

# Participatory GIS

## *some conceptual and theoretical notes*

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Participatory GIS (P-GIS) means generally different things to different people both in literature and in discussions. Does this matter? Not necessarily, I would say; as long as we are able to communicate. Nevertheless, some conceptual and theoretical efforts with regards to issues surrounding P-GIS seem to be appropriate.

### **Why a theory matters?**

A theory of P-GIS

- helps in clarifying “what we are talking about”
- helps to understand/explain/etc. concrete P-GIS practices
- relates to adjacent knowledge/literature/concepts/ideas
- helps to avoid pamphlet-ism
- helps to design sound/healthy P-GIS practices
- etc.

and above all

- helps to identify and formulate dilemmas in our current understanding and practice of P-GIS which – in turn – provide opportunities for doing non-trivial research and thus for continuous improvement of our understanding.

### **Danger of a theory**

However, theories may also have adverse effects. A potential danger of a theory is that it

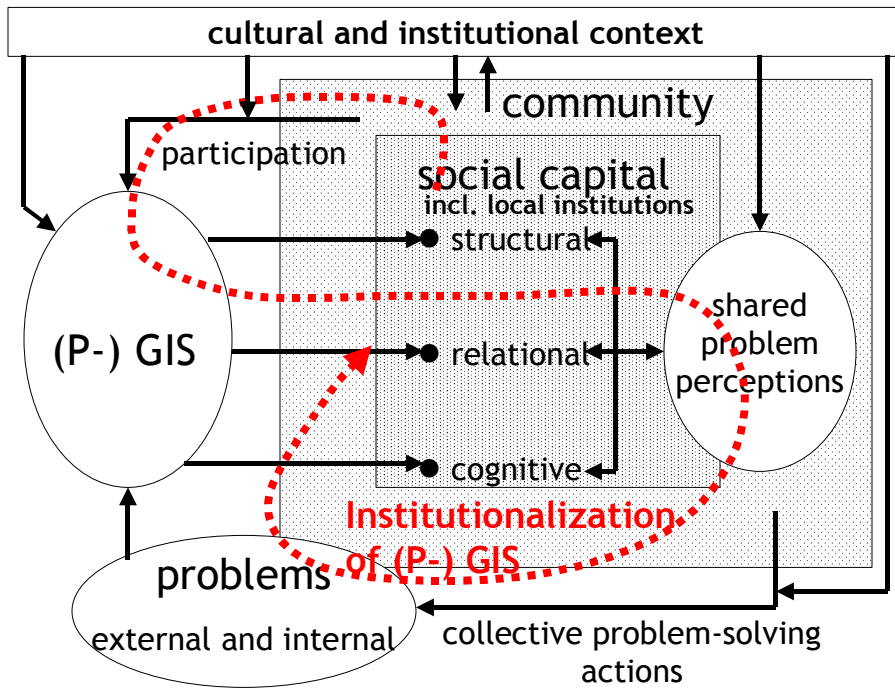
- creates artificial and unproductive divides
- tries to explain too much and actually does too little
- etc.

Conceptual and theoretical developments in P-GIS may help us to avoid the trap of positioning P-GIS in reaction of a caricature (misrepresentation) of mainstream GIS. Think for a moment what a *non-participatory* GIS would look like. Is information without participation thinkable? Probably, P-GIS is about what Information Systems (IS), GIS, Geo-information, and the like, *ought to be*. This then would mean that a theory of P-GIS is quite the same as a theory of GIS in general. And, consequently, I will speak of “(P-) GIS”.

### **Different theoretical frames may be applied to different research questions**

(P-) GIS is multifaceted and different aspects may be addressed by different research questions each having their own, distinct theoretical backdrop. The following conceptual framework intends to bring together some of the theoretical frames that I believe surround the field of (P-) GIS. Roughly speaking, the

conceptual framework bases itself on the premise that social groups (community) is the basis for geo-information – or any information for that matter – to be meaningful. On the other hand, mechanisms that provide communities with meaningful (geo-) information may become “part and parcel” or institutionalized within these communities.



### Conceptual framework of P-GIS

Note: "Community" may also refer to arrangement between local community and external authority.