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Social Network Analysis with the Net-map Tool - A Systematic Review

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Abstract

As participatory and visual social network mapping tool, Net-Map combines participatory action research, stakeholder and social network analysis with a sociological analysis of power relations. During group or individual interviews, Net-Maps help in identifying and visualising what actors are involved in a given network, how they are linked, how influential they are with regards to a specific outcome, and what their goals are. Since its development in 2006, there has been an increasing number of applications of Net-Map as research method and as tool to support project management and organisational development. Remaining challenges in the application of the tool include group dynamics which can hinder systematic data collection, and the aggregation and comparability of maps during data analysis. The proposed paper has the objectives to (i) describe the origins of Net-Map, (ii) review its current applications, and (iii) derive implications for its future use. We carry out a systematic review of 86 peer-reviewed articles using Net-Map.

We give a detailed overview on the topics for which the tool has been used, how authors integrated the tool with other methods, how they analysed and used the insights gained from the net-map sessions, which limitations are mentioned and which quality assurance techniques are suggested. Preliminary results show that peer-reviewed published articles using Net-Map show applications in a wide variety contexts of social action, ranging from natural resource management, to agricultural and rural service provision, and innovation, research and policy processes. Objectives range from collecting network data to eliciting governance challenges. Most authors used the method within a qualitative case study approach and in combination with other qualitative methods. Few quality assurance techniques are applied and the application of the tool is often not well described and discussed.

Based on these results we discuss the suitability of Net-Map for analysing these diverse contexts and identify benefits and limitations of Net-Map. To support the future application of Net-Map, we provide a framework to facilitate its systematic use and clarify basic principles of quality control.

Keywords: Governance, mixed methods, social networks