

Promoting social inclusion in urban areas through organisational changes **The *decentralised offices* of the Municipality of Cercado in Cochabamba, Bolivia**

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Introduction

Low-income housing belongs to the new tasks local governments have to deal with in Bolivia nowadays. The Law of Popular Participation (1994), and the Decentralisation Law (1995), aimed to institutionalise participatory approaches based on the dialogue among all key actors. Enabling people's participation in decision-making processes and decentralising authority and resources -- as well as functions and responsibilities to the level most effective in addressing the needs of people-- belong to the objectives of the laws. The way in which such a process is organised is an important issue that can lead to profound disagreements and conflict.

The improvement of poor living conditions in urban areas by people's participation was in praxis at the Municipality of Cochabamba since 1990.¹ The *decentralised offices* of the Municipality aimed to make authorities more accessible to the population in the neighbourhoods and to enable the involvement of key stakeholders in housing improvement.

The implementation of the Law of Popular Participation (LPP) and the Decentralisation Law (LDA) granted far stretching autonomy to the level of municipalities. Among the explicit goals of the laws was to create a more just distribution and better administration of public resources. Rural areas became part of the planning and management duties of the municipalities and the territorial limits of the municipalities were reviewed all over the country.² The Municipality of the Cercado Province³ was restructured in more districts and new *decentralised offices* were established.

The *decentralised offices* have gone through a series of changes in all these years. Decisions for new arrangements are normally taken by the highest authorities of the Municipality. And, despite the implementation of laws that provide the institutional and legal framework needed for its operation, the *decentralised offices* became more bureaucratic and less accessible to the population in time, and more vulnerable for political manipulation.

Differences in the three periods of the *decentralised offices* are beyond organisational aspects. The objectives and goals (visions) are different too. The changes implemented were not resulting from demands of the population, or from requirements of the teams working at the *decentralised offices*. The reasons behind the changes are mostly related to the potentiality the political parties in the Municipality government see in these structures particularly for electoral campaigns.

People not working anymore at the Municipality can be more critical and less afraid to express opinions on the *decentralised offices* issue. The extremely 'top-down' perspective in the management of the municipality is a recurrent topic in the conversations. It is clear that the *decentralised offices* issue is a high political thing within the Municipality. The interests of the population are frequently put behind political targets by those ruling the Municipality. To be critical or to not agree with decisions coming from the highest authorities of the Municipality has implied the loss of the jobs for many people.

¹ At that time, the planning and management tasks of the Municipality of Cochabamba were limited to Cochabamba city.

² Rural areas were the administrative accountability of the Executive Power of the central government before.

³ This is one of the 44 provinces of Cochabamba's Department. Its capital, Cochabamba city, is located here.

The paper discusses, from the perspective of different actors involved, how power relations at the local level play a crucial role in the possibilities of promoting social inclusion in urban areas through organisational changes. To understand the development process of the *decentralised offices*, as well as strengths and weaknesses of its different periods, qualitative tools were used for data collection.⁴ By clarifying the internal dynamics and the development process of the *decentralised offices*, the impact of organisational changes for housing improvement through people's participation is discussed. What practical effects do organisational changes have on power relations at the local level, and what influence these have for promoting more inclusive societies are the main concerns for the discussions of this paper.

Background

In the 1970s, public universities in Bolivia were highly involved in the political struggles for more inclusive and just societies. A whole generation of students was influenced by this reality. In the coming years, many professionals of this generation were involved in key positions of the public sector, at national and at local level. To meet the housing needs of the poor "according to their own needs and demands, and in the particular context of the country", became a challenge that demanded enormous efforts and creativity in praxis.

Architects and urban planners⁵ proposed and implemented solutions for housing the low-income, normally following the 'path' of other countries in the region.⁶ The *decentralised offices* implemented in 1990 by the Municipality of Cochabamba, were an innovative effort to deal with *unauthorised housing* in cities more affected by high urban growth rates. Proposals were inspired by an earlier decentralisation experience in Sucre municipality and by the strong organisational tradition of the neighbourhood committees (*juntas vecinales*). The main argument behind the proposal was the need of city management closer to the people living in poor districts. Proposals had political links with ideologies that claimed for more in-depth changes in society.

The visions behind the initial proposals have changed in all these years; many times, in detriment of more democratic and participative decision making process. The LPP and the LAD have had both positive and negative consequences for the achievement of the overall goal of improving the living conditions in poor neighbourhoods through social participation. In time, the *decentralised offices* became more vulnerable for political manipulation making way for the increase of power conflicts at the local level. And, despite the resources available through the LPP for some years now, the living conditions in most poor districts are still deplorable.

The *decentralised offices* of the Municipality of Cochabamba

Three different periods of the *decentralised offices* are identified:

- First period: *Zonal Workshops* (Talleres Zonales), from 1990 to 1993,
- Second period: *Communal Houses* (Casas Comunales), from 1994 to 1997,
- Third period: *Municipal Houses* (Casas Municipales), from 1997 up to now.

⁴ Open-ended interviews with key persons from the central and the local government, professionals at different levels of the Municipality, including the *decentralised offices*, community representatives and people living in the District 9; observations of different activities at the *decentralised office* of the District 9; review of written documents.

⁵ Few professionals in Bolivia are urban planners with academic degree. Architects use to learn and assume this role in praxis.

⁶ The housing sector in Bolivia is historically weak. Few programs implemented at national and local level have been linked to a well-structured housing policy (Solares 1999: 179–296).

First period: the Zonal Workshops (1990–1993)

The first references of the *decentralised offices* in Cochabamba are the *Popular Workshops for Urban Planning* implemented in Sucre city in the 1980s.⁷ The decentralisation process in Sucre was towards more coordinated efforts of the Municipality and the house owners in housing improvement.⁸ (Tórres 1991). The political links between professionals working in Sucre and professionals that ‘transferred’ the idea to Cochabamba for the establishment of the *Zonal Workshops* in 1990 is a noticeable factor.⁹ The *Zonal Workshops* were coordinated by the Urban Development Office of the Municipality at that time. The need of profound organisational changes in the Municipality to enable real improvements in poor neighbourhoods of Cochabamba city was the main argument behind the decentralisation proposals.

With half a million inhabitants in 1990, Cochabamba was the second city of Bolivia. About 50% of the urban land and 70% of the houses were owned illegally. The 12 architects working at the Planning Office had to deal with, among others, housing areas that they had never, or very seldom, visited (Oscar Terceros, 1998/08).¹⁰

The reviewed Master Plan of 1981 did not include *unauthorised settlements* established after that year, making its legalisation rather difficult. City planners had decided to ignore a reality that, paradoxically, represented more than half of the city’s growth in the past few decades. As a result, unauthorised modalities to access land and housing bolstered and became consolidated. Two legalisation programs were approved by the Municipal Council to tackle with the increasing ‘illegal’ conditions in land and housing in the city. The question on how to put the programs into practice and by what level of the Municipality emerged. The little experience existing at the Municipality on these issues and the lack of confidence in the local authorities by the population living in *unauthorised settlements*, made things more difficult.

The most difficult thing was to overcome the heavy centralized management of the city and the little experience at the Municipality on this kind of situations. To meet and solve the problems in practice was not easy for someone who was used to seeing the city mostly in blueprints, and not in the ‘real life’ (Terceros, 1998/08).

To make the people active subjects of their own development, to strengthen existing grass-root organisations, and to put the Municipality near to the poor, were the main arguments behind the *Zonal Workshops*. The joint work of the local government and the population in the improvement of the general living conditions in poor districts was the overall goal.

The *Zonal Workshops* were initially high dependent on the political wills of the Major. But, when a resolution to close down the two *Zonal Workshops* came from the Major in 1992, a huge mobilisation in the poor districts made it clear that the decision was unpopular. Even if this made the local government understand that the *Zonal Workshops* were fulfilling a real demand, this act became a turning point for the whole idea. “From that very day the politicians became aware of the potentiality of the *decentralised offices* for political goals”, points Terceros (1998/08).

The teams of the *Zonal Workshops* were involved in the daily life of the population and were often asked to solve conflicts between the neighbours and among members of the families. The complexity of the problems demanded multidisciplinary teams, experience and commitment.

⁷ Sucre is officially the capital city of Bolivia. The Judiciary Power with the Supreme Court of Justice has its seat there.

⁸ The *Talleres Populares de Planificación Urbana* main working areas were: the historical centre of the city; the transitional urban areas; and the urban areas in the periphery of the city.

⁹ Professionals that started the “decentralisation” process in both municipalities were militants of the leftist MBL (Movimiento Bolivia Libre); one of the fractions of the Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR).

¹⁰ Oscar Terceros, the architect considered the founder of the *Zonal Workshops*, was head of the Urban Development Office of the Municipality between 1990 and 1993, and member of the Municipal Council in 1994 and 1995.

To work with the people was not easy and was not free of conflicts. It takes time to learn the internal rules of the communities. The people want to be sure that your commitments are strong enough to take their side when conflicts emerge, particularly with the authorities at the central level (A.M. Dominguez 1998/08).¹¹

The neighbourhood committees¹² and other type of grass-root organizations were included in the *Zonal Councils*. Together with the *Technical Councils* the *Zonal Councils* were important means for the work of the *Zonal Workshops* in the districts, both as guarantee for a broader participatory process and for the achievement of adequate solutions (Terceros 1991). “The needs were many and the resources scarce, so making the right decisions for the investments were essential” (Dominguez 1998/08).

Discussions could be tough, but at the end of the day the decisions, whatever they were, had to be accepted by everybody, as a part of the democratic rules. To build a day-care centre instead of a basketball playground was not always an obvious priority. The groups may have different interests and different needs and, as in this case, both are a priority for the well being of the community as a whole. This makes the need of more democratic and participative processes relevant (Dominguez, 1998/08).

Assessments on the LPP’s role for more democratic and broader participation can be different. Some see the law as an obstacle, because the only organisations legally accepted in participatory processes are those with juridical status; a requisite normally fulfilled only by the neighbourhood committees in poor districts. This point of view is considered mostly as a bad interpretation of the law by others. “According to the LPP, the population is allowed to participate through its genuinely recognised organisation and the neighbourhood committees are part of them, but surely not the only one”, (Luís Ramírez, 1998/08).¹³ On this particular topic, José A. Martínez writes,

The LPP recognises all kinds of community organisations active within the limits of an administrative area; which does not mean the participation of all social organizations. When it comes to organizations such as the worker unions, in spite of its strong popular tradition, its representation is not considered by the law; in fact, the aim is to neutralise their social and political influence in Bolivia (Martinez 1996:105).

The resources allocated by the local government for the *Zonal Workshops* were few in spite of the huge needs and demands in the poor districts. Most members of the Municipal Council saw the *Zonal Workshops* only upon their own political interest.

For many at the Municipal Council, the *Zonal Workshops* had already a political identity and for this reason they were not willing to give financial support for our work. The potential benefit of the *offices* for the population seemed not to be the priority when discussions on resource allocation was in question (Terceros 1998/08).

The commitment of the teams with the population was one of the most important resources the *decentralised offices* had at that time. But, most professionals working at the *Zonal Workshops* had only temporary contracts and were therefore vulnerable for coercion and easy to dismiss when their point of views became uncomfortable for the authorities of the Municipality. Even with financial support from other external organisation, the possibilities to implement projects with a real impact were limited in this period.¹⁴

¹¹ Ana Maria Dominguez was involved with the work of the *decentralised offices* since the very beginning.

¹² The neighbourhood committees were active in struggles for the improvement of the living conditions of poor urban settlements before the LPP defined the Territorial Base Organisations- OTBs (Organizaciones Territoriales de Base) as legal representatives of the population at the local level. According to the regulations (Decreto Reglamentario 23858) the OTBs can be of: a) Indians; b) Peasants, and c) Neighbourhood Committees.

¹³ Luís Ramírez was involved in the design and implementation process of the Law 1551, Law of Popular Participation, during his time as head of the Housing Sector in Bolivia.

¹⁴ Financial support could come from the Development Corporation of Cochabamba (Corporación de Desarrollo de Cochabamba - CORDECO) and NGOs active in poor districts.

Second period: the Communal Houses (1994–1997)

During municipal elections in 1993, the *decentralised offices* came to be a ‘key card’ in the ‘political game’ of the political parties in campaign. As a result, the *Zonal Workshops* were transformed into the *Communal Houses* in 1994. The aim was to stress the beginning of a new period and point the new orientation of the *decentralised offices*. To emphasise the identity of the *decentralised offices* with the Municipality, as institution, was important as well. The Direction for Neighbourhood Management was established to coordinate their activities on behalf of the Municipality. Functionaries from different offices of the Municipality were transferred to the eight *Communal Houses* existing now.

There were two types of functionaries. Most were employees ‘punished’ because of problems in their former posts, other were professionals that really wanted to do something in the poor settlements. To work in the poor districts was not considered a ‘good job’ within the Municipality at that time (Guillermo Bazoberry 1998/08).¹⁵

Changes in this period were very much oriented to the set-up, the internal organisation and the working methods of the teams. A ‘multidisciplinary itinerant team’ was proposed to move around according to the demands of the different *Communal Houses*.¹⁶ These changes were not considered as “good solutions” by everybody.

The professionals were needed more regularly in each *office* to achieve better results. They should follow-up the process daily and more involved with the people. There was a big difference when the sociologists, social workers, lawyers and others, were part of the teams of the *Zonal Workshops* (Dominguez 1998/08).

The teams had surely more limitations to work near and more regularly with the people in the new arrangements. On the other side, while the *Zonal Workshops* were active in three neighbourhoods with about 15.000 habitants, the *Communal Houses* worked in eight districts and aimed to provide services to more or less 300.000 habitants. To finance multidisciplinary teams in each *decentralised office* was probably difficult for the Municipality’s budget at that time.

In this period, the teams were more oriented to technical questions in detriment of social aspects that had been of a higher priority before. The view on participation, one of the core stones of the former proposals, started to change gradually as well. Even so, this is often considered the best period of the *decentralised offices* in terms of internal organisation and of improvements achieved in the poor neighbourhoods through participatory action.

The mechanisms for making the participatory process democratic and free of corruption –both in the decision-making process and in the investment phase– was a central concern now in the country. Participatory planning became a key word for the work of the *Communal Houses* and the teams had to learn participatory methods mostly in practice. The way in which such arrangements enabled more in depth decision-making processes is a relevant question here.

Participatory planning is often limited to a ‘one-day exercise’ where the population can express priorities, but the final decisions are always made by the local government at the central level. I don’t believe that popular participation should be limited to decisions on basic infrastructure, streets to be paved, or the location of playgrounds. The needs closer to people’s daily life are also important for the achievement of real improvements in the districts, but these issues are not included in the discussions (Dominguez 1998/08).

The work with the *Communal Houses* made the professionals aware of the problems in the poor districts. This made way for discrepancies with the decision-takers and policy-makers “more distant and with less open-minded attitudes”. Directives coming from higher authorities could be considered as negative for the interests of the people living in the poor districts. Norms and

¹⁵ He was first coordinator of the Talleres Zonales (1991– 1992) and later on Director of the newly established Direction for Neighbourhood Management (1994 –1995).

¹⁶ Professionals in the itinerant team were part of the regular staff of the Direction for Neighbourhood Management.

regulations in force are not always suitable for the conditions existing in the 'informal city'. But, professionals working at the *decentralised offices* had to give answers daily, many times outside the 'formal rules of the game'. Conflicts between the highest authorities of the Municipality and the teams at the *decentralised offices* were sometimes unavoidable, not less when it comes to participation issues. The number of professionals of the *decentralised offices* forced to quit or resign 'voluntary' shows how the conflicts were solved by the authorities at the central level.

In some way, there were two Municipalities managing the city; the one in the city centre, vertical, centralised, with a lot of resources, planning and taking decisions far away from the reality; the other, in the districts, close to the real needs of the population, without enough resources for the work, but enabling participatory action in practice (Bazoberri 1998/08).

The population perceived this duality and was aware of the conflicts, it was very important for us to show a clear position. People needed to know that our commitments were trustworthy and that we were not only as controlling instruments there. It had been difficult to demand participation without their trust. The central level didn't understand this and fired professionals with experience because of personal disagreements (ibid.).

Paving streets or building playgrounds with the neighbours' contribution were the most common activities implemented with the co-participation resources at that time.¹⁷ People's contribution was in work but also in cash. Those working at the *decentralised offices* are often convinced that people's willingness to mobilise own resources is related to the likelihood of making decisions. In 1996 new changes were implemented. Each *Communal House* would have an 'administrator', designated by the Mayor himself. A top-down decision that was sensitive, not less because the intention behind the decision was clear in the political profile of the designated administrators. For the teams and the grass-root organisations, this attempt to gain more control of the *decentralised offices* was against the very aim of more democratic procedures at the local level.¹⁸

This was a step back in the democratisation process with the intention to exercise a centralised management of the city from long distance. But it was not only this. The objective of using the *Communal Houses* for political purposes by those ruling the government at the central level was clear. From that point, the *decentralised offices* became more vulnerable to political manipulation. My interest of working dropped (Bazoberri 1998/08).¹⁹

Professionals working in the *decentralised offices* in the second and third periods could perceive the first experience with the *decentralised offices* as a "voluntary work without enough links to the Municipality". Osvaldo Montaña²⁰ thinks that the *Zonal Workshops* were "mostly inefficient and without roots in the reality". The experience with the *Communal Houses* is often seen as "a more serious effort to provide services in poor districts"; but, many agree on that "a more holistic and integral decentralisation process was still needed at that time". Many persons see the *decentralised offices* as a means to transfer functions from the central level of the Municipality to the districts, but in a smaller scope. To prepare the conditions for the establishment of vice-Majors at district level was a central task for the *decentralised offices* in the districts now. Upon this perspective, the change of *Communal Houses* into *Municipal Houses* made sense.

¹⁷ Refers to the 20% of the national budget that goes to the municipalities yearly nowadays, and that is defined according to the population each municipality (and administrative unity) has. About 18% of the total budget of the Municipality of the Cercado Province is made up by the co-participation resources. Participatory planning implemented for the elaboration of the Annual Operative Plans is restricted to these 18%. Luís Ramirez means that the objective is that 100% of the municipalities' resources should be managed through participation.

¹⁸ Same year, the experience was presented as 'Best Practice' in Habitat II, for "its contribution to more democratic decision-making processes in housing improvement" (resolution of May 1996).

¹⁹ Professionals working at the *decentralised offices* were many times forced to quit. About 100 persons were dismissed since the *offices* were first put into practice, often for political reasons. He was among those 'voluntarily' removed from the Municipality.

²⁰ He has been working at the Municipality for about 20 years, mostly in urban planning. He was in charge of the *Communal Houses* after Bazoberri.

Third period: the Municipal Houses (1997–)

The Urban Management Unity was established to coordinate the work with the *decentralised units* in this period. The Municipality of the Cercado Province was reorganized in 13 districts with *Municipal Houses* in 10 of them.²¹ The *Municipal Houses* aimed to stress even more their institutional identity, and to put the urban character of their functions clearly. “The functions are practically the same: approval of plans, administration and control of urban development” (Montaño 1998/08). In other words, the *decentralised offices* would execute the directives of the Urban Planning Office, as smaller Urban Development Units. While the requirements for the whole municipality had necessarily to be defined centrally, the requirements for the districts could be done by grass-root organisations such as the OTBs and the neighbourhood committees. The need of more in-depth participatory process was, however, still stressed.

Although things do not function yet in that way, this is only a matter of time. The demand of the population for more participation is strong. The approval of projects through the ‘cartillas’²² is only a bad way making the population believe that they are somehow involved in the decision making process (Montaño 1998/08).

Critical voices mean that the attempts to control the *decentralised offices* have contributed to the ‘damage’ of its initial goals of more participative and inclusive municipality. The high level of politicisation of the Municipality that had reached the *decentralized units* was a hindrance for its good performance. “The administrators are more interested in politics and even the technicians at the *Municipal Houses* are politicians more than professionals in service” (Montaño 1998/08). The goal of more democratic and balanced development with active participation of people had been left behind by political targets.

Many persons working at the *offices* don’t have the adequate competence for this kind of work; they can be football leaders, traders, or something similar. The most important thing seems to be their political identification with the groups in power (Montaño 1998/08).

The priority was put on political campaigns, so the investments in basic infrastructure, paving of streets, etc., were now means to gain political support; the level of corruption and politicisation were too high. I could not stay there anymore so I decided to quit after 20 years working at the Municipality (ibid.).

In 1997, the ‘second man’ of the Municipality after the Mayor, the Main Official of Coordination, took charge of the *Municipal Houses*. In spite of her long experience at the Municipality, his assistant Fresia Torrico,²³ considers her responsibility as new coordinator of the *Municipal Houses* as a very constraining and demanding task.

To work with the population is not such an easy task as it looks like, the ‘neighbours’²⁴ and the leaders can act as dictators and answer only to political interests. It is important to stress clearly your professional role. Not all the things they demand are possible to do, and you need to deal with many situations not only technically but also politically. This is not always easy. I’ve paid my learning process with blood! (Torrico 1998/08).

The experience with the *decentralised offices* made many professionals understand that city development could not be planned “on a desk”; a view on city planning that has been changing gradually, in some extent as a result of the *decentralised offices’* activity. Proposals coming from the Urban Planning Office can be questioned by the teams of the *decentralised offices* when they

²¹ The Municipality of Cochabamba became the Municipality of the Cercado Province when rural areas were included to the planning and management tasks of the Municipality. The other three districts were still considered semi-rural.

²² In the cards (cartillas) there are a series of projects and investments that the populations discuss and approve yearly. The cards are previously elaborated at the central level ‘considering the proposals coming from the districts’. Critical voices mean that the objective of using this ‘method’ is to ‘force’ the approval of investments already defined at the central level of the Municipality.

²³ With a long experience at the Municipality, she had worked in offices at the central level and in one of the *Communal Houses*.

²⁴ The use of the word ‘vecino’ (neighbour) in reference to the people living in poor living areas is not uncommon in Bolivia, particularly when community participation is into discussion.

are not linked enough to the reality. The need to reflect and learn more in praxis is strongly demanded. Differences between the central and the decentralised levels could give room for situations when the teams of the *decentralised offices* did not consult to the higher authorities when making decisions. The teams simply implemented what they considered was the best solution to avoid long and bureaucratic procedures.

There were a series of aberrations in the proposals from us working at the central level. The critics from the *decentralised offices* forced us to review seriously our working methods (Torrico 1998/08).

We were very critical to what they were doing and to the solutions they implemented, often because these were different to our proposals. I know better now. My practical work with one of the *Communal Houses* forced me to abandon most of my old prejudices as a planner (ibid.).

The institutional identity of *Municipal Houses* is considered clearly now and their tasks are better defined. Some believe that the activities of the *Zonal Workshops* were often “beyond the responsibilities of the local government and had little impact because the resources were scarce”. On the other side, the *Communal Houses* were “too technically oriented and lost its social orientation”. The objective with the *Municipal Houses* was to find a balance between ‘technical’ and ‘social’ aspects for the achievement real improvements in poor districts.

It is not uncommon to hear that people’s participation is increasing and is more effective now; and, that the role of the professional as ‘advisers of the population’ is a guarantee for ‘right’ decisions because the population lacks sufficient knowledge, particularly when it comes to technical questions; but also because the risk that the community leaders put their own interests in the first place truly exists.

Professionals and technicians can contribute a lot to the dialog between the municipal employees and the ‘neighbours’. It is a matter of compromising all the time, and of fighting if it is necessary. The population has not always the right (Torrico 1998/0819).

It’s very important to be respectful with people’s opinions and wishes, but it is also necessary to be aware on the manipulative attitudes especially from the ‘old’ leaders. They will always try to win. This doesn’t mean that they are defending the best interests of the more vulnerable people (Dominguez 1998/0821)

The ‘administrators’ can be considered as a ‘natural step’ towards the establishment of vice-Majors at the districts, but is often criticism on how they are elected and on the political connections they usually have. Some people see this as a ‘transitory’ solution because the population eventually will elect the heads of the *offices* (i.e. vice-Majors) democratically. Other are convinced that the control of the *decentralized offices* aims keeping the government of the city. In any case, the *decentralised offices* are now considered “the operational arms of the Municipality”.

We (the local government) have good presence in the districts and the *Municipal Houses* are a well-know reference for the population. I could verify this many times when I was around in the low-income housing areas and I asked about its location. Everybody knew where the *office* of the district was located (Torrico 1998/08).

We have been slowly in giving answers also to other kinds of needs”, but I’m convinced that we are working more organised and structured than the *Zonal Workshops* did on i.e. environmental and gender issues, as well as with activities for the youth and the children. The activities of the *Zonal Workshops* were too ‘paternalist’ and were mostly improvisations (ibid.).

The relevance of the LPP for people’s participation is not an obvious thing indeed. Critics mean that popular participation has a longer tradition in the poor neighbourhoods; and that many talk about the LPP, without a real knowledge about what it means in practice. In fact, the struggles for the improvement of the living conditions in poor settlements existed before the LPP was implemented, and things have not changed much since it was approved. Some believe that the limit and the scope of participatory action are more relevant to discuss right now.

To define the limits of participation is the most important and the most difficult. It is not so clear, even for me, what are the limits of my own participation. It's often easier to be concerned about our own rights than the responsibilities we have as citizens (Torricco 1998/0819).

Discussions on the Annual Operative Plan (AOP)²⁵ at the *Municipal Houses* could leave a series of uncertainties as regards participation. One is related to the scope and the in depth of the issues that the population have the option to decide on. The other is the extent the representatives of the OTBs effectively voice what lives in society. But, also on the extent to which the Municipality is tied by the end result of the decisions taken.

There are steps to be fulfilled before discussions take place at the *Municipal Houses* when it comes to the AOP issue. In fact, an important share of the co-participation resources is first defined by higher authorities of the Municipality for investments of "common interest of the municipality as a whole". The resources left are so scarce in comparison to the needs and the demands that the participatory exercise can be experienced as frustrating by many. The way the resources are previously distributed is not such a clear thing even for those working at the *decentralised offices*. The lack of information affects different levels of the participatory chain with negative consequences for the very purpose of a more inclusive and participatory process.

We don't get the information we need when it comes to the resources of the LPP, there is a lot of information that stays at the central level that even we as heads of the *Municipal Houses* ignore and this is something that obviously gives room for doubts and susceptibilities among the neighbours... I think that the resources should be managed more decentralised and more directly by the districts, we consider that we could do much more; we could, for example, implement more works at lower prices (Administrator of the MH9, 2001/08).

It is not always easy to access the right information on how the distribution is handled, and this is indeed a very sensitive issue within the municipalities (Member of the Vigilance Committee-District Council 9, 2001/04).²⁶

There is already a time-bomb installed in my neighbourhood, 'you talk too much and do nothing' they have said to me in the last meeting... (OTB representative/General Meeting of the D9 Council at the MH9, 2001/08).

In fact, the demands that the population believe could improve their living conditions in the long term are not into discussion in the meetings at the *Municipal Houses*. The investments related to the LPP are mainly intended for physical improvements. But, for the achievement of more radical changes in former top-down practices in the country, more than participatory processes restricted just to the co-participation resources are surely needed. Moreover, other resources of the government at central and local levels are still defined as they were in the past.

What's really missing, not only here but everywhere in the country, are job opportunities, when one has a job, even if it's low-paid, more needs could be tackled by themselves, in this sense, for me this is the focal point that should be into discussion...(Workshop of the OTB representatives of District 9 with the Municipality, 2000/11).

For the teams working at the *decentralised offices*, the problems are linked to bad managements coming from higher levels of the Municipality and to their lack of understanding on the real problems in poor housing areas. For the population the failures are the responsibility of the community representatives. But, higher authorities of the Municipality could feel that the main problem is related to the scarcity the resources coming from the central government, the delays in

²⁵ Instruments aimed to define the investments to be done yearly with the co-participation resources. The implementation and monitoring of the decision-making process is in charge of each Municipal House with participation of representatives of all the OTBs active in the particular district.

²⁶ The Vigilance Committees (Comités de Vigilancia) are advisory and control organism to watch over the activities of the Mayor and his Council. Their link between the local executive council and the OTB structure aims to guarantee, among others, the use of the co-participation resources (Article 10 of the LPP). The members are elected by each OTB active in a particular administrative area (rural canton or urban district). Their competences and functions are regulated by law (D. S. 238558/94).

the disbursements, and the requisites for making use of the resources leave the Municipalities with “tied hands for making decisions at the local level”. Participation can be experimented as constraining not only by the population, or the representatives, but by the functionaries of the Municipality as well.

Participatory processes opens expectation that we can't fulfil if the financial resources are less than the initially programmed and are disbursed months after what was planned from the very beginning...(Head of the Planning Office of the Municipality, 2001/09).

Participatory planning is not only new for the population, it is also new for all of us and not all the persons have the right attitude to listen and to work together with other actors, and particularly with the low-income people. One thing is what the LPP says in words, but another is to put it into practice...(Technical Adviser of the Municipal Council 2001/07).

Conclusions

Attempts towards a more decentralised and participatory government at the local level started in Cochabamba Municipality before the Law of Popular Participation and the Decentralisation Law were implemented. The *decentralised offices*' idea was linked to the prevailing poor conditions in housing resulting from, among others, the high levels of urban growth in the past few decades. The too centralised management of the Municipality was no longer adequate for dealing with the increasing problems in urban areas. To make the authority accessible to the poor and to meet the problems through more participative decision-making processes were the main objectives behind the proposal. Since 1990, the *decentralised offices* have gone through a series of rearrangements, but have consolidated their presence at the Municipality structure as well. In spite of the changes and adjustments in their set-up, organisation, working methods, the goal of a more participative and less segregated urban areas is still far from being achieved in this Municipality.

The implementation of the LPP and LAD gave grass-root organisations the right to be involved in decision-making processes at the local level. The population was now called to ‘take part in decisions on things that affect their lives’ through particular structures and mechanisms regulated by law. The access to the *co-participation resources* became an opportunity to improve the living conditions in the poor districts through participatory planning. All these demanded Municipality structures and working methods closer to the population concerned.

The implementation of the LPP and the LAD could have been, in this sense, an important input for the development of the *decentralised offices*. In practice, the steps forward are less than the ones expected. Institutional and political weaknesses are structural and are deeply rooted in the operation of the public sector in Bolivia. Corruption and political manipulation was traditionally in praxis at the Municipality of the Cercado Province. This became reinforced through the *decentralised offices* when more financial resources were accessible and the possibility of gaining political support was there. These things need to be addressed adequately to make organisational changes a real potentiality for the achievement of social inclusion.

Proposals behind the *decentralised offices* claim bottom-up approaches, but they are actually top-down from a very beginning. By de-politicizing the topics open for discussion and by politicizing the selection of the key persons more linked to the *decentralised offices* the objective has been to control these structures; and, to neutralise the activities of more radical grass-root organisations active in the poor housing areas in the past.

Some questions arise. One is related to the need of participatory processes when most of the decisions have already been taken somewhere else. The other is on why people ought to be

involved in such a time demanding activity to decide about things that are so obviously needed, like drinking water, sanitation, or paving streets. But also on the sense people's 'taking part' has when the resources are so scarce to even meet their more urgent needs. Questions crucial if organisational changes aim more in-depth participatory processes and social inclusion in society. It is not uncommon to hear persons blame 'somebody else' for the few achievements thus far, or for the failures, no matter what role in the participatory process they have. The fact is that participatory process with so many actors involved in decision making processes, and roles formally established in the governance praxis, is a rather new experience in the country. It is not only the population who need to learn the participation procedures demanded by the new laws. Government officials at central and local levels, and the new generation of professionals and technicians, are often as little informed as the citizens, or they find it more comfortable in doing things the way they were done in the past.

But, there are still huge limitations compared to the objectives set-up in advance when it comes to participation. In fact, participatory processes at the *decentralised offices* are normally restricted to the community representatives' level. The most vulnerable, i.e. the poorest, the women, the elderly, ethnic minorities, and even the youth, have seldom a say in decision-making processes on 'things that affect their lives'. And, people can have a negative attitude towards participatory processes because of the bad managements and the limited achievements so far.

At last, the question on how relevant decision making processes that cannot touch upon structural issues that produce and reproduce inequality and poverty because the agenda does not allow it, is also crucial to understand the real possibilities and constrains organisational changes –such as the *decentralised offices*, the LPP, or the LAD– have for promoting social inclusion in urban areas.

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