



The challenges of social participation in Santiago de Cuba

Los desafíos de la participación social en Santiago de Cuba

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Abstract

Received 2021-05-02

Revised 2021-07-11

Accepted 2021-11-21

Published 2022-01-04

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Pages: 39-56

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In a society where social participation has been an essential component of the progress achieved, there are symptoms of exhaustion and limitations in its potential. The incorporation of new measures in the current context has not been able to give the required impetus. A set of limitations can be observed, the solution of which is a commitment of the authorities and local communities that join efforts to face the challenges posed. The article focuses on the argumentation of the challenges supported by research that provides the elements of judgment that support the discourse. The times demand the experimentation of new behaviors and attitudes.

Keywords: social participation, challenges, municipality, challenges, Santiago de Cuba and local government.

Resumen

En una sociedad, donde la participación social ha sido componente esencial de los avances alcanzados, se aprecian síntomas de agotamiento y limitaciones en sus potencialidades. La incorporación de nuevas medidas en el contexto actual no ha logrado dar el impulso requerido. Se observan un conjunto de limitaciones, cuya solución constituyen un empeño de las autoridades y comunidades locales que aúnan esfuerzos para enfrentar los desafíos planteados. El artículo se centra en la argumentación de los desafíos apoyado en investigaciones que aportan los elementos de juicio

que argumentan el discurso. Los tiempos exigen la experimentación de nuevos comportamientos y actitudes.

Palabras clave: participación social, desafíos, municipio, desafíos, Santiago de Cuba y gobierno local.

Introduction

Social participation is a recurring theme nowadays. The concern for its increase in quality and quantity has become the object of social research, among which sociological, psychological, philosophical, political science, anthropological and medical research are distinguished. One of the aspects that stands out in the various theoretical approaches is the multiplicity of concepts. Researchers use their understanding of the phenomenon of social participation as the starting point for their conceptual definitions. The scientific discipline on which the research is based is one of the conditioning factors of the conceptualizations.

The authors, as a rule, start from the etymological meaning of the term participation. This reveals an interesting aspect, which is the difficulty of precedence studies of the phenomenon of participation, especially in times when the concept of the citizen and his freedom had serious restrictions. Other coincidences in the concepts underlie. For example, in the determination of the types or forms of participation in society (citizen, political, community, social); in the evaluation by all authors of the government-society relationship as essential in the phenomenon of social participation; and in the coincidence in the spaces of reference: national, municipal, community. However, there are some specificities, since there are researches that focus on legitimization through participation and others admit legitimization, but include opposition, thus showing a more active and independent citizen with respect to governmental structures. Such research does not go beyond a reformist approach with possibilities of flexibilization, within the liberal conception of the social phenomenon.

As a rule, research takes as a reference the national and specifically the local level (Ganuza, 2004). The authors do not envisage change in the socio-political order through social participation. Valdés (2009) considers that a substantive element is to take into account in the definition adopted the possible alternatives to the dominant liberal conception. On the other

hand, the emphasis on the national space concretizes the participating subject, who is conditioned by traditions, customs, in synthesis an inherited participatory culture with which he may or may not break and without whose understanding it is impossible to interpret the characteristics and scope of the social participation under study. However, social participation is not limited to the national level. At the same time, globalizing processes globalize social participation, one of the expressions of which is associationism and volunteering. This is a manifestation of an emerging universalist culture in strong inter-national communicational links.

On the other hand, researchers rely on the constitutional articles and existing regulations (Restrepo, 2001) without taking into account that the history of social struggles has played an important role in them. Particularly Ligarreto (2018, p. 69) considers that, it is also associated with the mediation and transformation in the present day of national armed conflicts in the Latin American region.

It is also admitted that the notion of the citizen is currently under construction and therefore, this implies a social participation with new specificities in a rapidly changing world. Another aspect highlighted by some authors is the ambiguity of the term (Latapi, 2005). We are facing a social phenomenon, necessary, with limitations according to social ideals and complex in its content. Due to its characteristics, it must be studied in a specific social context.

For this reason, analyses in Cuba should take into account these considerations. In this sense (Carnero, 2021, p. 11) defines social participation for the Cuban municipal case as the process of social activism, expression of human practical activity aimed at achieving specific objectives to preserve or transform the organization of society in the various economic, socio-political and cultural spheres, and which implies a positioning with respect to the relations of domination.

Social participation in Cuban municipalities.

Cuban local society today experiences a greater transfer of autonomy, expressed in opportunities that open up in this social space; as part of the process of updating the Cuban Economic and Social Model of Socialist Development. A greater social participation of the acting subjects and their local institutions is required. However, this should be achieved by resorting

to new ways in public decision making and the effective and efficient use of human resources at the local level. At present, we face the challenge of adjusting the (spaces and forms) of social participation to the demands imposed by the urgency of dynamizing the economy, satisfying ever-growing needs and achieving the sustainability of our social project.

With the revolutionary triumph of 1959 in Cuba, the traditional conception of participation was definitively changed and a new way of participating was born. In the successive trajectory, social participation has had a determining weight, according to the socialist conception of the same, which has been a motivating criterion of the changes and the first sense to initiate new experiences. In the transition to the 21st century in Cuba, a questioning was opened from the social sciences, to the traditional conceptions on this dimension of local development, where social participation constitutes a key point of the debate. In the social context, two major social spheres converge: the private sphere, whose objective is to attend to the common interests of the community or to improve the quality of life of the communities, and the public sphere, which obeys more global aspects. In the local sphere, different types of participation converge, among which the following stand out: social, community, citizen and political participation. Consequently, from the conceptual point of view, the term social participation, with a popular, community or political content, is not contrary to the Cuban revolutionary process. It contains the types of participation and its various forms, from individual participation to participation at the level of collectives, companies, groups of intellectuals and civil associations.

Social participation as a concept is palpable in the different spheres of life. Its breadth, commitment and professionalism is a decisive condition for the success of the process of economic and social development of the municipality. It is aimed at deploying the creative vocation of individuals and groups to meet development needs, based on transforming existing relationships in an innovative way.

In the Cuban municipality there are particularities that pose a different analysis with respect to social participation in foreign local contexts, among which stand out. (Poder Popular. PP. 2019a, pp. 13-15), (Communist Party of Cuba. PCC, 2021, pp. 53 - 57): The existence of a socialist State at the

head of a new social construct; a unique political Party, which has among its practices the systematic exercise of consultation and national popular consensus and is recognized as the organized vanguard of the Cuban nation; a type of socialist transition society, which has a political system and civil society, composed of institutions, mass and social organizations, with a projection in the most part, in favor social process; to have a socio-classist structure in correspondence with the changes that are introduced in society; the type of socialist planning as a tool and principle that constitutes the main way for the direction of the economy and has the recognition of the socialist property of all the people on the fundamental means of production, as the main form in the national economy; in addition to the cooperative, mixed and private property of natural or juridical Cuban or totally foreign persons.

These specificities make social participation in the locality a diverse, complex and singular process, respectful of citizens' rights and inclusive. Social participation is materialized in the making of public, political, social or economic decisions of the country, the province and the municipality or that affect the daily life of the subjects. This participatory plurality is distinguished by respect for social diversity: gender, sexual orientation, age, skin color, disability, origin, religious beliefs, social status and political affiliation.

These particularities constitute determining factors that ensure the quantity, quality and social impact of the participatory process and democratic activism in a socialist transition society, which is based on social management and self-management, which is an indispensable element, due to the very essence of this social system. This demands that the process of pro-active social participation in the locality contains: Multiple, growing, original and *sui generis* differentiation of the subjects and the locality; more transparent, agile, and expeditious to transform the local space and move forward; the existence of a culture of social participation and mass consciousness becomes indispensable and the need arises to monitor, evaluate and measure the impacts of the participatory process in the localities.

The above, from the participatory spaces of the municipality, reaffirms that the functioning and performance of local government, led by the Municipal

Assembly of People's Power (AMPP) is essential for the social purposes of the country. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Cuba, approved in 2012, the AMPP, for the exercise of its functions is supported by its working commissions, by the People's Councils (CP), by the initiative and broad participation of the population, and acts in close coordination with the mass and social organizations." (PP. 2019a, p.14. a-192). On its real involvement together with the associative spaces, its institutions, organizations and the acting subjects; will depend the solutions promoted to guarantee the continuity and improvement of the Cuban social system, in a democratic and participative way. These are elements that mark the singularity of social participation in the Cuban municipality.

Social participation in the municipality of Santiago de Cuba.

At present, municipalities do not escape the impacts generated by the integral crisis of the capitalist system. The considerations made by Díaz-Canel and Núñez (2020) point out that this is conditioned by the existence of global tendencies that will apparently only become more accentuated in the future (p. 3). Social participation has been influenced by these effects, reflecting directly on the development of daily life in the country and in the municipalities in particular, affecting the active performance of social processes.

In the locality, a permanent balance must be achieved in the exercise of Popular Power (PP), establishing priorities that respond to existing social interests. In this sense, Tejera (2007) considered the municipality the ideal space for local development, which still requires, fundamentally: decision-making capacity at its level, administrative independence, improvement of social participation in decision-making and training of local cadres (p. 92). Some of these elements proposed at the time have already been incorporated into social praxis, others such as social participation in decision-making and training of local cadres have not yet achieved optimal results in their implementation. At the same time, new cultural and axiological issues are emerging.

For Antonio et al.,(2015) from Sociology points out that local development is given as a micro space, to mobilize endogenous energies and potentialities, to define development strategies and promote creative, self-sufficient activities, with local resources, creating synergies, seeking

possible external support, the latter factors being essential to sustainable development policies (pp. 636-337). The use of all the endogenous potentialities existing in this micro social space constitutes a premise for local development. On the other hand, the central government has transferred to the municipalities attributions, functions, competencies and capacities that are essential to be able to mobilize the reserves of productive and social forces, as part of the updating of the Cuban social economic model. None of the proposed transformations can be achieved without the active, inclusive, protagonist participation of the acting subjects and local collectives. Therefore, this process is based on the need for a proactive, integrating and permanent action in the municipality.

The city of Santiago de Cuba is the capital of the province of the same name and the main part of the municipality, which is also made up of a series of outlying towns. It is currently among the most important municipalities of the national economy due to its infrastructure, since the main industrial centers of this region and the main economic organizations of eastern-southern Cuba are concentrated in the territory. The PP (2019b) indicates that the (AMPP), is the most numerous in the country due to its composition -279 delegates, distributed in 29 popular councils and the National Office of Statistics and Information (ONEI, 2019) specifies that the territorial extension of the municipality is 1 031.74 km² (p. 10).

In this regard, Benítez et al. (2020) emphasize as a distinctive feature that the municipality of Santiago de Cuba is the most populated in the country, with 509,971 inhabitants. The population of this single municipality is larger than those of the provinces of Mayabeque, Cienfuegos, Sancti Spiritus, Ciego de Avila and Artemisa, which has made it a territory with specific requirements for its administration (p.4). On the other hand, Villarrubia et al., (2011), point out that on November 16, 1988, after a rigorous process of study of the historical-social and economic singularities, the Executive Bureau of the Provincial Party Committee approved the construction of two districts (p. 338). The configuration of the municipality is diverse and extensive in the socio-economic and territorial order. Four of the districts are urban (José Martí Pérez, 26 de Julio, Antonio Maceo and Abel Santamaría, with a total population of 393 034 inhabitants and two are

suburban (René Ramos Latourt and Frank País García, with 116 937 inhabitants.

According to the complexity of the territory, social participation acquires peculiar characteristics. These are expressed in the combination of official channels promoted by local governmental structures, together with those associated with the expansion of self-employment, citizens' initiatives and their organizations. There is also the multiplication of other formal and non-formal participatory channels that are an expression of the broad interests and needs of the individuals and collectivities that interact in the municipality.

Limitations of social participation in the municipality of Santiago de Cuba.

The analysis of the limitations focuses on three moments of social participation in the municipality: the vitality of the communication strategy in the municipality, the strategy of the AMPP with its structures in the communities and the local institutional approach to development.

Communication strategy and social participation in the locality.

Currently, the use of information and communication technologies is multiplying at an accelerated rate, specifically associated with large Internet companies that have designed and put into service the so-called social networks (Ramonet, 2016, pp. 15-16), providing new opportunities and posing social challenges. This reality has had inevitable repercussions in the Santiago locality, becoming one of the government's priorities. The Communist Party of Cuba plans to advance as a policy, in the creation of the Government Information System, ensuring the highest degree of computerization that the economic possibilities allow PCC (2021).

From an institutional perspective according to the PP (2019b), progress is observed in the local communicational strategy, which allows the exchange with society, administrations, institutions and agencies in that area. In the municipality, the first stage of e-government presence was concluded as part of the improvement of public policies. Thus, public participatory spaces of the government with society emerged, such as "The Citizen's Portal" and e-commerce applications, which allow people to interact and manage basic services at first, with some digital platforms of ministries, institutions and national, provincial and local entities, among which Transfermóvil, Enzona and Trabajar en Cuba stand out.

The actions deployed so far have been insufficient, if compared with the central government's purposes in the informatization of the country. Both PP (2019b) and Rodríguez et al., (2018) emphasize that the purpose is, to achieve in society an agile, efficient, modern, electronic and socially inclusive government. In the considerations made by Boffill et al., (2015) indicate that the management of local public administration requires not only to advance in the modernization of its structures, acquisition of technological infrastructure and undertake changes that crystallize in a new scheme of relations with citizens and businesses, but also to promote the introduction of such changes in society to create an environment conducive to the development of a culture of innovation and social participation in problem solving (p. 3). In this direction, progress must continue to be made in terms of the potential that can be contributed to the development of social participation.

In the different mass media there are spaces for interaction and social participation, insufficiently explored, if compared to their communicative and participatory potential, all with presence in social networks. They address different topics related to the economic, political, cultural, health and sports spheres, among others, with repercussions for society. Although they constitute internal communicative strengths for generating a formal and organized social participation of the institutions and their society, in some occasions, they are not effective for certain mobilizations and calls that are carried out. However, in the communities of the municipality, it has been found that effective communicative actions should be further diversified and not those that generate spontaneous, impulsive and unorganized participation, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, it is necessary to raise the participatory culture of the subjects and their local institutions (social, economic and political, among others).

The strategy of the AMPP with its structures in the communities.

At present, the AMPP and its management body (PP, 2019b) are perfecting the strategy of attention to the People's Councils (CP), based on the recognition of the latter's functions. In this sense, the strategy is limited by the insufficient use of local diagnoses as the starting point for any social participation action with the objective of raising the quantity and quality of life, economic and social. Current circumstances demand a local diagnosis

that expresses the needs of the subjects and at the same time characterizes the social reality under study. At the same time, it is required that individuals and local society, from the clear identification of needs, can adjust their social participation to them in order to achieve change based on the concept of endogenous development. To this end, its function must be precise and respond to what is regulated and, in addition, it must adapt to the diverse and changing social reality.

The strategy of the MPPA in its relations with its community structures - formal and non-formal - must ensure the participatory capacity of its society and its associative spaces, taking advantage of all the potentialities installed in the existing spaces in a creative and innovative way; as part of the modifications that are introduced to the socio-economic model; under very complex social, historical and economic circumstances. In the *Constitution of the Republic of Cuba*, the PCs are considered the fundamental link between the Local Assembly and the people. Its representative character is emphasized and with the highest authority for the assigned role. Its main objective is to strengthen coordination and collective effort, promoting the participation of the population and local initiatives for the benefit of the community. (PP, 2019a, p. 14). Hernandez (2014) highlights the weak relationship of local government with community institutions and the lack of mechanisms that enhance the participation of the population in development actions (p. 65). Despite all the political and legislative progress made in the country, there are still shortcomings that do not favor the transformations that are being introduced, which hinders the participatory process in the locality.

The constituency delegate is an achievement and expression of Cuban democracy, conceived in a coherent manner and in direct contact with the population, forming part of it at the local level. From a community approach regarding the delegate, Carnero (2007) pointed out that there is generally a lack of methods and leadership styles that allow his direct linkage with the leadership of the PPPA and vice versa, because of the mediation constituted by the PCs (p. 63).

This has raised the need to understand the significance and importance of this structure and its role in local government, as a channel or channel of transmission, realization and feedback to the grassroots of society and from

them to the central authorities and their different instances, not only as a passive repository of political, economic and social processes, which is often the case. In this space of social interaction, the role played by the delegates with the community is of unquestionable value in the exercise of socialist democracy. In the *Constitution of the Republic of Cuba*, it is noted as one of the duties of the delegates "to render an account periodically to their electors of their management, as established by law" (PP, 2019a, p. 14). Hechavarria (2017) indicates that the delegate marks the connection between the people and the municipal government insofar as, through the accountabilities that he/she assumes before his/her electors, he/she knows the problems that affect the community and transfers them to the representative body while managing their solution and responding to the electorate (pp. 162-163).

At present, insufficiencies are observed in the performance of the attributions and functions conferred to the PB delegate in his/her relationship with constituency voters, which is reflected in the social construction and the way in which participatory processes are sometimes conducted in different scenarios. This has repercussions on the states of opinion generated in not insignificant groups of individuals in the population and the evaluation of their performance in the community. Guancho (2012) considers that both the accountability of the delegate to his or her constituents and the delegate's own activity have lost vigor and vitality and have been subject to various criticisms (pp. 69-79).

There is an urgent need for the PP delegates to have greater support so that the results achieved do not depend on their individual leadership capacity. This could prevent, to a great extent, the enormous attrition that can be observed today in some of them. The percentage figures achieved in citizen and political participation during the exercise of the vote in the elections for PP delegates in the locality are an expression of the present shortcomings. In the period 2000-2015 they remained constant; however, from 2015, they begin to decrease to 88.1 % in 2017. This is in the latter year 45 080 people who did not participate in the exercise of a constitutional right. This trend is noted in the following.

Figure 1. Title. *Elections of Delegates to the Municipal Assemblies of People's Power at the close of December 31, 2018.*

Electoral process	Registered voters	Participating voters	Percentage of participation.
2000	340 874	335 356	98,4
2002	368 124	343 099	93,2
2005	372 363	351 585	94,4
2007	377 791	349 803	92,6
2010	378 343	351 683	92,9
2012	383 850	370 727	96,6
2015	361 541	320 370	88,6
2017	377 653	332 573	88,1

Note. Adapted from the *Yearbook of the National Statistics and Information Office*. (ONEI, 2019). Anuario Estadístico de Santiago de Cuba. <http://www.onei.gob.cu/sites/default/files>

Regarding the decrease in the percentage of the vote, Duharte (2015) points out among the possible new reforms to be undertaken in the current stage of socialist transition in Cuba are: the continuous elevation of the real authority and power -still meager- of the municipal delegates and deputies; the improvement and expansion of the forms, ways and mechanisms of participation of the population and of the periodic processes of accountability, not only of the delegates before their electors, but of all elected representatives (p. 164). The responsibility to find methods, ways and creative mechanisms that favor social participation goes beyond the physical presence in the participatory spaces of society. The agile and effective performance of the delegate, the PC president, the permanent work commissions and the integrated community work groups, are fundamental to socialize transcendental topics for the nation, the locality and its communities, which could enrich them with criteria and suggestions that, sometimes, do not go beyond the formal frameworks.

Direct involvement in local or community decision-making also generates social commitment and a sense of belonging. In particular, Muguercia and Arévalo (2019) highlight as a distinctive feature, that participation in a

general sense tends to create in society, strong and deep-rooted community ties and creators of collective identity (p. 220). Municipalities are the scenario by nature of unification of common objectives, where national and local public policies of development are implemented in the very foundations of society in which local actors must participate.

The local institutional approach to development.

Carnero (2007) indicates that it is necessary to create instruments that allow people to articulate their needs and participate fully in the task of shaping all aspects of local life and adopt an institutional approach to development in this social scenario (p. 58). Progress has been made in this regard. An analysis within the municipality reveals the existence of instruments for the articulation of individual or collective interests and capacities; however, regardless of the efforts made, they are used in an insufficient and formal manner. This is due, fundamentally, to the lack of a clear identification in the institutional approach that the effectiveness of social participation must have as a methodological basis a clear conception of development.

This requires seeing the concept of development as referring to people and not to objects, while its measurement is associated with the increase in the quality of life and not to the quantity of goods possessed. Naturally, the quality of life depends on the prioritization and empowerment of fundamental human needs, which are not the same for all people and form a system, in which it is not possible to establish hierarchies that would indicate some as primary and others as secondary. Any unsatisfied need produces poverty and social pathologies. This conception does not exclude, of course, the denial of the importance of material and spiritual goods as a support for existence. On the other hand, indicators need to be designed in the municipality to monitor and evaluate the levels - quantitative and qualitative - and impacts achieved in social participation. Currently, it is not enough to transfer power to local actors from the central government. It is also necessary to use and create favorable spaces that allow society to express itself in this social sphere. This has raised the need to increase the authorities' preparation and leadership in public management, since they are the most responsible and facilitators of social participation at this level, where the actions of local society are expressed.

Challenges to social participation in the municipality of Santiago.

In correspondence with the assessments made, the treatment of the identified limitations poses a series of challenges to the authorities and communities of the municipality. One of the challenges lies in the need to redesign diverse actions, focused on pro-active social participation, in constant development, social and economic transformation, based on communicative actions for the collective good, from the existing massive community spaces. Such actions should make it possible to evaluate and monitor the levels and impacts of social participation in the locality. This will allow an important contribution, from the participatory daily life of individuals and their institutions to the development of public management in the municipality.

The conceptions about development, updating and improvement in Santiago de Cuba do not adjust to the necessary levels aspired. Therefore, the articulation of different ways of thinking and acting participatory activities at the local level is another challenge. The existing participatory limitations in the municipality are associated with cultural, economic and legal inadequacies, even though there are advances. Therefore, there is a need to diversify actions, associative spaces and participatory methods, which allow interacting and socializing knowledge of social, legal and economic norms and projections, especially with local social and economic actors. The diversity of these actors makes it more complex to achieve their correspondence with the existing spaces of influence. It is a matter of putting society, its officials and public managers at the pace of the changes introduced in the locality, which requires greater preparation and leadership in the performance of local government authorities.

In what has been analyzed, the human factor with its creativity and initiative is of decisive importance. This issue is sometimes forgotten when evaluating the Cuban case and its municipalities; if we take into account the evolution of the tradition of protagonist social participation in the different social and economic processes experienced in the transition to socialism.

The process of updating the Cuban Economic and Social Model generates a greater empowerment, faculties and attributions particularly towards the locality; decentralizing and giving more faculties, with the intention of

acquiring a high level of autonomy that includes: the election or designation of its authorities; the faculty to decide on the use of its resources; the exercise of the competences that correspond to it; as well as to dictate agreements and normative dispositions necessary for the exercise of its faculties. This does not mean fragmentation of society, but rather multiplying the decision-making capacity of the municipality to solve problems that affect community life.

The municipality constitutes a necessary and viable option for social participation, provided by the existing territorial potentialities. It is a matter of strengthening Cuban democracy and the credibility of the socialist project in this social scenario. Integration and social cohesion are needed. The main consequence would be the promotion of local development in the municipality of Santiago de Cuba.

Conclusions

Social participation in the municipality of Santiago de Cuba is expressed as a dimension of local development; it occurs in two directions: the social participation of society, the subjects and their institutions and in the performance of the local government. There is a need from this social reality for the establishment of indicators to monitor, evaluate and measure the levels and impacts of social participation expressed on both sides in order to achieve a better interpretation of its evolution.

At the local level, there are shortcomings such as the insufficient use of the ways and methods established for the exercise of social participation, showing deviations between the real possibilities and the little effectiveness with which this is assumed by the participating subjects, their institutions and their society.

It is necessary to develop the independence of the social and economic actors, based on a more effective training that allows them to elaborate and use effective diagnoses; together with the preparation and leadership in public management of the local government authorities. It is necessary to gain in organization, optimal use of material and human resources and increased commitment and local identity, as components of a culture of social participation appropriate to the demands of socialist construction.

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