

Designing with, Not for: Reimagining Participatory Design with Rural, Indigenous Artisans

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Abstract

Artisanal production is crucial in sustaining the socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental fabric of rural and Indigenous communities, supporting the livelihoods, identity, and collective memory of artisan communities. However, globalization plus market pressures marginalize these traditions, prioritizing external consumer expectations over cultural integrity. While designers have sought to support artisans through collaborative efforts, such initiatives risk replicating Western-centric frameworks that undermine local knowledge and reinforce power asymmetries.

This paper examines how equal collaboration, rooted in trust and flexibility, offers participatory engagement while promoting equitable partnerships from a designer-activist perspective. Drawing on the ARTESANICO laboratory, an organic, practice-led design initiative in Colombia and Ecuador, the study highlights the importance of bridging knowledge systems and rethinking participatory methods while resisting Western-centric frameworks that risk recolonizing craft production. The findings highlight how reframing design as a reciprocal and activist practice can support artisans' agency, decolonize knowledge exchange, and contribute to sustainable, community-driven development.

Keywords: Design Activism, Artisans, Rural Development, Participatory Design

Introduction

Artisanal production in Latin America has deep historical roots that have shaped the social and economic fabric of rural and indigenous communities for centuries. Across the region, communities have transformed local raw materials, such as noble metals, clay, wood, natural fibers, and plant-based dyes, into functional and symbolic objects. These artisanal goods have become an essential feature of their identities, serving not only as household necessities but also as cultural artifacts that embody traditions, skills, and worldviews passed down through generations (Villegas & Villegas, 2000). Furthermore, historically, artisanal practices embedded in local economies were often based on barter systems within a hierarchical social structure that facilitated the communal exchange of goods and knowledge, thereby strengthening social cohesion (Chappe, Lawson, & Jaramillo, 2020). However, shifts in economic models and the pressures of globalization have disrupted these traditional systems, creating significant challenges for artisans and their communities. The increasing marketization of handicrafts has emphasized external consumer preferences, often overshadowing the artisans' cultural and social priorities (Frías et al., 2023).

Designers have recognized these problems and, using the potential of co-design, have fostered collaborative processes to enhance the market appeal of artisanal products while safeguarding the cultural and economic well-being of rural and indigenous communities (Frías et al., 2023; Kang, 2016; Wang et al., 2023). However, the well-intended approaches to these collaborations have often focused on the economic and aesthetic aspects of artisanal production, rather than on how these products and their production processes are integrated into other aspects of rural communities' lives. This aspect has highlighted key challenges, particularly the influence of design methodologies rooted in Western colonizing frameworks that reinforce the exclusion and marginalization of these communities. More importantly, they underscore the need for a design approach that acknowledges historical and systemic exclusions while positioning design as a catalyst for equitable and culturally respectful development.

This paper examines how participatory approaches can serve as a form of design activism, providing a critical perspective on these dynamics. By centering artisans' perspectives, it can promote equitable collaboration, resisting recolonizing dynamics and supporting long-term community empowerment.

Artisanal Production and Territorial Identity

Artisanal production, especially in rural communities, is deeply intertwined with the local economy and identity of the territory, features that go beyond the simple commercialization of products. Instead, it reflects traditional production models to preserve cultural heritage and sustain rural livelihoods. These practices enabled communities to develop capacities and skills that were passed down through generations, shaping the communities' identities and social structures. They signify and legitimize group membership and social roles, restoring intrinsically valuable materials and the labor invested in their manufacture (Costin, 1998; Villegas & Villegas, 2020).

Beyond the intrinsic social tissue built through artisanal production, rural economies operated within diversified, communal production systems, where goods were exchanged through barter rather than market transactions. The goal was to promote collective well-being more generally, rather than actions tied to economic profit, integrating artisanal practices into social dynamics (Chappe, Lawson, & Jaramillo, 2020). Today, artisans face a different reality, one that imposes economic models that centralize materials, production, and commercialization, leaving many artisans disconnected from the markets, possibly interested in their finished products, fostering in this way not just their exclusion but also pressuring communities to change their views and connection to their products radically (Frías et al., 2023).

Consequently, bridging this void between rural communities dedicated to producing artisanal goods and consumers seems mandatory, enabling more economically sustainable models for these communities. Aiming to create better conditions for artisans, their livelihoods, and their economic necessities, designers have thoughtfully created more respectful frameworks of collaboration. This framework, however, often represents a Westernized approach that threatens to marginalize and exclude communities from their traditions and values (Tapiero et al., 2024). Identifying the power relations embedded in the collaboration between designers and

artisans can shed light on the pathway designers must take to create space for active community involvement in the design and production process, thereby ensuring their needs and values are respected and integrated into the final product.

Design activism and participation dynamics towards a decolonizing approach

Numerous experiments have been conducted in which designers collaborate with artisans to bridge the interface between tradition and modernity, thereby helping to match craft production to the needs of modern living. However, despite their positive intentions, these collaborations can inadvertently reinforce production cycles shaped by Western and capitalist values, leading to unintended social and cultural repercussions (Frías et al., 2023; Tapiero et al., 2024). Often, the planning and implementation of such projects mirror capitalist dynamics by prioritizing a rooted knowledge production that maximizes profitability within modern economies. This unintended dynamic not only highlights existing power imbalances—determining who controls knowledge and benefits from it—but also perpetuates standardized frameworks that marginalize rural artisans.

One clear example is the privilege afforded to those who, by accessing "designer" credentials, are recognized as experts, thereby reinforcing access barriers and marginalizing those outside institutional communities. Meanwhile, artisans—despite their deep, situated knowledge—are often treated as laborers rather than experts. To counter this, scholars strive to cultivate awareness and transformation through critical and experimental processes (Smith et al., 2020). Such effort requires designers to question dominant Western paradigms of design that risk mirroring extractive, colonizing approaches towards rural and indigenous communities. This critical approach requires revising the timeframes of standard design and development projects, moving away from short-term, outcome-driven frameworks toward more equitable, sustained partnerships.

Time itself is a critical dimension of decolonising design practice. Rigid timelines can prevent designers from responding adequately to rapidly changing local needs and circumstances. Aiming for a critical statement, Fuad-Luke (2009) brings design activism to contest hegemonic power structures, promoting equitable development. Within this framework, it's critical to recognize how design methods shape knowledge

production and can either reinforce or disrupt existing hierarchies (Holmlid, 2009). In the context of activism, designers must prioritize care, flexibility, and collaboration to address vulnerabilities and survival needs. The designer's positionality, therefore, plays a pivotal role in determining whether they contribute to genuine co-design or perpetuate existing vulnerabilities (Rodriguez Schon, 2023).

Participatory design (PD) presents a crucial opportunity to shift design from being an imposed, top-down expert approach to a critical perspective, aiming to mitigate these inequalities and power imbalances. This approach seeks to reduce the marginalization of rural and indigenous communities by democratically involving all actors in the design process. Moreover, traditional PD workshops and material interactions have been critiqued for failing to support genuine social responsiveness, particularly concerning the intersectional oppressions and distrust that marginalised vulnerable communities.

Scholars such as Smith et al. (2020) advocate for transcultural approaches that create safe spaces for dialogue, enabling participants to shape the content through their knowledge systems. However, they also acknowledge the impossibility of entirely disentangling these efforts from colonial histories and neocolonial discourse embedded in existing institutional agendas.

An experimentation laboratory: Artesanico

To address inequities in design collaborations, the first author—drawing on a decade of experience in rural development and her background in design and sociology—developed ARTESANICO, an 18-month experimental process that engaged rural and Indigenous women artisans in Colombia and Ecuador. This initiative explicitly adopted a decolonial stance, seeking to reframe the designer-artisan relationship away from extractive, market-driven models and toward practices rooted in respect, reciprocity, and long-term care. It is essential to emphasize the nature of the collaboration process, a process that did not begin with predefined research questions or a fixed methodological structure. Instead, it emerged organically through immersion, mutual learning, and the evolution of trust within.

The initial curiosity of ARTESANICO aimed at:

- Building trust and shared understanding through informal, long-term personal commitment recognising artisans as active participants in a relationship-centred process.
- Valuing artisans' knowledge systems, recognising that artisanal practices are themselves design processes deeply rooted in cultural heritage and collective memory.
- Promoting flexibility and recognition of emerging processes in design, resisting rigid deadlines and responding instead to the artisans' rhythms, needs, and aspirations.

ARTESANICO's collaborations deliberately navigated the frictions described in the literature, including power asymmetries, market pressures, and institutional expectations, rather than delivering "market-ready" solutions; this approach required designers to unsettle their roles, acknowledge colonial entanglements, and support communities in reclaiming their ways of making, knowing, and being.

Methodology

ARTESANICO was conceived as an experimental laboratory, where rural and Indigenous women artisans and designers collaboratively explored new forms of knowledge exchange, product development, and cultural affirmation over a period of 18 months. As of now, the project does not have a legal figure, nor a funding or development agenda of any kind. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the artisans' practices, challenges, and socio-economic contexts, the first and most important tool was to spend time together, something that, according to scholars such as Frías et al. (2023), is an underscored benefit for building trust between artisans and designers.

As the process began as a spontaneous gathering and evolved into an active process of co-design and sharing, the authors could see and articulate retrospectively key insights as methodological tools and approaches, and subsequently, as research findings. The aim of translating this process into a scientific paper is to reflect on the use of participatory and collaborative methods in underserved contexts, making participatory practices in design inherently activist.

Therefore, academia is used as a platform to promote a critical approach to socially sensitive design practices.

The field of study: Indigenous and rural artisan communities in Colombia and Ecuador

The research focused on indigenous and rural artisan communities in Ecuador and Colombia, where artisans, particularly women, face significant economic and structural challenges.

- **Colombia (Boyacá):** A region with a strong craft tradition, where women artisans navigate significant economic and structural challenges. According to the World Bank, 71.6% of artisans in Colombia are women and about 40% of the artisanal sector lives in rural areas. Additionally, 70% of artisans work from home, and 82.5% earn below the legal minimum wage from craft sales. According to the *“Poverty & Equity Brief Colombia”*, 50.7% of surveyed artisans, handicrafts represent the household's primary source of income (Dávalos, 2021; Artesanías de Colombia S.A, 2020).
- **Ecuador (Imbabura):** Due to their geographical proximity, Ecuador and Colombia share similar challenges regarding artisans' economic difficulties, particularly in rural areas. A key issue is informality, often linked to low education levels and the isolation of these regions from commercial centers (Sión De Josse et al., 2010). Fieldwork focused on three projects in San Antonio de Ibarra, Otavalo, and Cotacachi, all spearheaded by women in rural areas. Both Otavalo and Cotacachi are key Indigenous artisan hubs, while San Antonio de Ibarra holds a long tradition of wood carving.

Summing the context in Colombia and Ecuador for rural artisans, we realized both faced common structural barriers, including:

- Limited access to fair markets and prices
- Precarious incomes and financial viability struggles
- Challenges in crafting compelling product narratives for industrialized markets.

An experimentation laboratory: Artesanico and the artisans groups

Creating ARTESANICO allowed designers and artisans to generate a safe space that served as a think tank where they sought to understand and work on the problems that plagued each of the groups but from a more general perspective.

The goal was to:

- Enhance artisans' work and economic prosperity while co-designing.
- Bridge the knowledge gap between artisans and the pressures of industrialized markets, through knowledge exchange.
- Accompany their production, commercialization, and project management.

Asopafit / Colombia



Figure 1 Asopafit's founder showing the making process of a basket. Photo by First Author.

Figure 2 A final product finished. Photo from their social media. Retrieved 23/07/2025

Located in Tibaná, Colombia, Asopafit, which reads for "Asociación de Artesanas de Paja blanca y el fique de Tibaná.," is a group of twelve rural women who have worked the craft of Basket weaving since 2013 using *coarse perennial grass*, locally known as "*paja blanca*," a raw material found in the páramo, an ecosystem similar to the alpine tundra ecosystem located in the Andes Mountain Range, South America.

Urku Mama / Ecuador:



Figure 3 Urkumama handmade pieces. Photos by Patricio Maldonado.

Figure 4 Mama Carmen creating a “chicha” (traditional corn flour drink).

Located in Cotacachi, Ecuador. Urku Mama reads for Urku (mountain in the Kichwa language) and mama as in mother, meaning Urku Mama equals Mother Mountain. It is a family and community project started by Mamma Carmen Urku and Claudia (Carmen's daughter). They have worked with traditional pottery as a part of their community tradition. They work a unique local clay mix working the process from scratch to the finished product. Their pieces usually represent the uses of pottery that are important for indigenous communities locally, and their cooking process follows the ancestral process of wood-fired kilns or open-pit firing techniques.

Madera de Mujeres / Ecuador:



Figure 5. A member of Madera de Mujeres painting . Photo by Sebastian Dominguez

Figure 6. Screenshot of the video “Memoria del proceso de creación” by Felix Atahualpa.

Retrieved 23/07/2025

Located in San Antonio de Ibarra, Madera de Mujeres was born as a community and collaborative project. Wood carving is a tradition present in San Antonio since the XVII and XVIII centuries mostly related to religious pieces; despite being a crucial economic source of income for the territory, men have taken the lead in the elaboration of products while women have accompanied them in the shadows. Back in 2020, a group of 8 women gathered together to create a collective that worked together in designing and creating pieces that were no longer related to religious pieces.

Huari Maqui Casa Matico / Ecuador:

Figure 7 and 8. Huarmi Maqui's counter-march loom used for their weaving activity and an example of the texture created in the fabric. Photo by First Author.

Located in Peguche, Ecuador, Huarmi Maqui, reads for "Mano de la mujer" or women's hands. A family project that waves traditional fabrics and designs from Kichwas communities in northern Ecuador. They have been weaving as a family tradition for more than three generations. Using the same counter-march looms they have had since the start; their work focuses on cotton, alpaca, and yarn.

Through an initial introductory interview, each project presented a primary concern rooted in subjects, such as **location**, **knowledge recognition**, **economic sustainability**, and **user knowledge**. These descriptions highlight the various concerns artisans face in their daily routines, constituting the first topic that enabled an open conversation. The primary concern is written directly from the first interviews with the artisans.

Table 1. The primary concern of the four case studies

PROJECT	PRIMARY CONCERN	CONTEXT
Asopafit / Colombia	<i>"We live in the mountain and it is complicated for people to get here, many texts us on social media"</i>	Location: Having a selling point in the town is challenging and highly expensive, and turning their houses into the selling point was also not an option due to their

Table 1. The primary concern of the four case studies

	<i>but we not always have connection”</i>	geographical location, which makes it very difficult to reach.
Huarmi Maqui Casa Matico / Ecuador	<i>“You know sometimes we would like to get funding or money to make new products for example but writing projects is not easy and they always ask us to “hire” a designer or “some expert”</i>	Knowledge recognition: Creating innovative products usually implies external resources for artisans. However, income besides selling is often related to development aid programs. These opportunities usually require a proposal that demands a level of education and experience different from the ones of artisans. This problem forces HuarmiMaqui to hire an external person with these certifications (designer).
Urku Mama / Ecuador	<i>“Now it seems anybody can make ceramics, it doesn’t matter if they make it traditional or not, it’s even “prettier” as they use glazes and such. It is not an option to stop doing what we do to do what anyone can do. I would like to pay the doctor and pottery is what I know”</i>	Economic sustainability: Urku mamma has been a family tradition since the beginning. It has represented an important economic income in the family, but they have always bartered products with their neighbors and community members. Recently, an important medical condition has pushed the family to relocate partially to the capital, Quito, where bartering is no longer an option.
Madera de Mujeres / Ecuador	<i>“We know more or less what sells and what not also depending on the areas we sell but how can you use that information?”</i>	Prototyping and user knowledge: While all the participants in the collective have vast expertise in their craft, they often face difficulties understanding their users' needs and anticipating those needs with their products. Even with user input it is difficult to know how to use it during the production process. Strategic decisions include materials, colors, and storytelling.

Table 1. Primary concern of the four case studies

From the primary concerns, it became clear that their concerns extended beyond the product and depicted a system (market, academia, consumerism) that worked in and

with values, structures, and languages, different from those of the artisans, leaving them excluded and underrecognized for their expertise.

The research questions guiding this paper are:

1. How interconnected is artisanal production to the socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental aspects of rural and indigenous communities, and what issues are currently threatening this connection?
2. How can design activism, using participatory and co-creative methods, contribute to sustaining the crucial role of artisanal production for rural and indigenous communities?

Emphasizing the significance of *situatedness* (Kang, 2016), the research evolved into a comprehensive understanding of the artisans' practices, challenges, and socioeconomic contexts, prioritizing participatory collaboration to capture the complexities of artisanal work by engaging directly with the artisans in their environments. The research process consisted of four participatory steps. Table 1 provides a more detailed description.

Table 2. Participatory and Collaborative Methodology

STEP	Contextual Immersion	Co-defining Project's Objectives	Collaborative Resource Mobilization	Knowledge exchange
AIM	Engaging with artisans to grasp the concerns and joys of their "everydayness"	Understanding how the success of their project could also reflect an overall wellbeing	Co-developing context-specific resources for skills growth and development	Peer learning and knowledge informal exchange through practice
METHODS AND TOOLS	- Conversations - Double side active and participatory observation	- Vision boards - Mapping experience and production phases	- Co-learning - Immersive and engaging experience in the production process	- Collaboration in the design process - Flexible skills development

Table 2: Participatory and collaborative methodology

Findings

The primary concerns expressed by the artisans became a window into their world, giving space for the designers to also share their experience; this sideways sharing allowed the creation of a safe space for collaboration. Since the concerns expressed were not directly related to a declared expected outcome, the methodology resulted in pathways that allowed all participants to assimilate the artisans' mindset and fears regarding their projects and daily life.

The findings of this experience have been divided into two sections:

- Intersections between artisan production, design, and rural development
- Participatory Design Reimagined: The Loop of Trust, Flexibility, and Recognition

As outlined in the methodology chapter, it is essential to note that 96% of the participants, comprising both designers and artisans, were women. This aspect influences the interpretation of the results and their implications, as it anticipated a collaborative process with which artisans felt more at ease and confident.

Intersections between artisan production, design, and rural development

From the primary concerns, it was clear that artisanal production has always been linked to design and rural development. By analyzing the intersections between these three concepts, we identified themes that both affect and benefit these dynamics, and in turn, raise new questions and significant revelations for the artisan's experience.

Figure 9 serves as a starting point for visualizing the intersections, as well as the categories that resulted from the mix.

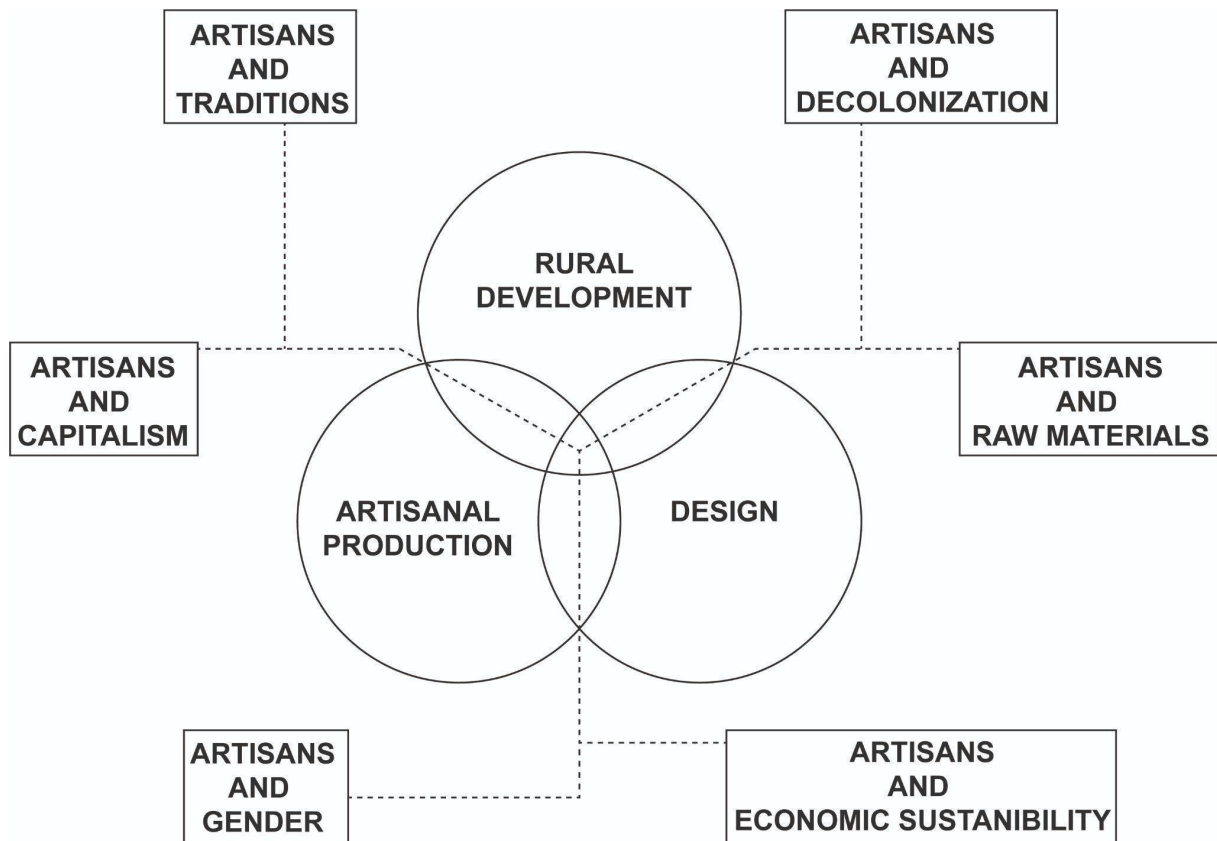


Figure 9. Subcategories of the interplay between artisanal production, design, and rural development

To deepen our understanding of the map presented in Figure 9, Table 3 serves as a template to unpack the tensions amongst. Although the intertwining connection between these three core concepts was clear, it was revealing to understand how some of these connections presented benefits for artisans, while others presented further concerns and complications for the groups. The benefits are written as the data we found while some of the further concerns, besides the finding, also raises questions that resulted from this conversational approach.

Table 3. Benefits and Further Concerns from the intersection of Rural Development, Design and Artisanal Production

SUB CATEGORY	BENEFITS	FURTHER CONCERNS
Artisans and traditions	Urku mama's traditional process has allowed them to create a strong connection and link to their territory, materials and community.	Urku mama' ancestral practice, goes from the raw material collection to product selling, however, ceramics is nowadays a

Table 3. Benefits and Further Concerns from the intersection of Rural Development, Design and Artisanal Production

	This connection has represented economic alleviation and help in cases of greater need.	semi-industrialized product. To what extent does the narrative of tradition and ancestry support the commercialization of handicraft products?
Artisans and capitalism		How can we promote artisan communities' sales and economic well-being without forcing them to play into the logic of mass consumption? How can artisan groups that have little direct interaction with their customers educate them about aesthetics that reflect and respect handmade production?
Artisans and gender	All groups have a routine and work schedules that they respect on a weekly basis. Plus having a designated workspace unrelated to their household chores. This feature allows women to become independent from patriarchal models. All the groups we worked with (representing 24 women) have community savings groups that have enabled them to earn an economic income independent of gender roles.	If artisanal production (for these cases) is currently facing economic concerns, how can these groups ensure similar benefits for future generations of women in rural areas?
Artisans and economic sustainability	The joint savings fund is in all cases divided into petty cash reinvested in their production and loans for personal purposes. This organization allows the group not to need to spend more of what they earn. Uruku mama and Asopafit are composed entirely of women who dedicate 50% of their day to agriculture. This means that 50% of her time, she divides her earnings with other family members. Besides this, both groups are made up of women with primary schooling, making it very	How can we create sustainable business models for women with low levels of education, ensuring their wellbeing and fostering their independence?

Table 3. Benefits and Further Concerns from the intersection of Rural Development, Design and Artisanal Production

	difficult for them to understand and manage finances, thus relegating this task to others.	
Artisans and raw materials	Asopafit works with white straw due to its proximity to the páramo. Their harvesting method involves a process of "peluquear," which gently removes the straw from the plant in a way that revitalizes it. This process aids the plant in its life cycle.	How do environmental issues influence or affect the production processes of handicraft products? The current global deforestation issues have affected the sales of the Madera de Mujeres. However, wood is the only raw material they know how to craft. In response, they have attempted to combine techniques and non-natural materials for designing new products; thus risking that their products might be categorized as neo-artisanal.
Artisans and decolonization		Madera de Mujeres, Huarmimaqui and Asopafit produce objects that follow a Western aesthetic because they claim that these are the types of products that sell the most sold at fairs or to intermediaries. On the other hand, the only group that has not modified its products since the beginning is the one with the greatest economic difficulties. If Western educational and market models mediate the creation of products, how can artisans transform their projects into sustainable and independent businesses?

Table 3. Benefits and Further Concerns from the intersection of Rural Development, Design and Artisanal Production

Close observation of the women artisans' work revealed that participation in artisanal production provides benefits beyond mere economic gains. Specifically, access to community savings funds offered a crucial pathway to financial independence, especially given rural women's challenges in accessing traditional bank loans, which often require male approval. Besides the financial benefits, we also found more subtle benefits, such as having an independent space and routine for collaborative

work, allowing women to develop skills and nurture their community outside of household roles. Both financial and social features directly address our first research question, demonstrating the critical role that artisanal production plays in the socioeconomic survival of rural communities. It enables women to overcome economic hurdles while contributing to their autonomy and self-determination, an aspect that will not only benefit them in the present but also their next generation. e

Furthermore, the (un)structured work routine and communal gathering spaces associated with artisanal production fostered a sense of identity at both personal and community levels. These spaces provided opportunities for socialization, knowledge sharing, and mutual support, particularly valuable for women who may not have access to formal education or social gatherings outside of their families and relatives. These observations align with Pöllänen's (2013) and Kang (2016) findings on the underlying impacts of artisanal production, emphasizing the importance of community and shared knowledge in fostering well-being and resilience among artisans.

Participatory Design Reimagined: The loop of Trust, Recognition, and Flexibility

By stepping away from conventional development agendas and profit-driven models, we crafted a unique path of collaboration that prioritized artisans' autonomy, traditions, and working methods. Venturing on the potential of participatory design to create safe spaces for the exchange of practical knowledge and co-design, our approach with Artesanico diverged from traditional participatory top-down frameworks by embracing a vulnerable context and adapting our methods and knowledge to serve it. This approach allowed us to reimagine participatory design through three core strategies:

- A. Creating a sense of safety and security rooted in trust and togetherness.
- B. Recognizing artisans' existing ways of designing
- C. Fostering flexibility in design agendas and knowledge structures

By embedding these principles into our collaboration model, Artesanico fostered a form of co-design that was more equitable and aligned with the realities of artisans. Table 4 describes each of the core strategies and their differences from traditional participatory design approaches.

Table 4. Artesanico's core strategies approach

CORE STRATEGY	Traditional PD approaches	Core Strategies in Artesanico
<i>Creating a sense of safety and security rooted in trust and togetherness</i>	Traditional methods focus on structured workshops and formalized collaboration (Frías et al., 2023; Tapiero et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023). Artisans may feel like passive participants rather than co-creators.	Organic approach that did not follow any expected outcome, fostered deeper engagement and a shared vision. Artisans and designers felt safe to share their fears, challenges, and aspirations, enriching the process.
<i>Recognizing artisans' existing ways of designing</i>	Artisanal processes are often seen as "informal" or "pre-design." Design expertise is assumed to come from professionals rather than artisans themselves, underappreciating the ownership of artisans over their craft (Frías et al., 2023; Reitsma, E.S. (2015).	Reframing artisans as co-designers allowed space for mutual learning. Recognizing artisanal production as design empowered artisans to take ownership of their creative process and validated their expertise.
<i>Fostering flexibility in design agendas and knowledge structures</i>	Conventional participatory frameworks often follow predefined methodologies (e.g., linear design thinking, rigid prototyping). These may not align with artisans' rhythms and priorities. (Wang et al., 2023; Holmlid, 2009).	Artesanico embraced adaptive collaboration , allowing artisans' needs and working styles to shape the design process rather than imposing external frameworks. This flexibility led to developing relevant, culturally embedded solutions that reflect artisanal traditions and contemporary design sensibilities.

Table 4. Artesanico's core strategies approach

Beyond the core strategies described in Table 4, these three concepts also reflected a modification to our initial idea of the methodological process. Table 2 describes four phases of the methodological approach (Contextual Immersion, Co-defining Project's Objectives, Collaborative Resource Mobilization, and Knowledge exchange). Due to the organic nature of the process, we realized that beyond a linear model of approaching and working with artisans, these four phases accommodate and cooperate at different scales and organizational levels. Therefore, while the initial idea viewed each phase as a crucial baseline to progress to the next one, our experience clarified that steps 2 and 3 created a continuous dynamic of constant learning and development that got richer through knowledge exchange.

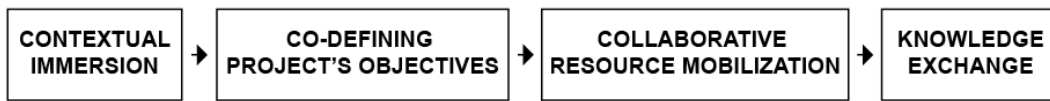
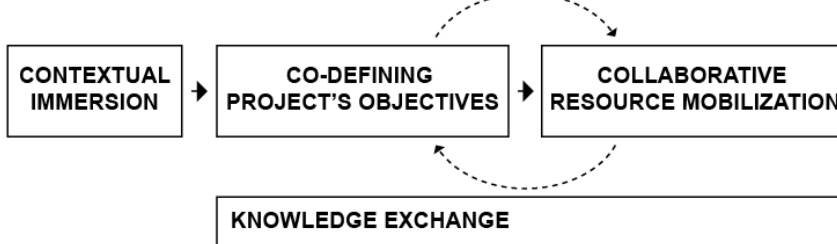
INITIAL IDEA**FIELDWORK EXPERIENCE**

Figure 10. Methodology adaptive changes through the fieldwork experience

Discussion

Bridging Knowledge Systems: Common Language, Common Ground

The aim of translating this process into a scientific paper is to reflect on the use of participatory and collaborative methods in underserved contexts, making participatory practices in design inherently activist. Therefore, through this experience, we aim to foster a critical approach to socially sensitive design practices, utilizing academia as a platform for this purpose. Besides reformulating our initial idea of the methodological approach, we found that creating a common language helped us connect the designers and artisans, serving as a baseline for this practical exchange.

Although we recognize the importance of creating a common language and how it can foster understanding and collaboration between artisans and designers, it is crucial to address this creation from a personal perspective. As researchers from a Westernized educational background who do not belong to these communities and do not practice these traditions, we were prompted to initiate the process through self-reflection on our approach to the entire context. In the process, we realized that to achieve genuine collaboration, it was essential to bridge the gap between different knowledge systems; moreover, when design methods and terminology often feel inaccessible to those unfamiliar with formal design practices. However, it was clear

that unfamiliarity with specific design terms does not equate to a lack of experience in similar processes.

To foster open communication and collaboration, building trust through shared experiences and collective practices was crucial. By engaging in daily routines and community activities beyond work-related tasks, artisans felt secure in sharing their thoughts and experiences, even those related to artisanal production. This sense of togetherness was essential for bridging potential knowledge and trust gaps that influenced their craft making, allowing artisans to express their fears, challenges, and aspirations freely. For instance, informal gatherings and shared meals became spaces where artisans felt comfortable discussing their concerns and dreams, informing more meaningful design work.

Reflection in action through active immersion enables recognizing Artisans' Existing Ways of Designing

One of the most impactful reflections was the collection of clay with Urku Mama's artisans. Figure 11 illustrates a ritual in which artisans offer goods to Mother Mountain before harvesting the clay.



Figure 11. Clay assessing and extraction - Ritual by Urku mama's. Photo by First author.

Beyond being an ancestral tradition, it also serves as a practice for artisans to assess the quality of the clay in terms of humidity, quantity, and moisture, which ultimately affects the final product's characteristics.

While not all artisans in our case studies followed similar rituals, URKU MAMA's unique approach highlights the diversity within artisanal communities. By recognizing and naming these existing creation processes, we integrated them into our experience, enabling the use of local materials and techniques to create products

that appeal to contemporary markets while preserving cultural heritage, resulting in more culturally relevant and innovative final products. Recognizing and valuing these alternative ways of knowing and doing is crucial, particularly within a design activism framework.

Conclusions

This process began with approaching crafts and communities out of curiosity. Slowly but steadily, it took us on an adventure of reflection, self-criticism, and cooperation. The process described and contextualized in this text can serve as a guide, inspire, and push designers to counteract standardized approaches to socially sensitive design, creating more equitable and mutually beneficial projects.

The paper examines the role of participatory design within craft production, specifically focusing on design practices that can foster more equitable and respectful collaborations with rural and indigenous artisan communities, thereby transforming this interaction into an inherently activist process. Drawing on collaborative fieldwork conducted in Colombia and Ecuador, the study explores the interaction between traditional craft practices and design approaches that can transcend predominantly Western models. By focusing on the knowledge and nature of relationships within artisan communities, and the context in which they operate, participatory design can function not only as a tool to support production but also as a practice for valorizing local knowledge, culture, and relationships. The reflection that emerges from this work and the reasons of enriching an already present discussion on design activism with artisan communities, concerns how to reconfigure design practices, even through small-scale local experiences, to make them more inclusive and non-extractive, helping to overcome the inequalities created by traditional models and to imagine new paths of co-design that involve multicultural, respectful approaches.

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give respect to their work, knowledge, and experience while honoring their processes and traditions. We invite readers and researchers to broaden their perspectives and narratives of rural and indigenous communities, respecting and acknowledging their unique characteristics and experiences.

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