Social participation in planning, design, and management of public spaces: the case of Mexico

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Abstract

Top-down approaches fail to involve, collaborate with, and consider social actors in the process of planning, design, and maintenance of public spaces (PDMPS). Through this research we address how social participation is included in PDMPS in the Mexican case, by identifying the actors, the level of communication achieved, and their authority and power in the PDMPS process. The paper employs a case study approach, informed by semi-structured interviews. We use a democracy diagram to uncover the diversity of involved actors. We show how government provide little support for social participation to implement participatory processes in PDMPS on a broader scale.

Keywords: urban planning; social participation; public space; democracy diagram; Mexico

Introduction

Public spaces are an essential asset for contemporary cities (Madanipour, 2015). In these spaces, social life unfolds, economic activities are developed, and traditions are reflected (Harvey, 2000). This research understands public space as different types of physical areas in a city, where diverse social, cultural, artistic, recreational, political activities and functions unfold and where social expressions and manifestations can be shared between citizens, creating a sense of community or collectiveness (Alvarado Vazquez et al., 2021; Gehl & Svarre, 2013; Madanipour, 2015; Narciso, 2018). Despite the attempts to give citizens a more central and active place in the different stages of planning, design and maintenance of public spaces (PDMPS) (Arango Cuartas & López Valencia, 2021), studies of participatory processes uncovered several challenges: lack of local governments support for participatory processes, lack of trust between government and civil society, lack of social visibility and reach, need for inclusive designs and public space interventions usually do not reflect the social needs (see Appendix Table 1).

This paper addresses the involvement of social actors in PDMPS in the Mexican context. We examine how social participation is included in PDMPS: (i) the actors taking part in these participatory processes; (ii) the level of communication achieved in the process, and (iii) the level of authority and power. Our research uses Fung's (2006) democracy cube as an analytical model to explore the degree of social participation that citizens achieve in participatory processes (Fung,

2006). The research is informed by a review of the literature on social participation for the PDMPS and on the use of the case study approach. We employ an explorative qualitative approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews with four groups of governance actors in two cities of the Mexico City Megalopolis: Mexico City and Puebla.

The paper is divided into five sections. Section 2 discusses the benefits of social participation during planning processes and the current challenges of social participation in PDMPS. Section 3 provides a brief outline of the case study context. Section 4 describes the analytical model and methods used to collect and analyse the data, while Section 5 presents the findings. Section 6 discusses the key insights from the research, focusing on social participation. The paper concludes by outlining the scientific and social relevance of current involvement of social actors in the PDMPS in the Mexican context.

Social participation

One of the main ways to improve or reshape public spaces is to consider the knowledge and ideas of local citizens (Hanzl, 2007). The contribution of local knowledge from different stakeholders can lead to more efficient management of public spaces, focusing on what is most needed while simultaneously saving resources (Møller et al., 2019)**.** Cruickshank and Coupe (2013) argue that this creative ability does not only reside with the planner or professional designer; also citizens can give meaningful feedback on how public spaces are planned or designed (Cruickshank & Coupe, 2013). This can transform the traditional vision of social participation, as the role of the community shifts from being a mere observer to an active participant in the PDMPS. For this paper, the concept of social participation is adopted to explore the importance of involving broader society in PDMPS.

Participation can be understood as the action of taking part in something. It can be defined as the democratic right for which any person can be involved in a decision process (Rydin & Pennington, 2000). The European Institute for Public Participation (European Institute for Public Participation (EIPP), 2009) defines social participation as the means to achieve democratic values such as justice, effectiveness, and legitimacy, usually associated with governance, and as a potential solution for democratic challenges. Social participation is related to citizen participation, community empowerment, co-production, co-innovation, and civic participation (see Appendix, Table 2). Social participation is seen as opening up planning processes to democratic scrutiny and as a way to generate legitimacy and user acceptance for projects (Mahdavinejad & Amini, 2011; Rydin & Pennington, 2000). It has been used for political purposes such as participatory governance or democracy approaches that promote participant values, skills, and knowledge (Morrissey, 2000). These approaches aim to empower citizens to take control and solve their problems. In the political scope, social participation seeks to enable citizens to discover their interests and how their input should be interpreted and used for a specific project (Morrissey, 2000). The lack of opportunities for social organisations to participate in PDMPS diminishes their influence in developing public space projects. This creates exclusionary practices among those who have decision-making power in these processes and the needs and views of the users of public spaces (Alvarado Vazquez et al., 2021).

Social participation challenges in planning, design and management of public spaces

Governments in developing countries are trying to implement social participation in PDMPS to promote democracy and a more transparent decision-making process that engages with civil society (United Cities and Local Governments, 2016). The European Union, the World Bank, local governments, and NGOs advocate for the inclusion of social organisations and local residents in PDMPS (European Union, 2011; Kher Kaw et al., 2020). Under the Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations (United Nations, 2015) recommends enhanced involvement of civil society to create more inclusive cities. Also, the New Urban Agenda advocates for societal participation in the different stages of planning processes (United Nations, 2017).

Nevertheless, there is not much clarity about how projects that involve participatory processes in PDMPS are reflected in the interventions in the public space and their effects on the future of their inhabitants (Paukaeva et al., 2021; Riegler & Bylund, 2020). Additionally, participatory processes raise the question whether citizens want to participate fully or just want to be given the opportunity (Hordijk et al., 2015). Practice shows that actors with professional knowledge are more aware of the urban context and participate more frequently, which results in discrimination of those lacking technical background instead of enhanced integration (Boonstra, 2015; Iwinska, 2017).

Other criticisms of social participation processes arise from the failure to translate policy intentions into reality. Time, practice, trust, and persistence are needed for institutional and community partners to become acclimated to the potential benefits of collaborative planning (Maginn, 2007; Swyngedouw, 2005). Recent studies indicate the additional challenges to increasing social participation in PDMPS (see Appendix Table 1). The challenges include lack of support by government institutions, low levels of trust between civil society and government, social needs not being considered, poor social visibility and insufficient research, and low awareness of social participation opportunities and outcomes.

Democracy cube

One way to analyse participatory processes in urban configurations is through the adaptable framework of the democracy cube (see Figure 1). Applied to democratic governance challenges, participatory community-based technology initiatives, and social innovation through e-participation (Pablo et al., 2013; Wehn & Evers, 2014), it is based on three dimensions:

(i) *Who participates*: The first aspect looks at the type of involved participant, ranging from select experts to an open invitation to anyone (Pablo et al., 2013; Schrögel & Kolleck, 2019).

(ii) *Level of communication:* This dimension examines how social actors participate and communicate with one another (as listeners, expressing preferences or developing preferences) and how they take decisions (aggregating and bargaining, deliberating and negotiating, deploying technical expertise) (Pablo et al., 2013; Schrögel & Kolleck, 2019). Pablo et al. (2013) use a different ranking, distinguishing six main modes of communication and decision-making in participatory processes. The first three – (1) listener as a spectator, (2) express preferences and (3)

develop preferences – do not attempt to translate participant views or preferences into a real decision or action. The second three are (4) aggregation and bargaining, participants know what they want; (5) deliberation and negotiation, participants discuss in a group to figure out what they want; and (6) technical expertise, professionals solve particular issues, usually involving planners, teachers, social workers but excluding everyday citizens. These six modes of communication are measured from least to most intense, indicating the commitment level required from participants (Fung, 2006; Pablo et al., 2013).

Fung defines communication as the process where local residents participate in a face-to-face conversation, engaging directly as equals and discussing alternative solutions to a public problem. For this research, we understand communication as the means of interacting with one another and making PDMPS decisions. Communication is important because it allows discussions about experiences, forms of knowledge, mutual learning, and collaboration about different constructions of urban futures (Christmann et al., 2020; Healey, 1997; Smaniotto et al., 2019). Existing research has focused on spurring better communication channels within urban planning, especially two-way communication and co-creation settings, thereby enabling better PDMPS channels (Staffans et al., 2020).

(iii) *Authority and power:* This dimension focuses on the impact of participation, on whether citizens have a say in decision-making processes or benefit from it (e.g., learning something new). Similar to Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, the cube covers five types of influence, ranging from 'least', where personal benefits exclude participatory decisions or where participants just listen and have little or no expectations to influence a policy or actions, to the most influential one, where participants have direct authority over public decisions (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006; Pablo et al., 2013; Schrögel & Kolleck, 2019). Fung (2006) defines authority and power as what participants want versus what public authorities do in reality. Participatory processes intend to produce better decisions, giving a degree of power in decision-making processes to the stakeholders of public space projects and look to ground citizen preferences in the final project (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). Collaborative and inclusive participation with government officials and other stakeholders can enhance acceptance by the intended users (Fung, 2006).

The level of authority and power reflects the citizen–government relationship. For Ertio (2015), it relates to the flow of decisions through three main levels (i) consultation, where information flows in one channel from citizens to the government; (ii) criteria power level, where residents can determine a policy; and (iii) operational power level, where residents have the decision-making power to translate a policy or service into reality. For this research, we define 'authority and power' as the impact of social participation in PDMPS decision-making processes. These three dimensions provide the space to map any participatory process.
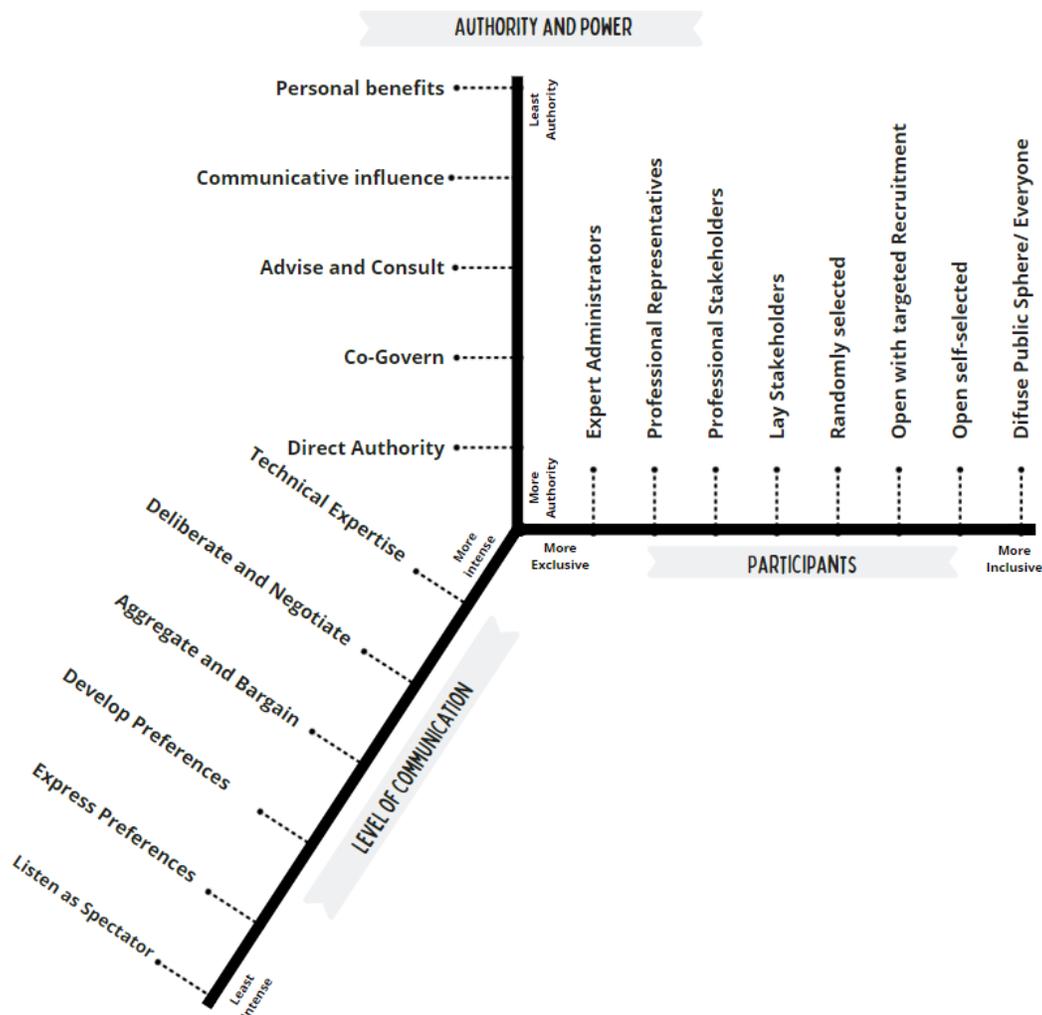
Figure 1. Democracy cube (Fung, (2006).

Methodology

This study focuses on neighbourhood-scale PDMPS of public spaces that are owned by the government, with flexible functions, appropriated by a community, and privately or publicly maintained. These can be parks, other green areas, empty plots, streets or the popular neighbourhood corner. They often need more attention in marginalised neighbourhoods as urban growth threatens their existence, and local governments often are less interested in investing in their maintenance (Jasso, 2018; Portal, 2016).

The research studies how social participation is included in PDMPS, by adapting Fung's (2006) democracy cube model (see Figure 1) to examine the degree of social participation achieved in participatory processes. The democracy cube is a framework that focuses on the range of institutional possibilities for public participation(Fung, 2006). Its usefulness lies in understanding the potential and limits of participatory forms based on public discussions with different stakeholders. It helps situate and contrast choices made by a group of actors along the three axes of the cube and to describe who directly participates, how they communicate inductively, and the

level of influence on the decision-making process. As our research focuses on social participation in PDMPS, this framework is considered suitable for understanding how residents see this topic and what could be a desirable social participation scenario.

Case study approach

As we seek to analyse social participation in PDMPS processes in real-life settings, the research employs a case study approach, focusing on Mexico City and Puebla. Geographically, both cities belong to the megalopolis of Central Mexico and have close geographic proximity and historical relation to the development of public spaces. Both cities are top-10 contributors to the country's GDP; however, each city has a different budget to invest in the development of public spaces and faces multiple challenges, namely insecurity and lack of attention by local administrations (Alvarado Vazquez et al., 2021; Jasso, 2018; Kuri, 2015). Three main aspects guided the selection. First, national and local level agendas have tried to promote social participation in topics related to PDMPS through government institutions (e.g., the Participatory Planning Manual with an Equity Approach in Communities of Protected Natural Areas) (Diario Oficial de la Federacion, 2016; Gobierno del Estado de Puebla, 2019). After the first General Law of Human Settlements, Land Management and Urban Development was published in Mexico in 2016, programmes and policies were promoted to create participatory approaches and address urban issues (Poder Legislativo, 2016). Thereafter, local governments published regulatory documents to promote innovative methods that improve social participation (Alvarado Vazquez et al., 2021; Indahningrum, 2020). Nevertheless, there are still challenges to facilitate meaningful feedback from local residents and ensuring that the local community has an influential voice in PDMPS decision-making processes (Alvarado Vazquez & Casiano Flores, 2022; Hernández-Bonilla, 2008).

Second, the lack of coordination and mismanagement in both cities create limited opportunities for local residents to participate in PDMPS (Alvarado Vazquez et al., 2021). Governmental organizations and academic institutions have been working on the inclusion of civil society organizations (Asociación Nacional de Parques y Recreación A.C., 2018; Delgadillo, 2018) and enhancing the interaction between different actors in PDMPS (Alvarado Vazquez et al., 2021; Pena-Salmon & Rojas-Caldelas, 2009). However, additional efforts are needed at the regulatory level and in practice. The lack of involvement in urban participatory processes, including those related to public spaces, and the limited opportunities for civil society to participate in PDMPS processes have been highlighted by scholars (Alvarado Vazquez et al., 2021; Kuri, 2015; Latina et al., 2009).

Interviewed actors

We conducted semi-structured interviews with stakeholders directly involved in PDMPS. Interviewees were selected based on the commonly identified actors in the literature and previous public space research (Alvarado Vazquez et al., 2021; Gehl & Svarre, 2013; Mandeli, 2010). Key groups of actors include the following:

- Government: Federal and local institutions and agencies that attend to public space and promote participatory processes (Mandeli, 2010; United Cities and Local Governments, 2016).

- Non-governmental organisations: These organisations focus on the local context and are usually formed by residents who share a common point of view and seek to solve a specific problem (Borja, 2011; Madanipour, 1999). We focused only on NGOs working on public space issues, where they represent residents and users, i.e., the bottom-up view.

- Architecture/urban planning consultancy firms: They bid on public tenders or proposal, sometimes upon invitation by public institutions. Government bodies often do not have the technical or operational capacity to execute participatory projects and rely on external consultancies. These contracts sometimes include the development of participatory processes (Cuenya, 2009).

- Academia: Local universities provide scientific knowledge about the local conditions and are invited to participate as consulting experts in the decision-making process (Gehl & Svarre, 2013; Ziccardi, 2012). Academia maintains a more regular contact with civil society through its research efforts and often is invited to join participatory processes (Alvarado Vazquez, 2017; Breuer et al., 2014).

Data collection and analysis

Twenty one semi-structured interviews were conducted in total, twenty between November 2019 and January 2020 and another two in August 2021. The interviews were administered, transcribed, and coded in Spanish, and select portions were translated into English to provide illustrative quotes. The interviewer recorded twenty interviews (25 hours of audio recordings) and took extensive notes during one interview where the interviewee did not wish to be recorded (see Table 3 in Appendix). The objective of the interviews was to gain insights into the governance actors' perspectives how social participation is included in PDMPS. The interviews were transcribed together with field notes and corroborated through the audio recordings. Based on the transcripts, the data was organised in a spreadsheet, according to the three dimensions of the democracy cube.

The democracy cube was partially modified based on the specifics of the research context and the outcomes of the literature review. The first modification relates to the participant dimension. The original framework established a set of predefined actors expected to be part of a participatory process. Our research simplifies the categorisation based on the stakeholders invited in participatory processes for PDMPS. Following Carmona et al. (2008) and Colic et al. (2013), we assume that a higher number of participants leads to higher levels of social participation, by virtue of including a wider range of perspectives. The second modification is the level of communication achieved in the participatory process. We added 'no communication' as the lowest level, along the following growing intensity scale: no communication, listen as spectator, express preferences,

develop preferences (co-creation), deliberate and negotiate, and deploy technical expertise. We also consider the level of development preferences as a co-creation process, where the action of ideating something is shared by two or more stakeholders (see Table 3 in Appendix).

The original democracy cube has six levels of authority and power, and for our democracy diagram, they remain unaltered, ranging from least influential (lack of transparency) to most influential (decision-making), along the following ordinal arrangement (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006): lack of transparency, informal, promoting, public consultation, collaborative planning and design, and decision-making. In our diagram, the lowest level means that information is not shared with the public and that there are no communication channels – the government retains full decision-making authority. At the highest level, all stakeholders provide technical expertise and a collaborative decision-making process is followed (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Democracy diagram for social participation in PDMPS. Adapted from Fung (2006).

Social participation: actors, communication, authority and power

Involved actors

In the two cities of central Mexico, we found eleven main stakeholders involved in PDMPS, classifying them into five groups. The actors most often involved are the federal and local government institutions, as they oversee PDMPS in Mexico and usually are the institutions that fail to promote the involvement of local actors in participatory process. They are followed by social organisations such as local residents, resident councils and NGOs as the next most important group. The group of professionals, such as academics or professional associations are in third place. The private sector has the fourth place, while international institutions were the lest frequently mentioned in the last place (see Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of stakeholders involved in PDMPS

Stakeholders mentioned by interviewees		Description	Group of interviewed actors				
			Federal government	Local government	NGOs	Architecture/ urban planning companies	Academia
1 Government	Federal government	*		X	X	X	X
	Local government	*	X	X	X	X	X
2 Social organisations	Local residents	Inhabitants of the city		X	X		X
	Resident councils	Groups of citizens working together to solve a communal issue	X				
	NGOs	*	X	X	X		X
3 Professionals	Academia	*	X	X		X	X
	Professional associations	Organisations formed by academics and practitioners of architecture or urbanism			X		X
	Public space professionals	Individuals working on public space issues		X	X		
4 Private sector	Architecture/ urban planning consultancy companies	*	X		X	X	

	Real estate developers	*Companies investing in properties for sale or rent*		X		X	
5 International institutions	Global organisations, such as UN-Habitat				X		

*Defined in section on interviewed actors.

According to our interviewees, the local government works more directly with citizens, and some government institutions encourage the creation of citizen councils. However, most of the time, those participating in citizen councils do not necessarily represent local needs as they have their own interests (interviews with local government practitioners and NGOs). Local government practitioners mentioned the need to improve the participatory process. Government participants mentioned that it is not common for communities to start a public space initiative (or at least they were not aware of such instances). In the case of Puebla, efforts have been made to improve public spaces in the city; nevertheless, local government actors mentioned a lack of technical capacity to meet the social and monetary needs and a lack of inter-institutional coordination.

> "A *mobility corridor was promoted by the government, through social participation, we create awareness about the importance to improve sidewalks and explain to the government the benefits of improving them."* (interview, Municipal Planning Institute of Puebla)

NGOs do not build strong relationships with government institutions as this could be seen as suspect and spread distrust among local citizens, and when such relations exist they are downplayed or not mentioned at all. NGOs and academics have the closest contact with local residents and social organisations, as they have a more positive presence within urban communities than the government.

Architecture/urban planning consultancy companies interact extensively with government institutions, as they are hired by government to develop public spaces projects. These consultancy firms must often complete the assigned activities with a low budget. Only one company mentioned trying to have participatory involvement with society, but just at a superficial level and civil society is rarely involved (interview with architecture/urban planning companies). However, the main complaints of the private sector are the lack of budget to continue or finalise projects and that social participation is just an administrative tendering procedure without any relevance to the final project. Only one company mentioned that local residents were part of initiatives to improve communal public spaces, however, only in high-income neighbourhoods, as they usually can afford to pay a private architecture firm (interviews with the private sector in Puebla).

> *"...some workshops had to be held according to the contract obtained with the government… several actors were involved such public servants in the tourism area, businessmen and owners of the land, and usually in upper-middle class neighbourhoods."* (Interview, consultancy company in Puebla).

Not-for-profit professional associations are involved in PDMPS mainly through government practitioners at the federal and local levels, who request their expertise in direct consultations or commissioned studies. One NGO mentioned the work of international organisations in Puebla, as

sponsors of public space projects and collaborations with the federal government, via international agreements such as the New Urban Agenda of Habitat III.

Level of communication achieved

Organising the findings along the level of communication axis enabled the visualisation of how the interviewed actors perceive the levels of communication achieved in PDMPS processes (see Figure 3). Government institutions, by law, need to promote communication strategies with social organisations to inform about the different actions, objectives and programmes to improve the urban environment. However, particularly for PDMPS, there is a generalised perception of absence of communication from government institutions to social actors. Federal government actors mentioned that they are developing collaborative projects with social strategies; however, they recognise that more efforts are needed as they have less involvement with local residents. They usually reach a level of communication where they try to listen to local residents and other stakeholders on public space issues in participatory processes. Local governments are more in contact with local residents, social organisations and other stakeholders , but respondents also felt that participatory strategies need to be improved. Local government try to hear what social organisations and other stakeholders have to say in participatory processes but they do not maintain a continuous communication.
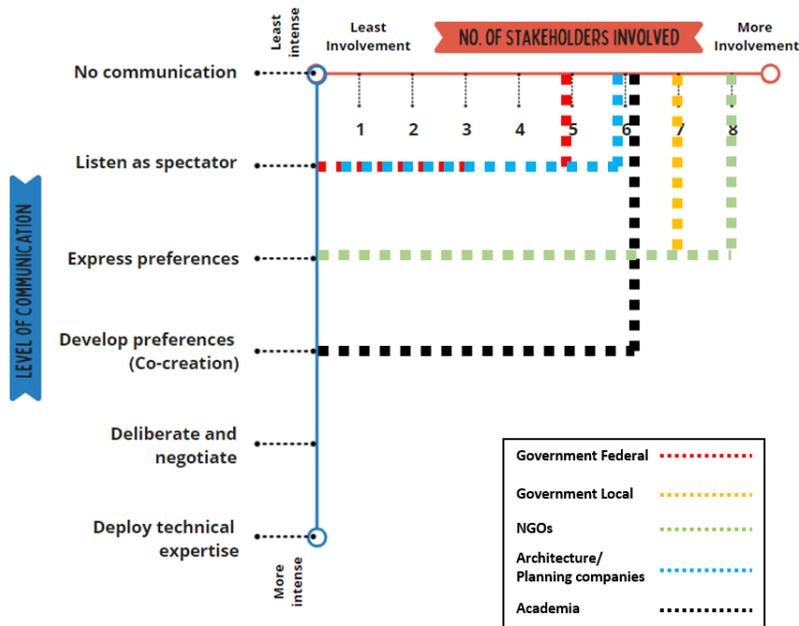

Figure 3. Level of communication in PDMPS in Mexico.

The selected NGOs focus their communication efforts on promoting or improving PDMPS from a bottom-up approach. Usually, they communicate constantly with government institutions, as these provide a budget for their activities. The level of communication mentioned by our interviewees is in the level of express preferences. Local residents and other stakeholders, if invited to a participatory process, express their preferences in development plans or during the development of public space projects, sometimes giving insights about how to improve them.

We interviewed professors with experience in social participation and public spaces. Academics see themselves as a bridge between civil society and decision-makers at the government level, having more liberty and time to work on academic projects related to PDMPS. We found that academics are the actors who interact the most with other stakeholders but still are cautious about getting involved with government institutions. Moreover, they usually try to work on collaborative projects through their students' bachelor's or master's thesis projects.

Architecture/urban planning consultancy companies develop public space projects for public and private institutions and sometimes have to develop a participatory strategy as a contract prerequisite. Nevertheless, all mentioned that the inputs obtained through social organisations never achieve real impact in the final project and that the participatory processes are minimal.

Level of authority and power

Following the democracy cube dimension of the level of authority and power, Figure 4 shows the different levels found for PDMPS in Mexico. Most interviewees report that PDMPS processes rarely involve collaboration with actors from civil society organisations. Most decision-making processes are usually left to government institutions. Federal government practitioners mentioned that in practice there is no direct interaction with local residents and that this task is usually delegated to local governments, academic institutions or well-known NGOs.

Figure 4. Level of authority and power in PDMPS in Mexico.

According to federal and local government, the level of authority and power is informing and consulting with civil society organisations. By contrast, the other interviewed actors find that government institutions do not consult any residents' or civil society organisation, and even when

it does take place, it usually does not lead to a meaningful contribution and impact. Local government practitioners mentioned the need to include residents and other relevant stakeholders in PDMS decision-making processes. Sometimes, participation is related to the personal interests of a selected group of actors invited in decision-making processes (e.g., real estate companies or investors).

We observed that in the democracy diagram, NGOs are trying to reach the levels of collaborative planning and design, they are also attempting to bring awareness about the importance to use the local knowledge of local residents and social organisations in the PDMPS. Nevertheless, they struggle to achieve a decision-making level, as government institutions have the last word in public space planning and design phases. Academia mentioned that their influence is minimal; they usually give advice and inform social organisations and other stakeholders about PDMPS issues and solutions. Academics perceive that government institutions primarily work with the private sector; only reaching out to them for some sort of collaborative planning, design and decision-making process.

The architecture/urban planning companies mentioned that social participation for PDMPS does not consider residents' needs and aspirations as there is a lack of social involvement. Companies are usually hired by government institutions and take the planning and design decisions. Often NGOs and other actors do not have a say in decision-making. The interviewed companies said that they consider social participation only if the government requests it as part of their contract. This companies usually they develop master plans or public space projects based on official government requirements provided by the government institutions. In practice was mentioned how they do not consider the needs or aspirations of local residents, and it is common to observe simulated participatory process that do not have any impact in a final project. All actors mentioned that local residents are usually informed about public space projects after they have already been developed and never in the planning or design phase. It was also mentioned that private companies make decisions according to their own consideration and that civil society is not included in the planning, design, or maintenance stages.

In summary, Mexican government institutions do not initiate social participation in PDMPS; communication is not adequate to develop a participatory process, and the decision-making process is still top-down.
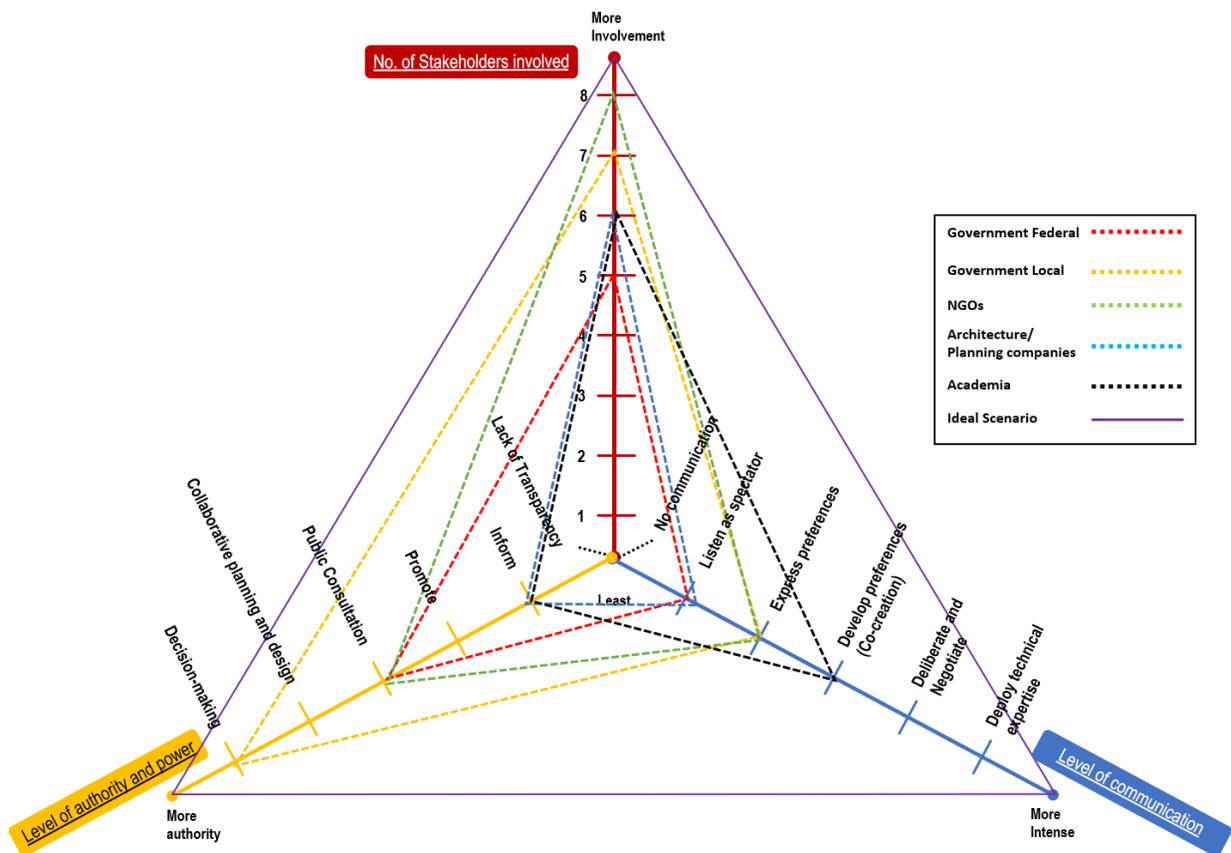
Figure 5. Democracy diagram for social participation in PDMPS.

Discussion

This paper focuses on PDMPS through the lens of the democracy diagram (see Figure 5) to understand to what extent social participation is present in the case study cities. Our findings suggest that social participation in Mexico faces a series of challenges related to weak or absent social involvement, a generalised distrust of participatory processes, and poor communication between different stakeholders. The findings confirm observations from other Latin American and European contexts (Arango Cuartas & López Valencia, 2021; Carmona et al., 2008; Zamanifard et al., 2018). All four groups of domestic governance actors find that social participation should be enhanced. However, there are particular perceptions that differ among the interviewed groups of stakeholders.

(1) All interviewed actors in both cities, except for government institutions, perceive a generalised lack of trust in government.

(2) In both cities NGOs and academics lack trust in the private sector (Architecture/urban planning companies and real estate developers). In their opinion, public-private partnerships develop public space projects with a focus on aesthetic designs but ignoring the functionalities that could enhance social interactions, and accommodate people's

14

preferences through participatory processes. Some NGOs avoid working directly with government institutions as this creates distrust among residents due to the generalised lack of trust in the government.

(3) The private sector (Architecture/urban planning consultancy companies and real estate) has more direct influence in the PDMPS in both cities. Nevertheless, academics mentioned simulated participation, which is not supervised by government Institutions.

Representation and diversity of stakeholders

Social participation has been supported by governments worldwide according to international municipality organisations (United Cities and Local Governments, 2016). However, our interviewees helped to confirm that in the Mexican case, this is only written on paper through laws or policies, but not taken into practice. Government institutions, as part of their agenda, mention social participation has been recently promoted to create more transparent decision-making processes. Social participation is a buzzword present in discourses and legislation but not in final decision-making processes (Bonilla, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2005). Our interviewees mentioned that social participation in Mexico is related to political electoral processes, and this mode of participation has been traditionally promoted. A lack of commitment by government institution to develop participatory process in the PDMPS is currently present.

We found a lack of commitment on the part of the government to involve society in PDMPS (see Appendix Table 1), as there is a traditionalist thought among residents and social organisations that regular citizens need to fight with the government and confront politicians to ensure that their needs are considered (Hernández Bonilla, 2013; Magdy, 2011). Nevertheless, according to NGOs, when an opportunity for participation is presented, many people decide not to participate or get involved. The level of representativeness of society, in general, is reduced, and those who participate do not necessarily speak for the majority (also related to the lack of social visibility and awareness) (Alawadi & Dooling, 2016).

Several efforts need to be made to create more social representation in PDMPS and promote social involvement. A negligible share of the population (0.40%) works in the civil society sector, including NGOs or other social institutions working on urban issues, especially compared with countries like the Netherlands (12%). Social changes need to be promoted through policies that empower activism and provide solid incentives for its creation and development (Ablanedo, 2009; Chávez & González, 2018). Nevertheless, residents and civil society organisations are increasingly becoming more aware of the importance of their local knowledge, and enhanced levels of activism are noted among residents. Especially NGOs and academics institutions have mentioned that they have seen an important growth of independent movements to improve the conditions of public spaces, which also relates to worldwide trends such as placemaking or tactical urbanism (Boonstra, 2015; Lydon et al., 2012). NGOs are the actor with the deepest involvement with residents and social organisations. NGOs working on public space issues focus their efforts on collecting the preferences of residents, but due to lack of resources, they seldom reach higher levels of communication.

Communication

Different communication channels are used to promote participatory processes and enhance public acceptance (see Figure 3). For example, the government and NGOs have used digital communication channels such as websites or social media. Our findings suggest that government institutions at the federal and local levels do not have open channels for continuous and reciprocal communication that would allow residents and social organisations to take part in decision-making processes. NGOs, academics, and architecture/urban planning consultancy companies mentioned an apparent lack of interaction with residents and simulated participatory processes using social media platforms. According to Pablo et al. (2013), when there is simulated participation or lack of communication among different stakeholders in participatory process, the views or aspirations of participants never reach a level of consideration in the final decisions of the PDMPS (Pablo et al., 2013).

In both cities we can confirm the existence of persistent challenges already mentioned by previous research. Among them, the lack of trust, lack of information and collective awareness; and insufficient lack of inclusive design based on local resident outputs are present in the Mexican case (Alvarado Vazquez et al., 2021; Bonilla, 2012; Magdy, 2011). The communication channels in Mexico still do not allow residents or civil society organisations to participate in a collaborative process to improve PDMPS; only academics mentioned that they had been involved in co-creation, mainly on their own initiative.

Authority and power

Regarding the impact of social participation in PDMPS, we find that government institutions are the main decision-makers in public space projects. In the ideal scenario, decision-making power would be shared with civil society organisations and other stakeholders throughout the planning process (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). The activism promoted by NGOs and academics lends a voice to broader societal needs. These organisations are trying to consider the residents' local knowledge and transform social organisations from observers to active agents (Cruickshank & Coupe, 2013; Hanzl, 2007). Nevertheless, residents still lack involvement in decision-making processes, and in practice, it is uncommon to consider the perspective of social actors. Although the exclusion and disempowerment of residents lacking legal representation or support from political representatives are a worldwide issue (Swyngedouw, 2005), Mexico has only 33 NGOs per 100,000 inhabitants compared to the more than 600 in the US or Chile (Ablanedo, 2009; Chávez & González, 2018). The lack of involvement of local residents and the apathy of decision makers to include social organisations in the PDMPS, creates a scenario of low social representativity.

Differences between the case studies

The two case study areas also had a few notable differences. The Mexico City government had more resources focused on participatory approaches for PDMPS than Puebla's. Unsurprisingly, Mexico City also had more experience in creating and communicating government initiatives on participatory processes in PDMPS. For example, the recently abolished Laboratory of Mexico City and the Ministry of Public Space of Mexico City developed participatory processes to improve the

conditions of public spaces (Gülgönen, 2016). In Puebla, only the municipal planning institution had tried to create channels of communication with citizens on planning issues (Instituto Municipal de Planeacion, 2021).

Academics and NGOs mentioned that the political stability of Mexico City, ruled by a left-leaning political party for more than 25 years, has facilitated policy continuity in PDMPS and the communication of initiatives and projects (Páramo, 2017). On the other hand, Puebla has a history of switching political parties with neoliberal policies. This has promoted solid relationships with the private sector, particularly with the real estate sector, where local academics mention how public space projects are concentrated in high-income neighbourhoods, like the Angelopolis area (See Figure 6), while leaving marginalised urban areas abandoned (Hofmann Aguirre, 2012; Navarro et al., 2017).

Figure 6 Public spaces in the Angelopolis area in Puebla. Source: Author, photograph taken in January 2019.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to understand how social participation is included in PDMPS in Mexico. The findings reveal the following: (1) a lack of participatory processes that include a diversity of stakeholders; (2) some efforts to create new channels of communication between stakeholders, but the local knowledge of social organisations is still not considered; and (3) civil society organisations did not reach a level of power where their inputs are part of the decision-making processes. At the intra-government level, there is still (4) a lack of support for participatory processes, (5) local residents and other social actors are not involved in participatory processes; and (6) Implementing participatory methods throughout the PDMPS phases is not observed in practice by federal and local governments.

We adapted Fung's (2006) democracy cube as an analytical framework to analyse how social participation is included in the PDMPS. We examined the perception of four groups of actors (government, NGOs, architecture/urban planning consultancy firms, and academia) through a series of interviews. The modification of Fung's approach, which we term 'democracy diagram', revealed the degree of diversity of actors involved in participatory processes. It helped visualise the participation challenges in our case study and can serve as a reference for replicating the

approach in countries with similar conditions, arrangements and challenges, such as Chile, Colombia and India (Barrera & Pacheco, 2016; Delamaza, 2011; Swapan, 2016). We argue that social participation in PDMPS needs a broader representation in urban planning, allowing local residents to participate in decision-making processes. We observed that it is necessary to implement methodological mechanisms that allow broader communication channels with local residents and stakeholders. A limitation of this research is that citizen participation cannot be generalised based on two case studies. A broader sample with more cities would expand on the challenges of the Mexican context.

Our findings contribute to debates on social participation in urban governance issues, particularly in public space management (Alvarado Vazquez et al., 2021; Carmona et al., 2008). Our research reveals weak participation in urban governance issues at the neighbourhood level. Also, it contributes to the scientific body of knowledge on social participation in urban planning and design of public spaces, specifically in the debates weighing top-down vs bottom-up decision-making, where political decisions and institutional interests neglect the interests and needs of the users of the public space (Alvarado Vazquez et al., 2021; Carmona et al., 2008; Delgadillo, 2018). A methodological contribution is made through the democracy diagram, which allows the impact of social participation in PDMPS to be situated. It provides a generic structuring device to understand the links between three different axes (number of participants, level of communication, and the decision-making power achieved), applicable to other social participation questions. Planning and urban design practitioners could use it to analyse the resources and ambitions of social actors and to improve participatory processes.

Further research could explore broader case study areas at a national level. Political differences between the different levels of government could have influenced interviewee responses since this research was carried out in the middle of the transition period (2018–2024) at the federal government level. Also, further research could analyse which techniques and technologies can be used in participatory processes by practitioners and if existing applications have proven effective in creating new communication channels or giving more power to social actors. Earlier studies have emphasised the need to develop a mixture of more interactive, participatory methods to engage with society from a bottom-up perspective (Alvarado Vazquez et al., 2021; Brynskov et al., 2014; van Leeuwen et al., 2018). An example is MIT's Centre for Civic Media or the Rotterdam Open Data Community, initiatives that create digital tools for local communities to collect and visualise data, giving them a voice in decision-making (Brynskov et al., 2014). Alternatively, participatory cartography has been used to produce maps representing public space issues in local communities via geographic information systems (Boll-Bosse & Hankins, 2018). A combination of methodologies, fields and technologies could operationalise the aspirations and needs of residents, enabling their involvement in planning public space interventions. The result would be cities that are finely attuned to their inhabitants.

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Appendix

Appendix Table 1. Challenges for social participation in the planning, design and management of public spaces

Challenge	Description
Lack of government support for participatory processes	Despite the adoption and understanding for the inclusion of civil society in the planning and design process in several countries, innovative processes supported by government actors remain rare (Magdy, 2011; Sørensen & Torfing, 2018). Local governments usually fail to identify citizen ideas, needs, and experiences in participatory processes (Boll-Bosse & Hankins, 2018; Magdy, 2011).
Lack of trust between government and civil society	In developing countries, government actors are not used to listening to the public. Indifference, corruption, lack of transparency, and private interest create mistrust between the citizens and public institutions (Hernández Bonilla, 2013; van Leeuwen et al., 2018).
Lack of inclusion	Government institutions largely exclude community leaders from decision-making processes. In turn, community leaders, informal associations and local inhabitants feel disempowered, lacking institutional or formal support or legal representation (Swyngedouw, 2005).
Lack of consideration of social needs	Public institutions need to face the challenge of building public spaces according to citizen needs and aspirations. Many interventions and participatory methodologies get stuck in the experimentation phase and the results are not considered in the final project (Alawadi & Dooling, 2016). As a result, local communities, and academic institutions prefer to reject government participatory practices because they are not being heard (Angotti & Irazábal, 2017).
Lack of social visibility and reach	Participatory approaches usually benefit a small group of citizens, often those with patience and concern for urban issues in their communities. However, decisions based on the views of a few local residents who participate can be seen as selfish or not representative of the needs of the majority (Alawadi & Dooling, 2016). Community planning meetings usually take place in the mornings or in governmental offices, limiting the number of citizens who can attend, and sometimes are non-inclusive for citizens with disabilities, the elderly, and those who may not have a chance to contribute (Magdy, 2011).
Lack of awareness of social participation	It requires more time, practice, and persistence to acclimatise government institutions and community actors to accept the potential benefits of collaborative planning (Maginn, 2007). Different actors who might be interested are not adequately engaged; sometimes, there is no record of workshops or meetings, and those interested may not be informed or invited.

opportunities and outcomes	Also, the problem to be addressed is not always adequately communicated (Magdy, 2011).

Appendix Table 2. Synonyms and definitions of social participation

Synonym	Definition	Relevance for public spaces management processes	Authors
Community empowerment	The action of citizens working together for the common good	Collaborative mapping can empower the community	▪ Schneider (2017)
Citizen participation	The action of achieve real change and empowerment in urban communities, also new possibilities of interaction for decision-making	Used to create indicators to monitor and measure the level, quality, and impact of citizen participation or to get feedback about an issue	▪ Fonseca et al. (2016) ▪ Morrissey (2000)
Co-production	The production of services among residents, collectively or individually, usually including a government agency, an NGO or both	Used to create co-design sessions with experts (using 3D modelling to design a public space), to collect local needs and aspirations, and as a communication channel	▪ Falco & Kleinhans (2018) ▪ Mitlin (2018) ▪ Van Leeuwen et al. (2019)
Co-innovation	A process of solving a problem through actors working across formal institutional boundaries, developing innovative solutions	Used to create institutional design and new forms of management and leadership in social organisations, via social capital	▪ Sørensen & Torfing (2018)
Co-creation	Any act of collective creativity, i.e. creativity shared by two or more citizens; a term with very broad application, from the physical to the metaphysical and from the material to the spiritual	Can be used to support spatial development process, to support the use of a place for community engagement or for place management	▪ Šuklje Erjavec & Žlender (2020)
Civic participation	An approach that tries to promote participants'	Concept that aims to promote a sense of	▪ Mccall & Dunn (2012)

	values, skills and knowledge in the diverse stages of decision-making, usually associated with political purposes	ownership of a plan or project to be implemented by a community. An example is the public participation in spatial planning techniques, involving communities in creating geographic information for decision making processes	

Appendix Table 3. Actors interviewed during fieldwork in Mexico

City	Institution	Stakeholder type	Date of the interview
Puebla City	Ministry of Mobility of Puebla	Local government	13/11/2019
	Municipal Planning Institute of Puebla (IMPLAN)	Local government	14/11/2019
	Mayor of the Romero Vargas district	Local government	20/11/2019
	Authority of the Historic Center of Puebla	Local government	21/01/2020
	Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities of the Autonomus University of Puebla (ICSyH)	Academic	11/11/2019
	Faculty of Architecture of the Autonomous University of Puebla (BUAP)	Academic	14/11/2019
	College of Planners and Environmental Designers of the State of Puebla (CUDAEP)	NGO	14/11/2019
	Re-Genera Espacio	NGO	15/11/2019
	Entorno Paisaje	Private	21/11/2019
	Proyectos y Planeacion Integral S.A. de C.V.	Private	21/08/2021
	Servicios de Consultoria Urbano Ambiental	Private	27/09/2021
Mexico City	Ministry of Works and public services and former collaborators of the abolished Authority of Public Space	Local government	30/11/2019
	Ministry of Mobility of Mexico City and former collaborators of the abolished Authority of Public Space	Local government	29/11/2019
	Metropolitan Autonomous University, Landscape program	Academic	18/11/2019
	The National University of Mexico (UNAM)	Academic	26/11/2019
	Taller de Inovacion Urbana	NGO	28/11/2019
	Barriopolis	NGO	08/11/2019
	Thorsten Architects	Private	09/11/2019
	Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development (SEDATU)	Federal government	19/11/2019
	Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development (SEDATU)	Federal government	22/01/2020

	Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development (SEDATU)	Federal government	23/01/2020