

## LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AND MEDIATION: THE CASE OF S. BARTOLOMEU DE MESSINES

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### THE CONTEXT - I

The Algarve is the south end region of Portugal with an area of 5 000 Km<sup>2</sup> in which live 390.00 persons, characterized by the existence of three different zones: a thin layer of beaches (south) with medium coastal cities; an intermediate zone (called "*barrocal*") of calcareous soils with some areas devoted to agriculture; and the northern mountainous zone. The Algarve is divided into 16 basic different administrative areas ("*concelho*") – the head of each one of them is the City Hall.

The place where our research was focused (S. Bartolomeu de Messines) is integrated on the administrative area of Silves. Some contextual data about it follows<sup>1</sup>: Silves has an area of 678 Km<sup>2</sup>. It comprises the small city of Silves and mostly a rural area with some active / modernized sectors. Yet the majority of rural producers work in small fragmented areas with low levels of mechanization, and some represent still forms of subsistence agriculture, destined to provide a complementary income to traditionally structured families. In this context micro-enterprises or small local rural business, if presenting possibilities of finding market niches for specific products, can make the difference.

Some data on the population can help us to characterize this context. Silves has a total resident population of 33.830 persons. 8,8% of these are up to 14 years old, 68,5% are between 15 and 64 years old and 22,7% have more than 65 years old. This means that the ageing index of Silves is 258%, a high number indeed. The educational data are worrying. As much as 17,8% of the resident population can not read or write; if to this number we add the population percentage who has never been to school and those who spend only 9 years in school, the total makes as much as 85,5%. Generalizing, this is the number of the population that can be considered to have low literacy levels.

The active population is 46% of the residents, but women present lower activity rates than men. Hence is it not strange that unemployment affects mainly women. In 2001, the total unemployment rate was 5,4% (close to the national average back then, but we should stress that unemployment has increased rapidly in the last years – in 2006 national average was 8,2%). But if

<sup>1</sup> All the statistical data come from the National Institute of Statistics.

among men this rate was lower (3,4%), the opposite happened among women (8,1%, that nowadays should be higher).

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

During the 80s local development was promoted in Portugal within a framework that combined some major tendencies: *i*) an option towards models with a strong territorial-intensive focus, that is, resources were concentrated in small territories aiming social and economical change; *ii*) a strong ideology of militancy, implying that all social actors involved had not only clear political backgrounds, but also that the personal and collective investments were significant; *iii*) local development was seen as a down-top activity rooted in popular sectors, that could provide forms of explicit resistance regarding the growing rhythms of globalisation. Most micro-development projects were integrated projects that did not forget cultural / identity factors – the tensions between modernisation and tradition lead to a growing fear of diluting traditional cultures and identity. Finally, a significant number of intervention projects, almost as a result of the former tendencies, used Participatory Research to promote local development processes, as we can see for instance, in Fragoso (2001), Lima (1990) or Silva (1996).

We understand participatory research as defined by Hall (1981), Fals-Borda (1992), Souza (1988) or Tandon (1988), among others.

Gradually during the 90s this type of models struggled against several types of difficulties. Some of these related to global tendencies and particularly to the programmes and funding available to local development action. For instance, the control exerted by these instruments made very difficult that the local interests of deprived populations were taken into account when designing concrete interventions.

At the same time, the non-government institutions that promoted local development projects changed due to political and economical tendencies. The fact that they are independent from the State when it comes to funding is very important, but at the same time leads these groups to constantly adapt their action according to the existing funding European programmes. We believe that during the 90s a significant number of local development projects rooted on popular education were abandoned. On the other hand, more funding was available to training, which soon occupied a very important space in public debates in Portugal. Recently the Portuguese Government elected training as the number one national priority. The *media* were strongly used to propagate «new» programmes to develop «qualifications» of the Portuguese population; this was the last element to quickly build a new kind of public consensus on

the matter. Statistical data was used to stress that Portugal was, once again, in the tail of Europe. As Duarte (2004) shows clearly, not only did the 2004 forecasts in Portugal reveal a high rate of low qualifications (68.4%) but even worse was that it had the slowest capacity for recovering, compared to other European countries. According to the National Institute of Statistics, in 2000 more than three million active adults hadn't completed the basic schooling of nine years.

This type of public exposed statements has in Portugal an immediate power of transforming public perceptions, opening the doors of manipulation. We are constantly «bombarded» by such statements that hit the core of Portuguese shame: during almost 50 years, the shame of living submitted to a fascist dictatorship regime; after the implementation of democracy, the shame of discovering that we are the poorest country in Europe, the shame of having low literacy rates, etc.

To summarize, a high number of non-government civil society organizations has turned the core of its action during the last twenty years. All sorts of training programmes were embraced, along with the national system of recognition and validation of competences. Politicians were very successful in putting civil society organizations acting accordingly to their own ideas and concepts, lowering public expenses at the same time that central control was increased.

The specific consequence of this is clear: popular education actions, critical local development projects, etc., were gradually abandoned. Associations or other type of civil society organizations adapted to the new times changing their action focus, downsized their staffs tried new forms of management. In some cases, creativity allowed them to experiment new models of social intervention. Could it be that mediation applied to local development is a new model emerging?

## THE CONTEXT - II

*In Loco* is a civil society organization created in 1989, already as a result of a three-year intensive intervention project in mountainous areas of the Algarve. It has been the responsible for local development projects since the middle 80s, but also for a significant numbers of social interventions in many different fields. Usually, when *In Loco* embraces new areas of action it tries to do it with the population and listening to their needs and desires, in a clear attempt of solving community problems. If in the last years training was also elected as an important part of its action, it is a fact that the forms and models being used are always aimed at changing, either this means to change profes-

nal practices, either this means to promote change at more wider community levels. For instance, In Loco negotiated action-research training programmes for the civil servants working at City Halls. Thanks for their constant focus in partnerships that include a high number of institutions (among other things), they do have a good reputation both at regional and national level. Finally, participation is a strong characteristic of In Loco's action. That is why, for example, there are privileged partners in the Participatory Budget processes of S. Brás de Alportel.

In Loco works in a number of different territories in the Algarve, and S. Bartolomeu de Messines is one of them. The good work done in the past in the area of Silves allowed them to assume the role of (active) mediators in the processes we are going to describe briefly:

#### **MEDIATION ON LOCAL DEVELOPMENT**

Between 2004 and 2006 a project of rural development was launched in Silves by the initiative of In Loco, with the partnership of a number of local entities. Here we are going to focus only in a specific dimension of this project, with as to do with the support to local rural producers.

The main aim of the project was to work with local producers, giving them training and qualifications that will allow them to develop small local business. The specific products to develop were food products like cheese, sausages and a local type of wine (*aguardente de medronho*). These small producers had conditions to transform their residual familiar activity into small firms legally licensed. But the process of licensing is not an easy one. The ones who had tried it in the past faced an immense number of obstacles, which in all cases ended with the legal files stocked in one of the institutions involved in the licensing process – and producers just quitted the idea.

The institutions involved in this licensing process are basically the City Hall, the Regional Directorate for Agriculture, and the Regional Directorate for Economy – in the wine case, the Customs are also involved because of the alcohol taxation. There are also other institutions that are partners for some reason. For example, a civil society organization named “Viver a Serra”, or other types of associations that gather small farmers. For each type of process the mediating team has to count with all the entities present in the social fabric.

In the case if licensing a new Law was published in 2004, which gave City Halls the power of the final decision in the licensing process (although it requires previous positive recommendations from the other institutions). Consequently the City Hall technicians' new nothing of this issue – nor even the legal diplomas at stake – fact that worsened the already difficult scenario.

In Loco's team first activity was to write three different guidebooks on the subject, with clear step by step instructions to guide producers along their way. But soon it was clear enough that the ones who needed more this type of guidance were not the producers, but the technicians', especially the ones from the City Hall of Silves.

Although the guidebooks helped in more than one way, it also became clear that this effort was not enough. The central problem was that the technicians' from the several institutions made different interpretations of the Law. In some points the individual producers processes progressed, but became being retained in other points of this legal path, precisely because interpretations were different – some of the technicians', for instance, treated this small firms as of they were big industrial units, imposing specific requirements impossible to attain.

There it had begun a major mediation process with two different levels: first, a mediation process between the technicians' of the several institutions, in order to build common interpretations, common points of view and common procedures that tried to ensure that the producers' processes were more easily analysed. The second level of the mediation process stood between the producers and the institutional level. In this action, it was possible that technicians' visited producers to know *in loco* the specific conditions of their businesses and personally gave them precise indications on the required changes for the processes to forward.

Training of the producers occurred at the same time. It was not only focused on technical knowledge but on the critique dimensions. The normal situation of these persons is to quietly wait for someone to tell them what to do. Basic responsibilities or «guilt» are always discharged «on the other», or better yet on the institutions that seem to exert a kind of a overwhelming power on citizens. Fatalism usually follows: what can I do if the others do not assume their responsibilities? In Loco team tried to oppose this, forcing farmers to analyse reality in a critical way. Eventually it was possible that producers training reached a point when they pressured public institutions, stating very clearly that the Law had to be followed, and that it was institutions duty to proceed in order to allow them to reach the development of their businesses.

The mediation process that took place in a set of working meetings involving the technicians' of the entities was not an easy one. Too many factors mixed and blocked the cooperation that should be obtained. Very briefly, we have identified the following difficulties in this mediation process:

1. Public institutions seem to have huge troubles in establishing basic cooperation procedures among themselves. Their habits are not directed to cooperation, but to a simpler substitute of it: distributing tasks among

the different actors / departments, according to a fragmented work organization that dilutes responsibility.

2. Technicians seem not to be prepared to face some tasks that are vertically assigned to them. This is especially true in the case of City Hall staffs, because in the last years central administration has been continuously transferring new responsibilities to local power structures, making the accommodations of these processes harder. Training is central in this issue – it is not by accident that a specific funding programme (FORAL) exists, specifically directed to the City Halls staffs.
3. Local conflicts between institutions. Some of these conflicts go on for years now and they are responsible for communication problems between the agents working in these entities. Mediating agents have to be constantly aware of these local problems, because they are not visible from the beginning of the processes.
4. The specific organizational cultures that each institution do possess, that sometimes and almost by nature produce opposed positions. Workers belonging to them often assume these cultural elements, almost as if they are intrinsic in their own personal natural, with immediate reflections in their attitudes.
5. Power issues. When we have four or five different institutions seated at the same table, even if the main aim is to reach a common ground to cooperate and therefore provide a better service to the citizens, power issues are quite clear. In fact, it seems that there is a constant negotiation of the boundaries of power of each institution embodied by the social actors that in a meeting represent it. Some times this is a negotiation for the importance and the local protagonism that institutions supposedly have; some times it is a statement on the protagonism institutions want to have in a process that, itself, is being sketched or built.
5. Political obstacles and corruption. This is a complex issue to face or to analyse. On a one hand, in order to a mediation process to reach a satisfactory level of success, institutions have to show political will to solve the problems but, more important, the social actors that represent the institution have to do so without ambiguities. In this specific case, this happened regarding the City Hall, because the Mayor assumed that this was a priority, since it could have a positive impact in the life quality of some producers, and at the same time to improve local economy. Surprisingly (or not) that was not enough. The sensible issue here is that the technicians are in a very complicate position, for two main reasons: first, their individual names have to be registered as the persons who gave this

technical opinion or final decision of approval. Usually politicians evaluate the recommendations that come from above and they are the ones who decide. Hence, if everything goes on as it should, politicians are the ones who take the blame for bad decisions.

It is precisely in this point that corruption enters the stage. Recently in Portugal corruption in City Halls has been discovered in a number of cases. But politicians usually find ways to discharge their responsibilities and Portuguese justice has not been effective in this matter. On the contrary, there were some cases where the small technicians got the blame. The following interview fragment illustrates the situation:

*“Obviously, you are not going to give your technical opinion on something that implicates a big challenge, isn’t that so? Even if the political will do exists, the technician is the one who is going to stay there for his lifetime, not the President. . . and who is going to be at stake? It is always the technician and you had a very clear example just recently, the politicians got away with it and the technicians were sacked out. . .”*

That is probably why (of course, many other factors are probably involved) in the meetings the mediating team felt that most of the times the technicians were thinking “I can’t say what I think” – and their job was in a certain phase to create a climate in which they could clearly state the things they think. Cooperation could only be obtained with such a climate.

The practical results of the project in this specific dimension, after two years of work were not good, if we look at the numbers of producers who got licensed. But the whole processes takes time, and a number of changes were actually achieved. As a consequence of it, it was possible to build a new project from 2007 on – funding decisions are delaying it yet – that represents actually the following of the previous steps. It was very easy now to count with the participation of the technicians of the institutions, as they really enjoyed participating in the first phase of the project and they are looking forward to work in cooperation. That was a major important advantage of the process so far.

Also 18 local wine producers were already selected to enter the project. More important, these producers are going to work together, trying to unite their productions and finding one unique brand, a common image to the product that could help them in the market competition. Once again, this will involve the individual support of the several technicians that will help producers to solve their individual problems, the cooperating meeting between the technicians to harmonize and smooth the procedures and, finally, training for the producers themselves to help them launch the businesses.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

Mediation seems an appropriate model to use on local development, provided that some contextual conditions are present. First, it is necessary to count with a local social fabric that already accommodates several types of associations or other types of civil society groups, public institutions and so on. The issue we want to raise here is that some territories in Portugal lack this type of social fabric. In these cases, social interventions have to be designed in a totally different way – at least if we want to stay in contact with the most deprived areas in Portugal, which right now seems to be some inland rural areas suffering fast processes of social transition.

Mediation seems to be an appropriate model in the perspective of the group that triggers and articulates cooperation between institutions, and in the perspective of the stable bettering of the relationships between local institutions. In the first case, the mediating team can do it with small teams, provided that they are well prepared in all regards, including the very hard technical knowledge that they have to master. And if the mediation processes are somehow succeeded, the mediating team can leave the scene and simply embrace a new project. The territory itself can gain new ways of cooperation and more sustainable action.

Mediation represents a very complex process that takes time in order to achieve stability. A significant number of factors can block the process and the team must know the territory and its agents sufficiently to avoid some local traps. Although we have not shown it in the text, it was also present in the discourse of the interviewees that the mediating team should avoid any kind of protagonism by itself. This can be difficult, because mediation implicates the articulation of the whole processes and groups, and some of the entities involved can react against this type of coordination action.

Finally, it is clear that people can get some advantages from these local processes. In our case, to improve local economy and to increase the quality of life of the producers was the finality to attain. And we should not lose track that local development processes should look at the most deprived groups to reach similar ends.

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