

Meta-participation in multistakeholder mechanisms: Peruvian civil society and the free trade agreement with the EU

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Abstract

This paper elaborates on the relatively unknown concept of meta-participation: stakeholders' attempts to reorganize the way in which their participation in decision-making is organized. It also applies these conceptual insights to an empirical study of Peruvian civil society. Relying on primary documents and interviews with stakeholders, the article analyzes meta-participation in the framework of Peru's Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the European Union, showing why and how Peruvian civil society has sought to improve the way in which the participation opportunities offered in the framework of the FTA have been implemented. The article has been developed in an abductive manner, with conceptual and empirical insights building on each other. Finally, the article also discusses the limitations of these meta-participatory activities. *Keywords:* Meta-participation, Free Trade Agreement, civil society, European Union, Peru.

Resumen: Metaparticipación en mecanismos multilaterales: La sociedad civil peruana y el Tratado de Libre Comercio con la Unión Europea

El artículo elabora el relativamente desconocido concepto de metaparticipación: Los intentos de las partes interesadas en reorganizar el modo en el que se organiza su participación en la toma de decisiones. Asimismo, aplica estas perspectivas conceptuales a un estudio empírico de la sociedad civil peruana. Basándose en documentos primarios y entrevistas con las partes interesadas, el artículo analiza la metaparticipación en el marco del Tratado de Libre Comercio (TLC) de Perú con la Unión Europea y muestra por qué y cómo la sociedad civil ha intentado mejorar la implementación de los espacios de consulta proporcionados en el marco del TLC. El artículo ha sido desarrollado de manera abductiva, en la que las ideas teóricas y empíricas se refuerzan unas a otras. Finalmente, el artículo también analiza los límites de estas actividades metaparticipativas. *Palabras clave:* Metaparticipación, Tratado de Libre Comercio, sociedad civil, Unión Europea, Perú.

Introduction

European Union's Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Peru, Colombia and Ecuador, provisionally applied since March 2013, is one of its first "new generation" FTAs which includes a Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) chapter. It is also the only trade agreement signed by Peru which, in the same TSD chapter, foresees dialogue with civil society (GCI Perú, 2018a). Civil society mechanisms in the EU's FTAs usually include Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) established by all Parties, and a joint civil society session. They monitor the impact of the trade agreement on labour and environmental protection, in line with international standards, and offer recommendations to the Parties. The TSD chapters have separate dispute settlement procedures, which do not foresee sanctions and cannot be directly triggered by civil society. This setup has often raised dissatisfaction among civil society, policy-makers and academia (Harrison et al., 2018, 2019; Kube, 2019; Potjomkina, Orbie, & Shahin, 2020).

The FTA with Peru stands out among other "new generation" FTAs due to weaker than usual provisions on civil society consultations and their limited implementation. The FTA has, according to Martens et al. (2018), a low civil society involvement index. It does not explicitly mention independence of civil society, and allows the Parties to use existing national consultation mechanisms where available; essentially the only requirement is "a balanced representation of representative organisations" in the areas of environment, labour and sustainable development (Orbie & Van Den Putte, 2016; Trade Agreement, 2018, Art. 281). The Peruvian government indeed designated a number of existing mechanisms to discuss the TSD chapter. As we will see below, they have failed at a meaningful dialogue.

However, these unfavourable conditions have neither discouraged civil society from engaging with the authorities, nor have they pushed it towards fully anti-systemic forms of protest. Instead, Peruvian civil society has responded with several creative activities aimed at changing the dysfunctional status quo of the existing participation system, which we conceptualize as meta-participation. Civil society carries out similar meta-participation activities in the framework of other EU's FTAs (Potjomkina et al., 2020), but their scope and coherence is unique in the Peruvian case, which explains its choice as the case study for this research. In particular, this is the only currently known case where civil society organizes in self-constituted (*autoconformado* in Spanish) or what we call "shadow" DAG; a similar process occurred in Colombia (Resumen, 2017) but the DAG was subsequently recognized by the authorities. Yet the existing research on participation of civil society in the framework of EU-Peru FTA has focused on its general traits and especially structural shortcomings (Kube, 2019; Orbie et al., 2017; Orbie & Van Den Putte, 2016), leaving a "knowledge gap" (Müller-Bloch & Kranz, 2015) on specific activities and motivations of civil society representatives, and to some extent an "action-knowledge conflict" (Müller-Bloch & Kranz, 2015), given that civil society has demonstrated much

greater activity than predicted by the literature which so far has focused on the constraints thereto.

At the same time, the paper sets out to refine the concept of meta-participation and apply it to the realm of (international) politics, addressing the “theory application void”, or lack of theory application to specific research issues (Müller-Bloch & Kranz, 2015) existing around this concept. Thus, the article pursues a dual objective: First, to advance the concept of meta-participation as a useful conceptual tool for analyzing activities of civil society which seek to reform the established participation mechanisms; and second, to shed additional light on the activities of civil society in Peru in the framework of the FTA with the EU. The article has been developed in an abductive manner, in which conceptual and empirical insights build onto each other: as Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019, p. 153) explain it, in an abductive study, data is being collected “to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and explain patterns, to generate a new or modify an existing theory which you subsequently test through additional data collection”. This approach is more flexible than “pure” deduction or induction, as in fact it contains elements of both (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). It also opened a way to simultaneously tackle the conceptual and empirical gaps.

Methodologically, the article has mainly relied on primary resources made available by Red Peruana por una Globalización con Equidad, or RedGE (Peruvian Network for Globalization with Equity), which chairs the “shadow” DAG. The webpage of RedGE provided excellent information for this research; we have analyzed approximately 90 relevant documents from years 2007-2020 published on its website.¹ We complemented this data by twelve semi-structured qualitative interviews with stakeholders operating in Peru, including participants of both officially designated and so-called “shadow” consultation mechanisms under the TSD chapter. The interviews took place in 2020 and, due to the travel restrictions caused by COVID-19, were carried out online. They have been anonymized to protect the identities of the interviewees. Part of this research – more specifically, three interviews and part of the desk research – overlapped with a previous study (Martens et al., 2020), which however focused on Peruvian civil society’s participation in the framework of the FTA more broadly and not on meta-participation. Additionally, we used insights from secondary literature.

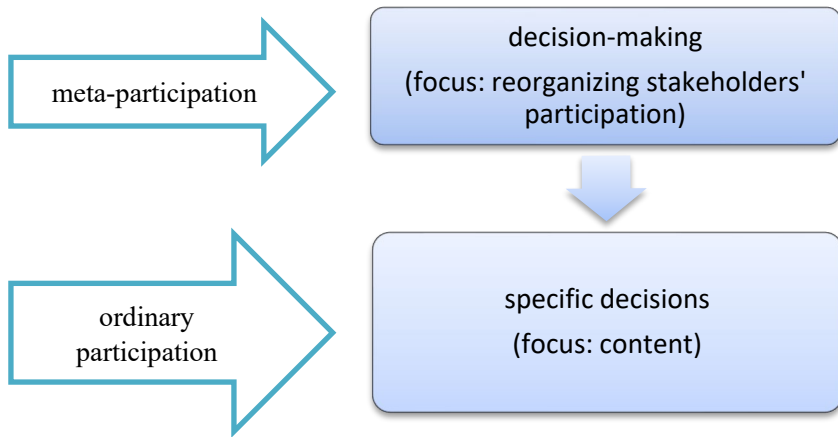
The article is structured as follows. We begin by elaborating the concept of meta-participation: stakeholders’ attempts to reorganize the ways in which participation in decision-making is organized. The term “meta-participation” has originated in the literature on youth participation at the local level (Trilla & Novella, 2001). This article looks at meta-participation in a political context and proposes additional conceptual tools that are suited for analyzing actors’ activities in relation to political systems. We continue by demonstrating how these conceptual insights apply in empirical analysis of the Peruvian case, covering the period since the provisional application of the agreement in 2013 until 2020. Ultimately, the article argues in favour of paying closer attention to meta-participation in multistakeholder initiatives, both conceptually and on the policy level.

Meta-participation: To change the status quo

The concept of meta-participation has not been widely discussed in the literature on participatory democracy and multistakeholder bodies. Articles on youth participation (Soler Masó et al., 2015; Trilla & Novella, 2001) offer comprehensive definitions and valuable insights, but they focus on the more day-to-day dimension of participation in local and municipal youth councils, without linking it to broader political processes. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines “meta” as “referring to itself or to something of its own type” or “outside the normal limits of something.”² Meta-participation has been defined as aiming to reorganize participation itself (Trilla & Novella, 2001; compare Holdo, 2020). Trilla and Novella (2001, p. 150) state that in meta-participation, “subjects themselves request, demand or create new spaces and mechanisms for participation. It appears when an individual or a collective considers that the recognition of their participatory rights is not appropriate, or when they believe that the established channels for it [participation] are not sufficient or effective.” Thus, “the [overall] right to take part in decision-making is reclaimed” (Trilla & Novella, 2001, p. 90).

Much of the extant literature on participation – which can be seen as “ordinary” participation in comparison to “meta-participation” – understands it as actions aimed at changing specific decisions or electing certain persons to represent the voters. Whether the specific participation channels have been authorized by the officials or not (cf. Ohme et al., 2018), the underlying idea is to reach specific, substantive goals (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; compare Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014, and van Deth, 2016). Some exceptions confirm the general rule. Some authors do allude to citizens who “participate outside the system” “to garner systemic change” (Jeroense & Spierings, 2023; see also van Deth, 2014), but in reality they do not elaborate on what change citizens aspire to and how they pursue it. Other authors mention growing movements towards direct democracy, but only as a strand of participation (Ohme et al., 2018). In another example, Brough and Shresthova (2012) talk about “aim[ing] to influence or change existing power relations,” but only when discussing informal engagement. In contrast, meta-participation focuses on activities aimed specifically at changing participation opportunities in a systematic way (which might ultimately, indirectly, affect the content of specific decisions). This relationship between both concepts is shown in figure 1.

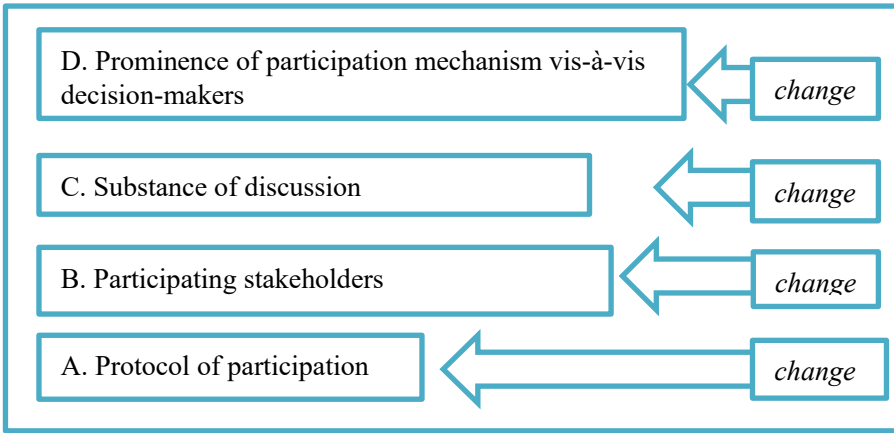
Figure 1: meta-participation and ordinary participation



Source: author's drawing, partly based on Trilla and Novella (2001)

We do, however, pragmatically borrow some relevant insights from the extant meta-deliberation literature for our discussion of meta-participation. Meta-deliberation literature focuses on deliberation and discourse and belongs to the theoretical tradition of deliberative democracy (Holdo, 2020), while meta-participation is also concerned with tangible actions (Trilla & Novella, 2001). Otherwise, the two concepts share parallels, as meta-deliberation refers to self-reflection and deliberative justification of deliberative processes (Thompson, 2008), whereas meta-participation involves reflection on the existing participatory institutions. Thompson's point on justification, in particular, points to the possibility that "meta" processes can provide a normative basis, and subsequent checks and balances, for participation. Holdo (2020, p. 106) further looks into the linkage of meta-deliberation to legitimacy, arguing that inclusive meta-deliberation "provides societies with reflective capacity, which helps them locate systemic weaknesses", open up to alternative viewpoints and empower marginalized groups. Societies that lack such reflective capacity will also lack tools to address and resolve confrontation (Holdo, 2020). In fact, as Holdo also shows, meta-participation is closely related to the notion of resistance, which we discussed in a previous article on the DAGs (Potjomkina et al., 2020). However, we would like to argue that meta-participation is a more specific concept: Its primary logic is productive, with a focus on creating or changing participatory mechanisms (Trilla & Novella, 2001), while resistance could be both productive and negative. What the existing literature misses is a clear operationalization of meta-participation. Thus, through an abductive reasoning process based on both conceptual insights and empirical data, we make a first step by distinguishing four substantive directions of meta-participation as demonstrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Meta-participation as changing the status quo of participation mechanisms



We propose to look at meta-participation as directed at specific participation provisions (boxes A, B, C, D) which have been pre-defined, in our case, by the parties to the agreement; meta-participation questions these pre-defined provisions and proposes alternatives. Meta-participating agents may work in one or several directions, which may overlap. When stakeholders meta-participate in the direction A, they address the “Rules of participation”, or the specific protocols for consultations. These could include, among others, the number of meetings, requirements for quorum, existence of a working plan, or financing for travel. As Soler Masó et al. (2015) and Derkx and Glasbergen (2015) point out, a “meta” approach may also entail systematization and coordination of different participative processes. The purpose is to increase the “quality of the governance processes” (as in the “throughput legitimacy” concept; Schmidt, 2013) from the specific stakeholder’s perspective. Meta-participation in the direction B refers to changing the circle of “Participating stakeholders”, allowing a different circle of stakeholders to have a say. Agents may act on behalf of other groups, whom they see as unfairly excluded (Holdo, 2020), or may reclaim the opportunity to participate for themselves (Trilla & Novella, 2001). In principle, inclusion of participants in the process goes hand-in-hand with inclusion of their perspectives in the debate and thus relates to the direction C (framing of the issue). However, here we treat it as analytically distinct.

The direction C, “Substance of discussion”, aims to change the substantive framework for participation: Which issues are up for debate, how they are framed, and what is off the table. Following Holdo (2020), we can see meta-participation as an attempt to challenge the dominant discourse, so that alternative viewpoints can be heard. The major limitations imposed on stakeholder participation by discourses have been documented by diverse literatures, including works on trade (Ford, 2018; Hannah, 2016; Holden, 2019; Lawrence, 2018). Thus, shaping the topics accepted in the debate can have fundamental political significance.

Finally, meta-participation may be directed at changing the prominence of the participation platforms vis-à-vis decision-makers (direction D). This reflects stakeholders' desire to see an end result of their participation, namely, getting heard and having practical impact (compare Trilla & Novella, 2001), and differs from directions A to C, which aim to change the internal functioning of a multi-stakeholder mechanism. Empirical studies show that policy impact is a high priority for civil society participating in the framework of EU FTAs (Martens et al., 2020). Thus, to borrow terminology from Malcolm (2015), meta-participating agents may advocate for creation of “empowered spaces” which either take decisions themselves, or are linked to other spaces where decisions are being made.

Importantly, meta-participation serves to adjust participation processes to specific actors' preferences, and we should not see it as a universal cure for legitimacy deficit, low engagement or societal and political conflict. The usual critique of deliberative democracy – the existence of sometimes irreconcilable conflicts and power inequalities among actors (Hudon & Rouillard, 2015; see also Martens, Gansemans, Orbie, & D'Haese, 2018) – still stands. Whether certain reforms serve to “improve” participation or not is in the eye of the beholder; what is desirable for one may not be desirable for another. Exclusion, inequality, manipulation and instrumentalization can manifest in meta-participation in the same way as in “ordinary participation” (Holdo, 2020; Trilla & Novella, 2001). We now turn to the empirical case of Peru.

Meta-participation of Peru's civil society: Creative and multi-dimensional

For decades, Latin American governments, driven by neoliberal ideologies, have been “fast-tracking infrastructure and extraction projects, and limiting dissent”, sometimes by violent means (Bebbington et al., 2018, p. 190). In response, Latin American civil societies have mobilized in defence of sustainable development, including environment, social impact of large projects, and human rights (Bebbington et al., 2018; Roca-Servat & Ocando, 2019; Sánchez-Vázquez & Leifsen, 2019). While some of these activities are best classified as “ordinary” participation aimed at influencing specific decisions, others can be considered meta-participatory, namely, attempts to “change governance arrangements” (Bebbington et al., 2018) and to promote participation of civil society in decision-making (Martínez, 2011; Roca-Servat & Ocando, 2019; Sánchez-Vázquez & Leifsen, 2019; Silva, 2015).

Activities of Peruvian civil society can be seen as a part of this broader pattern: An attempt to broaden participation spaces and thus also opportunities to contest neoliberal state policies. Peruvian authorities, beginning with Alberto Fujimori in 1990, have pursued commercial opening and promotion of foreign investment coupled with deregulation and flexibilization, particularly in what regards labour and environmental standards (Berrios, 2020; Mendoza Nava, 2008). The FTA with the EU is just one of a long string of agreements signed by Peru. Already in the negotiation stage, Peruvian civil society opposed the

agreement as harmful to sustainable development of Peru (Declaración de Articulación de Redes AdA, 2008; Intermón Oxfam, 2008) and lacking transparency (Peels, 2012). In fact, many early civil society activities were meta-participatory. In 2007, it submitted to the governments detailed proposals on involving civil society in negotiations (Alayza Moncloa, 2007; Fernández-Maldonado Mujica, 2008), and soon afterwards, proposed a democratic clause and involvement of civil society in monitoring the agreement (RedGE, CEDAL, ANC, & CNDDHH, 2008). The focus has consistently been on “effective”, not formal participation (RedGE, 2009; Pronunciamiento, 2009). As these demands were not met, “ordinary” and “meta” participation has continued until now, with a temporary slowdown around the time agreement came into force (2013-2014). Below, we focus on the meta-participation of Peruvian civil society at the implementation stage of the agreement.

The circle of Peruvian civil society actors engaged in meta-participation, and overall in discussing the FTA with the EU, is limited. Hence, by “Peruvian civil society” we mostly understand the organizations supporting the 2017 complaint and members of the “shadow DAG” as discussed below. Since its establishment in 2007, RedGE – a network of NGOs and social movements which focuses on sustainable development, trade and human rights among other topics – has played a particularly prominent role, including in coordination (Fernández-Maldonado Mujica, 2018). Major business actors, in turn, favour the government’s economic policy and are not interested in TSD issues (Fernández-Maldonado Mujica, 2018). While they are not necessarily satisfied with the status quo of consultations (interview P13)³, they have not been known to propose alternative formal consultation mechanisms, and so their activities are not covered here.

Meta-participation as (attempts to) change the protocol(s) of participation

A number of civil society demands have concerned defragmentation and increased effectiveness of official consultation mechanisms. In line with FTA provisions, the Peruvian government had decided against creation of new consultative spaces. However, it did not inform civil society about which of the existing mechanisms would fulfil this role and did not carry out consultations in practice (Orbie & Van Den Putte, 2016), prompting a 2016 request to establish a DAG (AIS PERÚ et al., 2016). After the government announced that it chose four labour and nearly 10 environmental bodies, all of them ill-fitted for the purpose, civil society meta-participated by demanding actual consultations in a dedicated space. The complaint to the European Commission, discussed in more detail below, criticized the existing mechanisms for being dependent on the government and never discussing the FTA, and demanded creation of an autonomous and independent advisory body which would be consulted on TSD issues (Queja, 2017). Ultimately, Peruvian government narrowed down the list of existing mechanisms to two: National Commission on Climate Change (*Comisión Nacional de Cambio Climático*, CNCC) and National Council of Labour and

Employment Promotion (*Consejo Nacional de Trabajo y Promoción del Empleo*, CNTPE) (P2). CNCC mostly consists of government representatives and other official bodies, with representation of enterprises and non-business civil society; CNTPE is a tripartite body uniting representatives of the government, employers and trade unions. Both bodies have been renounced by civil society as systematically ignoring its opinions (Romero Cano and Duquenne, 2019a; P1).

However, civil society is still trying to ensure that TSD chapter is actually discussed within these mechanisms, and criticizing their continued dependence on the government, weak institutionalization and inefficiency (Romero Cano & Duquenne, 2019a). Thanks to meta-participation of Peruvian activists, members of the CNCC learned that they are supposed to discuss the TSD chapter (P3), and an extraordinary, albeit only informative, discussion on the FTA took place (P2; P3; P5; P8; P12; P13). In the case of CNTPE trade unions have, on several occasions, suspended their participation for reasons unrelated to the FTA, and the FTA was never discussed (P1). Additionally, joint civil society declarations from all four Parties included demands to optimize the organization of the public sessions (*Sociedad civil organizada*, 2017), and to provide funding to civil society (*Declaración conjunta*, 2020; *Resumen*, 2017).

A “shadow” DAG was also created in an expression of meta-participation. It was established in November 2017 by a group of 16 Peruvian civil society organizations, led by RedGE and with limited support from a few European organizations present in Peru. It has since grown to 20 members (RedGE, 2020). The “shadow” DAG is intended as an alternative, independent mechanism for monitoring labour and environmental impact of the FTA and liaising with other Parties to the agreement, in a situation where the officially designated mechanisms fail to fulfil this function (GCI Perú, 2018a; Romero Cano, 2018; P3). It has been active both in coordinating civil society positions internally, with meetings at least twice a year, and in advocacy vis-à-vis Peruvian and EU authorities. The “shadow” DAG’s representatives managed to get invited to a session of CNCC discussing the TSD chapter, despite not being CNCC members (GCI Perú, 2019a), and have conducted transnational activities discussed in point D2 below. The “shadow” DAG also has written a number of letters to the Peruvian government explaining its work and concerns, and requesting to meet (GCI Perú, 2018a, 2018b). Finally, it has demanded, bilaterally and via conclusions of the public sessions, official recognition by the Peruvian government (GCI Perú, 2019b; *Resumen*, 2017). This is a unique attempt at creating a new participation space where existing ones have been found lacking.

Meta-participation as (attempts to) change the participating stakeholders

The formation of the “shadow” DAG has also been a way to change the list of stakeholders involved in discussions on trade and sustainability. The newly established “shadow” DAG has, on purpose, a modified list of members compared

to the officially designated bodies. Government representatives, which prevail in the CNCC and CNTPE, are not included, nor are businesses (although the latter were invited to join). In turn, the list of civil society actors was expanded. Three out of four trade union centrals participating in the CNTPE, and one more trade union, are represented in the “shadow DAG”. The CNCC has so far included two representatives each from environmental and indigenous organizations (Ministerio del Ambiente, 2018). Meanwhile, the “shadow” DAG includes not only these groups (some overlap in membership with the CNCC but much broader overall coverage), but also organizations dealing with farmers’ and rural issues, mining, small businesses, labour issues, macroeconomic topics, and human rights more generally, among others (P5). While both CNCC and CNTPE have limited membership and even participation in observer capacity has proven complicated, the “shadow” DAG is open to including new members (P1). It has been characterized as horizontally inclusive, namely, involving multiple relevant stakeholders (P6).

In particular, the shadow DAG has been used to foster the inclusion of indigenous people. Consultations with indigenous people are not specifically mentioned in the TSD chapter (Trade Agreement, 2018). However, they represent a very vulnerable stratum of the Peruvian population which is affected by trade-related issues, for example, investor activities in indigenous territories. Both in the negotiation and implementation phase of the FTA, Peruvian civil society has demanded inclusion of indigenous groups in the dialogue. They have referred to International Labour Organization and United Nations norms, with a special focus on the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent to projects which may affect the indigenous peoples (Actualización de La Queja, 2018; Resumen, 2017; RedGE, 2012a, 2012b).

Peruvian civil society has made additional steps towards more inclusive consultations. It has criticized CNCC for excluding some vulnerable populations such as women, young people, farmers and afro-Peruvians (Romero Cano, 2018). It has also expressed desire for even greater coordination at the national level (P2), even though there is an established connection between the Lima-based members of the “shadow” DAG and regional societies (P5; P6; P12). Moreover, civil society has been advocating for “power balance” or “equitable” participation for all stakeholders (P6; P12), especially when dealing with businesses. Business organizations are not currently members of the “shadow” DAG due to their own lack of interest or attitude of the responsible ministry (P2). They have been invited, however, non-business civil society organizations also criticize their disproportionate role in policy-making (P1; P2; P5), and see the “shadow” DAG as balancing their influence (P2). In this and previous examples, meta-participatory activities of Peruvian civil society cover not only legal norms but also actual practices of participation.

Meta-participation as (attempts to) change the substance of discussion

The debate on trade and sustainable development has been expanded through civil society's activities. Peruvian civil society's interests reach beyond the specific environmental and labour provisions of the TSD chapter. It believes that the FTA with the EU, as a whole, reinforces asymmetries between the two parties, without opportunities for Peru to strategically develop its economy, protect the environment, and extend the benefits to the population at large (Fernández Maldonado, 2016; Ivanova, 2019). Moreover, its concerns also include other trade deals signed by Peru (P2; P6), and related government's policies. Ultimately, meta-participation in the direction C (Figure 2) is an attempt to broaden the scope of discussion. As AIS Perú and RedGE stated, civil society engagement is needed to balance the state's efforts to attract investment at an environmental and social cost (AIS PERÚ et al., 2016; RedGE, 2016; see also GCI Perú, 2018a; RedGE, 2019).⁴ In fact, the FTA with the EU seems to evoke so much meta-participation not only by its own merits, but also because it offers one of the few platforms where such policy discussions can take place; as one interviewee put it, "Peruvian organizations [...] are always looking for mechanisms that can push the government to change this attitude [trade above all] [...] because there are not many agreements that have such a [TSD] chapter [...] it is like a way to pressure the Peruvian government" (P5; similar sentiments expressed by P6; P2). In other words, meta-participating Peruvian civil society organizations, at least to some extent, repurpose the mechanisms of the TSD chapter and reframe this dialogue in line with a broader agenda.

One of the instances of this repurposing and reframing is a civil society letter to the head of the EU delegation, where it went beyond the specific FTA and highlighted overall imbalance between promotion of investment on the one side, and weakening of environmental and social protection on the other (RedGE et al., 2015). While in subsequent communication it referred to the FTA more directly, civil society did continue to raise broader concerns about the government's policy (GCI Perú, 2018c). Additionally, in publications and studies dealing with the EU FTA, RedGE has addressed sustainability issues not directly mentioned in the TSD chapter, for instance, limits on defending human rights when these conflict with the FTA provisions (Fernández Maldonado, 2016); and discussed policy options for the Peruvian government, such as renegotiating the existing FTAs (Alarco Tosoni & Castillo García, 2018). This can also be considered meta-participation, or going beyond the narrow space for debate opened by the FTA with the EU.

Meta-participation as (attempts to) change the prominence of participation

Accountability and action from Peruvian authorities has been demanded. As mentioned before, the end goal for many Peruvian civil society organizations is a change in their government's economic, trade and social policies. Logically,

they also believe that their participation should not be merely consultative, but rather have a weight in decision-making (P1; P2; P6; P12). Current dialogue is mostly described as “frustrating” (P5; P6; P12) and “bad faith on the state’s part” (P12). To raise their prominence in the decision-making on FTA implementation, Peruvian civil society, and “shadow” DAG in particular, has demanded meetings with the authorities (GCI Perú, 2018a, 2018b); formal accountability, or response to civil society recommendations (Declaración Conjunta, 2020; RedGE, 2018b); and tangible government actions to remedy the shortcomings (RedGE, 2018c). While the last demand may seem to be an example of “ordinary” participation, it is also meta-participatory, because civil society is reclaiming power by demanding follow-up on its suggestions, in circumstances where the government gives it an observer role at best.

The prominence of the “shadow” DAG has also been reinforced through collaboration with EU partners. Peruvian civil society sees the FTA with the EU as a useful platform to address their sustainability concerns. Meetings between Peruvian and EU DAGs, and bilateral meetings between Peruvian civil society and EU authorities, are not formally foreseen in the agreement. However, Peruvian civil society has established collaboration in both directions. This can be seen as a meta-participatory attempt to reinforce its prominence, first as an informal coalition and then as the “shadow” DAG: As an interviewee put it, “many times mechanisms with third parties are needed to oblige the Peruvian government to really take civil society into account” (P5).

On the horizontal civil society level, Peruvian “shadow DAG” and Plataforma Europa Perú (organization of a former chair of the EU DAG) have conducted joint advocacy – submitting the complaint explained below, presenting it in Brussels, and writing joint letters to EU trade officials (Romero Cano & Duquenne, 2019a, 2019b). Peruvian civil society has participated in the yearly transnational public sessions (Romero Cano, 2018), which lately has involved obtaining accreditation from the CNCC (P2), and in preparatory meetings with Ecuadorian and Colombian DAGs (P1; P2). Accordingly, they also took part in drafting joint civil society declarations (for instance “Declaración Conjunta”, 2020). The “shadow” DAG also collaborates with European civil society organizations present in Lima, which help to raise its concerns in the EU (P4). Thus, Peruvian civil society managed to raise its concerns on the transnational level.

On the civil society to government level, Peruvian civil society organizations individually, and the “shadow” DAG as a whole, have on multiple occasions addressed EU representatives (head of the EU Delegation in Peru, European Commission and European Parliament officials). They asked to pay attention to violations of the TSD chapter and to discuss their concerns in the meetings with Peruvian authorities; brought attention to the need to create a DAG; and ultimately asked to recognize the “shadow” one (RedGE, 2017; RedGE et al., 2015, 2016; Romero Cano & Duquenne, 2019a; P4; P9). The “shadow” DAG also wrote a letter to the president of the Wallonian Parliament asking to wait for results of the complaint before ratifying the agreement (GCI Perú, 2018d), and

made numerous requests to the joint TSD Subcommittee of the Parties (*Declaración Conjunta*, 2020; *Resumen*, 2017). Admittedly, the EU has shown some hesitance to engage with Peruvian civil society (P5) and stopped directly inviting the “shadow” DAG to transnational meetings as soon as it realized that this body is not officially recognized by the Peruvian government (P2). However, the EU did raise the issues with the Peruvian government via letters, bilateral consultations and sending a fact-finding mission after the complaint (Tuininga, 2019).

Finally, a complaint was addressed to the European Commission. In October 2017, 28 Peruvian civil society organizations – many of which went on to establish the “shadow” DAG a month later – supported 14 European civil society organizations, which formally submitted a detailed complaint to the European Commission (Romero Cano, 2018). The complaint was based on 2015 and 2016 joint civil society declarations (GCI Perú, 2018a). It highlighted the violations of labour and environmental rights in Peru and criticized the failure of official civil society mechanisms to discuss the TSD chapter (Queja, 2017). Subsequently, complaint authors held discussions with the European Commission and the European Parliament and submitted an updated complaint in 2018 (RedGE, 2018a; P1). Submission of such a complaint is not foreseen in the FTA. The TSD chapter is not subject to the general mechanism of dispute resolution and instead has a non-enforceable procedure that must be triggered by one of the Parties (Trade Agreement, 2018). However, as an interviewee noted, the normal channels of consultations are not operational, so Peruvian civil society opted for a more confrontational strategy in this case as a last resort (P6). It can be seen as a prominent example of meta-participation, creatively using alternatives to the restricted formal arrangements.

Potential of, and challenges to, meta-participation

As we have seen from the empirical analysis, meta-participation can be driven by desire to make existing participatory processes more balanced between interests of different groups, more inclusive towards different stakeholders, more efficient and more effective (having prominence vis-à-vis decision-makers). In short, when stakeholders see existing participatory processes as lacking, they take meta-participatory action with the hope to reach a more favourable and legitimate arrangement. Yet, as discussed above, meta-participation can both rectify biases and reproduce them (Holdo, 2020). Moreover, meta-participatory activity may sometimes not lead to the intended results. The case of Peru provides some insights into the potential and challenges of meta-participation for reforming participatory processes.

To begin with the challenges, we see them as mostly structural in nature (for a theoretical discussion of structural impacts on multistakeholder bodies, see Potjomkina, 2021). One of the difficulties that the “shadow” DAG has been facing is achieving full horizontal inclusiveness towards stakeholders affected by the FTA, not by the fault of the group itself, but because of wider challenges that

civil society faces in Peru. As mentioned, influential business actors have been unwilling to engage in discussing sustainability measures, and so are *de facto* excluded from the activities of the “shadow” DAG. This could be seen as an obstacle to better managing differences between business and non-business stakeholders. On the other hand, practical usefulness of such dialogue seems highly dubious, since business mostly sees environmental and social sustainability as contrary to its interests and is neither interested in, nor can it be easily pressured into, compromises.

Power imbalances and resource shortages pose a major structural constraint for civil society. The business has high, even excessive, influence over politics. It has no motivation to engage in dialogue with non-business civil society stakeholders, and it has other channels for interacting with the government apart from CNCC and CNTPE. In turn, civil society is structurally disadvantaged. Trade unions in Peru are systemically weakened, and the high level of unemployment, precarious and informal employment, reinforced by governmental policies, prevents unionization and inclusion of these workers in the debate (Orbie & Van Den Putte, 2016; P9). Power disparities between businesses and trade unions can hardly be overcome (P5), not biding well for social sustainability. Conflicts also exist between Peruvian environmental and indigenous organizations and business interests. Again, business is not interested in improving environmental sustainability as it can endanger its economic interests. At an extreme, five environmental defenders were killed in 2020 alone due to opposing illegal business activities in their territories, without a serious response from the government (Sierra Praeli, 2021). Overall, Peruvian civil society is highly fragmented, and activists do not always have the possibility to cover all relevant issues (P12). While multiple organizations previously received financing from abroad for monitoring trade agreements, much of it has stopped over the past 10 years, and now a lot of this work is done on a voluntary basis (P2). Support by the EU, in particular, is very limited, and local support for organized civil society is not sufficient to create strong coordinated movements (P4). All this poses difficulties, especially when dealing with highly specialized topics (P5) and government’s attempts to frustrate the dialogue. While powerful actors maintain their power, civil society lacks resources to change the status quo.

Finally, Peruvian government suffers from a crisis of representation (Berrios, 2020) and is generally unwilling to engage in dialogue with society, especially when the latter contests its neoliberal policies. As one interviewee put it, “there is no culture of understanding, there is no culture of dialogue [...] to find solutions there has to be pressure [...] so if you do not have force [you do not reach your objectives]” (P9; similar insights from P8; P10). The government has neglected the complaints by civil society, not recognized the “shadow” DAG, and largely ignored requests from the EU to improve the consultation process, arguing that it acts in accordance with the FTA provisions (Romero Cano, 2018). At the same time, it has higher “political congruence” with big businesses, which results in frequent bilateral communication (P10; compare Peels, 2012). Since

meta-participation, at least in the case of Peru, ultimately aims to reform formal participation mechanisms, the official institutions coordinating these mechanisms must be collaborative for meta-participation to have the best effect.

However, the Peruvian example also demonstrates opportunities of meta-participation. Firstly, in spite of the unfavourable environment, the activities of civil society did lead to some changes. To a significant extent, this has likely been achieved through externalizing civil society concerns and bringing them to the EU level. As a result of the complaint to the EU discussed above, Peruvian government finally began answering letters from civil society and implemented some cosmetic changes in the existing mechanisms. According to one interviewee, “I will not talk about dialogue, but [there is] better communication with our authorities” (P2). Additionally, some changes have been implemented in businesses mentioned in the complaint (P9). More broadly, the complaint has likely contributed to the EU’s awareness of implementing the TSD chapters in Peru and more generally. While the EU cannot be expected to fundamentally change the structural imbalances described above, externalizing strategies (be that with EU or other international actors) can be one of the ways of improving effectiveness of meta-participation in hostile environments.

Moreover, meta-participation by Peruvian civil society has increased the inclusiveness of participation processes on the horizontal (societal) level. Civil society activists have consistently called for more inclusive participation, and this has manifested in the open character of the “shadow” DAG and in frequent and accessible communication with the public (see in particular RedGE website; compare Peels, 2012). As one of the interviewees put it, “throughout the history a lot of times it is like this, it is a rather small group who tries to put certain things on the agenda even if they do not have the whole population behind them” (P4). Ultimately, meta-participation described in this paper has intended to serve broad strata of Peruvian society. While it may not have reached all its goals, or fulfilled all stakeholders’ priorities, Peruvian civil society has brought its concerns to the national and international agenda; it has reached beyond the narrow circle of stakeholders officially involved by the government and raised societal informedness about the implications of the EU-Peru FTA.

Conclusions

This paper has advanced the conceptual understanding of meta-participation – participation aimed at reorganizing or creating new participation mechanisms. Meta-participation is arguably a longer but more sustainable route to influencing policies: It aims to create favourable conditions for stakeholder engagement, in which a variety of questions can subsequently be addressed. This is also what we see in the case of Peru. Most actors meta-participate with the long-term goal of readjusting different FTAs and overall government policies in line with sustainable development needs, but their first step is expanding opportunities for participation.

The empirical analysis has shown the multifaceted and creative nature of meta-participation by Peruvian civil society. It has followed all four directions described in the conceptual part, namely, (attempting to) change the protocols of participation; participating stakeholders; substance of discussion; and prominence of participation mechanism vis-à-vis decision-makers. These activities have brought limited results. Tangible change seems easier to achieve in directions A and B (protocols and stakeholders). Some modifications were made by Peruvian authorities, for instance, defragmentation of existing mechanisms and holding some formal discussions in the CNCC. Additionally, civil society itself managed to create an independent consultation mechanism (“shadow” DAG) which involves a much greater number and variety of stakeholders compared to the official bodies, albeit it lacks business involvement. In the direction C, civil society has consistently worked to expand the public awareness and debate about free trade and sustainable development, aiming for a broader discussion than foreseen by the limited provisions of the TSD chapter. This, however, has not changed the approach of Peruvian authorities. Finally, much work has been done in the direction D, attempting to increase political prominence of civil society participation. However, this direction of meta-participation is solely dependent on the receptiveness of decision-makers, and has not yet led to policy change.

This study has pointed to both the potential and the challenges of meta-participation. Peruvian civil society has consistently acted to improve representation of different societal groups (especially vulnerable ones) in the debate on the FTA with the EU and trade policy more generally, and advocated for sustainability and respect of international norms. Arguably, if their requests were satisfied, it would help to promote a more sustainable and inclusive trade policy and related policy areas, and would serve large strata of Peruvian society. Current approach of the Peruvian government is focused on extractivism, and adjustments are needed to stop injustices against vulnerable groups and violations of environmental norms. Many influential business actors, however, do not see these demands as compatible with their interests. Weak position of civil society vis-à-vis business and the government explains limited results so far.

In summary, meta-participation may have positive, negative or neutral consequences for perception of participatory initiatives by the stakeholders. Meta-participatory activities will not always have desired results, depending on receptiveness of policy-makers who determine the structure of the participation mechanisms. When they do, changes that favour some groups and some values may disadvantage others, and the assessment depends on one’s normative perspective. Yet this study argues that greater attention must be paid to meta-participation by civil society and other actors. Conceptual insights offered here can be applicable beyond the Peruvian case. While tense and unequal relationships among stakeholders can be difficult to manage, we also believe that recognition and promotion of meta-participation and reflexivity in participation mechanisms can be a way of ensuring their broad acceptance and continued relevance.

* * *

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Acknowledgments: The author is very grateful to all interviewees who generously dedicated their time to this research and to Prof. Dr. Jan Orbie, Prof. Dr. Jamal Shahin and Nadia Tjahja for their important suggestions and support throughout the process of writing this article. This paper also benefitted from comments of participants at the ECPR conference (2021) and at the RECONNECT Online Workshop on EU Trade Policy (2021). This work was supported by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel under Grant OZR/2017/092 (GREMLIN Project).

Notes

- 1 <https://www.redge.org.pe/>. All citations from literature, documents and interviews in Spanish used in this paper have been translated into English by the author.
- 2 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/meta>.
- 3 For privacy reasons, interviews are referred to solely by unique codes.
- 4 Peels (2012) believes that civil society prioritizes input legitimacy; however, interview data shows that its ultimate goal is more legitimate policy outputs.

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