



HDK – Högskolan för design och konsthantverk

Exploring pitfalls of participation and ways towards just practices through a participatory design process in Kisumu, Kenya

Helena Kraff

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Fakultetsopponent:
Professor Mugendi K. M'Rithaa, Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Abstract

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It is my belief that participatory processes can lead to positive transformations for the people involved. However, I do at the same time recognize that participation is inherently ambiguous and complex, and that this makes it vulnerable to unjust practices. It is this view of participation that led me to a focus on challenges that can emerge in participatory processes, or as they will be referred to in this thesis: pitfalls.

The purpose is to explore pitfalls of participation, especially regarding when, how and why participatory practices lead to unjust forms of participation. My experience of being engaged as a Swedish researcher in a participatory design project in a Kenyan context, and critical reflections on this experience serve as the foundation for this exploration. The project concerns small-scale ecotourism development in a fishing village on the shores of Lake Victoria in Western Kenya, where I worked with the development of ecotourism-related products and services in a participatory manner with a local guide group and residents, and with PhD student colleagues from Sweden and Kenya.

A number of pitfalls are highlighted as particularly problematic, which are connected to either abstracted and simplistic conceptualizations of participants and their participation, or to an unjust role distribution in projects. The terms community, empowerment and ownership are used to exemplify how the use of vague and elusive words to describe participation tends to hide participant diversity or lead to overstatements regarding the benefits derived from the project. I discuss how an unjust access to knowledge resources between actors who are to collaborate closely together hinder co-production of knowledge, and I acknowledge how designers' and design researchers' prejudices and a cultural unawareness can lead to some groups not being recognized as important.

The aim is to contribute with methodological guidance regarding how researchers and practitioners can identify and work against the pitfalls that they come across in their practice, and towards achieving just participation.