Can theatre be used in environmental governance? The view of environmental professionals in Mexico

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A B S T R A C T

Values of local people are often poorly represented in environmental decisions due to power differences. Performance arts-based methods have been put forward as one way to increase the representation of local values and signalling power differences. Environmental professionals' validation of these methods is essential as they shape the interpretation, uptake, and implementation of environmental decisions in practice, but their views remain largely unexplored. This paper uses interviews and focus groups with environmental professionals in Mexico to explore their views on whether these methods a) open the space to discuss a plurality of values and power differences within local communities; and b) can contribute to environmental decision-making, particularly with respect to their viability, cultural relevance and credibility. We use a case study applying Forum Theatre in two rural communities. Results indicate that performance arts-based methods provide openings for environmental professionals to identify interconnected values beyond single categories, and they have the potential to encourage local people to discuss power differences that constrain their participation in environmental decision-making. Results also highlight the importance of preparation and design, as well as rigorous ethical processes to carefully approach specific cultural contexts. Environmental professionals were wary of the methods credibility, partly due to disciplinary conventions that still adhere to positivism. Nevertheless, these challenges also demonstrate the possibilities of performance arts-based methods in fostering transformation and emancipation processes, encouraging local people to influence environmental decisions.

1. Introduction

Environmental decisions that represent the values of local people towards nature are key to addressing environmental degradation, poverty, and social discrimination (Agarwal, 2009; Colfer et al., 2015; IPBES, 2022; Reed, 2008). However, locals, who are often the most affected by these decisions, usually struggle to be fairly represented (Edwards et al., 2016; Elmhirst et al., 2017).

Environmental governance, as the set of processes and mechanisms that allow taking environmental decisions (Lockwood et al., 2010), involves a diversity of actors whose values influence those decisions (Schulz et al., 2017). One difficulty in representing the values of local people in environmental governance is the existence of power differences (Lockwood et al., 2010). These power differences are present in the way in which power is distributed between groups of people

(constitutive power), defining who can and cannot use, control, and make decisions over natural resources (Ahlborg and Nightingale, 1994; Colfer et al., 2015; Lukes, 2005). Local power differences affect environmental decision-making in different ways (Lloro-Bidart and Finewood, 2018; Rocheleau et al., 1996). In practice, for example, in rural contexts, they are present when people with land tenure have more chances of becoming representatives (typically men), excluding the voices and values of less powerful individuals and groups, such as women and groups who lack land or resource rights (Leisher et al., 2016; Ratner et al., 2013).

Participatory approaches have been increasingly implemented in the environmental realm to overcome power differences (Challies et al., 2016; Reed, 2008; Srdjevic et al., 2017). However, criticism is grounded in how the international agencies use participatory methods as their engagement with power dynamics often falls short (Cooke and Kothari,

2001; Turnhout et al., 2020). In part in response to this criticism, there is an increasing interest in the use of arts-based approaches to address the inclusion of local people' values in environmental decision-making (Muhr, 2020; Ranger et al., 2016), as participants have more control over their participation using different skills (Coemans et al., 2015). The most common approaches reported in the literature include participatory video (Morales et al., 2021; Tremblay and Harris, 2018), photo voice (Lopez et al., 2018), storytelling (Kenter et al., 2016), drawings (Hensler et al., 2021) and performance arts-based methods (Hensler et al., 2021; Heras et al., 2016). In these examples, arts-based methods show how local people's views and values are placed and exchanged in the meaningfulness of human-nature interactions.

Despite this growing interest, there is little information about how these methods are perceived by environmental professionals, such as policymakers and environmental NGOs, i.e. those supporting or undertaking processes of advising, designing, implementing and assessing environmental decisions (Martin-Ortega et al., 2019). So far, published work has predominately focused on the local inhabitants and communities engaged in these methods. However, the views of environmental professionals are of critical importance, due to their key role in the implementation of environmental decisions. They need to be able to identify and understand whose values count and how such values shape the outcomes of participatory processes; supporting better forms of representation (Edwards et al., 2016; Horcea-Milcu et al., 2019; Martin-Ortega et al., 2019).

If the use of arts remains under-evaluated by environmental professionals, their potential might never be realised in practice. Therefore, encouraging the use of these methods for fair environmental decision-making, in part, requires doing research on the practicality of these methods that can build credibility with funders, bureaucrats, and governments (O'Connor and Anderson, 2020, p. 27). The aim of this study is to explore environmental professionals' views on the potential of performance arts-based methods in bringing to the fore local people's values and to discuss local power differences in environmental decision-making; and to what extent do they see a role for these methods in environmental governance. This was done through focus groups and interviews in which environmental professionals discussed a case study applying Forum Theatre, in two rural communities in Chiapas, southern Mexico.

2. From conventional participatory methods to performance arts-based methods in environmental governance

From the 70's, participatory approaches were rapidly incorporated into official discourses and environmental public policies fostered by governments and international development agencies (Mohan and Stokke, 2000; Reed, 2008; Williams, 2004). Under a variety of concepts, such as science-policy interface, democratization of expertise, and knowledge brokering, amongst other, these approaches aim to integrate different ways of knowing how to make environmental management processes more empowering, democratic and just, particularly in development contexts (Mohan and Stokke, 2000; Turnhout et al., 2020; Williams, 2004). However, critics argue that they have failed to properly engage local communities (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Mohan and Stokke, 2000; Rahnema, 1990). Following Williams (2004) and Cooke and Kothari (2001), the failure of these methods can be described in three interrelated problems: the reinforcement of local power dynamics, the rhetoric of participation, and the limitations of Western models of cognition.

The reinforcement of local power dynamics refers to obscuring local power differences by uncritically celebrating 'the community' (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Local relations of power shape how knowledge is produced and shared; however, government and international agents, while implementing participatory methods, frequently consider these communities as homogeneous, rather than places of shifting alliances and power dynamics (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Walsh and Burnett, 2021a; Williams, 2004). The rhetoric of participation identifies participation as a means to accomplish the aim of a project cheaply or/and quickly (Williams, 2004). Under the influence of government and international agencies, there is often a lack of encouragement to adopt participatory approaches, because even when benefits occur, they are not always tangible, and come out too slow to fit into the normal funding cycle (Burdon et al., 2022; Kenter et al., 2014; Reed, 2008). In this sense, when these methods are implemented, local knowledge is shaped to cover this necessity of quick and tangible results (Cooke and Kothari, 2001), and universalised solutions (Turnhout et al., 2020). Furthermore, dialogues limited by Western models of cognition emphasise the use of language as the main form to communicate, in contrast to non-linguistic, tacit, and experiential knowledge (Mohan and Stokke, 2000; Walsh et al., 2022). Human-nature relationships are characterised by complexity, uncertainty, and emotions (Muhr, 2020); by emphasising singular forms of cognition grounded in Western models, values towards nature expressed through other forms risk being ignored. In this sense, an important critique of international or government agencies is that their agendas grounded in Western knowledge may influence value formation, determining and reshaping values instead of just eliciting pre-existing values which are expressed in other cognition modes (Himes and Muraca, 2018).

Fully genuine participatory approaches need to emphasise the virtues of receptivity, patience, and open-endedness (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Heras and Tàbara, 2014). To accomplish these standards, participatory action research was conceived as a new model for collaboration and dialogue allowing the use of flexible participatory tools to engage with communities (Rahnema, 1990). Participatory action research involves researchers and participants working together in critical-reflective processes oriented towards empowerment (Heras and Tàbara, 2014; Rahnema, 1990). These are generally designed as open-ended processes, where a diversity of methods and epistemologies can be put into practice (Heras and Tàbara, 2014). Following this flexibility for incorporating a diversity of methods and epistemologies, arts-based methods have been advocated to overcome some of the conventional participatory methods' challenges. These are methods in which arts play a primary role (Coemans et al., 2015), and often combine a social-constructivist and interpretative understanding of knowledge(s) and power dynamics (Heras and Tàbara, 2014; Walsh and Burnett, 2021b).

Performance arts-based methods, such as Forum Theatre, are one example of arts-based methods. They are theatrical activities that centre on conflict and require participation to reflect on delicate issues and unveil power dynamics which can be otherwise difficult to question (Boal, 2013; Heras and Tàbara, 2014; Olvera-Hernández et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2008). Their potential resides in the opportunity to foster active engagement and critical reflection and to explore and implement new encounters with the world (meaning-making) (Anumudu, 2018; Somers, 2002; Walsh and Burnett, 2021b).

Application of performance arts-based methods in environmental contexts is growing, with examples related to participatory environmental policy making (Guhrs et al., 2006), environmental justice

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Box 1
Perfroming Change project[1]

Aim

PerformingChange explored Forum Theatre as a mechanism to bring local values to the fore, while also allowing for discussions on power differences in the context of environmental decision-making.

What is a Forum Theatre?

Forum theatre was developed in the 1970 s by Augusto Boal as part of his Theatre of the Oppressed methodology. It uses practitioners to perform a scene representing common social interactions in which one character might feel oppressed or side-lined. During the performance, members of the audience can stop the scene, take the protagonist role (oppressed character) and change the scene (Boal, 2013). This method hopes to encourage local people to rehearse changes to the scenes from their own experiences on the topic (Heras andTàbara, 2014).

Socio-political context in the area of implementation

In the case study area (El Piru and Galacia, Chiapas), as in most rural communities in Mexico, land tenure is central to how most environmental decisions are made. Owing to Mexico's Revolution, most communities have a property system based on 'ejidos', by which communal land is worked individually by community members on designated farm-sites and fields (Bee, 2016). People with land rights (*ejidatarios*) – mainly men - constitute the *Ejidal* Assembly, which is the maximum authority and where most decisions are made through voting (Bee, 2016). The *Ejidal* Commissioner and the Chief of *Ejido* Council are responsible for implementing agreements made by the *Ejidal* Assembly. This decision-making process has been criticised as it excludes the voices and values of other community members such as women, young people and those without land rights (Bee, 2016; Pingarroni et al., 2022).

Forum Theatre script development

A trans-disciplinary team created a script with six scenes, in which nine characters discussed their views regarding the potential development of an ecotourism project as part of a Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) scheme proposed by a government agent (character), in a fictional community. The conflict was based on previous research conducted in the area (Olvera-Hernández et al., 2022) and reflected on the difficulties faced by women, landless people and young people in participating in *ejidal* assemblies. Each scene had specific conflicts based on the power differences of the characters, and showed the values they held (Walsh et al., 2022).

Conceptual base

The concepts of value pluralism and intersectionality guided the Forum Theatre design and application. Intersectionality is described in feminist political ecology as the operation of power in everyday practices of natural resources management based on people social axes such as gender, land tenure, education, age, and race/ethnicity (Cole, 2017; Lloro-Bidart and Finewood, 2018; Rocheleau et al., 1996). Value pluralism, as proposed by ecological economics, acknowledges the multiplicity of perspectives and means by which humans value nature. The Value Landscape Approach proposed by Schulz et al. (2017) was used to integrate the many understandings of values towards nature encompassing three categories of value: fundamental values, governance-related values and assigned values.

Forum Theatre activity

Once performers played the full scripted scene, and with the help of a trained facilitator, participants were invited to take different roles to perform changes to specific issues within the scene. Participants related to the Forum Theatre characters and dissatisfaction over the conflicts, motivating them to engage in reflections on their own personal experiences with power differences in environmental decision-making. In these narratives, local people also brought to the fore plural interconnected and dynamic values towards nature.

Material for dissemination

The Forum Theatre activities were video-recorded and a short video showing the method and fragments from participant's involvement and reactions was produced. The videos can be found at the following link: https://bit.ly/3SIyneh.

The application of Forum Theatre is detailed and evaluated in a separate publication (Olvera-Hernández et al., 2022). Here we focus on the analysis of the views of the environmental professionals.

(Sullivan et al., 2008), exploration of subjectivity and emotion in environmental management (Morales and Harris, 2014), performance of biospheric futures with young generations (Heras et al., 2016), and values towards nature (Hensler et al., 2021; Olvera-Hernández et al., 2022). In addition, these methods can be part of transformative processes, offering emotive approaches to values that could facilitate changes in systems (Muhr, 2020; Pereira et al., 2020). However, concerns have been raised about the difficulties of assessing the impacts of these methods, in relation to challenges in data interpretation and data representation in particular (Leavy, 2020; Muhr, 2020; Turnhout et al., 2020).

3. Methods

We implemented focus groups and interviews to a purposive sample of Mexican national-level environmental professionals. The project

PerformingChange was used as a case study to facilitate the discussion. The following sections provide further details on the PerformingChange project, the role that environmental professionals play on the environmental developing process in Mexico, and the methods used in this research.

3.1. Case study: Forum Theatre in Chiapas - The PerformingChange project

PerformingChange refers to several initiatives taken by members of El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR) in Mexico and the University of Leeds and Scotland's Rural College in the UK to explore the potential of performance arts-based methods, specifically Forum Theatre, as innovative mechanisms to deepen academic knowledge and practice in the context of environmental governance. Forum Theatre was implemented in El Pirú and Galacia, two rural communities located in Chiapas, in the tropical agroforest frontier of Southern Mexico (Olvera-Hernández et al., 2022). This project is described in Text Box 1.

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[1] For more information about the project check the follow link: https://water.leeds.ac.uk/our-missions/mission-2/performing-change/.

Table 1
Description of the focus group participants.

Sector	Geographical area of operation	Organisation aims/activities	Participants' role in the organisation	Previous experience with participatory methods	Inter-view code
		Focus Group 1			
Civil Society Organization and activism	South Central Mexico	Feminist network promoting forms of living in harmony with Mother Earth.	• Supporting indigenous women's organizations in the implementation of sustainable development projects.	Workshops and interviews	12
Civil Society Organization	National level	Influencing decision-making on climate change mitigation	• Identifying mitigation routes to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases in the agricultural and forestry sectors.	Interviews and surveys	13
Civil Society Organization/ activist	Southeast Mexico	Developing social innovation projects to improve the quality of life of vulnerable populations.	• Implementing participatory diagnoses to identify solutions to environmental problems.	Popular education, participatory diagnoses with focus groups and Lego Serious Play	14
Civil Society Organization	Southeast Mexico	Promoting civil rights, sustainable development, and participation of society in decision-making.	• Implementing social projects focused on sustainable water management.	Environmental education	16
Civil Society Organization and academia	Yucatan Peninsula	Creating bridges between science and local knowledge, considering the emotional perspective to promote a culture of conservation	• Research projects focused on cultural and social factors that affect the conservation of primates in rural, urban and indigenous communities.	Photovoice, participatory murals, storytelling, future scenarios and participatory maps	11
Civil Society Organization	National level	Contributing to the creation and execution of a national strategy for the active participation of women as agents of change in rural development.	• Promoting environmental education among women, • Visualizing gender differences on the management of natural resources.	Art such as murals and drawings	17
Civil Society Organization	Southeast Mexico	Promoting social, economic and environmental development of the indigenous and peasant sectors to improve their living conditions.	• Promoting traditional sustainable production in systems such as coffee and cocoa to generate added value.	Workshops	15
Government Agency	Western of Mexico	Contributing to the preservation and sustainability of ecosystems and natural environments in Mexico.	• Environmental education • Monitoring and rehabilitating wildlife	Development of educational and dissemination material	18
Academic institution	Southeast Mexico	Developing, preserving, disseminating and transferring scientific and technological innovations to the rural sector.	• Promoting of conservation projects in indigenous communities. • Environmental education.	Interviews and surveys	9
Academic institution	National level	Preparing qualified human resources for the management, conservation, and rehabilitation of water to contribute to the sustainable development of Mexico.	• Fostering community water management and governance of common goods, with populations in situations of vulnerability.	workshops and interviews	10
		Focus group 2			
Private sector	Latino-america	Combating systemic problems in the region through: Early Childhood, Water Security, Art and Culture, and Circular Economy	• Implementing corporative sustainability projects focused on access to water in semi-urban areas, conservation and reforestation in rural areas, and communitarian economic recovery.	Focus groups, workshops, theatre as dissemination method	8
Civil Society Organization	Southeast Mexico	Promoting sustainable development by fostering the valuation of natural resources and the conservation of biodiversity	• Resolution and mediation of environmental conflicts • Land use planning	Pedagogical, ludo-didactic, and cultural techniques	5
Civil Society Organization	Yucatan peninsula	Promoting the development of marginalized communities through economic-productive diversification, and the conservation of natural resources.	• Monitoring projects of food sovereignty in rural and indigenous communities.	Participatory maps, participatory flow charts and trend lines	1
Civil Society Organization/ activist	Northeast Mexico	Seeking reflection, debate and proposals for a revitalization of human-nature systems	• Implementing diagnoses, policy evaluations, and public consultations with indigenous communities	Interview, surveys, focus groups, activities with films and music, and round tables	4
Government Agency	Southeast Mexico	Contributing to the preservation and sustainability of ecosystems and natural environments in Mexico.	• Implementing sustainable production projects and the conservation of natural resources • Environmental education	Workshops, interviews, surveys	6
Government Agency	Northeast Mexico	Promoting productive activities, conservation and restoration projects in forestry.	• Forest fire prevention projects • Implementing training about rural fire fighting brigades.	Workshops	7
Academic institution	Yucatan Peninsula	Education campaigns to foster sustainable projects.	• Implementing mangrove ecological restoration projects • Environmental education workshops among fishing communities.	Environmental education and hydrology	3
Civil Society Organization	Yucatan Peninsula	Collaborating asa civil society to build territories with equitable and sustainable governance.	• Planning and implementing sustainable development projects	Community theatre, and various methods of popular education	2

3.2. Sampling, focus groups and interviews

3.2.1. Targeted sample

The profile of participants was defined as 'environmental professionals involved in forming, designing and implementing environmental public policy' (Martin-Ortega et al., 2019). This involves, in our context, civil societal organizations, government institutions, activists, and academics in Mexico.

Environmental professionals working on activism, academia, government institutions and civil society organizations have traditionally played a key role in planning and implementing the conservation strategies in rural communities (Hensler et al., 2021). Academics also often act as experts guiding decision-makers (Martin-Ortega et al., 2019). However, academics and professionals working in government institutions might also shape decisions with their own values (Hensler et al., 2021; Horcea-Milcu et al., 2019). Furthermore, environmental professionals working in civil society organizations have been argued to be agents of change, implementing diverse environmental projects (Hensler et al., 2021). Yet, rural people have also complained that civil society organizations hardly ever have sufficient resources to carry (long-term) projects out successfully, thus these organizations know that they are at risk of being perceived as illegitimate actors in environmental governance (Richard, 2009).

Eleven of the eighteen environmental professionals participating in this research are part of civil society organizations, 3 academics, 3 government agents, and one from the private sector (who, in the recent past was part of a funding international agency). Participants identified themselves as actors who actively participate in the implementation and follow-up of the environmental strategies.

Table 1 shows the number and types of organization to which the participants are affiliated and a brief description of their remit. The table also shows the experience environmental professionals had with participatory methods prior to our focus group, helping to establish a certain baseline prior to the workshop activities. It also shows the interview code allocated to each of the participants for analysis purposes.

3.2.2. Sampling

Participants were recruited following the snowball method (Biernacki and Waldorf, 2016). First, those professionals who were known by some members of the research team were invited. They were then asked to suggest other people who might be interested in participating. Eighteen environmental professionals confirmed their participation. Recruiting participants using this method allowed us direct access to a diversity of environmental professionals. This sampling method might have introduced some self-selection bias in that it may have attracted professionals which already had a pre-existing interest in participatory methods. We do not consider this a problem for the purpose of this research since its aims are precisely to explore the potential of performance arts-based methods *within* the realm of participatory environmental management.

3.2.3. Focus group design

The two focus groups were held in early 2021. Two separate focus groups were organised to maintain an appropriate number of participants (between 8 and 10) for better facilitation of the discussions (Barbour, 2011). The opportunity to divide the participants into two groups with similar characteristics suggests their views were not just an aspect of a one-off group, placing the researcher on the firmer ground concerning making statements about patterns of information (Barbour, 2011).

Each focus group lasted four hours. Due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus groups took place online (Zoom)[2] (Falter et al., 2022). To encourage participation, other online tools were used alongside Zoom, such as Padlet and Word Cloud. All participants were used to online interactions by the time the focus groups took place. The facilitators were an academic, a postgraduate student and a local artist, all of whom had already participated in the implementation of the Forum Theatre with the local communities; and Spanish is their first language so there was no need for translation.

The focus groups started with an introduction of the PerformingChange project, plus a presentation of basic theoretical background about values and power differences in environmental governance. This set a common framing for the rest of the activities. Then, the video with the application of Forum Theatre with the two communities was presented, followed by another short video with interviews of local participants about their views on the activity. Both videos have the benefit of the professionals witnessing the evaluative, meaning-making comments of the local participants as 'spect-actors' rather than only responding to the form/content of the intervention.

Following this, we facilitated a discussion on whether Forum Theatre can be a mechanism for local people to dissent and debate about environmental values and power differences in decision-making First, participants were asked to come up with a list of the values they were able to identify from the recording, followed by the identification and description of how power differences had emerged as part of the action in the video. Secondly, participants were asked about their perception of operational aspects of Forum Theatre in terms of viability, cultural relevance, and credibility (see focus group handbook in appendix A). During the focus groups, an artist took graphic notes to share the outputs of the discussions with the participants and beyond (see appendix C). Using the PerformingChange project as a case study enabled the research team to consider practical and case specific questions in detail. During the focus group, participants asked for particularities of the case study and the facilitators were able to explain in detail the process of implementing a Forum Theatre with these specific rural communities. However, we acknowledge that this is a limitation in terms that it only concerns one case but one that we consider to be very valuable as an example/illustrative case.

3.2.4. Semi-structured interviews

Online semi-structured interviews followed the focus groups. Interviews had a set of predetermined questions but that also allowed the interviewer to spontaneously explore themes or responses in detail about the comments shared in the focus group. At the end of the interviews, participants were asked to elaborate on the possibilities and challenges of using Forum Theatre in their jobs/activities (see interview handbook on appendix B). Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 min and involved all 18 focus groups participants.

3.3. Analysis

Notes and transcriptions from the focus groups and interviews were analysed in the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo12. The analysis looked into the two main themes of the focus group: a) Values and power differences identified by the participants and b) their views on the viability, cultural relevance, and the credibility of forum theatre.

We coded values using a structural code system (DeCuir-Gunby et al.,

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[2] We recognize the importance of experiencing this method for a better understanding of how Forum Theatre opens spaces for participants' engagement to discuss certain conflicts from their personal experiences. However, during the time this research was implemented restrictions related to COVID-19 were in place, making difficult to implement a Forum Theatre with the environmental professionals. This could be a very valuable activity to undertake in the future.

2011). For this, we used the categories of the Value Landscape Approach proposed by Schulz et al. (2017): fundamental values (such as guiding principles), governance-related values (such as ideal characteristics of 'good' environmental governance), and assigned values (such as uses of nature) (Schulz et al., 2017).

We then used a grounded approach to identify how Forum Theatre was perceived as a mechanism for identifying power differences (i.e. codes were attributed to themes as they emerged from the participants' narratives) (Srdjevic et al., 2017). The views on the aspects of viability, cultural relevance, and credibility were coded using a structural code system (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). These categories were created using the interrelated failings in participatory approaches to environmental development proposed by Williams (2004) and Cooke and Kothari (2001), namely: the rhetoric of participation, the reinforcement of local power differentials, and the limitations by Western models of cognition. Viability was explored in terms of resources such as time and training necessary to implement performance arts-based methods in projects that emphasise the virtues of receptivity, patience, and open-endedness, in opposition to cheap and quick approaches that foster participation just in rhetorical form (Chambers, 1994; Turnhout et al., 2020). Cultural relevance focused on the importance, in environmental governance projects, of understanding local contexts; adapting the methods to respect and embrace different groups of people based on their abilities, language, and traditions (Turnhout et al., 2020; Walsh and Burnett, 2021b). Credibility was explored as the possibilities and challenges of implementing performance arts-based methods in environmental governance and their framing of knowledge(s) as non-linguistic, emotional, and tacit (O'Connor and Anderson, 2020).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Identifying local people's values and power differences using Forum Theatre

4.1.1. Local people's values

Participants in the focus groups identified local people's assigned values by making reference to ecosystem services such as supporting, provisioning, regulating, and cultural services (Schulz, 2017; Tadaki et al., 2017). They did not mention the ecosystem services framework by its name; however, the values mentioned were associated to some degree with ecosystem services. This is not surprising as this framework has become a common way to frame values toward nature in policy (Martin-Ortega, 2015). Specifically in Mexico, this framework is clearly embedded in its environment political discourse (Martin-Ortega et al., 2019; Mesa-Jurado et al., 2018).

Focus group participants mentioned values associated with economic resources or goods, as illustrated by the following quote:

> 'They [the community participants] talked about natural goods from which they can obtain economic resources' (Focus group II, interviewee 4).

Participants mentioned they first recognized economic values because they know that local people need natural resources to survive in a market society. This is an example of how environmental professionals could shape the type of values they identified with their own values. In addition, the difficulty of noticing the non-market values associated with nature, including ecosystem processes upon which life depends, is common among policy-makers (IPBES, 2022). However, as the conversation on these market values unfolded, they mentioned that by using Forum Theatre they were able to identify how economic values were interconnected with ecosystem services values such as climate regulation and aesthetic. They also mentioned connections with desires of

protecting nature for the well-being of people. This can be associated with fundamental values representing desires that guide people's behaviour, going beyond the ecosystem services framework (Schulz et al., 2017; Schwartz, 2002). The following comment is an example of this:

> 'Also, like those who mentioned livestock, the ecosystem value of the soil and the vegetation that allow grazing spaces but also dismantle the rainforest, these were associated with climate regulation services, for example, rain. People expressed the intrinsic value that if it rains, it rains for all of us, a value assigned to the native vegetation of the forest.' (Focus group I, interviewee 5).

In this regard, performance arts-based methods can be implemented to explore plural values of human-nature relationships that do not fit into the provider-receiver metaphor of ecosystem services (Chan et al., 2018), better explaining why socio-cultural processes are important to understand environmental values (Irvine et al., 2016; Raymond et al., 2014). These approaches to values could also help address criticisms that link ecosystem services notions to nature commodification (Kallis et al., 2013; Martin-Ortega et al., 2019) and is aligned with arguments around the importance of more pluralistic conceptualisations of values towards nature (IPBES, 2022).

Beyond ecosystem services values, environmental professionals also observed how local people mentioned values associated with environmental governance's principles (in a normative perspective) such as inclusion, (lack of) equity, and solidarity (Lockwood et al., 2010). In the Value Landscape Approach proposed by Schulz et al. (2017), these types of values are described as governance-related values, and expresses proprieties of governance that are considered desirable (Schulz et al., 2017). For example, values identified by the participants were observed in terms of inclusion, collaborative work and negotiations. Inclusion is illustrated in the next comment:

> 'In Forum Theatre you can see how they (local people) value the recognition of the female voice and the value of the voice of young people in decision-making processes and it is very important to identify this' (Focus group I, interviewee 12).

While policy-makers often decide on the relevance of certain governance-related values based on a normative perspective (Akhmouch and Correia, 2016; Schulz, 2018), identification of values for transforming rigid governance processes should also include the governance-related values local people hold (Schulz, 2018; Zwarteveen et al., 2017). In this regard, Forum Theatre allowed the identification by the environmental professionals of people's values regarding local challenges and expectations of improving environmental governance.

Participants identified local people's values in everyday life experiences, as elements that are constantly created and transformed, similar to what was mentioned in other studies (Edwards et al., 2016; Heras et al., 2016). For example:

> 'well one of the advantages of Forum Theatre is that it can help build the references of those values, the experiences that build the values' (Interviewee 14)

> 'I also find it very nice that the themes that emerge are very personal narratives. it is not important only that this theme comes out and the abstraction of value is seen, but the way they [locals] say it is also very beautiful and powerful in those narratives' (Focus group I, interviewee 11)

As demonstrated by the above reflections, performance arts-based methods offer a different way of seeing values than what conventional participatory methods, in which the values become abstract data (Edwards et al., 2016; Irvine et al., 2016; Kenter et al., 2016). This can

be an opportunity of seeing how values are interconnected, and tighter on the significant human-ecosystem interactions (Arias-Arévalo et al., 2017; Chan et al., 2018; Chan et al., 2016). However, identifying plural values is not enough; it is also necessary to understand how local power differences marginalize some people and their values.

4.1.2. Power differences

To better represent local people in decision-making processes, environmental professionals need to see the local power differences as this can help foster more inclusive and horizontal processes (Edwards et al., 2016; Kenter et al., 2016). In the focus group, some local power differences were identified by the participants, such as exclusion of women from decision-making. The following comment is an example of this:

'About different powers (in the video shown), there is the government that is proposing this ecotourism and the delegate who is the next figure of power, and the assembly where decisions will be made; but there are also the people of the town, the women who are not listened to, they cannot reach the assembly'(Focus group I, interviewee 5).

This comment refers to what other studies have mentioned, on the performance arts-based methods' possibilities for enabling the recognition and dialogues of existing power dynamics (Olvera-Hernández et al., 2022; Walsh and Burnett, 2021a; Boal, 2013; O'Connor and Anderson, 2020). Participants observed that power differences were being 'faced up to' (in some degree) during local people's participation, providing an opportunity to change learned behaviours such respect and listen to authority rather than speaking to them. For example, on the way women 'faced up to' the character with the authority to make decisions. The next comment illustrates this:

'If we stop to think, it is what our parents have taught us (to respect authority). but I think that it is already changing a bit, and the young people and women who participated in the theatre also said 'no, well, I also want to put in my point of view, and it is also valid' (Interview 6).

As Balfour (2009) said, instead of expecting miraculous big social and economic changes the most we can hope for [Forum Theatre] are 'little changes'. Forum Theatre can be a tool to start processes of change, 'the sum total of all these little, almost all these little positive choices we take, can one day bring about the change we are all waiting for' (Sircar, 1981, p. 55). Thus, performances by the participants, such as the one mentioned in a previous quote about 'changing a bit' learned behaviour, might represent a humanizing and liberating resistance that should not be underestimated (O'Connor and Anderson, 2020) at it is key for transformation processes (Muhr, 2020; Pereira et al., 2020).

However, Forum Theatre also generated some concerns among participants in the focus groups. They mentioned the possibility of creating more conflicts by upsetting some powerful local people with the performances. For example, they referred to the issue of when norms and rules that constrain women's participation are contested; and that some men could feel uncomfortable or upset. They might have commented on this because decision-making occurs at the assembly, which is constituted by mostly men-land right holders, excluding voices of women or landless people (Bee, 2016; Pingarroni et al., 2022).

It is important to keep in mind that with performance arts-based tools, people's reactions can also be negative or unexpected (Balfour, 2009; Campbell, 2019). This is similar to other participatory methods, in which the content of research touches on areas of high sensitivity such as marginalization or exclusion (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). To create a safe space to discuss sensitive topics skilled facilitators are an important component (Kenter et al., 2016; Reed, 2008). In Forum Theatre, the support of performers/facilitators is recommended to create a character distance, allowing reflections on local power differences from the safety of the role of the character (Boal, 2013; Campbell, 2019; O'Connor and Anderson, 2020). Participants also commented on this:

'It is a staging, a situation that is not mine; it allows me to give an opinion from a distance. So, it is a situation that is not in my community., but there I express my own concerns and questions that I may be experiencing in my community' (focus group 1, interviewee 10).

This is precisely one of the aspects that make Forum Theatre a space to dialogue about experiences of exclusion; as an opportunity for environmental professionals to see whose values count, and how such values are represented (or not) in decision-making.

4.2. Operational aspects: viability, cultural relevance, and credibility

The discussion on operational aspects of Forum Theatre was guided by the terms of viability, cultural relevance, and credibility (described in subsection 3.3).

4.2.1. Viability

Environmental professionals emphasised that for Forum Theatre to be viable, it needs training and a trans-disciplinary approach. These aspects are considered in other participatory methods implemented in the realm of sustainability (Reed et al., 2014). In this case, participants specifically referred to the need of having trained facilitators:

'Well, regarding viability. a lot of work must be done within the role of facilitator, and this is something that I find essential to having clarity about the principles and to work on them in practice, as a facilitator must have this experience this practice' (Interview 1).

In environmental decision-making, as previously mentioned, having a good facilitator is key to dealing with explicit and implicit power dynamics (Kenter et al., 2016). Facilitators need to be capable of using different tools for which they will need to have technical capabilities that tend to be developed through years of experience, intuition, and empathy (Reed and Abernethy, 2018; Richards et al., 2004; Sullivan and Lloyd, 2007). In performance arts-based methods, they require knowledge of theatre practice and the artistic process of developing stories and characters (Balfour, 2020). A trans-disciplinary approach to projects implementing performance arts-based methods in environmental governance was also suggested by some of the participants in the interviews. They commented that:

'Well, these types of activities and processes have to be implemented from a multidisciplinary and trans-disciplinary approach, it is implicit. So, if your training is not artistic, then there has to be someone who contributes that. then, you have that demand for more staff, more time; but it should not be seen as a limitation…they are like intrinsic characteristics for working these things' (Interview 11).

These comments represent the fact that trans-disciplinary work is common on projects implementing performance arts-based methods (Heras and Tàbara, 2014; O'Connor and Anderson, 2020; Walsh et al., 2022). The case study presented as example was indeed of trans-disciplinary nature, in which the value of collaboration was key to entering the field with an increased awareness of our own positions within epistemologies and praxis.[3] Therefore, trans-disciplinary work and trained facilitators will be necessary in projects that emphasise receptivity, patience, and open-endedness, in opposition to approaches that foster participation just in rhetorical form.

4.2.2. Cultural relevance

In participatory methods, understanding participants' cultural contexts is required to avoid constraining participation (Devente et al., 2016; Williams, 2004), for example, to adequate the methods to participants' skills, availability, or capabilities (Kenter et al., 2014; Reed, 2008). Environmental professionals participating in our research

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[3] More information in Walsh et al., (2022).

identified Forum Theatre as a method easily adaptable to different cultural contexts because the script is written to represent specific characteristics of that context. The next comment illustrates this:

'The script is created from the stories of the locals and that makes it culturally permeated, in that sense, I do believe that they [performance arts-based methods] can encompass different characteristics and can be adaptable to different contexts and cultural areas' (Focus group I, interviewee 10).

Certainly, the script needs to be a reflection of people's reality. Its customization permits the adaptation of the method to different contexts (Boal, 2013; Campbell, 2019; Walsh et al., 2022). However, the idea of performing people's realities created concern among the participants in the focus groups. They argued that, if Forum Theatre's representations are taken by the audience as simplistic or disrespectful, they will get upset. This might represent a risk of breaking relationships between them and the communities, as illustrated by this comment:

'I'm thinking. We will have to start from a very deep knowledge [of the communities] to not create internal resentment and to not generate problems from a performance, in which they can feel ridiculed with a character' (Focus group I, interviewee 11).

In this regard, ethics is an important aspect to respectfully getting involved with the participants and avoiding discomfort. Ethics allow approaching the local participants and their cultural context with respect, reflecting on aspects such as local people's availability, selecting an accessible place for the participants, and language needs (Snyder-Young, 2022). However, ethical dilemmas are more than just inserting cultural differences into existing ethical frameworks, which only emphasize aspects of confidentiality, individual informed consent, or assessing individual risks (Brasher, 2020; Maiter et al., 2008). In performance arts-based methods, ethics of care also refers to how we approach the communities or participants, care about the script's development, care in how we perform the local realities, how to facilitate the participation process, and how we present results and following activities (Jordan, 2020; Snyder-Young, 2022). Thus, while the method is adaptable to different cultural context, its adaptability relies on a rigorous ethical approach (ethics of care).

In the original case study, ethics were approached by following the University of Leeds's ethical framework, which is based on the principles that a) research should aim to maximise benefits for society and minimise risk and harm, b) the rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected, c) participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed, and d) lines of responsibility and accountability should be clearly defined.[4] Following these principles, the script was created originally in Spanish and all the activities were carried on in Spanish (the first language of the participants)(Walsh et al., 2022). In line with local customs, the project was officially presented to the community heads (*comisarios ejidales*), who approved the research and agreed to invite the entire community to participate. The joker and performers were trained on the techniques of Forum Theatre and were made aware of the communities' social context and who would not oversimplify or misrepresent the conflict presented in the script (Olvera-Hernández et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2022). The above measures respond to an ethics of care, which involves the active acceptance of responsibility to foster mutual trust, embrace conflicts to challenge power dynamics, and long-term commitments within pluralistic research collaborations (Staffa et al., 2021).

4.2.3. Credibility

Participatory methods generally are sometimes questioned by professionals and funders in terms of their ability to produce valid and usable outcomes (Burdon et al., 2022; Kenter et al., 2014; Reed, 2008). These actors expect tangible and quick results from participatory approaches, which should be defensible and useful to incorporate in a 'legitimate' way into the decision-making process (Kenter et al., 2015). This was also mentioned in the focus groups regarding performance arts-based methods. Participants were concerned about finding support to implement these methods due to difficulties to offer tangible results. As part of this concern, participants commented the possibility to upset local people if they are not closed with useful results (agreements). The following comment illustrates this concern:

'If the Forum Theatre objective is only going to be to leave these issues in the air, if there are not going to be these minute agreements, it is also necessary to see how prepared the community is, they might feel like: and now, and now what? Because the community is also used to agreements… it would be necessary to see what the feeling of the people is if the people perceive it well' (Interview 9).

Forum Theatre in which the central objective is to allow participants to explore different solutions without the intention of reaching any final agreements (Boal, 2013) might therefore not always be 'defensible and useful' in the eyes of some environmental professionals (Devente et al., 2016; Muhr, 2020). In addition, as an answer to this regard (close with agreement), it has been recommended that the performance arts-based activities be implemented along with quantitative or qualitative methods. The use of additional methods can assure better analyses and interpretations (Leavy, 2020; Muhr, 2020; Turnhout et al., 2020). For example, Muhr (2020) says that complementing arts-based methods with qualitative methods for data analysis was vital to support the analyses of the artistic output. Environmental professionals also mentioned the importance of follow-up activities, using different methods, to complement the Forum Theatre to be feasible in environmental governance contexts. The next comment illustrates this:

'I think that the other step is to associate techniques or associate other exercises that can lead, perhaps not to agreements but to other results' (Interview 6).

The need for implementing follow-up activities can be a reflection of the existing power relations between environmental governance epistemologies in which some ways of knowing, such as science and economics, dominate policy and decision-making forums, for example, through the quantitative metrics of assessment often used in these arenas (Erwin et al., 2022; Horcea-Milcu et al., 2019); with these alternative methods seating less comfortably in those kind of evaluation frameworks. However, 'knowledge of the world cannot and should not be reduced into words and numbers alone' (O'Connor and Anderson, 2020, p. 14), specifically, when we are trying to understand values in social-ecological dynamics which are fluctuating, emotional, complex, and improvised (Brown et al., 2017; Himes and Muraca, 2018).

All in all, embedding performance arts-based approaches into projects looking for fair representation of local people in environmental decision-making can help recognise power differences and help those who have been marginalized to actively engage in finding synergies and solidarities, imagining actions that could guide on directions of change (Erwin et al., 2022; Walsh and Burnett, 2021a). This could also help address difficult issues from an ethics of care perspective in the long-term (interrogating power relations through reflective dialogue, building decisions upon marginalised knowledges) (Staffa et al., 2021). In this research, this was evidenced when participants identified that the Forum Theatre application methods encouraged participants to dialogue about local power differences (from their own experiences) and to act toward changing learned behaviour that constrains them from

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[4] Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of Leeds - reference AREA 19-030. For more information on the framework please see the following link: https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance/.

influencing environmental decision-making (Section 4.2). In addition, participants referred to the possibilities of using Forum Theatre to identify values beyond the ones associated with the market and create spaces to discuss values through emotive narratives (Section 4.1). In this regard, this research consent with the idea that performance arts-based method could be used for supporting sustainable transformational processes, challenging pre-established analytical views [on values and power] that might foster societal paradigms openings (changes) from which institutions, rules, and norms emerge (Heras and Tàbara, 2014; Horcea-Milcu et al., 2019; Muhr, 2020; Pereira et al., 2020).

5. Conclusions

Fair environmental decisions require the representation of views and values of diverse actors in decision-making processes. However, local people, who are often the most affected by these decisions, usually struggle to be fairly represented because of power differences. Environmental professionals are key actors in the validation and implementation of methods that can help foster the representation of local people in decision-making. In this paper, we have explored their views on the implementation of a performance arts-based method, specifically Forum Theatre, to explore local values and power dynamics.

Our participants could identify local values emerging as part of the Forum Theatre activity, but rather than identifying values as single categories, they appeared as interconnected and contextualized by the people's life experiences. The method was also able to reveal values associated with environmental governance principles such as inclusion, equity, and solidarity, which can be used to develop an understanding of processes or systems around the decision-making process. In this regard, performance arts-based methods showed clear promise in being used to identify plural values of human-nature relationships, and the socio-cultural processes that are crucial to understand these environmental values. The method was found to be a space of experimentation and imagination that encourages people to perform how local power differences are experienced in their lives and fictional actions to blur them. Precisely this demonstrates that these methods can be a safe space to empathetically dialogue about whose values count, and how such values are represented (or not) in decision-making.

Performance arts-based methods share challenges with conventional participatory methods (e.g. need for skilled facilitators, adopting a transdisciplinary approach and a rigorous ethical approach). Follow-up activities to generate further credibility for the method were seen as necessary. They clearly hold promise but, for the time being, environmental professionals might feel more reassured if they were used in combination with other methods to complement the outcomes obtained in Forum Theatre, such as imaginary solutions or scenic experiences, which are different from those commonly required by funding organizations or even from those expected by local participants.

It is worth noting that the views of the environmental professionals are rooted in their epistemological positions. Therefore, to better complement their views on the implementation of these methods in the realm of environmental governance, analysis of other case studies implementing diverse performance arts-based methods can provide further insights on how these methods improve the representation of local people's values in practice, and the existing operational aspects beyond those covered in this research. We also encourage future research exploring Forum Theatre to consider the positionality of other actors involved in environmental decision-making. For example, the use of Forum Theatre as an opening to transdisciplinary dialogue about experiences of exclusion in environmental decision-making experienced by the environmental professionals themselves. Finally, the process of implementing these methods can be a way for environmental professionals and local people to get involved in long-term projects that can lead to desirable social-ecological transformations.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Silvia Olvera-Hernandez: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **M. Azahara Mesa-Jurado:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Julia Martin-Ortega:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Supervision, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Paula Novo:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **George Holmes:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Alice Borchi:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Aylwyn Walsh:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.envsci.2023.103559.

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