 Personal interview with Erberson, January 27, 2016
the consultores brought rich information, questions, opinions and critical reflections (in the form of challenges to address resident discontent) into dialogue within Instituto Banco Palmas. As I describe in the previous chapter, this process culminated in a new co-created space, where the consultores began to think of specific actions for change.

In this process, the PalmasLab team members themselves acted as multipliers by providing leadership and facilitation with the consultores. Beyond the research project, their increasing leadership capacities are also evident in their increasing collaborations with the local CUCA branch (Urban Center for Culture, Science, Arts and Recreation\textsuperscript{134}). Specifically, when I returned in January, the team was simultaneously working on planning and preparations for Aplicativos Humanos (Human Applications), a project that they had developed to increase awareness about human rights among local youth in the periphery, and to promote solutions-thinking. PalmasLab proposed the project to the local CUCA and won a grant to support implementation, which included workshops with a series of speakers, followed by a session where participants worked together to think of ideas for apps that could be used to promote the defense of human rights in Fortaleza. In March of 2015, the PalmasLab team launched the initiative, which involved many of the same participants from the consultores course. Mateus explained his involvement in these efforts in the following way:

The consultores course, I participate in that and Aplicativos Humanos, I like working with kids my age because I believe that Palmas helped to change my thinking to help other people and I want others to go through that. So everything that involves other people I like a lot, because I like that others have this same sensation that I had in the bank that changed my thinking and I want the same thing for them, so they can go do something with that.\textsuperscript{135}

\textsuperscript{134} Fortaleza has several public CUCA centers in different areas of the city where youth are able to use athletic and cultural facilities and occasionally take classes

\textsuperscript{135} Personal interview with Mateus, January 20, 2016
Through their protagonism in the PAR process and subsequently in taking the lead in taking the consultores through the orientation to the framework and survey implementation, the PalmasLab team has more closely aligned themselves with the organizational and community history. As I shared in chapter five, this is apparent when Luiz and the other team members introduce their framework. The learning process that took place through the research, about the community but also about each other, may have also been a factor that contributed to a stronger identification with the collective identity that enabled their efforts in the beginning. This is apparent in the way that Luiz talks about his experience in the PAR process: “I learned more about the neighborhood, I joined my experiences together with those of community leaders, I learned more about the opinions of the other members of our group here.”

---

116 Source: Aplicativos Humanos Facebook page
117 PalmasLab team reflection, August 13, 2015
Projectivity and Social Change

“I think we are making history now too, it would be so nice if people in the community today could not just recognize the history that was before, but also recognize the story that we are making now, and join us.” - Luiz

Through their protagonism in the community-led research project described in this thesis, I argue that a collective capacity for projectivity was exercised and has been strengthened at PalmasLab. I believe this has equipped PalmasLab as a group with a heightened ability to be critically reflective, to engage in problem-solving, and in the process, to formulate future projects and work towards the realization of these.

Mische argues that we must take seriously the “projected future as a dynamic force undergirding social change” (2009, 694). While she notes that clearly the act of projecting in itself does not guarantee that the imagined future will come to pass, the ability to project, imagine and aspire does have an influence on action (Mische 2009, 699). Mische cites the argument that “beliefs and expectations of the future in part determine what happens in the present by contributing to how people think, feel and behave” (Zimbardo and Boyd apud Mische, 699). Indeed, the belief that what individuals want for the future shapes actions in the present, is part of the team’s own justification for including aspirations in their framework.

Not only does the ability to project have the potential to influence individual and collective action, projection represents a bold action in itself. Projection is the first step to pushing back against what Freire describes as the “discourse of impossibility,” or the dominant societal narrative about the inevitability of the “way things are” (Freire et al. 2007, 84). For the PalmasLab team to denounce the realities of inequality and injustice as subject to change by “announcing” something different is a form of intervention in reality, and a critical first step to transforming it (Freire et al. 2007, xxv). Freire argues that the very act of articulating possibilities for change, or a “possibility discourse,” disproves the notion that the status quo is a given (2007, 85). As he explains, “just making the possibility discourse is already proof of impossibility” (2007, 85).

Building both from the theoretical literature and the team’s own emergent theory about aspiration and change, I argue that the act of projecting must be taken seriously as a democratic exercise—one with transformative potential. Here it is important to distinguish again between short-term, concrete desires and longer-term aspirational projects. While both are important for creating

138 PalmasLab team reflection, August 13, 2015
conditions for change, it is the ability to pursue the latter that has inherent democratic potential. Projectivity, as the ability to reject circumstances as immutable to transformation and to imagine something new for the future, is distinct from the pursuit of immediate goals, desires or needs. This distinction is critically important for identifying the limits of “experts” in affecting change. While outsiders might be able to provide material gains to communities like Conjunto Palmeiras, and even train others in the use or management of these, only the residents themselves can define the kind of future that they want to see. Thus projectivity is not a capacity that can be transferred from “capacity-builder” to “recipient.” As Freire explains, “it is impossible for me, as an educator, to build up the yearnings of other men and women. That task is theirs, not mine. In what way can we find alternatives that provide a favorable context for that to happen?” (Freire et al. 2007, 5).

Too often the focus of participatory processes have centered on consultation, or “capacity and knowledge transfer,” as opposed to creating the context for engaging in dialogue and inquiry about problems and the structural issues that cause them. Also, the contributions of marginalized communities in these conventional processes are often seen as solely practical and pragmatic, while longer-term planning for social change remains the purview of “experts” and those in positions of power. However, as Freire argues, “the discussion around the dream or project of the society for which we struggle is not a privilege of the dominant elites or of progressive political leaderships. On the contrary, participating in the debates on a project for a different world is a right of the popular classes, who must not be simply ‘guided’ or pushed toward a dream by their leadership.” (Freire 2004, 36). In exercising projective agency as a collective, the PalmasLab team moved from claiming their right to define the problem, to claiming their right to define the project. Through their efforts in creating the context for others to do the same, they are embarking on a truly democratic exercise, although one that is not easily defined in terms of tangible outcomes.

Here I have argued that the PalmasLab team’s collective projectivity itself provides evidence of change, however, this is not to minimize the difficulty in bringing desired changes and aspirations to fruition. Freire states that, “dreams are visions for which one fights. Their realization cannot take place easily, without obstacles. It implies, on the contrary, advances, reversals, and at times, lengthy marches. It implies struggle” (Freire 2004, 43). The projects articulated by the PalmasLab team—changing mindsets, making demands on the state for improvements, pushing back on dominant narratives and conceptualizations of the economy—are enormously ambitious. However, although it may be difficult, and take time for team’s desired changes to come to pass, Mateus reminds us that
“it doesn’t cost us a thing to think that it can.” As Luiz emphasized, “It’s not going to happen from today to tomorrow, but I think that the project that we are doing, it is more or less on this path. I think that PalmasLab is this path.”
CHAPTER 7: THE RIGHT TO RESEARCH REVISITED

"Why are we poor? Conjunto Palmeiras became a well-known neighborhood, because it dared to ask that question. It was the guiding question of the first production and consumption mapping, which showed that only 20% of resident income circulated within the community; but many of you already know this story.

In January (2016) we launched a new mapping of wealths, poverties, desires and aspirations of the neighborhood. It comes from the collective need for the presentation of the potential and challenges of the periphery—different from the reality presented by media and conventional academy. It is a map that seeks to generate space to think of actions where the community is the protagonist.

This research was conducted in partnership with MIT's CoLab (USA), using a data collection application developed in PalmasLab with tablets donated by Citinova Foundation (municipality of Fortaleza). Thirty-five young people from Conjunto Palmeiras that are completing the consultores comunidade course offered by Instituto Banco Palmas, completed over 230 interviews in two weeks, and in March they will complete over 200 interviews to finish.

Today more than ever we need this kind of research, given yesterday's Diário do Nordeste, based on SDE research using IBGE 2010. The research shows that 72.49% of the working age population in Conjunto Palmeiras are illiterate or did not complete elementary school and only 0.60% have obtained higher education. This information presents an incomplete reality of the neighborhood, which demoralizes the local population and does not contribute to finding solutions.

If we are poor, we are poor together because 'nobody overcomes poverty alone.' The difference is that we are proposing a process to create solutions from the collective experience of the neighborhood and its ability to be the engine of innovation itself.”

– Statement released on PalmasLab social media platforms in reaction to a study by Diário do Nordeste, February 2016

The Right to Research as the Right to Imagination

"As beings programmed for learning and who need tomorrow as fish need water, men and women become robbed beings if they are denied their condition of participants in the production of tomorrow.” – Paulo Freire

In February of 2016, The Diário do Nordeste (Northeastern Journal) released an article about inequality in Fortaleza (quoted at the start of this thesis). The article highlighted a recent study that revealed Conjunto Palmeiras has the lowest share of residents with a higher education of all of the neighborhoods in the city, a factor “that is reflected in the social conditions of the neighborhood.”

In response, PalmasLab released the statement above on their social media platforms, accompanied by pictures of the consultores working on survey implementation.

---

141 Freire et al. 2007, 25 (emphasis added by author)
142 Diário do Nordeste is the major news outlet for Brazil’s Northeastern region
PalmasLab does not contest the fact that inequality in Fortaleza exists, and that it has pervasive impacts in the lives of city residents. Nor do they believe that peripheral communities such as Conjunto Palmeiras should be solely responsible for solving the problems they face as a result of this inequality. What Mateus, Erberson, Luiz, Asier, Alberto, Heitor and Luana reject is the idea that outside "experts" should be the ones to define these problems. By creating their own framework—their own theory about the place they live—the team asserted their right to research, and led other community members in doing the same. In the process, they engaged in critical reflection about supposedly "universal truths," such as: if incomes are low the community is poor; if the crime rate is rising the community is violent; if educational attainment is lagging the community is ignorant; and if all of this is true the community must be underdeveloped.

Rather, by engaging in a systematic process of inquiry and dialogue that began with the PalmasLab team and expanded to include increasing numbers of community residents, new truths about Conjunto Palmeiras were brought to light. These truths (having wealth is more than having money, violence must be understood as a series of interrelated factors, shared identity can be a catalyst for community action, aspirational thinking has a role in bringing about future change, among others) are not static, imposing or final. Rather, through each stage of the research process these truths evolved, and served to provoke further discussion and debate. In this discursive process of hypothesization and re-hypothesization, new trajectories for action were engaged—including short-term goals and longer-term aspirational thinking for the future.

I argue that this "hypothesization process" is not an "alternative" way of producing knowledge. It is not a technique for using in "youth development" programs that imbue young people with a sense of citizenship. Instead, I argue that "hypothesization," understood simply as the process of collectively engaging in social inquiry about reality, should be seen as central to democratic participation in society. In this sense I agree with Appadurai's argument that the "right to research, as a human right, is not a metaphor" (2006, 177). Instead, "it is an argument for how we might revive an old idea, namely, that taking part in democratic society requires one to be informed. One can hardly be informed unless one has some ability to conduct research, however humble the question or however quotidian its inspiration" (Appadurai 2006, 177).

As this thesis has shown, the right to research is not just critical for allowing individuals to increase their stock of knowledge, but also for increasing the reflective capacity (referred to here as projectivity) to break out of, or think beyond the constraints, stereotypes, habits, presuppositions labels and challenges of the present to imagine something different for the future. While projectivity
is not a capacity that can be transferred from "capacity-builder" to recipient, the process of strengthening projectivity through inquiry can be enabled by a set of tools. Appadurai refers to these as specific techniques, such as documentation, that enable the systematic generation of knowledge in relation to a concrete goal (2006). Dewey and Freire discuss communication, reflection and action in the world as tools in themselves; Freire adds an emphasis on critical consciousness. All of these tools contributed to the strengthening of a collective projectivity at PalmasLab.

Appadurai says that "without systematic tools for gaining relevant new knowledge, aspiration degenerates" (2006, 176). The right to research then, can be perhaps more accurately described as the right to imagination. The right to imagination should not be understood as simply having intrinsic value; for marginalized groups who have been denied their right to contribute their own visions to societal change, dreaming about and imagining the future is a "necessary political act" (Freire et al. 2007, vii). As I have argued in this thesis, aspiring to, or imagining something new for the future is a starting point for social change, and a necessary democratic exercise. Without it, as Freire says, we lose "tomorrow as a possible project" (Freire apud Ghosh et al. 2004, 179).

Reconceiving Expertise

The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a 'circle of certainty' within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary, the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side.144 – Paulo Freire

The perspectives highlighted in the second chapter of this thesis point to the ways in which the imposition of "expertise" (variously referred to as scientific-rationality, development discourse, technical knowledge etc.), has suppressed dialogue, resistance and the articulation of alternative visions for social change. As authors such as Escobar (1995) and de Sousa Santos (2007) have argued, “expertise” as a monopolizing epistemology is constituted by various, supposedly universal theories about what constitutes progress, development, and the economy, among other things. In response to these critiques, it is easy to forget about the role of epistemology altogether in search of pragmatic alternatives that increase local dialogue and facilitate the involvement of marginalized

144 Freire 1970, 39
groups in problem-solving or decision-making processes. Participation was incorporated into mainstream practice in a range of fields that purportedly aimed to do just that. However, as the critical perspectives in this thesis highlight, participatory processes and their claims to “build capacity” and “empower” have often, whether naively or deliberatively, further entrenched the power imbalances that supposedly make participation necessary in the first place.

What has not changed as the “expert” has moved from “reformer” to “capacity-builder” is the Western epistemological paradigm that forms the foundation for practice. De Sousa Santos argues that without global “cognitive justice” there can be no social or economic justice (2007). To achieve “cognitive justice” (the de-colonization of knowledge and power), de Sousa Santos argues that Western knowledge must be situated as just one of many particular, hybrid forms of knowing existing within a non-hierarchical “ecology of knowledges” (2007, xlv). For this to occur, not only are new discursive frameworks and approaches to practice needed, but the very conceptualization of what constitutes “expert” and “local” knowledge must be challenged.

The following section first addresses how PAR has the potential to contribute to a new culture of practice within fields such as international development and planning where problem and project definition has historically been the purview of “experts.” The second part of this section turns to the question of theory. Specifically, I argue that situated, or “local” knowledge should not be understood as solely pragmatic, practical or particular—existing in opposition to theory. Rather, theory derived from local contexts should be understood as having potential as a tool for social change that can have practical and intellectual applications across contexts and scales.

**Circulation of expertise: PAR as an approach to practice**

In terms of operational definition, participatory action research as practice is tenuous. As the first chapter of this thesis highlights, PAR can take a variety of different forms, can employ a range of methods, and can involve varying levels of involvement from different groups throughout the process. Accounts of PAR processes range widely from those that center on the development of a critical consciousness (Freire’s conscientização) among participants, that involve producing data to combat and contest a specific policy or program, or that involve outsiders and community groups working together to address scientific or environmental issues that affect communities. In this sense, the role of the “outsider” can range from providing pedagogy, facilitation, training in methods for data collection or analysis, or technical support, among other things.
Proponents of PAR do not reject technical knowledge. Indeed, sometimes communities face problems that are at least in part technical, such as the contamination of brownfields, the depletion of natural resources, or deteriorating health outcomes from increasing pollution. Environmental issues in particular are likely to only increase with the onslaught of climate change, which has already shown to have disproportionate effects on historically marginalized and low-income communities. In this context, technical knowledge itself is not the problem; the issue lies in the way that problems are framed by outsiders as purely technical in a way that excludes the equally important role of situated knowledge, derived from lived experience, in addressing these problems.

In addition, the complexity and scope of issues facing communities and the information at their disposal (or not) is changing with globalization. As Appadurai highlights, globalization has made information at once more (in terms of volume and digital access), and less (in terms of the difficulty of differentiating fact from fiction), accessible than ever before (2006, 176). In this context, the ability to strategically make sense of and engage in dialogue about local conditions and the way they are shaped by external forces is critical for taking informed action at any level (individual, community etc.).

In light of all of the above, planners and development practitioners have much to contribute in providing communities support with identifying and addressing the issues that affect their lives. Indeed, the issues faced by marginalized communities do not exist in isolation—they implicate and affect society as a whole. To work towards true “progress” that benefits all levels of society, it is critical to adopt a form of practice that democratizes the process of defining what progress should look like.

To this end the participatory model (that involves inviting communities to discuss problems that have already been defined by outsiders), must be exchanged for a model of co-production that facilitates the circulation of expertise through mutual inquiry and problem solving. I argue that PAR, as a political stance about who has the right to produce credible knowledge, and as an approach that joins together inquiry, reflection and action, has the potential to form the foundation for this new model. In other words, understanding PAR as an “alternative” approach to social science research and knowledge production is limiting. PAR values and key principles should be at the center of planning and development culture of practice, not the margins.

A PAR approach to practice would not necessarily always involve facilitating a research process the way that Alison and I did with PalmasLab. Questions of scale, time and resource constraints and community priorities would not always make a traditional PAR process feasible or
even desirable. However, what I am arguing for here is an approach to practice that is founded on PAR principles and values—specifically a commitment to “create the context” described in the previous chapter, both for concrete problem-solving and for the development of aspirational projects that only communities can determine for themselves. As a PAR approach would not involve imposing a pre-constructed model or framework, determining how to create this context in any given situation inevitably would involve a high degree of flexibility, adaptability and perception on the part of practitioners. It would also require acknowledging that fields that seek to affect social change are political by nature, and learning how to reflectively approach practice accordingly.

“Expert” as political

As John Forrester tells us, “to be rational, be political” (1989, 15). Against the traditional notion that planners are neutral actors John Forester argues, “clearly, planning analysts do much more than ‘process-feedback’ to decision-makers. As they formulate problems, analysts preempt decision makers; they define and select the feedback as well as process it... Planning analysts are more than navigators who keep their ships on course: They are necessarily involved with formulating that course” (1989, 16).

While Forrester was writing against the techno-rational tradition of planning at the end of the 1980’s, I argue that practitioners (in a range of fields beyond planning as well), need to be reminded of his message today. Understanding the role of “expert as political” involves reflecting critically on power and accepting that the production of knowledge, the definition of problems, the visualization of data, the creation of maps, the structuring of discursive spaces and a range of other practices are never neutral acts. A concrete example of this that I have pointed to previously in this thesis, is the way that methods such as asset-mapping can limit community groups in constructing their own tools for problem-solving within or making sense of the places they live. A PAR approach involves not only explicitly acknowledging the political nature of practice, but also unapologetically taking a side by allying with communities in combating injustice and affecting positive change, based on demands and issues identified by them.

Based on my own experience, I believe that for practitioners involved in this process, it is necessary to develop a specific set of skills and a critical, reflective capacity for remaining responsive to the inevitably political nature of the work. For me, as a student of an institution that for many (both within and outside of it), is emblematic of “expertise” and power, coming to the realization of my positionality as an entitled political agent has often left me feeling paralyzed. Throughout my two
years at MIT I have been in situations both internationally and domestically where my opinion and knowledge have been privileged over that of local groups by decision-makers in organizations. Conversely, I have been in situations where I have had to work harder to gain the trust of partners or collaborators because of the MIT label that I carry. At times my reaction to being “labeled as the expert” has been to try to take as little credit as possible, fade into the background, or downplay my opinions. In the process of developing my own theory of practice (an endeavor which is, and should always be an ongoing one), I have realized that there are no necessarily “right answers” for negotiating my role in the face of this tension. Rather, I believe that this discomfort is important to acknowledge, reflect on and learn from.

My discussion of reflective and critical capacity in this thesis has mostly been in reference to the PalmasLab team. However, as Freire suggests in the quote that opens this section, the development of a critical consciousness that allows one to “confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled,” is of fundamental importance for those who wish to be allies of historically marginalized groups (1970, 39). For those of us in positions of privilege, it is important to constantly reflect on practice, be critical about power, confront discomfort and listen. In my experience as a student of international development and planning, too often these skills are marginalized and discounted in favor of “hard skills” that are marketable and more easily quantifiable. This kind of pedagogy often produces practitioners that think they know the solutions before actually understanding the problems, perpetuating a cycle that is not only often oppressive, but also unproductive in affecting lasting change. As Freire suggests, to break out of this “circle of certainty” we must first develop the critical ability to recognize the way it confines us in the first place. Only then can we embark on the kind of problem-solving approach that centers on the knowledge of those closest to the problems.

The role of theory in the articulation of alternatives

This thesis opens with two quotes about place and theory. The first is from Rachel de Queiroz, an author from Fortaleza who became famous with the publication of her novel O Quinze (the fifteen, named in reference to the devastating drought that hit the state of Ceará in 1915). The book, which she published at twenty years old, is considered part of the Northeastern cultural legacy in Brazil. In the quote from Queiroz, she encourages us to eschew maps, statistics and “cold guides” and turn to poetry if what we want is a truly vivid picture of place, or terra. The second quote is from Emma Shaw Crane, who reminds us that like poetry, theory is a representation, a narrative. As
theory can never be neutral, she argues instead that it should be “something we construct with others and carry with us to make sense of our worlds.”

As I have consistently emphasized throughout this thesis, the power of “expert knowledge” to de-politicize, shape individual subjectivities, entrench market values, and maintain structural inequalities, among other things, lies in its ability to impose a set of abstracted theories, or “truths” as generalizable and universal. The manipulative impact of “expertise” on society is not a hypothetical argument, nor is it irrelevant to the current context. The research process at PalmasLab revealed very specific incidences of the ways in which statistics and external concepts about the economy and violence shaped the way people think, act and identify. As described in this thesis, the PalmasLab team pushes back on these “truths” by producing their own.

While throughout this thesis I have described the team’s “ecosystem of production and consumption” as a framework, I believe that it can also just as well be understood as a theory that is at once deeply grounded in place, and that could prove to be generalizable and applicable across scales and contexts. In line with de Quieroz and Crane, I argue that theories are nothing more than narratives, and narratives have proven throughout human history to be profoundly effective as tools for making sense of the world and guiding our actions within it. However like narratives, theory cannot be abstracted from the context and history within which they are produced; in fact, often it is context that lends theory its power. This belief is reflected in the concept of “trans-contextual generalizability,” which holds that although no theory may be completely generalizable, universal, or predictive, theory can have explanatory power and broad applicability when accompanied by a reading of the context where it was created (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 70). Accepting the notion of trans-contextual generalizability, over universality allows us to begin to bridge the theory-practice divide and take seriously the role of theory grounded in context as a tool for social change.

The theory produced by PalmasLab has already proven to have local resonance and impact. As the focus groups, and survey process with the consultores demonstrated, the team’s theory served in different moments as a catalyst for dialogue and a guide for action. However, in addition to its potential for practical application at the local scale and across scales, I believe that theories like the one produced by PalmasLab have a critical role to play in the articulation of alternatives to the “truths” (about the economy, development, expertise) that continue to dominate global society and oppress marginalized groups.

As Erberson highlights, it is difficult to make the case for new conceptualizations of what constitutes wealth and poverty, using the vocabulary of the model that we wish to reject. In this
sense, a challenge for protagonists of PAR and community-led research is to think of how new concepts, theories, and “truths” derived from concrete, local settings can be leveraged to inform both intellectual conversations about economic and social alternatives and specific social struggles across scales. PalmasLab is willing to take on the challenge, and I have every confidence that they are up to the task:145

Erberson: People believe that a good gang member is a dead gang member, people’s concepts... they complicate things; they’ve got to expand these concepts. In the same way that we are trying to expand peoples concepts about what constitutes wealth and poverty—that it is something more than having money or not—people also have to expand their conceptualization of the economy as a whole. The economy is a series of things: political alliances, etc. We have to expand people’s thinking on this.

Jenna: Do you believe you have the capacity to do it?

Erberson: Completely.

145 Personal interview with Erberson, January 27, 2016
REFERENCES


APPENDIX 1- Survey

GENERAL INFORMATION

1. Sex
   □ Female
   □ Male

2. Age

3. How many years have you lived in the neighborhood?

4. What neighborhood did you live in before?
   □ Always lived in Conjunto Palmeiras
   □ Another neighborhood in Fortaleza
      □ Which neighborhood?
   □ Outside of Fortaleza
      □ Which city?

5. What is your level of education?
   □ Primary school incomplete
   □ Primary school complete
   □ High school incomplete
   □ High school complete
   □ Undergraduate incomplete
   □ Undergraduate complete

6. What is your job?

7. How many people 18 years or older live in your house?

8. How many people 18 years or younger live in your house?

9. How many people in the house work inside the neighborhood?

10. How many people in the house work outside the neighborhood?
    □ Of these, how many go by car?
    □ How many go by bus?

ECONOMIC PROFILE

Technology

11. How many cell phones do you have at home?

12. How many of them are a smartphone?
13. Do you have internet in the house
   □ Yes
   □ What type? (radio, broadband, don’t know)
   □ Is it shared with the neighbor? (Yes, no, don’t know)
   □ No
   □ Don’t know

**Finances and banking profile**

14. What services do you use at Instituto Banco Palmas?
   □ E-dinheiro
   □ Banking correspondent
   □ Social currency
   □ Productive credit
   □ Financial education
   □ Other trainings
   □ Fairs
   □ Nothing

15. Do you have a bank account?
   □ Yes
     □ Banco Palmas
     □ Caixa Econômica Federal
     □ Banco do Brasil
     □ Bradesco
     □ Santander
     □ Itaú
     □ Citibank
     □ Other
   □ No

16. Do you have savings?
   □ Yes
   □ No

**Assets and income**

17. Your home is:
   □ Owned
   □ Rented

18. What is the monthly income of your household?
   □ Up to 1 minimum salary
   □ Up to 2 minimum salaries
19. What is your family’s primary source of income?
   □ Informal work
   □ Formal work (carteira assinada)
   □ Civil Servant
   □ Autonomous
   □ Retired
   □ Government benefits
     □ Which: ____________________

20. Does anyone from your family receive *bolsa familiar*?
   □ Yes
   □ No

EXPERIENCES

Personal experiences

21. Do you utilize public spaces in conjunto palmeiras?
   □ Yes. For what? ____________________
   □ No. Why not? ____________________

22. Have you missed school or work in last month?
   □ Yes
   □ Why?
     □ Health
     □ Family problems
     □ Violence
     □ Economic problems (bus fare, etc.)
     □ Other
   □ No
   □ Does not apply

23. How would you assess your health generally?
   □ In good health
   □ A few health problems
   □ Not in good health

24. In your last visits to the health post, how satisfied were you with your treatment?
   □ Not at all satisfied
25. If you could improve one thing about the health post, what would it be? [Spontaneous response]
   □ Little satisfied
   □ Satisfied
   □ Very satisfied
   □ Lack of doctors
   □ Making appointments with a doctor
   □ Making appointments for exams
   □ Receiving exam results
   □ Lack of medicine
   □ Wait time
   □ Quality of care
   □ Other

26. How satisfied are you with the quality of education in the neighborhood?
   □ Not at all satisfied
   □ Little satisfied
   □ Satisfied
   □ Very satisfied

27. If you could improve one thing about the education in the neighborhood, what would it be? [Spontaneous response]
   □ More professors
   □ Better instruction
   □ Professors that don’t miss class
   □ Smaller class size
   □ Other

28. If you could improve one thing about the public transport in the neighborhood, what would it be? [Spontaneous response]
   □ Cost of bus fare
   □ More lines
   □ More security
   □ Air conditioning
   □ Other

29. What is the main thing that has contributed to your personal development? [Spontaneous response]
   □ School
   □ University
   □ Local courses/projects
   □ Professional courses
   □ Family
30. Do you feel that you have people you can count on when you need it?
   - Yes
   - Sometimes
   - Rarely
   - No

31. Who do you turn to when you need help?
   - Family
   - Friends
   - Church
   - Local organizations/social projects
   - Government agents (health/social workers)
   - Professors
   - No one
   - Other

32. How do you perceive the economic situation of your household?
   - We can meet our basic needs and more
   - We can meet our basic needs
   - We can meet our basic needs sometimes
   - We cannot meet our basic needs

33. How do you perceive the economic situation of Conjunto Palmeiras in relation to other neighborhoods in the periphery?
   - Better than others
   - The same as others
   - Worse than others

34. How would you evaluate your quality of life?
   - Very good
   - Good
   - Bad
   - Terrible (pessima)

35. Do you feel safe in the neighborhood?
   - Most of the time
   - Sometimes
36. Where do you feel most unsafe?
   □ Bus stop
   □ Public spaces
   □ In the house
   □ In the street
   □ Other

37. Have you or someone in your family been stopped by the police?
   □ Yes
      □ How were you treated? ______
      □ Why do you think you were treated that way? ______
   □ No

38. Does neighborhood policing make you feel more or less safe?
   □ Safer
   □ Less safe

39. Have you been assaulted in the neighborhood?
   □ Yes
      □ Did you report it?
         □ Yes
         □ No
      □ Why not?

Community experiences

40. In your opinion, what is the best way to contribute to the community's development in Conjunto Palmeiras? [Spontaneous response]
   □ Buying locally
   □ Participating in church life
   □ Participating in local organizations
   □ Opening in a business
   □ Being a leaders
   □ Educating other people
   □ Other

41. Are you familiar with the history of the construction of Conjunto Palmeiras?
   □ Yes
   □ No

42. Have you ever participated in initiatives for improving the neighborhood?
   □ Yes.
43. Do you participate in any community activities (cultural, sports, artistic)?
  □ Yes.
  □ No

Needs

44. What are the three principal difficulties that impede your development (crescer na vida)?

   [Spontaneous response]
   □ Lack of employment
   □ Low income
   □ Lack of education
   □ Lack of Family support
   □ Lack of support in the community
   □ Lack of government support
   □ Lack of knowledge (falta de conhecimento)
   □ Health problems
   □ Family problems
   □ Lack of time
   □ Lack of opportunities
   □ Violence

45. What factors do you consider most important for improving your quality of life overall?

   [Spontaneous response]
   □ Employment
   □ Income
   □ Education
   □ Family support
   □ Community support
   □ Government support
   □ Knowledge (maior conhecimento)
   □ Health
   □ Family
   □ Opportunities
   □ Reduction of violence
   □ Religion

DESIREs / AsPIRATIONS

46. What is your greatest desire right now?
47. What are your aspirations?

48. What do you most need to fulfill your aspirations?

49. What do you most like about living in the neighborhood?

50. a. If you could move ONE thing about the neighborhood, what would it be?

b. Does the community have the capacity to contribute to a solution to this problem?
   □ Yes
   □ No

c. What would you personally do to contribute to a solution to this problem?
APPENDIX 2- Instituto Banco Palmas Org Chart

Created by Asier Ansorena, org chart missing Elias Lino who left the bank to pursue a doctoral degree in philosophy in February 2016
APPENDIX 3- Recorded interviews and reflection activities

Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joaquim de Melo Neto Segundo</td>
<td>President of Instituto Banco Palmas</td>
<td>August 13, 2015 and January 23, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asier Ansorena</td>
<td>Director, PalmasLab</td>
<td>January 24, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luiz Ernandes</td>
<td>Staff, PalmasLab</td>
<td>January 18, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mateus Henrique</td>
<td>Staff, PalmasLab</td>
<td>January 20, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erberson Lino</td>
<td>Staff, PalmasLab</td>
<td>January 27, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elias Lino</td>
<td>Former Director of trainings, E-dinheiro specialist</td>
<td>January 25, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dona Da Silvia</td>
<td>President, ASMOCONP</td>
<td>January 26, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sr. Augosto</td>
<td>Community leader, one of the founding residents of Conjunto Palmeiras</td>
<td>January 20, 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reflection activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PalmasLab team video</td>
<td>Recorded November 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PalmasLab team reflection</td>
<td>August 13, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultores comunitários reflection session</td>
<td>January 28, 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>