Study: "The impact of citizen participation in the efficiency of social inclusion policies"

Social inclusion is a concept that has been quite successful at redefining the goals of social policy, in the face of the challenges of a new era characterized by speeded change, mobility, instability and fragmentation at all levels: in the economy, in the society and in the vital trajectory of each individual. Citizen participation is also an idea that enjoys great acceptance, understood as a way to save democracy from its increasing distance and inefficiency with respect to the problems and demands of the people.

The incorporation of the mentioned concepts in the governmental speeches and, to a lesser extent, in its policies, has improved the respect for human rights, but it obviously has been insufficient to eradicate social exclusion and defective democracies. The advances are selective, and go in parallel with multiple situations of stagnation or even regression, manifested, for example, in precarious jobs, degrading public services or negation or the lack of political rights.

We can't blame this situation only on the current economic crisis. Certainly, while increasing the number of victims, the crisis has reduced the capacity of governments at all levels to tackle the problems through their own resources and policies. But these had already been weakened previously, by the lack of real commitment of many rulers and by the policy approaches that see the market as the only valid and possible form of social regulation.

How can such difference between speeches and realities be explained? Perhaps we can find an answer in the fact that we have assumed that the words social inclusion and participative democracy correspond with meanings that are univocal and evident for everyone. However, it is not the case. There are several ways of understanding democracy: Liberal, republican, freelance... associated with diverse forms and degrees of exclusion/inclusion. Even citizen participation can be originated by very different, even contradictory motivations: from the work for the definition of a public interest to the effective defense of private interests. And under the umbrella of social inclusion we can find phenomena such as the stigmatization of all those that do not fit in a "correct" model of person, family or community, with consequences as execrable as assimilation, segregation or elimination.

It is for that reason that the research begins with a critical conceptual analysis and a stand taking: we understand that social inclusion and participative democracy only make sense as political goals committed to the recognition of the other -to equality within the difference- and to civil, political and social right. The mentioned goals allow, however, the application of very diverse, institutional and non institutional, tools.

From here we investigate about the relationship between two concepts which, intuitively, we would say that they belong together. The concrete research question is if the existence of a more participative democracy is a necessary condition to advance towards more inclusive societies, and search the answer putting the focus on the cities, because it is in the urban areas where the problems and challenges put by globalization are manifested with all their crudeness; as well as the possible ways of solution, in which the local governments will play a crucial role.

We build an answer from the theoretical development of two ideal types: policies of inclusion without participation and policies of inclusion with participation. This allows us, besides ascertaining and grounding the bond between inclusion and participation in all the spheres (work, public services, education, daily life in the neighborhood, etc.), mapping concrete proposals for putting in value and reinforcing the mentioned bond.

What emerges is a constellation of alternatives where the solution is not to apply a model based only in the market, which has failed, neither to go back to a protective social state, which is too rigid and smothers social autonomy, but a model that is able to extract the best of the state, the market and the third sector to reinforce the public: public values, public services, public places... as the basis of social inclusion. A strong public sphere has to be constructed day by day, incorporating participation, formally adapted to each context, to institutions, firms and NGOs.