

6. Conclusions

Social inclusion is a concept that has been very successful in redefining the objectives of social policy in the challenges of new times, characterised by accelerated change, mobility, instability and fragmentation on all levels: in the economy, in society and in the life course of each individual. Citizen participation is also widely accepted, and is considered a form of saving democracy from its growing distancing and ineffectiveness regarding the problems and concerns of the citizens.

Progress has been made in the respect for human rights by incorporating the mentioned concepts in the discourses and, to a smaller extent, in governmental practices, but this has obviously not been sufficient to put an end to social exclusion or to do away with the deficits of democratic quality. Progress has been selective and has come with many situations of stagnation or even regression, shown for example in the deterioration of working conditions and basic services, or in the denial of political rights.

The situation cannot be attributed only to the present economic crisis. In addition to increasing the number of victims, the crisis has certainly reduced the government's capacities on all levels to deal with the problems through its own policies. However these policies had already been weakened by a lack of true commitment on the part of many governments and by approaches that see the market as the only possible valid form of social regulation.

How can we explain such a difference between discourses and realities? Maybe the problem has to be sought in the fact that we have taken for granted that the concepts of social inclusion and participatory democracy corresponded to unequivocal, obvious meanings for the whole world. This is not the case. As we have seen, there are different ways of understanding democracy, and each one gives a different idea of exclusion and inclusion. Even public participation can obey very different focuses and motivations: from work for (re)generating the public sphere to the effective defence of private interests. The umbrella of social inclusion can also hide realities such as the stigmatisation of all those who fail to follow a person, family or community's "correct" (working / social / cultural) model, with such terrible consequences as assimilation, marginalization or elimination.

This is why we believe that social inclusion and participatory democracy only make sense as political objectives committed to the recognition of the other (*of equality in difference*) and with the civil, political and social rights. But these are objectives which also enable the application of highly diverse institutional and non-institutional instruments.

To the specific question of whether the existence of a more participatory democracy is a necessary condition for advancing towards more inclusive societies, we have

reached the conclusion that this bond exists and is given in all spheres of social life (work, public services, education, neighbourhood's life...). What's more, there is no possible inclusion in urban societies without participation. There may be powerful social policies that achieve a certain, always weakened, redistribution of income and wealth on the basis of transfers; nevertheless, without true involvement of the excluded in the process of inclusion, it will all be but a mirage. There will be no real transformation because it will not be based on people's autonomy.

How to ensure that the excluded or those at risk of exclusion mobilise? First of all, by recognising and accepting the differences in the framework of equality, secondly by eliminating the social structures causing inequality and thirdly, by not braking or discouraging the initiatives of these groups, even though they might not fully respond to the models of the dominant society. Furthermore, there are many community initiatives that generate public value and deserve to be encouraged and helped by the public authorities with economic, technical and logistics support. It is also positive to engage into joint service production with the public authorities and also, logically, to channel collective demands and pressure for improving the services provided by the institutions. There must therefore be a double inclusion strategy: recognition of rights (social citizenship) and promotion of group and community self-organisation and promotion (empowerment) of the excluded.

By making a map of specific proposals for starting up this strategy in a local context, we find a constellation of alternatives where the solution is neither to apply a market-based model, which has been shown to fail, nor to return to the protective social state, which is excessively rigid and stifles social autonomy, but rather to turn to a model that enhances the improvement of the public sector, the market and the third sector to strengthen what is public: public values, public services, public spaces... as a basis for social inclusion. For a public sphere must be created day by day, bringing participation with different formats adapted to each context, to the institutions, to the companies and the social initiatives.