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Minority voice in community design building processes

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Abstract

An old lady's words during the building process of a participatory design with a community: "But this is what we thought might be ideal?" Versus her husband, a construction worker: "But this is the way it should be done!" When dealing with participatory design processes sometimes the opinion of the experts are the ones always honoured and the minorities, not in quantity but in voice, are underestimated. This paper is based on a case study of three different design processes taken place on the rural community of San Jose de Olaes- Ecuador, dealing with the importance of the voice of the minority, in this case represented by the women of a community, and the men's voice, usually the working force. We will illustrate this process and how it has both positive and negative consequences on the project and community relationships.

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1. Introduction

"Minority; a culturally, ethnically, or racially distinct group that coexists with, but is subordinate to a more dominant group. As the term is used in the social sciences, this subordinancy is the chief defining characteristic of a minority group." (MarcadorDePosición1) (Encyclopedia Britanica, Inc, 2016) (MarcadorDePosición1) (Encyclopedia Britanica, Inc, 2016)

How minorities act or are really involved on the decision making? Is it necessary to include minorities in the decision making process of the design and implementation of infrastructure on a community?

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This investigation is the result of a process of over a year's work in the community of San José de Olaes developing design-built projects on the basis of participatory design and construction. Based on three different projects we will illustrate the dissimilar ways or appropriation of this participatory design process and how this affects both positive and negative on communities. Our aim is not to categorize the effectiveness of participatory and inclusive methods but to raise awareness on how particular communities and processes need particular approaches; no recipes apply on this kind of projects.

We will first introduce some concepts about inclusion and different level of participation in community design processes, as a foundation, in order to analyze and compare three different design-build processes, the community kitchen, the church and the shadow. We think it is important to compare these three different cases in order to illustrate how, during this period of time, the participatory involvement evolved, leaving us with the question on how pertinent inclusion may be in these type of projects.

Historically, matriarchy and patriarchy have been two models of leading cultures, in which the leader takes action, based on his/her wisdom or their counselors. This has not changed for several communities and countries. And in the name of democracy we have "majorities" which paradoxically are minorities leading processes for the majorities and minorities.

Minorities are not a concept that applies only on matters of number, sometimes majorities in number are minorities in matter of taking decisions and responsibilities, "minority status does not necessarily correlate to population. In some cases one or more so-called minority groups may have a population many times the size of the dominating group, as was the case in South Africa under apartheid (c. 1950–91)" (Encyclopedia Britanica, Inc, 2016)

In Latin America, and the Andes specifically, usually a community is led by the older males that take decisions, frequently they are not majority by number in the community but are the ones that take the economic resources to their families, and because of this fact then they know, or think they know, what their families and communities need in terms of infrastructure. In the other hand, women in communities are mainly meant to take care of children, their homes and community activities.

It has become fashionable, on every level of the decision making process, from states to local government, to talk about participation, especially in communities when they are developing processes for their infrastructure. It is said that it is important to have participatory processes so every voice in the community will be heard and everyone will see their work reflected on the infrastructure, "citizens, individually and collectively, shall participate as leading players in decision making, planning and management of public affairs and in the people's monitoring of State institutions and society and their representatives in an ongoing process of building citizen power. Participation shall be governed by the principles of equality, autonomy, public deliberation, respect for differences, monitoring by the public, solidarity and interculturalism. The participation of citizens in all matters of public interest is a right, which shall be exercised by means of mechanisms of representative, direct and community democracy. (Asamblea Constituyente, 2008). By inclusion, we refer to take account of every member of a community or its representative, minority or majority.

Being socially included means that people have the resources, opportunities and capabilities they need to:

- Learn (participate in education and training) .
- Work (participate in employment, unpaid or voluntary work including family and career responsibilities).
- Engage (connect with people, use local services and participate in local, cultural, civic and recreational activities).
- Have a voice (influence decisions that affect them). See Fig.1.

"Design processes that involve user participation concern issues of representation in the early stages of design, when users' needs and expectations are being expressed. A participatory approach is used to investigate the nature of design discussion during the early stages of design. It is shown that the ideology of inclusive design is similar to the ideology of participatory design. The ability of language-use to reveal user preference is explored through the analysis of architect–user conversations. Investigating architect and user interaction revealed that tacit knowledge can be made explicit and the difficulty of generalizing user-needs from user statements." (Luck, 2003)

Socialization, participation and personal leadership are concepts that exists in order to validate inclusion within the decision making process in communities. See Fig.2.

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