Citizen Participation in Urban Governance in the Context of Democratization: Evidence from Low-Income Neighbourhoods in Mexico

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Abstract
Participation has recently been subject to renewed attention and critique in the context of neoliberal urban governance. This is especially relevant in countries where decentralization and democratization in the context of neoliberalism have led to increased promotion of local-level participation. This article suggests that current critiques of participation’s potential for democratic citizen engagement in a neoliberal context would benefit from further reflection on how participation is implemented in contexts, particularly the global South, where neoliberalism and democracy may be understood differently. Different ‘cultures of engagement’ in specific settings suggest that understandings and practices of participation draw on different traditions, including corporatism and self-help. This article seeks to add to the debate by exploring the socio-spatial consequences of participation structures in low-income neighbourhoods in a provincial Mexican city. Based on qualitative research in two low-income neighbourhoods in Xalapa, Mexico, it examines how the provisions of the local citizen-participation framework compare with residents’ experiences of it. Formalized conceptions of participation, framed as involvement in service provision, interact with and shape residents’ activities in developing their neighbourhoods. This has consequences for urban development there, including the reflection and reproduction of social and spatial marginalization.

Introduction
Participation is an increasingly common tool of local governance across the globe and is linked to diverse agendas including sustainable development, democratic governance and the neoliberal project, sometimes simultaneously (Connelly, 2010). In an ever more urbanized world, local governance increasingly equates to urban governance; and state-sponsored participatory strategies of social management have become widespread responses to urban social problems, as part of local governance under neoliberalism.
(Guarneros-Meza and Geddes, 2010). Meanwhile, recent debates have suggested that the context of neoliberal economic and social policies precludes the possibility of truly democratic participation. Despite these critiques, participation is seen as a central element of ‘good governance’ by international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations, in terms of active citizenship, participatory democracy, and greater decentralization (ibid.). In fact, contextual factors in particular settings may be critical in determining how participation is understood and implemented at the local level. In particular, while participation is implemented on the basis of similar rationales across the global North and South, it is contextualized by distinct ‘cultures of engagement’ deriving from different political histories, institutions and cultures (Connelly, 2010: 335). In particular, neoliberalization in the global South has been accompanied by parallel trends of democratization and decentralization.

Reflective of much of Latin America, Mexico has witnessed increased democracy and decentralized governance, along with economic liberalization, over recent decades (Camp, 2003). Alongside these processes, formal structures for citizen participation at the municipal level have developed as part of reforms intended to bring greater openness and accountability in local governance. In the Mexican urban context, citizen participation has acquired a specific interpretation relating to participation in, and decision making about, the city’s space (Ziccardi, 2004) and, in particular, service provision. Alongside analysis of the implications of this for democratic change (e.g. Olvera and Isunza Vera, 2004; Isunza Vera, 2007), a growing literature has begun to explore the implications of these developments for urban residents (e.g. Ziccardi, 2004; Rocha Menocal, 2005; Guarneros-Meza, 2009). In particular, it has been asserted that a ‘two-tier’ system of participation has resulted in the reproduction of social segregation (Guarneros-Meza, 2007).

This suggests the need for further exploration as to how different variables, including historic and current practices and structural factors, combine to contextualize and shape participation in different settings. This article seeks to contribute to debates around participation in the context of neoliberalization and democratization by exploring how participation in local urban governance occurs in a global Southern city and by reflecting on the implications that this has for relevant critiques and debates, particularly those relating to the potential for democratic citizen engagement. Specifically, it explores how local citizen participation structures may interact with, and reproduce, existing socio-spatial inequalities for residents of the low-income neighbourhoods known as colonias populares in Xalapa, a provincial city in Mexico. This article compares the formal, legal and instrumental framework for participation with residents’ experiences in order to explore how the idealized structure meshes with actual practices, and how contextual factors significantly influence participation in this setting. While processes of neoliberalization and democratization are significant, other factors including the legacies of the corporatist regime and a long tradition of self-help may be equally so.

To situate these findings theoretically, the next section explores some key current debates around participation, drawing on critiques of neoliberalism and discussions from participatory development and planning, and explores the particular significance of context in more depth.

Debates on participation and the importance of context

Participation, democracy and neoliberalism

‘Participation’ retains a sense of its Enlightenment reading as ‘enacting a will larger than the individual . . . and of sharing this duty . . . with others’ (Patton, 2005: 252). Participation’s association with democracy as a collective project entailing the rule of

Colonias populares are low-income, self-built neighbourhoods, usually founded on formerly agricultural ejidal land – agricultural land owned collectively by farmers under Mexican law – that has been illegally subdivided and is therefore unserviced.
law, civil and political liberties, and free elections (Young, 2002) is based on the shared duty of citizenship. While most democracies in today’s mass societies are representative, participation in decision making is still seen as an important element of democratic governance, however problematic and time-consuming it may be. Different degrees of democracy are possible in different contexts. Young (ibid.: 6), however, suggests that inclusion is central to legitimate democratic decision making, both in terms of process and opportunity to influence decisions. Participation is an important adjunct to inclusive representation, and may allow more marginalized citizens with fewer resources to make up for this inequality with organization and time (ibid.: 3).

In the last 10 years or so, participation in urban decision making has come under increasing scrutiny from those who see it as a technique of neoliberal governance. Neoliberalism is commonly thought of as an economic and political project that aims to liberalize trade, privatize state-controlled industries, and introduce market-orientated management to a reduced public sector (Perreault and Martin, 2005: 192). It is based on the fundamental assumption that ‘society functions better under a market logic than any other logic, especially a state-command one’ (Purcell, 2011: 42). However, this does not imply the elimination of the state, which retains a central role in facilitating markets; it leads to its alteration rather than disappearance (Elwood, 2004). This altered role prioritizes assisting capital over other state functions, and citizen participation has come to play an important legitimizing role in this.

Employing participatory decision making in cities offers a veneer of legitimacy for neoliberal governance, and potentially depoliticizes previously political struggles by incorporating dissenting factions. The outcome of decisions is determined not by participation processes but by existing uneven power relations, strengthening unequal patterns of distribution (Raco, 2000). The potential for genuine input into urban governance by less powerful groups such as socially excluded and marginalized populations is therefore minimal, and what input does take place may involve ‘competing for the crumbs while resolutely ignoring the cake’ (Saunders, 1980: 288). In other words, formal participation mechanisms have the potential to divert local participants’ time and energy towards irrelevant issues and factionalism, while decisions regarding the distribution of resources are taken elsewhere. Critics of neoliberalism therefore question the potential for democratic engagement due to the impossibility of empowerment in an inherently unequal system.

Certainly, it has been suggested that neoliberalism produces democratic deficits through processes of deregulation and the gradual transfer of power to institutions beyond the state, leading to lack of accountability (Purcell, 2011). However, far from being incompatible with liberal democracy, neoliberalism’s adoption of techniques of democratic governance such as the involvement of urban citizens in decision making highlights the paradoxical nature of citizen participation under it. Participation is one of the ‘Janus-faced’ techniques of neoliberal urban governance, which is fundamentally lacking in democratic transparency and legitimacy (Swyngedouw, 2005); discourses of inclusion and diversity obscure the ever more authoritarian nature of governance (Swyngedouw, 2000). Rather than a ‘zero-sum’ power relation (whereby either the state or citizens hold power), participation is seen more as a transformation of power whereby the state, through new formal and informal techniques, continues to exercise control ‘at a distance’ (Blakeley, 2010: 132). This gives rise to two paradoxes of citizen participation: first, the power of the state is not necessarily diminished despite the emerging plurality of governance actors; second, the spread of participatory practices does not necessarily lead to citizen empowerment.

Participation is, therefore, seen as a legitimizing tool for the neoliberal project, through the appropriation of quasi-democratic practices, which, in fact, are likely to reinforce existing power relations and inequalities, precluding any possibility of genuine citizen engagement. However, the context in which these relations are situated is of paramount importance, as neoliberalism takes different forms in different contexts, as does democracy. The importance of examining processes of participatory urban
governance through detailed empirical study of different contexts has been noted (Elwood, 2004; Beebeejaun and Vanderhoven, 2010; Silver et al., 2010), and this is particularly significant when considering participation in urban governance in the global South. While similar rationales for participation exist across the global North and South, different political histories, institutions and cultures give rise to distinct ‘cultures of engagement’, a culture of engagement being ‘a set of norms and expectations of what kinds of political interactions between state and citizens are appropriate and possible’ (Connelly, 2010: 335). Such cultures are not fixed, but subject to change over time and dependent on the different institutions and actors through which they are enacted.

In Latin America, citizen participation has been bound up with processes of democratization that have succeeded authoritarian regimes across the region since the 1990s (Ziccardi, 2004). However, in many countries this has been accompanied by simultaneous processes of neoliberalization, leading to a ‘perverse confluence’ of neoliberal and democratic participatory projects (Dagnino, 2007). How participation in urban governance is practised in diverse settings may have implications for current critiques, which are often formulated in a Northern context. Before discussing these implications in more detail, some background on past debates to help situate ideas about participation in the global South is outlined.

The influence of participatory planning and development

In the setting of cities of the global South, ideas from the fields of planning and development have had particular influence on the way participation is understood in the urban setting. The influence of both sets of debates can be seen in recent suggestions that, in an increasingly urban world, participation is an important component of addressing urban problems. For example, in 2003 the United Nations Global Report on Human Settlements suggested that ‘the participation of people living in poverty and their representative organizations as empowered and equal partners [is] crucial for effective problem solving’ (UN-Habitat, 2003: xxxiii). However, such debates often fail to acknowledge a debt to ideas about self-help, discussed in more detail below.

From a (rural) development perspective, Chambers’ (1983) argument that participation is both an end and a means, with transformative potential for empowerment, has had lasting appeal. The widespread implementation of participatory development during the 1980s and 1990s, which aimed to increase the involvement of socially and economically marginalized peoples in decision making over their own lives, was justified in terms of sustainability, relevance and empowerment (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). However, this was followed by a wave of criticism about participation in development. In particular, it was suggested that in the context of uneven power relations, participation had the potential for ‘tyrannical’ effects (ibid.). At best, participation was seen as a largely cosmetic exercise, and at worst, ‘a “hegemonic” device used to secure compliance with, and control by, existing power structures’ (Taylor, 2001: 137). Responding to these critiques, participation’s defenders argued that it could still be potentially transformative, if appropriate regard was given to its pitfalls (Hickey and Mohan, 2004).

From a planning perspective, Arnstein’s (1969) highly influential model conceptualized ‘public participation’ as active involvement with the formulation or implementation of state policies, with democratic ends and the potential for ‘citizen power’. Later accounts criticized the dualistic ‘state versus community’ conception of participation contained in this model. Instead, it was suggested that the complexities of participation required it to be considered as a contextualized and subtle means of influencing policymaking (Sharp and Connelly, 2002), or a multi-way set of interactions (Innes and Booher, 2004). Meanwhile, echoing development debates, critiques suggested that participation could be used as a technique of governance as dominating systemic power (Ploger, 2001). Participatory planning approaches can be broadly framed as either deliberative or conflict-orientated: approaches that emphasize deliberation see
consensus-based decision making as the key means of empowerment through participation, while conflict-orientated approaches are more wary of the potential for power relations to determine the outcomes of participatory processes, seeing conflict as an inherent part of these processes (Silver et al., 2010), a position more in line with critiques of neoliberalism.

Additional to the consideration that most theories of participation in planning have their origins in global Northern settings (Watson, 2007; Connelly, 2010) — once again suggesting the need for an awareness of contextual factors — there is an assumption underlying both sets of debates that the state plays a central role in participatory processes. Despite some suggestions that the true value of participation is located outside state-directed activities (Goodman, 1972; Sandercock, 1998), most accounts posit a central role for the state, obscuring the importance of what has been called ‘autonomous social participation’ (Ziccardi, 2004), reflected in a long tradition of self-help in cities of the global South. Accounts that emphasize participation through formal, state-directed structures often leave out stories of informal or autonomous participation (Beebeejaun and Vanderhoven, 2010). However, despite a general lack of explicit acknowledgement in the above debates, recent exponents of participation in urban decision making (e.g. UN-Habitat, 2003) have undeniably been influenced by the legacy of the self-help agenda, following the work of Turner (1968; 1972) and others who saw the solution to urban problems in the capacities and resources of urban residents.

Turner’s work was based on his observation that the rapid urban growth that characterized many cities in the global South, combined with government failure to provide affordable housing and services, meant that low-income urban residents were forced to provide their own housing solutions, leading to the development of informal settlements. Based on this immense productive capacity, ‘self-help’ suggested the need for greater dweller autonomy in housing more generally. As a result, sites-and-services and upgrading policies were promoted by the World Bank and implemented in many countries during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Critics suggested that this risked absolving the state of its responsibility to provide affordable housing (e.g. Ward, 1982). Moreover, as Satterthwaite et al. (2005) point out, such participation may be borne of necessity more than civic impulse: while most people do not want to actively participate in the planning, construction and management of services such as roads, water supply and electricity systems, urban residents whose basic needs are not met have little choice. Autonomous participation processes may therefore imply a situation in which the poor pay more, being forced to contribute ‘resources of time, effort and money in order to obtain services which the rest of society obtains without direct contribution’ (Devas, 1993: 95). Despite these criticisms, the influence of this idea endures: for example, in participatory urban upgrading through resident involvement in agency-led programmes to improve the built environment in informal settlements (Imparato and Rusler, 2003).

However, the general fixation in participation debates on formal or state-driven processes has perhaps led to the broader exclusion of informal practices and their significance in shaping participation in urban governance. Acknowledging the influence of these practices and debates affords a more situated understanding of participation in the global South, where rapid urban change is linked to processes of neoliberalism, but also democratization.

**Participation in the context of democratization: the case of Mexico**

The adoption of neoliberal policies across Latin America has been roundly criticized as ‘both reflect[ing] and produc[ing] spatial and scalar differentiation, intensifying processes of uneven development’ (Perreault and Martin, 2005: 194). However, in a ‘paradoxical double movement’, neoliberalism has been associated with the deepening and broadening of market democracies in Latin America (Guarneros-Meza and Geddes, 2010: 117). Dagnino’s (2007: 550) characterization of the ‘perverse confluence’ of neoliberal and participatory democratic projects in Latin America is based on the fact
that both require a vibrant civil society, and share key terms of reference including participation; but this homogeneity obscures divergent meanings.

Participation, as both a condition and guarantee of democracy, is seen as harbouring the prospect of radical transformation of power relations in Latin American societies; but neoliberalism’s appropriation of participation in this context has led to its redefinition as the execution of service provision by civil society, within a neoliberal framework (Dagnino, 2005).

In Mexico, neoliberal economic policies adopted as a response to economic crisis during the 1990s entailed economic restructuring and greater integration into world markets, emblematised by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Meanwhile, the promotion of increased formal participation there has taken place in the context of a wider transition to political pluralism, following 70 years of one-party rule by the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party); although it has been less than clear what kind of democracy will result (Stolle-McAllister, 2005), as the legacies of a political culture based on corporatism, social segmentation and organizational fragmentation as strategies of control still prevail (Klesner, 2004; Guarneros-Meza, 2009).

On the one hand, citizen participation has been seen as a potential means of bolstering the new democracy through fostering civic capacity and social capital among citizens (Ziccardi, 2004). On the other hand, the idea of participation in local affairs in Mexico is not new: as Ward (1999: 182) points out, ‘there has always been a strong tradition of community participation, albeit played out as a two-way co-optation exercise between government and local communities in which both sides have generally benefited’. A long tradition of autonomous participation and collective action means that where in other contexts authorities struggle to motivate citizens, ‘in [Mexico’s] urban context citizens are extremely involved’ (Hernández Bonilla, 2005: 198). This relates to the conflation of participation with demand-making, addressed to urban authorities by (usually low-income) residents in order to obtain goods and services (Aguilar, 1988: 42), often on a clientelistic basis (Jimenez, 1988).

This is linked to the informal processes by which Mexican cities have developed over the last 50 years. Of Mexico’s population of 106 million, more than 45% exist below the poverty line, a figure that has increased since the 1980s (Graizbord and Aguilar, 2006: 92). Some observers attribute this to the implementation of neoliberal economic policies (Meyers, 2003; Ortiz Flores, 2003), which intensified historic structural inequalities. Since colonial times, Mexico has suffered from unequal distribution of wealth, consolidated during the paternalistic pre-Revolutionary regime of Porfirio Diaz, and intensified during the early twentieth century by continued iniquitous development and exclusion of large sectors of the population from employment and housing opportunities, and since the 1970s by inflation, inadequate tax reform and failure to tackle basic economic structural problems such as low productivity in agriculture (Cosío Villegas, 1985). Up to 60% of Mexico’s urban dwellers live in areas with informal origins, known as colonias populares (Connolly et al., 2003). Despite initially poor conditions, colonias have comparatively good prospects for upgrading and ‘gradually integrating . . . into the physical fabric of the city’ (Ward, 1999: 4), as residents petition officials for land titles and public services, sometimes with the support of local social movements. While this takes place, residents often set up alternative infrastructure arrangements (Siembieda and Lopez Moreno, 1997; Moctezuma, 2001), a form of self-help.

3 Corporatism has been defined as a ‘political structure that tend[ed] to eliminate competition for power and emphasize conciliation among different societal groups through their vertical or subordinated relationship with the state apparatus’ (Reyna, 1977 quoted in Guarneros-Meza, 2009: 467).

4 For example, country-wide protests took place in 2007 at escalating prices for basic goods due to the removal of trade tariffs under NAFTA (Arias Hernández, 2007).
In the case of Mexico, democratic reforms since 2000 and before have led to a rapidly changing panorama, particularly with regard to urban governance (Klesner, 2004). Since the 1990s, decentralization and democratization at the local level have seen the promotion of greater participation by private and voluntary sectors in local policymaking. In 2000, the federal government suggested that ‘national and local economic development should favour a multi-actor responsibility by promoting citizen participation and partnership with different sectors of society’, leading to the introduction of citizen participation in urban development plans (Guarneros-Meza, 2009: 470). The federal government’s decentralization of fiscal resources for planning and development to local governments has resulted in the creation of Citizen Councils at the municipal level, accompanied by Neighbourhood Councils at the local level (Guarneros-Meza, 2007).

While these mechanisms suggest enhanced democracy, in practice their remit has tended to reflect the essentially simple agenda of local government in Mexico, relating to the delivery of basic services, urban infrastructure and some social assistance (Ziccardi, 2004: 11). Indeed, councils have been criticized as more decorative than transformative, playing a legitimating role with regard to government decisions, and lacking the capacity to hold government to account (Olvera and Isunza Vera, 2004). Municipal Citizen Councils have a consultative role relating to social infrastructure projects, such as basic services, urban improvements, education and health. At the neighbourhood level, residents are expected to participate in particular issues affecting the area, complementing the work of the municipal Citizen Council. Government sources provide the majority of financial resources for both Councils, from the Municipal Social Infrastructure Fund known as Ramo 33 or Branch 33, with additional contributions from the private sector and citizens. This fund was created in 1997 to decentralize poverty-alleviation funding from central government to state and municipal levels. It represents the main source of official funding for social infrastructure at the municipal and neighbourhood level, suggestive of the Mexican government’s conceptualization of participation as a mechanism targeted primarily at low-income sectors.

In fact, while these structures are open to all, a two-tier system means that participation in municipal Citizen Councils involves local elites, while participation in Neighbourhood Councils frequently applies mainly to residents who live in areas lacking services that middle-income residents take for granted (Guarneros-Meza, 2007). Given existing high levels of resident input into consolidation processes in colonias populares, increased formal participation has resulted in the institutionalization of the self-organized demand-making and innovative processes of service provision fostered by urban residents and social movements in earlier decades. However, this does not guarantee the incorporation of excluded groups, as in practice the social segmentation of the PRI era often prevails (Guarneros-Meza, 2009). Furthermore, it is not necessarily accompanied by an increase in residents’ power to take decisions about urban space, but is rather a means of creating consensus to avoid contestation (Ziccardi, 2004). Finally, it also supports an agenda whereby participation is conceptualized as contribution to service delivery, rather than an opportunity for democratic interaction and citizen growth (Ziccardi and Mier y Terán, 2005).

The complexity of participation in the context of Mexico, where democratization and neoliberalization are occurring simultaneously and interacting with the legacies of a corporatist regime and ongoing processes of self-help, has implications for relevant debates. It suggests that existing critiques should be considered in the light of experiences from other contexts, where ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘democracy’ may assume a different significance, and participation be interpreted differently. The conditions of inequality that preclude empowerment may derive from different historical factors, and include opportunities for recognition and engagement not present under neoliberal regimes in the global North. The following examination of citizen participation in two low-income neighbourhoods in Xalapa focuses on how legal and instrumental frameworks are experienced by residents, in order to explore these issues.
Citizen participation in low-income neighbourhoods in Xalapa

Legal frameworks of participation: the Xalapa Citizen Participation Bylaw

The medium-sized capital of the Gulf state of Veracruz, Xalapa, has a population of around 600,000. Xalapa is one of around a hundred medium-sized cities in Mexico playing a central role within a restructured system based on neoliberal economic reform (Meyers, 2003). The significant growth it has experienced in the last four decades, leading to the proliferation of colonias populares, could be seen as the effect of neoliberal processes. From 1980 to 1995, its population increased from 205,000 to 336,000, 50% of which was due to migration, including increasing numbers of ‘rural refugees of economic reform’, based on the effects of neoliberal economic restructuring on the agricultural sector of Veracruz state (Meyers, 2003: 77). Downturns due to financial crisis and economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to the informalization of the economy and declining standards of living. In 1990, 50% of the city’s population lived in colonias populares; 39% of households were without water in their homes, and 37% were not connected to the municipal sewerage system (Meyers, 2003).

Two case study colonias, Loma Bonita and Moctezuma, provide the setting for exploring the municipal framework for citizen participation, which played a significant role in the development of both. The two neighbourhoods diverge in age and levels of consolidation, with Loma Bonita established almost 10 years after Moctezuma (in 1998 as opposed to 1990), and consequently having lower levels of service coverage in terms of water, electricity and sewerage. Residents of these two neighbourhoods were interviewed regarding their experiences of citizen participation, in the context of a broader research project on the socio-spatial production of place in informal settlements. During interviews, citizen participation was repeatedly mentioned as one of the most important policy frameworks relating to colonias populares.

Citizen participation in Xalapa is overseen by the Municipal Development Board, the local equivalent of a municipal Citizen Council, and the instrument of planning and monitoring for apportioning social infrastructure funding. Administrative responsibility for citizen participation in Xalapa falls to the Municipal Office of Social Management, Citizen and Resident Participation (DGPC). Its influence in these areas is largely based on the Reglamento de Participación Ciudadana (Citizen Participation Bylaw) (CPB, 2004), the legal framework for participation in Xalapa. The Bylaw outlines processes of participation, including referenda, public consultation, and meetings, and sets out the auxiliary bodies supporting participation processes at the municipal and neighbourhood levels. At the neighbourhood level, the main formal instruments for citizen participation in Xalapa are two citizen-led bodies: patronatos, equivalent to Neighbourhood Councils, and works committees, which have a financial role in public works projects (CPB, 2004). These instruments of participation are considered below, after a brief discussion of the legal framework.

The lack of a Federal Citizen Participation law in Mexico demonstrates the absence of political will to support state reform at federal level (Olvera, 2009). Instead, citizen participation laws and regulations at state and municipal level have gradually been established in most Mexican states through a process of ‘legal imitation’ of the first local

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5 Over the course of 7 months in 2006-07, 34 semi-structured interviews were carried out with a total of 42 respondents in Xalapa, from 4 groups of key respondents: residents of case study neighbourhoods (21), state officials (10), civil society representatives (9) and non-residents of the case study colonias (2). Interviews were also carried out with 16 specialists in urban development from within and outside Xalapa. Additional methods including participant observation, solicited photography and documentary analysis were also employed. The latter included the consultation of policy documents such as the Citizen Participation Bylaw and the Municipal Development Plan, as well as media monitoring of three local newspapers over the course of one month.
Citizen Participation Law in Mexico City in 1995, reformed in 1998 (ibid.: 7). By 2006, there were state laws in 28 states, although these differ greatly in terms of their scope and level of effectiveness (ibid.).

In Veracruz, the Referendum, Plebiscite and Popular Initiative Law sets out the terms for citizen consultation (Alarcón Olguín, 2002), as referred to in the Xalapa Citizen Participation Bylaw. However, it is the Veracruz Ley Organica del Municipio Libre (Fundamental Law of Free Municipalities) (EDV, 2001: Article 52) that specifies the requirement for municipalities to promote and organize citizen participation in the Municipal Government’s activities. As Olvera points out, there is some overlap between the citizen participation regulations and existing laws such as the State Law of Fiscal Coordination (Olvera, 2009: 15). Similarly, at the municipal level, the Urban Development Bylaw also mentions citizen participation as a fundamental element of land tenure regularization.

The Xalapa Citizen Participation Bylaw’s stated aim is to sustain municipal development with the participation of citizens, based on the concept of ‘co-responsibility’, defined as ‘the shared obligation of citizens and government to comply with mutually agreed decisions; recognizing and guaranteeing the rights of inhabitants to propose and decide about public affairs’ (CPB, 2004: Article 2). In this way, the Bylaw recalls the federal government’s endorsement of multi-actor responsibility, implying a connection with processes of democratization. The Bylaw sets out definitions of citizenship according to residential status in Xalapa, including inhabitants (habitantes), people born in the municipality with permanent residence; residents (vecinos), people who have lived in the municipality for at least one year; temporary residents (transeúntes), passing through the municipality without residing there; and a special category of residence (domicilio) for public servants, soldiers, students and prisoners. This more nuanced approach to citizenship suggests an attempt to move beyond previously clientelistic structures of intermediaries by widening the conception of participants (Ziccardi, 2004).

Several residents of colonias populares used the language of the framework to describe their residency in Xalapa. However, the hierarchy of citizenship set up by the Citizen Participation Bylaw also potentially reflects and reproduces existing social marginalization. This is particularly relevant in colonias, which are often populated by residents seen as outsiders, even though they may have lived in the municipality for many years. In fact, Federico, a community leader in Moctezuma, suggested that this hierarchy existed not only among outsiders but also colonia residents, who internalized it:

We use categories; we say there are first-class and second-class citizens, but not because others see us like that — often it’s because the same person mentally classifies himself like that (interview, 15 February 2007).

Federico also referred to the difference between ‘citizens’ (ciudadanos) and ‘settlers’ (colonos), suggesting that there are two classes of urban dwellers. Such categorizations confirm that social stigmatization accompanies spatial segmentation, based on underlying structural inequalities that reinforce existing class prejudices. In this sense, participation is not the root cause of the problem; but the Bylaw’s categorization risks both reflecting existing exclusionary social hierarchies, and reproducing them by further stigmatizing already marginalized residents.

Citizens’ rights and obligations are also set out in the Citizen Participation Bylaw, with notably more obligations (16) than rights (3). A diverse set of responsibilities relates to different categories and scales, with a strong emphasis on issues relating to urban space. Residents are exhorted to use the land according to the regulations of the Municipal Development Plan, with specific requirements for households such as fencing off empty land on properties, painting the façades of buildings at least once a year, and ensuring that a plaque with the official, municipally assigned house number is visible on the house. A strong environmental imperative can also be detected in citizens’ responsibilities to report theft of street furniture, refrain from disposing of waste irresponsibly and conserve
greenery. There are also requirements for citizens to vaccinate domestic animals, carry out emission checks on motorized vehicles, ‘to observe, in all of their acts, respect for human dignity and good manners’ (CPB, 2004: Article 17).

As the legal instrument of citizen participation in Xalapa, the Bylaw reveals several key assumptions underpinning participation in this setting. Participation in the urban context is presented as particularly relevant for low-income residents of colonias populares, where environmental problems and lack of services are pressing issues. In this way, the service-delivery dimension is prioritized, relating to the highly spatialized conception of local-level participation in Mexico generally, whereby participation is a way of directly intervening in the urban environment to address issues unresolved due to the local government’s lack of capacity or resources. But the Bylaw’s conception of participation also relates to the production of citizens in a democratizing context. ‘Development’, as conceptualized in the Bylaw, presupposes an ethical norm, such that those who are being ‘developed’ are being moulded into a particular normative conception of the good citizen (Chipkin, 2003). However, this citizenship is not a given status, based on rights, but a performative act through which urban actors attain legitimacy (Lepofsky and Fraser, 2003). Thus, the ‘citizen’ imagined in the Bylaw has certain ideal qualities, such as ‘dignity’ and ‘good manners’; but the prescriptive tone of the Bylaw (inadvertently) constructs its target population as lacking these qualities, thus positioning them as subjects in need of development through participation. Such constructions potentially reinforce the distinction between ‘first-class’ and ‘second-class’ citizens mentioned above, thus entrenching existing segregation and marginalization. However, the ensuing discussion of social and material effects of instruments of citizen participation in Xalapa reveals that residents are not solely passive subjects, but also agents in these participatory processes.

Instruments of participation: patronatos and works committees

Although the Bylaw sets out a variety of processes, participation at the neighbourhood level takes place through two main instruments, patronatos and works committees. These formal structures are explored here, in terms of the Bylaw’s framework and how residents experience them.

Participation as self-organization: Patronatos

The patronato or neighbourhood council is a permanent body of citizen representation (CPB, 2004: Article 32), which can be formed at the street, neighbourhood, rural area and housing estate level, at the request of residents. Patronatos are supposedly formed on the basis of specific needs in the neighbourhood, reinforcing the idea that participation mainly relates to areas where full service provision is lacking. Members must be residents of the municipality, have lived in the corresponding area for at least one year, be of age and in full exercise of their rights, and be ‘an honest and participatory person’ (CPB, 2004: Article 34); language again invoking the ‘ideal citizen’.

Colonia residents have long taken the lead in instigating, executing and realizing service provision in their neighbourhoods, and these instruments represent a degree of formal recognition of this role through its institutionalization. Sebastian, a community leader in Moctezuma, explained the attitude of State Government officials, once land had been granted to residents:

What [the officials] were saying was ‘You’ve got your land now, you can go and live there’ . . . They live in a residential area, and when they arrive there they’ve already got all the services. We didn’t have any of these services (interview, 23 February 2007).

Thus, citizen participation suggests the formalization of expectations for certain residents to participate in particular ways. Such expectations may derive from the local
‘culture of engagement’, whereby in the context of state neglect and/or tolerance, residents have traditionally solved their own housing needs and initiated service delivery; thus participation is seen as self-organization. Despite the recognition of residents’ agency through formalized participation, persistent spatial marginalization reflects their ultimately marginal position in local decision making. While having the opportunity to participate formally in their own neighbourhoods, they have little influence over wider processes at the city level.

In practical terms, colonia residents’ participation through the patronato may include putting together a proposal for service provision, and facilitating and supervising works. Gracia, from Moctezuma, commented:

That’s how the patronatos work: you have to keep an eye on things, go around checking up on how the work is progressing, whether they’ve authorized it or not. And when it’s authorized you have to check when they’re going to send the material. . . . I mean, you end up going round in circles [son vueltas, que tiene uno que andar dando] (interview, 14 February 2007).

The phrase used here, dar vueltas, is generally employed to describe passing time aimlessly. It was used repeatedly by respondents, for example describing the process of petitioning local authorities for services, and the need for repeated requests in the face of local inefficiency (such as bureaucrats losing important documents).

The use of this turn of expression implies that vueltas are a consequence of the participation framework. Ward (1999: 186) suggests that in this sense, ‘it is the government which sets the rules [for demand-making], and increasingly such rules privilege law-abiding, participative, quiescent, and sometimes electorally supportive settlements’. Although a key objective of the Xalapa citizen participation framework is to facilitate residents’ demands, the implied element of time-wasting may be an unintended consequence, or even a means of delaying service installation, in order to manage demand and limited resources. Even when residents are self-organized, Ward suggests that participation is as much about maintaining control and stability — through clientelistic relations that favour certain groups over others — as it is about empowerment. However, the research also revealed that residents often pursue simultaneous strategies of autonomous participation, including self-build, while also putting pressure on local authorities if promises are not fulfilled. ‘Pressure’ usually means direct collective action, in the form of protests, taking over buildings, or blocking roads — all seen as legitimate strategies to engage with the authorities. In this way, formal participation represents only one channel for residents’ efforts; indeed, it has been suggested that citizen participation in Mexico can be understood as a continuum of formal to informal mechanisms (Isunza Vera, 2007). The next section discusses residents’ understanding of this situation, suggesting a more informed population.

Participation as economic cooperation: works committees

The second instrument of participation, works committees, are constituted in every street where public works take place, to control and monitor the financial dimension of projects. Works committees are formed on an ad hoc basis for every approved project being carried out in an area, and last for its duration. In auditing works on behalf of the community, they carry out tasks such as inspection and monitoring through documentation (such as signing certificates of delivery–receipt) (CPB, 2004: Article 44). According to the Bylaw, they exist to ‘request the economic co-operation of the residents . . . for carrying out public works of collective benefit’ (CPB, 2004: Article 48).

The element of ‘economic cooperation’ in the Bylaw was explained by Gracia, relating to the construction of pavements in her street in Moctezuma:

For a full discussion of these autonomous participation strategies, see Lombard (2009).
We had to be there, and . . . pay the builders, because the Municipality put in the material, but we had to pay . . . the whole cost of the labour . . . 80% was the material and 20% we put in ourselves, in labour costs (interview, 14 February 2007).

Residents who cannot afford to contribute economically can offer labour instead, on the basis of a faena or collective work group. However, interviews revealed that most residents understand cooperation in its economic sense. Prioritizing the financial dimension of participation in this way may mean that other elements relating to democracy and citizenship are less valued, such as fostering active and autonomous subjects with the capacity to exercise fundamental human rights (Ziccardi and Mier y Terán, 2005: 18).

The element of economic responsibility relates to the idea of ‘co-responsibility’ expressed in the Xalapa Citizen Participation Bylaw, and found in more general discourse, including that of colonia residents: as Magdalena, a resident of Moctezuma, put it, ‘everything in life costs something’. Other residents suggested that the onus of instigating service delivery should fall on residents rather than local authorities, and that more participatory neighbourhoods were likely to be attended to first, echoing the Bylaw’s prescriptive tone. The economic imperative for participation supports the authorities’ management of residents’ expectations and demands for infrastructure, while emphasizing the importance of citizens’ contributions. However, while the framework for contributions gives residents greater responsibility for their neighbourhood’s development, it does not necessarily result in increased power to get things done, as shown by differential rates of service provision in the two neighbourhoods. Placing responsibility on the poorest residents to finance their own service provision also reveals the institutionalization of one of the most widely criticized elements of self-help, namely that the poor pay more, as it is in areas where services are lacking that economic participation is most likely to apply.

At the same time, residents were cynical about the effectiveness of economic participation. In Loma Bonita, respondents reported that they had contributed regular payments for the water supply, as well as one-off payments for other services, but had yet to see results. Indeed, petty fraud among community leaders was mentioned as a general problem in colonias populares by Pedro, a resident of Loma Bonita:

Well, the people here are very disorganized . . . because some cooperate, and others don’t want to cooperate . . . because [leaders] . . . come and ask for [economic] cooperation . . . The one that collects the money takes it and he leaves, with the money . . . And we have to start all over again . . . That’s why people are distrustful now, and many don’t want to cooperate (interview, 15 February 2007).

As a critique of participation as economic cooperation, this response suggests that cynicism based on past experience leads to lower levels of participation, as people became disillusioned with regular meetings, payments and activities, and the economic function of participation breaks down. The previous regime’s legacies of clientelism and manipulation persist, with detrimental consequences for the development of neighbourhoods, but also for the quality of democracy more generally. However, the decision to opt out by residents is suggestive once again of their role within this framework; although this option is the product of constraints, withdrawing, which may have been more difficult under the previous corporatist regime, is an indication of some degree of agency, albeit negative.

Thus, citizen participation in low-income neighbourhoods has specific social and material consequences for residents, interacting with existing social and spatial inequalities. In democratizing Mexico, formal participation is increasingly prevalent, but has a specific interpretation shaped by past practices as well as current conditions. The focus on service delivery implied in the legal framework of the Bylaw reveals the spatialized conception of participation as a means of addressing local governments’ lack of capacity and resources to fulfil the needs of urban residents, particularly low-income
ones. The formulation of citizenship implies some concern with the democratic development of urban residents; however, this is based on a performative, rather than a rights-based approach. The instruments of citizen participation suggest that underlying assumptions derive from a different ‘culture of engagement’, drawing on longstanding practices of self-help and self-organization, products of a situation deriving from housing inequality met with immense productive capacity. Formalization of existing demand-making processes, in other words self-help, recognizes to some degree the contribution of residents to neighbourhood and urban development in these difficult conditions. However, the potential for manipulation in the context of uneven power relations remains, embodied in pervasive clientelistic practices. Thus, the way citizen participation is understood and practiced in Xalapa reveals how participation is not the cause of, but may reflect and reproduce, existing inequalities.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is suggested that the complexities of participation in urban governance in specific contexts — particularly those in the global South — both confirm and contest elements of existing critiques and debates. Despite the potential for neoliberalism’s ‘Janus-faced’ mechanisms to appropriate participatory techniques, the above discussion suggests that processes of democratization, and the situated nature of participation within historical and structural processes, are also significant.

Despite concerns about the quality of democracy emerging in the Mexican context, there is some consensus that local level governance has been slowly improving since the era of the PRI, along with acknowledgement that such improvements will take time and must address the effects of patronage and lack of capacity-building from that era. To some degree, the legal framework of the Xalapa Citizen Participation Bylaw attempts to instigate categories of citizenship and the concept of ‘co-responsibility’, as part of wider attempts to make local governance more transparent, fair and open in the context of democratization. Meanwhile, the instrumental framework of participation recognizes traditions of self-help and the productive capacity of residents, based on conceptions of participation as self-organization and economic cooperation, drawn from residents’ autonomous participation in their neighbourhoods. Residents also operate as knowledgeable agents, with the capacity to opt out of processes, or simultaneously engage in informal action such as demonstrations.

However, the legal framework’s conception of citizenship is performative rather than rights-based, meaning it risks reproducing existing social segmentation based on its conditional bestowal of citizen status. Meanwhile, the instrumental framework’s interpretation of participation as self-organization and economic cooperation risks entrenching corporatist practices from the era of the PRI. Residents are fulfilling the same role they always have done, in terms of self-help, and the economic interpretation of participation suggests the state’s input remains limited, while fraud by community leaders suggests clientelism is still rife and residents’ cynicism is not misplaced.

Bringing this empirical evidence to bear on the debates outlined above, it is suggested that, broadly speaking, there is a need for greater recognition of participatory traditions in Southern cities, which are often not understood as ‘participation’ when viewed through a state-focused lens, but which have an important influence on understanding and practice in these contexts and may help to explain the prospects of democratic engagement through participation. Further careful empirical study of participation in urban governance from contexts in the global South — at the neighbourhood and city level, and relating to the micro-politics of participation — will add to debates about participation’s effectiveness in the context of neoliberalism, which often derive from Northern contexts. Common critiques may need to be reconsidered in the light of different interpretations of neoliberalism and democracy, especially in the context of
democratization. However, evidence so far suggests that where the quality of democracy is uncertain, so is the potential for empowerment. While local governments suffer from lack of capacity and resources, and the legacies of previous regimes prevail, participation may be found to reflect and reproduce existing social segregation relating to both new power structures and old ones.

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References


