

Opportunities for participation in the policies of municipal social services in Spain

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Abstract: The article presents an analysis and systematic evaluation of the opportunities for citizen participation in the public policies of social wellbeing at the local level in Spain and their actual impact on the design, implementation, execution and evaluation of public policies of social wellbeing at the municipal level. The results of the investigation, between 2004 and 2012, permit, first, to present the type of offer diverse opportunities for participation in the regional level of social wellbeing in Spain and then identify, from its participants, dimensions that help to improve efficiency of public wellbeing policies at the municipal level by intensifying processes of democratization. The results show little opportunity to participate and if more formal than real, not to favor the possibility of an exercise of power or actual impact on the design, implementation and evaluation of municipal social policies.

Key words: quality of democracy, public policy, participation, analysis and evaluation, wellbeing policies.

Resumen: El artículo presenta un análisis y evaluación sistemática de las oportunidades de participación ciudadana en las políticas públicas de bienestar social en el ámbito local en España y su impacto efectivo en el diseño, implementación, ejecución y evaluación de las políticas públicas de bienestar social en el ámbito municipal. Los resultados de la investigación continua, entre 2004-2012, permite, en primer lugar, presentar la diversa tipología de oferta de oportunidades de participación en el ámbito autonómico de bienestar social de España y, posteriormente, identificar, a partir de sus participantes, las dimensiones que contribuirían a dotar de mayor eficacia las políticas públicas de bienestar en el ámbito municipal, intensificando procesos democratizadores. Sus resultados nos muestran escasas oportunidades de participación y, en su caso, más formales que reales, al no favorecer la posibilidad de realizar un ejercicio de poder o impacto efectivo en el diseño, ejecución y evaluación de las políticas sociales municipales.

Palabras clave: calidad democrática, políticas públicas, participación, análisis y evaluación, políticas de bienestar.

Presentation

The article presents an analysis and assessment of the opportunity offer for civil participation in the design, implementation, follow-up and assessment of public policies of municipal social services in Spain and their potential influence on the agenda and management of public policies of local social wellbeing. The results of the research allow, in the first place, systematizing as typologies the offer of mechanisms, organs and participation processes in the design, management and assessment of municipal social services, and later on, identifying the dimensions of analysis that contribute to provide social public policies with greater efficacy, by means of intensifying both civil participation and local governance.

Researching on the assessment of the impacts of the participation mechanisms of the agenda to build public policies and the incidence of the former in the management of the latter supposes to address an innovative aspect of preferable interest in the sphere of public, academic, researching and professional administrations. Nowadays, there emerges an increasing demand for direct democracy and civil participation in public management, becoming central and current issue in the political, civil, professional and academic debate in general, and with a substantive meaning for politicians, researchers and professionals (directly and indirectly) linked to social policies. The complexity and interdependence of the social phenomena and facts, as well as the difficult situations experienced by the individuals, families, groups and communities requires commitments, competences and interactions of the diverse public actors (public and civic), therefore participation is a consubstantial element in this new pluralist and relational context.

Participation, as stated by various authors (Cunill, 1991, 1997; Maiz, 2000; Held, 2001; Warren, 2001; Montero, Font and Torcal, 2006; Bloundiaux, 2008; Pares, 2009, Pastor, 2011, among others), offers substantives beneficial for the organizational and communal dynamic as it provides gradual suitability of the functioning of the institutions, breaking apathy and civil mistrust, offer the representatives tools to assess and improve the management of public issues, allow the citizenry to reconquer and recover the public space, generate social capital, potentiate community sentiments, enabling “politics to socialize”, and reinforce the decisions to take or, even those taken. Hence, participation became an issue on preferential and transversal interest in the agenda of governments and professionals that intend to implement an efficacious political and/or technical management, oriented to improve the social wellbeing and quality of life of the citizenry and the users of centers/services. Participation in making social policies is a “fundamental tool to improve design, assess services and detect the actual needs of the population” (Subirats, 2007: 57). However, this centrality requires

instruments that enable adequate and transparent channeling of it and also decision processes and decentralized management, collegiate and agile, as well as co-responsible in municipal social public issues.

The extension and diversification of the participation offer produces certain mobilizing effect in the sense that citizens with similar orientations to local (Navarro, 2011) and/or organizational democracy become more involved where there are more opportunities, when they live in a participatory context, thus producing an increase in the exercise of active citizenship. Then, the challenge is to produce conditions and spaces for civil participation/involvement that generate actual and favorable conditions for deliberation and collective construction of social policies from the consolidation of defined and informed preferences among the citizenry in the complex relational universe.

As pointed out by Sauca and Wences (2009), the uncontestable consolidation of civil participation in making and controlling decisions everyday advances in occidental democracies; in the sphere of political practices, the instruments that intend to support this participatory imperative are multiplied and in many societies they extend to every governmental level (Blondiaux, 2008). It is plain to see, the relevance of civil participation in the consolidation of representative democracies, for the strengthening of this form of government not only depends on the free exercise of political rights, but also that citizens become actively involved (participation) in the different spheres and stages of public issues (Vallespín, 2000; Giddens, 2000; Bobbio, 2003; Espinosa, 2009); then we are before, according to some authors, a “deliberative turning point” (Chambers, 2003; Jorba, 2009).

The guiding methodology of the study

The study, whose results are presented below, carried out between 2004 and 2012 has produced a typology of the mechanisms, organisms and processes of civil participation in the autonomic system of social services in Spain, a comparative analysis of cases, as well as an assessment of the impact, in terms of contributions and potentialities of the Councils in the democratic deepening of local public policies regarding Social Wellbeing and the improvement of the efficacy in managing social services and benefits.

The research context was the Sistema Autonómico de Servicios Sociales en España [Autonomic System of Social Services in Spain], in particular the offer of opportunities for associative and/or individual participation in implementing, managing and assessing municipal social policies. To do so, we have carried out a rigorous and systematic analysis of the last 17 Laws of Social Services promulgated and the mechanisms and organisms that are established to promote participation in the management of public policies, using the analysis of the normative content.

Once such typology is analyzed and compared, there is an approach to the main actors in Councils and Institutes of participation in the policies of general social wellbeing in the territorial scope of Spain, specifically in the region of Murcia. For this analysis we have approached all the Local Corporations (town councils and municipal associations) incumbent in Services of Social Wellbeing existing in the region of Murcia, namely 45 town councils and 5 municipal associations, being the observation units the participation mechanisms established in them, paying especial attention to Councils and Institutions with general-territorial character.

In the development process, in the first place, the Centers of Social Services of the region were identified as well as their scope of action, 50 technicians were interviewed, the people were in charge of the set of town councils and municipal associations with competence in this respect, these represented the observation units. Then, 22 in-depth interviews with the actors who were involved in such participation mechanisms, representing 22 entities. The actors were interviewed on several occasions, being selected according to the composition of the participation mechanisms (politicians, professionals, social and vicinal associations).

Paying attention the most representativeness of the existing discourses, the participation of a number of actors in the mechanisms under study, in short the agents: politicians (in office or from opposition parties), technicians (relevance, heterogeneity, responsibility and direct implication) and associative (qualification and contrast of discourses, diversity, maximal representativeness and permanence as an officer in the participatory mechanism).

The final report from the content analysis was presented to two discussion groups comprising qualified actors (politicians, professionals and social organizations), other than those interviewed. This process of research and analysis has allowed having validated, reliable and ethically contrastable information on the dimensions that will contribute to improve public policies on local social wellbeing.

The utilized methodological approach is based on the use of techniques, fundamentally —not exclusively— qualitative in nature, which has allowed gathering discourses, opinions, comments, suggestions and interpretations of the protagonists of the processes of civil participation in relation to local social policies. The case studies, specifically of the Municipal Councils of Social Wellbeing, have allowed proximity and participation of the actors that build reality, thus overcoming mere descriptive or countable intentions to explain the motives that lead to a determinate reality. On its own, this method has allowed producing relevant knowledge from the combination of techniques and from a participatory context of the subjects/actors.

Considering the complexity of the phenomenon to research, several techniques have been used to gather data in views of increasing the efficiency and solve

the problem posed by the analysis of the causal complexity, fundamentally, the interview with the technicians/responsible people of all the local corporations of the region, in-depth interviews with the main actors or discussion groups with strategic participants. This way, a strategy of methodological triangulation has been developed—within-method triangulation—in views of increasing the analytical capacity, data reliability and validity of research, avoiding methodological biases. In order to achieve the estimation necessary for validation, the most usual processes have been considered, namely, technique triangulations, saturation of proofs and evidence and contrast with other similar researches.

For contrasting and broadening, we resorted to compilation, summarization and documental analysis (theoretical, normative and empirical) in a dual direction: internal and external to the observation units. As for the first, by means of “documents” produced by the participant actors, such as: regulations, statutes, acts, agendas, calls, etc. in relation to the external, oriented to the theoretical, normative and bibliographic analysis of the existing discourses on civil participation, especially linked to the municipal social policy, as in relation to similar experiences occurred at national and international level. All this has enabled contrasting data from interviews and discussion groups with those from documental and content analysis; from a comprehensive and reflective approach by the actors of civil participation in managing social policies in the local sphere in the region of Murcia.

Governance of social public policies in the municipal sphere

In the current knowledge society, the disposition to accept decisions made in a hierarchical or opaque manner decreases; on the contrary, new ways to participate and communicate are demanded. Governing cannot be any longer a unidirectional and hierarchical action from public powers toward the citizens and social fabric. Governing increasingly requires capacity of involvement and commitment, both in the definition of the problem and policies as well as in the management of centers, services and programs.

The local level is an experimental environment to try new cooperation procedures, as well as innovative ways to articulate political leadership and social participations (cooperative intelligence). “Knowledge society provides a new notion of citizenship that hermeneutically merges diverse horizons of significance; it accomplishes an empathic understanding that verifies the originality, authenticity and social peculiarity, and preserves individual identity (Aguirre, 2009: 235).

The novelties and debate on municipalism become tangible in the transit from the traditional local government to the current local governance—network government /administration/ relational municipality—. The municipal context

offers a privileged sphere to revitalize democracy; it is where we find the first and best example of new ways to understand the governing of public issues from the model of relational municipality, characterized and legitimized by its capacity to create and foster networks, stimulate the participation of civil society and exercise its governmental leadership (representativeness), from a new management model called “civil-based”, open and democratic.

This model of “making politics” and managing public issues, together with local proximity, favors building community identities/rooting, feeling involved in the conflicts, in the needs and in everyday coexistence, and so in the alternatives and finally accepted decisions. Local governments do not dialogue anymore with a homogeneous community, but with multiple communities and identities that coexist and/or relate in, from and with the territory. On the other side, citizenry—demands quality and efficacy in the offer of public services, and also partake in the very definition and articulation of public policies that lead social development. Hence, the challenge is to create conditions and civil participation/involvement spaces that generate actual and favorable conditions for the deliberation and collective construction of social policies from the creation of sound and informed preferences among the citizenry in the complex local relational universe.

The question revolves around how citizenry has to participate in the definition of the city model and its territory. The greatest wealth of our cities, towns, barrios (division of a municipality), etc. is indeed the quality of their public spaces, as spheres to exercise citizenship, where the capacity of democracies to configure legitimacy, participation and responsibility spaces is accredited (governance capacity). This is so because the cities are places of dialogue and conflict, a “space” with hard (structural/tangible) and dynamical soft (relational) infrastructure.

Local government appears before us as a privileged participation space, being especially visible the emergence of the participatory spaces/mechanisms in this sphere. This way, most of the European local governments are, as pointed out by various researches and authors (Löffler, 2004; Hamzaoui, 2006; Alguacil, 2008; Colino and Del Pino, 2008; Ganuza and Frances, 2008; Navarro, Cuesta and Font, 2009; Sintomer and Ganuza, 2011; Putnam, 2011; Amnesty International, among others) immersed for at least two decennials in reform process.

The objectives which have been pursued with these reforms can be summarized as two: on the one side, the administrative ones, oriented to accomplish efficiency, efficacy and quality of the local administrative structures and their results in their relation with the citizens’ desires; and on the other, the policies that aim at accomplishing the enrichment of local democracy, normally as more transparency and civil access to public decision making with an effect on the citizens. Both aspects

in e-government (Naser and Concha, 2011) plays an essential role in transparency, accountability and civil participation.

Citizenry “claims” for a new “way” to govern and relate with reciprocal and continual influence between local administration and citizenry. A democratic deepening, understood as a broadening, in quantitative and qualitative terms, both of the actors (number and representative plurality) that can intervene in the participatory processes and of the questions and levels of influence and production of social policies by the different actors involved (politicians, technicians and citizens). From here, the undeniable growth of participatory experiences and of the policies oriented to foster the participation of the citizens in public issues, especially in the local sphere.

A progressive and evident renovation and adaption of the democratic structures, which by means of participation and more direct involvement of the citizens contributes to improve democracy (Pasquino, 1999), foster transparency, legitimacy, efficacy, efficiency and influence in public decisions, optimize institutional performance and shape better citizens and politicians.

However, this progressive offer of opportunities to participate in public policies takes place in political and institutional contexts reticent to the impulse of policies oriented to promote participation and the opening of new spaces and participatory processes, and prefer to circumscribe to traditional mechanisms of representative democracy.

Not only does the existence of a mature citizenry improve the functioning of participatory instruments, but also the entire community. This way, participation is a key factor and the prime matter to develop social capital and cooperative intelligence, as it works not only to facilitate the offer of certain services or to legitimize certain decisions and policies, but to promote civil, democratic and solidary behaviors and attitudes

Participation in contexts of social fracture and exclusion: from “caged” participation to vindication in performances

The complex, heterogeneous and dynamic scenario of participatory mechanisms and practices that exist in the municipal sphere are usually distinguished around associative-based mechanisms (civil participation municipal councils; territorial or sectoral councils; committees of service users and local development groups...); direct or deliberative processes and practices (participatory budgets; citizen juries or participatory intervention nucleuses; citizen assemblies; vicinal, communal or service meetings; referendums or popular consultations; demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, satisfaction surveys; deliberative surveys; discussion groups...) and

mixed (territorial strategical planning; agendas 21, councils, forums or territory, sectoral or service assemblies; civil platforms; workshops on territorial and service prospective, among other).

From the analysis of researches on participation in the local sphere (Font, 2001; Gutiérrez, 2005; Rodríguez *et al.*, 2005; Montero, Font and Torcal, 2006; Harms and Pereyra, 2006; INAP, 2008; Navarro, 2008, 2011; Pastor, 2011; among others), we can verify two phenomena: on the one side, the decentralization of the Wellbeing State as of the mid 80's has caused that municipal governments had looked for social interlocutors: third sector/system —and even mercantile— in relation to their new competencies; and on the other, that they develop adaptive strategies in relation to steady and dynamic features of the political structure in its historical background.

Hence, the offer of political participation opportunities, fostered initially by town councils, mainly the urban (Navarro, 2008), is supported on the traditional model and typically associative (territorial and sectoral councils), however more often than not, direct participation mechanisms are being set into motion —civil-based model— or information or consultation (surveys, citizen defendant, referendum, internet) and or deliberative, which suppose a public discussion process on decisions and/or concrete initiatives (participatory budgets, citizen councils).

These participation mechanisms are nowadays in decline before the emergence of situations that “convulse” the citizenry before inequalities and “attacks” on social rights. Now we clearly notice collective demonstrations motivated by the growing risk situations of poverty and social exclusion (Pastor and Sánchez, 2014) from economic reasons, social inequality, economic crisis, unemployment labor precariousness, capitalist accumulation, high family indebtedness, etcetera.

Protests which by means of dramatization make visible the unequal distribution of wealth, loss of social and labor rights, the reduction of services and public services, all in all: a complex, but built with premeditation from political and economic instances, mosaic of contradictions and existing contradictions, which are likely to lead to the rupture of cohesion and social peace, and whose orientation is to sensitize citizenry on a reality that affects everyone and decisively influence on the policies and the political “class”. Civil disobedience, as Marcone (2009) states, is a fundamental drive for the symbolic device of democratic States and activates two of the legitimizing principles of the democratic order: popular sovereignty and the mutual recognition of the right to have rights.

In Spain, protests are visualized by means of forms or performances (strikes, chaining, caceroladas [demonstrations hitting saucepans], civil gatherings, hugs and collective nudes, takings of buildings, prevent evictions, marches, blockades,

silent screams, waving arms, etc.) oriented to sensitize and exercise political, social and economic influence. We have moved from silence to social media, from social media to the street (15M, Democracia real YA, Juventud sin futuro, Anonymus, #no les votes, democracia, Movimiento, #ARV12M, etc.)

This way, Tilly (2008), Tarrow (1997) and Tilly and Tarrow (2006) point out that performances are the relatively familiar and standardized forms with which a set of actors perform collective claims to another set of political actors. According to Tilly (2008), these are partly the result of innovation and learning processes. The actors register the efficacy and/or adequacy of the protest actions they develop, adapting, improving them as for resources and initiatives necessary for their development, task division, the need to involve others, etc., if it is intended to learn to solve the problems of protest and coordination that the collective actions they try to develop supposes, up to the assignation of a shared denomination, which in virtue of its repletion becomes recognized by others.

Participation in the Autonomic System of Social Services in Spain

The 1978 Spanish Constitution appoints the public powers to promote the conditions so that the liberty and equality of the individuals and the groups in which they integrate become actual and effective, to remove the obstacles that hinder or impede their full application and facilitate the participation of all the citizens in political, economic, cultural and social life. All these principles aim at the development of wellbeing policies in which the presence of citizens is not limited to the mere reception of services, but that it includes, additionally, the citizens' collaboration in establishing criteria to act in this respect, as well as the development and assessment of such policies.

In the development of these criteria, the basic legal references in the State sphere are Law 7/1985, regulator of the Bases of Local Regime; Royal Decree 2568/1986, dated on November 28th, by means of which the Regulation of Organization, Functioning and Juridical Regime of Local entities is approved and Law 57/2003, dated on December 16th with measures for the Modernization of the Local Government. The latter, in virtue of our analysis, is an attempt to "formally" develop the organisms and mechanisms for citizen participation in the local sphere.

With this new regulation the Spanish State tries to incorporate into the European tendencies that propose to reinforce the possibilities of participation and incidence of citizens in local government in order to prevent or correct their distancing from public life. In short, it contemplates three supposed "novelties", specifically in relation to the creation of districts, of the Social Council of the City and an Especial Commission of Suggestions and Complaints.

In the architecture of Autonomic State, social services¹ are exclusively appointed to the Autonomous Communities, therefore it is needed to “approach” them to analyze civil participation in Social Services. The set of autonomic laws contemplate, at different levels however, the principle of “citizen or civil participation”, by means of creating mechanisms and channels by means of which foster the participation in the management of the so called “Public System of Social Services”, and also planning, follow-up, control and assessment of social centers, plans and programs.

More recent laws identify the promotion of participation as an end and/or ruling principle of the system (Law of Cantabria 2/2007,² Law 5/2009 of Aragon,³ Law 12/2008 of the Basque Country,⁴ Law 14/2010 of Castile-La Mancha,⁵ Law 16/2010 of Castile and Leon⁶), objective (Foral Law 15/2006;⁷ Law 12/2007 of Catalonia;⁸ Law 13/2008 Galicia;⁹ Law 5/2009 of Aragon; Law 4/2009 of Balearic Islands;¹⁰ Law 7/2009 of La Rioja,¹¹ Law 14/2010 of Castile-La Mancha), benefit (Law of Principality of Asturias 1/2003,¹² Law 14/2010 of Castile-La Mancha) of the policies of social services, municipal competence and/or specific function of basic social services.

All of them contemplate the creation of mechanisms that channel citizen participation, as well as the rights and duties of the users of centers, services and programs, directly or through representative social entities (nonprofit, initiatives and volunteering). Both citizenship exercises appear in the service listings of the laws decreed as of 2005 that “formally” reinforce the protection of users, with

1 Among the competence catalogue those of autonomous communities, one finds those related to social assistance

2 Law Cantabria 2/2007, March 27th on Rights and social services– B.O.C. no.: 66, April 3rd.

3 Law 5/2009, June 30th on social services in Aragon – B.O.A. no.: 132, July 10th.

4 Law 12/2008, December 5th on social services of the Basque Country– B.O.P.V. no.: 246, December 24th.

5 Law 14/2010, December 16th on social services of Castile-La Mancha – B.O.E. no.: 38, February 14th 2011.

6 Law 16/2010, December 20th on Social Services of Castile and Leon – B.O.E. no.: 7, January 8th 2011. BOCYL. no.: 244, December 21st 2010 and mistake correction in BOCYL, no.: 23, February 3rd 2011.

7 Foral Law 15/2006, December 14th on social services – B.O.E. no.: 27, January 31st.

8 Law 12/2007, October 11th, Catalonia – B.O.E. no.: 266, November 6th.

9 Law 13/2008, December 3rd on social services of Galicia – D.O.G. no.: 245, December 18th.

10 Law 4/2009, June 11th on Social services of Balearic Islands – B.O.B.B. no.: 89, June 18th.

11 Law 7/2009, December 22nd on social services of La Rioja – B.O.R.: December 28th.

12 Law of Asturias Principality 1/2003, 24th February on social services– B.O.P.A. March 8th.

a principle of guaranteeing participation and a detailed description of rights and duties, among which the participation of people as agents of their own change is identified and that of the groups and identities of civil society in the functioning of social services is as well.

Participation was already present in the first social service laws in the 1980's and 90's (and its later normative development), the novelty is the extension to the listing and catalogues of services, and their link to quality and rights and duties of the users and professionals, and to the strengthening of social initiative in the offer of services and free election by the consumer in their growing privatization/outsourcing.

The normative content analysis of the set of autonomic laws on social services in Spain has allowed characterizing the map of mechanisms and channels for citizen participation in the autonomic and local space as pointed out below:

- Inter-administrative and interdepartmental regional mechanisms of coordination to produce autonomic planning (strategic plans, maps) and guarantee the participation of competent managers (observatories, and/or councils inter-institutional or inter-administrative coordination).
- Technical committees on social needs and assessment of the efficacy and quality of social services and ethics committees of social services.
- Regional participation organs with advising, consultation and proposal functions, whose objective is to articulate participation and contribute to the better development, quality and efficacy of social services (autonomic councils).
- Advising and consulting regional organs in aspects related to addictions (Consulting committee of addiction assistance)
- Sectoral collegiate organs created by sectors of social action
- Provincial, historic or insular participation organs oriented to advise, consult and propose, and ascribed to the respective disputation (councils of social services).
- Local participation mechanism in social services (local councils)
- Fomentation to participate in the social initiative in social services; in this aspect we find laws that differentiate lucrative social initiative (mercantile initiative) from that non profitable (social initiative). In other laws, such differentiation does not exist, recognizing the right to participate in the creation of centers and services and only under analogous conditions of quality, efficacy and costs, there will be priority to collaborate with nonprofit social organizations. As for the modalities of collaboration, there are some formulas such as: concertation, agreements and pacts and subventions.

From the normative content analysis we notice that scarce, and if any, they ambiguously state there might be an articulation by means of associative movements and participatory processes. As for the participation of users, “second” and “third” generation laws attribute them, formally at least, a more active role; in short, to partake of all the decisions that affect them directly or indirectly, individually or collectively. All the entities and social service centers shall have procedures for the democratic participation of the users, or their legal guardian, according to that stipulated in the regulations; for such end the council of users is established.

It is interesting to indicate that rights and duties of the users that incorporate the recent laws are a clear influence of Law 39/2006,¹³ of Promotion of Personal Autonomy and Attention to people in dependency situation, even though in this sense the systematic assessments of the application of the aforementioned law show that the importance given to the user/beneficiary in relation to decision making in the process of diagnosis and social intervention and the link to quality criteria is more “formal/virtual” than real.

By paying attention to recent researches on the subject (Gallego and Subirats, 2011), one notices that in the imaginary the traditional aid-like and beneficial perspective of social services, associated to economic poverty and risk groups, verifying besides a negative vision of social services, inadequate and insufficient offer of services in relation to the population needs (intensity of coverage), excessive dependence on the media agenda that may produce a wrong prioritization of public intervention (extension) more centered on populism. A territorial heterogeneity in extension and intensity of coverage that tends to insufficient funding; this arbitrariness and political clientelism we observe in like manner in the offer of opportunities and actual impact in participation policies.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the growing concern of public administrations about the sustainability of the system evidenced in the inclusion in recent laws and conceived as sufficient funding for the system to secure its stability and continuity over time and provoking, among other, the expansion of the market and outsourcing via service offer and the internalization of protection cost of dependency by means of co-payments and informal familial attention, characteristic of the social European model of dependency attention and which has had consequences in the configuration of the system of social services.

13 Law 39/2006, December 14th on the promotion of personal autonomy and attention to people in dependency situation, published in B.O.E. no.: 299, December 15th 2006

Characterization and typology of participation mechanisms in the regional context

The majority of the mechanisms for citizen participation in policies of municipal social services are the following: a) participatory structures of associative base or councils;¹⁴ b) deconcentrated autonomous public organisms or Institutes;¹⁵ and, c) non-formal participatory mechanisms of associative base.¹⁶

In the empirical study carried out in the region of Murcia, and on the basis of the previous typology, we verified that out of the 45 town councils in the region, only 11 (24.4%) have formal mechanisms for decentralization and/or participation in social wellbeing or social services in a broad sense (general or sectoral), even though there are 8 (17.7%) town councils that in practice have set into motion the aforementioned participatory organs. Of these, two have only Sectoral Councils, however not of general character, and other three comprehend a broader object than that of the proper social services, as they deal with various areas of public activity of the Local Corporation (Municipal Council of Citizen participation and NGO). Therefore, five are the town councils that in the region of Murcia have a Council (three) or Municipal Institute of Social Services (two), of general character and which nowadays operate, representing only 11.1% of the Local Corporations in the region.

On the other side, the five Municipal Associations of social Services —existing up to 2007— as Local Entities of supra-municipal nature with competences “delegated” in respect to social services by the town councils comprised in it, directly manage the Social Services of Primary Attention of 23 town councils, which represents more than 50% of the town councils in the region of Murcia. So far none of them opted, neither in their inception nor in their development, for the deconcentrated formula of management as it is the Institute of Social Services nor have they fostered inside of them the creation of Territorial and/or Sectoral Councils of citizen participation in social services.

14 They are characterized for being consultative, territorial and/or sectoral and extensive in nature and facilitators of information, and advise and gather proposals.

15 They have proper juridical personality, competence delegation in general and/or social services and with certain autonomy in decision making and technical economic-administrative management of the area. This way, they combine: adoption of decisions, execution/management of agreement and participation.

16 Formal dimension of the facilitation exercise; by means of periodical meetings with social-service technicians with territory associations and technicians of other systems. The initiative, call, agenda and organization is carried out by means of the directors/coordinators of the Centers of Social Services, on occasion with no support on the issues dealt with and agreements reached in them. Among their ends one finds: offer information, detect needs, ask for participation, promote inter-associative and generate networks and protocols of inter-institutional technical collaboration.

As for Sectoral Councils, six are the town councils that have set them into motion, representing 1.33% of the Local Entities existing in the region. One finds in the first place those of Woman and Elderly People, which exist in four town councils. In short, one has both, two have Council of Woman (Equal Opportunities and others linked to Violence against Women) and other of elderly people. Serving other collectives, two town councils have Immigration Councils and other two are focused on drug addictions.

Therefore, only five town councils have Municipal (o councils of citizen participation) or Sectoral Councils simultaneously. As for Institutes, nowadays they only function in two town councils, representing 4.4% of the municipalities; however, it is worth mentioning that two Local Corporations nowadays have a Municipal Council, originally they were institutes of autonomous management of social municipal issues.

Analysis of the opportunities and limitations of participatory mechanisms in the management of policies of local social services

Now we present the main results of the content analysis and the in-depth interviews with the actors of the regional participation mechanisms and that allow us to identify the most significant contributions, potentialities and limitations of the Territorial Councils of Social Wellbeing related to their capacity to influence the democratization processes in the construction of social policies in the municipal sphere.

Model of institutionalized participation by and for administration

The analysis of normative regulation of the councils verifies that this grants administration an enormous and flexible capacity to control the agenda, actors and participatory processes. The statutes and regulations define and determine the levels and issues in which it is possible to participate, thus limiting the actual frame and possibilities of effective participation in social public issues, at the same time they allow the politically/technically responsible to introduce in the session agenda those issues that this person is interested in.

This way, the participants become “guests-consumers”, not protagonists nevertheless, they can raise their voices, but filtered by their fit to the agenda and strategy of political action. The participation mechanisms are not perceived by the organizations as a proper space, but as a periodical meeting point with the local administration, in which the former offers information on the actions carried out or to-be carried out in social policy. For technicians, a framework in which to account for their management in an explicit and systematic manner, perceiving

them as a burden, institutional and social control, more than a shared task. All in all, a model centered on the institutional and on procedures foreseen and controlled by and for the administration.

Associative participation and interferences / interdependences for participation

The composition and representativeness of Municipal Councils of Social Wellbeing or Social Services have a participation base, fundamentally, associative; with a clear prominence of the federations, foundations and association before citizens as individuals, platforms and minority entities; at the same time, sectoral representation is privileged over the territorial. These preferences for social entities, fundamentally sectoral (specialized nature), as protagonists in participation is an interactional pattern very common in participatory policies and experiences.

A progressive bureaucratization, professionalization, functional specialization and dependence of the associative sector in relation to public administrations. The proceedings and conditions to access the sectoralized and increasingly visited and “exiguous” public “fund” (contracts, agreements, subventions) can lead the entities to reduce their flexibility potential and capacity to innovate, because in the end administration determines which (centers and services), what for (purposes and aims), how it is done (ways to intervene) and who receives them (collective and target problems).

This dominion of public logic, both institutional as service offer, submits the organization to dilemmas, on their own identity, autonomy, ethics and strategy of social intervention. This context generates competence relations between the entities —to obtain positions to have administrative power— more than cooperation/networks/alliances and which difference us from more consolidated wellbeing models, such as the Nordic or the Bismarckian, in which these entities share responsibilities with Administration.

On the other side, the fragmented and atomized associative reality makes the representation and plural participation processes difficult, especially in the largest municipalities, where social fabric is numerous and diverse. It is observed that certain social organizations hoard social representation in multiple participatory forums and asymmetrical contexts of capacity and opportunity to access political issues are noticeable. Inequality, on the one side, in the access to spaces and opportunities for participation in organizations, and on the other the capacity and ability of the participants to formulate political opinions, determine this representative asymmetry of collectives and problems subjects and objects of social services.

Divergent expectations among actors

The existence of a breach is noticed between the formal objectives those actually reached in practice, as in the perception of the various implied actors have on the actual objectives — stated in the ‘regulations’— and those they deem should be met (expectations). The involved social entities perceive them as an instrument to be informed on the municipal social aspects; interchange points of view, inform the administration of actions they perform; having a meeting and collaboration space between social entities that allows them to acknowledge the existence and work each one performs, coordinate services and actuations, and translate needs and claims of collectives.

This communication has improved, in particular in reference to the derivation of users and development of concrete actions among the Centers of Social Service and social organizations. These value very favorably such mechanisms, especially because of the possibility of dialogue and interchange of information with the professionals of social services. For technicians, it supposes an instrument to detect social needs, haste processes and on occasions, improve coordination of quotidian issues of the area (follow-up of cases, registers and cancelations of economic benefits and services, information on projects and results).

One of the most important and visible aspects of the analyzed participation is its competence to determine the ways to act; the methodological aspects of the sessions, the issues and how they are approached does not facilitate the consultation, deliberation and elaboration of proposals. The participatory process is perceived and considered an administrative procedure rather than substantive.

Instrumental agenda and opacity

The approached issues are related to the presentation and information of services, projects, actuations, budgets; regulating norms for services and aids and cases. Therefore, focused on technical and administrative requirements not political, such as the production of diagnoses, projects and joint decision making. On its own, the superficiality with which they are dealt generates confusion in the comprehension of the complex reality of these phenomena.

The technical/administrative management of social issues becomes relevant in the agenda, organization, functioning and dynamic of these mechanisms. The participatory process is directed by the technical discourse from politically decided aspects, discouraging participation. The necessary incorporation of actual debate and deliberation into social aspects requires “times” and “languages” that allow analyzing and producing proposals by the entities, prior to the sessions. It is true however, there are important administrative and technical limitations when certain

proposals of centers, programs and projects have to be served within deadlines defined by organs alien to the Council, and even of the same local administration or center, in views of seizing autonomic and/or State funds. It is verified that the nonparticipant general citizenry and social organizations do not know of the existing and/or functioning of Councils, since the formalization and functioning process has not been accompanied by previous and later actions, with information, dissemination, consultation, proposal and debate. This insufficient transparency feedbacks/contributes to arbitrariness in the selection of the actors and functioning of mechanisms, reproducing biases in participation.

Prevalence of information and nonbinding consultation

The actors go to Councils with documented and exhaustive information but also biased and filtered, by who, which and how that information is presented, which determines the formation of individual and collective opinions in relation to reality and alternatives that are presented as objective and possible. Information is not something given, it is submitted to a previous process of data construction and interpretation, which are utilized to define reality and plan possible courses of action.

Consultation, on its own, seems to be a democratic “rite” limited to express, not always, the opinion on what is asked, in the framework of the alternative defined as possible. It does not convey deliberation, but a mere aggregation of opinions, and so, more related to a strategy to learn the odds of success or failure of a certain action —policy and/or technique—carried out or to-be carried out. The topic and how they are stated do not usually have modification options or the margin is reduced.

The poor linking of the agreements and the perception of not influencing in the local social policy in a practical manner implies that the members feel, on occasion, “invited”, “nonparticipant” —as it is expressed— in the actual decision making process arising absenteeism situations (not attending to sessions). The organizations “are mute” taking an “absent” role and even “conformism” in the sessions, using other more useful ways to channel their demand, as previously indicated, and influence in decision making. The citizens are willing to invest their free time and other resources if their participation improves their quality of life and the quality of the services they use.

If the citizens’ participation, on the contrary, does not yield visible results, citizens lose interest. This way, the consultation processes that lead nowhere and that only consider the decision making process certainly do not increase the confidence of citizens in their government if, as pointed out by Löffler (2004), decisions are not made considering the perspective of citizens.

Governance of social wellbeing public policies in the local sphere: intensifying quality

Concurring with the conclusions of studies on associative democracy (Löffler, 2004; Montero, Font and Torcal, 2006; Colino and Del Pino, 2008; Navarro, 2008; Navarro, Cuesta and Font, 2009; Pastor, 2009, 2011), the municipal policy of participation in municipal social services configures a democratic model that can be called “democracy of access”, as it remains outside the incorporation of citizenry in the effective formulation of policies, not in the activation of the agenda, but in the discussion on the problems it must or nor incorporate.

There is another division that “separates the set of important issues, on the one side, of the accessory things, on the other” (Gutiérrez, 2005: 180). While, the discourse of institutional participation refers to it as deliberation and discussion of public issues, reality shows that Councils concern with instrumental aspects, formal and secondary, oriented to legitimize institutional policies, and occasionally, of the professionals of the centers of social services.

Councils and Institutes favor processes of interaction between the actors, but they do not guarantee on their own and automatically democratization in building social policies in the local sphere, nor vice versa. Hence, beyond their regulation, it is needed design, regulation and functioning that enables conditions and actual opportunities to access and influence on decision making processes in social policies.

Paying attention to the analysis from the participants in the research, we can systematize the proposal oriented to improve: a) the system of social services in the municipal sphere, and b) the participatory mechanisms and practices.

Contributions to foster improvements in the system of social services in the municipal sphere

1) *Greater normative, economic and local management autonomy in social primary-attention social services.* Transfer local corporations the budget and necessary competences for an adequate and autonomous management of services and elaborate strategic plans in each of the local corporations.

2) *Implant an organizational system in the local administration that promotes public policies in a participatory manner.* Create councils of citizen participation that promote associative participation and direct participation organs for the citizens in the different areas of municipal management; boost the production of transversal social policies from the coordination of the different areas of municipal competence addressing participation as an essential element for their configuration and reach political agreements that prevent the instrumentalization of mechanisms by the parties.

3) *Create normative instruments that regulate the right and mechanisms of participation in local administration.* Foster measures that guarantee the participation of people and social entities in the decision making processes in public social issues: promote municipal regulations for civil participation, produce and approve citizens' rights acts and incorporate the possibilities of new technologies to innovate in participation and create accessible municipal registrations.

4) *Universalize the coverage of territorial and sectoral councils of social services in all the local corporations with competence in the management of primary-attention social services.* Create municipal councils of general social services, generating intermediate participation structures of territorial and sectoral nature, broadening the coverage of participants and linking agreement and proposals up and downward.

5) *Deconcentrate and decentralize management of municipal social services in intermediate participatory organs and in the territory.* Manage primary-attention social services from public autonomous organisms. The institutes are instruments adequate to deconcentrate the management of competences of social services in the municipal sphere, they favor transparency and promptness in economic, technical and administrative management of social issues and allow incorporating participatory mechanisms.

6) *Improve representativeness and diversity of the main actors in councils and institutes.* Break with the dichotomy between the high social representativeness vs. efficacy in the management of public issues. To do so it is suggested articulating work tables or sectoral councils with delegated competences and which allow reaching agreements in representative intermediate organs of each collective or concrete social problem that represent the set of entities and organizations linked to each population sector. Considering the vertiginous growth of associations and other social entities, it seems convenient to include in the statutes or regulation the flexibility to incorporate new members without the need to modify the former, simply by means of agreements. Establishing conditions and guarantees of representation in the members elected for such end so that the representatives behave as such: gathering demands and needs and adequately transporting them, reporting continually. Incorporate social diversity into the councils and institutes, intensely incorporating the social groups that nowadays are infra-represented.

7) *Generate relational strategies of deeper impact on local social policies.* Clarify objectives and functions of the councils and institutes in relation to their direct incidence in local policies, specifying the issues that offer actual content for these mechanisms, therefore, motivate to participate. The intention is to innovate in the design and implementation of participatory methodologies that facilitate actual participation and avoid "falling" into the "inertia" of nonparticipation. To do so, it is deemed

opportune to associate mechanisms of associative participation with forms that promote direct participation; vitalize social capital, socialize and educate for participation, foster and support associations and cooperative movements, promote associative relationships, generate social local networks, support strategic agreements between social organizations and the local administration; coordinate centers and local services, foster co-management with vicinal and social organizations of municipal centers; optimize resources, boost social cooperation measures between and the local administration, provide the existing citizen participation organs with municipal resources, generate meeting spaces between administration, etc.

Contributions to deepen into participatory practices oriented to generate significant dialogue in the local sphere

The dimensions to consider in order to intensify citizen participation in the processes, practices, actors and results can be summarized as follows:

1) *Adequate preparation*; the institutional contexts significantly shape the roles adopted by the actors, processes, and so results and satisfaction of the actors. From here the need of coherence in municipal organization to listen and link issues and agreements with governmental actions. Therefore, it is needed: administrative structure, normative development, resources to support organization and development and political will. Defined responsibility, sound leadership that links local government actions as a whole.

2) *Inclusive planning and process criteria*; it implies agreeing “rules to play”, clarity in the context, finally, purposes, design in processes and tasks. Times, place and criteria and selection of actors to participate should be cared for. The participation mechanisms existing in a government shall be interconnected in views of producing a vision that integrates citizenship. The participatory process must satisfy the emotional (the participant and citizenry have to feel recognized, respected and heard), the genuine interest of the participants that obtain results and feeling/perceiving/objectifying that the procedure is legitimate, fair and valuable. These issues require preventing improvisation, fatigue and “simulations”.

3) *Inclusion and diversity of actors/territories*; it supposes the equitable incorporation of actors, not only from statistical representativeness, but especially from the integration of all positions/voices. This requires equality in considering/recognizing in debates from horizontal communication. The criteria and processes to select the actors shall be transparent, avoiding the privilege of “large corporations”, ignoring opponents, or else excessively privileging “experts”. The best inclusion/representativeness implies that general citizenry has to be able to access and become involved in political decisions, not only qualified people and groups. The

mechanisms and procedures that exclude from decision making processes people or groups because of lack of (social, cultural, economic, technologic) “capital”.

4) *Dynamizing team and facilitating dynamic*; the facilitators must be impartial and qualified, their main task is to cultivate a shared sensation of appropriation, “empowering” citizenry by means of significant dialogue. This requires promoting indignation, communication transparency and self-reflection; ingredients that potentiate communication, generate a confidence environment oriented to identify coincidences and informed differences. This way, it is worth underscoring that it is not only to attend meetings, but to appropriate the decision making processes from the various mechanisms and means available to listen to the citizens, considered individually, as non-organized groups and as social entities.

5) *Motivating dynamic*; the mechanisms have to motivate and stimulate participation. Participants must feel and be certain that their efforts are seriously considered and that their proposals are not “left for good”, but that these will be taken into account at the time of making decisions. The experiences show the risk of utilizing mechanisms to justify previously taken decisions, instrumentalizing public opinion.

6) *Collaboration and shared objective*; it supposes to work in planning, gathering and presenting information, etc. preventing the promotion of primary and secondary options.

7) *Openness and learning*; help listen to one another, explore without restrictions new ideas, generate new options, by means of a space to learn, distend and self-reflection. For this it is important to be attentive times, generate inflection moments that to allow to show vulnerable and to become vulnerable and permeable to the rest of actors.

8) *Deliberative functioning*; the methodological process of sessions shall promote deliberation. The participants shall not only discuss on the basis of the information they have, but they should have comprehensive and diverse information on the pros and cons, various interests and options of the issue to address. It is necessary to plan all the aspects of a topic, make it transparent, present the different interests, alternative solutions, costs and repercussion on the resolution of other issues (priority ranking) and on the affected people. It is necessary to transfer those capacities to the citizenry so that it has the capital and power to make autonomous decisions. However, the information input should not be confused with its use to gain the citizens’ support for a decision made by the administration.

9) *Transparency and confidence*; the information shall be accessible, multidirectional, policentric and over different media. It is necessary to generate clear and flexible processes, both in information and opinions, analysis and generation of alternatives analyzed from viability and future perspective.

10) *Support to general good*; the participants shall support common wellbeing, this is to say, the adoption of important decisions for the future of community and not only for certain groups. This requires a communal diagnosis on the basis of prioritization criteria adopted in a participatory manner.

11) *Impact and action*; make sure that each participatory effort has actual potential, which implies interconnected, adequate, effective and enabling participatory mechanisms. The participants have to prove that their participation is significant, influential and that impacts with a sensation of real appropriation of processes, tasks and decisions.

12) *Sustained commitments – participatory culture*; participatory processes shall link to one another in views of generating participatory culture in a context that involves all the spheres of quotidian life and socializing agents to generate citizen participation.

The analysis verifies that participatory processes should:

- Address complexity: social (diverse interests and perspectives), dynamic (causes and affects without time and space) and generative (uncertain/undetermined future).
- Coordinate diverse meanings/understandings: confidence and mutual acceptance, which implies transparency in processes and results.
- Produce innovation: novel, different answers, tangible for the citizens.
- Enable deliberation: dialogue, systematize opinions, frame alternative options, and adopt agreed firm decisions.
- Sustained dialogue: produce processes/results in the long run.
- Generate capabilities: empower, train, create work groups, produce and support leaders and their rotation, etc.

To sum up actual and effective transparency and innovation in civil participation in designing, managing and assessing social service policies is configured as the essential element to generate/reinforce/rebuild in the closest territorial and organizational level. Its incorporation will allow improving the efficacy and efficiency of public policies and social service offer, and adopting significant and binding decisions for the social actors and users of centers/services, provoking a progressive vitalization of the social capital of the municipalities and social organizations where we work from the transactional synergies.

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