

# Fostering Participation in community development as a social-pedagogical approach

**Abstract.** It is widely acknowledged that local participation is a crucial element for achieving human and sustainable development in community projects, grounded in the capacities of local actors and responsiveness to the needs of the territories where projects are implemented. At the same time, participatory activities enable socio-pedagogical interventions to provide unique opportunities for lifelong learning.

Empirical evidence and literature highlight a growing conceptual and practical interest in understanding participation in community development projects, as demonstrated by several recent studies aiming to synthesize extensive indications regarding the impacts of participation. However, it is in the interest of socio-pedagogical intervention to understand the processes and dynamics that can achieve more meaningful and impactful participation, able to generate learning.

In this article, we discuss how Social Pedagogy presents a duality of participation. On the one hand, the desirable civic participation with the democratic engagement of all local actors, and on the other hand, the opportunity to create meaningful pedagogical interventions, grounded in hospitality, mediation, and human relationships. Finally, we propose guidelines for socio-pedagogical interventions that prioritize participation by local actors. We emphasize the importance of understanding their motivations, needs and expectations, particularly in vulnerable groups. There is also emphasis placed on the need to promote moments of dialogue and discussion, ethically mediated, aimed to achieve responsible decisions and participations, and able to foster meaningful educational experiences.

**Keywords:** participation, Social Pedagogy, community development

## 1 Participation – empirical evidence and theoretical literature

In the realm of community development, fostering active participation from local actors is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone for social and sustainable development initiatives. In our previous studies “Socio-pedagogical Practices in Development Cooperation: Participation and Capacity Building” [1] and “Actors Participation and Socioterritorial Development” [2] we perceived the crucial role played by different actors, persons and institutions, in the development of participatory process. Throughout this research, we identified that effective participation of local actors not only fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment but also contributes to the creation of solutions that are more tailored to the specific needs of each community and territory. Additionally, we highlighted the importance of collaboration among different stakeholders, including civil society organizations, and governmental institutions in seeking strategies for sustainable and inclusive development.

Research literature emphasises a growing conceptual and empirical interest in understanding participation and development, as evidenced by several recent studies aiming to synthesize extensive research in this area. Through a meta-case study analysis of 100 cases, Gaventa and Barrett [3] construct a typology of democratic and developmental outcomes, with four main categories: citizenship construction; enhanced participation practices; responsive and accountable state strengthening; and inclusive and cohesive society development. Their findings indicate that citizen participation produces positive effects across these outcome categories, even with instances of negative outcomes within each category.

In other main empirical study, Mansuri and Rao [4] analyzed over 500 examples of interventions which have supported participatory development. Their focus was on “induced” participation. They verified that communities often exhibit higher satisfaction with decisions in which they have had a chance to participate, even if their involvement does not modify the outcome or if the outcomes do not align with their identified preferences. The same study demonstrated that usually participatory projects tend to exclude those from lower socio-economic groups and instead are dominated by elites. Mansuri and Rao also note that lower literacy levels pose an additional barrier for the engagement of the most marginalized groups in a community, since this hinders local actors' ability to engage in the documentation of projects and access written materials in order to make well-informed decisions. [1][2][3][5][6]

A holistic and participatory approach in socio-pedagogical intervention considers not only participation as a citizen's right and duty, but also as a socio-pedagogical dynamic. Our analysis [1][2] also emphasized the need for promoting educational experiences, particularly in vulnerable contexts. It is in this sense that we consider the need for a qualified and informed participation, envisioned beyond merely broad opportunities to participate.

In this regard, consistent with Social Pedagogy as conceptual basis for practice where ethical reflection plays a crucial role, we reflect that this work promotes participatory socio-pedagogical interventions. Through intentional pedagogical actions, we seek provide a proposal to reduce barriers that hinder active participation, with ethically invested interventions, especially among groups facing vulnerabilities.

## **2 Participation and socio-pedagogical intervention**

### **2.1 From citizen participation to socio-pedagogical intervention**

Models that seek to clarify and interpretate participation arose from Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation in 1969 [7]. This model establishes linear and normative frameworks that begin with non-existent participation and progress to levels where participants have complete control.

While Arnstein's ladder allows the analysis of participation from the perspective of individuals, Jules Pretty's participation typology [8] allows analyze the type of participatory approaches. In this framework those typologies of low participation appear more

passive, where community members are informed of what will happen by project agents or managers. In typologies of higher participation, there is greater mobilization by local actors, while at the highest levels, people are engaging in joint analyses, leading to action plans and to the formation of new local institutions or the strengthening of existing ones. At these levels, people take control over local decisions and participate in maintaining structures or practices. Pretty's typology is considered normative by several authors [2] [4], ranging from forms considered "less participatory" to "more participatory". However, while these typologies allow establish levels of participation, they do not enable a dynamic understanding of the participatory process, nor do they establish guidelines to promote the desirable participation.

While normative and typified participation frameworks offer valuable insights into the spectrum of participatory approaches, integrating socio-pedagogical interventions elevates the quality and effectiveness of citizen engagement, by employing educational strategies tailored to the specific needs and communities' contexts.

It is important to note that socio-pedagogical intervention is a process involving two situated agents: social pedagogues and local actors [9]. As in any interpersonal relationship, the results of intervention, whether successful or not, depend on the involvement and commitment of these agents.

This holistic approach, in a perspective of lifelong education, emphasis Social Pedagogy in is precisely domain of knowledge which valuing education in all its social and anthropological amplitude allowing framing the plurality of social and educational developed experiences in community [10].

## **2.2 Participation: A Dual Role in Citizenship and Lifelong Learning**

In a Social Pedagogy perspective, participation concept embodies a duality that encompasses both citizen engagement and socio-pedagogical processes aimed at capacitating local actors. On one hand, civic participation is seen as a fundamental aspect of democratic governance, where citizens actively contribute to decision-making processes, voice their concerns, and hold authorities accountable. Simultaneously, participation can be understood as a socio-pedagogical process designed to enhance the capacities and capabilities of local actors. Through structured educational activities, training workshops, and experiential lifelong learning opportunities, this approach aims to provide individuals with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to engage meaningfully in societal development initiatives.

This dual function of participation is vital for social pedagogy, as it assigns to participation both a goal and a meaningful means of intervention. Azevedo [11] points out that the imperatives of human development, valued in its personal, social, and civic component, converge today towards the recognition of the need for continuous learning, desired to be led by each citizen throughout their life, thus justifying the territorial-based socio-pedagogical dynamics. From Caride's perspective [12] the contemporary concept of participation demands the involvement of everyone in the "task" of development as "agents of change," linking humans to the construction of their own development. Caride implies that education is bestowed with the role of equipping humanity with the capacity to master its development through participation.

### 2.3 Fostering participation in socio-pedagogical intervention

Within Social Pedagogy, the *episteme* of socio-pedagogical intervention and Social Education is *techné*. In Table 1, we propose guidelines to enable more thoughtful and pedagogically balanced socio-pedagogical participatory interventions. This model arises from our research and previous literature review.

Our proposal recognizes that community participation is not a one-size-fits-all concept but rather a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon that, when socio-pedagogically invested, should be guided by reflected pedagogical intentions. It emphasizes the importance of understanding local actors, their motivations, desires, and expectations, to bring them into active participation, particularly vulnerable groups, considering that people who engage in learning processes become more active, more able and more resilient to face daily life challenges [10]. This importance on the relationship of participation, inclusion, and lifelong learning is also reflected in the UNESCO report - *Reimagining our futures together A new social contract for education* [13]. The report implies participation and inclusion as essential components of emancipatory adult education, encompassing informal learning experiences gained outside formal schooling environments. There is also emphasis placed on the need to promote dialogue and discussion moments, ethically mediated, aimed to achieve responsible decisions and participations. Moreover, inherent in socio-pedagogical intervention, identifying and constructing pedagogical strategies that contribute to a qualified and informed participation.

It is important to clarify that in social pedagogy there is a weak correlation between pedagogical norms and learning outcomes [9]. This complexity in establishing cause-and-effect processes in learning requires social pedagogues to use their personal and professional experience in mobilizing and reconfiguring dynamics that promote lifelong learning. Thus, the guidelines we propose outline dynamics that allow the design of socio-pedagogical interventions more favorable to foster significant learning processes, to support social pedagogues and social educators in their professional reflection.

**Table 1.** Fostering participation in socio-pedagogical intervention

<b>Fostering participation in socio-pedagogical intervention</b>
Identify and map local actors.
Understand motivations, interests, and limitations of local actors.
Manage participants' expectations.
Facilitate and mediate dynamics of sharing, discussion, and decision-making.
Identify training needs and establish goals with local actors.
Strengthen and establish networks among local partners.

#### **Identify and map local actors**

Identifying and mapping local actors enables social pedagogues to gain a nuanced understanding of the specific needs, challenges, and assets of these community actors.

By pinpointing vulnerable populations such as marginalized individuals, ethnic minorities, or socioeconomically disadvantaged families, social pedagogues can tailor interventions to address their unique circumstances and promote inclusive participation.

#### **Understand motivations, interests, and limitations of local actors**

Understanding motivations, interests, and limitations of local actors is essential to design and implement effective socio-pedagogical interventions. By obtaining insight into what drives and influences the behavior of key stakeholders, social pedagogues can tailor interventions to align with their needs, aspirations, and capacities. This enables social educators to foster a sense of ownership, commitment, and engagement among local actors and build their trust. Additionally, understanding the interests and limitations of local actors helps social pedagogues to anticipate potential challenges, conflicts, or barriers to participation, allowing them to proactively address these issues and mitigate risks.

#### **Understand and manage participants' expectations**

Managing participants' expectations helps to establish trust, maintain engagement, and support the success of the intervention. By clearly communicating the goals, scope, and potential outcomes of the project, social pedagogues can align participants' expectations with the realities of what can be achieved. This reduces the likelihood of disappointment or dissatisfaction among community and fosters a sense of transparency and accountability in the intervention process. Additionally, managing expectations will support to identify individual and collective lifelong learning needs and to design meaningful pedagogical strategies.

#### **Facilitate and mediate dynamics of sharing, discussion, and decision-making**

Creating and facilitating dynamics of sharing, discussion, and decision-making fosters collaboration, inclusivity, and learning within the intervention process. By providing opportunities for participants to share their perspectives, experiences, and ideas, social pedagogues can promote mutual understanding, empathy, and trust among local actors. This not only enriches the dialogue but also ensures that a diverse range of voices and viewpoints are heard and considered in the decision-making process. This collaborative approach not only enhances the quality of decision-making but also promotes ownership and commitment to the intervention outcomes. Furthermore, emphasizing hospitality in these dynamics creates a welcoming and supportive environment where everyone feels valued, respected, and safe to express themselves openly.

#### **Identify training needs and establish goals with local actors**

Identifying training needs and establishing goals with local actors is crucial for empowering them and enhancing the effectiveness of socio-pedagogical interventions. This not only fosters personal and professional development among local actors but also equips them with the tools and resources needed to actively contribute to the intervention process. Moreover, involving local actors in setting goals and objectives ensures their buy-in and ownership of the intervention, increasing their commitment and motivation to achieve desired outcomes.

### **Strengthen and establish networks among local partners**

Strengthening and establishing networks among community local partners enhances collaboration, resource-sharing, and collective action within the intervention context. By establishing connections with other organizations, institutions, and community groups, it is possible to access a wider range of expertise, resources, and support networks to complement community efforts. This enables social pedagogues to leverage the strengths and capacities of diverse actors and stakeholders, leading to more comprehensive and sustainable interventions.

The complexity of social pedagogy arises from the diverse environments and periods in which individuals, groups, and communities engage in their activities [9]. Unlike traditional scholarly pedagogy, it views individuals as integrated wholes, where knowledge, emotions, and actions are not compartmentalized. Instead, all these facets of the individual are engaged and nurtured through their interactions with others [9] [10]. Therefore, the relationships that occur in individuals' daily lives serve as both conduits, contexts, and substance for socio-pedagogical interventions.

In this order, these non-normative guidelines are conceptualized through social pedagogy as the *episteme* for socio-pedagogical intervention the *techné*. Where guidelines should be interpreted as key points to support socio-pedagogical interventions, and not as pedagogical prescriptions. The contextual knowledge and professional experience of social pedagogues are principal and enable the valuation of their actions at every moment of their interventions.

## **3 Conclusion**

In a socio-pedagogical intervention scenario, community participation is perceived in a dual means, as a democratic imperative and as an opportunity to develop meaningful lifelong learning moments.

As inherent to socio-pedagogical intervention, the need to provide meaningful educational that leads to desirable social changes brings, to social pedagogues, challenges without predefined curricula. Although socio-pedagogical intervention is distanced from rigid recipes and norms, there are dynamics that contribute to promoting and developing more significant social learning.

The proposed dynamics presented in this work can support social educators in their interventions within communities by reinforcing participation and lifelong learning through engagement in participation. Identifying and understanding the motivations, limitations, and expectations of local actors are necessary conditions for establishing meaningful learning objectives. Participation through dialogue and discussion, in an environment with hospitality and ethically mediated, allows reaching sustainable consensus and obtain decisions that reinforce social cohesion and weaken social ties.

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