

# Citizen Participation and Neighborhood Law: A Systematic Review

*Participación ciudadana y derecho barrial: una revisión sistemática*

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## Abstract

The main objective of this article is to analyze the relationship between citizen participation and neighborhood rights, addressing their application in local contexts through a systematic review of research published between 2020 and 2025. The PRISMA method was used, applying criteria for identification, selection, eligibility, and inclusion based on academic databases such as Scopus, SciELO, Dialnet, Redalyc, and Google Scholar. Sixteen relevant studies were included that empirically addressed citizen participation in neighborhood settings. The findings reflect that, despite the existence of a favorable regulatory framework—such as the Ecuadorian Constitution, the LOPC, and the COOTAD—in many cases, citizen participation is weak, instrumentalized, or symbolic. In the canton of La Libertad, the main barriers identified are linked to the lack of regularization of participatory mechanisms, the organizational fragmentation of neighborhoods, political patronage, and the limited technical training of community leaders. This situation generates mistrust, apathy, and disconnection between citizens and institutions. The study concludes that strengthening neighborhood rights requires not only political will, but also training processes, legitimate leadership, and an active civic culture that guarantees true participatory governance.

**Keywords:** citizen participation, democracy, community organization.

## Resumen

El presente artículo tiene como objetivo principal analizar la relación entre la participación ciudadana y el derecho barrial, abordando su aplicación en contextos locales mediante una revisión sistemática de investigaciones publicadas entre 2020 y 2025. Se empleó el método PRISMA, aplicando criterios de identificación, selección, elegibilidad e inclusión sobre bases académicas como Scopus, SciELO, Dialnet, Redalyc y Google Scholar. Se incorporaron 16 estudios pertinentes que abordaban empíricamente la participación ciudadana en entornos barriales. Los hallazgos reflejan que, a pesar de la existencia de un marco normativo favorable —como la Constitución ecuatoriana, la LOPC y el COOTAD—, en muchos casos la participación ciudadana resulta débil, instrumentalizada o simbólica. En el cantón La Libertad, las principales barreras identificadas están vinculadas con la falta de regularización de los mecanismos participativos, la fragmentación organizacional de los barrios, el clientelismo político y la limitada formación técnica de los líderes comunitarios. Esta situación genera desconfianza, apatía y desconexión entre ciudadanía e instituciones. El estudio concluye que fortalecer el derecho barrial requiere no solo voluntad política, sino también procesos de formación, liderazgo legítimo y una cultura cívica activa que garantice una verdadera gobernanza participativa.

**Palabras clave:** participación ciudadana, democracia, organización comunitaria.

## Introduction

Citizen participation is expressed both as a right and as a tool for influencing decision-making, while neighborhood rights represent the set of powers of organized sectors to intervene in public life from their territorial reality. In this sense, Schroeder et al. (2022) explain that collective intervention in public debates promotes a more equitable distribution of access to decisions. Therefore, strengthening the skills of social collectives, particularly at the neighborhood level, expands their opportunities to propose ideas and engage in policy formulation (p. 149).

From this perspective, it can be asserted that citizen participation and neighborhood rights constitute two key dimensions in building an inclusive and responsible local democracy. Particularly in contexts where social

fabric is organized at the neighborhood level, such as in the canton of La Libertad, both concepts acquire strategic importance for community development and the legitimacy of public management.

The canton of La Libertad has 107 neighborhood sectors and an approximate population of 103,000 inhabitants. However, despite this potentially participatory structure, everyday practice reveals limited effectiveness of participation mechanisms and weak articulation between neighborhoods and municipal authorities. This translates into a low appropriation of neighborhood rights by citizens, which hinders the strengthening of local democracy.

From a theoretical perspective, citizen participation is understood as the set of mechanisms through which individuals engage in decisions affecting the community. In this line, Polo and Villa (2021) note that collaboration is not limited to being part of a specific group or organization; it also involves actively engaging in various situations through proposals and actions aimed at strengthening community processes (p. 104).

At the local level, this participation takes on a more tangible and everyday dimension. In particular, neighborhoods, as primary spaces for territorial and social organization, become key scenarios where participation can manifest or be absent. From this perspective arises the concept of neighborhood rights, understood as the set of collective powers that inhabitants of a territory possess to organize, influence public management, and be recognized as valid interlocutors in planning and decision-making processes.

According to the COOTAD, neighborhood units or territories have recognized organizational guarantees in the norm, highlighting the obligation of government levels to implement organizational structures and promote community participation. In this regard, Barroso and Constantino (2022) warn that, unlike political parties, associations, or pressure groups, collective action is characterized by a capacity for mobilization based on more flexible and non-traditional forms of organization (p. 67).

Under this framework, local governance becomes the space where both variables converge. According to the model of participatory democracy, municipal administrations are called to generate structures and practices that promote the effective intervention of organized collectives in neighborhoods. However, despite the fact that the Organic Law of Citizen Participation (LOPC, 2010) establishes that the State must guarantee institutional channels for participation, in many cases these mechanisms are weak or not applied, particularly when local authorities do not foster an active participatory culture.

The case of La Libertad canton provides an opportune scenario to analyze this interrelation. In this context, citizens face multiple obstacles to exercising their right to participate, while neighborhoods, despite their organizational potential, lack stable structures and technical or political support from the local government. While it might be thought that the responsibility lies with the collective for not achieving complete organization, in reality, the constitutional guarantee weighs this right as unencumbered and without restrictions, except for the limits established by law. Therefore, when local governments are required to apply this right in public policies, the least that should occur is its diminishment.

Consequently, it is necessary to rethink the institutional and normative frameworks that ensure true articulation between citizenship, territory, and public management. This is established by the 2008 Constitution, which states that participation is one of the pillars of the State and that citizens have the right to be protagonists in matters related to their advancement, programming, and management of the public sphere.

In this same vein, the LOPC develops concrete mechanisms for participation, such as neighborhood assemblies, public hearings, oversight committees, vacant seats, participatory budgets, and sectoral citizen councils. These tools are designed to strengthen neighborhood rights, as they allow communities to organize and be recognized by public institutions. However, their actual implementation depends on the political judgment of the ruling governor, which in many cases leaves neighborhoods without effective spaces for influence.

Additionally, the COOTAD reinforces these provisions and establishes as a competence of autonomous cantonal governments the promotion of community intervention in local development. In its Article 304, it demands the institutionalization of permanent participation mechanisms integrated into the territorial planning system. Thus, citizens organized in neighborhoods have sufficient legal backing to demand their inclusion in key processes such as territorial ordering and project planning.

In this framework, the present article aims to analyze the relationship between citizen participation and neighborhood rights in the canton of La Libertad. To this end, a theoretical and documentary review methodology is employed, with the purpose of identifying the conditions that limit or favor the exercise of this right, evaluating compliance with the current regulatory framework, and proposing strategies for greater community inclusion in local management.

## Methodology

The research was developed under a qualitative descriptive approach, which allowed for the interpretation, organization, and critical analysis of the implications of citizen participation and neighborhood rights. The methodological process was structured following the PRISMA protocol, which establishes an organized sequence in four stages: identification, selection, eligibility, and inclusion.

In the identification phase, a search was conducted in recognized academic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, SciELO, Redalyc, and Dialnet. Combinations of key terms related to “citizen participation,” “neighborhood rights,” “community organization,” and “citizen rights” were employed, both in Spanish and English. Boolean operators (“AND” and “OR”) were also used to enhance the precision of the results obtained.

During the selection phase, duplicate records were removed, and titles and abstracts were examined to verify their relevance to the object of study. Only those investigations that met the following inclusion criteria were considered:

- Empirical studies on citizen participation in neighborhoods or local communities.
- Documents published in scientific journals or reliable academic sources.
- Works in Spanish or English.
- Publications made between 2020 and 2025.

Additionally, the following exclusion criteria were established:

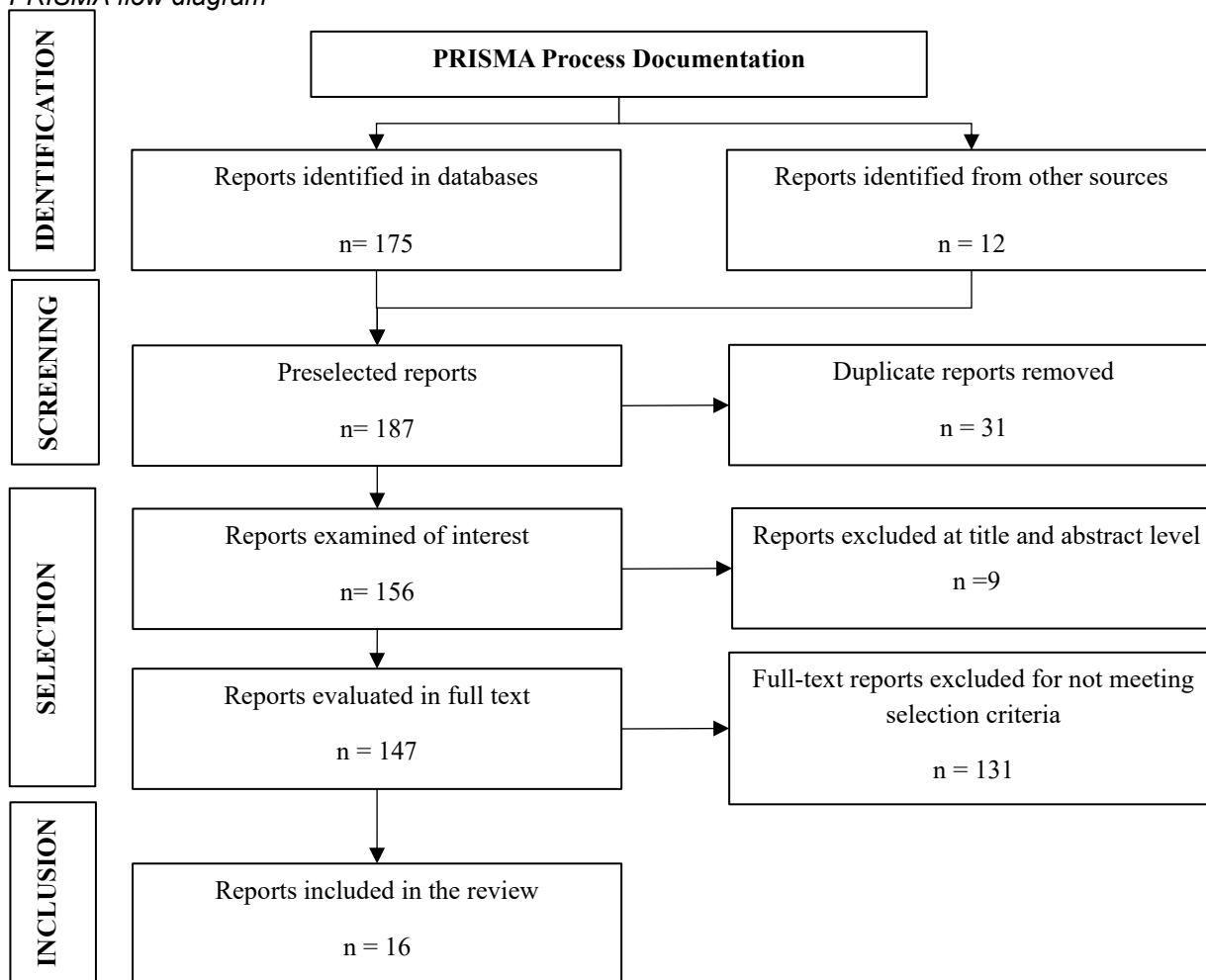
- Theoretical research without empirical analysis.
- Studies focused on participation at the national or municipal level without a direct connection to the neighborhood context.
- Documents without access to the full text.
- Works that did not specifically address the relationship between citizen participation and neighborhood rights.

In the eligibility phase, preselected texts were reviewed in detail to confirm that they met the previously established criteria. Special attention was given to whether the investigations examined the role of citizen participation in the defense and exercise of neighborhood rights. Studies that did not meet these parameters were discarded.

Finally, in the inclusion phase, the most pertinent studies were selected, which were subjected to a detailed qualitative analysis. A total of 16 studies were incorporated that provided significant evidence for understanding the mechanisms, challenges, and benefits of citizen participation in strengthening neighborhood rights.

Below, **Figure 1** presents the flow diagram that summarizes the methodological process followed for the selection of studies, in accordance with the PRISMA protocol.

**Figure 1**  
PRISMA flow diagram



## Results and discussion

The results of this study, derived from the systematic review of documents and regulations, provide a comprehensive view of the current situation regarding neighborhood rights and citizen participation in the canton of La Libertad. Despite this region having an organization composed of 107 neighborhood sectors and a population close to 103,000 inhabitants, institutional, political, and cultural conditions have significantly limited the effective exercise of participation in local management. This reality manifests at various levels, starting with the structural fragility of neighborhood organizations, which mostly do not have updated legal status and lack a consistent organizational dynamic. The fragmentation of the territory, along with the socioeconomic heterogeneity of the neighborhoods, has generated a disarticulated structure that hinders the creation of reliable communication channels with the municipal government. According to Quecaño (2024), restricted access to participation mechanisms, the lack of institutional support in neighborhoods, and the persistence of corrupt practices reduce representativeness and undermine citizen trust.

At the institutional level, one of the most relevant findings pertains to the inactivity of the Citizen Participation Commission of the Cantonal Council. According to the official website of the local government (Gobierno Autónomo Descentralizado Municipal del Cantón La Libertad, 2024), this commission has not held meetings or convocations in the last 24 months. The lack of management prevents citizens from accessing essential mechanisms to exercise their right to participate in decisions that directly affect their environment. Additionally, the internal division among neighborhood leaders—organized into two competing boards—exacerbates the situation. While one of these boards has the support of the cantonal authority, the other lacks official recognition, reflecting how the partisan political environment affects community organization. Instead of

consolidating as legitimate social actors, neighborhood leaders have been instrumentalized as tools for political mobilization, weakening their credibility and capacity for influence. In this regard, Hütt and Hernández (2023) point out that, although new political formations promise transformations, in practice they reproduce clientelist control systems that intensify the disconnection between citizens and institutions.

From a regulatory perspective, the analysis reveals that, while the canton has specific regulations created in 2011 to govern citizen participation and social oversight, their application has been superficial and limited. This legal framework, which should guarantee citizens' rights to engage in public management, has been reduced to formal compliance without real impact. The document review found no records of neighborhood meetings, public hearings, or oversight committees related to significant municipal decisions, such as those concerning the budgets for 2023, 2024, and 2025. This lack contrasts with the requirements set forth in the COOTAD, Article 304, which demands decentralized autonomous governments to establish permanent participation mechanisms. Consequently, citizen participation is subordinated to the political will of the moment, creating a scenario of formal compliance without ensuring the substantive right of the community to be heard. As Signorelli (2024) warns, this type of pragmatic participation does not respond to the foundations of local democracy, as it lacks depth and impact on public decision-making.

Another relevant finding is the absence of a formal record documenting community consultation processes related to major projects in the Territorial Development and Ordering Plan (PDOT), such as the fishing infrastructure in Ecuatún, the transfer market, or the new bus terminal. Although these initiatives represent significant opportunities for the economic and urban development of the canton, they were designed without deliberative instances, community assemblies, or evidence of popular support. The omission of these procedures is alarming, as it obscures the need to recognize neighborhoods as legitimate actors in territorial planning. In this sense, Oregi et al. (2023) argue that participation processes must include a preliminary phase of identifying key actors and analyzing the context to ensure more democratic and sustainable decisions. The absence of such practices in La Libertad reflects a municipal management oriented toward a technocratic approach, to the detriment of citizen inclusion.

The distance between the population and local authorities is also evidenced by high levels of distrust, apathy, and social disinterest. When citizens perceive that their voices are not considered, their motivation to participate in public processes diminishes, exacerbating the crisis of institutional legitimacy. Reyes (2021) documents how replacing authentic participation mechanisms with clientelist practices weakens neighborhood cohesion and generates a greater sense of exclusion. Similarly, Carvajal and Bunster (2024) assert that, to strengthen community well-being, it is essential to promote social capital, unity, and citizen empowerment—factors that are scarce in various sectors of the canton. The widespread apathy is reflected in the lack of shared responsibility regarding everyday issues such as neglect of public spaces, inadequate waste management, and neighborhood insecurity. Aspects that, in other contexts, could drive community organization are approached with resignation in La Libertad.

From a political perspective, the municipal government has not demonstrated a genuine intention to foster inclusive management or integrate neighborhood organizations into the public policy cycle. On the contrary, a tendency has been identified to convene leaders only for ceremonial acts, excluding them from decision-making spaces. Castro (2023) argues that civic education should focus on specific community problems, which is unfeasible when neighborhood representatives are marginalized from public debate. The lack of autonomy, limited technical training, and political subordination to local authorities restrict the consolidation of neighborhood leaders as legitimate actors in governance. In this regard, Schneider et al. (2021) maintain that political opportunity structures dominated by clientelism and centralism significantly limit citizen participation at the local level.

In light of this scenario, the findings allow for the proposal of various strategies to improve the inclusion of the population in public management processes. Firstly, it is essential to institutionalize the participation mechanisms established in the current regulations, such as participatory budgets, social oversight committees, open town halls, and vacant seats, so that they do not depend on the political discretion of the local government. Secondly, there is a need to restructure and strengthen neighborhood leadership by promoting internal democratic processes and fostering continuous technical training. Finally, it is recommended to implement awareness campaigns and civic information initiatives that strengthen the exercise of rights and the development of an active political culture. In this regard, Franco (2023) emphasizes that participatory governance must transcend the regulatory framework and consolidate as a real practice that involves citizens at all stages of management.

The experience of the canton of La Libertad demonstrates that an advanced legal framework can be ineffective if there is no political will or democratic culture to support it. Fachine et al. (2024) argue that public policies achieve greater effectiveness when they are designed and executed with the genuine participation of the

community. Consequently, strengthening neighborhood rights is not only a legal obligation but also an essential need to ensure legitimate, inclusive, and sustainable governance at the local level.

## Conclusions

The systematic analysis of the relationship between citizen participation and neighborhood rights in the canton of La Libertad reveals a significant gap between what is established by institutional design and what is applied in local management. Although the current regulatory framework explicitly recognizes the collective rights of citizens to intervene in the planning and oversight of public affairs, this framework has not been effectively implemented, leaving the community without real means of influence over decisions that directly affect their daily lives. This situation not only questions the functionality of neighborhood rights in this context but also reveals a contradiction between the participation promoted in discourse and that which is truly materialized in practice.

From a critical perspective, it can be concluded that the problem is not limited to the lack of individual will among citizens but responds to an institutional model that has normalized the exclusion of the community as a collective actor. Reducing participation to formal acts or politically controlled spaces reflects a management logic that concentrates power and limits citizen co-responsibility. This dynamic affects essential elements such as the development of real deliberation spaces, oversight of public resources, and the legitimacy of local government in relation to its inhabitants. Therefore, rather than being an operational failure, this represents a political culture that requires profound transformations.

Neighborhood rights, which should consolidate as an effective channel for collective empowerment, have not managed to become a solid tool for participation in La Libertad. The absence of strong leadership, fragmentation of organizations, partisan use of spokespersons, and the limited technical training of their members have weakened neighborhoods as legitimate interlocutors. However, this reality also presents an opportunity to rethink territorial management, ensuring that neighborhoods are not limited to being passive recipients of decisions but are strengthened as spaces for proposals and joint construction. To achieve this, a more open, accessible, and dialogical institutional framework is essential, capable of translating neighborhood rights into a daily and effective practice.

Finally, this study raises questions for future research: What training processes can contribute to rebuilding community fabric in contexts of accumulated distrust? How can neighborhood organizations maintain their autonomy and avoid being captured by political interests? What regulatory adjustments would adapt legislation to scenarios with low civic culture? These questions serve as relevant starting points for deepening the understanding of the limits and possibilities of citizen participation in territories facing similar challenges. Collaboration among universities, citizens, and local governments will be key to advancing towards more inclusive and sustainable models of community management.

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