

In Search of New Knowledge in Urban Areas: The Potential of Citizen Participation in the Implementation of the Local Agenda 21 in Municipalities of the Barcelona Metropolitan Area

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In the past few years, urban and environmental planning has begun to face two new challenges – the introduction of a sustainability criterion and the use of participative methods. In clear contrast to the tendencies of the seventies and eighties, when economic growth and rational objectivity were the central argument and justification of public policy, these two new criteria – sustainability and citizen participation – have emerged with such force that they have become an essential component of new proposals for public planning.

It should therefore be no surprise that the actions and projects designed to implement these programs become a crossroads where many contradictions arise in relation to consolidated economic and territorial interests on the one hand, and on the other, popular expectations for transformation created by the very use of new sustainability criteria.

The goal of this presentation is to explain some aspects of the processes in which new environmental knowledge is acquired in the context of the implementation of the Local Agenda 21 (LA21) in areas of metropolitan expansion with predominantly urban and industrial economies and supported by a dense transportation network

Hypothesis

Before beginning the research, a series of ideas were identified as a working hypothesis to be applied to the entire project. The ideas that make an explicit reference to the mechanisms and processes for the acquisition of knowledge are listed below.

a) Many contemporary environmental problems are complex and at the same time charged with an important social dimension, especially with regard to the local impacts. For this reason, the population in the towns covered in our study have acquired a wide range of information on these matters.

b) In part, this local knowledge is associated with daily personal experiences and word-of-mouth / interactions between town residents.

c) On the other hand, and especially when determined social segments and municipalities have been involved in social movements for the defense of nature, this knowledge has been enriched by the introduction of concepts and points of view used by environmentalists present in the citizen committees that have organized such mobilizations.

d) It is possible that, in many municipalities, the process of reflecting on the degradation of the natural surroundings has led the population to form ideas for a model of municipal development that is different from and an alternative to the one generally followed in urban peripheries.

e) The LA21, as well as other associated references, such as the Environmental Audits of Municipalities, could be an ideal framework for the incorporation of new approaches to city planning.

f) Both research projects and planning processes – such as the LA21 – must make it possible for interested parties to participate in such a way that their contributions will be taken into account. The process should be based on the premise that everyone – politicians, technical specialists and citizens – has something to say and something to learn.

Design of the Research Process

The two main objectives of our study were: a) to identify the conditions, difficulties and expectations that can be generated in the course of implementing the LA21 in municipalities of the Barcelona area (these were expected to vary according to the different territorial situation of the municipalities), and b) to demonstrate the possibility of integrating participative dynamics in the development of our research. For this reason, we planned our research so that it would have a special focus on citizen collectives and associations, as representatives of a specific form of civic organization for public participation. We also intended to address the study to the vast range of associative possibilities – from environmental organizations, to neighborhood, sport and cultural associations, as well as local commerce and agriculture, and other economic interests.

The research itself was divided into four phases, and it was planned to allow for several different kinds of interaction between the participating associations and the research team. The first and second phases were entirely dedicated to gathering information from the entities (through the interviews and surveys). However, the third research phase was designed especially to maximize the degree of interaction. With this goal in mind, the research team sent a draft of the report on the two previous phases to all the groups that had participated up to that point; at the same time, these groups were invited to a meeting in which these results would be discussed and additional suggestions or corrections could be made. Lastly, the final report took these comments into account and incorporated a summary of the meeting as well as the conclusions of the research team. This process was repeated nine times, one for every one of the municipalities that took part in the experiment.

Environmental Knowledge among the Population

The results of this research can be interpreted from different perspectives or points of view. In view of the interests of this seminar, and in accordance with the above-mentioned hypothesis, the results most relevant to the processes of environmental knowledge acquisition are described below.

a) The Implication in Environmental Problems and Matters.

First of all, the research confirmed that interest in the environment is restricted to determined nuclei or groups within the population. If the proportion of surveys answered is taken as a reference, the average participation was about 30%. At the same time, two factors should be taken into consideration:

1. Depending on the circumstances in each municipality, this average oscillated between a maximum of 50% participation and a minimum of 18%. These circumstances were related to territorial factors (large or small municipalities, semi-rural towns versus completely urban settlements, etc.) as much as the severity of the environmental problems affecting the area of study and the climate of relations between the population and public institutions. At any rate,

the average survey response rate indicates a very clear differentiation between the population sectors that are rather sensitive to the subject and the rest of the population which, with some exceptions, can be considered environmentally indifferent

2. In all the municipalities, this population nucleus participated in the two subsequent phases. The majority agreed to be interviewed, and there were varying rates of participation in the meetings.

b) The Social Sectors that Expressed the Most Interest

An analysis of the types of organizations participating in the study better reveals some of the reasons as to why and how they participate. It is interesting to note that, in absolute terms, the conservationist and environmentalist groups formed the majority of the participants, followed by the neighborhood associations and the local centers of studies and cultural entities in general.

These results allow us to confirm an impression that was held strongly prior to beginning the research: the implication of environmentalist groups was very significant. In the case of this study, they responded in 100% of the cases and they also participated actively and intensely in the interviews and meetings, with the exception of only one group.

On the other hand, the relative predominance of citizen groups tied to the neighborhoods and cultural associations also stands out. This data, which is probably a novelty, might indicate the beginning of a process of more widespread environmental consciousness in the context of specific concerns of this kind of group: their town and neighborhood.

c) Issues and Approaches

The following points can be considered a general summary of the most relevant contributions made by participants in terms of subjects and approaches:

1. The relative predominance of concerns focused on processes of territorial urbanization responsible for the reduction of environmental quality and the loss of natural spaces. These concerns can be broken down into a series of issues intimately linked to the day-to-day experiences of the population in the local environment; they correspond to the main territorial dynamic present in the country.
2. The positive recognition of the actions taken by the public administration in the environmental sphere, a recognition that does not exclude, however, the existence of criticism regarding the implementation of certain actions.
3. The scarce comprehension of the concept of sustainability together with a palpable skepticism when considering its applicability in the municipal context. Nevertheless, the responses reveal an initial understanding of the relationship between this concept and lifestyles, as well as the need to introduce changes in the habits and attitudes of the population through environmental education.
4. The concept of prevention, however, is accepted and understood without problems.
5. Only in some cases did the research team detect a tendency to answer with clichés and erroneous assumptions; this occurred primarily in the municipalities most affected by problems of participation.

Conclusions

To finish, we would like to add some ideas that can be deduced from the material presented in this document. These ideas are related to processes involved in generating new environmental thinking and can be described in the following manner:

First of all, the perception of local space is interpreted in the context of a loss of values and environmental quality. This phenomena is a common occurrence in Catalan urban regions and could

become a motor or reason for the redirection future municipal development as something quite different from the conventional economic and urban planning.

Secondly, the idea that environmental mobilizations can be a vehicle for the diffusion of new environmental knowledge-thinking has been confirmed by our study. In fact, the research detected certain parallelisms between municipalities with the most participation and a higher level of quality in the survey responses and those municipalities where there have been popular demands for environmental causes.

Ultimately, this link between citizen participation and environmental demands lead us to consider the connections that can established between some of these results and the general process of creating a new environmental paradigm. In this sense, our research suggests that, as in other moments in the history of science, the current emergence of a new scientific basis for environmental preservation and restoration is also intimately linked to a process of changing mentalities among the general population.

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