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Volunteering for Democracy: Dangers and Opportunities for Good Governance and Active Citizenship

Whether during election periods or during a political mandate in Europe, one can not help wondering when observing national and EU politics: where are the citizens at this stage? What is their role in this run for power? Can individuals feel concerned by principles or touched by any personal stance or a political commitment in this new era? How can anyone who is interested and active still believe that there is a way to ensure accountability of his/her leaders? Should this only happen on the electoral toll ? Can we really have influence after we have casted our votes?

Our belief is that we can, but that is not easy to achieve. We believe that a representative democratic system, which involves citizens, civil society and different stakeholders in a collective and thoughtful manner in the decision-making process, is the correct and appropriate response to in a complex context of today's world. This implies an organised, prepared and vivid civil society, acting like a solid and credible companion to the representative democratic process.

Citizen participation, active agent for democracy

However, the process of citizen/civil participation its active agents - citizens and civil society groups, stakeholders of active citizenship – has been seen as a competitor to representative democracy. In the best case scenario, it would mean a continued control applied by citizens to authorities between two electoral periods. In the worse case, it would diminish the catharsis of elections in political life, would endanger the legitimacy of representative democratic systems and take away from authorities the power to indepently govern a State. Nevertheless, citizen participation in decision-making is currently seen as a right and given its inherent value, decision-makers should welcome that. Democracy is all about engaging citizens, therefore all forms of increased participation should be positive.

Participation and direct forms of democracy

The pluralist democratic system envisaged mechanisms for participatory democracy such as referendums or votations. Usually, the elected decision-makers bear the responsibility to set referendums in motion as a means to identify majority and minority views on important political matters. It has used



these mechanisms with caution. However, when a significant group of citizens requests that the final decision be given to the people (by votations), one could fear that the final decision puts into danger fundamental principles that have been acquired and fought for in the past. In December 2010, the three main decision making bodies in the European Union, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council came to invent a rather strict framework for the implementation of the Citizens' Initiative in Article 11 of the Lisbon Treaty. Initiatives that put into question fundamental human rights and freedoms are excluded from the EU's review.

Indirect forms of participation

We might argue that it is clearly unacceptable to consider that referendums, votations or the EU mechanism of citizens' initiatives encompass all possible forms of citizen participation in Europe, and so satisfy the needs for democratic governance.

Local political leaders (but not only) have not remained deaf to citizens concerns and have understood that the most plainful reforms can only happen by an active implementation by their electorate. The dynamics of political decision making process, whether it is at national or local level, requests an articulated form of collective consultation with representative samples of citizens in order to get constant feedback, consultancy, agreement and exchanges on specific matters and issues. Most of the efforts to introduce these indirect participative elements to good governance have been done at local level. Consultation committees or discussion groups generated by local authorities have flourished in local politics on various topics. Participatory governance has become a regular theme on local councils discussions, and tools designed to collect citizens' views have had repercussions –albeit difficult to gauge - on decisions made at local level.

The major argument against mechanisms of citizen participation by authorities is the lack of interest, awareness and education of the citizens themselves. One could argue that the decision-making processes are complex and therefore are only accessible to a fringe of well-educated, middle-class citizens. The majority of individuals (among which many young people) have little conscience or simply not interested. Despite the evident patronising tone of these arguments, there is ground for concern when sociological studies show the lack of personal involvement by citizens in public life and the successes of targeted communication strategies of political life in our modern societies. Combining communication with the sole purpose to raise awareness, and engagement of citizens to promote collective action, is still a challenge for society today.



Volunteerism, a constituent part of Active Citizenship

The doctrine of active citizenship is based on the complementary and balanced role of freedoms, which citizens have acquired by belonging to a nation or State, and their responsibilities towards that nation or State. One of the most frequent illustrations is the basis of the European health solidarity system, where a citizen benefits from free social security and contributes to it by paying taxes. While rights have been set in fundamental documents, legal texts and judiciary decisions, the difficulty lies in the unclear identification of responsibilities. The question of what a citizen can do for his/her community, his/her society and his/her country is even more relevant today.

The issue is even more complex when we speak about weak States, where the public sphere is non-existent and where there is little public life and debate. Should individuals be active where there is nothing to gain in return? Many citizens have asked themselves that question and have decided that giving back is more costly than what they can afford, in time and money. This deepens the gaps in our communities and leads to an enhanced atomisation of citizens in our societies.

New technologies have given a new ground for participation. We see more and more campaigns for individual consultation of citizens, which consists only in ticking the right box on a given question. Intermediary groups (groups of interests, associations, etc) are left outside from that process. The European Commission is often using on-line consultations addressing individual European citizens. But what is the value for a citizen to give his/her opinion on policy matters, when he/she has not had time to reflect upon the implications of that policy on his/her life?

Many young people have become active in social networks and other forms of communication on line and share their views on blogs or websites of their interest. More recently, Facebook or Twitter have given to youth in the Mediterranean countries, but also in Greece, Ireland and Spain, a new opportunity to voice their concerns and get organised. However, has a profile picture or an update of your status ever had any impact on political society? The real value of the social networks lies in the possibility to secretly organise large pressure groups with a (more or less) guaranteed anonymity. This new kind of active citizens have used these new tools to build critical mass in order to reclaim their rights back. It has a lesser importance when we talk about opening to new ways to “pay back society” and therefore define new responsibilities towards our communities.

Active citizenship has still to be reinvented in European countries and our belief is that it can be linked to volunteerism. Tocqueville has given the most pertinent description of the role of volunteering in *Democracy in America*. He said that the real power as a people in the US came through voluntary associations. The



personal freedoms would be protected if the US citizens could voluntarily resolve the problems of society, rather than permit the hand of government to do it for them. Tocqueville also recognized their great weakness - the willingness to live 'as strangers apart from the rest'.

A culture of volunteering

It is obvious that there is little awareness among citizens that volunteering is a responsibility towards communities in Europe. And where there is, one can not but notice the discrepancies between European countries in promoting volunteering as a tool for active citizenship. Social and economic situations, the level of education, unemployment and family circumstances can influence people in working or not for unpaid jobs. The culture of volunteering has mostly developed among well-educated middle-class employees or retired people, whom would also be voters. But this makes a very limited number of active citizens.

In countries where volunteering is a regular practice, working for voluntary organisations is a sort of rite of passage for the adolescent and a contribution for the personal well-being for the others. In many countries, participation in charities or contributing to community development is not only understood as a responsibility, but also a duty, nurtured and developed during a lifetime. However the real value of volunteering comes with the opportunity by individuals to work for a collective goal, as advocated by the organisation he/she is working for. This is a winning position as much for the volunteer, as for the organisation as well as for communities.

There is a strong link between the capacity citizens to be engaged in volunteering and the democratic level of the countries. Most of those active citizens have understood that to have the right to vote and participate in the decision-making processes at all levels, means to have a responsibility to volunteer and give back to the community or the State what they have provided from him/her. Actively participating in public life, by voting, volunteering or getting elected becomes a virtuous circle that actively engages citizens and therefore fulfills the conditions for a truly democratic governance.



We recommend actions so that civil society organisations and local authorities to seriously envisage jointly elaborated public policies for promotion of volunteering. The aim is to produce a culture of volunteering, which binds individuals in a society and make more democratic and aware of citizens' needs.

A mentoring system

Volunteering can not represent a powerful mechanism for active citizenship unless it is framed by a specific mentoring system. That implies that we identify and support, on one hand, civil society organisations (CSOs), which accept to train and work regularly with volunteers.

In this perspective, **we recommend to local authorities that have not yet opened to dialogue with CSOs, to enable their participation in decision-making with the expertise they have acquired.** A helping tool to gauge the level of participation and to construct models for civil involvement is the Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process of the Council of Europe.

We recommend to CSOs to work on establishing internal democratic mechanisms and coaching structures for volunteers and employees. They should include in their work community leaders, respected individuals with a strong presence in their communities, who will act as activators for specific topics of concern for the communities and as educators for newcomers.

The European Union's methodology of citizens' panels has included such an element in promoting Active European Citizenship as a means to compensate for the "democratic deficit". **We recommend to our members to establish a network of "mentors", "community leaders" or civil society representatives at local level, who will work in accordance with general principles set by the local authorities in order to promote volunteering especially among young generations.**

2011 has been declared European Year of Volunteering through Active Citizenship. In order to cope with the democratic deficit of its institutions, **we recommend the European Union institutions to consider volunteering as a strong component of participative democracy and to set favourable framework for the volunteering organisations to work and contribute in the EU policies. by giving them a full-fledged status of policy-maker.** In this perspective, we welcome the EU's Citizen Initiative, which will enable concerned citizens to have a direct say in EU policy matters.