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Power Dynamics in Collaborative Governance Processes: A Case Study of a Disadvantaged Neighbourhood in Southern Spain

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Abstract: This study focuses on assessing collaborative governance from the perspective of power dynamics in a disadvantaged neighbourhood in southern Spain: Las Palmeras. Increasing global urbanisation in recent decades has exacerbated problems of segregation within cities, posing a major challenge to achieving healthy urban environments for harmonious coexistence. Public policies have struggled to address this challenge, particularly following the adoption of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which have underlined the importance of fostering inclusiveness and sustainability in urban environments. In this context, collaborative governance has emerged as a prominent strategy for democratising the implementation of public policies in urban contexts. However, the efficacy of collaborative governance is hampered by the dynamics of power relations, which limits its effectiveness. The aim of this study is understanding how these dynamics mediate collaborative processes in urban regeneration contexts, an area little addressed so far. Through a case study and the systematisation of experiences, the study proposes strategic recommendations for managing these dynamics within collaborative governance. The insights drawn from this study can serve as a basis for better addressing urban challenges, thus fostering greater inclusiveness and sustainability in urban areas as well as offering valid lines for future research in the field.



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1. Introduction

This study focuses on exploring power dynamics within collaborative governance processes in urban regeneration contexts. To contribute to this body of literature, this study focuses on the experience of Las Palmeras, a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Córdoba (Spain). For the last eight years, this neighbourhood has been developing a collaborative governance process promoted by a grassroots initiative: the “Comprehensive Plan” of Las Palmeras. The relevance of this study lies in its ability to shed light on the power dynamics shaping the implementation of this “Comprehensive Plan”, highlighting their effects on the efficacy of the process. In addition, the uniqueness of the case is demonstrated by its status as a bottom-up experience.

Comprehensive planning in urban settings poses crucial challenges, as citizen collaboration and governance are intertwined in complex ways. To reach consensus on decisions, public bodies and stakeholders are articulated in a deliberative process called collaborative governance [1]. However, recent studies have noted the paradoxical and conflicting nature of collaborative governance [2–4]. Moreover, many authors have pointed out how such governance is mediated by power dynamics [5–11]. In this sense, the most recent trends argue for the importance of analysing collaborative governance processes with a logic of power, applying it to practical experiences at the micro level [3,5,9].

1.1. Contextual Framework: Collaborative Governance for Urban Regeneration

The increase and consolidation of segregated territories in urban spaces is a reality shared throughout the world. As Carlos [12] points out, cities reproduce social stratification through historical, economic, cultural, and political factors. Thus, structural and inequality issues shape certain suburban neighbourhoods, sometimes referred to as disadvantaged neighbourhoods [13,14]. These are usually formed from the breakdown of working-class neighbourhoods, marked by the gradual dismantling of the welfare state. Today, they host multiple problems ranging from precariousness to delinquency; hence, these neighbourhoods have been converted into territories of residential segregation.

A complex of circumstances characterises these as territories with high levels of conflict and violence, which causes a social stigma to their inhabitants. This structural issue, together with the complex nature of the reality of these neighbourhoods (multidimensional, multiscale, and multifactor), questions the urban regeneration models proposed to date [14]. This questioning has fostered a relevant debate on power dynamics [5,15–17].

The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have echoed this debate, encouraging a participatory approach (SDG 16, Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) when promoting more inclusive and sustainable cities (SDG 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities). In this context, collaborative governance is understood as a deliberative process in which public entities and non-state actors work together to solve territorial or sectoral problems, democratising the implementation of public policies [18].

In line with it, numerous studies about collaborative governance have been conducted in recent years [13,19–22], highlighting their democratic and power-sharing nature [9,22]. Urban studies, such as those developed by Kamruzaman and others [23] and Amini Pishro and colleagues [24], have highlighted how mobility impacts communities and how approaches such as Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) offer strategies to overcome risks such as the displacement of communities [25], addressing governance challenges [26], influencing urban design for inclusion [27], and promoting the use of sustainable transport [28]. These approaches can balance environmental benefits with their social implications, highlighting the importance of collaborative governance that incorporates diverse voices to address power dynamics and ensure inclusive and equitable urban development. The social processes analysed by such a body of literature have in common the inclusion of stakeholders in the governance process. However, the characteristics of each experience depend on contextual factors. For example, in Spain, collaborative governance processes normally have revolved around the so-called “Comprehensive Plans” [29–31].

A “Comprehensive Plan” is a collaborative governance process that includes a multifaceted, comprehensive, and coordinated approach to the problems and challenges of an area or territory. Applied in disadvantaged urban contexts, it aims to improve quality of life, reduce inequality, and promote development. Such plans are called comprehensive as they address the complexity of the problems in areas such as housing, health, or education; imply the coordination of all levels of public administration, whether state, regional, or local; and assume the collaborative participation of the different types of actors present in the focal territory, whether political, technical, or civic. Thus, each “Comprehensive Plan” is unique because it is adapted to the particular circumstances of its territory [29]. The object of this study is, precisely, of one of those plans, as proposed by the citizens in a particular neighbourhood: Las Palmeras.

1.2. Conceptual Framework: Power Dynamics in Collaborative Governance Networks

Power dynamics, understood as the unequal relationships and subsequent tensions between individuals and groups in terms of influence, resources and authority, play a crucial role in decision-making about common interests [32]. Thus, power imbalances affect collaboration and decision-making in governance contexts. The most recent research has highlighted the importance of expanding the understanding of power dynamics to improve collaborative governance [5,16,17]. Understanding power relations is deemed essential for improving stakeholder engagement and motivation in collaborative governance [17].

Traditionally, power has been defined as the ability to influence, control, or direct the behaviours and actions of other people or groups through coercion, compensation, or persuasion [33]. The degree, scope, or even historicity of power has been studied, whereby it has been noted that power is mediated by the social and cultural structures affecting the structuring of organisations [34–36]. Therefore, applying this view to collaborative governance processes is crucial.

Collaborative governance presupposes that any deliberative process with different stakeholders jointly reaches consensus and makes collective decisions [9]. However, this implies planning and management [1]. Thus, collaborative governance processes must be analysed as a network of interacting actors, mediated by the power tensions of their roles. To navigate such tensions, collaborative governance adopts strategies to achieve the objectives of the network in a framework of democratic consensus. However, recent authors [7,15] have identified that the power relations among actors are projected in the collaborative network, generating situations of power asymmetry. In this way, collaborative governance becomes a dialectical tension between the benefit of sharing power and the asymmetry of power [9].

Such asymmetry of power shows that not all stakeholders present themselves on equal terms or with the same amount of power. Therefore, for the correct analysis of collaborative governance networks [9,11,37], an evaluation of the sources of power of every stakeholder is needed. This analysis can define their ability to influence their network. Accordingly, the literature has begun to clarify the different sources of power, such as formal authority, resource control, or discursive legitimacy, involved in participatory processes. These sources of power determine the roles of participants in a dynamic way, as they fluctuate depending on the arenas and flows of power [5].

The most refined theoretical framework for analysing the exercise of power in collaborative governance networks is the one proposed by Ran and Qi [9], a framework of contingent factors and a series of analytical hypotheses. In their proposal, the authors propose a specific hypothesis, i.e., how the more widespread the sources of power are, the more beneficial for the effectiveness of collaborative governance it is to share them. Their analysis also points to a dual categorisation of collaborative governance networks: mandatory or voluntary networks. The former are those subject to legal-based regulations, supported by hierarchical and bureaucratic mechanisms, and sustained through medium- or long-term planning. The latter are based on voluntary collaboration characterised by reciprocity, consensus, and mutual trust and linked to urgency and emergency.

Other authors have focused on the participants who collaborate in the network [38], who are commonly classified by the legal nature of their organisational structure as political, technical, or civic actors [39,40]. Other authors incorporate into this distinction actors' practices, discourses, or rationalities [41–43]. Thus, actors with political rationality, technical rationality, neighbourhood rationality, profit-making rationality, or bureaucratic rationality emerge. What is relevant in this view is that each stakeholder is traversed by various rationalities subject to spatial–temporal contexts [38]. The rationalities of the actors at each moment in the process condition their objectives in the network [41] and articulate the processes of collaboration in it, as rationality maintains a dialectical relationship with praxis [44].

Summarizing, collaborative governance networks and their effectiveness appear to be mediated by the type of network that is constituted; the nature and rationality of the actors that make it up; and contingent factors specific to each context. All these elements are traversed by the logics of power.

The objective of this study is to deepen the understanding of these power dynamics through the presentation of a localised case study, a methodology that has been proven effective for this purpose. To this end, this study examines how these power dynamics cut across collaborative governance practices in the urban regeneration of the Las Palmeras neighbourhood in Cordoba, offering new perspectives on the implementation of these practices in disadvantaged urban contexts.

As noted above, the case of Las Palmeras represents a differential experience of collaborative governance in a deprived urban area, as it is based on a grassroots initiative.

A combined approach of the systematisation of experiences [45] and case studies [46] has been used. This approach allowed for the collection and analysis of qualitative information from multiple sources, including interviews, participant observations, and documents of the process itself. This approach was selected for its ability to systematise practice and simultaneously provide a detailed and contextual understanding of governance processes, social relations, and their symbolic value.

The research reveals how collaborative governance practices in the context under study, while improving the implementation of public policies through collaboration between stakeholders, are traversed by power dynamics that affect governance, as Ansell and Gash [1] argue. Consequently, differences in access to resources and influence can affect the effectiveness of collaborative governance, as Ran and Qi [9] point out. Thus, the study suggests the need to take power dynamics into account in the practice of collaborative governance in order to influence its effectiveness.

This study offers significant practical insights, highlighting the importance of citizen autonomy, self-regulation, agenda co-management, and accountability. These aspects, together with an analysis of power dynamics, provide useful tools for those involved in urban governance and community development.

To this goal, the study is structured as follows: Following the above presentation of the contextual and conceptual frameworks, the adopted methods and materials are elaborated to build the narrative of the focal case study. The systematisation of the results obtained is then presented according to the categorisation established based on the participation levels, methodologies, and actors. Finally, the findings are discussed with respect to the conceptual framework. We close the study by making specific action proposals before appropriate conclusions are drawn.

2. Materials and Methods

To carry out the study, we apply a systematisation of experiences approach [45,47] to a case study [46,48]. The former connects with the tradition of Participatory Action Research, an approach that emphasises participation in the research process, oriented towards action and social change [49–51] and parallels storytelling, a method that uses personal and collective narratives as a research tool to capture experiences and perceptions, facilitating the qualitative analysis of social phenomena [52,53]. These approaches are essential to investigate the case in its complex circumstances, allowing for generalisable lessons to be drawn. It reconstructs the objective and subjective elements of an event from an analytical and critical reflection together with participants [47]. The latter investigates such event by considering its complex circumstances with the intention of understanding the focal phenomenon, which allows for the extraction of generalisable lessons [54].

This combination of approaches was selected given the capacity of systematisation to valorise the experience by generating knowledge for the participants themselves [45] and the case study given the uniqueness of the experience as a bottom-up initiative governance process [48].

As Jara suggests, the reconstruction of processes must incorporate the voice of those who have played a leading role in them. Various factors must be scrutinised: the political, economic, and social context of the experience; the specificity of the experience; the subjectivity of those who have lived the experience; the salient results or effects; and the relevant relationships [55]. In parallel, the case study method involves an empirical question related to the focal event and is relevant when it is difficult to distinguish between the context and the phenomenon [48,54,55].

Both approaches therefore involve the collection of a large amount of information from various sources. Thus, different sources of information are used to integrate the scientific and social discourse [54]. Although mixed methods is the most common methodology used in case studies [46], systematisation is typically based on qualitative sources of

evidence such as interviews, documents, and observations [48], particularly in the dialogical approach [56]. In this way, the two approaches have been integrated, starting with the reconstruction of the process through narrative and dialogic techniques (systematisation) and moving on to a contextualised exploration of collaborative governance in a real-life setting (case study). This methodological combination facilitates a comprehensive understanding of power dynamics, linking the reflexive analysis of systematisation with the contextualisation offered by the case study.

In this study, this methodological approach has been applied to a collaborative governance process called the “Comprehensive Plan”, which began in 2015 in the Las Palmeras neighbourhood (Córdoba, Spain). The objective of the research is to reconstruct this process from its genesis to the present by addressing the following research question: how are power dynamics configured in a collaborative governance process arising from a grassroots initiative?

The relevance of the case is illustrated by its clear representation of a bottom-up process that starts with a neighbourhood organisation and is configured to promote comprehensive policies of social inclusion and urban regeneration. Bottom-up processes are not a common focus in the literature, where top-down cases tend to prevail [1].

In the compilation of the study materials, the proposal of Koch [57] has been followed in gathering the following sources of information: academic papers on the case; documents generated in the process; the protocols of each phase; participant observations; notes from the main actors; and 5 interviews with key informants.

Interviews were selected following the criteria of direct involvement in the governance of the Integrated Plan ensuring diversity including community leaders, civil servants, and academics. Sources of information were selected following the criteria of relevance to the collaborative governance process or its stakeholders.

The information collected was managed with the qualitative research software NVIVO 12 [58], which was used to code and organise the data collected through the labelling of text segments, allowing for the identification of emerging patterns that make up the categories or themes of analysis [59,60]. This has facilitated the application of thematic analysis during the examination of the data, which allows for the identification, organisation, description, and analysis of the issues identified in the dataset [61,62]. This methodology is commonly used in case studies [20,21,63].

Braun and Clark’s six-step model was used for coding [64]. This model allows researchers to identify patterns in the texts studied by co-differentiating them through the themes around which their analysis is structured [61]. To do this, a deep dive into the data was conducted, and then initial codes were generated by labelling relevant data (e.g., Comprehensive Plan, initiative, political perception, etc.). Subsequently, topics were identified by grouping the generated codes (e.g., participation, power, etc.). Finally, topics were reviewed to finally define and categorise the themes (levels of participation, methodologies, and actors) that open the door for systematisation.

To address potential biases and limitations inherent to the methodological approach adopted, such as those related to case selection or interpretative subjectivity, data triangulation was implemented using different sources (interviews, documentary analysis, observations, etc.), and criteria were applied to select the case, such as the fact that it was a bottom-up initiative, that it was alive, that it was a neighbourhood of exclusion, and that the promoters were still active. In addition, validation was sought from the participants by returning the study. These measures seek to ensure the robustness and accuracy of the findings, contributing to the rigour of the analysis.

Thus, to answer the research question, three themes of analysis were selected: the level of participation, observed through who holds the initiative in the process; the methodologies of participation, identified through the mechanisms of participation, the spaces, and the times; and the actors, determined through their identification and the rationalities that they activate. The conceptual model is introduced as Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes in the thematic analysis.

Themes	Sub-Themes
Levels of participation	Initiatives
Methodologies	Mechanisms, spaces, and times
Actors	Participants, rationalities, and motivations

Source: author's own elaboration.

Given that the case is an ongoing process, once the analysis had been carried out, several implications and proposals were identified to address the limitations of this process, which can also be applied to other analogous processes affected by power dynamics.

3. Results

3.1. Presentation of the Case Study

The Andalusian city of Cordoba in southern Spain is a historic city. With a population of just 300,000, the city has four UNESCO World Heritage declarations, signalling the weight of the importance of the city's past. However, it now faces contemporary challenges typical of a southern European urban environment, such as social and economic inequality, and is home to four of the fifteen poorest neighbourhoods in Spain [65]. One of them is the Las Palmeras neighbourhood. With a population of around 3000 inhabitants and a housing stock of 719 homes, Las Palmeras is located at the extreme west of the city. It originated as a temporary shelter for hundreds of Cordovan families who had to be relocated due to the floods in 1963. The development of such neighbourhoods was part of the urban policy at the time, dominated by urban renewal and urban redevelopment initiatives [66].

The city's population dynamics, lack of resources and spatial segregation have shaped this neighbourhood with increasingly high indicators of social exclusion [67,68]. It has a per capita income of less than EUR 5000 per year and an unemployment rate of more than 60%, resulting in the strong presence of an underground economy, insecurity, and urban deterioration [69,70]. The persistence of these exclusion standards has motivated the implementation of urban and social regeneration programmes, as the neighbourhood is highly affected by public administration. However, such interventions have not reversed any situation of exclusion.

In 2015, this situation led residents in the neighbourhood to self-organise, following the tradition of social struggle in Las Palmeras, and the Neighbourhood Association "Unión y Esperanza de Las Palmeras" was established. It began its journey with the intention of developing a "Comprehensive Plan" for the development of the neighbourhood and to demand public administrations to develop more effective policies for social inequality in the neighbourhood. After a period of neighbourhood consultation, the "Comprehensive Plan" of Las Palmeras was approved in January 2018. According to the criterion of control or management of the Plan, four different relevant periods can be observed: 2015–2018, dominated by citizen action; 2018–2020, controlled by the public administration; 2020–2022, characterised by outsourcing; and 2022 to date, in which citizen relocation takes place.

3.1.1. 2015–2018: Genesis of the "Comprehensive Plan"

This period began in 2015 with the constitution of the Neighbourhood Association "Unión y Esperanza de Las Palmeras", which initiated the bottom-up consultation process. This period culminated in 2018 when the City Council, meeting in plenary session, unanimously approved the document provided by the Neighbourhood Association, and, thus, the "Comprehensive Plan" was born.

In this period, the process was managed by the Neighbourhood Association, which takes the initiative to open a participatory process to build a text with which to commit the public administration to implement a "Comprehensive Plan" in the neighbourhood. In the words of a neighbourhood leader,

“... that defence that this Neighbourhood Association is doing and that it will continue to do, is going to be the defence of the representation of this Comprehensive Plan of its neighbours”

(Neighbourhood leader 2)

The Neighbourhood Association implements listening mechanisms such as individual door-to-door interviews and neighbourhood meetings:

“So, the idea that occurred to me at that time, or occurred to us, was a bit of doing a neighbourhood interview. Block by block, that is, door to door, right? With what little I knew how to write that my daughter taught me. I know very little. I took my notebook and asked them, Hey, what would you like? How would you like things to be done in the neighbourhood? What do you think we should do?”

(Neighbourhood leader 1)

In this period, deliberative mechanisms were applied. In 2015, e.g., tables were set up in each square to discuss the needs of the neighbourhood. They also developed strategic mechanisms, such as the functional reinforcement of an existent roundtable of associations in the neighbourhood. Although in this phase protagonism was sustained by the Neighbourhood Association, the entities in the association’s roundtable and neighbours without affiliation participate actively.

The spaces where the different milestones were developed are multiple: the squares, where informal meetings took place through word of mouth; public devices as the one known as “La Foggara”, located on the edge of the neighbourhood; facilities of Loyola Andalucía University, with which the Neighbourhood Association signed a collaboration agreement in 2017; and the City Council itself, in which the Plan was ultimately approved in 2018.

This period was thus dominated by a neighbourhood strategy whose rational logic was to value the needs expressed and felt by the citizens. On the other hand, it also activated mechanisms of a political nature to position its process and its product in the “Comprehensive Plan”. Meanwhile, the agreement with Loyola University maintained a technical-citizen rationale, shaping the technical orientation of the endogenous process to improve its political impact.

3.1.2. 2018–2020: The “Comprehensive Plan” as Public Policy

This period began with the approval of the “Comprehensive Plan” in January 2018 and ended in mid-2020 amid changes in political signals after the municipal elections which changed the conceptualisation of the plan and the model of dialogue with the neighbourhood. Also, mobility limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic made face-to-face participatory actions difficult, thus defying the participative nature of the process. It was dominated by milestones related to the Public Administration, particularly the beginning of the ERACIS, a regional policy for combatting social exclusion heavily financed by the European Union.

Once the “Comprehensive Plan” was approved in the municipal plenary session, the initiative of the process passed into the hands of the City Council, while the Neighbourhood Association moved to the background while maintaining an active role in different community processes.

The City Council put up 5 of its own roundtables for the development of the “Comprehensive Plan”. However, it ultimately only convened the education roundtable and the employment roundtable. In parallel, all the proposals included in the “Comprehensive Plan” were formally included in the ERACIS policy but without any consultative or participatory process. This mechanism guided the “Comprehensive Plan” towards community social services.

Regarding spaces, the City Council activated consultative/informative mechanisms, such as the aforementioned education and employment roundtables. However, the space established through the ERACIS prevailed: another roundtable at District level. This one

gathered many social entities that provide services at the local, regional, or even state level but not the Neighbourhood Association or other neighbourhood-based entities. In this space, technical rationality and unidirectional information prevailed. A summary by a neighbourhood community radio station of one of these meetings is as follows:

“During the meeting, there was an exhibition of the actions carried out in the area and the situation of the labour itineraries carried out so far. Then, in the round of questions and answers, the attendees explained the challenges and difficulties that the ERACIS strategy was facing” [71]

In parallel, the Neighbourhood Association and Loyola University initiated a socioeconomic diagnosis of the situation in the neighbourhood, establishing training and consultative mechanisms. While technical organisations participated in the roundtables promoted by the City Council, the Neighbourhood Association and youth of the neighbourhood collaborated in the socioeconomic diagnosis.

Beyond this initiative, the space par excellence became “La Foggara”, the public building located on the edge of the neighbourhood run by community social services. The strategies implemented were based on a political–technical logic in which variables such as time and resources have important weight. In this sense, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and municipal elections delayed the activation of the mechanisms provided in the “Comprehensive Plan”. The election delayed the process, while the pandemic limited its mechanisms with a participatory nature, affecting the implementation of the Plan very negatively.

3.1.3. 2020–2022: Outsourcing

In 2020, there were two outstanding events that conditioned the development of the process: the concession of a Horizon 2020 project of the European Union to the University of Córdoba in alliance with the City Council of Córdoba and the Association of Neighbours, called In-Habit, and the signing of an agreement between the Córdoba City Council and Loyola University to intervene in the vulnerable neighbourhoods of the city, including Las Palmeras. Both projects had high external financing.

Although, in a certain way, neighbourhood movements were integrated into both plans, the “Comprehensive Plan” was diluted by the City Council, which seemed to constitute a process of outsourcing. Specifically, the process outsourced the community action in the neighbourhood via these two interventions that were highly financed and implemented by the two universities in the city. Despite the fact that each university had its own participatory strategy, a certain shift in the role of the neighbourhood entities can be observed. The Neighbourhood Association was, however, a partner in both projects.

The main actors in this period were the City Council, the University of Córdoba, the Loyola Andalucía University, and the Neighbourhood Association, in addition to the various entities and organisations linked to the processes in each project, mainly service providers.

Once again, the space par excellence became “La Foggara”, and other institutional spaces such as Loyola Andalucía University where training was carried out. However, in the neighbourhood, intervention actions were developed mainly in the parochial halls by the entities located in the neighbourhood.

In this period, the “Comprehensive Plan” was diluted by the usual efforts of the City Council without any participatory structure being articulated. Municipal actions tend to cover some proposals concerning actions in a territory based on a large, outsourced project. For this reason, this phase was dominated by an eminently technical rationality.

3.1.4. 2022 to Date: Neighbourhood Reconnection

This last period began in March 2022, when, at the initiative of the Neighbours Association and Loyola Andalucía University, a local team was established that promotes the process in the neighbourhood: the “Driving team”. It is a local platform of neighbourhood entities and residents without affiliation, with the aim of promoting the “Comprehensive

Plan” with a bottom-up logic. It serves as a space for deliberations on interventions in the neighbourhood. The team was organised into working groups and began to promote some proposals included in the “Comprehensive Plan”, such as a community kitchen or urban gardens.

In 2023, amid the call for new municipal elections, the “Driving team” organised a discussion in the neighbourhood with the main political forces in the city. Additionally, in 2023, Loyola University trained another group of young people from the neighbourhood in social communication, aimed to support the civic processes that take place in their neighbourhood.

In this same year, there was a conflict with the regional Public Administration concerning the schooling of the minors in the neighbourhood. There is an important mobilisation linked to the education sector including the “Driving team”, neighbourhood families, and municipal technicians.

In this period, the City Council maintained its proposal to outsource the intervention and thus the dilution of the “Comprehensive Plan”. However, in the face of this strategy, there was a neighbourhood protest, which took up the initiative of the “Plan” with the driving force to operationalise it and to put it again on the political agenda. This period is thus dominated by neighbourhood and social action.

Various participatory mechanisms were introduced: consultative mechanisms, such as surveys; deliberative mechanisms, such as assemblies; and strategic mechanisms, such as working groups. Although the prominence and initiative of the Neighbourhood Association are notable, the social entities that provide services, neighbourhood entities, neighbours with a private capacity, teams of educational centres, and universities, participate in the “Driving team”. In this way, the dominant strategy becomes the articulation of civil society in the territory by neighbourhood leadership. Thus, the articulation of territorialised social entities and connections with the administration is the aim, whereby constant tension is maintained between technical and civic rationality. In this period, the spaces of reference are the parochial halls located at the extreme west of the neighbourhood.

4. Discussion

4.1. Levels of Participation

By levels of participation, we consider how power is redistributed in the participation process [72]. To make a process operational, the type of link that occurs between institutions and social organisations must be analysed, establishing a gradation of participation [38,43]. Specifically, the approach of Ortiz de Zárate is followed [73] while adjusting the participation ladder [72] to include “nonparticipation”, i.e., a lack of citizen involvement in decision-making processes; “symbolic participation”, involving citizens in certain activities but with no real impact on final decisions; and “citizen power”, where citizens have an active and meaningful role in decision-making. The starting point for this analysis is to assess who takes the initiative.

In general terms, the collaborative governance process was based on an initiative led by organised neighbours. Even though the initiative has fallen throughout the process into technical and political hands, the grassroots initiative has kept the “Comprehensive Plan” active throughout the process:

“So, it is a Comprehensive Plan that is made by the residents that the neighbourhood association has done; it is defending it, it is carrying it out, it is leading it”

(Neighbourhood leader 2)

The specific initiative has varied in the four periods discussed above, based in the neighbourhood at the beginning and at the present but passing through political and technical initiatives. This illustrates what Ran and Qi propose [9] when they argue that the roles in collaborative governance vary depending on the sources of power. In the two central periods, when the initiative was run by the Public Administration with political and technical control, the source of power was formal authority and the control of resources. Formal authority emerged as soon as the plan was approved and became managed by the munici-

pality, and the resources were controlled when it intervened in hyper-financed programmes such as *ERACIS*, *In-Habit*, or the agreement with Loyola. On the other hand, when the initiative remained in the neighbourhood, the source of power was discursive legitimacy:

“One so simple and so clear, like going with the heart in the hand everywhere with the truth ahead, Eh? And humility. Because when you tell a person your reality... your truth, huh? There will be those who accept it and there will be those who do not accept it, but at least they consider that you are a person who goes honestly, that you go with your face and that you go with your truth in your hands”

(Neighbourhood leader 1)

In the periods in which the initiative was in the hands of the institutions, the process of the “Comprehensive Plan” became lethargic, exemplifying the postulate of Grey and Purdy [74] suggesting that power differences create major obstacles in the successful development of collaborative governance. Basically, those who dominate the sources of power become central actors and control the process. Thus, a dialectical relationship is maintained between the agents of the collaborative network for the control of the sources of power within their capacities, which generates asymmetries of power that articulate and mediate the process.

The evolution of the levels of participation in the “Comprehensive Plan” highlights how the power dynamics between stakeholders have affected the management of the process due to power asymmetries marked by the agenda-setting capacity or control of resources of some stakeholders vis-à-vis others (the administration or highly funded entities).

In short, although the collaborative governance network that emerges from the “Comprehensive Plan” is part of a grassroots initiative, coinciding with the last steps of the participation ladder [72] or what Zárte [73] calls citizen power, the dynamics of power allow for the loss of control over the process among promoter actors and the co-optation of it by actors who dominate the sources of power, such as the City Council, certain public devices, or universities.

4.2. Methodologies

Methodologies refer to the characteristics of the strategies and mechanisms activated by some agents and others to develop participation within the collaborative network. First, they include the participation mechanisms, which differ according to the objectives of the moment in such a way that they complement each other [22]. In turn, they are mediated by space and time. The former allows researchers to analyse the formal or informal character, as well as the symbolic value, of the places of participation. The latter makes it possible to determine whether they are permanent processes or circumscribed to conjunctural periods or mechanisms of process or synthesis, reflecting the degree of institutionalisation of the participation instruments [38]. The characteristics of each of these three elements are explained below.

First, regarding the participation mechanisms, their implementation has varied according to the moment in which the process has been developed. While during the initial stage, the mechanisms applied were listening, consulting, and strategizing, in the following stages, these mechanisms diminished or were diluted via the small strategies that the different large projects implemented in the neighbourhood.

The participation mechanisms that allow for managing the control of power are mediated by the type of collaborative governance network. In the first period and in the current period, in which the network has been voluntary in nature, the strategies and mechanisms used have allowed the social organisations to increase the strength of their source of power: discursive legitimacy. On the other hand, in the periods of political-technical control, the networks became mandatory [9]. These central periods have been characterised by the application of hierarchical and bureaucratic mechanisms, as well as by a decrease in participation and a loss of neighbourhood control, coinciding with the

following hypotheses of these authors: “the more voluntary the type is, the more beneficial collaborative governance is for sharing power” [9].

Power dynamics have been reflected in the mechanisms of participation by mediating agenda-setting capacity, the control of resources, or access to information depending on the type of network that was constituted, where more horizontal mechanisms reduce the asymmetry of power compared to more hierarchical mechanisms.

The loss of oversight of the “Comprehensive Plan” by the social actors has coincided with the decrease in the participatory mechanisms. In this way, both the nature of the network (voluntary or mandatory) and the flexibility and adaptability of the implemented mechanisms have affected the relationship between shared power and the asymmetry of power, aligning with the literature [9].

Second, regarding the spaces for participation, these form a physical and symbolic context [75] that affects the collaborative network. The first period of the “Comprehensive Plan” is identified within the space of the neighbourhood; thus, its journey is carried out in the squares or even door to door. In times of technical–political control, the space par excellence became the publicly owned building “La Foggara”. However, in the last period, the spaces that dominated were again in the neighbourhood, but formal, such as the parochial halls.

Different physical spaces symbolise the contexts where the power takes place. Thus, these spaces became related to the actors that dominated each period, their sources of power, or the natures of the mechanisms that were applied. The hypothesis of Ran and Qi [9] maintains that the stronger the institutional context is, the more beneficial it is to sharing power. In contrast, in the case analysed, the more institutional the context became, the more distrust it generated among the actors.

Third, the times of the “Comprehensive Plan” have been mediated by exogenous and endogenous issues: changes in the government bodies; the COVID-19 pandemic; the dynamics of groups; or emerging events in the neighbourhood. Thus, time has configured the identity and genuine character of the process [76].

The four periods analysed above have been differentiated according to who had the initiative, articulating each period as a source of power. Thus, when the process was managed by the Public Administration, either directly or by outsourcing, the asymmetry of power that had been activated allowed for the lethargy of the participatory mechanisms of the “Comprehensive Plan”. This highlights the risk of co-optation of the process by the most powerful actors.

The literature recognises that the neighbourhood-dominated processes are marked by urgency and emergency, while the administrative periods are dominated by exogenous factors such as elections or budget cycles. Given that the “Comprehensive Plan” involves a long-term planning and implementation process, the investment in time remains very high, now approaching 10 years, entailing the establishment of a horizontal structure with a permanent vocation: the “Driving team”. However, the urgent and emerging processes that have motivated the neighbourhood articulations require a temporary hierarchical structure [9,77] to be effective. This has led to a loss of citizen control in the process, in line with Ran and Qi [9], who note that the less demanding the mission fulfilled by collaborative governance is, the more beneficial it is to share power for collaborative governance.

The methodology is traversed by power dynamics, sustaining power asymmetries by maintaining dialogical tensions such as those between the mechanisms of temporary and permanent networks or between voluntary and mandatory networks. The control of resources, access to information, interdependence, or adaptability are aspects that reflect the methodologies implemented that project existing power asymmetries, where tight deadlines and inaccessible locations can limit participation. However, it is observed that when mechanisms address these issues, they minimise the impact of these asymmetries, enabling interest in participation, as has been the case in the initial and current stages of the process.

4.3. The Actors

The actors are those individuals, groups, organisations, or institutions participating in the network, and they are identified according to their particular position and their specific interests in the process [38]. Authors such as Alberich [78] and Villasante [40] have classified these actors into three broad categories: technical, political, and civic. All of them contextualise their performances through judgements of relevance or rationalities [38,42,43], which is the element taken into account in this analysis.

The profile of the actors involved in the network has been shaped as the process has developed. First, local, or territorial organisations and individual neighbours who participated from the beginning stand out. A preexisting culture of networking was already established in the neighbourhood, the association's roundtable, which facilitated the constitution of a collaborative governance network of a voluntary nature [9]. This has favoured the emergence of consent, reciprocity, and trust:

"And the neighbours are trusting. [...] They are having enough patience to trust, [...] after so much suffering, they are already living a "Comprehensive Plan" that was drawn up by the neighbours"

(Neighbourhood leader 2)

This is how the "Comprehensive Plan" is configured as a bottom-up process [79]. This is a characteristic that in some way persists, standing out in the constitution of the "Driving team" in the last period, where the collaboration network was once again more civic:

"We wanted many more entities to be added, many more people. In addition to the associations, roundtable of internal and external groups that we already had in it and so it was decided. So, I don't know, well, the associations roundtable as such stops working, but the representatives of the associations table are still in the Driving team"

(Neighbourhood leader 3)

The Plan was born, therefore, with a civic rationality as it was activated by a coalition of social entities linked to the territory and neighbours. They did so because it was urgent, which is characteristic of civic rationality [38]. And it managed to be approved in the municipal plenary session because this urgency was translated into a highly technical document: the "Comprehensive Plan".

This approval supposed the emergence of a political rationality, reflected in the agenda of the political authorities, their capacity for dialogue, and the collaborative associations that they establish, marked by a logic of accumulation of power [38]. However, due to power asymmetries, political rationalities have fluctuated among technical, political, and citizen agents. This was observed, e.g., when the Neighbourhood Association made use of the media or when they activated alliances with other entities, such as universities. In any case, from its consolidation into a technical-political document, technical rationality became present throughout the process, fluctuating across all the categories of actors, to the point that the Neighbourhood Association became a formal partner in one of the projects managed by the University of Córdoba.

The dense networks among actors, based on positive experiences and power sharing, explain the survival of the "Comprehensive Plan" after 10 years of ups and downs, a survival consistent with the literature [80]. The process and the governance network of the "Comprehensive Plan" are sustained because they legitimise the acceptance of the process, the perception of its opportunities, and the desire to share power. This is possible because it maintains a diverse and complex network of actors, preventing constant tension between the mandatory network and the voluntary network via the small achievements of the process. These coincide with the three major types of legitimacy of political systems (input, throughput, and output) identified by Martí-Costa and others [81].

Ultimately, the "Comprehensive Plan" has involved a diverse network of actors (technical, political, and civic), whose interactions and rationalities evolved throughout

the process, reflecting power dynamics. The fluctuation of power among these actors is seen in how the power asymmetries, agenda-setting capacity, and control of resources have impacted the plan. The variation in actors, and their rationalities, has brought unequal legitimacy and access to information mediating the collaborative web of governance. On the other hand, these tensions lead to practices such as the formation of alliances and the use of media that actors such as the Neighbourhood Association apply to balance these asymmetries.

4.4. Implications and Proposals

The analysis of power dynamics in this study highlights the paradoxical and dialectical nature of collaborative governance. This question implies limitations in practice, which calls for the activation of contingent solutions [3]. Therefore, within the framework of a strategy for addressing these paradoxes and the power dynamics that they imply, in light of the preceding analysis, four strategic proposals are proposed: citizen autonomy, self-regulation, comanaged agenda, and accountability. These proposals address the limitations of the focal case by addressing the dialectical nature of collaborative governance.

First, we propose mechanisms for guaranteeing citizenship quotas regarding autonomous participation within an agenda outside the network. The establishment of such participatory structures will allow civic sectors to have their own agendas. This could contribute to reducing the danger of public co-optation of the process, as well as the game of power asymmetry. In the case analysed, progress has been made with the establishment of the “Driving Team” and their working groups. The former allows for the management of the process in the neighbourhood, and the latter allows for the establishment of networks of proximity and collaboration among the different actors.

Second, to minimise power asymmetries and limit the potential co-optation of the process, we propose to develop practices such as self-regulation, already proved in similar processes as a participatory budget [19,82–84]. This entails developing a participatory document that organises the rules of the process in all its steps and actions [84]. Some authors suggest that a process of self-regulation should be based on the principle of parity under the criteria of social justice, focused on participatory synergies [19,83]. Through a participatory and open methodology, self-regulation can address the limitations resulting from the asymmetries of power and the paradoxical nature of collaborative governance, promoting transparency, deliberation, and decision-making in a framework of power distribution. In the case studied, this issue is a pending task.

Third, it is known that whoever controls the agenda controls the outcome, either by excluding certain issues or problems, by excluding important lines of action, or by making use of the structure itself [85]. The establishment of an agenda is mediated by the dynamics of power and has important consequences for deliberative processes [85,86]. Thus, we propose the co-management of the deliberative space, which could enable the balancing of power dynamics through shared control and the adjustment of the agenda. The active collaboration of the actors in this line is facilitated through balanced and structured information, as well as the incorporation of didactic materials, considering the contextual factors [87]. In the case analysed, internal, external, formal, and informal mechanisms are beginning to be configured, allowing for movement between the public agenda and the political agenda, from deliberative processes to decision-making. However, there is still room for advancement.

Fourth and last, numerous academics have already noted the importance of accountability in collaborative governance [10,88,89]. Accountability is defined in terms of the relationship between an actor and a forum, where the former has the obligation to justify his or her actions and face the consequences of the forum’s deliberation [90]. This implies a relationship of coresponsibility between the members of the network who are accountable (account-givers) and those who are rendered account-holders [89]. The creation of horizontal and informal accountability mechanisms can strengthen the deliberative capacity of the network, mutual trust, and legitimacy [10,91] by ensuring transparency and fairness in

decision-making [92]. However, as it is an essentially communicative process and information is a source of power, the system must be carefully designed to recognise any imbalance of power and minimise it [89]. In the case analysed, the group of young people trained in communication is called upon to do so, but their empowerment is still a pending task.

5. Conclusions

The results indicate that collaborative governance essentially maintains a paradoxical and dialectical nature whereby power dynamics have significant weight and are present across all times, levels, and procedures. This study has illustrated how, even when the participatory process starts from citizen empowerment, power dynamics mediate the process, either limiting or expanding it but always making it more complex. It also illustrates how the nonrecognition of this paradoxical and essentially conflicting nature leads to power dynamics that affect the benefits of power sharing for collaborative governance. In addition, it has highlighted the need for carefully designed strategies to balance these forces and strengthen the legitimacy of the process, and some strategies have been proposed: citizen autonomy, self-regulation, a co-managed agenda, and accountability.

Furthermore, this study contributes significantly to the literature on co-operative governance by offering a case study exploring power dynamics, in line with what Ran and Qi [9] suggest. This analysis provides valuable insights into how these dynamics affect stakeholder interaction and participation mechanisms, deepening the understanding between power asymmetries and participation. We also present a novel methodological approach to the analysis of power dynamics in specific contexts, thus contributing to the expansion of analytical tools available for future studies in collaborative governance.

Despite these findings, this study also has important limitations. First, the qualitative and participatory nature of this research, where the researchers are agents involved in the process, could lead to bias. On the other hand, the uniqueness of the focal case and its specific history call for prudence when extending the abovementioned results, especially in the application of the strategic proposals in other contexts. Furthermore, the temporality and complexity of the case do not allow for capturing the full multiplicity of factors; collaborative governance is inherently fluid and contingent, subject to unexpected changes.

Nevertheless, this study contributes significantly to the understanding of collaborative governance and citizen participation in a framework of power relations and offers a deep understanding of the challenges and complexities inherent to these relations. Likewise, it offers practical proposals for strengthening citizen participation and legitimacy in similar processes, highlighting the importance of preserving the autonomy of the community amid the co-optation of the most powerful. The combination of limitations and insights open future lines of research, including additional case studies that address the dynamics of power in collaborative governance. They could shed more light on the proposals indicated above, especially in terms of the autonomy of citizens and the danger of co-optation.

Possible Directions for Future Studies

This study of power dynamics in collaborative governance in the Las Palmeras neighbourhood opens up several avenues for future research. One promising direction is the application and refinement of the concepts and methods developed in this study in diverse geographical and cultural contexts. This would allow researchers to explore how power dynamics and participatory mechanisms designed to balance these asymmetries work in contexts with different socio-economic structures.

In addition, further research is suggested on the design and implementation of participatory mechanisms that foster inclusion, assessing their effectiveness in empowering marginalised stakeholders. A longitudinal study examining the evolution of collaborative governance in Las Palmeras, or in similar contexts, would provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of the strategies implemented and how power dynamics and citizen participation change over time.

Exploring new strategies that promote effective self-regulation and citizen empowerment in the face of the constraints and challenges encountered in this study also represents a direction for future work. Furthermore, addressing the limitations of our study, such as the focus on a single urban context and the limited temporal scope of the analysis, comparative studies that expand the geographical and temporal focus and the inclusion of a wider range of voices and perspectives would enrich the understanding of collaborative governance and the power dynamics involved.

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