

Participatory Mapping

What it is

Participatory mapping is a group-based qualitative research method that gives participants freedom to shape discussion on a given topic with minimal intervention from researchers. Put more simply, it is an activity whereby citizens are asked to mark preferences, locations, and other features related to a given topic on a map. The medium through which this process occurs has historically been a large, physical map that is brought out at a meeting or other public venue so that the public can write, draw, or place post-it notes directly on it. However, there are now web-based applications such as Crowd-Map which allows vast numbers of internet users to digitally provide personal input.

Why it Works

Perhaps no one has a more intimate understanding of the geographical dynamics of a community than the people who actually live there. If an agency wants to initiate a program or project that has a distinct geographical component (which very well be most), participatory mapping is an effective way to gather input. Even if an agency is confident that it has a solid understanding of where certain things are or should be, the local community may have a contrasting opinion and it is important to gain insight



Participatory mapping on cultural and natural resources of the territory of Bergamo (Italy)

Participatory mapping can be made available through online resources (at left) or be included as an activity facilitated by staff at an agency event (above).



into those differences. Further, maps are tangible objects that bring the abstract issues of planning into a visual world that community members can imagine and relate to, which in turn spurs on their interest in participation.

When to Use It

Participatory mapping can be used for a variety of purposes: To help communities articulate and communicate spatial knowledge to interested agencies; to allow communities to record and archive local knowledge; to assist communities in land-use planning and resource management; to enable communities to advocate for change; to increase a community's effective capacity; to address resource related conflict; etc. Ultimately, an agency would be well served to use participatory mapping when trying to understand a community's perception of any topic that has geographical implications.

Example

[Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, Mercer County Bikeability Map](#)

[Chicago Snow CrowdMap](#)

Resources

[Good Practices in Participatory Mapping](#)

[Guide to getting started with Participatory Mapping from the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement](#)

[Community Mapping Training](#)

Audience

All people who have any semblance of geo-spatial awareness of the landscape in question should be able to contribute in a participatory mapping exercise. Physical, in-person variations of this method are better suited for those who may need a staff member to facilitate their understanding of the map and the mapping goals. The online variation is effective because it allows for high levels of specificity and is extremely versatile, but it may limit participation to those with high-speed internet access and advanced understanding of how to use web-based programs.

Estimated Level of Effort

Presuming the input an agency wants to receive from a community is already determined (i.e. – “where should the new bus stop be located on Elm Street?”), the only effort that is required is developing a map (physical or digital) that portrays the area of concern in a manner which allows for a high level of community feedback. Online versions are more complex to maintain, but there are web programs available that simplify the process.

Cost Considerations

Costs can vary from extremely cheap (printing out a large map and asking people at public meetings to draw ‘X’s on areas of concern) to moderately expensive (maintaining a volunteered-content digital map that allows users to insert pins and other information that are catalogued in an online database). Determining which variation is more appropriate will depend on agency goals.