

# Participatory Action Research

## Transitioning Toward Youth Leadership in Protected Areas of the Risaralda Model Forest

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### Introduction

This research was conducted as part of a collaborative initiative aimed at strengthening the meaningful participation of the Semillas de Mokatán Participatory Action Research Group (PARG) in socio-environmental territorial processes within Santa Emilia Natural Park, a protected area in the municipality of Belén de Umbría, Risaralda, Colombia. Analyzing the context revealed a structural tension between policy frameworks that promote youth inclusion and institutional practices that, in practice, limit young people's effective influence. Although legal frameworks and public discourse recognize youth as strategic actors in territorial development, their participation is often confined to consultative or symbolic spaces without real decision-making power.

The research problem centers on this gap: the distance between the formal recognition of youth leadership and the absence of procedural mechanisms that ensure young people's meaningful involvement in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of initiatives. This situation is further aggravated by asymmetric power dynamics between institutional actors and youth organizations, limiting the latter's autonomy and ability to influence decision-making.

The study is driven by the need to understand, from a strategic perspective, how relationships among stakeholders shape the effectiveness of participatory processes and how an explicit theory of change can help transform these dynamics. The research not only addresses a diagnostic need but also seeks to propose methodological improvements that strengthen collaborative governance with youth.

### Methods

The research was grounded in Participatory Action Research (PAR) as its central methodological approach. This framework assumes that knowledge is not generated externally to the territory but rather through direct interaction with local stakeholders, who actively participate in identifying and addressing the problem.

The process was organized into interconnected phases. First, a participatory diagnosis was conducted. Next, a causal analysis of the protected area's environmental conditions was carried out. Finally, participatory action was implemented to plan actions within the protected area.

| PAR Phase                            | ILM Element          |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Negotiating the demand               | Shared Understanding |
| Self-diagnosis                       |                      |
| Programming and implementation       | Vision and Planning  |
| Praxis, evaluation, and new openings |                      |

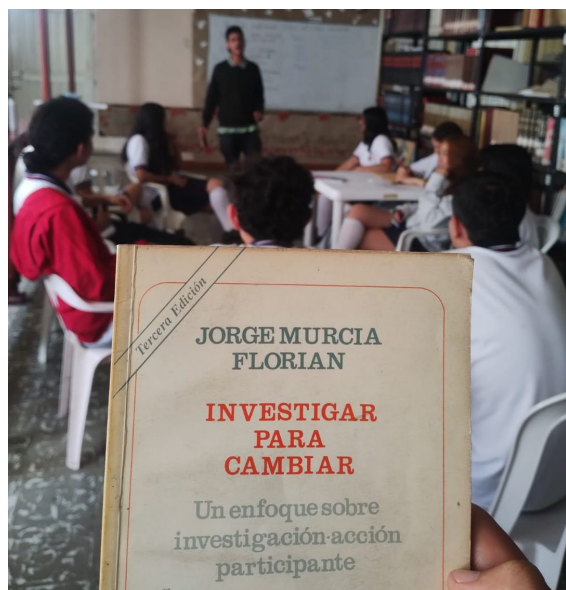
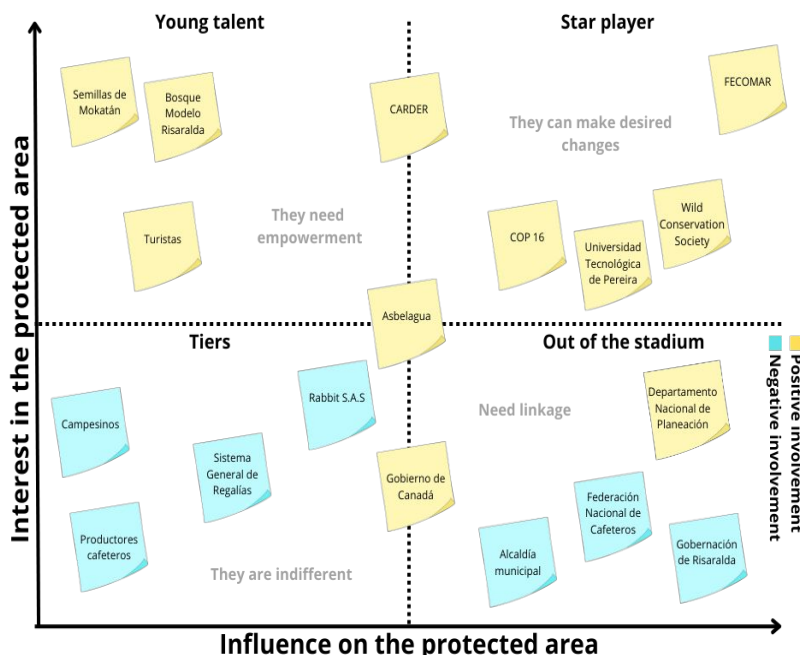
Note. PAR-ILM Alignment (2025)

## Key Results

Key results included a causal analysis of the environmental challenges identified within the protected area, as well as an assessment of conflicts and opportunities; a stakeholder analysis (shown in the figure at right) examining actors' influence and dependence within the protected area; and an analysis of local actions from a youth perspective and their relationship to the elements of Integrated Landscape Management (ILM).

To focus the PARG's interest on environmental actions, it was necessary to implement practical approaches that facilitated its active engagement in the research process.

In this context, PAR was integrated with an educational innovation strategy designed to create spaces for discussion, feedback, and collective knowledge creation through playful learning, thereby reducing the distance between students and the learning process.



Source: Discussion session with the Semillas de Mokatán PARG (2025)

## Conclusion and Next Steps

The organic emergence of youth participation in landscape-scale governance processes demonstrates that children, adolescents, and young people can not only be included in these spaces but also constitute strategic actors in building territorial visions oriented toward sustainability.

With regard to the implications of engaging youth in ILM, the study concludes that social agreements, as a mechanism for building a shared vision of the territory, must consistently include young people—not as passive participants, but as co-managers of long-term territorial actions.

Download the full research paper [here](#).

The authors express their sincere gratitude to EcoAgriculture Partners for promoting the development of this research pathway. They also thank the Semillas de Mokatán Participatory Action Research Group for providing this first opportunity to engage in Participatory Action Research.