2014

International
Observatory on
Participatory Democracy

IOPD

O I D P

[THE ROLE PLAYED BY ASSOCIATIONS WITH REGARD TO CITIZEN PARTICIPATION]

I. Introduction:

The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) is a network of over 600 towns and cities throughout the world, as well as associations, organisations and research centres that are interested in learning about, exchanging impressions on and, at a local scale, applying participatory democracy experiences, for the purpose of extending democratic practices in municipal governments.

Work Groups are one of the tools used for exchanging experiences and generating contents that are of interest to our members and that are open to civil society in general and administrations throughout the world.

During the Internal Session of the 13th IOPD Conference in Cascáis (3rd July 2013), the Barcelona City Council, which holds the IOPD Technical Secretariat, proposed that a work group be set up to look into the role played by associations with regard to citizens participation.

Barcelona is a city in which associations, both in the past and today, have and do play a very important role when it comes to mobilising citizens with regard to cultural, political and social questions. While this rich associative fabric is one of the city's distinctive features it also implies a different model of governance that is undergoing a constant process of evolution. For this reason the Barcelona City Council has occupied the position of leader in this Work Group, for the purpose of sharing, studying and analysing the role played by organised citizenry in towns and cities and their relationship with local governments.

It must be pointed out that during the present year, 2014, the city of Barcelona has also been the European Volunteering Capital, which has led to a series of activities aimed at the promotion and defence of volunteering over a range of different spheres.

Given that we are fully aware of the many differences regarding the economic, social, political and cultural realities found throughout the world, the concept of association that we have analysed here has been in the broadest terms, i.e. being understood as any non-profit making citizens' organisation with a range of social, cultural, neighbourhood or political ends. While the immense diversity of IOPD members may make the discussion and drafting of a unique set of conclusions difficult, doubtless it will also bring greater value and an increased perspective to them. The purpose of this Work Group is to perfect awareness of the role of associations in the participation of citizens in local governments, on the basis of both specific experiences and theoretical perceptions, with the aim of being able to apply this knowledge to our respective cities and regions.

II. Composition of the Work Group:

Below we list the IOPD members (local governments, research centres and civil associations) that registered to participate in the Work Group. It must be stressed here that not all of the participants ended up having the same level of involvement and participation, as can be seen when reading the contributions made by each of them in the annexes to the present document.

AfroLeadership – Yaundé (Cameroon)

Barcelona City Council – Catalonia (Spain)

Cardedeu Town Council – Catalonia (Spain)

Molins de Rei Town Council – Catalonia (Spain)

Rubí Town Council – Catalonia (Spain)

Sant Cugat Town Council - Catalonia (Spain)

Vic Town Council - Catalonia (Spain)

El Masnou Town Council - Catalonia (Spain)

ADD (Sustainable Alternatives for development) – Mbalmayo (Cameroon)

Hispano-American Educational Association –Lima (Peru)

In Loco Association - Sao Bras de Alportel (Portugal)

Segangan Youth Association– Nadir (Morocco)

Alcorcón Town Council –Community of Madrid (Spain)

Mairena del Aljarafe Town Council – Andalusia (Spain)

Vitoria-Gasteiz City Council – Basque Country (Spain)

Municipality of Beit Sahour (Palestinian National Authority)

Democratic City - Sao Paulo (Brazil)

Democracy, Social Cohesion and Global Challenges Committee /Conference of INGO's of the Council of Europe – Strasburg (France)

Matola Municipal Council (Mozambique)

DEMÀ (Department of Studies of Current Means) – Catalonia (Spain)

Psychology and Sociology Department, Zaragoza University – Aragon (Spain)

Political and Social Science Department – Bologna (Italia)

Deputation of Barcelona – Catalonia (Spain)

Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, University of Chile

Solidarity Foundation – Santiago de los Caballeros (Dominican Republic)

FISE (Foundation for Social and Economic Initiatives) – Warsaw (Poland)

District Council of Miraflores – Lima (Peru)

GPPC (Citizens' Participation Promoter Group) – Cordoba (Argentina)

ICNIC-T (International Centre and Network for Information on Crime) – Dar es Salaam (Tanzania)

Illustrious Municipality of La Serena (Chile)

IMPRES-Association – Bucharest (Rumania)

Instituto Cultiva – Belo Horizonte (Brazil)

Institute of Social Investigations- National Autonomous university of Mexico (Mexico)

LAHAS (Laboratory for Housing, Participation and Gender) – Mexico FD (Mexico)

Koungheul Town Hal (Senegal)

ATED NGO – Nouakchott (Mauritania)

SOS NGO (Development Arlit /Synergy) – Arlit (Niger)

RECIC (Network of Civic Education in the Congo) – Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of the Congo)

Davao City (Philippines)

Togo Democracy Watch – Lomé (Togo)

National University of Rosario (Argentina)

III. Methodology:

Notification of Members:

At the beginning of November 2013 notification was sent out to all IOPD members, explaining the question to be dealt with by the Work Group and its goals, along with a brief description of the expected methodology. The number of responses was higher than expected, with more than 40 members making contact over the following weeks in order, either to register with the Work Group or, at least, ask for more information. Finally 40 members actually registered to join the Group (see the list attached above).

Once the members had responded to the email, confirming their wish to participate in the Work Group, they were sent a return mail, with an attached form that they were asked to fill in and return. This short form asked them to provide a series of details with regard to the associative movement in their towns or cities, information on their specific interests in the area, plus a series of questions regarding operational aspects, such as language requirements and how often they wished to receive mails. On this occasion the level of response was much lower, specifically only 8 questionnaires were filled in and returned.

Opening the Intranet Discussion Forum:

After settling on the composition of the Work Group and setting up an initial contact with Group members, a private space was then set up on the IOPD web so that Group members could share their experiences and reflect on the different questions asked.

To begin with, four lines of discussion were opened:

- How can associations be strengthened by local governments?
- To what extent do associations, through citizens' participation, improve local governments?
- Case studies
- Operational doubts

To which the members' response was relatively poor, in some cases because they had lost or forgotten their Intranet access codes, or as a result of other practical problems. We quickly realised that the system was not as dynamic for participants as it could have been and, coinciding with the return to work following the summer holidays, the decision was made to introduce a model that would function in a simpler way.

Email Response Chains:

The new model consisted solely of sending a brief question or subject heading, so that all Work Group members had to do was post a reply to emails that were sent to the whole Group. The question or subject headings were to be attached in Spanish, English, French and Portuguese, and the members

would then reply in one or other of these languages. Finally, at the request of some of the members, translations were then provided of all the commentaries that had been received.

These were the questions asked:

- *Do you believe that* **the citizens' associations in your towns/cities are sufficiently legitimated to represent citizens** *as a whole? (Please attach a brief explanation of your answer.) I.e. whether or not you consider them to be valid intermediaries with citizens, and why*.

A total of 24 replies were received, including attached documents, the results of local surveys and other contents that were of great interest.

- **What channels exist for relationships between associations and local governments**?

Channels: formal (advisory boards, regular meetings, specific institutions ….) or informal (relationships between politicians and association leaders, occasional meetings…

Also try to comment on what the advantages and disadvantages of each model are.

In this case there were 4 replies.

- **How can local governments help associations so that they will become stronger**?

Examples: through financing, training, spaces, legal and formal recognition...

In reply we received 7 mails with commentaries from Group members.

- **Are the citizens' associations in our towns/cities inclusive or do they reproduce the power/participation dynamics**?

I.e.: Do associations actually achieve participation by the kind of people that are usually least likely to participate (ethnic or religious minorities, immigrants, the disabled, people in the lowest income brackets and or with the least educational qualifications, that participate less for reasons of age or gender)? And if this is so, in which cases and why?

Or, on the contrary, are the associations only well organised groups with training? And are the dynamics of exclusion solely reproduced within the associations.

In this case there was only one reply.

This system presented the advantage of using a much used tool, without people having to make any additional effort. They just have to open their mail and reading the messages, no need to enter into the Intranet or key in a password. On the other hand it is also true that receiving so many mails can result in saturation, with some people taking weeks to reply, while there are also some limitations to understanding, due to linguistic diversity.

6

20th Barcelona Association Spring Forum: Work Group Attendance Session

Taking advantage of the existence of this Group, the IOPD collaborated in the organisation of the 20th Association Spring Forum in Barcelona, promoted by the Barcelona Associations Municipal Board and organised by _Torre Jussana_ – Barcelona Associations Services Centre. During this edition, held on 8th, 9th and 10th May, the contents were coincident with those of this Work Group, in order to take advantage of the contents. This Forum included a theoretical session, presented by _Professor Gerry Stoker_ of Southampton University and _Joan Font_ of CSIC, an IOPD presentation session led by the Citizens' Participation and Associationism Commissioner, _Carles Agustí_, a debate on the role of volunteers and two sessions that centred on the presentation of local and associative experiences.

Five different towns/cities presented their associative experiences: Malaga, San Sebastian, Madrid, Sant Boi and Rennes, the first four of which are IOPD members.

The Spring Forum sessions were streamed, and broadcast via social networks, particularly Twitter. The Pere Tarrés Foundation were entrusted with the drafting of a transcript of the sessions, along with some final conclusions, to be incorporated to this document.

IV. Main Ideas:

Below we present the main ideas suggested for discussion by the Work Group members. You can consult the full commentaries in the attached annexes.

1) *On the legitimacy of associations as actors to politically and socially represent citizens.*

Generally speaking it is believed that these entities are adequate representatives of society, although a warning is made with regard to practices that might undermine legitimacy when it comes to speaking in the name of citizens.

Significant differences were detected between countries, insofar as there are countries such as Romania, where there has been little associative development, and others with a long democratic tradition, in which associations are well established and a great many stable spaces have been created for coordination with public administrations. In some countries they can serve as an effective counterweight to the governing bodies and it appears to be evident that, the less legitimate the State is for society the more legitimate the associations are. In some African countries associations are considered to be more legitimate than the governments themselves, given the existence of problems of corruption.

When it comes to evaluating the level of legitimacy that associations have, it appears that sometimes these are particularly effective when they represent highly specific groups but that it is harder for them when they have to represent the population as a whole, or larger more diverse groups. Many associations are set up as a response to very specific questions and only enjoy success at given moments, when a particular group of citizens feel that they are being represented by that association at those key moments, while not being given a "free hand" on an ongoing basis.

Despite the distance felt by the population with regard to these entities they are, generally speaking, more highly valued than the institutions, despite the fact that social movements still tend to be more highly valued than traditional associations.

Certain realities and cases of misconduct are detected on a regular basis; situations that do not favour support for the associations on the part of citizens and that question their legitimacy. These include:

- Excessive dependency on public subsidies, resulting in the absence of a sufficient degree of independence from the administrations.
- Clientele relationships with political parties that also raise questions about their independence.
- Excessive partiality and the defence of a particular set of interests (What about mine?).
- A lack of transparency and a lack of definition in terms of the organisation's vision and mission.

9

With regard to coordination and advisory boards, in some countries these work well because they are able to veto certain questions, but in general the opinion is that it takes a lot to get people to participate and the way that these function needs to be reconsidered.

2) What channels exist for relationships between associations and local governments?

That is, what channels, either formal (advisory boards, regular meetings, specific institutions, ...) or informal (relations between politicians and association leaders, occasional meetings, …) exist through which associations and local governments can relate. Also comment on the advantages and disadvantages of each model.

As many formal as informal channels have been detected. In some African countries it appears that informal channels dominate in two spheres: the social (environmental protection, micro-credits, vaccination, ...) and the political (participatory budgeting, the promotion of participation among young people and women). Yet relations are always easier in the social rather than the political sphere. The other channels mentioned are advisory boards and weekly meetings between local people and public or private institutions.

Below we indicate the main advantages and disadvantages that have been mentioned with regard to the relationship channels between Local Governments and the Associations:

Advantages:

- Allowing associations to gain more experience and have greater impact.

- Getting to know the needs of the population from different points of view and allowing for innovative initiatives to be voiced.

- Helping with the drafting of strategies that allow for problems to be resolved.

- In terms of informal channels, personal relationships between members of the government and NGO leaders are sometimes more effective than formal channels, because they facilitate these relationships and can break down communications barriers.

- Mayors that promote citizens' participation processes may receive more support from their citizens.

Disadvantages:

- Interlocution often merely serves to centre attention on problems that only affect one group.

- In cases where decisions need to be taken in a concerted way, those decisions have often been taken previously. For example, in cases where decisions have to be taken regarding labour policies, the government is obliged to listen to the voices of associations and unions, but it is usually a case of decisions that have already been taken, consequently involving bad practices, the well known DAD (Decide-Announce-Defend) system.

- Sometimes in informal channels we can find a lack of legitimacy, of transparency and a suspicion of corruption.

10

- Often, for the administrations, any collaboration with entities will unfortunately depend on the political stripe of the people who are set to benefit from the projects.

- The relationship is unequal, bearing in mind the fact that associations only have access to very limited resources.

3) How can local governments help associations so that they will become stronger?

In the answers to this question there is general agreement that local governments should support the associations and that they should also work to strengthen them. Moreover, there is some emphasis on the fact that it is fundamental to strengthen associationism because this will increases its legitimacy.

In the different fields were such strengthening may take place, the most important is related to legal recognition and providing guidance for their formalisation, while other aspects also include:

- Empowering them to take on the responsibility for development in the town or city, i.e. enablement.
- Providing for freedom of expression, the circulation of human rights, and guaranteeing an environment of participatory democracy.
- Acknowledging the role of entities as interlocutors.
- Providing entities with meeting points.

The doubt emerges as to whether or not local authorities should financially assist associations, given that this could lead to conflict between the plurality of the associations and their dependence on local government for funding. Moreover, in many developing countries local governments have only limited resources and economic assistance is not possible.

4) Are the associations in our towns/cities inclusive or do they reflect the dynamics of existing power/participation dynamics?

In other words, do associations actually achieve participation on the part of the kind of people who are usually least likely to participate (ethnic or religious minorities, immigrants, the disabled, people in the lowest income brackets or with the least academic qualifications, lower participation due to age or gender)? And, if they do, in which cases and why?

Or, on the contrary, do associations only serve the interests of well organised and well educated groups, and are these dynamics are reflected within them.

This line of discussion failed to illicit a large response on the part of the participants, although we would like to indicate that both associations and citizens' participation need to be serve as a stimulation for the generation of social capital and relationships between citizens and, consequently, to present an opportunity for the people that have the fewest resources, people that are not usually either politically or socially active.

V.   Association Spring Forum:

The 20th Association Spring Forum presented the opportunity for a few days of encounter, reflection and discussion of the role of associations in towns and cities. Below we present some of the main ideas that were discussed, and which were included in the final transcript drawn up by the *Pere Tarrés Foundation*:

During the three days of the Association Spring Forum we heard the opinions of researchers, representatives of public administrations and association leaders. The conclusions that we present below are the result of contrasting the contributions made by the different speakers with those of the public, who had the opportunity to take part in the subsequent round table discussions and conferences.

We have confirmed a number of things that we already knew but that we would like to underline, such as:

- **Associationism is positive for society** because it builds bridges between institutions and citizens, brings in volitions, expresses points of interest for the collective experience and, as a result, because it brings out more values on the streets.

- **Education at all levels is key to participation**. This is particularly true for those that do not have expectations of taking part in either associative or general participation. The reason why many people do not participate in democracy is precisely because they do not consider themselves competent.

- The most usual tendency in citizens' participation is that of strengthening a model that **combines representative democracy** with the addition of elements of **direct democracy**.

- **Beyond their spheres of operation**, we can classify the **entities** on the basis of the degree to which they are dedicated to leisure, provision of services, reclamation, or any combination of these three aspects. There are a wide range of entities that need to be treated in a differential way.

- Things can change and we have the volition to keep on moving forward, and the best way of doing this is for people and groups to establish relationships in order to change them. What keeps us moving are relationships, we cannot manage it on our own, **we have to work together, associations and the administration**, towards common goals.

- **The quality of public space and the climate** generated are of the utmost importance. Where the quality of public spaces is good conflicts, which always have existed and will exist, can be moved towards the terrain of reasonable debate, rather than turning into a train wreck. The quality of public spaces improves when there is a spontaneous organisation of associationism, when there are good public services, when there is a perception of trust and when politicians exercise their functions in a qualitative way.

We are aware that the ways of experiencing and understanding politics in the 21st century are changing:

- A new model of **digital revolution** has appeared that, in just a few years, is accelerating processes that would otherwise have taken much longer to arrive. There has been an increase in on-line participation that is combined with attendance participation.

- Individual commitments have become more irregular and there are constant changes in the interests and questions that citizens are concerned with.

- An increase in the need to directly resolve their own questions, with greater emphasis being placed on how norms are applied, rather than on their approval.

- There is an increase in the need of citizens to be truly **heard** and for the administrations to justify and explain the reasons for the decisions that they make.

- **Social movements** are setting themselves up as actors with a renewed protagonism in social participation. These movements then engage with associationism in such a way that it is often hard to see them as different realities.

- There has been an increase in **mistrust with regard to politics and politicians**, accentuated in a context of crisis, with regard to politics, political parties and representative democracy as a whole

Gerry Stocker and Joan Font, with the journalist Xavier Grasset in the chair

During the sessions researchers, administrators and associations have explained to us what they do, and we have been able to take a look at:

• Studies confirming that effective **cooperation between institutions and associations are the basis of full democracy**. Moreover, the models make it increasingly clear in which cases the most successful collaboration situations occur, leading to municipalities, towns and cities being more united.

• **Successful examples of citizens' participation that have been led in different ways**. Some have formal associations at the head, while some have more informal organisations. Others are led by the administrations and in some cases the leadership is shared by administrations, entities and citizens.

• Public policy models in which **the promotion of citizens' participation comes together with the promotion of volunteering and the strengthening of associationism**. Some public policies place the emphasis more on one aspect or a combination of two of them. In fact, it is a matter of in-between spaces that can be combined, as we have been able to confirm in a number of municipal experiences.

• And, moreover, bearing in mind the different system that administrations have of set up for dealing with entities, along with their natures, in practice there are different models for setting up relationships between entities and administrations, and these tend to vary from place to place.

- Examples of entities that, despite a primary dedication to leisure, culture or festivals, work on values with members, reinventing themselves every day, and creating **innovative community models**.

- Some citizens' participation experiences have become very successful, as they are able to combine in a collaborative way with other areas, such as social entrepreneurs, architecture, the arts or sustainability.

- The relations between the administration, associations and citizens that we spend so much effort defending are often, in practice, extremely conflictive, generating tensions, which is something that also occurs in the day-to-day of participatory processes in all spheres.

We have seen elements that tend to make participation difficult, such as:

- Governments and administrations that do not always make enough effort to honestly listen and respond to their citizens. Sometimes proposals and contributions are not even debated, merely "processed".

- Often there is a feeling, with regard to participatory processes, that the rules of play are not respected by the political sphere, which creates a sense of apathy and frustration, as well as serving as a barrier to motivation with regard to participation on the part of both citizens and entities.

- There is also a danger in personalised relationships with entities, i.e. that they will end up turning into client relationships. Associations must never be turned into mechanisms that benefit the organisation itself or its members. To avoid this kind of clientelism administrations should not establish unique interlocutors, while associations must be convinced that clientelism is contrary to the general interests of society.

There are other elements that also benefit participation and that must continue to be strengthened. It is recommendable:

- **That the rules of participatory processes and associationism-administration relationships should be well known and always complied with**. It is important to have effective rules of play and that they are always respected. If these are not well defined then we will be giving a comparable advantage to those that do not play by the rules. While regulation should not be excessive it is necessary to have rules that have to be complied with, as well as good experts and expeditors.

- **To explain the mistakes and difficulties that all participatory and interlocutory processes will generate**. This is a case of sharing in order to learn as much as possible about everybody else's experiences. In this case more can be learned from bad practices than from good practices!

- That the administration has a better understanding of **the immense variety of different types of associations** that exist and does not try to treat them all in the same way. In many cases relationships with entities will have to be unique, insofar as they express very specific realities.

- That **governments should make a clear commitment to transparency**, that the administration is not afraid to open up its data to citizens and show them its inner workings. If the work is being done as it should be..., then there should be no problem with revealing everything.

- A commitment to **imagination and innovation**. Not being afraid of conflict and exploring the full range of possible participation tools.

- That work should be done in order to achieve a **public space of good quality that allows for a good climate for coexistence**, this being the result of the behaviour of those that participate in the space, paving the way for communication, seeking people's commitment and reinforcing trust.

Carles Agustí making his presentation of the IOPD

However, we have also realised that, in order to improve, there are still important challenges that have to be met, such as:

- **Carrying out a thorough study of modern society's new ways of participating** and organising itself. Society is changing so fast and we need to pay a great deal of attention to the changes as they are taking place before us. We cannot take it as a given that we know how participation works, because these days the changes are coming fast and furious.

- **Evaluation and indicators** for analysing results. We also need to have indicators with regard to coexistence and social cohesion, far beyond the ones that we originally started to use to measure the specific impact of different participatory processes.

- **The way in which conflicts are habitually handled** by administrations and entities.

And this would not be complete without some indication of the multiple additional questions that have also generated doubts and discussion among us…

- Are we really adapting participation systems to this new way of doing politics?

- Is it enough to merely copy successful models or, given that the copy will never be as good as the original, is it always more worthwhile to innovate?

- How can we achieve a better response from administrations, along with explanations of the proposals that are derived from participatory processes?

18

- How can associations be endowed with greater legitimacy with regard to participatory processes?

- What are the areas of decision where co-participation is needed, and in what way does it have to be binding?

- Can we adequately manage day-to-day conflicts by defending the positive values generated by citizens' participation?

- Do we take sufficient advantage of the permanent dissatisfaction that exists in order to make progress and consider new challenges, and in order finally to improve the quality of democracy?

- How can the complementary aspects of existing participation mechanism be found, along with and the new spaces that are seeking a more participatory democracy?

- Should more radical changes be considered and should we ask ourselves who really holds the power and what we need to do to empower?

- Are other models, alternative to the two existing models of direct and representative democracy, also possible?

- Does a comparison between social movements and associations (perhaps more concerned with sustainability than with making a political impact) make any sense, or are we talking about the same reality but with different forms of expression?

- Do association know how to relate to unorganised citizenry?

- How can we find a balance between regulation and flexibility when it comes to dealing with associations from the perspective of the administrations?

Finally, we would also like to make a couple of practical recommendations that could be of use:

- The CLEAR model for evaluation, on a qualitative basis, of a town or city's level of participation. This is a model that was explained by Professor Stoker and that some other participants also vouched for, in light of their own experiences.

  http://sectordialogues.org/sites/default/files/acoes/documentos/gove_01_-_perito_-_gerry_stoker_-_paper.pdf

- Various participants mentioned the economist Elinor Ostrom and her theories regarding Common Pool Resources (CPR) Management. This is a theory that can provide us with inspiration when it comes to approaching new ideas with regard to the relationship between citizens and CPR management.

VI. Conclusions:

The purpose of this Work Group has been to share experiences, reflections and opinions regarding the role of associations in citizens' participation at local level. Bearing in mind the enormous differences in social, economic and political contexts across the different countries, we have reached a series of conclusions.

When citizens are organised in associations they are more effective in terms of their political impact than when they are not associated. In this way associations can present themselves as actors in the governance of towns and cities, making it clear what their fields of action are, and insofar as they have the required levels of transparency and internal democracy.

Associations can also be both a school for citizens and a factor that generates social capital, assisting in the creation of relationships of trust among citizens and operating as a factor of both stability and democratic growth.

However, despite these evidently positive aspects of associations, we should not undervalue their limitations in terms of the representation of citizens and operating as legitimate actors. In this sense it is the context and credibility of each association that must serve as the conditioners.

Finally, in view of all of the above reasons, local governments must acknowledge the role of associations, promoting their creation by means of legal and political recognition and providing training or other kinds of assistance, despite the inevitable tensions that are bound to arise in relation to the dangers of clientelism and the use of associations as political instruments. The challenge for both associations and local governments is to seek channels through which understanding can be reached and collaborative work can be work, while maintaining their respective spheres of independence.