

CADERNOS DE REFLEXÃO E PRODUÇÃO POLÍTICA

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FICHA TÉCNICA:

CRPP – Revista Científica Internacional
ISSN 2183-8380

Linguas: Português, Inglês, Francês, Espanhol

Periodicidade: BiAnual

www.citidep-press.org/crpp/

Editora: CITIDEP Press (www.citidep-press.org)

Contacto: citidep@gmail.com

Information Costs in Rural Development

Introduction and research questions^{1 2}

Alejandro Natal

anatal@cmq.edu.mx

Abstract

One of the major questions in terms of participatory decision making for self-reliant communities is how to access, use and organize information they need to provide services for themselves. This article discuss how communities manage information for participatory service provision. It focuses on the costs and benefits attached to the process of searching for and managing information for service provision that rural communities have. In particular, it argues that the costs of getting relevant information for service provision are specially high for rural communities, particularly those passing through a process of modernization. It contends that these costs can represent serious constraints for communities to provide for themselves. It brings evidence from the Mazahua cases to explain why and how these costs affect community participation and how communities have developed institutional arrangements so as to minimize them.

The Meetings in the Mazahua Self-Reliant Communities

Meetings are the heart of participatory decision making. They played a central part in the process of service provision in the communities studied.

Though the old Mazahuas remember that they had meetings before participatory development reached the region, they remember also, that those were of a very different type. Because only the more senior members of the community had voice, and for the leaders, were very authoritarian. As promoted by the government and NGOs, participatory development brought a democratic component to the collective decision making process.

¹ based on Chapter IV of Ph.D. Thesis Draft, LSE, UK

² Submetido ao CRPP em 1997

In current meetings most people from the community were invited, and though not all of them come, there was in general high assistance to them.

One of the reasons the government office, the QUANGO and the NGO gave us to consider the communities studied as *self-reliant* was precisely that their meetings were highly participative. In two of the communities, San Lorenzo and EL Salto, the field officers even stressed the particular role of women in meetings. These field officers (both women) were highly satisfied for they perceived that as a consequence of the process of participation women had been empowered. The field officer of El Salto said to us “now that they have gained voice in the meetings, nobody will be able to take it away from them”.

In our first visit to the field we had the opportunity to attend to some of the meetings these field officers had with the communities of El Salto and San Lorenzo and indeed we observed a high level of involvement of women. At that time we observed that the community very soundly listened to the information the field officer use to present them when proposing a project. We also observed how, afterwards, the participants asked many questions and openly discuss their opinions. If there are signals to self-reliance these communities were indeed giving them.

A year later, in our second visit to the field, these communities had been already *declared self-reliant* and the agent had “taken off”. We were stricken by the radical change the meetings had had.

The communities studied were still having meetings to decide what and how to provide for themselves, just as they had done with the presence of a field officer. The meetings were now, however, very slow, incredibly long and in many cases the actual objective for which the meeting had been called got lost.

To our surprise, and contrasting with what we had seen before, though the assistance to the meetings was acceptable (an average of 65% of the household were represented) most people remained silent and just a few talked and apparently took decisions. Moreover, women that had seemed to us terrible participative before, were now specially silent, and excepting one or two most of them were totally quiet. Men were not behaving very differently and there were only a few that actively involved themselves in the discussions. The role of the large majority was just to be present and vote at the end of the meetings. What they keep on going to the meetings for was a question that puzzled us, as we will discuss later.

The way they voted was also specially interesting. At the end of the meeting a vote session was called and the first ones that rose their hand were precisely those that had been more actively involved in the discussion. Detailed observation of these moments make us realise that those that raised their hands after were expecting to see how the more actively involved voted so as to imitate them. If we had not have observed this pattern repeated, practically in every single meeting, we would have concluded that it was just part of the same process of being more involved. However, it soon became evident that the participants to the meetings were voting in groups.

We never saw, any participant of a meeting directly opposing others' opinion. The more open debates that used to take place when the field officers were present gone. Now, when an individual had a different opinion he/she tried to put it forward once. If his/her opinion did not received support he/she stayed quiet for the rest of the meeting. The more active members, however, could defend their opinions a bit more forcefully, but if it was not supported they usually surrendered and accepted the propositions of others as it had always been theirs.

One of the most common feature of meetings, practically present in all of them, was the fact that when deciding which service they wanted to provide the question of "how do we do it" inevitable came to the table. Most of the times an individual was pointed by somebody else (never by him/herself) as knowing something about the issue. For he/she had once worked, seen or had been told of a similar thing which had been done somewhere else. Then he/she explained his/her experience and the participants discussed again the new information.

The case of the construction of a dike in San Lorenzo exemplifies this observation. The meeting was divided between extending the electricity network to cover the poorest households or building dike to stop the rains washing off the main road. A young man was pointed as once having worked in the construction of a "big wall" in the neighbouring town. He then explained how wide -he thought- the dike needed to be and though some comments were made on the differences between a dike and a "big wall" no body opposed the "expertise" of the young man. The electrification network had apparently been forgotten. There was practically no further discussion on the issue.

Other illustrative example that mirror this pattern is the decision made in El Salto on the construction of a fish tank. The community was divided between the building of a school or a fish tank to serve as a fish farm to increase the nutrition levels of the community. An individual was pointed as having once told the others

he had seen a fish tank in a neighbouring community some years ago. He came then to explain what he had seen and how he thought they could replicate it in their village. Though some shy comments on the strength of his knowledge on the topic were raised nobody dared to oppose the motion and the fish tank was approved. The school issue was forgotten.

Our observations in different years seemed to contradict each other. Opposing those of the first year, our observations of the second visit were of meetings in which participation was rather weak, in which more shy members of the community kept quiet and in which the louder ones were apparently deciding on what the community should do. We also observed that decisions were not really made on the basis of what the community wanted but on the basis of the information they had, even if it was very little. Why one issue was “forgotten” and other taken?, What was behind this apparent anodyness of the participants?, were some questions we asked ourselves and we tried to explore as we discuss later.

The striking changes in the way communities were deciding collectively could be in general synthesised in the following:

(a) Communities were not deciding on what they wanted to provide for themselves, but on what they knew, or at least on what some members of the community knew.

(b) Some members of the community were apparently “taking over” the meetings.

(c) There was this evident “group vote” in which people really pay attention to vote in groups.

The question must be asked as to what happened?, how these very participative communities, that had really worked in a participatory fashion had become so quiet and anodyne?

Several explanations could be given.

First, a culturalist approach would sustain that the Mazahua culture actually imposed itself at the end of the day, and that the more traditional and hierarchical “nature” of Mazahuas came up once the field officer was not present anymore. However as explained before the communities studied were precisely appropriating themselves of the manners and mores of the mestizo culture and their identity was facing a process of rejection of traditional values and assimilation of more modern ones.

Second, a Marxist approach would sustain that the local elites had taken over, not only the meetings, but also the participatory project in order to benefit themselves. They would go then to analyse how the culture and traditional structures of Mazahuas make possible for the elites to reverse the democratic effort and the empowerment that had been achieved by the poor, especially by women. However, as we discussed before the communities studied have a relatively similar income and the large majority of peasants own their own plot of land, *ejido*, and the complex net of interdependencies make that in very little relations one could *exploit* other³.

An alternative explanation is the one we try to put forward in the next part of this chapter, suggests that the changes in the participatory decision making were due to the high costs of information people had and to the institutional arrangements they had found useful so as to minimise them.

Our Argument

In rural communities participation to produce a service, as indeed in every contract, there are information related costs. These costs must be incurred as part of the activities individuals have to engage in so as to achieve agreements. In order to agree to a contract individuals have to obtain relevant information on the product or service they are buying or participating on. When buying a product individuals have to inform themselves on the price, guarantee, and conditions of use. In other types of contracts individuals have to investigate on the respectability and trustworthiness of the other party; on the possible hazards of the transaction. These searches for this information imply costs, the information costs associated with contracting activities.

When individuals are to provide for themselves they have to investigate the technical requirements of -say- building a bridge or obtain information on who owns the fields that the bridge will affect and more importantly they have to assess on the benefits versus the costs that the construction of the bridge would imply for them.

This aggregation and searching of relevant information is not problem free and when communities engage in participatory decision making a series of information

³ .- See Johnson in Berstein.

related problems arise. These are related with the access, use and distribution of information within a community.

It is our contention that these problems can be particularly high and that they seriously limit the possibilities of rural communities to effectively provide for themselves.

In the cases studied they appeared in three major forms.

First, the actual problem of searching for relevant information. It is not that communities do not know what they want but that they do not have the relevant information for effectively producing services for themselves.

Second, when put to decide collectively is likely that individuals will use the information they have, regarding their needs, activities and interests, to pursue their own benefit.

Third, when individuals have to decide they search for information in those who they have more trust on, and is likely that individuals will associate with others with common interests, and hence with common information.

The first and second set of problems are related with incomplete and asymmetric information. The third set of problems is derived from, what we will call here, the political economy of information of a community.

Information related problems in community participation have been very rarely explored. Ostrom's work is the single most important contribution (Ostrom, 1993). Others, such as J. Fox, have detected and reported on information costs in their field work but have not specially explored them (Fox, 1996). The enormous troubles communities face to gather information and the solutions they give to these problems remain largely underresearched.

Until now we have not been really able to understand these problems for the participatory approach is based in assumptions that somehow deny the existence of information costs.

Although they are never clearly stated, the more radical advocates of participatory development seem to base their approach to community decision making in the following assumptions:

- (a) Individuals have perfect information.
- (b) There is unlimited trust. They feel free to disclose and share the information they have looking the benefit of the community as a whole.

(c) Co-operation and solidarity are the premises of individuals behaviour and choices. Individuals would eventually subordinate their personal interest to the good of the community as a whole, and conversely, they can expect their points of view to be taken properly into account.

(d) Community is a unity of interests.

For the premise is co-operation for the construction of the collective good, in participatory decision making *people* is expected to behave as a unity of interests. For competition between the poor is not acknowledged the possibility that certain individuals can use information as an asset to put forward their own interests and maximise their benefits has not been really recognised.

We believe that this assumptions on participatory decision making are highly partial and naive to say the least. More radical authors working with the question of participation have been led more by the good will to improve the conditions of the poor than by a more rigorous analysis of the reality they face. By building on successful cases of co-operation, that do indeed exist, they have romanticised the overall, largely underestimated real-world problems that individuals in rural areas face when providing for themselves.

Most authors have overseen, for instance, the information problems communities face and its serious implications to participatory decision making, and consequently to community sustainable development.

Important bodies of knowledge have suggested, however, that information related problems are the major constraints individuals face in decision making (Simmon).

These problems have been studied and thoroughly analysed in such different contexts as markets, firms (Williamson, 1985), genetics and sustainability of rural infrastructure (Ostrom, 1993). In the city where individuals have all the possible technology to access information participatory groups face serious information related troubles. And is well known that counties have to make big efforts so as to break barriers to accessing information (see Agenda XXI).

In rural communities this problems magnifies. Rural people have not always the skills and face serious structural problems to access information that allow them to efficiently and sustainable provide for themselves. This is not a patronising statement, *au contraire*, is the recognition that individuals in rural communities, though having all the capacity to decide on their own future not always can for they

are missing relevant information that allow them to properly do so. If participatory development is going to work for the rural poor individuals have to have access to the relevant information that allow them to make pertinent decisions. The development of effective mechanisms that facilitate them to reach the information they need is a pressing need on participatory development research and practice.

In order to know what and how to design these mechanisms we have first to account for what happens, i.e., which are the costs people face when processing information and how have they intended to solve them. This is what this chapter explores.

In order to analyse what the information problems the rural communities studied were facing when providing for themselves we applied the analysis of information costs mainly as developed by Akerlof (1970; 1986), Ostrom (1993) and Williamson (1985). To analytically approach the problem we initially divided it in three stages or sets of questions, that we put in form of questions:

(1) What information did people have?, which has been referred to in the literature as local knowledge or as time and place information (Ostrom, 1993); how people were organising this information to collectively decide on which services to provide; and which were the costs the individuals of the communities studied were facing in the process of bringing together, aggregating and sharing information?

(2) What information did people need?, how did they access technical information when they needed it; and which were the costs associated to the process of searching for this kind of information.

(3) How (1) and (2) impacted participatory service provision.

Final Considerations

For the rural poor it is important to know, for instance, when cheap medicines or food will arrive, where there are jobs on offer, and so on. Because they live in an environment of particularly scarce resources, they compete between themselves to be the first to get information on these issues. This will give them an advantage which may be crucial for survival. In the Mazahua communities information was underprovided and there were only some individuals who, in a changing environment, had access to the relevant information the community needed. This placed other individuals on a position of dependence in relation to these *knowledgeable* individuals.

In these communities, therefore, information was power. However, because it was not evenly distributed within rural communities, *who* controlled *what kind of* information was a core question to assess in the analysis of participatory decision-making.

The observation of these issues in the Mazahua area has made us believe that information costs, particularly in communities passing through a process of modernisation, re-organise their political economy around those who have relevant information, creating groups of interests.

Groups in the Mazahua cases are the way individuals have found to defend their interests and to manage information. They constitute here what we called the *political economy of information* since in participatory decision making they represent both a costs and a facilitating mechanism.

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An Engineer in the Land of Planning *

or Reflections from an interview with Carmen Amelia, Mason Fellow at Harvard

Pedro Ferraz de Abreu

MIT - DUSP

pfa@mit.edu

Abstract

The Mason program is Harvard's version of MIT's Special Program of Urban and Regional Studies (SPURS), a program dedicated to give mid-career professionals in planning the opportunity to take a break from the real world and sweat one year of academic life at MIT. Mason and SPURS Fellows are the traditional target of an imaginative interview assignment ("Chase a Planner") from an MIT planning course. As a former SPURS Fellow, then "downgraded" to a measly Ph.D. candidate, I got to experience both sides of this "chase". This is how I met Carmen Amelia, an engineer from Venezuela that chose to become a planner, and how I got the chance to take a fresh look at the relationship between engineering and planning. Is there an "engineer view" of planning? What brings engineering to planning? What is like to be an engineer in the land of planning?

Interviewing Carmen Amelia⁴ was in itself an interesting experience. Self-confident, expressive and good humored, she had as many questions to ask me as the ones I intended to ask her. Fair enough. Being my ever polite self, I offered to answer the first one, and she had it ready: "You had 40 people to choose from. Why me?"

Engineering background: asset or liability for a planner?

The main reason I had was precisely her background. She has a degree in Computer Engineering, among others, and worked as a consultant in the private sector. As it happens, Computer Engineer is one of my hats, and a consultant job for

* Submetido ao CRPP em 1996

⁴ Original interview in 1991

a private company left once my mind playing for a while with the idea of making a career of it.

These similarities may seem at first the worst possible criteria. The fact is, I frequently see myself, or better, someone with my background, as a rare specimen in the land of planners. Many times I hear DUSP students, alumni and guest speakers talking of engineers as people with propensity to technocracy, too narrow focus, and other diseases that make them bad planner material (even if my colleagues are kind enough to let me know that they think I am an exception...). It is not by accident that the Department of Planning is glued to the Department of Architecture. But here was a Mason fellow, therefore "legally classified" by DUSP as a planner, with apparently a similar background. It was too tempting to let it pass.

So I passed the hot potato to her. Did she perceive her engineering background as an asset or a liability in her work? She thinks it is an asset. In her view, to be an engineer in Venezuela is more prestigious than in the USA, because it is difficult: "People who can't make it through engineering school go away and take [courses like] business administration, and while Venezuela doesn't have a top-notch business school like Harvard, it has a top-notch engineering University".

Surprise, surprise. What I really meant was whether her engineering expertise had helped her - or handicapped her - in her work as a planner. But for Amelia the issue was also the *image* an engineer projected, and how it was perceived. I would like to think that the question I asked is more relevant than the question she answered, but unfortunately, she might be right. In a society where even governments spend more and more in marketing techniques to improve their image, the measure of success becomes more and more the measure of the *perception* of success.

An agent of change...

Learning more about Amelia's background, however, made me understand that her's was not an empty image. While obviously proud of her engineering degree, she described a trajectory from engineering to organizational behavior. After her BS in Computer Eng. and in Mathematics in Universidad Simon Bolivar, Venezuela, she worked for IBM 2 years as system engineer, helping clients to develop applications. Then one year working for Arthur Anderson's consultant firm in Venezuela (AA), developing information systems. Transferring to Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA, she did an MBA at the local University. Back in Venezuela, she remained 5 years with AA, doing profit improvement analysis and organization

structure charts. Afterwards, she worked for Coopers & Lybrand (Venezuela branch) for 2 years, being offered a partnership. In 1989, she came back to USA to study psychology and organization behavior, got a MA in Psychology at BU, and was admitted to the Kennedy School as a Mason Fellow.

Before moving on, I pressed her a little more. Yes, but did she think of herself as a planner? "I see myself more as an agent of change", she said, "to change things for the better, and for me planning is the necessary first step to achieve directed, guided changes, otherwise it would be chaos". But, she continued, "a plan in itself could be just a document that someone shoves in a drawer, so for me carrying through is really important".

Implementation-driven planning: an engineer-alike approach?

This emphasis in "carrying through" the plan, which I share, brought to my mind the view of Desmond McNeill, that offers "... *an alternative planning process, based on a more realistic view of the context in which urban planning agencies operate, and attaching first priority to implementation*". He goes further, stating that "*Planning with implementation in view requires a very radical change in both the methodology and institutions of urban planning*" [McNeil 85].

It is interesting that McNeil's methodology has for me, and for Amelia, a striking similarity to what we call an engineering approach.

Says McNeil, "*Rather than elaborating and analyzing in detail the objectives in view and then seeking means to achieve these ends, the planner should begin with a critical review of the instruments available - the powers that the public sector possesses to bring about change, and the power of the planning agency to influence the public sector*" [McNeil 85]. Similarly, an engineer designing an electronic device, rather than applying analytical methods to identify the optimal components to buy, and then search for these components, which may very well not be available, will first seek to know which components are currently available in the market, and then proceed to design the best possible device within that constraint.

Does this mean that planners with engineering background are more likely to adopt this methodology - planning with implementation in view - than other planners? This is probably stretching things a bit too far, but maybe such a provocative question will bring us interesting answers from planners with a different background. I believe, however, that while a planner needs a broader

perspective than the narrow technical expertise typical of engineers, the planning profession can make good use of the no-nonsense engineering approach.

Class interests and choices in the planning process.

We can go one step further by looking at this the other way around: why (some) planners shy away from tying planning with implementation? And here I disagree with McNeil's "cynical theory". For him, those planners fall either in the category of "blind planners" (unaware of conjuncture) or "cynical planners" (aware that the plan will never be implemented, by lack of conditions). People would fall in one or the other of these categories by choosing a bad methodology. That seems rather simplistic to me.

In the real world, the difference between implementing or not implementing a plan, is often the difference between maintaining the status quo or changing it. If I make a plan to divide the land of a latifundi into a thousand plots for poor peasants, I am serving the interests of the poor peasants; but if the plan is not implemented, either because it was not feasible, or because I didn't care about the implementation, I am in fact serving the interests of the rich landlord. Are planners "blind" and "cynical" because of a methodology or because of class interests?

I wanted Amelia's thoughts on this, so I asked her to elaborate on what a planner is or should be. In her own words, "A planner should be someone who is out there; contrary to people who see planners in a penthouse somewhere thinking, I think they should be out there in touch with what really is going on. Then, they should be very creative people, who can transform that reality, come up with a vision in their mind of how to transform it. But it has to be based on reality; the planner should be able to make a plan that is also realistic and can be carried out. Planners should be people that have done real projects, because if not the plan is going to be like 'pie in the sky' and not a realistic think".

While agreeing with her, I still think that there is more to it. What about social commitment? Whose interests are the planners promoting? Doesn't it matter the planners' ideology? And who pays them? And what class interests control those who pay them? But there is a very good point in her view: planners "should be out there in touch with what really is going on". And I think there is an inseparable link between my point on social commitment, the implementation-driven concept and this need for contact with reality.

Ernest Alexander said that for the practice of plan-implementation, *"there is a need to mobilize a political constituency for proposals and to generate the public commitment needed for successful implementation"* [Alexander 86]. Who is afraid or unwilling to do so? Interesting enough, we can find an answer for this question in Venezuela's Ciudad Guayana case. While living on the (target) site, when most planners remained in Caracas, Lisa Peattie writes that *"It made for a different perspective and for different commitments. ... The planners were sensitive to the needs of the big companies they wanted to attract; the needs of my neighbors would have to yield to the big strategy."* [Peattie 87].

Did this happen by accident? I don't believe so. In a previous article about the same project, Peattie says that *"there was no place for local participation in the planning process; indeed the general who was in charge of the development agency ... once declared that he only wished that he could put everyone under anesthetic until the city was completed"* [Peattie 86].

Is this phobia -- against local participation -- dissociated from the planning methodology? I don't believe so either. The same author refers that *"Planning was addressed to the ruling elites. Planning focused on decisions rather than actions"* [Peattie 86]. She also refers that the implicit perspective of the designers in the Guayana project was that *"planning is quite different from implementation"* [Peattie 87]

That is why I think that there is a link between social commitment (which class interests to serve), planning methodology ("blind", "cynical", or "with implementation in view"), and planning style (be "out there" in the field, mobilizing local participation, or be "in a penthouse somewhere" close to the corporations' offices). Conservative forces can certainly plan "with-implementation-in view" to promote projects of their interest. However, stalling implementation, keeping the status quo, plays generally in their favor. This is rarely true for those planners who side with "The Wretched of the Earth".

Engineering background: the wrong question.

Does this link (social commitment & implementation-drive) mean that planners with an engineer background will be more likely to side with the poor than with the powerful? Everyone is ready to dismiss such an absurd inference. The catch is, the opposite view is equally absurd; yet, some critics of the "short-sighted engineering perspective" in planning hint no less.

Think about that next time you hear someone discussing whether engineers give better or worse planners than architects (or economists, anthropologists, etc). It reminds me of Pauli 's famous sentence (mind you, not an engineer, but a physicist): "This theory is totally useless. It's not even wrong!".

After the long conversation with Amelia, I felt many points of identity with her perspective. It can be said that this happened because of our common engineer background. Both of us felt strongly about implementation being at the center of a plan. Both of us wanted to *act* "out there", to improve things.

Yet, for Amelia the improvement of Venezuela's infrastructure services (like water, etc) meant making it more profitable, increase productivity, by means of a mixture of privatization, layoffs and competent management. For me, the same infra-structures should be regarded as a public service, to serve the needs of the people, not a business where you invest or not according to the market laws. For me, things are improved when there is less unemployment, and not necessarily when there are more profits in the private business. And since I don't buy into "trickle-down" theories, I don't believe that more profits in the private business are the sure way to get more jobs, etc.. But I know of many architects, not to mention economists, who think like Amelia. So the main issue is not the professional background one has, but what are we going to do with it; how are we going to use it; what are the implications of our choices; which interests are we siding with.

This is why planners need a broader perspective than technical engineering expertise. But the same applies to other backgrounds. That's why Planning is an independent discipline, as well as an interdisciplinary domain. That's also why it is so important that planners be recruited from a diversity of backgrounds; each one brings with them unique approaches to planning. An engineer in the land of planning is no exception.

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Making local government more accountable and responsive to local people^{*}

Simona Florio

s.florio@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper, after providing a definition of the terms "accountability" and "responsiveness", explores recent attempts to make local government more accountable and responsive to local people. It does so by focusing on reforms which celebrate the concept of consumer. It concludes that whilst more people are able to express their views as customers their influence as citizens has been limited to the consumption as opposed to the production of politics.

"*Accountability* is the condition of being held responsible and answerable for decisions and actions (or inactions) which affect others and which are usually taken on their behalf" (Byrne, 1990).

Responsiveness is the flexibility and speed with which service provision responds to needs and demands. Market relations respond to the need of individual consumers or interest groups. Alternatively responsiveness can be pursued through support of demands expressed by sectional groups or entire communities.

The context

As far as the size of local authorities is concerned, in the 1970's the UK was dominated by the "*big is beautiful*" approach which (despite the many initiatives designed to improve responsiveness to the public) usually established highly centralised and large decision making structures (Burns et. al., 1994). Also, partly because of persistent social inequalities, participatory democracy failed to materialise at the local level. During that decade, the relationship between central and local government was one of interdependence and, often, consensus (ibid.). Within this framework, accountability was scarcely an issue and local elections did not become an accountability mechanism since in most cases their results, as argued

* Submetido ao CRPP em 1997

by Gyford, (1976) merely reflected the local population's views on national policies and issues.

The consensus between the two levels of government started to break down in the late 1970's when central government cut their financial support to local authorities and through the introduction of rate capping, reduced local government's control on its means to raise revenue locally. As citizens were being transformed into rate-payers and local and central authority struggled over local spending, local governments became increasingly politicised (Burns et al., 1994). Whilst the national government, partly through the "*rate-payer democracy*" promoted its ideology and sectional interests at the local level, a new urban left emerged and reacted against the shift to the right at national level (ibid.). Both the left and the right started to promote accountability and responsiveness at local level, through initiatives which sometimes, but not always, reflected their diverging ideologies.

Generally speaking, both the left and the right agreed that service recipients had to be treated more as demanding customers⁵ whose feedback had to be encouraged and responded to if council services were to be delivered more efficiently and responsively. However, while the right promoted initiatives that tended almost completely to replace the concept of citizen with that of consumer⁶, the left hoped to give voice to the public through 'extended democracy'. So, while, on one side, the privatisation of the provision of collective goods was sought, on the other citizens were being encouraged to "participate" hoping that this would empower them in relation to the increasingly semi-public organisations that were intended to serve them.

Whilst it would be unfair to deny those positive outcomes which increased community participation has had, the scope of activism is restricted by the very decentralisation of service provision. "Quasi-privatisation" has meant that the responsibility for providing a service has been separated from the act of providing it. The result is that local authorities, as mere "enablers" of service provision, are unable to fully respond to the demands of the service recipients. The quangos which

⁵ This essay does not use the terms customer and consumer interchangeably. As, it will become clearer hereafter, the concept of consumer is used as one which, according to certain ideologies, can replace that of citizen: citizens' rights are reduced to consumers' rights. The concept of customer is different in that an individual may approach service provision as a customer whilst retaining his/her civic rights based on citizenship.

⁶ In fact, since 1979, the delivery of many government functions have been transferred to appointed bodies or quangos such as Urban Development Corporations, Grant-maintained Schools, Housing Action Trusts, Health Service Trusts and the like (Wahlberg et al, 1995).

provide the services, on the other hand, are not accountable to an electorate but to a group of service consumers and indirectly to the elected or state bodies which pay for their services.

In short, the fragmentation of service provision has caused situations where the responsibilities of councillors or officers are rarely closely matched by a structure of accountability. In many cases *"councillors or officers are held to be accountable for issues over which they do not have effective responsibility"* (Wahlberg et al., 1995) In other cases, however, there are *"accountability deficits"* in that councils *"are not accountable for some of their areas of responsibility"* (ibid.). For instance this happens in localities where councillors and officers are active members of non elected bodies.

Naturally, the nature and the degree of accountability (and consequently responsiveness) problems are closely related to the political composition (ibid.) as well as to the social and economic legacy of localities . So, despite central government's pressures towards greater control and uniformity, the range of attempts which have been made to generate more responsive and accountable systems vary across space and so does their effectiveness. However, it should be noted that it is difficult to establish, in a vacuum, whether certain initiatives have enhanced democracy more than others.

As we have seen, both the right and the left wanted to improve responsiveness and accountability. Yet, for both parties, this pursuit was only an "interim objective". The final objectives were others: creating a consumer democracy on one side and extending democracy to more citizens on the other.

Thus this paper, in the attempt to substantiate some of the assertions made in this section, will examine some of the recent attempts to increase responsiveness and accountability trying to focus on initiatives which were intended to celebrate the concept consumer. Initiatives which celebrated the concept of citizenship will only be referred to and briefly discussed in the conclusion . Whilst over-simplistic and un-comprehensive (given the limited space available) this approach can more efficiently help understand the aggregate effect that the recent attempts at reform have had on democratic practise on the nation as a whole.

Towards a consumer democracy.

Consumerist approaches within local government place a great emphasis on the sovereignty of the consumer and seek to promote accountability and responsiveness

by introducing market mechanisms into public service provision . In practice this results in the privatisation of some previously public functions and the development of market approaches to service provision (such as improved complaints procedures) within other areas which remain within the jurisdiction of local authorities (Whalberg, 1995).

Whilst compulsory competitive tendering has introduced an element of competition and has secured the privatisation of a large number of (usual smaller scale) activities, this has not resulted in increased consumer choice as this concept is ill suited to public services as, in most public service situations, unsatisfied customers cannot switch to other suppliers (ibid. and Burns et al. 1994 for instance). Indeed most private or (more typically) semi-public providers, whilst often specialising in the delivery of only one or a group of services, are still monopoly providers at the local level. These providers do not compete for payments from individuals but for earmarked budgets (Burns et al. 1994). Thus citizens cannot change their consumption patterns individually in ways other than "moving their business" to locations serviced by other suppliers or different methods of delivery. This tends not to be a realistic option especially for the weaker groups of society.

As a consequence, with the exception of a few cases (nurseries competing for vouchers, for example), the new service providers would seem to have even less reasons to be responsive to their clients than the councils themselves as they are not directly accountable to the voters. The degree to which these suppliers are accountable to elected members of councils varies but in general they have stronger bonds to central government. Many boards, such as urban regeneration agencies, for instance, are appointed directly or indirectly by ministers and their financial ability to operate depends on central government as well as on their ability to attract leverage funding.

Moreover, central government has determined that local authorities should operate very closely or even in partnership with certain quangos (such as in the case of City Challenge) and this may lead to the distortion of the council's wider priorities and may even reduce councillors' responsiveness to their constituencies. As argued by Wahlberg et al. (1995): "*If councillors or officers on quangos do not get adequate support from their authority, there is always a danger that they will start to reflect the views of the quango rather than of the elected local government*"

Not surprisingly, within this fragmented system of service delivery people no longer know whom to complain to about what problems and councillors may not be able to influence the outcome (ibid.). On the other hand, however, consumers are

being offered more channels and, through the introduction of charters for instance, more opportunities to raise specific complaints (and/or express their views) about service provision. In fact all service providers, including councils which are taking the private sector as a role model (but adapting practices to the public sector), have attached great importance to encouraging feed back from, listening and responding to individual consumers. In the name of responsiveness front line staff are trained to listen to more attentively and provide resourceful assistance, comments and complaints lines have become increasingly common and opinion polling and other methods of market research are on the increase. In the name of accountability annual reports, charters and financial statements have become a must. The local press and other forms of media are widely used as reporting mechanisms.

The effectiveness of these consumer oriented devices varies across space but in general it has helped challenge bureaucratic paternalism which characterised service provision in the 70's. However, as mentioned above, elected politicians have not necessarily become more responsive as in many cases the responsibility to respond is not theirs. In other cases, councils are "commitments forced upon them" by central government. The Council Tenant's Charter, produced by central government, is a good example of this as it represents a political decision taken at central level and which makes local authorities accountable for its implementation. So, while service provision was being decentralised and decision making functions centralised local governments were increasingly transformed into administrative agencies.

Gyford (1991) explains that these pressures for a "de-politicised" and slimmed down form of local government may appeal to more "high calibre" councillors as there are less service management meetings to attend. "Higher calibre" often means higher social class and may reflect an anxiety to return to the social relations which existed before the working class rose to some sort of power through the Labour Party. This newer form of local government would thus seem likely to be more responsive to business and individualistic interests but to be highly suspicious of extended democracy (ibid.).

Against this background the decentralisation of local service provision seems to have generated a system of local governance which is more likely to be responsive to the wishes of central government and (in line with central government's ideology) to those costumes who, because of the socio-economic position, are better able to make their voice heard within the consumer's democracy.

This approach is particularly problematic when it affects areas such as planning which are part of an interventionist approach to the political process (Hampton, 1990). Planning is supposed to mediate between interests of customers (developers, for instance) and citizens (the communities affected by the development) in the attempt to pursue longer term objectives in the interest in of the wider community and its socio-economic development. Thus if planning were to focus more on consumers and less on citizens it would lose its *raison d'être*.

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**RegioNet: Sistema Interactivo e Informativo para a Assembleia da Republica
na Internet de Suporte ao Debate Público Sobre a Regionalização. ***

Nuno Cidraes Vieira

CITIDEP

ncvieira@citidep.pt

Abstract

Para que o debate público sobre a regionalização se faça efectivamente com o maior número de organizações e cidadãos interessados no processo, é necessário que se criem condições de acessibilidade e que existam diferentes canais e níveis de informação/participação. É igualmente importante que estes ofereçam garantias de estabilidade e de continuidade e que sejam constantemente realimentados e actualizados. Por outro lado é necessário que os mesmos sejam objecto de uma avaliação objectiva e sistemática.

Proposta

A proposta que o CITIDEP - Centro de Investigação de Tecnologias de Informação para uma Democracia Participativa - apresenta⁷, visa a concepção e a implementação de um Sistema Interactivo e Informativo de suporte ao debate público sobre a regionalização em Portugal, através da Internet, contribuindo igualmente para aproximar a Assembleia da República, e o seu trabalho, dos cidadãos.

Propõe-se a implementação na Internet de um sistema interactivo, concebido em módulos sequenciais, permitindo desta forma que a informação possa ser complementada e ampliada por fases, e que o primeiro módulo possa desempenhar um papel útil na sensibilização da opinião pública a curto prazo.

* Submetido ao CRPP em 1997

⁷ Apresentada á Assembleia da República

Propõe-se igualmente, nos módulos seguintes, aumentar o conteúdo informativo, assim como a utilização de técnicas mais avançadas (como a utilização de Sistemas de Informação Geográfica para Internet, e/ou representação gráfica de modelos de simulação para avaliar as consequências das varias concepções de regionalização).

Pensamos ser importante que se mantenha um esforço de informação e um debate participado, mesmo após a aprovação dos diplomas na especialidade, visto colocar-se a hipótese de haver matéria para a realização de referendos regionais ou mesmo nacionais, e visto ser legítimo pensar que será na fase de implementação que irão surgir mais dúvidas e talvez maior motivação por parte do cidadão e dos autarcas. Assim, uma informação oportuna e objectiva, simples de consultar e de fácil acesso, permitindo uma documentação mais rica do debate (do que, p.ex., as expressões simplistas que tendem historicamente a aparecer durante referendos), poderá desempenhar um papel importante nestas fases.

Passamos agora a apresentar as linhas gerais do Projecto. Estamos naturalmente disponíveis para apresentar de imediato o desenho mais detalhado do mesmo.

Características gerais do Sistema RegioNet

Este Sistema será concebido de forma a constituir uma estrutura flexível e operacional, capaz de integrar e orientar diferentes opções de consulta e um conjunto de questões e respostas, no sentido do acesso à informação o mais completa possível, na diversidade de opções e pontos de vista que constituem as grandes linhas políticas representadas na Assembleia da República, relativamente à matéria da regionalização.

O Sistema será, assim, alimentado com as diversas opiniões acerca da matéria, permitindo uma sistematização e balanço das vantagens e desvantagens de cada modelo de regionalização, segundo os diferentes programas políticos e pontos de vista.

A informação é apresentada em forma de questões e respectivas respostas por parte dos diversos partidos políticos. As respostas podem ser ilustradas com mapas, ou outras figuras, assim como por vídeo, e podem conter extractos, ou a totalidade de documentos. O acesso à informação tanto pode ser feito por índices temáticos como por pesquisa de palavras chave.

O Sistema inclui um inquérito aos utilizadores, e a sua interactividade permite a criação automática de páginas de opinião na Internet, onde são incorporadas comentários e questões postas pelos cidadãos.

O primeiro módulo poderá ser posteriormente complementado com a introdução no sistema de mais perguntas, e respectivas respostas, não só de representantes políticos mas igualmente de técnicos e diversos especialistas, quer da academia quer profissionais do sector publico e privado.

O sistema pode ser ainda enriquecido com informação sobre as experiências de regionalização levadas a cabo em outros países (e.g. Espanha, Holanda) e ainda através do recurso a Sistemas de Informação Geográfica e a modelos de simulação sobre os efeitos das várias opções de regionalização. Em tal fase complementar, propomos articular este Projecto com Programas de investigação, desenvolvimento e demonstração, apoiados em Protocolos a estabelecer com entidades nacionais, comunitárias, ou outras (p. ex. JNICT, ESPRIT, MIT).

O sistema proposto pode ser facilmente adaptado posteriormente a outras temáticas em que se pretenda a realização duma consulta pública.

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