

*A look at citizen participation during COVID-19 in the
city of Pinar del Río*

Yusmila Adalina Hernández Fernández
Hany Raisely Pérez Bruno

Introduction

Studies on cities in Cuba have been gaining interest from the different disciplines of the social sciences. From communication, they are still unfinished, especially due to the need to understand the phenomena that occur in urban areas.

One of these edges is the reference to citizen participation that, applied to development projects, enables and puts people into action as actors and supervisors of their own development (Contreras, 2002, p. 13).

Building citizenship is promoting the active participation of people in the construction and transformation of the society in which they live according to their interests and needs. (Camacho, 2001, p. 79). To participate is to belong to a whole that understands and has the participant in mind. It happens to be an active entity, feeling with possibilities to do, contribute and decide.

According to Gabriel Gyarmati, participation is the real and effective capacity of the individual or a group to make decisions on matters that directly or indirectly affect their life and activities in society (Krause, 2002, p. 45).

This definition includes individual and collective aspects, relating participation to psychosocial change and well-being. In times of crisis, due to the sensitivity of the situation, participation can be the formula to alleviate discomfort.

Based on the above, it is intended to discuss the complexity of this phenomenon in the pandemic stage in Pinar del Río, a territory that had passed through the implementation of a City resuscitation program on the occasion of its 150th Anniversary, a celebration that will be the starting point in this article, whose novelty and relevance is marked because decision-makers rarely take into account the needs of citizens to incorporate them into the transformative processes in the city. To what limits does citizen participation go and how it reverts in a moment of crisis, is a matter for reflection.

Contextualizing before the pandemic: Citizen participation in Pinar del Río

In the second decade of the 21st century, the local authorities decided to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of granting Vueltaabajo the title of City. Never before has citizen participation been significant in urban development in Pinar del Río.

A movement began to take shape as part of a program, called Reanimation of the city. The constant demands of the population, among other elements, made that two years before the date, the revival of the city began to be associated with this celebration. Provoking an unprecedented movement and participation trend.

The resuscitation was conceived from the specialized participation and the citizen, whose demands were centered in a visible renovation of the city, incorporating the imaginary sketch to the new proposals of the leaders.

Several sites were modified and rebuilt, acquiring new meanings for its inhabitants. They tried to give a new image to the entrance of the city and its main artery; buildings with architectural value and marked deterioration were rescued; work was done on qualifying the image of natural areas, as part of the concept of a green city; proposals were made for pedestrian circulation and access for people with disabilities.

Participation also influenced the diversification of services in the remodeled premises. Some of them modified through tenders to guarantee harmony and a utilitarian sense, acquiring new meanings and giving this avenue greater mobility during the day, but above all at night.

Another contribution was the remodeling of the section where the city begins, which gained recognition after its reconstruction. It became a more busy walk, a must-see, where you can relax and talk.¹

¹This is explained in the project of Environmental Design of the main Artery of the city, prepared by the Ágora group.

This resuscitation was interrupted with the emergence of COVID-19, where efforts and resources were directed to the safety and well-being of the population. The challenge was to continue with citizen participation in the face of the health emergency, responding to emerging social needs.

Revive the city from the pandemic

Given the global health emergency, in which Cuba was inserted, new strategies were necessary to generate contact without exposure to the virus. Faced with major emergencies, the resilience of communities is determined by the capacity to organize, develop a shared vision of the needs of the neighborhoods and the emergence of leaderships to conduct sustainable intervention strategies (Vera & Mashini, 2020).

For government entities, the projects to be carried out had new perspectives.² The walks, parks and green areas acquired new meanings. Gyms and indoor sports venues were replaced by outdoor exercises.

Cultural institutions were decisive, artists found scenarios in virtual spaces to express themselves and summon a cultural movement that would strengthen the resilience of cities in the face of this crisis.

The service entities redesigned their offers incorporating new proposals such as online and home sales. Pioneers in this scheme were private entrepreneurs and later state agencies joined.

One of the fundamental pillars of citizen participation, as an axis to advance in the management processes of public space, is the generation of collective actions that tend to make small contributions to the improvement of social reality, this context being one of those that require special attention from the institutions (Schroeder & Vilo, 2020, p. 110).

Another form of community articulation and citizen participation was the neighborhood organization before the purchase and distribution of food and medicine, especially to vulnerable people such as the elderly and the sick. Citizens were identified who would bring basic necessities to people in isolation. This structuring, very functional in the different stages of the epidemic, acquires greater relevance within a red zone.

The volunteering of the population fostered new ties and social fabric for the management of more supportive cities. The people of Pinar del Río became active actors in their envi-

²Idea endorsed by the participants in the online debate forum on post-COVID-19 urbanism (Instituto de Planificación Física, 2020): Urban planners have to work to maintain a balance between the new concept of “social distancing” and generate ideas that combine efforts, creativity and resources in the fight against the virus, to adapt and redesign our cities in response to the new context of the pandemic.

ronment in sanitation actions, collaboration with isolation centers, preparation of means of protection,³ dissemination of help messages, etc.

The virtual environments were resignified channels, paying tribute to educational, health, commercial services as well as to the neighborhood articulation. These assumed the functions of informing, guiding and organizing actions aimed at social assistance, among others.

Interventions in public space are collective tools to compensate for individual scarcity and inspire community exchange, enabling emotional and cognitive development, environmental awareness, and other issues related to common well-being. Locating public space as an area of strategic intervention opens up a new range of possibilities.

Final thoughts...

The 150th Anniversary was the provocation to awaken the enthusiasm of the citizenry and make it an active part of the transformations generated later. It resulted in a better communication process that was translated into informative and participatory audiovisual spaces, meetings and contacts of the authorities with the main entities and with the public, public hearings, especially for intervened squares and parks. This way of including the population and keeping it informed caused the inhabitants to feel, for the most part, satisfaction with the modifications made.

Many of these spaces were retaken by the authorities during the pandemic, as an important informational and feedback resource. They became spaces required by their effectiveness and acceptance.

The changes carried out, as part of the festivities, provided an evident development of the city and improved the relations of its leaders with the population. The views around social dynamics were revitalized and, in general, the self-esteem of the people of Pinar del Río was raised. The leaders understood that a movement of such magnitude and without precedent could not develop without citizen participation. In the same way, it was assumed during the pandemic, where participation constituted the basic device for the articulation of all the factors and actors.

The arrival of COVID-19 imposed new lifestyles on the inhabitants of Pinar del Río, by making them more resilient and adaptable to the environment to prevent its spread. All this easier thanks to the experiences of the 150th Anniversary and having a more physically and structurally prepared city.

³Many citizens and private businesses made headgear and face masks to donate. Others contributed to bring some services such as hairdressing, manicure, food, cleaning, etc., free of charge to vulnerable people.

Efforts to stop the spread of the Coronavirus drive us to think about creative public interventions, bringing services closer to neighborhoods, redesigning physical spaces to achieve distancing without isolation. It is necessary to think about rapid response actions, linked to the Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030, that help citizens and their leaders to act in a committed and equitable way. The post-COVID-19 scenario represents an opportunity to rebuild more resilient, responsible and balanced cities and territories.

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