

COLLECTIVE APPROPRIATION OF NEIGHBORHOOD PUBLIC SPACE. REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE “CAMINO AL BARRIO” PROJECT, CALI, COLOMBIA ¹

APROPIACIÓN COLECTIVA DEL ESPACIO PÚBLICO BARRIAL. REFLEXIONES SOBRE EL PROYECTO
“CAMINO AL BARRIO”, CALI, COLOMBIA

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Este artículo muestra las reflexiones del proceso de investigación desarrollado en articulación interinstitucional entre entidades públicas y privadas, adelantado en el sector de San Francisco del barrio Siloé de Cali, Colombia, entre los años 2018 y 2023. Objetivo: trabajar con una comunidad vulnerable frente a condiciones socioambientales, al motivar su participación y empoderamiento como actores de cambio, al tiempo que se fortalecían los vínculos vecinales que dan soporte a procesos de mejoramiento del espacio público urbano del sector. Metodología: bajo un estudio cualitativo, se tomaron elementos de la Investigación Acción Participación (IAP), para adelantar acciones de mejoramiento del espacio público a escala barrial, al tener como norte la formación e integración vecinal desde un nuevo sentir social y comunitario, a través de recorridos urbanos, talleres participativos y grupos focales. Resultados: aplicación de una estrategia de ejecución de proyectos de base comunitaria que canaliza las potencialidades del liderazgo comunitario y permite avanzar hacia ciudades con espacios públicos más articulados, funcionales y con una operatividad en servicio de la comunidad. Conclusiones: el proyecto arrojó la conformación del colectivo barrial "Camino al Barrio"; estrategia con enfoque pedagógico, para fomentar la participación ciudadana y la apropiación colectiva del espacio público barrial.

Palabras clave: cultura de paz, participación comunitaria, autonomización, desarrollo comunitario, planificación urbana.

This article presents reflections on the research process conducted through inter-institutional coordination between public and private entities in the San Francisco sector of the Siloé neighborhood in Cali, Colombia, between 2018 and 2023. Objective: Work with a vulnerable community in the face of socio-environmental challenges, motivating their participation and empowerment as agents of change, while strengthening neighborhood ties that support urban space improvement processes in the sector. Methodology: This qualitative study employed elements of Participatory Action Research (PAR) to implement actions aimed at improving public space on a neighborhood scale. The goal was to foster training and neighborhood integration through a new social and community feeling, achieved via urban routes, participatory workshops, and focus groups. Results: Application of a community-based project strategy that channels the potential of community leadership and allows progress towards cities with more articulated, functional public spaces that operate in the service of the community. Conclusions: The project led to the formation of the neighborhood collective "Camino al Barrio," a strategy with a pedagogical approach to encourage citizen participation and collective appropriation of neighborhood public space.

Keywords: culture of peace, community participation, autonomization, community development, urban planning.

I. INTRODUCTION

The accelerated urban expansion in Latin American cities has generated a series of problems associated with informal settlements, especially on hills and mountainsides. These neighborhoods are characterized by conditions of social and environmental vulnerability, as well as a high risk of disasters. This study focuses on the case of the San Francisco neighborhood, located on the hillside of the city of Cali, Colombia, where factors such as poverty, violence, and environmental deterioration have generated a context of social exclusion and limited quality of life for its inhabitants.

In this sector, flooding and flash floods have occurred as a result of the Isabel Pérez gorge, located in the sector's lower part, overflowing. This has produced enormous material losses, the collapse of homes, and the loss of human lives since 2016. Municipal authorities have tried to address this complex problem; however, no substantive solutions have been implemented that effectively involve the community.

There is a growing concern about citizen participation and the mechanisms to enhance its effectiveness in urban decision-making. However, there are still gaps in understanding how long-term community interventions influence the development of active citizenship and the transformation of urban spaces.

This study aims to analyze the case of Camino al Barrio, identifying the factors that facilitated citizen participation, the changes observed in the social fabric and public space, and the lessons learned for future interventions. It is expected that this study will contribute to enriching knowledge about social intervention practices and inform the design of more participatory public policies.

Firstly, the text illustrates the contextualization of the place and the importance of public space as a facilitator of social structures. Subsequently, the methodology, based on the sociological intervention and Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, is presented. The results obtained show three elements: 1) intervention and accompaniment strategy, 2) community-based exercises, and 3) consolidation of the proposal and the Camino al Barrio collective. Finally, the discussion and conclusions focus on the dilemma of building and reconstructing in the neighborhood of Cali, which provides valuable lessons for implementing similar projects in similar contexts.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Extreme weather events, such as flooding or flash floods, disproportionately affect vulnerable communities due to their limited capacity to respond. The distribution of these impacts is not equitable; the poorest regions and developing countries

are disproportionately affected, as their coping mechanisms are often overwhelmed (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2008; Pörtner et al., 2022). In the case study, there is evidence of an increase in impervious areas and human settlements at the expense of forest and environmental protection areas. This significantly raises the risk of flooding due to increased surface runoff, since the "gray infrastructure" (Chen et al., 2021) disrupts the natural hydrological cycle of assimilation, infiltration, and evapotranspiration.

From the human sciences, the problem of risks is understood as a social construction and a rational perception influenced by the lack of information and the omission of social dynamics (Duclos et al., 1990; UN-Habitat, 2012; Vallejos-Romero et al., 2022). For this reason, it is essential to strengthen territorial governance from the communities, articulated with government development policies, to establish an alternative public management model of co-responsibility between the State and society.

According to Bonilla Sandoval (2012), achieving greater protection and social equality can foster transformative economic dynamism. The challenge lies in finding the synergies that allow equality, growth, and sustainability to generate virtuous dynamics that promote social inclusion and reduce territorial inequalities. These productive, social, and territorial synergies can positively impact the collective imagination (ECLAC, 2012) and open up opportunities for community work that improves the living conditions of vulnerable populations. For this reason, the proposal was structured based on the identification of the vulnerability issue and the potential for social resilience in the study area.

In this context, the proposal seeks a new way of understanding the city and the role of citizenship in shaping public space, which involves its shared use by citizens and community-based citizen representative bodies (Cuéllar Obando, 2015). Participation promotes pride and awareness about taking care of one's physical environment (Hernández García, 2008; Ong et al., 2018; Matherne et al., 2018; Ibarra-López, 2023). In this project, the community focused on improving the neighborhood's public space, as its collective nature makes it a key point for self-organization in the common interest.

The public space, as Jane Jacobs (1961) notes, is fundamentally a construction on a human scale. Its design and management are crucial for strengthening social life, fostering interactions, promoting community cohesion, and empowering the inhabitants. Regarding the community process, this project is based on two theoretical pillars of Jacobs' work (1961): first, public space as an adaptive organic system, which is planned with a "bottom-up" approach that gives priority to the role of the local community to address



Figure 1: Location of the city of Cali in Colombia. Source: Google Maps, 2025.

territorial challenges; and second, its role as a facilitator of a network of more resilient neighborhood relations with the capacity for self-organization.

From the perspective of community resilience, the work of Jacobs (1961) is complemented by that of Granovetter (1973). While Jacobs highlights the importance of human interactions for neighborhood cohesion in what can be called “strong or intermediate ties”, Granovetter (1973) emphasizes that community resilience, measured from its capacity for adaptation, innovation, and access to external resources, also depends on the existence of “weak ties”.

In his theory, ‘the strength of weak ties,’ Granovetter (1973) states that weak ties allow opportunities, resources, or ideas for improvement to flow from outside the circle of strong ties of a community, which encourages access to different perspectives and solutions that can contribute to the improvement of public space and the empowerment of the community. That is, strong ties give internal confidence, while weak ties connect the community with a broader world of resources and information.

Taking this into account, the methodology designed allowed for the identification of strong, intermediate, and weak ties in the community. Strong and intermediate ties (organized

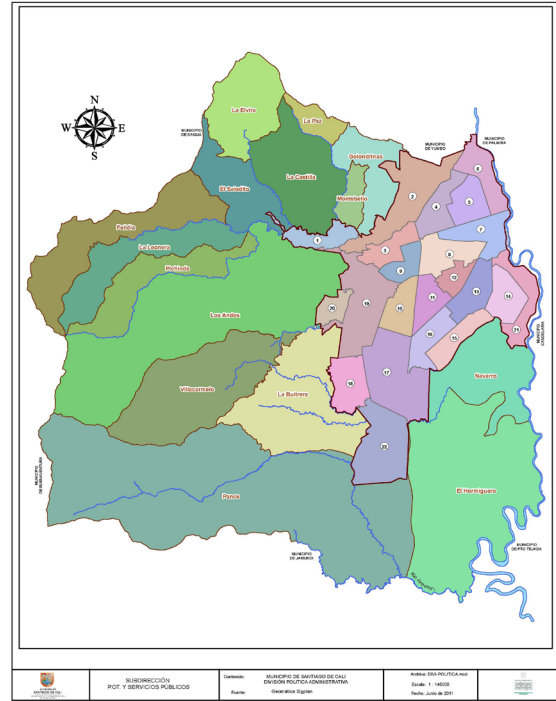


Figure 2: Location of the case study. Source: Mayor’s Office of Santiago de Cali, 2014.

community) were key to integrating weak ties (detached individuals). The latter, as they became involved, not only showed increasing interest but also brought unexpected and valuable external contacts to the process.

III. CASE STUDY

The Camino al Barrio project was conducted in the city of Cali, in Colombia (Figure 1), in a sector known as Siloé, located in commune 20 (Figure 2). This area is located on the western margin of the city, marking the urban-rural border. It is one of the points where the urban layout ends, adjoins rural land, and borders the city’s environmental reserve, known as the Los Farallones National Natural Park.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The project employed elements of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology (Fals Borda & Rodríguez Brandão, 1987), particularly in the qualitative data obtained from direct observation, which involved the application of interpretative and analytical procedures to address the object of study

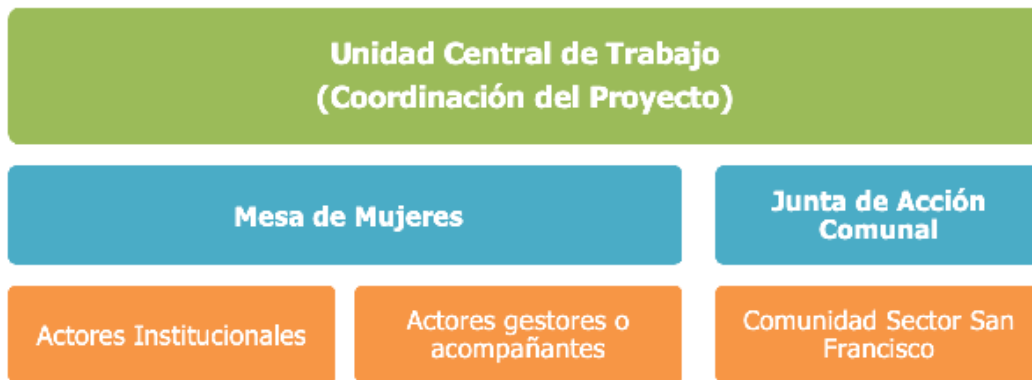


Figure 3: Project participants. Source: Prepared by the Authors, 2020.

(Colmenares, 2012; Delgado-Algarra, 2015). The strategies were applied transversally throughout the project. During the local participatory diagnosis, tours of the area, interviews and meetings with community leaders, and participatory workshops were conducted for the diagnostic stage, as well as the collective construction of a map of the project's actors and their lines of action at the local level.

The methodology applied aimed to transform community attitudes, particularly in San Francisco and its agents, in favor of physical intervention in the area. To this end, activities were held to ensure the permanence of people in the intervention activities, most of which involved sharing food, cultural activities, and sports activities.

Participants

The project aimed to connect all citizens living in the sector. To achieve this, a focus group of community leaders was formed, who work in different instances according to the role assigned within the process (Figure 3). Female participation stands out, since out of the thirty (30) community members who permanently participated in the project, fourteen (14) are female leaders who already had a particular background in the local context.

Tools

To conduct the project, guided visits were conducted with community leaders, and technical and logistical support was provided by entities such as the Administrative Department of Environmental Management (DAGMA), the Special Administrative Unit of Public Services (UAESP), and the Secretary of Citizen Security of the Municipality of Cali. Local meetings and festivities were also attended to strengthen the ties between the project's group of professionals and the community.

Procedure

The proposed methodology was conducted following the thematic phases and lines associated with Urban Pedagogy (Pérez Preciado, 2000; Rubio Noha & Majadas Andray, 2007; Salinas, 2009; Páramo, 2009; Mora Ardila, 2012; Moncada Cardona, 2015; Lopes, 2016; Mora Gómez, 2018), in three moments: a) Recognizing the city and the neighborhood context, b) Identifying the problems and potentialities of urban space and, c) Participation and responsibility as a citizen (Villa Velasco, 2020).

V. RESULTS

The intervention began in the profound ignorance of the community where it would take place, and with the reading of some references, especially those related to Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Fals Borda & Rodríguez Brandão, 1987; Martí, 2005; Colmenares, 2012; Arkedis et al., 2021). In this context, PAR focuses on transcending academic language and aims to connect scientific knowledge with the wisdom and experiences of communities, utilizing various citizen participation mechanisms with multiple dimensions, including inclusion, deliberation, and impact on public policies.

However, it would be discovered that, while the exercise was taking shape, a mobilizing agent in the dynamics between external agents (researchers, government entities, private parties) and neighborhood and community forms of organization is the work around food. The latter would indicate a harsh reality that these exercises face: it is difficult to mobilize people to causes such as "the environment" or "risk management" when people attend meetings on a diet of two meals a day. In this context, the dimensions, scope, limitations, and achievements of voluntary and solidarity action (García-

Colín & Verduzco Igartúa, 2016) are associated with a notion of reciprocity (Zamudio-Nieto et al., 2018).

Documents were reviewed, and initially, five (5) community leaders of the sector were spoken to, seeking guidance on how to consolidate the exercise. All the neighbors with whom we spoke had an interest in working together; however, each one had their particular interest, and in most cases, they were looking for a personal benefit. In this context, the decision to work on improving the neighborhood public space as a strategy to mobilize people towards collective thinking turned out to be a good decision, as the communities actively participate in the transformation of the problems identified for the transformation of reality, and this participation is more cohesive if it is around a common goal (Valderrama Hernández, 2013).

In the process, as already indicated in the methodology, some projection activities were carried out, in which more people from outside the neighborhood participated than the sector's inhabitants themselves. The exercise focused on community work with the following premises (Enesterio Reyes & Góngora Trujillo, 2010): 1) community work with a global approach, which will go beyond the assistance of conventional interventions, 2) community work for the development of a project in the area that involves an interdisciplinary approach and, 3) community work that relies on existing social organizations to achieve a common goal.

The beginning of the process did not extend beyond assistentialism and the exchange of goods for participation, and some similar interventions do not exceed this level (Velásquez Carrillo, 2001). At this point, it was evident that work with communal action groups is currently devalued and highly permeated by various forms of political patronage. These legitimize the continuity or the promotion of political projects, some of which are self-described as "alternative" ones that continue to use classic repertoires of outreach with political groups, where promises and institutional supports stand out, which, without the approval of some state organs, are practically impossible (Fals Borda, 1999).

One of the great lessons that emerged from conducting community-based exercises is this. If the project or strategy does not have immediate access to financial resources for its consolidation, people's expectations may turn against the project, given that community actors have immediate needs to address in their environment, and sometimes the patience and slow response with which external agents are mobilized is not tolerable.

So, what allowed the intervention to be different in this context? Several elements. To begin with, the project team was not the only actor in the territory; there were other participating entities. Interestingly, a turning point occurred when several community members asked to work together, all in the same meeting space.

Here, from an academic and university exercise, one moves on to a community one, one that from now on would be called Camino al Barrio.

This scenario allowed combining efforts and financial, logistical and technical resources of the participating institutions, which allowed participatory planning with the following principles (Elvis Sierra & Peña Fajardo, 2013): 1) The planning and the expected results were always thought to benefit the community, 2) Identification of problems and viable solution alternatives according to the local context, 3) The commitment and willingness to action and organized mobilization by the community to implement the plans was the pillar of the project.

Another distinctive element of this project was the close and ongoing collaboration with the community, which was grounded in Urban Pedagogy (Páramo, 2009). Through this, it is sought that communities learn to participate in the construction of the city, the latter, understood as a learning environment (Sarmiento-Díaz, 2023), where, based on the route of the territory, it is possible to make a comparison between urban reality, the norm, theory, and imaginaries, to understand and transform public space. In this context, the city is viewed as a valuable educational resource in socio-urban participation and integration processes (Guzmán Ramírez, 2020). These guided tours enabled the community to become familiar with and reacquaint itself with its context and the habitability conditions associated with occupying the hillside land (Figure 4).

The multidisciplinary team comprised different external agents: Undersecretary of Territories, Inclusion and Opportunity TIO of the Mayor's Office of Cali, YMCA-Cali Christian Youth Association, and the team of teachers and students of the Universidad del Valle (architects, visual designers, communicators, sanitary engineers), who came together to plan actions in the area, discuss problems, provide training on a topic, or share.

In the meetings, regardless of the role or rank, decisions were made collectively. There were no notable leaders, and actions were not decided until everyone in the group had approved them. As a result of the exchange of ideas, it was decided to prioritize the intervention of a public space. This included the construction of a retaining wall using tires, the planting of vegetation to stabilize the land on the slope, the installation of a sustainable urban drainage system that filters runoff water from the upper part of the slope, and the construction of an urban garden.

One of the highlights of the process was the high level of female participation. The collective comprises more than fourteen (14) women who continuously and permanently worked in the Female Panel, which would become the driving force for the project. They worked long days, during which, thanks to their efforts, one of the project's most significant challenges would be consolidated: motivating participation in an urban intervention



Figure 4: Occupation of the hillside, San Francisco sector. Source: Prepared by the Authors, 2020.



Figure 5: Women were the driving force behind the community work exercise. Source: Prepared by the Authors, 2021.

exercise. The role of women and their positive impact on territorial and community exercises is highlighted (Figure 5). Their participation in this project represents a concrete and quantifiable action to close the inequality gaps between men and women (UN Women, 2016).

VI. DISCUSSION

The “Camino al Barrio” project, conceived in Siloé, successfully brought together neighbors, the government, and academia over a period of more than two years to improve the urban environment. Its key achievements include community empowerment and leadership, collaborative learning, the construction of lasting networks, and the appropriation of public space.

The project provides methodological guidelines to facilitate progress in the effective engagement of the community, as the leading actors in defining the problems and solutions were the neighbors themselves. From a horizontal approach, teamwork was also prioritized, and the concentration of power in a few leaders was avoided, which promoted reflection on practices and power dynamics in the community and allowed recognizing the importance of the collaborative process, where the transformation process was valued more than the immediate results.

Among the primary challenges faced by the project are the rotation of participants, resistance to change, and limited resources. Camino al Barrio demonstrated the importance of community participation in achieving social and urban change. In addition, it highlighted the need for different actors and disciplines to collaborate on addressing complex city problems through joint initiatives that have the potential to be lasting, as is the case with this project.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

This experience highlighted a severe criticism of urban development models that fail to integrate the daily subsistence needs of vulnerable communities into their strategies. The expectation of effective participation in collective causes crumbles in the face of immediate needs, which reveals a deep gap between external agendas and the reality of the communities. For this reason, achieving community participation was the greatest challenge of the project.

The transformation of a neighborhood public space has become a successful strategy to catalyze participation, revealing that working towards tangible and common goals brings the community together in a way that welfare or clientelist approaches do not achieve. The collaboration between multiple external actors and the community, united under the “Camino al Barrio” project, was fundamental to pooling resources and planning participatory actions that benefited the population.

Under the “Urban Pedagogy” approach, the inhabitants understood and transformed their environment. The remarkable and sustained participation of women as the driving force behind this process was highlighted, demonstrating the transformative power of women in community motivation and reducing inequality gaps. This underlines the need to integrate gender perspectives into any community development initiative.

This participatory process in Siloé is unprecedented and culminated in the construction of a public space dreamed of and designed by the community itself, the result of collective effort. This achievement is a powerful demonstration of the transformative power of strategic alliances and community leadership in driving change to the physical and social environment.

VIII. CONTRIBUCIÓN DE AUTORES CRÉDIT

Conceptualización, C.P.G.; Curación de datos, C.P.G.; Análisis formal, C.P.G.; Adquisición de financiación; Investigación, C.P.G., C.C.V.V.; Metodología, C.C.V.V.; Administración de proyecto; Recursos; Software; Supervisión; Validación; Visualización; Escritura – borrador original, C.P.G.; Escritura – revisión y edición, C.P.G., C.C.V.V.

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