



**REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS  
FOR A DECOLONIAL PD PROCESS**

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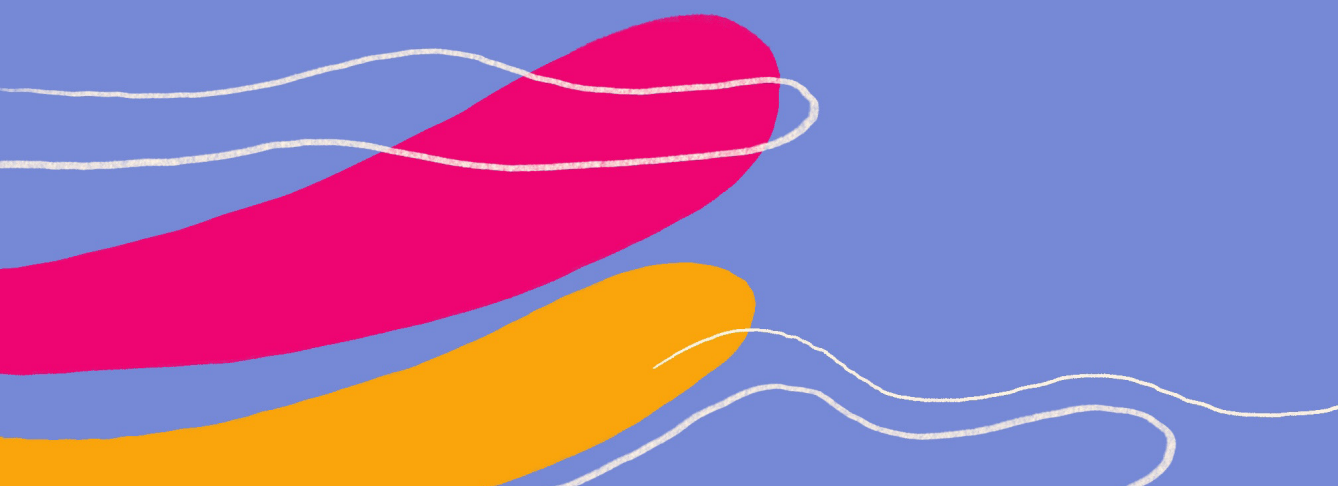
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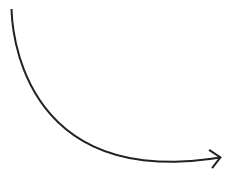
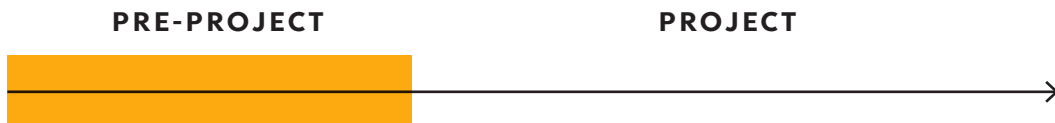
## INTRODUCTION

Participatory Design is usually understood as an approach that aspires to include in the design process the people intended to use the outcome. Especially when PD is used to work for societal change, this practice attempts to address inequality issues and intends to have a “positive impact” in our society and the most vulnerable. However, this is not always accomplished especially when engaging different stakeholders in a complex context in which political agendas and power imbalances still play a fundamental role in decision making and the reproduction of oppression. Even so, PD can indeed be a powerful tool to balance power and give voice, agency, and ownership to the marginalized communities we work with. As designers, we can help this purpose by giving attention to the power dynamics in the PD process and especially in the way we engage and build relationships with the members of the community.

**These questions are made for design practitioners who are interested in finding new ways of doing PD delinking their role from the normalized practices for a more power-balanced and socially just practice when working with marginalized communities.**

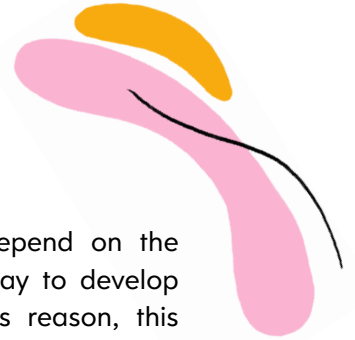
## THE PRE-PROJECT

A new understanding of PD suggests that for a power-balanced and democratic project, the structure of the process including the goal, the framing, and the phases among other elements, should be defined with the community in the context. Imposing a project structure without any consultation with the people we are going to work with, can already have power disbalances as many designer's assumptions and biases would be already embedded in it. To build a plan with someone trust and open communication are needed. Taking this into account, building strong relationships with the community based on mutual understanding is a crucial step before the planning of any PD project that aims to contribute to social change. How we enter into a project and engage with a community will determine the dynamics of the rest of the process. So, starting with the right foot will facilitate a more just and democratic next phases.



The questions in this document will focus on the pre-project phase. This means that the questions posed here are going to support you in reflecting on the following levels:

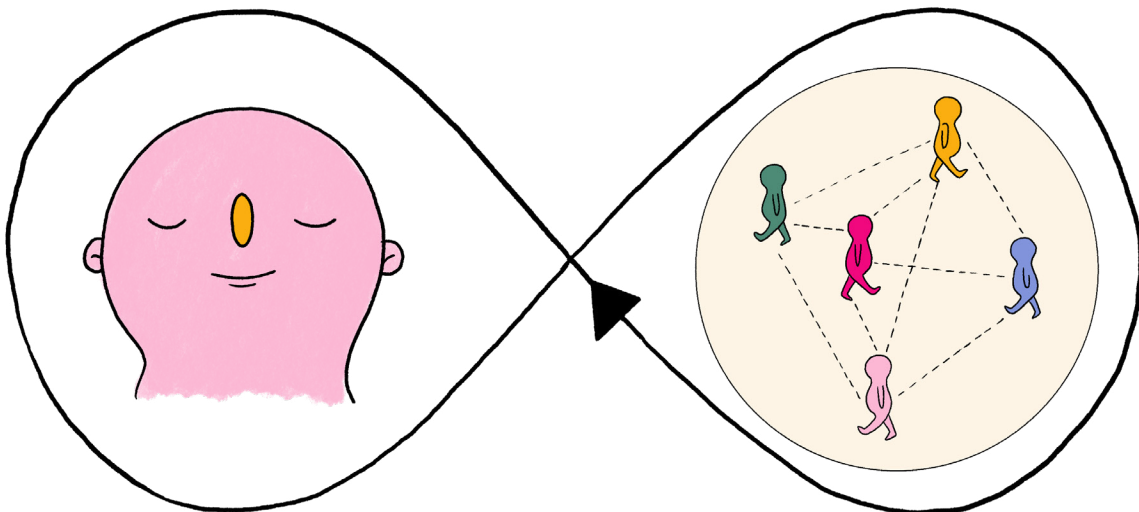
1. Conceiving an alternative understanding of a PD process
2. Positioning the designer in the project
3. Engaging with the community



As the PD process is going to depend on the community, there is not just one way to develop a power balanced project. For this reason, this document is not aiming to impose any specific way of doing things but to pose some questions to reflect on the process and challenge our normalized assumptions. Hopefully, the questions will support you to think about your role as a designer and in this way reflect on the dynamics with others inside the context.

This reflection can be seen as a loop. Once you redesign your role as a designer, also the dynamics inside the project will be redesign, changing you back again.

**So, let's start!**



**RE-DESIGN OF THE DESIGNER**

**RE-DESIGN OF THE DYNAMICS**



**CONCEIVING AN ALTERNATIVE UNDERSTANDING  
OF A PD PROCESS**

## The call for joining the project

Reflecting on how a PD project is initiated and why could help you realize your position and the community's in the process. Sometimes as designers we expect to have a fixed group of people to work with without questioning the motive or the dynamics under which the participation is being framed. These questions may support you in analyzing the power dynamics behind the call for participation.

- » **Who is making part of the PD process?**
- » **How is the community contacted to join the project?**
- » **Who is deciding who participates in the process? Why?**
- » **Who is making the call for participation? Is it someone from the community? Is it an outsider?**
- » **Under which circumstances is the community participating? Can they be feeling obligated to do so?**
- » **Do the members of the community have the possibility to say no to the project or activities?**
- » **What are the reasons the community has to join this project? Am I assuming those reasons? How can I corroborate them?**
- » **What role am I expecting the community to have in the project? Is it a primary role? Secondary? Why?**

## Collaboration instead of participation

In a power balanced process thinking about just participation can be a bit limiting. Participation can give the idea that the project is based on something that the designer creates and the community takes part afterward. The ownership, in that case, seems to be on the designer's side. However, for more balanced dynamics, understanding the project as a collaboration with the community could help in sharing control and ownership to the people we are working with.

- » **Am I prepared to change the project direction if needed after starting my work with the community?**
- » **Am I willing to build a plan and a project structure with the community I am going to work with?**
- » **Am I prepared to share the decision making in this process?**
- » **Am I willing to consult the community in all the stages of the process?**
- » **Am I willing to give credit and recognition to the community for this project?**
- » **Am I prepared to trust the people I am going to work with and their creativity?**
- » **Do I trust a valuable outcome even if it does not match my initial expectations?**



## Seeing design as a support for something bigger

To level the power dynamics in a PD process it is important to understand that a project that tackles social issues in a complex system cannot revolve only around the design practice. There are many other kinds of knowledge and expertise that could support social change and is our task to acknowledge them. Understanding that design skills are something we bring to the table together with other practices and capabilities is recognizing that we are working with others as equal partners in the process.

- » **What kind of knowledge is this project giving priority?**
- » **What other skills or capabilities could be needed in this project?**
- » **Do I trust the skills and knowledge of the community?**
- » **How can I ensure to give space to the knowledge of the community in this project?**
- » **Am I willing to see my design skills as a support for the community?**
- » **Am I prepared to step out when the situation requires me to do so?**
- » **Am I willing to postpone or cancel any plan or activity I planned because it might harm the community or is not adedcauted for the context?**



## POSITIONING THE DESIGNER IN THE PROJECT

## **My own stand and expectations**

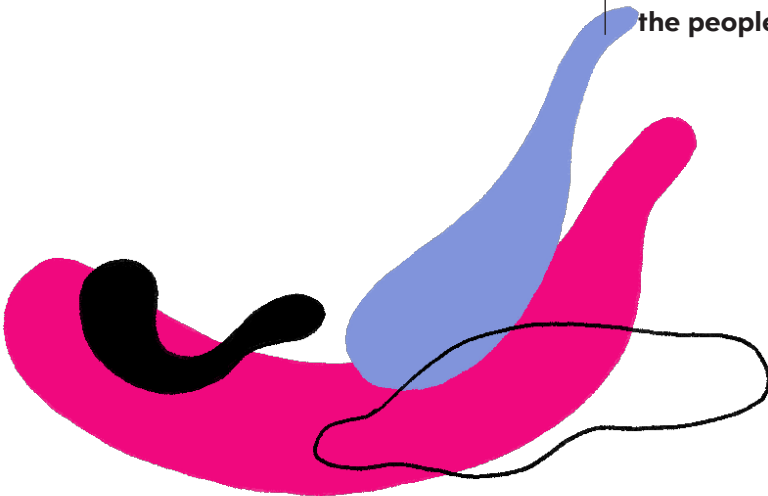
Expectations and stands towards PD projects can largely determine the ways in which designers relate and engage with the communities they work with. Reflecting on the intentions and beliefs we have before starting a project can help us to be more conscious about the ways we engage with the members of the community. The next questions can support you reflecting on the value you want to bring to the project and your own expectations from it.

- » **What does participation mean for me?**
- » **Why Am I interested in joining this project?**
- » **What do I want to gain with this project?**
- » **What are the outcomes I expect?**
- » **How am I needed in this project?**
- » **How can I contribute to this project?**
- » **What is determining my expectations?**

## Defining my role

A new understanding of a more socially just and power balanced PD process entails changing the perspective we have about our role as designers and give away part of the control we normally have in the design process. Giving control to the community we are collaborating with, will give them more accountability and ownership which is ideal for processes that aim to trigger and maintains social change.

- » **What is my role in this participatory process?**
- » **What power or privilege my role has?**
- » **Who is giving me this role?**
- » **What tasks does my role entail?**
- » **Am I prepared to re-evaluate my role with the community?**
- » **Am I prepared to adapt my role to what the community needs?**
- » **Am I prepared to negotiate my tasks with the community?**
- » **Am I willing to give control of the process to the people I will work with?**



## Considering other actors with power

When designing with societal ambitions, as designers we will also have to engage with other social actors besides the community. Whether these actors are a private or public institution, a university, an ONG, etc, they will exercise power over the project, the designer, and the community. Being conscious of those power dynamics may help you to understand how they affect your relationship with the community and how your actions and attitudes could be a consequence of those dynamics.

- » **Whose agenda is following the project?**
- » **Who is benefiting from the project? In which way?**
- » **Who is taking the decision in the project? Who has the last call in a decision? Why?**
- » **What is being required and expected from me? Who is requiring this from me?**
- » **How those requirements can affect my attitude in the project?**
- » **How can these requirements affect my relationship with the community?**
- » **Are the expectations of other actors aligned with the ones of the community? In which ways?**
- » **Can the community be harmed by the expectations of the other actors? In which way?**

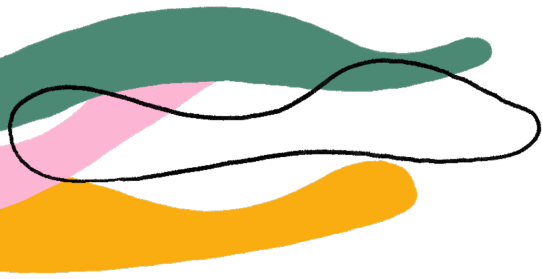


**ENGAGING WITH THE COMMUNITY**

## Knowing the community

If as designers we are aiming to level the power dynamics between ourselves and the community, we first need to take the time to know the people we are collaborating with as equal partners in the process. This means considering their knowledge, their values, but also what are they already doing in the context. In this way, it should be easier to establishing a collaboration based on mutual desirability for change.

- » **What is the background of the community?**
- » **What is important for this community? What does the community care about?**
- » **What are they doing already around this care?**
- » **How can I support them with what they are already doing?**
- » **How do my values align with theirs?**
- » **Why collaborating with me could matter to the community?**
- » **What do I have to offer in this collaboration?**



## Looking for dialogue spaces

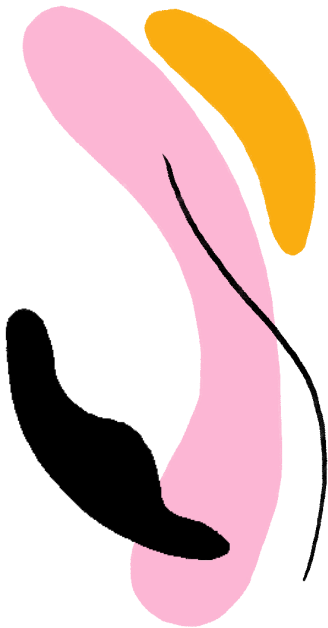
Looking for spaces for dialogue with the community is a basic but fundamental element when engaging in a power balanced PD process. Having open communication with a member of the community without the mediation of a design activity can help both to broaden the understanding of the other without limiting the identities to the aspects that fit a determined activity.

- » **What places in the context can I go to meet and talk to people?**
- » **Am I considering the time in the project for dialogue and relationality?**
- » **Am I prepared to leave judgment aside and be an open listener?**
- » **Am I willing to spend time with the community outside the design activities?**



## The designer as a participant

Being invited to be part of activities already happening in the context can help us to perceive the context as the community does. Based on the member's understandings, values, and beliefs, the context can emerge as something more complex and rich than the design view. These simple questions may help you reflect on strategies to look for spaces for your participation



- » **Are there any activities in the context prepared by the members I can join as a participant?**
- » **Why are those activities relevant for the community?**
- » **How can these activities make me be more familiar with the members of the community and the context?**
- » **Is there any possibility of volunteering or offering my support in activities already happening in the context?**

## **The designer as a collaborator**

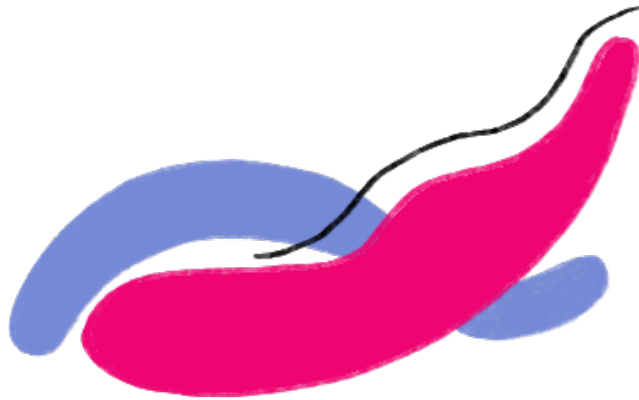
Engaging in a power-balanced way does not mean the designer cannot propose any activity for the community. As we saw till this point, it is first necessary to sense the context and be part of it in a non-disruptive and respectful way. Once the designers have established valuable relationships with the community it is possible to start thinking about activities to carry out in collaboration with the members and in this way scope down the project. The next questions may help you think about different aspects when planning activities with the community in a power balanced way.

### **How are the the activities framed?**

- » **What is the goal of the activity?**
- » **Who is framing the problem or the activity?**
- » **Is there any bias in that framing? How?**
- » **What words are being used to define the problem or frame the project? Are there any underlying assumptions in those words?**
- » **What could be harmful/incorrect assumptions I am having about the identities of the members of the community or the context?**
- » **How can I prove or challenge those assumptions?**

### **Who defines the benefits and relevance?**

- » **Who is leading the activity? Why?**
- » **Who is benefitting from this activity? How?**
- » **What is the benefit for the community with this activity?**
- » **How does this activity matter for the community?**
- » **What may be the expectations for the community with this activity? How can I know them?**



### **Is the activity fitting the context?**

- » **How does this activity fit the context's practices and dynamics?**
- » **Who is choosing the time and the location? Why?**
- » **Is this activity considering the ways of living in the context?**
- » **Am I being available and reachable for the community?**
- » **Is the place accessible for the community?**

### **Are other worldviews and types of knowledge being considered?**

- » **What kind of knowledge is needed to collaborate in this activity?**
- » **What other kind of knowledge could manifest during the activity?**
- » **Is the activity/interaction representing the identities of the community?**
- » **Is the activity exposing members? Is making them share information they don't want to share? Or making them do things they may feel uncomfortable doing?**
- » **How is the activity representing the values, culture or beliefs of the community?**

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Because of the complexity that a PD process entails, thinking about power dynamics in the process and how to balance them is not an easy task. The practice of design has embedded a big number of assumptions and prejudices that need to be dismantled if we want a more socially just practice. And we can do it little by little. Hopefully, these questions can be a small contribution to the alternative understandings and narratives we as designers need to create to use our practice for collective liberation.

**Thanks for reading and reflecting!**

