

Strategies to Encourage Community Participation Through Communication: Milagro Case Study

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to determine the pattern of communication and its incidence in the processes of community participation in the neighborhood "Las Piñas" in the city of Milagro. This study employed a quantitative-qualitative methodology, utilizing methods of communication and participation in processes. The development of the city was analyzed through interviews and in-depth research, as well as documents and observations of the social situation and situation through the voices of community leaders and a survey of families in the area (Piña Norte and Piña del Sur). As a result of the research, it was found that community participation is characterized by the actions of the inhabitants of the community. The inhabitants of this place do not recognize the implications of their actions and consider participation only as a form of social gathering for a common purpose. This could indicate that this way of thinking is the result of their ignorance of the processes and forms of participation that imply an active development of the conscious. In this context, the social communication variable is considered deficient, lacking community orientation, so that the citizens of Las Piñas do not find an adequate space to present their ideas. Consequently, communication does not serve as a catalyst for participation, which has implications for the advancement of the community. Conversely, during the course of the research, it was discovered that the local government is not perceived in a favorable manner; rather, it is perceived to have a negative image and lacks credibility.

Keywords: Social Communication, Community Participation, Community and Social Development.

INTRODUCTION

The Citadel of Las Piñas of the Canton of Milagro was established as a result of an invasion between 1980 and 1988. Its construction was ordered by the mayor of the time, Humberto Centenaro Gando. These lands were part of the Hacienda San Miguel, which was characterized by the prevalence of vegetation and cacao and fruit plantations. By the year 2000, the lands were administered by the Municipality of Milagro, as decreed by the National Congress in Decree No. C.D.176 of February 20. Over the following years, the municipality began to implement various infrastructure projects, including the construction of gravel, curbs, street lighting, and a water supply system (1).

It is currently one of the most populated settlements in the locality, with approximately 8,084 inhabitants distributed across 2,021 families between Piñas North and South. The citadel is part of the parish of Ernesto Seminario Hans, which is considered one of the oldest parishes in the municipality. (2) The inhabitants themselves attribute their lack of interest in participating in community processes to the fact that politically motivated community leaders only become active during general elections and engage in opportunistic communication that is not for the benefit of the community, but rather to satisfy individualistic interests. This is evident not only in their conditions of progress, but also in their routine behavior in the face of common problems such as insecurity and the lack of social participation to eradicate it.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The citadel faces several challenges in terms of community participation. Residents often feel demotivated or disconnected from the decisions that affect their environment. However, communication can be a powerful tool to encourage participation and strengthen the social fabric in these communities.

It is therefore important to implement effective communication strategies that encourage the active participation of neighbors in matters of common interest. These strategies can include the dissemination of relevant information through traditional means such as flyers, posters, and community meetings, as well as the use of digital platforms such as social networks and messaging groups to keep residents informed and facilitate interaction among them.

It is crucial to create spaces for dialogue and citizen participation where neighbors can express their concerns, propose solutions, and collaborate in making decisions related to the development of their community. Similarly, cultural, sporting, or social activities and events can be organized to encourage residents to meet and collaborate, thus strengthening the sense of belonging and community cohesion. In this context, democracy becomes important as a close relationship between being and duty. (3) It also represents a form of government that is little understood in society (4).

The application of democratic principles and effective communication will facilitate the community's capacity to achieve effective development, which can be defined as the analysis of economic growth and the manner in which individuals live within society. This process ultimately leads to a sense of relevance or collective identity, which, according to Aceves, is an objective expression shaped in the conscience, in the way individuals perceive and represent themselves to others (p.37).

For Hernández (7), participation is divided into different spheres, which are mentioned below:

Citizen Participation: understood as the organization of people in search of general welfare and of a collective.

Community Participation: which refers to the actions of the population in search of an improvement in their living conditions.

Social Participation: conceived as a process in which people come together to defend and represent their interests.

Political Participation: framed in politically oriented activities, exercised by citizens.

It is thus evident that participation, from a social perspective that encompasses the community, entails the entitlement of individuals to assume a leading role in decision-making and public administration (8). In this context, Rocha (9) posits that there are two distinct types of citizenship: citizenship of disorder and citizenship of high intensity.

Citizenships Of Disorder

The emergence of these citizens of disorder can be attributed to the necessity for housing, which compelled them to settle in an irregular manner. They resorted to political manipulation through clientelistic actions to serve their own interests, which reified them as instruments of political use. At the same time, they claimed benefits through a double transaction, seeking advances or social benefits. The states of disorder that Rocha cites, according to his assessment that presupposes disorderly conditions, have created these citizens in their own image and likeness. This is because they lack an urban development plan and a minimum foreseeing idea of demographic growth. Consequently, they have been permissive and even sponsors of settlements. Rocha states, in his own words, that "first the houses are made and then the territory is thought of."

High-Intensity Citizenship

As a form of citizenship that is characterized by a high level of intensity, it can be observed that this is reached by passing from disorder to order. In the Colombian case, this can be exemplified by the FARC, which negotiated its passage from the clandestine and armed struggle to the established order. This citizenship of disorder can be observed in the inhabitants of Las Piñas. Their actions can be described as a means of understanding their disorderly behavior, as well as their capacity to transform weaknesses into strengths when pursuing limited but meaningful improvements. The evolution of humanity is a continuous process, and the organizational and communicative manifestations have existed alongside humans since their inception. Therefore, it can be reasonably assumed that the current state of the inhabitants of the citadel Las Piñas represents a transitional phase between one state and another. Every crisis presents an opportunity for growth and advancement, and this is a fundamental aspect of the evolutionary process. It is therefore necessary to provide effective communication tools and strategies that are easy to use and readily accessible.

In accordance with Ander Egg (10), community development is defined by the following characteristics:

Involve a process of educating people to change their attitudes towards their reality.

It necessarily demands social action techniques to direct the efforts of the community.

It seeks social welfare, improving the quality of life of citizens.

Encourages the participation of people on a voluntary basis so that they themselves are the managers of change.

It requires a communication process that enhances dialogue among citizens and between citizens and the outside world.

It can be argued that communication for community development is an aspect of the practice of reflecting on the current situation and how to transform it. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to incorporate education and a transformative communicative process. (11) However, the implications of communication extend beyond mere observation. Herrera (12) asserts that it also entails citizens assuming a primary role in the communication process as content creators and media managers, thereby emphasizing the importance of social appropriation. It is also important to note that communication processes may not always facilitate democratic participation. Therefore, it is essential to implement a model that aligns with the desired outcomes.

Community development in Ecuador is supported by legislation. Article 83 of the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador (2008) states that citizens have a responsibility to assess the fairness of obligations, rights, and duties in relation to leadership and participation in community development.

METHODOLOGY

Given the nature of the research, a combined methodology was deemed appropriate, whereby qualitative and quantitative information, as well as documentary and bibliographic data from reliable sources, could be gathered. This involved the use of different methods, tailored to the specific nature of the intervention, whether documentary or field-based.

A survey was employed, which was distributed to residents of the Las Piñas neighborhood and comprised both open-ended and closed-ended questions. This approach can be described as a semi-structured survey. Additionally, six representatives of the community were interviewed in-depth. The interviews were conducted in accordance with a pre-established set of topics, with the objective of facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter by means of a comparative analysis of the obtained results. Additionally, direct observation was employed, with the findings recorded on a record card according to the topic under investigation.

Table 1: Distribution of the sample

Citadel	Homes	Percentage
North Pineapples	229	71%
South Pineapples	94	29%
Total	323	100%

Source: own elaboration (2024)

Data Analysis Procedures

The instruments were previously validated to identify potential difficulties in the flow of the questions, conflicts with comprehension due to terminology, and other aspects. Consequently, the interview, which was applied to three individuals, had to be modified to enhance the dialogue with the interviewees. This was necessary because the initial proposal included questions that were limiting and did not elicit further information from the respondents. The estimated average duration of the interview was 40 minutes. The survey was validated with five individuals, and the flow was deemed adequate. The questions were found to be clear and easily understandable, with an estimated time of 10 minutes per question.

RESULT AND FINDINGS

In order to ascertain the evolution of Ciudadela las Piñas, official sources within the municipality were consulted. According to data obtained from the municipal government over the past ten years, the citadel has:

1 police checkpoint

2 Evangelical Churches: First Christian Church “Kairos de Dios” and the Evangelical Church of God.

Apostolic

1 chapel of St. John's Catholic Church

1 multi-purpose sports court built by the municipality

Centro Cristiano de Servicios Médicos de las Vistas Hospital

1 Gerontological center

1 Police housing center

1 paved road. The main street Dr. Armando Jiménez

1 private citadel called Bosque Real.

3 educational centers: Unidad Educativa Oswaldo Hurtado, Unidad Educativa Italo

Centenaro and the Julio Pimentel Educational Unit.

Line 4 of the urban transportation system runs through the citadel.

A study conducted by Abarca revealed that 52% of the population had completed high school, while 23% had only completed primary education. This combination of qualifications and experience made it challenging for them to access jobs. Furthermore, 87% of the population had an income of less than \$500, with only one person in the household contributing financially (14).

Table 2: Systematization Of In-Depth Interview

Participant	Knowledge of community participation	Organic Law on Citizen Participation and Social Control	Social organizations	Ciudadela las Piñas and community participation	Social Communication
Edison T.	Community participation in issues related to the development of their locality.	It is unknown and is considered to be one of the weak points of the leaders.	I have been in the locality for 14 years and I am not aware of the existence of a social organization.	There is no community participation.	Communication is direct, i.e. person to person.
Joaquin P.	Associated with the existence of a community leader to encourage the meeting of the community. people for common reasons.	I have not really heard of this law.	There is no community leader at the forefront to guide the community, so the citadel is not arises.	It would be very important for there to be an organization that ensures the improvement of the locality.	There is no communication from the municipality to communicate what they are going to do in the Location

Juan C.	It is to work together with the leaders of the sector for the benefit of the town.	I imagine it is a law that encourages citizen participation.	There is no local social organization involved in the community.	Participation is being developed through community brigades, in this case, through The sub-center is currently being reconfigured so that people who are not in the to get a better deal.	It manifests itself through conversations.
Geraldo C.	It's when a leader stands up and sees certain needs and doesn't just stay with the intention.	The law is positive, but it turns out that it is only in letter and there is no effectiveness in the Community	Rarely does an institution come to the citadel.	Lack of participation is a cultural thing, lack of education and little concern for what is happening in the locality.	We are the media ourselves, the news is carried by the person we are spreads in this way.
Eric P.	Community participation takes place every day in a planned manner.	It is associated with the sovereignty that resides in the people starting from art 1 of the Constitution. Constitution, since this is the basis for the Law of Citizen Participation.	Public institutions intervene eventually to train the population (MIES, Ombudsman's Office, Ministry of Health, Environmental Directorate).	We have social groups through the WhatsApp open network in every neighborhood of the and details every need of your locality.	Local authorities use flyers and social networks through leaders.
Diana M	This is when the community attends the meetings.	I have heard of this law, but I really don't know what it is about because I haven't read it.	Institutions come only when it is election time.	In the previous administration, community participation was promoted, and the people generated ideas.	Communication channels need to be created for people to indicate what is happening to them, that need

Source: Own elaboration (2024)

Community Surveys

Characterization of the Population

The data indicate that 49% of the informants are male and 51% are female. The most representative age groups are between 18 and 44 years old, comprising 60% of the sample. The average age for women was 38 years old, while the average age for men was 43 years old.

The educational attainment of the informants is as follows: 47% have completed secondary school, 26% have completed primary school, 22% have completed higher education, 3% have completed graduate studies, and 1% have no formal education.

Knowledge of Community Participation

Community participation is defined as the meetings held with the community to organize themselves in some activity, as reported by 50% of the informants. The remaining 50% of respondents were unable to provide a definition.

When asked to describe community participation, 24% of respondents indicated that they did not know how to define it. Another 21% associated it with the communication between community members and between them and the authorities regarding needs. Finally, 6% identified it as the assistance planned by the competent authorities for the community.

Nevertheless, 24% of respondents associate community participation with inclusive activities related to sports, culture, and education. Additionally, 23% of respondents indicate that community participation is simply a meeting among the community, 15% relate it to mingas, and 1% to the election of authorities.

Citizen Communication

Among the various media outlets utilized by the community to obtain information, 34% of respondents indicated a preference for television, 34% reported using social networks, 22% indicated a reliance on the written press, and 10% reported using radio as a source of information.

The frequency with which individuals inform themselves about local issues varies. The frequency of information acquisition is as follows: 30% of respondents indicated that they do so often, 37% sometimes, 27% rarely, 5% admitted that they never do so, and 1% did not answer the question.

DISCUSSION

The research study, which examines the communication pattern and its impact on community participation and the development of the small town of Las Piñas in Canton Milagro, defines community participation as the coherent behavior that gives strength to social organizations that bring together the inhabitants of a specific territorial circumscription to work for common objectives guided by a leader. However, the lack of interest and little commitment that the population presents in being part of groups that promote such actions has led to social backwardness and stagnation of the development of some human groups in reference to others.

Although the majority of the people of the citadel recognize the value of community participation and the positive impact it can have, there is a significant proportion of 97% who are reluctant to engage in any form of collective action. This indicates a clear lack of interest, which can be attributed to the ineffective organizational structure and the absence of effective participation strategies. The lack of motivation among the inhabitants of the citadel due to inadequate community communication is currently preventing the necessary enthusiasm from being generated, necessitating the generational replacement of leadership.

These results are at odds with the perspective of Hernández, who views community participation as actions undertaken by the population with the goal of improving their living conditions. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the inhabitants of Las Piñas have engaged in any such actions. In general, leaders and social groups are mobilized by causes proposed by institutions, rather than addressing genuine needs. Consequently, it is recommended that the neighborhood representatives of the population assume a more active role in order to enhance the social formation of the community of Las Piñas.

The following data align with the findings of Rojas and Robles, who posit that 56% of individuals were unaware of the activities undertaken by local authorities in their community. This lack of awareness can be attributed to the residents' lack of interest in participating in the various calls and meetings organized by the authorities. These issues are largely attributed to the absence of designated representatives who are responsible for disseminating information about activities conducted within the community. While some residents were aware of these activities, their perception of these actions was largely indifferent. (15)

In terms of communication, Bernat posits that in a community context, it enables interaction with individuals to facilitate the negotiation of mutually beneficial outcomes. However, this study reveals that there are significant shortcomings in the communication between local authorities and the community. The communication from the local authorities is largely informative, and there is a lack of encouragement for social encounters, which contributes to community discontent. (16) Nevertheless, the findings of Abarca and Chila's research indicate that the demographic profile of the population remains largely unchanged in comparison to the current study. The majority of the population continues to have a secondary education level, which restricts their access to employment opportunities. Additionally, the majority of employed individuals earn low incomes. These data align with what Lozano identifies as living conditions, suggesting that the citizens of Las Piñas have general needs. This is in agreement with Ander Egg's assertion.

CONCLUSION

The inhabitants of the citadel tend to view community participation as a narrow concept, limited to a mere gathering of community members with no tangible impact on the planning of objectives and activities aimed at achieving the common good.

The organizational manifestations of the community have not had an efficacious impact on their demands and development. Furthermore, they have not perfected an organic model that encourages the inhabitants to actively participate in the achievement of their goals. Consequently, an organization that promotes community participation and develops a culture of commitment to the resolution of their needs is necessary.

A culture of commitment and belonging has not been developed to create an identity for the fulfillment of roles in the organization. Furthermore, communication tools and strategies have not been defined to ensure that people feel ownership of local management for the solution of their needs.

It is evident that there is a direct correlation between community participation and the development of the Las Piñas neighborhood. This is because, without open communication within the community and with the local government, it is impossible for residents to create an agenda of needs or communicate them to those who are responsible for demanding the fulfillment of works that respond punctually to solve them.

The preceding conclusions demonstrate that there is an inadequate communication process among the inhabitants of the town of Las Piñas and its organizations, which has resulted in a decline in community participation and a stagnation of local development. This situation calls for the implementation of solutions that incorporate communicational innovation in an efficient, responsible, and coherent manner, with the objective of encouraging young people to assume a leadership role in addressing the challenges that adults have been unable to overcome.

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