THE ACTIVE ROLE OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN THE LOCAL REDEFINITION OF NATIONAL POLICIES

Alcides A. MONTEIRO

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Abstract

The community-based organizations are an important partner of national States towards promoting community participation and sustainable development, and engaging citizens and other organizations in the decision making of local governance. The purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of local organizations in the design and delivery of social services, with a particular focus on the impact of their own political orientation and strategy in the local redefinition of national policies. The data presented in this paper is the result of an external consulting and assessment work, requested and financed by the two projects in analysis, by the use of a multiple and mixed-method research design conducted over three phases and during four years. The results reveal that Portuguese community organizations are far from being a passive partner which merely executes guidelines when in partnership with the State. On the contrary, main findings support the idea that these organizations aim at the promotion of local (social and economic) development and can play an important mediation role between programmatic guidelines and their execution, strongly reflecting their own political identity in both the process and the results.

Keywords: community-based organizations, governance, social inclusion, local development, social entrepreneurship, Portugal

Introduction

Actually, in most European countries, the ideal of the 1980s and 1990s - which was nurtured by a significant part of the social movements and organizations of the third sector - has been virtually abandoned. It defended that it was possible to

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promote local development essentially through a joint effort of local communities and organizations, supported by the management of local resources. In this perspective the geographic proximity was seen as 'potential to render problems into opportunities' (Fragoso, 2009: 119). Nowadays, the main orthodoxy, greatly influenced by the political guidelines stemming from the Lisbon Treaty (Borrás & Jacobsson, 2004; Daly, 2007), stresses the relevance of the celebrated partnerships between the State and the civil society in favor of local and community development. Portugal is not an exception to this rule and during the last few decades several nationwide initiatives have adopted such a configuration. Examples include the successive models of the LEADER Program, the Social Network Program, the National Program for the Fight against Poverty and, most recently, the Program for Inclusion and Development (PROGRIDE).

Many analysts evaluate negatively this new territorial governance (Rhodes, 1996; Peters, 2002; Geddes, 2006; Argiolas, Cabras, Dessi, & Floris, 2009; Wang, 2011), since it does not reflect greater involvement of community-based organizations in the co-construction of public policies. On the contrary, the organizations are seen as gradually involved on competitive contexts oriented to the marketization of social services, acting mainly as frontline service providers and only as co-producers of public policies. However, some empirical evidence allows the hypothesis that not always the role of local organizations is reduced to the implementation of State orientations or that the influence of local-based organizations in the shaping and delivery of social services it is only a matter of "street-level bureaucracy" (Lipsky, 1980; Prior & Barnes, 2011). Based on the two case studies that support the present analysis, we want to emphasize the idea that these organizations can play an important mediation role between programmatic guidelines and their execution, strongly reflecting their own political orientation and strategy in both the process and the results.

Therefore it is this paper's goal to evidence how two community-based organizations have implemented the same national Program at a local level, having chosen clearly different strategies which follow two different approaches to local development and also shape dissimilar combinations between economic and social development. This study is more focused on strategies and processes than on results. Nevertheless, we will not disregard the potential impacts of the interventions carried out, as well as their sustainability perspectives.

Portugal: new regulatory frameworks for public policies

During the post-1974 period (year of the April 25th revolution, an event which changed the Portuguese regime from a 48-year old authoritarian dictatorship into a democracy), due to internal and external conditionings, the State has used its politically reinforced regulatory power to create spaces inside civil society, the so-called 'secondary civil society' (Santos, 1987). These spaces were powerful

enough to negotiate the sharing of responsibilities as far as social protection was concerned (Hespanha et al*.,* 2000). 'New social partners' have emerged, with whom the State came to establish cooperation protocols, and from then on not only sponsored and financed them, but also regulated their interventions. This form of dependency transformed the Private Institutions for Social Solidarity (or IPSS - Instituições Particulares de Solidariedade Social) in social service providers of a functional nature, who managed local services and offers but at the same time had a limited autonomy. Likewise, there was no significant investment in the articulation between the fight against poverty and exclusion, on one hand, and territorial social-economic development, on the other (Estivill, 2008).

From the 1990s onwards, mainly due to the implementation of the European Program Poverty 3, a new generation of social political measures emerged in Portugal. In the areas of local development and the fight against poverty and social exclusion, some examples of projects: the LEADER Program (an integrated action initiative aiming at the development of essentially rural areas); the Social Network Program (an initiative implemented in 1997, with the goal of improving local social activities, particularly the creation of information systems, strategic planning and direct intervention in local problems, based on a concept of proximity and partnership) (Monteiro & Ribeiro, 2008); the carrying out of local-based initiatives according to the National Program for the Fight against Poverty (or PNLCP, based on the currently deactivated European Poverty program's principles: integral nature, partnership, participation and a territorial approach). In 2004, the PNLCP was replaced by another nationwide plan, the Program for Inclusion and Development, PROGRIDE.

In addition to the introduction of new management and intervention models, state intervention measures of this sort also implied the participation of new agents – namely, Non-governmental Organizations (NGO), local development associations, schools or social solidarity cooperatives - and assigned new responsibilities to municipalities and secondary local administrative units. In turn, these different programs and measures allowed the implementation of distinct governance models.

To fully understand the complexity and diversity underlying the idea of governance, it is useful to consider the analyses made by some authors which are focused on the range of meanings involved in the use of this concept and public policy, namely with respect to models of multi-level governance (Marks & Hooghe, 2003) and public / private partnerships (Lang, Roessl, & Weismeier-Sammer, 2013). By adopting the concept of 'steering State' and exploring its partnership relations with civil society in public service delivery, Yves Vaillancourt and Philippe Leclerc (2007) clearly distinguish co-construction processes, understood as the active participation of civil society organizations in the definition of public policies, from co-production processes, which refer to the participation of those organizations in the materialization of the policies. While the first formula favours

partnership relations between the two parts and practices of 'deliberative democracy', the last one leads predominantly to instrumental relationships.

With similar analytical concerns, Treib, Bähar and Falkner (2005) suggest a typology of modes of governance which result from the combination of the legal instruments employed (binding provisions, such as regulations, directives and decisions, versus non-binding, namely recommendations, opinions or 'conclusions' and 'declarations') and the implementation procedures followed (which can lean towards either rigidity or flexibility). As a result, four different governance models may be identified: (1) *Coercion*, involving detailed and mandatory legal tools, the implementation of which is highly standardized (2) *Voluntarism*, which stands for the complete opposite of the previous model, relying on non-binding instruments and broad goals which shall be adjusted on a case-by-case basis; (3) *Targeting*, as a model which focuses mainly on non-binding recommendations, though of a more detailed nature, which results in a less flexible implementation; (4) *Framework regulation*, which results in fairly mandatory tools, presented together with a range of idealized goals or suggestions regarding the different possible ways to fulfil them.

As far as its formal character is concerned, PROGRIDE is based on a *framework regulation* approach, since its implementation depends on a legal support (created by Ministerial Order no. 25/2005 of 3 January) which defines the goals of the program, the principles that should guide the development of local projects and the mandatory intervention areas. The program's main goals are: to promote social inclusion within marginalized and degraded areas; to support an active intervention among groups afflicted by exclusion, marginality and continued poverty. Each project must observe five core principles: partnership, a territorial approach, cross-sectional nature, flexibility/innovation, and participation. Concerning the implementation of local projects, the adopted strategy was to plan them over a four-year period, based on the previously defined Social Diagnosis and Social Development Plan for the municipality, as part of the Social Network Program (see definition above). On the other hand, its implementation would result from the partnership between the promoting entity (the municipality, usually), the provider (a 'non-profit private entity with a curriculum in the social solidarity domain', necessarily) and other local stakeholders.

The formula and the novelty introduced by the different modes of governance has been the target of several critical reactions, some of them pointing out its benefits while others stressing the risks involved. The positive arguments assert that governance management supported by self-organized networks may lead to a more balanced power distribution, greater autonomy for local decision-making and an enhanced involvement of the different social agents in the governance dynamics (OECD, 2001a, 2001b; Kooiman, 2003; Kjaer, 2004; Wilson, 2008; Faguet, 2011). They also claim that the innovative character of local interventions may help in the revision of not only public policies, but also certain public

institutions (Ranci & Montagnini, 2008; Squazzoni, 2008; Defourny & Nyssens, 2011).

Other analysts, however, prefer to stress how some models may lead to weaker government ability. They question the potential for drift, which may be introduced by 'softer' governance models – those ones that, according to the more neoliberal approaches, have outlined the possibility of 'governance without government' (Rhodes, 1996; Peters, 2002). Such critical voices doubt the legitimacy of a government based on local decisions, as well as the vulnerability to doubtful agents and personal interests, or even conflicting goals and values which deviate the governance intervention from the pursuit of the collective interest (Geddes, 2006; Weber & Khademian, 2008; Wang, 2011). As Sorenson and Torfing (2004) point out, the transformations carried out by decentralization bring the challenge of imbalanced responsibilities and power among local stakeholders.

In short, the quality of governance mechanisms appears to be based not only on the guarantees offered by the State, but also on the capability of local agents, namely community organizations, to observe some essential principles, which will improve the co-construction and co-production of public policies (Edwards, 2013). Among those principles we can include the ones followed by PROGRIDE, namely the principles of partnership, territorial approach, transversal nature, flexibility/innovation and participation.

Methodology

Though geographically separated by a mountain, the 'social intervention areas defined as priorities' by the two projects analyzed share a common fate: they are located in ageing and depopulated inland locations in Portugal, their inhabitants are spread across small rural villages, in geographical territories that are also characterized by the decay of its mono-industry (more precisely, the textile and mining industries), scarce employment opportunities and the departure of the most potentially productive population members, who migrate to other regions. In regions depressed by 'galloping exclusion', as defined by the president of one of the providers, only the elderly, the most vulnerable families and very few other resilient inhabitants remain.

The data presented in this paper is the result of an external consulting and assessment work, requested and financed by the two projects. As Elena Saraceno explains (1999), the evaluation exercise in programs that have adopted a bottom-up approach has at least two main functions: (i) to provide information on the results and impact of realized actions at local level; and (ii) to provide information on the real processes which are taking place at local level as a result of this development approach. On the other side, the focus on a collaborative approach

(Foster-Fishman, Perkins & Davidson, 1997; O'Sullivan & D'Agostino, 2002) improves the analytic capacity of program participants, and also increases the likelihood that evaluation results will be used to refine and improve programs or local projects (Fine, Thayer & Coghlan, 2000; Cojocaru, 2009). The consulting and assessment work followed a multiple and mixed-method research design conducted over three phases. First, a critical analysis of the work plans of each project was carried out, with the objective of identifying the conditions for its implementation, the internal coherence and sustainability perspectives. In phase 2, annual progress reports were produced, some of them dedicated to specific themes and upon request by the technical teams, such as the degree of knowledge and modes of participation of stakeholders in the project or on the relationship between economic and social development. In phase 3, final assessment reports were carried out, one for each project, focused mainly on integration of these projects in a local development strategy, the dynamics for intervention enthralled, the degree of implementation of planned activities, the compliance with the general principles associated with the PROGRIDE and again about the prospects for sustainability.

In project 1, the work has extended for over two years (approximately half of its planned duration), while in project 2 it was carried out during the four years of the original schedule. Throughout each phase several information gathering tools were employed (local surveys, individual interviews, focus groups), as well as direct observation and debates with technical teams and other partners regarding the development conditions of the projects in question. An important resource of information was the annual self-assessment reports produced for each activity by the technical staff in charge and that account for its evolution and results.

Results

Development in Gouveia Project

Faced with a legal framework previously defined and a set of principles to be respected, the Development in Gouveia Project (or GED - Gouveia em Desenvolvimento), promoted by the local municipality and executed by a local foundation, adopted as main strategy the field consolidation of a network of interconnected services and initiatives, able to address the complex issues their target public (the multi-problematic families) had to deal with: 'The goal of the projects' technicians is to promote change and improve the families' self-organization, in order to render them autonomous in the resolution of their problems' (quotation taken from the self-assessment report, 2009, Activity 1.2.4 – Family and Social Mediation). To fulfil this goal, three different approaches were outlined: 1) Working closely with the families, in order to identify the constraints they have to deal

with (thus contributing to a personal and/or family diagnosis); 2) Support to the identification of the opportunities available to these families (professional training courses, available complementary training, job opportunities...); 3) Acting directly through the concession of funds and the enabling of solutions, particularly as far as family and vocational guidance is concerned, as well as the distribution of material goods.

Throughout the four years of the project a total of twenty-seven independent initiatives were carried out, focusing on issues such as the creation of a 'Family Support Centre', the promotion of a Social-Educational Support Centre for seniors, the creation of an Economic Development Support Centre or, finally, the establishment of a network of activities particularly targeted at the youth and Schools. Apart from its intrinsic value as new and innovative solutions (goods and services) provided to families and/or individuals in a precarious situation, another goal of the project was to innovate using a network organizational model, based on local partnerships and also able to provide a more efficient answer to the multiple needs of the families. Thus, the principles of partnership and the cross-sectional nature became crucial for the development of the 'network' concept which this project aimed to establish. The cross-sectional nature refers to the involvement of families and individuals in a consistent network of supports, which could ease the understanding and structuring of their life project. Partnership is meant to be understood as a challenge for local stakeholders to find agreement on, thus encouraging them to accept joint responsibilities in the demand for improved knowledge and solutions for local social issues.

Even though the GED Project succeeded to fulfil some of these main goals, there were others, however, which proved very hard to materialize, such as: the establishment of a cooperative and empowering approach with the populations (Fraser, 2005; Ninacs, 2008); and the ability to relate the nurturing of economic initiatives to the promotion of social development. In fact, the promotion of social economy initiatives associated to the improvement of traditional economic activities was never given the relevance which the project had planned. Rather, the Economic Development Support Centre focused its intervention on policies designed to encourage the occupational integration or reintegration of young people and the unemployed, as well as promotion and entrepreneurship training activities. As far as the strategies for encouraging active participation are concerned, only very seldom did the Project move beyond the summoning of the target public for participation in initiatives outlined in the Project, thus taking an active part in consultation, cooperation and co-construction practices.

In short, if the GED Project managed to leave a mark regarding the local implementation of PROGRIDE, this was mostly felt in the consolidation of a support network directed at the multi-problematic families of the municipality, the improvement of mediation strategies and the enhancement of potential results from the partnership between associations and local services. Among the project's

most relevant results we shall stress not only an improvement of the provision of new solutions (goods or services) regarding the problems the target public has to deal with, but also the establishment of new organizational arrangements and/or institutional partnerships which allow for greater effectiveness and efficiency.

Terra a Terra Project

How can one promote Social Inclusion and Development and, simultaneously, the rehabilitation of economic activities? Or, in other words, how can the former be fulfilled through the promotion of the latter? With this notion as the main challenge raised by the territory defined as priority, the intervention program outlined by the Terra a Terra Project (also promoted by the municipality and implemented by a local development association) focused on a main goal: the improvement of living conditions in the region through an intervention able to 'promote participation and community activities through actions aiming to ease the intervention and active participation of local agents, valuing local potentialities and resources and encouraging the economic, social and professional inclusion of individuals' (Terra a Terra, 2005).

The activities implemented in the area of intervention fulfilled different goals: the creation and promotion of social equipments; the development of competencies; social-communitarian animation activities; reinforcement and establishment of existent and novel partnerships; development of voluntary projects; social economy promotion; nurturing of employability and tourism opportunities using endogenous resources, local products and artefacts; the support of the 'Thematic Houses Network' initiative. The priority was to promote a market approach and economic sustainability, along with social development dynamics, by exploring local potentialities and resources. As a consequence, the 'Thematic Houses Network', a set of infra-structures conceived with the goal of promoting selected products in order to turn them into a significant trademark of the region (for example, honey, mushrooms, linen and drums), became one of the Project's main catalysts, boosting not only local heritage but also entrepreneurship development. This initiative gave visibility to the contribution of the Terra a Terra Project for economic development, a symbol of the continuous intervention in these territories and privileged repository of the PROGRIDE principles.

More specifically, the Thematic Houses Network implemented by the Terra a Terra Project was intended to develop and promote certain assets inherent to the local territory. This approach involved the rehabilitation of specific economic activities directly associated to the region, which were lethargic or in a near-extinct state, such as bee-keeping and linen production, or the use of local resources like mushrooms and drums cultural tradition. Four Houses were established: the Honey House, providing bee-keepers not only with the equipment for honey extraction, but also with information and training on legislation and

workplace safety & hygiene; the Mushroom House, aiming at the promotion of a local product, the *Pleurotus* wild mushroom, through direct investment in the exploration of new production procedures, as well as the search for new producers and its publicity next to the local populations; the Weavers' House, aiming at the preservation of the linen production, by introducing innovation via the production of goods featuring a contemporary design; and, finally, the Drum House, which most prominently features an ethnographic character, thus reinforcing the municipality's cultural identity through the support of local craftsmen.

Each of these Houses establishes a different path through the endorsement of common goals: the one of promoting direct and indirect employment; becoming places of training and experimentation; evolving into local economic activity trademarks in the villages where they were located; promoting communitarian development supported by a direct participation by the population; boosting economic initiatives always compatible with sustainability principles.

Conclusions

Featuring a very similar social and economic context and observing the same legal guidelines, two different projects, developed by municipalities and carried out by community-based organizations in partnership with other local institutions, identified different ways of fulfilling their defined goals. One of them chose to invest in new organizational settings, able to reinforce the dynamics of a transversal approach and the territorialisation of social intervention. The other one opted to support an intervention associated to social economy and the improvement of social entrepreneurship, thus fostering the relationship between economic activities and social development.

In the first case, the strategic option was motivated by the belief that optimizing and increasing the density of the support networks for multiple-problematic families and individuals would be the most successful way to not only promote an active search of solutions for the problems of the target community, but also integrate or reintegrate the unemployed in the job market. Additionally, the technical team has also considered that this would be a way to rehabilitate the local economy, since it would contribute to a decrease in unemployment-related problems, not only instilling the target public with an improved propensity for skill development, but also improving their entrepreneurship abilities. In the second case, the adopted strategy is clearly inspired in the European tradition of social and solidarity economy investment by civil society associations (Ávila & Campos, 2008; Defourny & Nyssens, 2011). In the Thematic Houses project, it is easy to identify several features normally associated to that tradition: reintegration of outcast workers and the providing of services to the most vulnerable communities; the relationship between the production of goods and services and the

embracing of a clear social role, in this case obviously related to the preservation of local cultural customs; a priority attributed to the participation dynamics and the involvement of different stakeholders in the management of equipments and services.

When the conclusions of the PROGRIDE were presented, in 2010, the promoting entities of both analyzed projects (the two involved municipalities) were invited to take part in another program financed by the European Social Fund and the Portuguese State, which is the Local Social Development Contracts Program (CLDS). However, and worryingly, the managing rules of this new program are more restrictive regarding the providers, giving them even less autonomy: the program is based on a very comprehensive set of mandatory actions and interventions related to national priorities; and the rules for execution are very strict, while the budgets are assigned by partner and by action.

The integration of civil society associations in a more competitive context, oriented to the marketization of social services, is supposed to encourage the application of new organizational formulas and innovative operational methods (Dart, 2004; Shortall & Warner, 2010; Wright, Marston & McDonald, 2011). However, previous experiences in other countries actually led to the opposite, namely to an increasing propensity for 'organizational inertia', greater immobility and a loss of innovative capacities: 'It is therefore a "blocked" and static sector, with little dynamism in a mainly defensive position' (Ranci & Montagnini, 2008: 9). Additionally, it can also compromise the Third Sector's own identity (Eliasoph, 2011).

Far from being passive partners and acting as mere public policy management agent, local organizations have demonstrated initiative and used their own political orientations and strategies towards the improvement of public services. Nevertheless, we do not know for how long and how far will the State be available to contribute to these governance models, which allow associations to intervene in a creative and innovative way. Through their partnerships with the State, civil society organizations are still an essential and active agent in the co-construction and co-production of public policies. Therefore, the mark of their identity and the will to innovate are still very present, at least locally.

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