

Epistemic Capabilities and Epistemic Injustice: What is the Role of Higher Education in Fostering Epistemic Contributions of Marginalized Knowledge Producers?

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Aim of this contribution

- This presentation aims to address one of the inequalities which is specially related to higher education: **epistemic injustice**.
- As Anisur Rahman, a Bangladeshi economist, points out: “The gap between those who have social power over the process of knowledge generation—and those who have not—has reached dimensions no less formidable than the gap in access to means of physical production.” (Quoted in: Gaventa, J., & Bivens, F. (2013), p. 70).
- The role of universities in reproducing and enlarging this gap is highly relevant.
- **Knowledge, scholarship, and research are not neutral projects**, but rather are conterminously shaped by history and the societies in which the work is undertaken, and in which the researchers are themselves molded and positioned. Knowledge is constructed and produced within social and political contexts, and spaces of in/equity

Aim of this contribution

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- To discuss how research and teaching in higher education could expand epistemic capabilities of marginalized knowledge producers
- To highlight how epistemic injustice could limit those epistemic capabilities
- With 2 case studies located in the Global South in Nigeria and Colombia



5-day of an action research PV workshop in Lagos with 25 members of the Nigerian Slum and Dwellers Federation (2017) and a Nigerian NGO, Justice and Empowerment Initiative (J&E)



Paz y Región (Peace and Region) programme at University of Ibagué (Tolima, Colombia) a compulsory programme based on service-learning pedagogical approach

Epistemic injustice and the epistemic contribution capability

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Epistemic contribution capability	Ways of frustrating the epistemic contribution capability		
Production of informational (information, evidence, hypothesis, argumentation) and interpretive (concepts used, alternative interpretations, other relevant critical materials) materials	Deliberately: Physical force Coercion Legal order...	Testimonial injustice: The speaker suffers a credibility deficit caused by hearer's prejudice	Hermeneutical injustice: She enjoys less than some reasonable level of participation in the generation of shared social meanings

Miranda Fricker (2015) Epistemic contribution as a central human capability. In G. Hull (ed.), *The Equal Society* (pp. 73–90). Cape Town: UCT Press.

Hermeneutical injustice is also addressed by José Medina (2017):

- Subjects are not simply mistreated as intelligible communicators, but also **prevented from developing and exercising a distinctive “voice,”** that is, prevented from participating in meaning-making and meaning-sharing practices.
- Medina adds an active component to the epistemic capability (although he is not using this term) illustrating that is not only an issue of giving interpretive materials, but also **having the possibility of participation in epistemic practices.**
- Medina dissents from Fricker’s interpretation of hermeneutical injustice. For her, hermeneutical injustices are epistemic wrongs that simply happen, without **perpetrators** .. for Medina, in some cases, there seem to be such perpetrators.. hermeneutical intimidations in interpersonal exchanges, as is well illustrated by the literature on micro-aggressions..

PV action research in Lagos (Nigeria): context

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- **Lagos** is the largest city in Africa (21 millions aprox) 2/3 live in riverine slums, populated by fishing communities (traditional livelihoods, migrants from other part of Lagos, Nigeria, Benin and other African countries)
- City governments have recognized the **importance of securing tenure for the urban poor** to enable in situ upgrading of informal settlements and broader inclusion. Even, there are court decisions that ban evictions
- However, as is demonstrated by the continued **mass evictions and demolitions of urban informal settlements in Lagos**, secure of tenure is far from being achieved.
- From 2012-to present, Lagos State Gov. embarked on a series of **eviction processes** (Otodo Gbame and other enclaves)



“getting rid of criminals, kidnappers, Niger Delta militants, Boko Haram terrorist”

“enforcing compliance with a master plan”

“remove people from unsafe conditions”

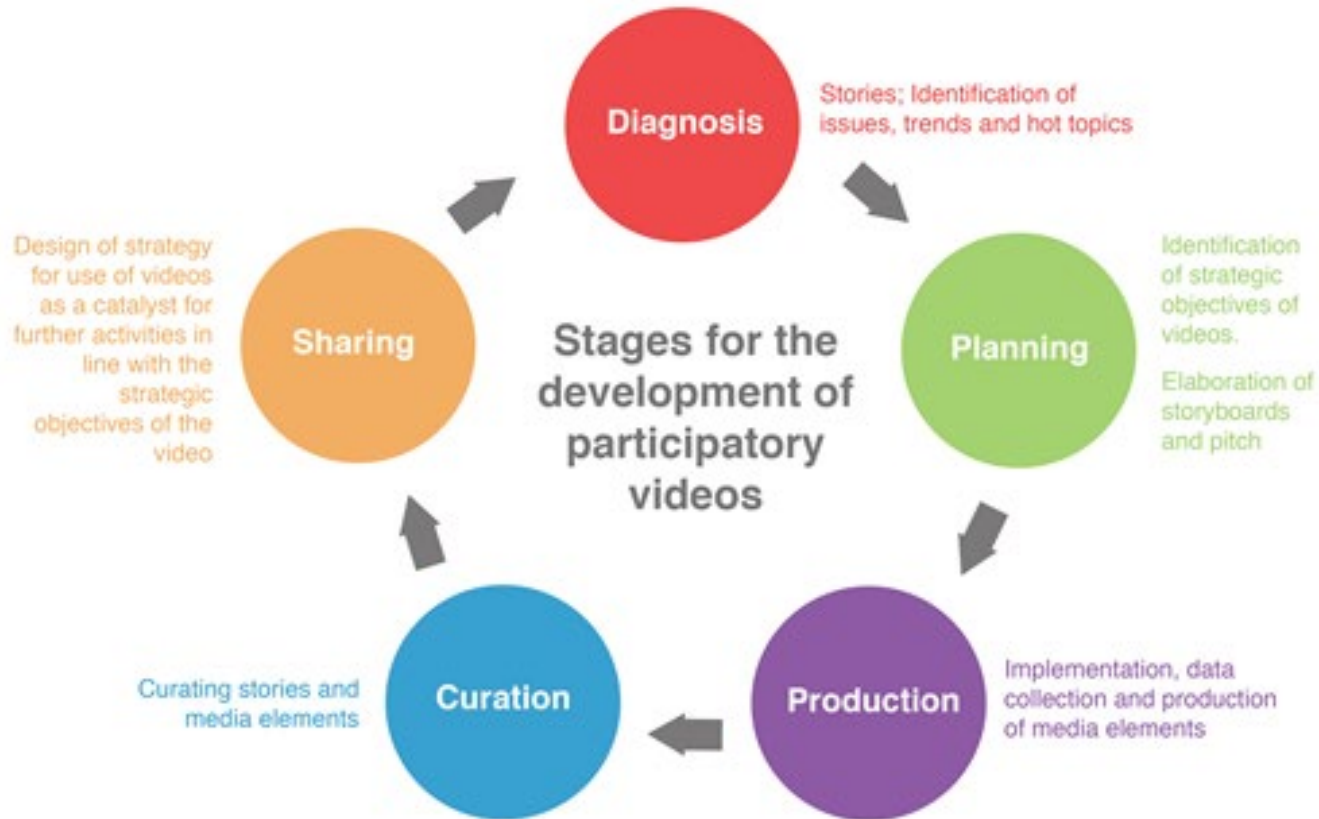
- Even if, with the help of J&E and the Federation, residents of slums are producing different information on their interest and priorities, and even alternative views of what development means for them, the **epistemic capabilities** are systematically undermined by the Lagos State Government through the 3 ways described by Fricker:

- **deliberately**, using physical coercion (as the massive forced evictions and demolitions highlight);

- **testimonial**, as the version of the slum dwellers are less credible than the official versions because their origins, ethnic background, economic status, etc;

- **hermeneutical injustice**, (following Medina): slum dwellers are facing different kinds of injustice (not only epistemic) and there are clear perpetrators. However, in this context, J&E are developing a communication strategy in which participatory video fitted.

PV Process





Refugee in my own city

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eMHY_O2_PA#action=share 3:43

This video is located in the Sogunro community where local residents are hosting “refugees” from Otodo Gbame community, which had suffered a dramatic eviction. Through five interviews with two welcoming Sogunro’s residents and three people evicted from Otodo Gbame, the video tells two main stories:

- 1)How the Otodo Gbame eviction happened and what have been its consequences for the people evicted
- 2)The conditions in which refugees are living in the host community

We are part of you. Respect our right

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wr7ohjkFLoY#action=share> 5:34

This video is located in the Otodo Gbame community where a recent eviction occurred. Through five interviews with Otodo Gbame residents and one interview with a lawyer expert on the Nigerian eviction legal system, this video strives to show:

- 1)The effect of the eviction on Otodo Gbame’s population
- 2)How the eviction is violating Nigerian law

Keep our dreams alive:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tM6CER4w5Rw#action=share> 6:43

This video is located in Ebute Ilaje Bariga community where, recently, Governor Ambode banned the sand business, which was the main livelihood for all inhabitants. Through six interviews (three women and three men from this community) the video aims to show:

- 1)The history of this community before the ban
- 2)How the stoppage has affected many aspects of people’s lives.

Video 4: The right to work in my community

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JS9vi_Cf_A#action=share 5:42

This video is also located in Ebute Ilaje Bariga community and, similar to the previous one, aims to show how the ban of the sand business ordered by Governor Ambode has changed the community.

The structure of this video is slightly different from the other three in two regards: firstly, six of the nine characters that appear are members of the PV team that made this video. They wanted to appear in the movie as a way of denouncing how the Ebute community is living after the ban. Secondly, the first part of this video contains a drama, a short representation of how Governor Ambode approach the lagoon and banned the sand business. The other three characters are a disabled woman, one of the oldest women of Ebute, and a young well-educated man. The three of them are referring to the bad effects that the stoppage had on the well-being of dwellers



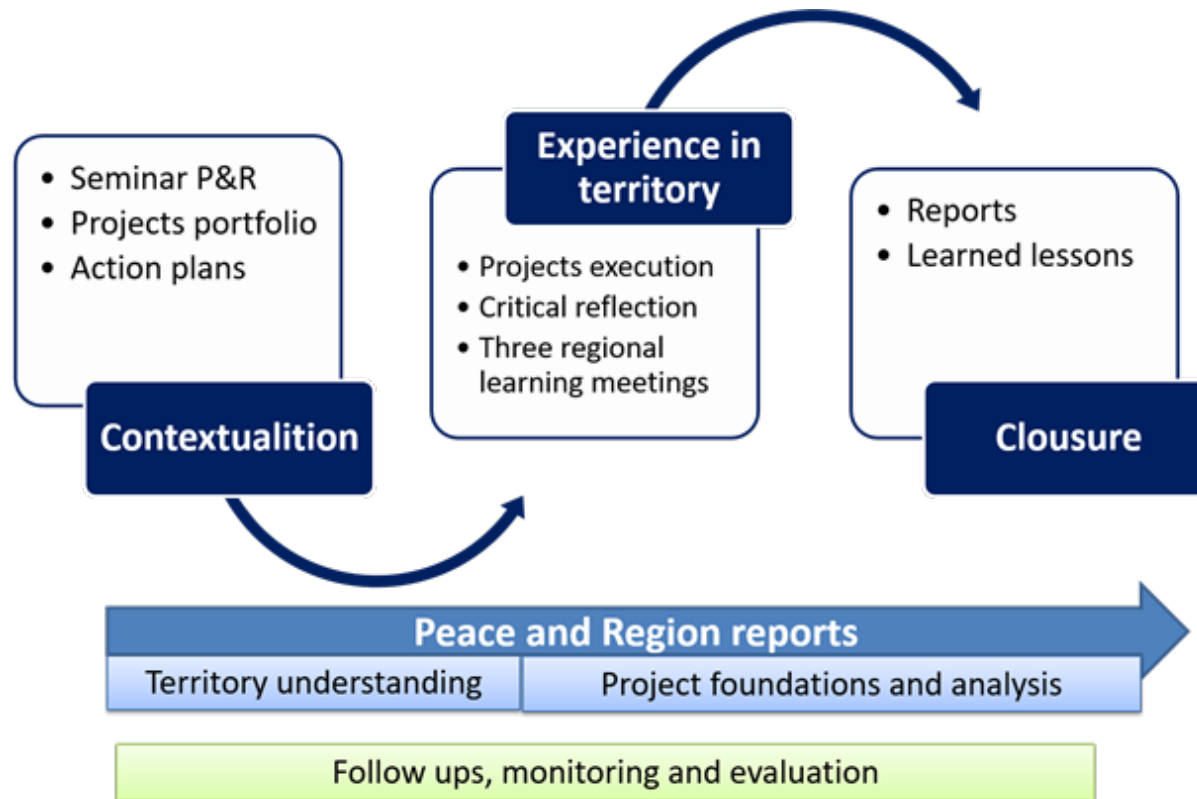
In January 30th 2016 the governor came to the community

Peace and Region Programme (U. Ibagué)

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- Universidad de Ibagué, a **private university** of medium size according to Colombian standards (around 5,600 students and 330 teachers) founded in 1980 by a group of businessmen and civic leaders from the Department of Tolima. Its **mission** is **to provide comprehensive training** for leaders and entrepreneurs with solid scientific and professional training, with deep-rooted **ethical and moral principles, and committed to social, cultural and economic regional development.**
- Tolima Dept. is in the 12th place among the departments with higher poverty levels in Colombia (UNDP, 2012) where the **armed conflict** has had great incidence
- Between 2011 to 2018, **808 students** from 16 undergraduate academic programs have participated in the P&R programme, and **400 projects** have been carried out in **45 of the 47 municipalities** of the department of Tolima. (From 2015 is compulsory).





Service Learning approach: reciprocal learning in which both, providers and recipients of the service, benefit from each other. Also, service learning could be a way to enhance civic engagement and social justice for communities

Epistemic capabilities: PV

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- PV was able to develop **technical skills** related to video production (handle a camera, record, edit, etc.). Such abilities can be considered as a **means** to the epistemic capability: the production of informational and interpretive materials.
- **Developing confidence, relationship, and trust (relational component)** have also been means that have contributed to the exercise of the epistemic capability.
- We can observe how the epistemic capability enhanced through the video making led the participants **to express their traumatic experience** which, in our view, can be considered another capability related to the epistemic capability.

Photo by Alexander MCFarlane available at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dpu-ucl/albums/72157677117358853>

Epistemic capabilities:



The abilities learned through the process, plus developing confidence, relationships and trust among participants, and interactions with local communities, have been **a means** to expand epistemic capability.

This has been reified in the production of the four videos (its **functioning**) and had another unexpected effect (**a new capability**), namely the opportunity to transform pain into action i.e., expressing a traumatic experience through the process of video making.

Epistemic capabilities: PR

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- 1) Previous meetings among social leaders, politicians and P&R program coordinators to set meaningful and practical goals to enhance social well-being: **pre-arrangements to the exercising of the epistemic capability.** Trust relationships, respect for each other's contributions and clear rules are essential in this process.
- 2) When students go to the municipalities to become fully immersed in the projects they will work with the communities or the local government, they have an induction process with the local communities they will live with in order to learn from them, understand their expectations, and also to provide their knowledge toward the solution of specific problems. Again, this moment can also be considered as a part of the **essential previous arrangements to the exercising of the epistemic capability.**
- 3) **Regional seminars with the students,** a collective process is guided by the academic advisors to reflect with students on their adaptation to the context, cooperative work, conflict resolution, decision making, and conceptual aspects such as peace, development, and citizenship.



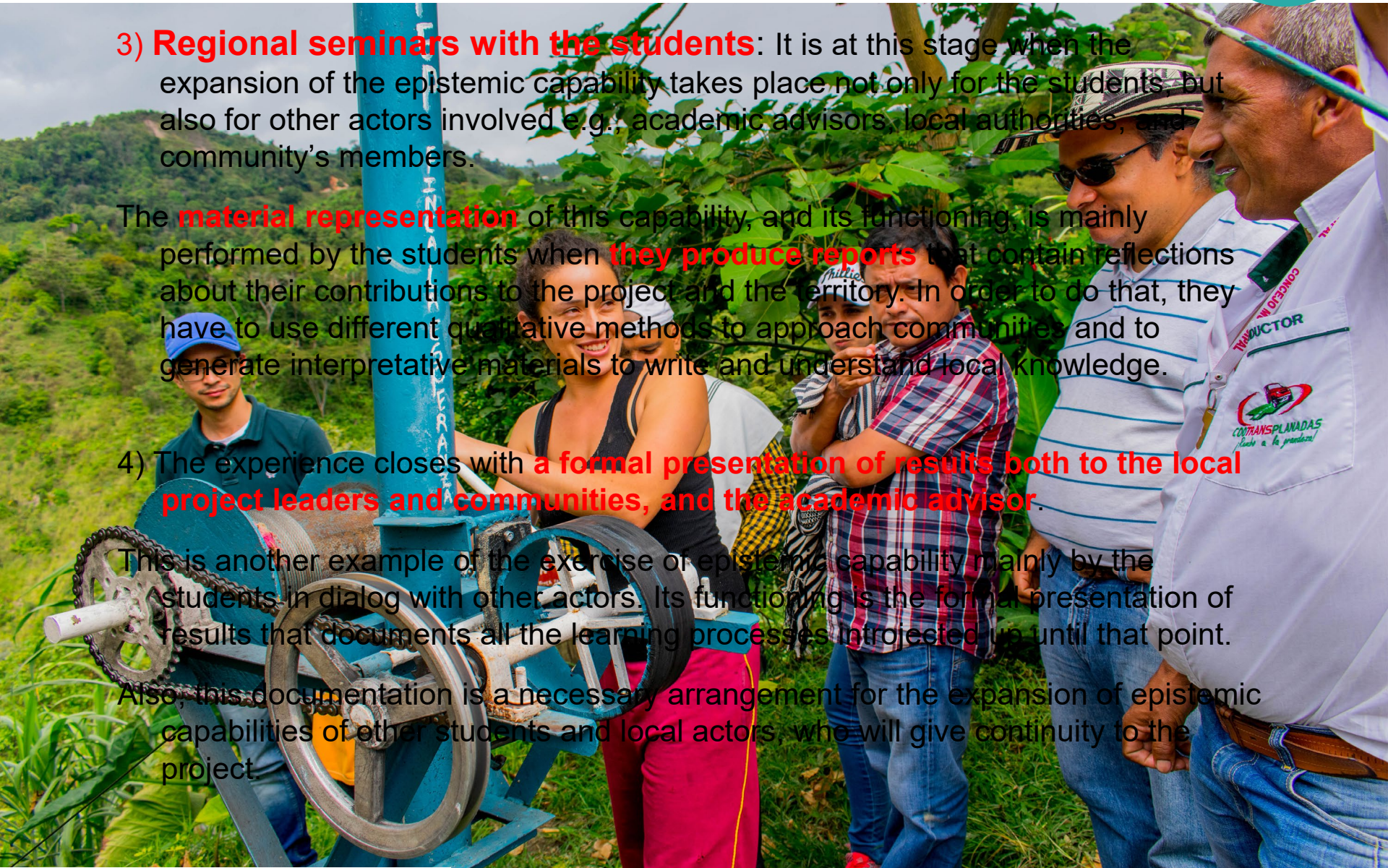
3) **Regional seminars with the students**: It is at this stage when the expansion of the epistemic capability takes place not only for the students, but also for other actors involved e.g.: academic advisors, local authorities, and community's members.

The **material representation** of this capability, and its functioning, is mainly performed by the students when **they produce reports** that contain reflections about their contributions to the project and the territory. In order to do that, they have to use different qualitative methods to approach communities and to generate interpretative materials to write and understand local knowledge.

4) The experience closes with **a formal presentation of results both to the local project leaders and communities, and the academic advisor**.

This is another example of the exercise of epistemic capability mainly by the students in dialog with other actors. Its functioning is the formal presentation of results that documents all the learning processes introduced up until that point.

Also, this documentation is a necessary arrangement for the expansion of epistemic capabilities of other students and local actors, who will give continuity to the project.



- **PV participants have challenged the epistemic injustice that occurs in a deliberate way.** Although the official version is still predominant due to power imbalances that exist in Lagos in the production of information and social understanding of what is happening in the coastal slums, PV participants were able to produce the videos and, in that sense, to demonstrate that, with appropriate methodologies, everyone is able to produce knowledge.
- However, **hermeneutical injustice** as described by Medina (2017) **is still present** as the inhabitants of the slums have been systematically denied their hermeneutical power, and equal access to participation in the generation of social meaning.
- The four videos are drops in an ocean of hermeneutical marginalization, which has **perpetrators**, as Medina claims. There is an intentional act of the Governor and other official stances to label the slums inhabitants terrorists, criminals and kidnappers to be able to legitimize and therefore proceed with the eviction plans. We can state the same with regard to testimonial injustice. We can't perceive that the four videos can have an effect on the hearer's prejudice that confers a lack of credibility vis-à-vis the epistemic producer.

- But, from a more positive point of view, we can consider this PV experience a step in the overall **media strategy** that JEI and the Federation are following, which brings together other project and initiatives aimed at generating social meanings from marginalized actors.
- Also, it can be considered as a positive example of **how a research project driven by two Universities from the Global North can be conducted in an horizontal** way, overcoming the usual power imbalances that characterize university and community relations in research. The PV methodology allowed participants to build their own narratives represented in the four videos; **the role of the academics was to facilitate that process, not to impose their own perspective.**
- Moreover, **the four videos have been screened in different academic** settings in the United Kingdom, Spain, Argentina, Canada, and South Africa. They were (and will be) presented at academic conferences, and have been used as training materials on PV.
- In that sense, the voices of slum dwellers in Lagos have been, and will be, heard by academic actors and practitioners. All of it is **not enough to reverse the multiplicity of epistemic injustices but it is a positive contribution**, not only to these specific actors but could also inspire other possibilities to expand epistemic capabilities for marginalized communities.

- Since the program is based on non-traditional practices, its adoption and put into operation has not come without **criticism from students and some faculty** members of the University
- From some **faculty members**: it impacts the formal curriculum by cutting out disciplinary courses.
- For **some students**: a mandatory program that forces them to have a non-disciplinary social experience is seen as a waste of time, a delay in the labour insertion, and even as an obligation to perform unskilled tasks that a professional should not be doing.
- **Disciplinary knowledge** is predominant and seen as more valid when compared with the P&R kind of knowledge proposed which comes from experience, field immersion, and participatory strategies giving equal importance to non-hegemonic actors (hermeneutical injustice)

- The **academic incentives** system both for tenure and economic bonuses **privilege formal outcomes** such as academic publications, teaching materials, and other types of industrial property products.
- The university is currently working on structuring a more robust **framework** that **integrates different types of learning and knowledge production**, in order to build a human capabilities university policy that impacts every aspect of the academic life.
- There is a **recognition and validation** from the authorities to epistemological diversity in order to consciously enforce cognitive justice, but this requires a **change in culture in addition to formal measures**.

- As we have seen in our two case studies, the University as social entity has great potential to confront injustices, especially those that originate in epistemic imbalances.
- The Lagos experience shows how participatory action-research methodologies could promote epistemic capabilities and functioning, making it possible for the PV participants to generate interpretive materials to speak of their own realities.
- However, this experience is too limited to address testimonial and hermeneutical injustice.

- The Colombian experience highlights the potential of an institutional strategy to contribute toward confronting local challenges related with peace, development, and citizenship through a service-learning program.
- P&R is a remarkable experience that is building epistemic capabilities among students and other local participants.
- However, P&R is also facing challenges- especially inside the institution-
- There is a **hermeneutical and structural injustice** that tends to give more value to disciplinary and codified knowledge at the expense of experiential and tacit knowledge.

- As Sousa Santos remarks (2014) there can be no **global social democracy if there is no democracy between forms of knowledge**.
- Sousa Santos (2014) proposes a '**pluri-university knowledge**', which is contextual, practical, and whose results have been agreed between researchers and users.
- It is **trans-disciplinary**, and due to its contextual character, is always in dialogue with other types of knowledge.
- This kind of knowledge thus looks for a **solidarity reorientation** of the **relationship** between university and society.
- It offers a wide range of **action informed by scientific and practical knowledge**, considered useful and shared by researchers, students and citizen groups.
- This can contribute to create broader **epistemic communities** that transform universities in public spaces where citizens and social groups can intervene without being exclusively learners or simply being the objects of research.

Thanks!

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