

Participatory design in Latin America: reflections on care and politicization

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines participation in design from Latin American and popular perspectives, arguing that these contexts generate a distinct logic of participation understood as a situated political practice grounded in care and the construction of collective bonds. Methodologically, the study combines a critical review of participatory design literature with qualitative case-based research. The central experience is the International Development Design Summit (IDDS), held in Guatemala, explored through an auto-ethnographic account based on the author's direct involvement as a member of the organizing team. This approach makes visible methodological, ethical, and political tensions in participatory design processes conducted in intercultural and unequal contexts. The findings show that participatory practices may reproduce extractivist dynamics when reduced to procedural inclusion, but can also foster politicization when grounded in care, relational commitment, and sustained engagement. The paper identifies care and politicization as key analytical lenses and argues that emancipatory participation requires time, implication, and a willingness to sustain conflict and transform power relations within design processes.

Keywords: participatory design; Latin America; politicization; care.

INTRODUCTION

Participation has become central to contemporary design initiatives and is widely mobilized in projects oriented toward social innovation, community development, and the inclusion of users in design decision-making. In many contexts, participation is framed as an unquestionable value, assumed to democratize design, improve the adequacy of solutions, and foster engagement. Yet beneath this apparently inclusive and well-intentioned framing lie fundamental contradictions: under what conditions does participation take place? Who defines its formats and temporalities? How are responsibilities and decision-making power distributed? What outcomes are expected, and who ultimately benefits from them?

Over recent decades, participatory design has undergone a process of depoliticization (Beck, 2002; Serpa, 2022). Originally shaped by alliances with workers and struggles around technology and the organization of labor (Ehn, 1988), participatory design has gradually been transformed into a programmatic methodological repertoire, adaptable to a wide range of contexts—particularly corporate and market-oriented ones. This shift has contributed to the erosion of the political meaning of participation, which, once detached from its historical roots, often operates as a technique of legitimation or as a symbolic form of superficial engagement (Racadio, Rose, & Kolko, 2014).

In contrast to this hegemonic trajectory, this article proposes rethinking participation through reflections and experiences situated in Latin America. In contexts marked by structural inequality, epistemic erasure, and long-standing histories of resistance, participation takes on different meanings. It emerges as a relational, pedagogical, and political practice, rooted in collective ways of living, creating, and struggling (Silva, 2023). To participate in these territories is not merely to contribute opinions, but to build processes, reclaim narratives, share responsibilities, and contest the meanings of design practice itself.

From this perspective, care appears as an ethical and political foundation for sustaining participation. In the contexts examined here, care involves enabling listening, redistributing time, sustaining relationships, and engaging with the conflicts that arise when one chooses to design with others. At the same time, participation acquires political significance precisely because it enables processes of politicization, creating conditions for collective reflection on reality and its transformation.

This paper brings together a theoretical framework grounded in Latin American and popular perspectives with a critical analysis of participation in concrete experiences. In particular, it examines the International Development Design Summit (IDDS), held in Guatemala in 2017, in which the author was involved as part of the organizing team. Although the event aimed to foster participatory processes with local communities, it revealed significant frictions between discourse and practice, especially regarding time, methodological formats, and the sustainability of collectively constructed decisions. In dialogue with other practices discussed throughout the article, the analysis of the IDDS allows participation to be understood as a contested field between presence and protagonism, listening and extraction, bonding and protocol.

The paper is structured into six sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 presents a critical overview of the origins and trajectories of participatory design, highlighting the limits of its institutionalization and the critiques that challenge its promises. Section 3 proposes a Latin American turn, foregrounding experiences, practices, and analytical categories that reposition participation as an act of resistance. Section 4 analyzes the IDDS experience, discussing its contradictions, lessons learned, and implications. Section 5 articulates care and politicization as practices that sustain participation, problematizing discourses of empathy and calling for an ethics of implication. Finally, the conclusion revisits the main arguments and points toward participation as a collective construction of a more dignified and just life.

1. PARTICIPATION IN DESIGN: ORIGINS AND TRAJECTORIES

The concept of participation constitutes one of the central pillars of the field of Participatory Design (PD), which emerged as a critical response to the exclusion of users from design processes, particularly in the context of the computerization of work in Scandinavian countries. The origins of Participatory Design can be traced to collaborations between labor unions and researchers in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the UTOPIA and DEMOS projects led by Kristen Nygaard and Pelle Ehn (Ehn, 1988). These initiatives sought to ensure greater worker influence over the introduction of new technologies in the workplace. This foundational moment was closely linked to a Marxist critique of the division of labor and to the claim that workers' practical and experiential knowledge should be recognized as a legitimate epistemology within processes of technological innovation.

The work of Paulo Freire played a central role in the original constitution of Scandinavian participatory design, particularly in Pelle Ehn's formulations, which combined Nygaard's trade union critique with the principles of Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed to develop emancipatory practices on the factory floor (Ehn, 1986). However, as Amaral, Maynard, and Mazzarotto (2023) document, subsequent English-language PD anthologies and textbooks, particularly those published from the late 1990s onward, rarely cite Freire, even when discussing participatory methods rooted in dialogue or emancipation. Instead, references to Freire are replaced by more generic invocations of "user participation" or "stakeholder involvement," stripped of their original political and pedagogical density. This erasure operates through at least three mechanisms: (1) linguistic and geographic filtering, whereby non-English, non-Nordic sources are systematically underrepresented; (2) methodological depoliticization, reframing Freirean concepts as neutral techniques (e.g., "dialogue" as a communication tool rather than a practice of conscientization); and (3) institutional canonization, where citation patterns in PD handbooks reproduce a narrow genealogy that prioritizes Scandinavian labor studies over Latin American popular education. Recovering Freire, therefore, is not merely a historiographical restoration but a critical move to contest these mechanisms of epistemic silencing and depoliticization.

In its inaugural phase, participation was not conceived merely as a methodological or ethical concern, but as a political tool of resistance to hierarchical forms of management. By recognizing workers as co-producers of knowledge, Participatory Design shifted the focus from technical expertise toward the collective construction of decisions. This orientation led to the development of participatory methods such as mock-ups, role-playing games, and simulations, designed to translate workers' experiences and perspectives into design artifacts (Bødker et al., 1987). It is important to note that these practices emerged within welfare-state contexts, such as those of the Scandinavian countries, whose social and political conditions differ significantly from those of other regions, particularly Latin America, which is central to the argument developed in this article.

Over time, Participatory Design expanded into other fields, including urbanism, education, health, housing, and social development; and into different geographical contexts, becoming appropriated by a wide range of institutions, governments, and international organizations. This process of geographical displacement and institutionalization produced profound transformations. On the one hand, it increased the visibility of participatory design and broadened its applications and procedural formulations; on the other, participatory practices increasingly came to be framed within technical and managerial logics, often detached from their political origins. Participation thus shifted from an instrument of struggle to a design protocol, frequently stripped of its transformative potential (Beck, 2002; Robertson et al., 2014).

This depoliticization has been the target of sustained critique. Beck (2002) warned that the mere inclusion of "users" at certain stages of the design process does not guarantee political transformation, as participation can easily be reduced to a symbolic practice with no real effects on the redistribution of power. Racadio, Rose, and Kolko (2014) further argue that participatory processes often fail to produce meaningful changes in the systems in which they operate, leaving structures of domination intact. From this perspective, participatory design should not be reduced to a methodological model, but understood as a practice that must generate tension and confrontation with hegemonic forms of governance, production, and the use of technical and social artifacts.

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Ann Light (2010) adds that participation is not inherently good or transformative; on the contrary, it can mask structural inequalities, particularly when conducted uncritically. Participation without shared responsibility and commitment may become a form of domination disguised as democracy. Other scholars, such as Tlostanova (2017), have problematized the imposition of Eurocentric models of participation—a critique that resonates strongly with, and is further developed through, Latin American experiences, as will be explored in the following section.

Taken together, these critiques point to the need to rethink participation in design not as an isolated phase or a methodological box to be checked, but as a situated and relational political practice. Participation must be understood as a contested field, in which diverse forms of knowledge, subjectivities, and inequalities intersect—often in conflict rather than harmony. This also requires abandoning the notion of project neutrality and recognizing that all design processes are shaped by power relations, values, and interests that must be made explicit and collectively debated.

In practice, many participatory projects operate with an instrumental notion of involvement, in which so-called “stakeholders” are consulted primarily to validate decisions already made by those who hold power—or funding. Influenced by design thinking and liberal approaches to social innovation, this logic turns participation into a means of legitimizing interventions and increasing the efficiency of solutions, rather than fostering substantive social transformation (Kimbell, 2011). Such approaches reduce the complexity of social contexts, treat collectivities as “users,” and shift attention away from structural change toward the adjustment of products and services.

Moreover, many participatory processes fail to address the epistemic inequalities that permeate design spaces. Miranda Fricker (2007) conceptualizes this phenomenon as epistemic injustice, whereby certain subjects have their knowledge systematically devalued or disregarded due to their social position. In design projects, this occurs when the knowledge of women, Black people, Indigenous peoples, and informal workers, for example, is treated as mere “intuition” or “empirical experience,” rather than as legitimate forms of knowledge. By ignoring these asymmetries, participation risks reproducing logics of silencing and invisibilization.

In response to this landscape, several authors have called for a repoliticization of participation. Gautam and Tatar (2020) argue for the inclusion of personal politics and affect as integral dimensions of design decision-making, rather than focusing exclusively on systems or products. Reynolds-Cuéllar, P., & Delgado Ramos (2020) propose understanding participation as a space of confrontation with coloniality, grounded in practices that recognize territorial agency and the plurality of ways of being. Along similar lines, in my doctoral research I argue that participation is only emancipatory when it is understood as an instrument of politicization for the collectivities involved (Serpa, 2022).

Taken together, these contributions point toward a path that reconnects participation, politics, and struggles for social justice. Rather than promoting “inclusion” as an act of designer benevolence, this perspective calls for the construction of processes of collective conscientization, in Paulo Freire’s sense (2014 [1968]), through which people can identify the material and symbolic conditions of their existence and act collectively to transform them. Participation, thus understood, becomes a space of dispute and care, of conflict and the building of bonds, of knowledge affirmation and the reconfiguration of subjectivities.

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This shift also requires revisiting the criteria by which participatory projects are evaluated. Instead of focusing on metrics such as the number of participants or ideas generated, it becomes necessary to assess whether and how processes contribute to community strengthening, the redistribution of power, and the construction of autonomy. From this perspective, the sustainability of participation is directly linked to the ability to sustain relationships, redistribute knowledge, and cultivate practices of care and solidarity.

Participation in design cannot, therefore, be treated as a universal and intrinsically positive value. It must be understood as a contextualized political practice that involves recognizing difference, building material and symbolic conditions for engagement, and committing to transforming the power relations that structure design spaces. These issues are further developed in the following section, through Latin American experiences that propose epistemological shifts and participatory practices committed to social transformation.

From these perspectives, design ceases to function as a mediation between needs and solutions and instead becomes a field of politicization. As I argue elsewhere, participation entails becoming implicated in the construction of autonomy, acknowledging conflict, and creating spaces in which collectivities can speak for themselves and decide on the directions of their own processes (Serpa, 2022). This requires rethinking the role of the designer, who no longer acts as an expert or facilitator, but as part of a collective in motion.

Participation thus ceases to be an end in itself and becomes a means for the construction of collectivities. The centrality of bonds, encounters, and shared experience challenges conventional metrics for evaluating design projects. Outcomes are no longer measured by deliverables, but by the capacity to sustain alliances, redistribute power, and foster ongoing processes of politicization. This perspective recognizes that territories are not lacking but powerful; that subjects do not need salvation, but material and symbolic conditions to act; and that design should not “translate” the realities of others, but make itself available to collectively construct new possibilities for a better life.

2. PARTICIPATION FROM LATIN AMERICA

On this side of the Atlantic, participation in design has been shaped not only by institutional or sectoral demands, but by everyday practices of resistance, creation, and the reinvention of life. In Latin America, the notion of participation—more broadly conceived and not limited to design—is deeply intertwined with historical processes of community organizing, struggles for social justice, and the affirmation of silenced forms of knowledge. From this perspective, the challenge is not to adopt already consolidated participatory methodologies, but to radically reconfigure the epistemological and political foundations of design itself, as well as the ways in which the field understands participation.

The Latin American tradition of Popular Education, developed in the 1960s and 1970s by Paulo Freire and other militant educators, constitutes one of the main matrices of this expanded and critical understanding of participation. For Freire (2014 [1968]), participation is not merely a matter of expressing opinions or being present; it means taking part in a historical process of conscientization, organization, and transformation. The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which values experiential knowledge and rejects the logic of unilateral transmission, inspires design practices in which the project is not an end in itself, but a means of strengthening bonds and disputing meanings (Serpa & Mazzarotto, 2024).

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Latin American participatory design thus proposes forms of coexistence and co-authorship that challenge hierarchies between expert and layperson, between planner and planned. Gutiérrez Borrero (2021) argues that such practices entail a redesign of design's own categories—such as problem, solution, user, and prototype—which, under conditions of coloniality, operate as instruments of capture and silencing. In contrast, these approaches call for openness to other ways of designing that involve rituals, silences, narratives, and affects. What emerges is a form of design that does not merely produce things, but cultivates relationships and re-exists with bodies and territories.

Research conducted by Maria Cristina Ibarra (2020) points in a similar direction. Drawing on the concept of *sentipensar*, developed by Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, Ibarra argues that popular forms of knowledge do not need to be translated into the categories of modern design; rather, they must be listened to in their full complexity, including when they are expressed through non-verbal forms such as manual making, orality, and the moving body. In such cases, participation only becomes effective when there is a willingness to slow down, to remain, and to build long-term alliances and dialogues through languages that lie outside both design and academia, yet hold value as knowledge and as project.

These practices constitute a field of epistemic insurgency, as argued by Calderón-Salazar and Huybrechts (2020), in which participation becomes a technology of collective life—a way of sharing the world and disputing modes of existence. In contexts of persistent coloniality, participation cannot be understood as methodological neutrality; rather, it must be practiced as a situated relationship, marked by conflict, affect, desire, and concrete limits.

The critique of universalizing models of participatory design is also central to the work of Marco Mazzarotto (2024). The author proposes five categories for analyzing relationships among subjects in design processes: invasion, omission, appropriation, co-optation, and cultural synthesis. The first four describe hierarchical and extractivist modes of relation—still prevalent in projects labeled as “collaborative.” Cultural synthesis, by contrast, refers to a form of co-authorship grounded in dialogue and mutual learning. Inspired by Paulo Freire, this category emphasizes the construction of new frames of reference through encounters between different forms of knowledge, without one subordinating the other.

This perspective is embodied in the experience reported by Sâmia Batista e Silva (2023) with CineClub Terra Firme, in the state of Pará. Grounded in a Freirean and decolonial methodology, the author describes a process of participant research in which visual communication and audiovisual practices are mobilized as tools of denunciation, resistance, and re-existence. Design outcomes emerge from the group's own narratives, but go beyond representation by activating processes of critical consciousness and political organization. In this context, the designer does not intervene from the outside, but builds alongside the collective—being transformed in the process as well.

The idea of coexistence as a method, present in Freire's work, is further reinforced by the experience narrated by Ana Santos, a community leader from Serra da Misericórdia, located in the Complexo da Penha in the northern zone of Rio de Janeiro. In an interview with the Design and Oppression Network, published in *Alter-Journal Resistências* (2024), she explains that the collaboration between the community center she coordinates (CEM - Centro de Centro de Integração na Serra da Misericórdia) and designers from ESDI/UERJ was not based on consultancy models or sporadic encounters, but on long-term relationships of coexistence and mutual learning. Designers' sustained presence in the territory, attentive listening to local

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needs, and the valuing of the knowledge of women farmers enabled the development of a communication and institutional organization project deeply embedded in everyday life in the favela. In this process, design was re-signified: it ceased to be merely about form or aesthetics and became a means of affirmation, articulation, and resistance. As Ana states, “design did not give me a voice, I already have a voice, but it helped me organize my ideas and present them without losing my essence.” This testimony makes explicit the difference between extractivist participation and a solidarity-based alliance: the former seeks to “improve” the other, while the latter is transformed with them.

From these perspectives, design ceases to function as a mediation between needs and solutions and instead becomes a field of politicization. As I argue elsewhere, participation entails becoming implicated in the construction of autonomy, acknowledging conflict, and creating spaces in which collectivities can speak for themselves and decide on the directions of their own processes (Serpa, 2022). This requires rethinking the role of the designer, who no longer acts as an expert or facilitator, but as part of a collective in motion.

Participation thus ceases to be an end in itself and becomes a means for the construction of collectivities. The centrality of bonds, encounters, and shared experience challenges conventional metrics for evaluating design projects. Outcomes are no longer measured by deliverables, but by the capacity to sustain alliances, redistribute power, and foster ongoing processes of politicization. This perspective recognizes that territories are not lacking but powerful; that subjects do not need salvation, but material and symbolic conditions to act; and that design should not “translate” the realities of others, but make itself available to collectively construct new possibilities for a more dignified and just life.

3. REFLECTIONS FROM THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT DESIGN SUMMIT (IDDS)

Building on the Latin American perspective developed in the previous sections, this article turns to the experience of the International Development Design Summit (IDDS). Held in Guatemala in 2017, the event functioned as a space of learning and friction, revealing both the potentials and limits of participation in design within contexts of international development marked by deep cultural inequalities. Organized by an international network linked to MIT’s D-Lab, the IDDS presents itself as a co-creation initiative between specialists and members of peripheral communities, aimed at developing technical solutions with potential for replication and sustainability. A closer examination, however, exposes tensions between this participatory discourse and the structural arrangements that sustain the event.

Participation in the IDDS takes place within an intensive four-week format, during which local residents, students, designers, and specialists share a common living and working environment. Community visits and overnight stays foster listening, affective bonds, and the recognition of local knowledge, yet these encounters remain constrained by the event’s compressed timeframe and institutional framing.

Methodologically, the IDDS is grounded in Creative Capacity Building (CCB), which emphasizes active participation in idea generation, prototyping, and skill development. Teams are organized around predefined themes such as waste, cooking, sanitation, and energy, and receive technical and financial support to develop prototypes. As a member of the organizing team, I was directly involved in shaping the methodology and mediating between participants

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and organizers, a position that implicated me in both the process's achievements and its limitations, intensifying my reflexive engagement throughout the event.

One of the first tensions emerged around ensuring the participation of community members. Participation stipends were provided to cover transportation, food, and a symbolic remuneration for exclusive dedication to the project. While this measure made participation materially possible, it also raised important ambiguities: to what extent did daily presence reflect genuine engagement? How were political commitment and economic necessity negotiated? Participation, in this context, was not fully spontaneous, but partially contractual. This contractuality, while fair and necessary, produced subjective and symbolic effects that demanded critical attention, while also challenging romanticized notions of voluntary participation detached from material conditions.

Methodological tensions soon became evident. During an early “brainstorm” activity based on post-it notes, visual voting, and wall interaction, local participants—many of whom faced literacy barriers or primarily spoke K’iche’ rather than Spanish—remained silent and seated. What emerged was not merely a technical issue of language or literacy, but a deeper misalignment between the proposed design language and participants’ communicational codes. The centrality of written visibility, individual choice, and autonomous movement toward the wall did not resonate with their modes of engagement.

In response, the activity was reformulated: we sat in a circle, revisited ideas orally, and collectively recorded contributions. Participation was reactivated, underscoring that methodological adaptation involves more than translating tools: it requires rethinking how people gather, listen, and collectively construct meaning. This episode revealed how exclusion can occur even within initiatives labeled as participatory when interactional codes are not shared or respected.

As the process unfolded, relationships became more horizontal, though tensions persisted. Shared living conditions and collective moments of fatigue and care contributed to a common field of experience. Still, the pressure for results and the formal structure of final presentations continued to privilege a product-oriented logic. Despite the emphasis on process, teams were expected to deliver viable prototypes, some of which later evolved into social enterprises supported by external partners, not always under community control.

This point is particularly critical. When project outcomes are appropriated by external organizations or transformed into scalable solutions without the active participation of those who co-created them, extractivist logics are reinforced. Participation then functions as symbolic legitimation rather than as redistribution of power. As Latin American scholars have argued, participation requires not only listening, but the redistribution of space, authorship, and material outcomes.

Within the IDDS, these contradictions were partially acknowledged by organizers, who attempted methodological adjustments and sought to prioritize relationships and group temporalities. Nevertheless, rigid schedules, task divisions, and predefined deliverables imposed structural limits on participation genuinely rooted in local realities.

From a personal and political standpoint, the experience produced significant displacements. As both researcher and organizer, I was confronted with my own limits and with the contradictions of my position. I came to understand that participation is not simply about offering listening, but about sustaining discomfort, re-evaluating priorities, and allowing

oneself to be transformed. As the next section will elaborate, analyzing the IDDS through the twin analytical lenses of politicization and care shifts the evaluative question: rather than asking whether the summit achieved measurable participation outcomes, we ask instead which moments opened possibilities for critical consciousness to emerge (politicization) and whether the material and relational conditions for sustained engagement were present (care) – and which structural constraints foreclosed both.

4. CARE AND POLITICIZATION AT THE CENTER OF PARTICIPATION

To think about participation from a Latin American perspective is to recognize that it cannot be reduced to mere presence within a design process; it necessarily involves time, conflict, listening, and collective construction. In contexts of structural oppression, participation can only be sustained when rooted in care, not as individualized affect, but as a political practice. To move beyond an essayistic treatment of concepts such as politicization and care, it is necessary to specify their empirical referents without reducing them to procedural metrics.

In this article, politicization is understood not as a set of observable changes within the design process itself, but as a process of critical consciousness-formation (Freire, 2014 [1968]) through which participants come to recognize the structural inequalities that shape their lives, locate themselves within those structures, and act collectively to transform them. Politicization, therefore, is not equivalent to "having a say" in design decisions. It operates on at least three interconnected registers: (a) epistemic: questioning who is authorized to know and to speak, and affirming subjugated knowledges as legitimate; (b) relational: naming and contesting power asymmetries that extend beyond the immediate design setting (e.g., coloniality, racism, sexism, extractivism); and (c) action-oriented: mobilizing design as a pathway to, not a substitute for, broader struggles for autonomy and dignity. A practice is considered procedural (as distinct from politicizing) when participation is confined to optimizing solutions within existing power structures, when conflict is smoothed over in the name of "consensus," or when the design process produces no discernible effect on participants' capacity to critically analyze and act upon their social condition beyond the project.

Feminist theorist Joan Tronto (2013) defines care as the set of activities required to maintain, continue, and repair our common world. In this work, care, as an analytical lens, refers not to affect alone but to observable practices that sustain the material and relational conditions for politicization to occur: redistributing time to accommodate collective deliberation, enabling listening across asymmetries, providing stipends or translation, repairing ruptures in group processes, and – crucially – refusing to abandon the collective when conflict arises. Care, in this sense, is not an end in itself but the weave that makes sustained politicization possible.

In the analysis that follows, these concepts guide the reading of the IDDS case. The question is not whether the summit achieved politicization – an unlikely outcome within a four-week format – but rather which moments opened possibilities for critical consciousness to emerge (e.g., when participants reformulated the brainstorming activity, asserting their own communicational codes), and which moments foreclosed those possibilities (e.g., the pressure for deliverables that redirected energy toward product viability rather than collective reflection). This analytical move shifts evaluation from outcomes measured within the project to the relationship between design and the longer, slower process of becoming political subjects.

Freirean pedagogy provides a powerful foundation for this understanding. Within this horizon, to care is to politicize relationships: to open spaces in which subjects can recognize themselves as part of a historical process and as producers of knowledge and transformation. This requires listening (and sustaining listening) as well as inclusion coupled with a commitment to redistributing power and resources. Care, in this sense, is inseparable from politicization.

Across the experiences analyzed in this article, particularly those developed with peripheral collectives, care emerged as an everyday practice of sharing, tension, and reinvention. As Amaral, Maynart, and Mazzarotto (2023) demonstrate, participatory processes only become emancipatory when there is a willingness to sustain bonds, negotiate conflict, and recognize difference as a foundation rather than an obstacle. The notion of cultural synthesis, inspired by Freire, further underscores that participation requires co-learning and shared responsibility, not merely good intentions (Mazzarotto, 2024).

During the IDDS held in Guatemala, care proved to be both necessary and fragile. The attempt to enable participation through the provision of stipends exposed an important paradox: care materialized as the provision of minimum conditions can become an emptied form of contractuality if it is not accompanied by political commitment. Daily presence alone did not guarantee engagement with the process—particularly when methodological formats failed to resonate with participants’ communicational codes, as became evident during the “brainstorm” activity. In that moment, the discomfort with visual language and spatial arrangements revealed that caring, in that context, required more than technical adaptation; it demanded a re-examination of the very premises underlying the proposed dialogue.

The perspective advanced here also calls into question the criteria commonly used to evaluate participatory projects. Rather than counting the number of ideas generated or participants involved, more relevant questions would be: what kinds of bonds were built? Which subjectivities were politicized? What conflicts emerged, and which were sustained? The effectiveness of participation is not measured by deliverables, but by the capacity for collective making—even when the collective is tense, unstable, or incomplete.

Ann Light and Yoko Akama (2014) contribute to this debate by proposing that care in design should be understood as an infrastructure that sustains relationships, rather than as a punctual or isolated gesture. Eleutério and Van Amstel (2023) argue that care is constantly tensioned between the desire for comfort and the inevitable conflicts of collective action. This requires abandoning the notion of “safe spaces” and recognizing that, to be ethical, care may also be uncomfortable. To participate with care is to build imperfect alliances, to sustain difficult conversations, and to remain engaged even when the path is not comfortable. The authors emphasize that continuity, maintenance, and the willingness to remain in discomfort are often neglected in innovation-oriented projects. This argument resonates with the challenges experienced in the IDDS: the pressure for short-term, tangible results collided with the temporalities of coexistence, revealing that care does not fit neatly into rigid schedules. The most meaningful bonds did not emerge from methodological dynamics, but from moments of pause, sharing, and collective revision.

As Cherryppe and Paim (2021), as well as Serpa and Batista e Silva (2021), point out, there is a growing tendency for the vocabulary of care and empathy to be appropriated by design practices that continue to operate within productivist and extractivist logics. Such practices often reinforce the central role of the designer as the privileged mediator of the process,

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without any effective redistribution of power, authorship, or the gains derived from the outcomes. This dynamic can also be observed in the IDDS, when solutions co-created within communities give rise to social enterprises that may benefit the community but are not directly managed by it. It is therefore essential to keep alive the question of what communities actually gain from participatory processes and their results.

From this, it becomes evident that care cannot be treated as an accessory to participation. It is its foundation, its condition, and its horizon. At the same time, care alone is not sufficient. To participate with care also means to contest meanings, sustain processes of conscientization, and confront hierarchies. The politicization of collectivities requires material engagement, epistemological displacement, and the construction of autonomy.

This entanglement between care and politicization challenges the binaries that separate technique from affect, action from listening, and planning from presence. Care, understood as a political practice, entails designing with others, but also with limits, conflicts, and with temporalities that escape the urgency of delivery. It is in this in-between space—where listening becomes bond and bond becomes a political process—that politicization takes place and participation gains density and transformative power.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has offered a critical examination of participatory design practices, foregrounding epistemological and political contributions from Latin America. By shifting away from Eurocentric models toward practices rooted in inequality, struggle, and resistance, it has argued that participation is not a neutral methodological protocol, but a situated, relational, and contested construction. In contexts marked by coloniality and epistemic silencing, participation emerges as a practice of insurgency.

Drawing on critical theory, Freirean pedagogy, and Latin American epistemologies, the article has shown that participation demands more than dialogue; it requires implication. Participants are not consultants, but co-producers of processes, languages, and decisions. This entails rethinking the role of the designer, redistributing authorship and resources, and sustaining relationships beyond the project cycle. Participation thus becomes a space for political formation, autonomy-building, and collective reinvention.

The reflexive analysis of the International Development Design Summit illustrates these tensions from within. Writing about participation, in this sense, is also an act of participation: a situated critique that acknowledges limits, contradictions, and transformative potential. The IDDS experience demonstrates that emancipatory participation is sustained not by methodological form, but by encounter. It requires time for conflict and care, and challenges design to abandon a mediating stance in favor of collective construction.

Experiences of participation from the multiple cases point toward alternative pathways for participatory design, contesting approaches that reduce participation to a market-oriented product. Southern struggles for participation and cooperative modes of material production reveal participation as collective labor carried out for and by producers themselves. In this sense, participation operates as both a process of humanization and an exercise in politicization.

Care, understood as a political practice, emerges as a condition for sustaining participatory processes. The IDDS case makes clear that care and politicization are not supplementary

layers added to design projects; they are the very ground of collective construction. Participation, when rooted in care and politicization, becomes pedagogical, political, and poetic, a way of existing collectively with dignity, imagination, and responsibility.

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