Epistemological and ethical dilemmas of public participation on residential tourism planning[1]

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Abstract: There exists a wide consensus among governance theorists about the need of broadening the level of active engagement of the public in the processes of local planning and decision making. However, the praxis of public participation still arise many doubts and uncertainties that have not been solved by the academia yet. This paper examines the problems and difficulties faced during the design and implementation of a public participation process on the alternatives and future of several local development projects of residential tourism in two municipalities in the South-East of Spain. The objective of this paper is to show the main epistemological and ethical dilemmas (legitimacy, representation and utility) challenged during this project, as well as some of the answers given to these questions.

Keywords: Public participation; Critical perspective; Epistemological dilemmas; Legitimacy; Methodology.

Resumen: Existe un amplio acuerdo teórico sobre la necesidad de ampliar el nivel de implicación activa del público en los procesos de planificación local y la toma de decisiones. Sin embargo, la praxis de la participación pública todavía suscita muchas dudas e incertidumbres que no han sido resueltas por la academia todavía. Este artículo analiza los problemas y dificultades surgidos durante el diseño e implementación de un proceso de participación pública sobre las alternativas y futuro de diversos proyectos de desarrollo turístico-residencial en dos municipios de la provincia de Alicante. El objetivo de este artículo es mostrar los principales dilemas epistemológicos y éticos (legitimación, representatividad y utilidad) afrontados durante este proyecto, así como algunas de las respuestas dadas a estas cuestiones.

Palabras clave: Participación pública; Perspectiva crítica; Dilemas epistemológicos; Legitimación; Metodología.

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Introduction

There exists a wide consensus among governance theorists about the need of broadening the level of active engagement of the public in the processes of local planning and related decision making. Either with an ideological objective of promoting ideals such as legitimacy, equity, transparency, accountability, justice, etc., or with a more pragmatic purpose of assuring efficient and effective decision making processes (Abelson et al., 2003; Adger, 2002; Meadowcroft, 2003), public participation is considered to be a requirement for what has come to be called good governance.

However, the praxis of public participation still arises many doubts and uncertainties that have not been solved by the academia yet. This paper examines the problems and difficulties faced during the design and implementation of a public participation process on the alternatives and future of several local development projects of residential tourism in two municipalities in the South-East of Spain. The aim of this Project is to offer a set of proposals for the reorientation of the residential tourism sector towards a new model that is environmentally, economically and socially sustainable. The important growth of this sector in the last years, as well as the favourable expectances of future development, require an analytical approach that allows the identification of the costs and benefits it generates, and the design of restructuring and improvement proposals for this area of study.

To introduce the context of this research, 600,000 new second homes are expected to be built in Spain in the next years, and the province of Alicante will develop 20% of them. At present, the number of tourist houses in the province of Alicante ranges from 350,000 to 400,000, mainly demanded by British, German and French residential tourists. Aledo and Mazón (2004) have proved that the unlimited growth of residential tourism has led some municipalities on the coast of Alicante to the end of the tourism product life cycle. As Butler (1980) says, at this moment of the cycle it is required to articulate renewal measures or the tourist destination will start an unavoidable phase of decline. This situation makes it necessary to design viable proposals of reorientation for consolidated destinations as one of the case studies of this project (Dénia) and for municipalities that are in the early phases of the model (as the second municipality analysed in this research: Villena)[2].

The driving force of this research has been an intellectual interest, this is, providing proposals from the academy for a socioeconomic model of development (residential tourism) that scholars have defined as unsustainable. Although this qualification of unsustainability is the outcome of a long scientific research activity. (Gartner, 1987; Vera, 1987; Aledo and Mazón, 2004), we wonder about the social legitimacy of such an assertion, which should be considered as an intellectual production rather than a definition socially agreed.

The validity and legitimacy of this assertion proposed from the academia is questioned by several arguments: 1) the acknowledgment of the value bias that can be found in every academic approach (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000); 2) the acceptation of the fact that these values are not superior, just because they are scientific, to the values from the local and endogenous knowledge (Rahman, 1993); and 3) that from the combination of this value diversity and the self-critical reflection that allows encountering the other, it can be obtained a more emancipated approach about our own cultural constructions (Villasante, Montañés and Martín, 2001).

This focus leads us to think, first, about the existence of other qualifications for this socio-economic model that might be in conflict with that proposed by the academic sphere, and, second, to which extent the academic initiative is imposed or interferes with a social dynamic that some social groups do not perceive as conflictive, or that do not feel specially threatened by scenarios of risk and unsustainability.

With the aim of solving these queries about legitimacy, and trying to motivate reflexive and practical projects, it was decided to activate participatory processes where the different social groups more or less related to the object of analysis were represented with equity.

Finally, this research team is interested in finding ways to transform the knowledge achieved through deliberation into useful knowledge for the different social groups, so that it is not a mere academic benefit. In other words, accomplishing mechanisms that can be activated so that, once there is a consensus about a theoretic reflection on the most appropriate model of local development related to residential tourism, it can be agreed a praxis to implement the principles reached through the public participation process.

The context: Residential Tourism in the Spanish Mediterranean and the Villena and Dénia case studies

As Aledo and Mazón (2004) have stated, since 1970 the Spanish Mediterranean coasts have undergone an expansion of a new urban model based on the second home market. The typology of these residential developments is characterized by horizontal, low density residential complexes, usually closed and related to a golf course. The number of houses in these complexes ranges from 800 to 1500 houses. These residential areas are usually separated from the rest of the urban area and they are high standing households used seasonally.

With the development of the Welfare State in Western Europe, along with the increase of the free time and the improvement in early retirement and its pensions, many North-Western Europeans decided to access to these new residential areas on the Spanish Mediterranean coasts (Nogués, 2007).

By Residential Tourism we understand the "economic activity dedicated to the urbanisation, construction and sale of residential tourist homes that constitute the non-hotel sector", and we can summarize the characteristics of this urban model in the following:

a) Important seasonality, although it is lower than that of the 'sun and beach' tourism.

b) Scarce and poor-quality complementary activities associated to this kind of tourism.

c) The residential tourism properties are not available by the traditional mecha-

nisms of the tourism market.

d) High fidelity of the residential tourist to the destination, as they want to recoup the cost of the house.

e) Low expenses per day of the residential tourist.

f) High environmental impact of the extensive residential areas.

g) Lack of planning as a consequence of the dependency of the local authority finances on the urban taxes generated by this kind of rapid development (Aledo & Mazón, 2004).

This urban model has been developed mainly on the Spanish Mediterranean coast, although it is nowadays spreading towards inland municipalities. Dénia is a good example of a coastal municipality with a mature residential-tourism development. Dénia has a population of 40,601. The history of the residential tourism in Dénia starts with the arrival of tourists from Europe, along with middle-upper class tourist from Madrid and Valencia. Nowadays its economy is based on building and real state sector and tourism. The city faces problems of saturation and infrastructures and services deficit, mainly during the summer season. At present, a new urban plan for the city is being designed. This plan proposes an significative urban growth. It is expected 20,000-30,000 new households for the next ten years.

Villena is an example of the new inland residential tourism development. It is located in the Alicante province, 60 kilometres away from the coast. Villena has a population of 34,185 and it is 345'4 km² in area. Traditionally, its economy has been based on the agriculture and the shoe manufacturing.

The three main factors that have fostered the development of residential-tourism projects in Villena are:

a) The crisis in the traditional economic sectors, which places the urban development sector as an alternative for the local economy.

b) The expansion of the residential-tourism of the Alicante province from the coast to inland municipalities

c) The abundance of land for development in Villena, which is the second largest municipality in the Alicante province.

Recently the local council of Villena has

received several proposals for urban projects that are the basis of the following future scenario for the municipality:

	2004	2015
Population	33,889	43,737-51,123*
Number of households	16,402	4,924 new households

Table 1. Population and households in Villena (2004) and projection (2015). *The coefficients applied for the estimation of the population in 2015 were 2 and 3'5 persons per new household, depending on the occupation level. Source: Valencian Statistical Insitute; Villena Town Council.

Faced with the intensity of these new urban developments, along with the infrastructure deficit related to the residential-tourism model found in the Alicante province, this research team proposed a participatory process with the aim of designing socially agreed proposals for a sustainable urban development.

The Participation Process

To undertake this project, it was decided to start with an exploratory analysis of the context of the residential tourism in Dénia and Villena, not only through secondary data from existing reports and statistical resources, but also, and more important, carrying out semi-structured interviews to key social agents in the municipality. These interviews provided us with a broader view of the situation in Dénia and a possible future scenario for Villena. The interviewed subjects also supplied the research team with information to shape a social network and to identify people with a relevant role in the community life.

In a second phase of the research, focus groups were organised to complete the diagnosis of both municipalities

It was also organised a debate session where around fifty people from most of economic and social sectors in Dénia and Villena. After a brief introduction to the PROMOTURE Project and to the context and future of the residential tourism in the Alicante province, the audience wrote down

in the notebooks they were given those ideas that the previous account had suggested to them. Those annotations were collected by the research team and analysed subsequently.

Finally, a two-day participatory workshop was organised with local stakeholders from the agricultural, service and industrial sectors, as well as technicians and experts in urban development, local culture and environment. The aim of this workshop was to agree a series of propolsas for the reorientation of the residential tourism model.

The Villena Workshop

The workshop was structured alternating group sessions and plenary sessions. First, they worked in small groups and afterwards plenary sessions were developed to explain the group work. This dynamic allowed reaching a consensus, as in the plenaries they talked about already agreed ideas.

The composition of the work groups evolved along the workshop. Three different positions regarding the residential tourism in Villena were noticed from the results to a questionnaire. These different views resulted in three work groups with a homogeneous discourse, which elaborated arguments about four issues related to residential tourism: Environment and Urban Development, Water, Economy and Society/Culture. Later, the members of these homogeneous groups where mixed into heterogeneous groups with regard to their discourse. People in these groups had to agree the answers to the questions that the facilitators asked, about the former issues. The objective with this dynamic was that the answers agreed in each group defined the possible common points among the three different starting views.

After exposing in a plenary this work and organising these points into possitive and negative, the audience was again divided into groups to agree the most important possitive and negative ideas for each issue. Finally, and divided into four thematic groups (Environment and Urban Development, Water, Economy and Society/Culture), they had to develop proposals to maximize the positive ideas and minimize the negative points. These proposals

were designed by answering simple questions (What? How?, When? and Who?) to describe the way these goals could be achieved. The proposals were then debated and agreed in a plenary session.

The Dénia Workshop

The Workshop in Denia started with the presentation of a diagnosis of the situation of the municipality that had been elaborated with the collaboration of different stakeholders, technicians and politicians. This Shared Diagnosis showed the different effects that the Residential Tourism has at a local level in four different areas: Environment, Economy, Society and Services and Infrastructure.

We asked the participants to work into groups with regard to the area they were more interested in. These 'Interest-Groups' were asked to prioritize the seven most important effects on such area, and define them as positive or negative. After this work they had to draw a Logical Map[3] for five of those effects.

The research team organised them into different groups, in order to revise the maps drawn by the previous teams, and they were asked to select the three causes they considered the most important to elaborate proposals. The Logical Maps and the prioritized causes were exposed in a plenary.

The participants worked again into the 'Interest-Groups' with the task of designing proposals with the aim of maximizing the positive effects and minimizing the negative ones. They had to ask the questions: What do we want to achieve? How can we do it?, Who is responsible for these actions?, and When should they be developed?

Finally, the proposals were discussed in a plenary session.

Facing the epistemological and ethical dilemmas of the participatory process

The exposed case studies represent the first stages of a wider and more ambitious research project. In this sense, this paper responds to a moment of the research process in which this team is developing a reflexive evaluation of the ethical, epistemological and methodological problems that have arisen throughout this early phase.

The aim at this moment is to improve the approach and the execution of future case studies.

Three general dilemmas have been detected during the process: a) the social representation of the selected participants, b) the legitimacy the process fostered by an academic team, and c) the non-academic utility of the project.

With regard to the issue of representation the research team opted to use a political representation against a sociological representation. By sociological representation we mean the representation of the socio-demographic morphology by population quotas, random selection or with an open-door participation process. On the other hand, by political representation we that given by an specific knowledge and values, the structural position of the individuals within a socio-economic network, and their structural position with regard to the residential tourism sector. Given that 1) the object of study was the generation of specific alternatives for a highly complex field, and 2) that the techniques deployed required a level of reflection that married abstraction and empirical knowledge, it was needed the participation of stakeholders with a specific knowledge. These stakeholders were selected from the different socio-economic sectors directly or indirectly related to the residential-tourism sector. The stakeholders that attended the meetings ranged from farmers to representatives of the hotel sector, from urban developers to residential-tourists. The aim was that the different views, values and interests existing in the analysed communities were represented. From the information given by diverse key agents it was elaborated a sociological map of stakeholders that were invited to participate in the process.

There exists a relationship between the legitimacy of those that foster the participatory project and the outcomes of the process with regard to the number of participants and the social support to the proposals designed during the process. In this respect, the initiative of the participatory process from the academia, as well as the lack of an explicit support of the local government probably hindered the participation of all the stakeholders. The absence of

politicians during the process triggers distrust among the participants, and they doubt the results will influence on the decision-making processes. To lessen this attitude as well as the distrust of the use that the academia would do with the outcome, we insisted that the objective was to give the information obtained back to the participants themselves, so that they were responsible for using it as they considered in their own field of action.

The last of the challenges we detected was how to ensure that the results would have a real effect on the decision-making. At the beginning it was decided not to include the politicians in the deliberative process to prevent the ideological difference from monopolizing the debate, and to prevent their strong position in the local power structure from interfering in the deliberative behaviour of the rest of stakeholders. Notwithstanding, weighing up the distortion that the presence of politicians could exert on the deliberative process, and, on the other hand, the uncertainty about the lack of implementation of the proposals designed through the process, we believe that the decision of excluding the political representatives may have been a mistake. The distortion that the politicians could have made on the deliberation would have possibly been less important than the uncertainty about the future application of the proposals.

Final Comments

These three dilemmas are common to most of the participatory processes, regardless the issue they are related to. However, the singularity of the Residential Tourism adds new difficulties to the development of this participatory methodology.

The Residential Tourism is closely related to the model of urban planning in Spain. The Spanish urban regulations do not compel to implement participatory processes, and therefore the urban planning issues are dealt among politicians, technicians and urban developers. Experience proves that none of these three groups, specially the urban developers, is willing the civil society to get involved in these decision-making processes. These participatory actions are considered to be an obstacle in their technical or entrepreneurial tasks.

Nevertheless, the transformation potential of the Residential Tourism, which has an integral effect on the local environment, demography, economy, society and culture, requires participatory criteria that endow citizens with an active role in the design of their cities.

This reason should foster the promotion of a higher number of participatory processes that allow the participation of the citizenry in the planning of residential-tourism cities, as well as the encouragement of social learning. The development of a social learning will enable the different sectors of the local population to take advantage in a responsible and efficient way of the unquestionable benefits that the residential-tourism activity yields at a local level.

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Notes

[1] This research is a part of two different R+D projects:a) "*PROMOTURE: Propuestas para la reorientación del modelo de desarrollo en municipios turístico-residenciales* (Proposals for the re-orientation of the development patterns in residential-tourism municipalities), funded by the Generalitat Valenciana (GV05/105); and b) *"Turismo residencial :análisis de la demanda y propuestas de reestructuración para los destinos consolidados"* (Residential Tourism: demand analysis and proposals of restructuring of consolidated destinations), funded by the Ministry of Education y Science of the Spanish Government (SEJ2005- 04305)

[2] The Promoture Project aimed to reach this objetive in two case studies: Villena and Dénia. It is expected to develop at least three more experiences in the future, which will allow us to improve the methodology and increase the knowledge in this field.

[3] The Logical Map consists of the identification of the direct and indirect causes for a certain effect. The participants would draw a cause-effect diagram for each effect.