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Article

"Emancipatory Circuits of Knowledge" for Urban Equality: Experiences From Havana, Freetown, and Asia

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Abstract
Feminist, Southern, and decolonial thinkers have long argued that epistemological questions about how knowledge is produced and whose knowledge is valued and actioned are crucial in addressing inequalities, and a key challenge for planning. This collaborative article interrogates how knowledge is mobilised in urban planning and practice, discussing three experiences which have actively centred often-excluded voices, as a way of disrupting knowledge hierarchies in planning. We term these "emancipatory circuits of knowledge"—processes whereby diverse, situated, and marginalised forms of knowledge are co-produced and mobilised across urban research and planning, to address inequalities. We discuss experiences from the Technological University José Antonio Echeverría (CUJAE), a university in Havana, Cuba, that privileges a fluid and collaborative understanding of universities as social actors; the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre, a research institute in the city of Freetown, which curates collective and inclusive spaces for community action planning, to challenge the legacies of colonial-era planning; and the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, a regional network across Asia, which facilitates processes of exchange and co-learning which are highly strategic and situated in context, to advance community-led development. Shared across these "emancipatory circuits" are three "sites of impact" through which these partners have generated changes: encouraging inclusive policy and planning outcomes; shifting the planning praxis of authorities, bureaucrats, and researchers; and nurturing collective trajectories through building solidarities. Examining these three sites and their challenges, we query how urban knowledge is produced and translated towards epistemic justice, examining the tensions and the possibilities for building pathways to urban equality.

Keywords
Asia; co-production; epistemic justice; Freetown; Havana; knowledge translation; participation; planning; urban equality

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1. Introduction

Addressing deep, growing, and multidimensional urban inequalities requires a reframing of policy, planning, and governance, and how these are shaped by and relate to diverse urban knowledge(s). There is a growing acknowledgement of the necessity of engaging with historically marginalised groups, represented in discourses of

participation and co-production in planning and practice (Castán-Broto et al., 2015; Healey, 2006; Watson, 2014). Yet, if urban inequality is understood from a multidimensional social justice perspective (Fraser, 1995; Young, 1990)—beyond the (mal)distribution of resources to also include recognition, participation, and solidarity and care (Allen & Frediani, 2013; Levy, 2015; Yap et al., 2021)—this generates important questions for how we understand knowledge. Feminist, Southern, and decolonial thinkers have long argued that addressing "epistemic injustices"—or the systematic exclusion, misrepresentation, or undervaluing of particular knowledges, rationales, or geographies—is central to understanding inequalities (Fricker, 2007; Santos, 2014). Attention to epistemic injustice requires engaging with how knowledge is produced, whose knowledge is valued, and how different knowledge claims are negotiated. Such questions go beyond the "inclusion" of marginalised voices, drawing attention to deeply contested and power-laden processes through which diverse knowledges are (or are not) mobilised, recognised, and actioned.

What does it entail to work through multiple knowledge claims to challenge injustices? What are the challenges of working across diverse actors and contested histories, and the strategies to navigate these tensions? This article interrogates these questions through three experiences which have actively centred excluded or marginalised groups, as a way of disrupting hierarchies in knowledge production and promoting transformative urban practices. We term these experiences "emancipatory circuits of knowledge"—processes of co-producing and mobilising knowledges across research and practice, actors, and scales, with their emancipatory character lying in the capacity to build on often-invisibilised voices, to challenge historical and structural multidimensional inequalities.

This article discusses experiences from Havana (Cuba), Freetown (Sierra Leone), and across Asia. First, we examine how the Technological University José Antonio Echeverría (CUJAE), a university in Havana, Cuba, has engaged in practices of *collaboration and co-production*, which sees knowledge produced through practice, and through the interaction of traditional and non-traditional knowledge institutions. We see in this experience an "emancipatory circuit" which privileges a less linear, more fluid, and collaborative understanding of the role of universities as knowledge producers. Second, in Freetown, we explore how the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) has supported processes of *community action planning.* This case offers an example of an "emancipatory circuit" which moves beyond apolitical and technical approaches to participation, to an approach which is deeply reflexive and seeks to address unequal legacies of colonial-era planning. Finally, we discuss the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) and the approach of this regional network in nurturing situated practices of *exchange and co-learning*. This example demonstrates an "emancipatory circuit" which challenges the idea of de-contextualized knowledge, policy transfer, or "best practices," to instead facilitate flexible learning processes based on mutual trust, common experiences, and the advancement of shared principles of action, as a way of building a collective identity. Though still deeply entangled in the legacies of inequalities, these three experiences unsettle assumptions within prevailing paradigms of knowledge and planning, revealing the possibilities for knowledge translation (Cociña et al., 2019) to generate emancipatory outcomes.

This article proceeds by firstly outlining the link between knowledge and inequalities, before defining "emancipatory circuits of knowledge." Second, we discuss the methodology and cases, outlining how these institutions challenge historical structural deprivations through multi-directional, situated, and political planning practices. Third, we identify three "sites of impact" in which these emancipatory circuits address a multidimensional understanding of urban inequalities: firstly, transforming material policy and planning outcomes; secondly, expanding the sites and understandings through which planning knowledge is produced by researchers and practitioners; and thirdly, changing the collective lives of those historically misrecognized groups involved in knowledge production. We discuss the shared strategies to mobilise knowledge towards these multi-layered outcomes, as well as their deep and enduring challenges. Finally, we conclude with a reflection on what these "emancipatory circuits" teach us about how urban planning knowledge can be produced and translated towards epistemic justice, and the lessons for building pathways to urban equality.

2. Centring "Knowledge" Questions: Epistemic Dimensions in the Pursuit of Urban Equality

2.1. Changing the Conversation: Towards Epistemic Planning Questions

The last few decades have witnessed increased efforts across disciplines to engage with questions of knowledge as linked with social justice. Looking at what Fricker (2007, p. 1) terms "epistemic injustice," some injustices are "distinctively epistemic in kind," in that they consist of "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower," through the devaluing or misrecognition of their experiences. Similar philosophical questions have configured a tradition which engages explicitly with global political economy, with Boaventura de Sousa Santos' work being crucial in this regard. In dialogue with decolonial discourses (Escobar, 2010; Quijano, 2000), Santos (2014) has called for *global cognitive justice*, grounded in an acknowledgement of the history of colonialism and oppression that renders certain types of knowledge invisible. He advocates for "epistemologies of the South," built on multiple *ecologies of knowledge* and *intercultural translations*, which have been historically

misrecognised by global structures and local institutions. Santos (2014, p. 212) defines an *ecology of knowledge* by acknowledging that "different types of knowledge are incomplete in different ways, and that raising the consciousness of such reciprocal incompleteness (rather than looking for completeness) will be a precondition for achieving cognitive justice"; and *intercultural translation* as the search for "concerns and underlying assumptions among cultures, identifying differences and similarities, and developing, whenever appropriate, new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication." "It is time to change the conversation," Santos (2014, p. 2) claims in his provocative reading "against *epistemicide*," contributing to discussions of "epistemic violence" as crucial in the constitution of the colonial subject (Spivak, 1994).

These epistemic questions have been taken forward by the urban field in general and planning in particular. Building upon feminist notions of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) and ideas of collaborative planning (Healey, 2006), debates on planning within complexity have acknowledged that "experts cannot provide a complete response to the questions of planning" (Castán-Broto et al., 2015, p. 10), requiring the engagement of diverse types of knowledge through a "collaborative rationality" (Innes & Booher, 2010). Some of these discourses have gained traction under what has been called Southern urban theory—or the "South-Eastern" perspective, as termed by Yiftachel (2006). Likewise, there is a rising interest in the "co-production of knowledge" in urban research (Mitlin & Bartlett, 2018; Osuteye et al., 2019), and in radical, insurgent, or agonistic practices in extending planning beyond formal institutions (Frediani & Cociña, 2019; Legacy, 2017; Miraftab, 2009; Thorpe, 2017). These debates have had a correlation with the active efforts of grassroots groups and allies to promote locally produced knowledge–through self-enumeration, surveyorship, and mapping—as valid sources of urban knowledge (Boonyabancha, 2005; McFarlane, 2006; Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2007).

These traditions have called for the production of knowledge and theory that is relevant for cities and sites outside of dominant academic circuits. In doing so, they challenge at least three key assumptions about knowledge that often inform the mainstream planning landscape.

First is the idea that there is a *linear relationship between research and practice.* This assumption has been challenged by practitioners and scholars openly questioning the schism between planning research and practice (Balducci & Bertolini, 2007; Porter, 2015; Whitzman & Goodman, 2017) and by the growing acknowledgement of the multiple sites of knowledge production—emergent from lived experience, practice, or cultural traditions—seeking theory produced *from* place and *through* place (Bhan et al., 2018).

The second assumption relates to an *apolitical understanding of knowledge, abstracted from the unequal global circuits of knowledge production*. Similar to what feminist theory has done in terms of questioning the rationalities and structures of knowledge production from a gender and race perspective (Ahmed, 2004; Fraser, 2013; hooks, 1991), Southern approaches have sought to historicise knowledge by contesting the universality of inherited and dominant planning theory, exploring how these rationalities have contributed to the extension of capitalism and colonialism (Lawhon & Truelove, 2020; Roy, 2009; Watson, 2009). Substantially, scholars have called "to theorise from practice and to engage in empirical work based in contexts where conventional planning theory has had little relevance" (Parnell et al., 2009, p. 237). A Southern approach calls for a distinctive approach to knowledge that challenges the universal and linear character that underlies the notion of "development," acknowledging *different trajectories* of modernisation and urbanisation (Santos, 1979), recognising what has been termed "plural modernities" (Sintusingha & Mirgholami, 2013) or the "pluriverse," as an ontological tool for "reconstructing local worlds" (Escobar, 2018, p. 4).

Finally, these traditions have challenged the idea that *knowledge can be de-contextualised*, and therefore *can be transferred universally across scales and space*, a key assumption in debates on policy transfer and mobility (McCann, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2015). Conversely, there are calls to "provincialise" urban theory, querying the localities (i.e., Northern cities) through which dominant theory has been produced and how well this travels to the "urban majorities" shaped by very different political and material conditions (Leitner & Sheppard, 2015). This position calls for an approach to knowledge that engages with the specificities of urbanisation and planning practices in cities and how these travel (Harrison, 2006; Watson, 2002; Yiftachel, 2006).

2.2. Urban Equality from a Knowledge Perspective: Searching for Emancipatory Circuits

In this article, we advance on these discussions by looking at epistemic questions from an urban equality perspective. Based on seminal social justice work (Fraser, 1995; Young, 1990), we understand urban inequalities not only in terms of *material deprivations*—a lack of adequate income, shelter, infrastructure, or services—but also by structural conditions which shape the possibilities for the *reciprocal recognition* of multiple identities, *parity of political participation*, and the strengthening of *solidarity and care* practices across diverse social groups (Allen & Frediani, 2013; Levy, 2015; Yap et al., 2021). We argue that bringing these epistemic interrogations to the discussion of urban inequalities across these four dimensions generates critical questions for planning:

- Which experiences of material deprivation are treated as evidence for *redistributive* actions, and what blind spots or gaps exist in policymaking and planning?

- Whose priorities, rationales, practices, or worldviews (i.e., understandings of “progress” and “development”) are *recognised* and actualised in policy and planning, and whose intersectional identities are rendered invisible in those processes?
- Which voices are considered valid in *participating* in decision-making, and what institutional capacities exist to engage with diverse knowledges, embracing and addressing conflict in democratic practices?
- How are relations of *solidarity and care* supported and valued in planning, shaping collective values in organising, friendship, care for nature, mutual aid, respect, and trust?

We posit that examining the strategies—and the assumptions which underpin them—through which diverse forms of knowledge are mobilised across these four dimensions is key to transformative city-making. We explore this proposition through the notion of “emancipatory circuits of knowledge,” examining three grounded practices.

3. Emancipatory Circuits of Knowledge: Methodology and Cases

Knowledge is produced, translated, and mobilised in layered ways, shaping how cities are planned, produced, and inhabited. In this article, we look particularly at those “circuits” that amplify, validate, and activate often-invisibilised or excluded expertise, experiences, or practices, as a way of challenging traditions of exclusionary planning. These circuits entail the movement and translation of knowledge across research and practice, through forms of curation or encounter which speak across diverse actors and knowledges and are aimed at particular sites of impact. We understand these circuits to be “emancipatory” where they entail the intentional redistribution of resources and authority and seek to address multiple dimensions of inequality: *redistribution*, *recognition*, *participation*, and *solidarity and care*.

These inquiries have been carried out within the Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality (KNOW) programme, which co-produces research, and builds capacities and action with local partners to inform policy, planning, and practice for more equitable cities. This article draws upon a collaboration with CUJAE, SLURC, and ACHR. These partners have co-produced knowledge with urban poor and grassroots groups, collaborating with diverse stakeholders to impact policy and planning changes which address structural inequalities. The analysis presented here draws upon interviews, focus groups, workshops, and policy and document reviews in each locality, using a historical approach to trace “knowledge translation” strategies in advancing urban equality, including how: CUJAE as a university actor has co-produced knowledge and articulated actors and practices towards more equitable urban policies, ACHR as a regional network has facilitated knowledge and learning on community-led development, and SLURC as a research institute has collaborated to support informal settlement upgrading. Following the conclusion of fieldwork activities, individual and collective workshops were held with each partner to reflexively discuss, compare, and exchange the understandings of the link between knowledge and inequalities, the specific practices undertaken to co-produce knowledge, what make these circuits “emancipatory,” and enduring challenges.

3.1. Havana, Cuba

CUJAE, the Technological University of Havana, like all universities in Cuba, has an explicit public mandate to engage with current social challenges. An interdisciplinary group, KNOW–Havana was established to examine the implications of a “prosperity with equality” approach and participatory planning in Havana. In the context of deep socio-economic transformations in Cuba, KNOW–Havana seeks to co-produce research-based outputs with a range of key actors and collaborations, to contribute to urban equality struggles. To do so, the team has worked across several themes (including social inclusion, health, energy, food, mobility, habitat, and economy), identifying the manifestations of existing inequalities, finding resources to tackle them, establishing collaborative partnerships, and co-conceiving transformative strategies.

CUJAE’s approach has entailed practices of *collaboration and co-production* that move beyond the traditional role of the university as a service or knowledge “provider,” challenging how outreach activities and partnerships are usually framed around notions of authority and expertise. An explicit aim of KNOW–Havana has been to translate the co-produced knowledge into recommendations for current urban management and policy tools (i.e., Cuban National Urban Agenda and municipal development strategies). This interdisciplinary work has entailed identifying strategic collaborations and undertaking collaborative research activities, including workshops in selected neighbourhoods, focus groups and interviews with diverse actors, site visits, student-led work, the co-production of urban instruments (i.e., the municipal development strategies and Destraba neighbourhood plans), and the establishment of the National University Urban Forum.

Since the opening of higher education to universal access in 1959, knowledge has been a question of equality for Cuban universities. What KNOW–Havana does, however, is to engage with the *process* of knowledge production as an equaliser in its own right, showcasing a more fluid relationship between research and practice. As reflected by Jorge Peña-Díaz (CUJAE):

> Access to knowledge is an equaliser, and the university has an important traditional role in this regard.

> But sometimes it needs to innovate in order to be truly transformative, through collaborations that connect elements and institutions, highlight the relevance of certain knowledges, and intersect personal and collective trajectories.

KNOW–Havana uses its leverage as a university actor to build an "emancipatory circuit of knowledge" through research *co-production and collaborations* that mobilise multiple views, experiences, and types of knowledge, creating valid and valuable narratives in decision-making spaces. Acknowledging that full co-production is not always institutionally and politically possible, the research group has strategically adopted four distinctive "modalities" of engagement: a more traditional role as a "connector" of academic knowledge with processes and institutions, as with work done around sustainable mobility in collaboration with Havana transport authorities and international actors and networks during the last decade (Morris et al., 2019); as a "broker," establishing dialogues between communities, authorities, and other actors, as with work in a small public space in Los Sitios that involved community participatory design workshops and active citizen engagement, especially with youth and children; as a "plug-in," in which CUJAE connects itself to existing processes, accelerating or highlighting certain agendas, like the development of capacity building workshops and planning proposals for the ongoing development planning of the Havana Bay; and in a more aggressive "trojan horse virus" role, getting involved at the core of existing urban processes, injecting more radical ideas about equality, like the case of the current development of a municipal development strategy led by CUJAE and co-produced around the notion of "prosperity with equality." Across these multiple roles, CUJAE has extended or even subverted the notion of "university expertise," demonstrating an "emancipatory circuit" that challenges the directionality of knowledge, seeking to redistribute authority and resources, while widening the recognition of multiple worldviews.

3.2. Freetown, Sierra Leone

Established in 2015, SLURC generates capacity building and research in cities across Sierra Leone, focused on the well-being of residents of informal settlements. The centre has played a key role in co-producing knowledge, connecting diverse local and international stakeholders, and making urban knowledge available and accessible to influence urban policy and practice, to respond to the priorities of informal settlement residents (Lynch et al., 2020). Its focus is on "bridging the knowledge gap between policy producers, and those who suffer the consequences of the policies" (Joseph Macarthy, SLURC). Knowledge is understood as a crucial resource linked with inequalities, with SLURC supporting the production and framing of missing narratives in ways that are more inclusive and actionable by authorities.

SLURC has helped build an "emancipatory circuit of knowledge" particularly through the curation of collective and inclusive spaces for research, engagement, and action. An example is the Community Area Action Planning (CAAP) process, in collaboration with grassroots members of the Federation of the Rural and Urban Poor, local NGOs, such as the Centre of Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation and the Sierra Leone Young Men's Christian Association, and international groups, such as Architecture Sans Frontieres UK. The first CAAP process entailed workshops within two communities, Cockle Bay and Dworzark, focused on participatory design and planning, to develop upgrading plans to advocate for more inclusive city-making with local authorities (SLURC, 2018). Building on this precedent, in 2019 the KNOW/SLURC collaboration established a City Learning Platform, and a series of Community Learning Platforms, two interconnected governance structures which bring diverse urban stakeholders to meet periodically and discuss challenges and strategies facing informal settlements (City Learning Platform, 2019). Inclusivity is encouraged through safeguarding participation of key social groups, for instance, across gender, age, tenure status, religion, or ability, particularly in the formation of Community Learning Platforms, to recognise the diversity of men and women in the settlements they represent. This commitment to the curation and establishment of new governance structures builds on the long history of collaborative planning with informal settlement residents, seeking to address inequalities embedded in the legacies of colonial-era planning.

Crucially, these experiences have sought to challenge the tokenistic or apolitical ways in which "community participation" usually occurs. As described by Joseph Macarthy (SLURC):

> When we started, the focus was on partnership: promoting strong collaborative relationships with communities and government entities. But upon reflection, we saw just partnering was tokenistic. We wanted to go beyond that. To make participation effective, we needed to first empower the residents that normally bear the consequences of policy decisions. *Participation can only become emancipatory if it is linked with empowerment.*

Thus, through the grounded practices of *community action planning*, SLURC has sought not only to enhance "participation" in discrete planning spaces, but also to build and support the capacities of informal settlement residents to produce research, increase public confidence in the quality of the outputs, and work with local authorities to reflect upon inequalities embedded in the planning system, and to make use of alternative types of knowledge. This interrogation of the groups and ideologies which have historically framed and led planning agendas demonstrates an "emancipatory circuit" which seeks to increase participation and redistribute

resources in knowledge production, in ways that address structural inequalities.

3.3. Asia

The ACHR is a regional network of grassroots organizations, NGOs, and professionals established in 1988, involved in community-led models of poverty reduction and development. At its core are shared tools for community organisation for access to secure land tenure, housing, and finance, from community savings groups, enumerations, and profiling to the collective purchase of land and housing construction. Network members have collaborated on, learnt from, and adapted community-driven innovations across the region. These innovations have included models such as the Baan Mankong programme in Thailand (Boonyabancha, 2005); improved low-cost infrastructure of the Orangi pilot project in Pakistan (Hasan, 2006); the Community Mortgage Programme in the Philippines; or settlement upgrading of the Kampung Improvement programme in Indonesia (Silas, 1992). Lessons from these initiatives were consolidated regionally through the large-scale Asian Coalition for Community Action programme (2008–2014), which provided grants and loans for community-level infrastructure and housing projects, supporting residents to engage in city-wide organising, mapping, partnership development, and prioritisation, and the negotiation of land across 215 cities (Boonyabancha & Mitlin, 2012). Crucial to ACHR's ethos is the flexible use of these tools, which are adapted across contexts, taking as its base the recognition of the similar structural drivers and experiences of inequalities. Shared is a set of core values around seeing urban poor communities as the central problem-solvers, supporting them in the development of localised innovations, and working closely with authorities where possible to draw from the expertise of all local partners. ACHR groups primarily support the leadership and capacities of women, but also focus on engaging diverse social groups in community action. The ACHR/KNOW collaboration at the regional level has focused on the history of the network, examining the strategies for how the collective has built and shared actionable knowledge.

The ACHR network has built an "emancipatory circuit of knowledge" linked with practices of exchange and co-learning, facilitated through regular events or interactions, such as regional and international meetings and exchanges. Rather than sharing "best practices" or "policy recipes" to be transferred across the region, these forms of learning are politically strategic, deeply situated, and relational. In the words of Somsook Boonyabancha (ACHR), Secretary-General of ACHR until 2021:

> If city officials, urban poor leaders, and technical staff go together to see something positive in a different country, they learn it together. They have discussions and share amongst themselves. This will be a very powerful learning—*a joint learning process*—between actors who are supposed to do the same thing, but normally do it with different, and sometimes antagonistic, attitudes.

Exchanges might include delegations of urban poor leaders, progressive local authorities, and NGO or technical staff to learn from "successful" housing, land, or infrastructure projects elsewhere in the region, and are often linked with politically strategic moments when the prestige of an exchange visit can be leveraged to press for policy or practice change. Other practices entail the representation of voices of the poor at international forums, organising "high-level" meetings and using "outsiders" presence to attract and negotiate with authorities, or supporting the education and training of young professionals and bureaucrats to challenge disciplinary pedagogies. Learning can also operate in reverse: with members of well-established—but sometimes stagnant—collaborations taken to cities with newly formed collective action, to re-visit and learn from the energy, adaptation capacity, and innovation of emerging processes. These reversals of the directionality and hierarchies of knowledge production are also demonstrated, for instance, in supporting local authorities to learn from communities on how to address urban informality challenges.

While co-learning and sharing may generate changes in policy and planning, its value lies firstly in building collective inspiration, courage, confidence, and trust across urban poor groups and allies. This relational form of learning is strongly linked with the emotional dimensions of the network, referred to variously by members as a sense of friendship, shared values, or providing a spiritual connection or "soul" for groups in the region. Therefore, this "emancipatory circuit" prioritises contextualised learning as an active process designed not only to communicate information and tools, or to "transfer" techniques for change, but to build a sense of collective solidarity and recognition as a crucial route to addressing inequalities.

4. Discussion: Cross-Cutting Strategies and "Sites of Impact" of Knowledge Circuits

Though operating in very different contexts, across these three "emancipatory circuits of knowledge" are three layered "sites of impact" through which these partners have generated changes towards urban equality. This section explores the shared strategies, as well as challenges faced in expanding the room for manoeuvre for marginalised groups. In different ways, these sites offer opportunities to address epistemic questions across the four dimensions of equality: redistribution, recognition, participation, and solidarity and care.

4.1. Transforming Policy and Planning: Curating Institutional Spaces to Leverage and Reframe Resources

This first "site" is often conceived as one of the main outcomes of knowledge translation—referring to concrete

changes in policy and planning that better respond to excluded groups. Across these three partners is a common approach, using their institutional positioning and role as facilitators to strategically curate, transform, or expand governance structures, platforms, and resources, in ways that give space for usually misrecognised forms of knowledge to influence action.

CUJAE, for instance, has played a key role in leveraging and redistributing university resources. Sometimes, its main resource is "authority," due to the explicit recognition by the Cuban government of universities' social role (Díaz-Canel, 2021). This can be used to validate community-generated knowledge, for instance, in informing the municipal development strategy from an equality perspective. Resources can also include the contribution of time and physical space or relying on students and academics that are connected with certain neighbourhoods and urban processes. And, on occasion, "the main resource can be as simple as organising a proper meal at the end of a workshop, to ensure a dignified environment for building trust and relationships" (Jorge Peña-Díaz, CUJAE). For SLURC, their contribution rests on the assertion that multiple kinds of knowledge were already being produced within the city, but that it was not always "useful, usable, and used" (Braima Koroma, SLURC) by policymakers. Within this context, SLURC's efforts to curate institutional spaces such as the CAAP and Learning Platforms have been coupled with activities to build capacities and translate knowledge into "actionable formats"—whether reports, policy briefs, or working group inputs—which are produced inclusively and can speak to policymakers. And in the case of ACHR, working at the regional and international level has been strategically used to demonstrate that collaborations between communities, local governments, professionals, and other local stakeholders can bring about change in land, housing, or urban services. These exchanges are used both to "unstick" or inspire action in other cities and to make the case for embedding support systems for community-led development in policy and planning. These three cases reveal the importance of alliance-building for the institutionalisation of knowledge co-production, and the role of knowledge intermediaries in using their positioning to advocate for material changes in policy and practice.

Leveraging on strategic political moments, available resources, or opening up institutional structures is fundamental to the recognition of often invisibilised knowledge circuits. However, partners highlighted that long-term trajectories based on patriarchal, vertical, hierarchical approaches to planning and policy-making remain difficult to challenge. As outlined by Joseph Macarthy (SLURC), for knowledge co-production to sustain transformation over time, it requires policymakers and authorities to accept a loss of authority:

> Public institutions have their own ways of thinking and acting in silos….As long as they keep from giving out information, they are in control of resources and management. Starting to engage means giving up some level of power, and particular interests could be at risk. So, how do you convince them?

Likewise, while each of the partners explicitly engage with diverse community members in co-production processes, a lack of gender parity within local authorities, universities, or private sector partners has created challenges for addressing entrenched gender norms within key decision-making institutions. Sometimes these challenges have been difficult to address even within the structures set up by the partners themselves, requiring reflective and active labour to challenge deeply embedded gender or racial disparities. Beyond working closely with groups and institutions usually left outside official planning discussions, sustained institutional change requires building capacities of individuals and institutions to embrace research and knowledge produced by different sources, addressing identity imbalances, supporting emerging local leaderships and processes of co-production, and building opportunities for long-term resourcing of emerging platforms.

4.2. Expanding How Researchers and Practitioners Understand and Produce Planning Knowledge: Methodologies for Changing Praxis

A second shared strategy relates to approaches explicitly designed to destabilise the traditional sites, hierarchies, and directionalities of planning knowledge. Across the three cases, this has materialised through processes and methodologies which recognise, mobilise, and centre the expertise of urban poor or marginalised communities, while also actively supporting researchers and policy-makers in the reflexive examination of historical exclusions. These activities open up a "site of impact" related to the changing perspectives and actions of researchers and practitioners—or "praxis"—in the process expanding the remit of planning.

For ACHR, for instance, efforts to shift praxis are clearly seen within the methodologies of exchanges and city-wide co-creation workshops, which are designed to support multi-directional and mutual learning, collective planning, and design. Working in "mixed teams" of professionals, city officials, traditional or cultural authorities, and urban poor groups supports the reciprocal recognition of diverse knowledge sources, acknowledging that sharing across "technical" and lived knowledge are required for change. These efforts towards "joint learning" are explicitly designed to change the perspectives and practices of groups that may not normally work together, as much as they are about communicating technical information. Likewise, the work of CUJAE in Havana has challenged the directionality of university-led capacity building, learning, and exchange by building co-production partnerships that challenge traditional hierarchical definitions of the "experts" or

"learners," seeking fluid ways of producing urban knowledge across the public, civil society, and higher education institutions. For SLURC, this has entailed building capacities of urban poor groups such as the Federation and partner NGOs to engage in participatory action research with the direct involvement of public and academic institutions, expanding their "participatory capabilities" to engage in reflection and action together (Macarthy et al., 2019). These approaches ask important questions about where planning knowledge is produced, who is framing and leading planning agendas, and how co-production happens across stakeholders with differential access to resources and authority.

Despite expanding alternative planning imaginaries, partners highlighted individual and institutional challenges in destabilising traditional mechanisms of knowledge production. For instance, both SLURC and the regional work of ACHR often rely upon international collaborations, and their research and programmatic approaches are deeply impacted by the wider funding environment, which often prioritises discrete projects with measurable outputs—particularly as linked with the Sustainable Development Goals—over longer-term process-oriented forms of change. In all cases, these institutions have their own structures and timelines for deliverables, which may not always support iterative reflexive action. CUJAE, for instance, highlighted the friction between "academic time" and "community time," especially given the urgent needs of many of the communities they work with, a concern echoed by both SLURC and the ACHR. These changes also require challenging the "egos" and authorship of researchers and policymakers, a process of "unlearning" which is ethically fraught, even where there are good intentions. These represent serious time, cultural and financial challenges to reframing and extending planning knowledge, which is often outside of these institutions' control, and impacted by the wider political economy of knowledge and development. While acknowledging these structural constraints, these partners demonstrate a route towards the transformation of planning knowledge via methodologies which seek to change the perceptions and practices of key individuals and collectives in an expanded notion of planning.

4.3. Changing Collective Trajectories of Mis-Recognised Groups Through Knowledge Production: Building Trusted Relationships and Organisations

Finally, for these three partners, an important shared approach lies in building trust and solidarities over time, a practice which requires deep reflexive work on the nature of the partnership. These strategies reveal a crucial "site of impact" related to the transformation of internal dynamics and processes of self-recognition and organisation, or "conscientization" (Freire, 1968) within usually marginalised groups. These processes speak to deeper epistemic questions about who has a right and sees themselves as autonomous knowledge producers.

For SLURC, this has entailed a long process of building trust and confidence with and within the informal communities with whom they partner, and reflexive work to understand the difference between tokenistic "community participation" and a "genuine spirit of partnership and engagement" (Braima Koroma, SLURC). As articulated by Yirah O Conteh, head of the Federation of the Rural and Urban Poor, these collaborative actions (with and beyond SLURC) have boosted residents' confidence over time in their own collective capabilities, expanding and transferring this consciousness both within and across informal settlements in Freetown. For ACHR, knowledge sharing is done through storytelling, with members recounting their lived struggles and the strategies they have collectively undertaken. This sharing is intended to trigger change in both those sharing and listening to these stories, as a way of building confidence, inspiration, and collective empowerment. The complex fabric of the network over 30 years has been sustained by this "deep capacity of listening and respect" (Brenda Pérez-Castro, ACHR), moving beyond professional engagement, to encapsulate shared values and motivations such as a sense of family, solidarity, and friendship. For CUJAE, this has entailed nurturing relationships of collaboration between academics from multiple disciplines, public institutions, and grassroots groups—which may have started as linked to a particular research project—and has required the renewing of bonds of trust as their specific focus has changed over the years. These practices have contributed to important changes in the lives and collective dynamics of historically marginalised groups through their active involvement in the co-production and recognition of knowledge about their living conditions and lived experiences of inequality. These changes have been felt even without tangible outcomes in policy and planning; in the words of an ACHR member from the Philippines, "friendships have scaled, even if programs have not."

Supporting these changes in the collective articulation, negotiation of differences, confidence, and capacities of historically excluded groups is arguably the deepest layer upon which these emancipatory circuits can be tracked, and offer valuable pathways of resilience and solidarity. At the same time, these processes are fragile, and sustaining these transformative processes with and within communities can be jeopardised by participation fatigue and disempowering institutional dynamics. For SLURC, ACHR, and CUJAE, true co-production may be an "ideal" that is not always reached, resulting in different and pragmatic modalities of engagement dependent on the wider opportunity context. However, these differing expectations can be unsettling and wearying for those communities living on the frontline of risk, particularly where there may be misaligned timeframes and expectations on the roles of different actors. Overcoming long legacies of mistrust takes time; as

articulated by a community leader in Freetown in relation to the recognition of their capacities, but frustration at the lack of concrete changes, "Yes, we have the knowledge, but not the power." Nor are communities homogenous and are equally a site of contested knowledge and aspirations, requiring long-term processes of negotiation towards collective goals. In Freetown, for instance, there are differences between riverside settlements—under constant threat of eviction linked with flooding risks—and hillside settlements, that might find more political manoeuvre to advocate for upgrading initiatives. In ACHR, while important capacities have been built in the confidence and authority of particularly women leaders, this can be at great risk for these individuals when dealing with changes in government authorities, or as they negotiate social and familial expectations. Or in Havana, while a multi-dimensional understanding of equality beyond material disparities has been advanced in certain urban policies, longstanding racial and gender cultural disparities remain. Such reflections highlight the long and slow timescale of change, and the necessary—if uncertain—emancipatory work to support excluded groups to build solidarities, collectively reflect, and advocate, even where institutional or social changes do not always follow.

5. Conclusion: Emancipatory Circuits of Knowledge for an Epistemic Revision of Planning

Addressing urban inequalities requires a radical approach to the transformation of planning and governance. Emancipatory circuits, like those discussed in this article, offer alternative ways of co-producing and mobilising diverse knowledges. Whether through university-community-policy collaborations that disrupt linear understandings of knowledge, community action planning that subverts apolitical notions of participation, or forms of exchange and co-learning that unsettle universal and de-contextualised notions of expertise, these three experiences help destabilize how we think about knowledge and planning. These circuits show us living and messy examples of what it looks like in practice to heed the calls of South-Eastern, feminist, and decolonial theory—which argue that knowledge can only be transformative where it is multi-sited, cognisant of global relations, and deeply rooted in place.

In doing so, these emancipatory circuits have generated important registers of change, encouraging inclusive policy and planning outcomes; changing the planning praxis of authorities, bureaucrats, and researchers; and building collective solidarities. On their own, these may not be enough for sustained transformation. However, when layered, they represent vital pathways towards tackling inequalities in their multidimensionality—or, as hooks (1994, p. 47) reminds us in relation to Freire's work, conscientisation is not "an end itself, but always as it is joined by meaningful praxis.''

These circuits open up opportunities to address *maldistribution* through policies and practices that more closely reflect the experiences of often-excluded residents, and through concrete initiatives of upgrading, strategic planning, or urban development that address local needs and aspirations. They have supported the *reciprocal recognition* of who frames planning approaches and of the knowledge underpinning different approaches, reckoning with structural and historical drivers of oppression, and modelling methodologies to engage multiple stakeholders inclusively across diverse and intersectional identities. They have increased the *parity of participation* in decision-making, both within dominant institutions and outside them, through new or expanded platforms, collaborations, or collective organisations, with broad capacity building to support the equitable and meaningful engagement of usually excluded groups. Finally, while embracing differences and conflicts, these circuits have supported a collective sense of identity and friendship by building relationships of *solidarity and care* across diverse stakeholders and within urban poor communities, through knowledge co-production processes and concrete interventions which move towards more collective relationships with land, housing, infrastructure, and nature.

These lessons, however, come with challenges and tensions: It is no coincidence that we have referred to these circuits as "emancipatory" rather than "emancipation," reflecting the uncertain and still ongoing process of change. Contestation remains constitutive of these processes, driven by deep epistemic clashes, and the negotiation of differences toward collective goals. While capacities and reflexivity may have been built with progressive individuals, they remain embedded within hierarchical and often patriarchal institutions that may not have the will or resourcing to sustain planning changes. Nor are these issues localised, with the three partners situated inside the global development industry that remains driven by project-oriented and "results-based" forms of management. In a post-Sustainable Development Goals world, questions have been raised around the kinds of "expertise" that inform contested concepts of sustainability and resilience (Butcher, 2022). Likewise, marginalised communities are themselves full of diverse aspirations and needs, and deeply impacted by different trajectories across genders, identities, and geographies, which shape trust, social norms, and expectations.

In the face of such challenges, it might be easy to remain cynical about the routes to transformation, and the long roads of advocacy, research, and action walked by these institutions. However, the imagery of a *circuit* is used to reflect the slow but radical transformation they mobilise, as a multi-directional process of knowledge and exchange, and the halting progress through which learning and "un-learning" happens in ways that may only be visible once we arrive back to our starting points, and *know it for the first time*: "We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to

arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time" (Eliot, 1943, p. 39). These emancipatory circuits of knowledge invite a fundamental reframing of *what constitutes planning knowledge*, and of the spaces, actors, and practices involved. We see these as crucial questions of epistemic justice, and therefore holding deep capacities to build pathways towards urban equality.

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