

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Giovanni Allegretti

Among the activities paralysed by the COVID-19 outbreak are many civic participation processes. In the last decade Portugal has entered the world map of institutionalised participation, as one of the few countries to adopt not only hundreds of local participatory budgets, but also experiments promoted by the central government in this area. In addition, there is a Network of Participatory Municipalities (NPM) that encourages mutual learning of innovative processes centred on social dialogue. While these experiments remained on standby, forms of spontaneous activism emerged that conquered the digital social networks, our balconies and our streets. The suspension resulting from the pandemic raises four interrelated issues: 1) the risk that the wave of institutionalised participation processes will not be able to resume its dynamics and that the loss of one of its annual cycles will lead to the end of many of these experiments; 2) the choosing of the best instruments to relaunch and update dialogue between institutions and communities; 3) the renewal of participation methodologies and the very topics under discussion; 4) the experiments that can serve as a guide in this “updated recovery” of participatory processes.

With the end of the state of emergency, the stage of “obedience” is over and it is necessary to build environments of collective responsibility to value common social capital in the reconstruction of a “new normal”. To avoid the paralysis of forms of participation “by invitation”, a dialogue between citizens and administrations needs to be restarted rapidly, refocusing participation on two fronts: the methodological and the substantive one.

Methodologically, the solution lies in hybrid forms that bring together small discussion groups and a greater use of technologies that connect and harmonise micro-deliberation

spaces. The physical contact suspended by COVID-19 for fear of large agglomerations must be recovered. The “cold” technologies and digital staging have already invaded our lives too deeply not to create rejection. A balanced compromise of bodies engaging in dialogue, with appropriate safety distancing, can bring enduring solutions. It is also necessary to do away with the administrative fragmentation of processes, by creating interscale participatory pathways where citizens’ ideas can be channelled into immediate solutions at different levels of public policy.

The pandemic has made us more ambitious about the substance of the debates: we want to help restructure the welfare state destroyed by decades of neoliberal policies, reduce the new inequalities and exclusions, and rethink concepts and standards of quality of life (such as public space and housing as a multifunctional place, capable of accommodating diverse demands). Civic participation in the “new normal” needs public investment in order to function. It also needs to be shaped around the forms of playful activism and solidarity – which have multiplied during lockdown – and to be attractive and entertaining, to respond to a great variety of needs that politics and technocracy find difficult to imagine.

There are examples to follow. In Galicia, young architects are helping families to remodel their homes; in France, mayors have negotiated with the President of the Republic the creation of citizen panels to oversee the reconstruction of everyday life; and in Italy several municipalities are co-designing with citizens the new participatory processes. Let us also not forget the fact that cities such as Seattle or Prato have already invested in civic dialogue during the pandemic, thus showing how innovative solutions can bring benefits to communities.