Cultivating Citizenship and Participation Through Culture: The Use of Participatory Planning Methods for Community-Based Watershed Management in Santo Andre, Brazil

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Introduction
Throughout the past three decades governments, international development agencies and various non-governmental organisations have increasingly reflected an interest in adopting, either in policy or rhetoric, the idea of community participation. One of the greatest polemics encountered both in discourse and practise involves the interpretation and subsequent meaning that different ideologies attribute to participation. Since not all forms of participation are democratic and/or productive, the degree, level and objectives of participation remain in question especially in our pluralistic urban centres. If planning intends to be an inclusive and democratic endeavour we must search for diversified channels of participation that are comfortable and accessible to various social segments, and that simultaneously contribute to the larger goal of fostering more equal, just and healthy communities.

Given the increasingly complex and diverse nature of urban centres, the spaces and channels of participation that link public power to civil society must be created so as to facilitate the expression of a given social group’s perspective and input. Knowledge held by community residents is distinct to the knowledge held by planners, engineers and/or architects and both can learn from each other when planning the management of natural resources. It is precisely the meshing together of these two ways of knowing that offers the most relevant information with which to direct and shape substantive natural resource management plans. However the blending of local-insider and outsider-expert ways of knowing is not only about extracting knowledge that can be integrated into plans, rather, it is about creating channels of participation to provide a forum where information is expressed and exchanged, consciousness is raised, people’s rights are made known and activism and citizenship are stimulated. Participation should be pedagogical for participants, an educational, formative and informative endeavour.
Research Focus
This research illustrated how culture, as both a creative practice and a way of life, provides a valuable instrument for community participation. The role of culture as a participatory tool was analysed for its potential in the construction of active citizenship, and as a method that facilitates the expression of local knowledge. Since putting the ideals of participation into practice is difficult, the specific purpose of this research was to identify and document some of the opportunities and constraints to providing creative channels of participation. This study was situated in the Municipality of Santo Andre, Brazil, where a strong commitment to participatory planning combined with the urgent need for watershed protection has triggered the adoption of a Community Based Watershed Management (CBWM) project.

The CBWM project aims to incorporate informal settlement residents into watershed management and subsequently enhance the stewardship of the resource. Increasing the environmental awareness of local residents while simultaneously attempting to address their immediate basic needs promises a higher level of protection in a highly environmentally sensitive and vulnerable ecosystem threatened by mismanagement and precarious settlements. The informal settlement of Parque Andreense located within the watershed boundary provided a pilot project study area for the CBWM project and the results and lessons learned here will inform other urban watershed settlement issues rampant in neighbouring municipalities and in Brazil in general. My research was based on this pilot project and specifically focused on the use of cultural mechanisms to tap into the local knowledge of residents from informal settlements, inquiring about what are the opportunities and constraints that have characterised the attempts of Brazilian municipal planners.

The Role of Culture in Participatory Planning
The active involvement of diverse citizen groups in participatory planning has proven to be a complex and often challenging objective, and therefore much thought has been directed towards adopting creative methods of stimulating community participation. The experience in Santo Andre has shown that culture is an undeniably valuable instrument
for the construction of identity and citizenship and holds the potential to catalyse the
deep process of social transformation. Two innovative examples of participation that
were utilised in Parque Andreense involve the use of hip-hop culture amongst youth and
the documentation of watershed residents’ oral histories.

**Hip-Hop**

Hip hop, a contemporary Afro-Latino musical expression, is a language often used by
certain youth to express their realities as an excluded segment of society. When used to
attract youth participation, it can simultaneously represent a channel of communication
and a vehicle for inclusion into discussions on watershed management and public policy
in general. In Parque Andreense hip-hop workshops were used to attract people to gather
and engage providing a valuable opportunity to discuss social, economic and
environmental issues. This type of approach looks at cultural expression not only as a
channel of communication in the participatory process, but more importantly, as powerful
instrument of stimulation, engagement, learning and transformation where self esteem,
pride and identity are built and fortified. These are critical ingredients in the
development of active citizenship and provide stepping stones for effective citizen
participation.

It is important to note that despite the immense potentialities in hip-hop culture as it
relates to community development, one must not overlook its constraints. Class and
gender distinctions and signifiers also play out within hip-hop culture. Some clusters of
youth involved with hip-hop culture are “children” of a deeply exclusionary classist,
racist and capitalist system and to a certain extent reproduce this by excluding and being
unreceptive to others that are not into hip-hop. They are a clique that is often intimidating
for other youth, particularly women, given the mainly male composition of the
movement. Many are also oblivious to the social transformation roots from which hip-
hop culture stemmed and therefore do not see it as a tool capable of triggering thought
and change amongst youth and in youth’s relation with public power.
Oral Histories

Cultural expression through oral history and storytelling provides a rich account of people’s lives and is indispensable to a deeper understanding of the social, psychological, emotional and constructed realities to which they belong. In February 2000 an oral history documentation project was initiated in Parque Andreense. The idea behind this initiative was to reconstitute the oral expression, visions and perceptions of Parque Andreense residents regarding their daily experiences dealing with the limits and potentialities of living in a watershed protection area and exploring the link to their locale and its relationship with the city of Santo Andre.

The documented stories revealed a wealth of information and insight that was directly used in the CBWM project. Residents discussed the immense ethnic, racial, religious, geographic, demographic and other diversities found in their community. A variety of valuable local skills and knowledge were brought forth and people expressed their awareness regarding the sensitive environment in which they live. In addition these stories provided a first hand account of the process of change occurring in the watershed area. The oral histories gave a sounding board to the isolated voices of watershed residents opening a space for them to speak their minds regarding their diversity, knowledge, beliefs, mentalities, concerns and visions for the future of their community and the watershed.

Hip-hop and oral history documentation illustrate two innovative forms of community involvement that have been used to expand citizen input and integrate distinct voices that are traditionally excluded from the municipal planning process. Although the municipality of Santo Andre has demonstrated significant innovation in its attempt to harness unconventional methods of community involvement, the adoption of alternative forms of participation that incorporate culture and pedagogic processes confront several challenges. As such it is crucial to look at what Brazilian planners find are some of the opportunities and constraints involved in embracing innovative forms of participatory planning.
Opportunities and Constraints

Opportunities can be discussed in terms of the favourable circumstances, be they political or other factors that facilitate the adoption, implementation and integration of innovative forms of participation. In the municipality of Santo Andre, this opportunity is made available as a result of a political commitment to and planners’ experience with participatory planning, coupled with a deep interest in sustainable development principles. Opportunities can also be thought of in terms of positive spin-offs that stem from citizen participation both throughout and after the participatory process is over. These are opportunities afforded by the adoption of participatory methods and may reflect a project’s overarching goals of increasing environmental awareness, community cohesion and active citizenship. Identifying the various opportunities involved in adopting innovative forms of participation can shed light on existing constraints and vice versa.

Several opportunities and constraints were found at the community, community/municipal interface and municipal (institutional) levels. At the community level much positive change was expressed regarding the increased quality and quantity of popular participation and disposition to organising. Some examples of attitude change were also documented amongst youth and other participating citizens. Constraints included community mistrust and skepticism of public power initiatives, a paternalistic mentality and reluctance to participate, the initial weak involvement of women who face several barriers to participation and a general lack of a collective mentality.

At the municipal/community interface level lies the challenge of strengthening citizens’ ability to participate more effectively in municipal processes. This often involves community outreach, education and informing people of their rights as citizens. The production and socialisation of relevant planning information plays a crucial role and often presents a challenge to overworked staff. It was also observed that dialogue between planners and citizens can at times be obstructed by the use of jargon that results in the alienation of those who are unfamiliar with specific terminology.
At the municipal level challenges included coordinating inter and multi-disciplinary work, attributing equal value to the knowledge and expertise of distinct municipal departments, the meshing of local and planner knowledge and the discrepancy between available resources and a high demand for innovative projects. Probably the most significant constraints lie in the distinct perceptions of participation and the understanding that planners have regarding the purpose of culture.

**Conclusion**

Despite the many constraints faced by planners in Santo Andre, to date the several projects and creative participatory methods they have devised have caused Santo Andre to become one of Brazil’s exemplar cities in relation to progressive municipal planning. However, for participatory management to occur public power needs to assume a more democratic posture in which they willingly share their information and knowledge with civil society seeking ways for the community to have a more effective presence in planning processes. The point therefore is not only to open various channels of participation because channels of participation do not deconstruct or eliminate the social division of labour or the unequal appropriation of strategic planning information (Baierle, 1998). The channels themselves must be democratised spaces of expression, learning and transformation where people construct identities, build self-esteem, participate, learn about their rights, identify areas for activism and make decisions regarding the future of their communities.