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One step forward, two steps backwards? – Shifting patterns of participation in a former informal settlement in Mexico City

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Abstract

While advances in participatory planning have led to more inclusive rebuilding of informal settlements, the bulk of the debate regarding participatory planning has focused on the improvement of current informal settlements without asking 'what next'. Neighbourhood decline following settlement consolidation, however, provides evidence of the potential shortfalls of temporary participatory approaches. Drawing on an ethnographic case study of a former informal settlement in Iztapalapa, Mexico City, this paper analyses the transformation of resident participation in neighbourhood development over 40 years. Comparisons between residents' historical accounts of neighbourhood formation that took place mostly in the 1980s and experiences in the contemporary setting show a gradual increase of disengagement. The data collected in 2016-2017 highlight diminishing local participation in the case study locality and suggest that dismissal of previous local practices can hinder citizen participation. The paper shows what can be learnt from the historical observations of transforming informal settlements.

I. INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes increasingly urban, urbanisation processes in the global South continue to be led both formally and informally, by agencies as well as local populations.¹ Managing increasing urban sprawl and the provision of housing in expanding informal settlements² receives the attention of

¹ Bredenoord, J and Van Lindert, P (2014), "Backing the self-builders: assisted self-help housing as a sustainable housing provision strategy", in J Bredenoord; P Van Lindert and P Smets (editors) *Affordable Housing in the Urban Global South: Seeking Sustainable Solutions*, Routledge, Oxon, pages 55-72.

² The term informal settlements is used throughout this article to refer to settlements that have sprung up autonomously following residents' self-build strategies. These settlements are informal in the sense that their

practitioners and researchers informing the current needs to improve settlements as well as participatory practices. Yet, the potential to learn from neighbourhoods that were formed informally³ and have become consolidated as part of cities is largely left unexplored.⁴ Longitudinal research has shown that development initiatives and consolidation can change rather than resolve the challenges relating to informal settlements. Involvement of local residents in development initiatives that can be terminated unexpectedly can contribute to the erosion of local participation⁵ and social cohesion⁶ over time despite addressing a lack of basic services or infrastructure. Changes in policy from settlement removal to upgrading and vice versa have been shown to maintain a cycle of insecurity.⁷ As evidenced by longitudinal research, the challenges informal settlements face are likely to continue beyond settlement consolidation because urban settings are dynamic and ever changing. This suggests that resident involvement should form the basis for local development beyond the delivery of basic services or land titling to strengthen inclusive urban development.

Informal urbanisation has been a prominent characteristic of cities in the global South decades before the arrival of participatory aims in urban governance. Mexico City, for example, grew rapidly during the second half of the 20th century, giving rise to informal self-built settlements since the 1920s, most notably in the 1970s and 1980s.⁸ Informal urbanisation continues to be a strategy for appropriating

formation has not followed formal planning or building regulations. Instead, houses have been built often incrementally, using materials that have been available, building on land that has been acquired through a mixture of means such as land invasion or unlawful land sale.

³ Massey, R (2013), "Competing rationalities and informal settlement upgrading in Cape Town, South Africa: a recipe for failure", *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* Vol 28, No 4, pages 605-613.

⁴ Fernandes, E (2011), *Regularisation of informal settlements in Latin America. Policy focus report*. Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Cambridge MA.

⁵ Moser, C (2009), *Ordinary families, extraordinary lives: assets and poverty reduction in Guayaquil, 1978-2004*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington DC.

⁶ Perlman, J (2010), *Favela: four decades of living on the edge in Rio de Janeiro*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

⁷ Perlman, J (2021), "The hill and the asphalt: a 50-year perspective on informality in Rio de Janeiro", in A Di Raimo, S Lehmann and A Melis (editors), *Informality through sustainability*. Routledge, Oxon, pages 237-254.

⁸ Connolly, P (2009), "Observing the evolution of irregular settlements: Mexico City's colonias populares, 1990-2005", *International Development Planning Review* Vol 31, No 1, pages 1-35

housing in other parts of Mexico⁹, across Latin America,¹⁰ and elsewhere in the global South such as sub-Saharan Africa.¹¹ Similarly, participatory planning approaches have been applied in over 50 countries across five continents.¹² Yet, the levels of participation vary from city to city, not only from country to country, with application of participatory approaches in large-scale urban development continuing to be a challenge.¹³ Clientelism¹⁴ and a rejection of resident-led initiatives¹⁵ continue to hinder the spread of participatory planning that involves those inhabiting informal settings. As Latin America has a long history of informal urbanisation,¹⁶ research conducted in Latin American cities is well placed to inform what challenges remain and arise in the context of former informal settlements.

Mexico City is one example of how the formalisation of citizen participation and new practices of participatory planning have attempted to replace previously active participatory practices that were linked to resident-led informal urbanisation. Drawing on an ethnographic neighbourhood study in Iztapalapa, Mexico City, this paper shows that the transformations that follow the consolidation of a self-built settlement can erode previously vested resident participation. The analysis of neighbourhood transformation over a period of 40 years shows how participatory processes developed alongside neighbourhood development, progressing from resident involvement to disengagement. This paper contributes to broader debates regarding participation in urban settings by showing how local participation diminishes in the long-term despite the introduction of new formal

⁹ Benítez, G, Pérez-Vázquez, A, Nava-Tablada, M, Equihua, M and Alvarez-Palacios, JL (2013), "Urban expansion and the environmental effects of informal settlements on the outskirts of Xalapa city, Veracruz, Mexico", *Environment & Urbanization* Vol 24, No 1, pages 149-166.

¹⁰ See reference 4.

¹¹ Visagie, J and Turok, I (2020), "Getting urban density to work in informal settlements in Africa", *Environment & Urbanization* Vol 32, No 2, 351-370.

¹² Flores, A (2016), "Mexico City and its participatory budget: a truly empowering process of citizen participation?", in Y Beebejaun (editor), *The Participatory City*, Jovis Verlag, Berlin, pages 38-45.

¹³ Van den Brandeler, F, Hordijk, M, von Schönfeld, K and Sydenstricker-Neto, J (2014), "Decentralization, participation and deliberation in water governance: a case study of the implications for Guarulhos, Brazil", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 26, No 2, pages 489-504. See also reference 11.

¹⁴ Ayuero, J (2000), "The logic of clientelism in Argentina: an ethnographic account", *Latin American Research Review* Vol 35, No 3, pages 55-81. See also reference 1.

¹⁵ Mitlin, D (2013), "A class act: professional support to people's organizations in towns and cities of the global South", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 25 No 2, 483-499.

¹⁶ See reference 11.

structures of participation in an informally formed neighbourhood. The historical account of local participation emphasises the relevance of residents' changing needs and resident-led practices in the expansion of participatory processes in Mexico City.

The following section provides firstly a brief review of participatory practice in urban development, focusing secondly on changing citizen participation and collective forms of neighbourhood formation in Mexico City. This is followed by an overview of the research study and research context. The findings of the case study are then discussed in two sections, first relating to neighbourhood formation in Consejo Agrarista Mexicano (CAM) and secondly neighbourhood transformation. The discussion section relates these findings to the broader debate regarding participation and urban governance, concluding with a reflection on the implications of this article.

II. PARTICIPATION IN URBAN SETTINGS

The diversity of participatory approaches and how they aim to involve people has generated several ways to conceptualise participation. Citizen participation refers to the redistribution of power by enabling citizens' involvement in decision-making alongside experts and professional actors.¹⁷ In the case of Mexico City, citizen participation is the term used by the city government. The legislative changes made in Mexico City to implement citizen participation and participatory planning are discussed below in this section. This paper also refers to resident participation, distinguishing formal citizen participation from the pre-existing resident-led participatory processes. The term resident participation draws attention to the processes residents in the case study locality took part in through small neighbour groups that instead of a uniform approach contributed to neighbourhood improvement in an intertwined manner. This makes resident participation different from community participation which suggests that participatory processes, such as building community capacity,

¹⁷ White, S (1996), "Depoliticising development: the uses and abuses of participation", *Development in Practice* Vol 6, No 1, 6-15.

address community as a homogeneously acting entity.¹⁸ Resident participation highlights the relational aspects of participation as a process that residents take part in through a variety of manners, reflecting their individual and group circumstances.

a. From participatory action to participatory planning in urban development

The drive to involve local people in shaping matters that are relevant to them has generated the complex challenge of how participation can be achieved in practice. This challenge includes moving beyond informing and consulting which are conventional but more limited ways to involve a range of people in initiatives.¹⁹ More lasting inclusive approaches focus on collaboration between different actors, aiming to enable mutual learning – transformative participation.²⁰ Approaches to participation have been diverse,²¹ ranging from co-production as a tool for grassroots organising,²² to building housing stock²³ and service delivery.²⁴ While the importance of participation is widely recognised, one of the main criticisms continues to be the way the implementation of participatory approaches replicates top-down frameworks rather than creates opportunities for collaboration. One example of this is mandatory citizen participation that enforces local involvement and decentralisation of power²⁵ through changes in legislative structures.

¹⁸ Grant, E (2001), "Social capital and community strategies: neighbourhood development in Guatemala City", *Development and Change*, Vol 32, pages 957-997.

¹⁹ Cornwall, A (2008), "Unpacking 'participation': models, meaning and practices", *Community Development Journal* Vol 43, No 3, pages 269-283.

²⁰ Otsuki, K (2014), *Transformative sustainable development: participation, reflection and change*, Routledge, London.

²¹ This, among other shortfalls of participatory approaches, have been debated in international development literature by several authors. See, for example, Cooke, B and Kothari, U (editors) (2001) *Participation: the new tyranny?* Zed Books, London.

²² Mitlin, D (2008), "With and beyond the state – co-production as a route to political influence, power and transformation for grassroots organizations", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 20, No 2, pages 339-360.

²³ Wakely, P (2016), "Reflections on urban public housing paradigms, policies, programmes and projects in developing countries", *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development* Vol 8, No 1, pages 10-24.

²⁴ See reference 13.

²⁵ Kohl, B (2003), "Democratizing decentralization in Bolivia: the law of Popular Participation", *Journal of Planning Education and Research* Vol 23, pages 153-164.

The rise of participatory governance in urban development has generally involved the spread of institutionalised participation models.²⁶ Participatory governance utilises participatory frameworks through initiatives such as participatory planning and participatory budgeting to expand collaborations between local people, government actors and NGOs. The use of participatory planning and budgeting is increasing globally even though the initiatives in Porto Alegre, Brazil, were originally directed to selected participants only.²⁷ Extending these frameworks to involve residents throughout the whole duration of development projects²⁸ is one shortfall of participatory governance, which echoes the challenge of achieving long-term transformation in practice. This is despite the development of new tools such as action planning. The matrixes utilised in action planning aim to expand the involvement of disadvantaged communities by placing them at the centre of project frameworks in participatory planning models.²⁹ Despite these advances in planning, there continues to be a gap between the roles residents are given in project design and the roles they play in project delivery, as the emphasis continues to be on consultations during the initiation of projects.³⁰

Participatory programmes have in some urban settings been completely rejected by local residents, resulting in conflict rather than collaboration.³¹ This suggests that consultations are an essential part of participatory planning, as they enable dialogue between actors. However, consultations alone should not be the primary tool in urban governance.³² The limitations of resident involvement in local decision-making are particularly noticeable in the context of informal settlements due to limited

²⁶ See reference 20.

²⁷ Postigo, A (2011), "Accounting for outcomes in participatory urban governance through state – civil-society synergies", *Urban Studies* Vol 9, No 49, pages 1945-1967.

²⁸ Brand, R (2013), "Facilitating sustainable behavior through urban infrastructures: learning from Singapore?", *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development* Vol 5, No 2, pages 225-240. See also reference 5.

²⁹ Hamdi, N and Goethert, R (1996), *Action planning for cities, a guide to community practice*. Wiley, Chichester NY.

³⁰ Müller, F and Segura, R (2017), "The uses of informality: urban development and social distinction in Mexico City", *Latin American Perspectives* Vol 44, No 3, pages 158-175. See also reference 20.

³¹ Bolay, J-C (2012), "What sustainable development for the cities of the South? Urban issues for a third millennium", *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development* Vol 4, No 1, pages 76-93.

³² See references 4 and 12.

budgets and pressures to meet development goals whilst dealing with expanding urban sprawl.³³ Political and economic changes have previously hindered agencies' abilities to support self-built housing as a participatory approach in Latin America due to neoliberal pressures that reject the premise of informal urbanisation.³⁴ This suggests that moving beyond "formal-informal dichotomies"³⁵ continues to be a challenge and more needs to be done to seek hybrid approaches in community management in informal settings.³⁶ Partnership-based hybrid approaches have been shown to effectively expand the involvement of local residents in settlement upgrading by involving both residents and authorities in the co-production of service delivery.³⁷ These partnerships have the potential to be extended beyond the immediate improvement needs of informal settlements, continuing to bridge the gap between local autonomous practices and more formal aspects of participation. For participatory governance to reach its aims of inclusivity, further efforts are needed to ensure formal structures to participate consider both local circumstances as well as pre-existing local practices of participation.³⁸

b. The formalisation of citizen participation in Mexico City

Citizen participation arrived formally in Mexico City in the 1990s following a series of laws on participation.³⁹ This process was part of the many structural changes that aimed to decentralise power and democratise representation in the city.⁴⁰ The changes included how both the head of the government (*jefe de la Gobierno*) and the borough representatives were initially chosen and

³³ See references 3 and 13.

³⁴ Peek, O, Hordijk, M and d'Auria, V (2018), "User-based design for inclusive urban transformation: learning from 'informal' and 'formal' dwelling practices in Guyuaquil, Ecuador", *International Journal of Housing Policy* Vol 18 No 2, pages 204-232.

³⁵ McGuirk, J (2014), *Radical cities: across Latin America in search of a new architecture*. Verso, London, page 22.

³⁶ Meredith, T and MacDonald, M (2017), "Community-supported slum-upgrading: innovations from Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya", *Habitat International* Vol 60, pages 1-9.

³⁷ Pimentel Walker, A (2016), "Self-help or public housing? Lessons from co-managed slum upgrading via participatory budget". *Habitat International* Vol 55, pages 58-66.

³⁸ See references 17, 19 and 31.

³⁹ Sánchez Mejorada, M (2000), "La participación ciudadana en el Distrito Federal: reflexiones sobre la Ley y las elecciones vecinales", *El Cotidiano* Vol 16, No 99, pages 80-91.

⁴⁰ Ziccardi, A (1998), *Gobernabilidad y Participación Ciudadana en la Ciudad Capital*, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, UNAM, Mexico City.

eventually elected.⁴¹ The focus of the 1995 Citizen Participation Law (*Ley de Participación Ciudadana*) was to form links between citizens and the new political structures. The reinstated borough councils (*consejos delegacionales*) started acting as channels through which residents could negotiate their demands directly with their local authorities.⁴² The 1998 change to the law placed elected neighbourhood committees (*comités vecinales*) at the core of citizen participation instead of previous structures such as block representatives (*jefes de manzana*) and residents' associations.⁴³

While the systematic change was related to broader political changes, there is a notable history of resident-led collectivism that relates to the formation of self-built neighbourhoods in the megacity.⁴⁴ The many forms of collective action from urban social movements⁴⁵ to less organised resident groups⁴⁶ as a response to a lack of adequate housing have been analysed by a number of scholars.⁴⁷ Influenced by the lack of political dialogue during the Institutional Revolutionary Party's (PRI) rule, residents began to draw on collective action in the 1970s to take forward the construction of especially peripheral parts of Mexico City.⁴⁸ The many forms of collective action were an opportunity for low-income households to make their voices heard regarding the need for adequate housing across the city.⁴⁹ The experience of participation has been defined by the space – the neighbourhood or the wider borough – in which it has taken place.⁵⁰

⁴¹ Martínez Assad, C (2004), "La participación ciudadana en el Distrito Federal", in Ziccardi, A (Ed.) *Participación ciudadana y políticas sociales del ámbito local*. UNAM, Mexico City.

⁴² See references 39 and 41.

⁴³ Harbers, I (2007), "Democratic deepening in the third wave democracies: experiments with participation in Mexico City", *Political Studies* Vol 55, pages 38-58, page 44. See also reference 39.

⁴⁴ See reference 40.

⁴⁵ Ariza, M and Ramírez, JM (2004), "Urbanización, mercados de trabajo, y escenarios sociales en el México Finisecular", *Working Paper* 04-04f.2, Center for Migration and Development, Princeton University. Available at: http://meme.phpwebhosting.com/~migracion/rimd/coleccion_america_latina/ciudades_latinoamericanas/c4.pdf (accessed 10 September 2020).

⁴⁶ Wigle, J (2010), "Social relations, property and 'peripheral' informal settlement: the case of Ampliación San Marcos, Mexico City", *Urban Studies* Vol 47, No 2, pages 411-436.

⁴⁷ Moctezuma, P (2001), "Community-based organization and participatory planning in South-East Mexico City", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 13, No 2, pages 117-133. See also references 45 and 46.

⁴⁸ See reference 47, page 118.

⁴⁹ See references 8 and 27.

⁵⁰ See reference 40.

Previous studies in Mexico City have identified shortfalls in how formal structures of participation have engaged local residents both before and after the Citizen Participation Laws of the 1990s. Analysing the uptake of formal channels of participation in a transforming self-built settlement in Tlalpan borough in the south-west of Mexico City in the 1980s, Aguilar identified a divide between residents' neighbourhood improvement processes and neighbourhood committees.⁵¹ The formal channels of participation were limited to consultative functions, leading to a weakening of participation.⁵² Accustomed to making their own arrangements to demand for land titling and basic services, the residents continued to prefer alternative channels instead of the newly introduced local representatives.⁵³ Similar shortfalls as those highlighted by Aguilar have been identified in Tlalpan in relation to the governance structures that were formalised in 1997-2003 and included the election of local representatives. The residents' dismissal of the new channels of participation was made clear by their low turnout when given the opportunity to elect their local representatives.⁵⁴ Furthermore, evidence shows that elections did not take place in all neighbourhood level units as planned, partially due to the apathy expressed by locals in Tlalpan borough specifically.⁵⁵ Voter turnout in the first election following the new Citizen Participation Law was less than 10% of registered voters across Mexico City,⁵⁶ showing how poorly received the changes were overall.

The citizen participation reforms also decentralised governance structures within the city. The boroughs were given the power to set up their own participatory programmes in 2003, an opportunity taken up by Tlalpan and Cuauhtémoc, two of the 16 boroughs.⁵⁷ Furthermore, 2007 saw the introduction of the *Programa Comunitario de Mejoramiento Barrial* neighbourhood

⁵¹ Aguilar, A (1988), "Community participation in Mexico City: a case study", *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol 7, No 1, pages 33-46.

⁵² See reference 51. Aguilar (1988) discusses the popular participation structures that predated the Citizen Participation Law, mainly neighbourhood councils (*Juntas de vecinos*) that were created in 1970 and expanded to four hierarchical levels in each borough in 1978.

⁵³ See reference 51, page 43.

⁵⁴ Flores, A (2002), "Tlalpan neighbourhood committees: a true participatory option", in P McLaverty (editor), *Public Participation and Innovations in Community Governance*, Taylor and Francis, London, pages 63-76.

⁵⁵ See reference 54.

⁵⁶ See reference 43, page 46.

⁵⁷ See reference 12 and 43.

improvement programme. The programme aimed to drive social development in disadvantaged neighbourhoods by investing in public space improvement that was delivered by local residents.⁵⁸ Citizen participation was inbuilt in the aim to expand participation by establishing local committees run by residents to organise project delivery.⁵⁹ Aimed only at neighbourhoods that were experiencing medium to very high levels of marginalisation, the programme's funds were available to former informal settlements, *colonias populares*. A city-wide expansion of participatory budgeting was introduced in 2010 in the form of participatory proposals.⁶⁰ 3% of the city budget is divided between the 16 boroughs that allocate the funds of the participatory budgeting initiative to projects selected by the citizen council (*consejo ciudadano*) in each borough.⁶¹ Citizen participation structures continue to evolve in Mexico City, forming an increasingly complex setting for local residents to navigate and participate in.

III. RESEARCH STUDY

The doctoral research project this paper draws on involved over six months of fieldwork that was completed in three stages between 2016 and 2017. A neighbourhood case study was completed in the south-eastern borough of Iztapalapa in Mexico City, carrying out observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups (FGs). In total, 73 residents took part in the study, some of whom were interviewed individually in addition to attending a FG. Participants were aged 20-81, the majority being aged 60+ due to the historical aspect of the study. 19 participants were male, 54 were female. Most participants had lived in CAM since the beginning of the 1980s. Seven participants had moved to the area once the housing estates had been completed, 1990-2000. A further four participants had moved to the area more recently, between 2010 and 2012. In addition to the scoping study, the first

⁵⁸ Ziccardi, A (2012), "Espacio público y participación ciudadana – el caso del Programa Comunitario de Mejoramiento Barrial de la Ciudad De México", *Gestión y Política Pública* Vol 2012, pages 187-226.

⁵⁹ See reference 58, pages 200 and 215.

⁶⁰ Valverde Viesca, K, Gutiérrez Márquez, E & García Sánchez, FM (2013), "Presupuesto público sin participación ciudadana. La necesidad de un cambio Institucional en México para la consolidación democrática", *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* Vol 58, No 218, pages 105-128.

⁶¹ See reference 12.

month of the first fieldwork stage was spent completing non-participant observation in the research locality before proceeding with interviews. The research project set out to study informal social networks and the exchange of social support in the context of urban development.

A historical aspect was included in the study to understand the relationship between local social ties and urban development due to the initial findings that showed reciprocal solidarity among neighbours was diminishing. All interviewees were asked about their history in the neighbourhood, which showed that nearly all participants who were aged 55 and over had arrived in the area during neighbourhood formation to build their own houses. Similarly, nearly all interviewees aged 20-35 were born in the research locality. This made it possible to piece together the history of the neighbourhood using historical events such as the 1985 earthquake or personal events such as children starting school to specify the course of events. As FGs were included as a method only during the final stage of fieldwork, it was possible to use FGs to triangulate the data that was collected in one-to-one interviews especially during the previous fieldwork stage.

FGs were completed during the final stage of fieldwork and focused specifically on neighbourhood formation and the history of the neighbourhood. Interviews discussed participants' social ties, exchange of social support and personal accounts of their experiences in the neighbourhood. The inclusion of FGs as a method, as well as comparing data from FGs and interviews supported the analysis of changes in residents' interactions alongside neighbourhood transformation. FGs were particularly suitable for discussing the historical aspects. The discussions allowed the participants to compare memories and remind each other of events that took place especially in the 1980s by sharing when they arrived in the neighbourhood and what services – if any – had already been achieved on their home streets.

a. Research setting

Iztapalapa is the most populated borough in Mexico City with 1.8 million residents, 20.5% of the total population of Mexico City.⁶² Located to the east and bordering the city of Nezahualcóytl, Iztapalapa is also the most densely populated borough in the city with a history of irregular settlements⁶³ and self-built housing.⁶⁴ These factors – combined with the socio-economic profile of Iztapalapa as a lower income and predominantly working-class borough – guided the choice of Consejo Agrarista Mexicano (CAM) neighbourhood as the research locality. Located in the south-eastern part of Iztapalapa, CAM has historically experienced medium to high levels of marginalisation.⁶⁵ As a *colonia popular* (working-class self-built neighbourhood), CAM has a high population density which made it a suitable research locality for researching the role of local residents in urban development. The population of Iztapalapa started to increase substantially in the 1940s as settlements were formed as a combination of unlawful and lawful land sale⁶⁶ as well as land invasion.⁶⁷ These three practices were also characteristic of CAM, where residents arrived mostly from other parts of Mexico City to build homes in the 1980s. The population of Mexico City grew at a rapid pace especially during the 1940s-1970s, with peripheral parts of Iztapalapa such as CAM being among the last to become urbanised.⁶⁸

IV. SHIFTING PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION IN CONSEJO AGRARISTA MEXICANO NEIGHBOURHOOD

⁶² INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía) (2015), Encuesta intercensal 2015. Available at: http://www.cuentame.inegi.org.mx/monografias/informacion/df/territorio/div_municipal.aspx?tema=me&e=09 (accessed 03 September 2020).

⁶³ The term irregular settlement is often used to describe informal urbanisation in Mexico City specifically because of the combination of unlawful land sale, appropriation of land through land invasion and incremental self-build strategies. Self-built settlements form the majority of housing in Mexico City. See reference 8.

⁶⁴ Author (forthcoming), Details withheld to preserve blind review.

⁶⁵ Jefatura de Gobierno del Distrito Federal (2003) *Coordinación de Planeación del Desarrollo Territorial: Consejo Agrarista Mexicano*. Available at: <http://www.sideso.cdmx.gob.mx/index.php?id=63> (accessed 20/04/2021)

⁶⁶ Interviews and FGs showed that the while many participants bought land directly from the land owner, there were also some cases where the participants had been sold land by a third party who was not the legal owner of the land, making the sale unlawful.

⁶⁷ See reference 47.

⁶⁸ See reference 47.

This section discusses the research findings in two parts. The first part analyses the formation of resident participation through neighbourly collaborations, the second focusing on the transformation of participation following the arrival of formal channels of participation.

a. The formation of resident participation

The gradual urbanisation of CAM began in the 1970s, however, most people arrived in the neighbourhood between 1982-1985 with the aim of building a house for their young families. The final stage of urbanisation was the completion of three major housing estates 1990-2003. Several participants stated that there were no empty plots of land left in CAM after 1986, indicating how rapidly the landscape was changing from the beginning of the 1980s when the area was still dominated by vast fields. Those who arrived in CAM in the 1970s lived there for years without running water or drainage as the delivery of basic services led by local residents began street-by-street following the arrival of more residents. One participant arrived in CAM in 1983, building a house opposite a family that had arrived in 1975. It was only following their arrival in 1983 that neighbours on that street started to collaborate requesting and building basic services.

The processes of inhabiting CAM involved collaboration to make the surrounding neighbourhood liveable. Once the neighbourhood became more populated, collaborations with neighbours became more frequent as it was necessary to collectively drive forward the development of the area. Inhabitants who arrived in CAM often knowing only the members of their household quickly became acquainted with their neighbours whilst discussing how to gain access to water, drainage and electricity. The gradual population of the neighbourhood meant that different parts of the neighbourhood received basic services at different times. Residents only started to approach the borough, making requests to improve their home streets once more people had arrived to inhabit their street as it was necessary to show the authorities that it was several people and not only individual households that required basic infrastructure.

While the approaches to achieving and building basic services varied depending on the part of the neighbourhood, the collaborative element and resident-led approach was present in all the participants' depictions. "People got together to ask for basic services and cooperated in terms of money to build it all. The only thing that the government gave us was the legal paperwork, everything else we had to build ourselves" explained Ricardo who arrived in the area in 1978.⁶⁹ Another participant highlighted that the way to ask for services was based on shared agreement between neighbours living on her street: "in the meeting [with all the neighbours] we agreed to go to the borough and ask for services... For drainage, they formed a committee that went to speak to the borough...Later they [the borough] sent the materials for the pavement and then for the sidewalks".⁷⁰

Several participants explained how residents would complete the work using materials they received from the borough, showing a resident-led approach to the delivery of basic services. These approaches included collecting signatures to request support from the borough, completing groundwork to support the delivery of water and drainage networks, as well as carrying out the works to install sidewalks.

We had to ask for everything separately... We had to borrow a truck to get the materials here and then the borough helped with the work. The sidewalks we had to install ourselves...water and drainage was different. They [the borough] gave us everything but we had to prepare the ground so they could come and just install it.⁷¹

FG discussions showed how occasional collaborations were gradually extended to continuous collective projects between neighbours living on the same street before block representatives (*jefes*

⁶⁹ Interview with Ricardo, April 2017.

⁷⁰ Interview with Luciana, March 2017.

⁷¹ Interview with Andrea, March 2017.

de manzana) were formally established.⁷² “Someone would say there is a meeting, and everyone went... You had to go, because we were the homeowners”.⁷³ The gatherings led to arranging for one person to approach the borough – decided collectively depending on who had time to do so, often taking turns to share the responsibility. Neighbours were required to participate constantly as several visits were required to gain each service. The neighbour groups also overlapped as many residents were also involved in the development of neighbourhood-wide services such as a new primary school and a communal sports ground.⁷⁴

b. Neighbourhood transformation and citizen participation

The transformation of CAM from agricultural land to irregular settlement at the turn of the 1970s-1980s and to a densely populated neighbourhood in the 1990s was accompanied by shifting levels of resident participation. The aspects characterising and contributing to this change were: achieving basic infrastructure, the arrival of external developments in the form of housing estates and the formalisation of participatory processes that followed wider political restructuring in the megacity. As CAM became more urbanised, the relevance of neighbourly collaborations diminished. The neighbour groups had achieved basic services by the end of the 1980s, along with a local school and a sports ground that was established in the mid-1990s.⁷⁵ It was no longer necessary for neighbours to meet regularly to plan and carry out improvement works. As one participant said, “it was more important to participate when we were organising things like drainage”.⁷⁶ Some participants felt that there was a general lack of willingness among many residents to take part in shared activities in the contemporary neighbourhood.

⁷² While a hierarchical system of *jefes de manzana* (block representatives) was instigated in Mexico City in 1978 (See reference 51, page 35), it took years before the elective system reached CAM which was still developing in the 1980s.

⁷³ Violeta in a focus group, February 2017.

⁷⁴ Author (2019), Details withheld to preserve blind review.

⁷⁵ See reference 74.

⁷⁶ Interview with Aitana, December 2016.

The diminishing of collaborative projects among neighbours coincided with the arrival of major housing estates and an increase in population. “Many things changed when more people started to arrive. Some things also got better because there were more services, but they built too many housing blocks”.⁷⁷ Those participants who had lived in the neighbourhood since the neighbourhood formation phase expressed their discontent with the arrival of the housing estates because they thought the increase in population caused further problems such as crime and insecurity, leading to apathy even though the built environment appeared more developed. “Problems started when they started to build the housing blocks... Now people don’t care... They don’t want to participate in anything”.⁷⁸

Interviews and FGs showed that the residents who had arrived in CAM to build their own homes felt those living in the housing estates – especially social housing – had no interest in improving the neighbourhood. Part of the rationale proposed by the participants was that those living in social housing had been given apartments and had not chosen to live there.⁷⁹ Those participants who lived in the social housing estate that was completed at the turn of the 1990s now owned their apartments or cohabited them with a family member who owned one. A distinctive difference between the original residents and the newcomers was the time and effort they invested into requesting basic services and building the neighbourhood.⁸⁰ As Mireya stated, referring to residents living in housing estates: “Everything was ready for them and they just moved here”.⁸¹ This statement echoed those made by many participants, reflecting the discontent with how little support original residents had received from the authorities during neighbourhood formation despite living without running water or drainage for years.

⁷⁷ Patricia, focus group, March 2017.

⁷⁸ Patricia, focus group, March 2017.

⁷⁹ The earthquake that caused major devastation in Mexico City in 1985 resulted in the displacement of people living in badly affected areas such as Tepito near the historic centre.

⁸⁰ See reference 64.

⁸¹ Mireya, focus group, March 2017.

The further urbanisation of CAM also meant the arrival of more formal block representatives, *jefes de manzana*.⁸² Initially some of the participants or their family members who were involved in the delivery of basic services took up the representational duties for the block where they lived. This showed that the changes in participation were gradual and the informal neighbour collaborations acted as a springboard for those who wanted to continue being involved in the more formal neighbourhood committees, *comités vecinales*. While *jefes de manzana* were initially chosen among neighbours themselves, legislative changes in citizen participation within Mexico City brought in an electoral system which saw a reduction in the number of representatives as *jefes de manzana* became *representantes de manzana* or neighbourhood presidents as the participants called them. “There are no longer many links left [of neighbourly collaborations], now there is only a neighbourhood president. She is more involved in political parties... She is part of PRD [Party of the Democratic Revolution]”.⁸³ While PRD was the party driving the expansion of citizen participation in Mexico City, many of the participants had negative views of them, indicating that the changes were not well received. “People used to organise between themselves more...There are still some connections between these people [neighbours who took part in neighbourhood formation] but Iztapalapa has changed a lot since PRD came into power”.⁸⁴

The difference in residents’ involvement in neighbourhood matters in the contemporary neighbourhood compared to the participants’ accounts of neighbourhood formation was substantial. One participant whose husband used to be involved in the neighbourhood committee said that she no longer paid attention to the representatives’ activities as the neighbourhood committees and

⁸² The structures of representation changed in Mexico City, following the broader legislative change first to the Federal District (Distrito Federal) in 1971 and the establishment of the Advisory Council (*Consejo Consultivo*) which encouraged block-level representation through *jefes de manzana* (literally translation is block bosses). This structure was further reformed in the 1990s in several stages which included the shift towards elected borough-level representatives (*jefes delegacionales*) and neighbourhood committees. Estrella, J (2005), “Ciudadanía y participación ciudadana en la Ciudad de México”, *América Latina Hoy* Vol 40, No May-August, pages 121-145.

⁸³ Interview with Luciana, March 2017.

⁸⁴ Interview with Maite, April 2017.

structures changed frequently.⁸⁵ There was also general confusion as to who the ‘president’ of the neighbourhood was and whether there still was a block level *jefe de manzana*.⁸⁶ The participants also expressed general discontentment with the way the representatives worked, stating that they would only help you in exchange for something which is why many were unwilling to be involved with them. For example, many participants noted that any improvements relating to shared infrastructure such as mending sidewalks often occurred preceding elections.

There were also differences in how the housing estates were organised. Residents in the privately owned housing estate with trade union links had a representative for each building, with the responsibility often rotating between households. The privately owned housing estate also benefited from 24-hour police surveillance on both of its gates. The social housing estate located across the street, however, did not have any security despite persistent issues with crime. When asked if the residents had tried to address the issues one resident explained that: “we don’t have any [*jefe de manzana*, block representative]. I know other estates have them, but we don’t. There is a *mesa directiva* (general committee) that is for the housing estate but that is to deal with the support that the government gives to us who live in the buildings. That is why they have to have it”.⁸⁷ The socio-economic differences between the housing estates were reflected in the level of participation among the residents. The more affluent housing estate with a trade union background was more organised. The social housing estate, however, appeared disintegrated and unable to address ongoing issues.

Even though the originally informal neighbourhood had basic services and houseowners had received confirmation of land tenure, the participants felt a continuing lack of support from the local authorities. This related to longstanding issues with water quality, increasing crime and insecurity – matters raised frequently by participants in interviews and FGs. This showed that despite becoming consolidated as part of the megacity, many participants felt that the neighbourhood was still not

⁸⁵ Interview with Luana, December 2016.

⁸⁶ See reference 64.

⁸⁷ Interview with Juana, March 2017.

receiving the support needed. Whereas previously residents would organise between themselves to drive the development of the area, this was no longer the case. FG discussions showed that some expected the younger generation to continue the work of those who were now retired and no longer able to do physical work.

The data highlights a reduction in collaboration between neighbours that was further reflected in the disintegration of local participation. However, there was one city government initiative that aimed to support local involvement. The Community Neighbourhood Improvement Program, *Programa Comunitario de Mejoramiento Barrial*, funded the construction of a cultural centre in 2007-2010 on the premises of a previously established community sports ground in CAM, aiming to increase local participation whilst improving the services provided by the community organisation. The programme improved neighbourhood facilities by providing a new place for cultural activities in an area where public space was extremely limited. However, only one of the participants mentioned the programme, showing the limited scope it had in the neighbourhood, involving only a selected few in the organising committee. The temporary nature of the program also meant that any change in local participation was short-lived. The programme was beneficial for those who use the cultural centre. However, interviews showed that many younger residents chose to take their children to the newer park in the neighbourhood up the road because the other park was better maintained and had a regular police presence.

As the neighbourhood became a densely populated and fully developed urban area, it also lost local participatory practices. There was clear lack of involvement with the formal citizen participation channels which was evident from the disconnection between neighbour groups, the *jefes de manzana* and neighbourhood committees that followed, as well as the elected block representatives, *representantes de manzana*. While the neighbourhood formation stage was characterised by resident participation that combined social and political aims, the contemporary neighbourhood was characterised by disengagement. As urban development progressed, local participation diminished

following initially the fulfilment of basic services and other shared needs. This pattern continued further as formal channels of participation were rejected by the residents, reflecting their experiences of increasing crime and violence along with changes in the built environment that were unwelcome, and a sense of neglect experienced during years of heightened need. The contemporary neighbourhood appeared to be declining compared to the improvements the residents had previously achieved amongst themselves, as longstanding issues such as poor water quality and increasing insecurity were left unresolved.

VI. DISCUSSION

The findings discussed above indicate a shift in levels of local participation in CAM over the 40-year period from resident-led neighbourhood formation to the densely populated contemporary urban neighbourhood. The processes of resident participation that peaked in the 1980s in the form of small neighbour groups gradually became less active as the neighbourhood became consolidated and urbanisation advanced. The construction of major housing estates was accompanied by the formalisation of participation processes. The local residents did not engage with the formal processes of citizen participation to a similar extent they once did in the local practices of resident participation – partially due to the lessened need to do so after basic needs had been fulfilled. While this indicates a disconnection between pre-existing local practices and the formal processes of participation, other factors such as general discontent with the actions of the local authorities and opinions of clientelist practice also played a role. The progress made in terms of the built environment and consolidation of the neighbourhood meant residents' involvement was not as essential as previously. However, moving away from block-level shared responsibilities to more hierarchical participation and representation was also a move away from local involvement that could have potentially mitigated gradual resident disengagement.

The changes that took place in CAM during 1990-2010 indirectly affected the residents' level of participation in local matters. Once residents' basic needs were fulfilled, the further development of

CAM involved externally led construction of housing estates. This transformation caused discontent among the locals due to increasing population and the changing landscape. The unwanted changes alongside the longstanding issues such as poor water quality and increasing insecurity contributed to the residents' hesitant views of the authorities. Previous research shows that negative experiences such as the unexpected termination of development initiatives or unwanted outcomes of consolidation can hinder local participation by causing tensions between local residents and creating distrust in authorities.⁸⁸ Rising levels of crime in disadvantaged settings has also been linked to declining local participation due to the distrust and divisions it creates among locals.⁸⁹ Residents' motivations to participate over the long-term can also be curbed by increasing household assets which makes pooling of resources less essential for some.⁹⁰ The findings from CAM show that residents' views regarding the relevance of citizen participation were affected by the broader transformations in the neighbourhood in addition to the changed needs following the achievement of basic infrastructure.

The finding that resident participation diminishes once self-built informal settlements receive basic services as observed in the case of CAM is in line with previous research.⁹¹ Previous studies in Mexico City focus mostly on community organising through social movements and associations, showing the disintegration of participatory processes once neighbourhood formation has been completed.⁹² However, research that analyses the development of participatory practices beyond neighbourhood construction is lacking, which considering the prominence and long history of self-build housing and informal settlements in Mexico City is surprising. Ariza and Ramírez⁹³ show how declining participation was related to the arrival of party politics, whereas Moctezuma⁹⁴ considers the diminishing of local collective processes part of "organizational decay" that can be expected over time. Considering

⁸⁸ See references 5, 7 and 18.

⁸⁹ See references 3, 5 and 35.

⁹⁰ See reference 5.

⁹¹ See reference 47.

⁹² See references 45 and 47.

⁹³ See reference 45.

⁹⁴ See reference 47.

patterns of citizen participation, Flores⁹⁵ states that it is common for “someone with very specific political interests” to take the lead in transforming working-class neighbourhoods, giving way to clientelist practices. However, it remains broadly unclear how resident-led local processes evolve following neighbourhood formation and whether they can be successfully incorporated in formal representation.

The diminishing of local participation in CAM implies shortfalls in resident engagement during the transition to new processes of participation. The dismissal of local representatives by the local residents indicates that the arrival of institutionalised citizen participation structures did not build on previously active local participatory processes. This suggests that the implementation of the changes was not appropriate for the local setting despite the setting not being unique to CAM. The political and legislative changes that occurred in Mexico City from the redistribution of power to local authorities in the 1970s to local elections and laws on citizen participation in the 1990s and beyond were driven by political interests to open up the political dialogue in the city.⁹⁶ While perhaps fit for the purpose of creating a formal link between political representatives and residents’ local practices including neighbourhood committees, the introduction of elected local representatives has not been shown to support local participatory processes in practice.⁹⁷ In fact, the restructuring of citizen participation in the 1980s and 1990s have been shown to undermine the resident-led “demand-making” processes⁹⁸ such as those in CAM which were driven by local residents based on their immediate needs.

The inactivity of local residents following the shift away from block-based collectivism indicates issues with the broader processes of representation. The rejection of formal participation in CAM was based on the previously experienced unresponsiveness of the local authorities in addition to the sentiment that local representatives would not provide support without receiving something in return. While

⁹⁵ See reference 55, page 69.

⁹⁶ See reference 39.

⁹⁷ See reference 39.

⁹⁸ See reference 51, page 36.

neighbour groups had to attend the borough several times making requests for each service separately, the shared responsibility of doing so increased participation among the residents whereas rotating the responsibility kept clientelism at bay during neighbourhood formation. This is unlike the observation that informal settlements tend to rely on clientelism,⁹⁹ and findings that residents often have positive views towards clientelism due to the responsiveness of such channels.¹⁰⁰ In Mexico City the expansion of citizen participation was expected to be a move away from clientelism,¹⁰¹ as the expansion of democratic processes especially in relation to the provision of water services has been in many Mexican cities.¹⁰² In the case of CAM, however, the arrival of citizen participation meant shifting power to formal representatives – a step away from block-level participation. This led to disengagement with the new participatory structures, which was also linked to the fragmented combination of local participatory channels that differed in parts of the neighbourhood and provided an unclear basis for further participation. It is also worth noting that Iztapalapa, which is home to a fifth of the population of Mexico City, holds a major role in the distribution of political power in the city.¹⁰³

The findings of the case study in CAM shows how the introduction of new citizen participation structures does not necessarily support the inclusion of local residents in participatory processes even if the participatory structures were designed to expand citizens' opportunities to affect local decision-making.¹⁰⁴ Elected block representatives are at the core of citizen participation in Mexico City, with one of their key roles being making the voices of their local neighbourhood heard.¹⁰⁵ However, the elected representatives now represent a larger part of the neighbourhood, instead of connecting with residents on a block level. In the case of CAM this has been a step away from local engagement. These

⁹⁹ Herrera, V (2017), *Water and Politics: Clientelism and Reform in Urban Mexico*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor. See also references 14 and 15.

¹⁰⁰ See references 55 and 18.

¹⁰¹ See reference 27.

¹⁰² See reference 99.

¹⁰³ See references 40 and 41.

¹⁰⁴ See references 12 and 43.

¹⁰⁵ See reference 12.

findings call for a further consideration of how existing practices can be better incorporated in formal structural changes, so that institutional goals such as the roll-out of the laws on citizen participation in Mexico City does not take precedence over local practices. Evidence shows top-down approaches to participation are often limited by technocratic governance,¹⁰⁶ whereas resident-led projects which are driven by local needs foster local participation.¹⁰⁷ Political actors' resistance of the extension of partnership-based initiatives that support participatory planning¹⁰⁸ shows that resident-led initiatives continue to be overshadowed by political and institutional gains.

CAM has evolved from resident-led local participatory projects to an area characterised by disengagement and neighbourhood decline regardless of the arrival of participatory budgeting programmes in the late 2000s. This suggests that previously active resident participation is not easily rekindled by temporary projects despite their aims to increase residents' involvement in local matters. The arrival of participatory budgeting approaches such as the neighbourhood improvement programme (*Programa Comunitario de Mejoramiento Barrial*) is a step into the right direction. The programme resulted in major improvement of the local community centre in CAM. While the community centre is geographically located at the heart of CAM, observations and discussions with local residents showed that the space was used by a selected group of people, whilst others preferred to go elsewhere. This suggests that the long-standing outcomes of the programme in this case did not benefit the neighbourhood as a whole. The ambitious participatory proposal programmes in Mexico City have not been entirely unproblematic. While they are a move towards more resident inclusion,¹⁰⁹ the emphasis of participatory proposals in the city continues to be on consultations, whereas approved but unfulfilled projects suggest challenges in rolling out the initiative.¹¹⁰ As participation requires an active role from the residents in addition to the opportunities created by authorities,¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ See reference 12.

¹⁰⁷ See references 5 and 15.

¹⁰⁸ See references 22 and 36.

¹⁰⁹ See reference 60.

¹¹⁰ See reference 12.

¹¹¹ See reference 19.

the transformative potential of participatory processes that are not appropriate for local settings is likely to be limited.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Residents' participation in urban development continues to be a challenge, even though the debate regarding participation in development and planning has been ongoing for over 50 years.¹¹² It is evident from numerous studies that there is no one-size fits all approach – or ladder – to participation in urban settings. Previous research persistently shows a mismatch between local needs and agencies' participatory frameworks despite advances made in participatory governance and participatory budgeting.¹¹³ It is evident that further dialogue between residents and local agencies is needed so that inclusivity in urban development could be increased in a manner that is meaningful to residents as well as experts. Partnerships that are resident-led or draw on local knowledge should be pursued, addressing the inability of urban planning to engage with informal urbanisation.¹¹⁴

This paper contributes to the debate regarding participation in urban development by showing how local needs and previous practices of participation in an informally formed neighbourhood affect the transition to formal practices of participation. Benefiting from a historical account, the findings of this study indicate that implementing new structures of participation does not necessarily improve local levels of participation if the new structures do not align with local practices and changing local needs. While residents' needs change following neighbourhood transformation, the challenges in disadvantaged urban settings also continue to evolve beyond the fulfilment of basic infrastructure. This suggests long-term collaboration between residents and local authorities is needed to support local development.

¹¹² See reference 19.

¹¹³ See references 25, 28 and 27.

¹¹⁴ See reference 15.

Overall, the findings suggest that the design and implementation of participation reforms should consider local needs and circumstances before reforms are introduced to ensure that new processes can reach their participatory potential. In the case of CAM, maintaining block-level engagement could have increased dialogue between residents and borough authorities. Furthermore, continued engagement from both sides could have hindered the formation of clientelist processes and enabled unravelling the sentiments of discontent observable in the residents' accounts of living in the area. This paper highlights the implications of the gap between local and formal practices of participation in the long-term, calling for further consideration of participatory approaches that incorporate local practices and extend resident-authority partnerships beyond settlement upgrading.

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