

**Local participation in Spain:  
beyond associative democracy**

JOAN FONT

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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© Joan Font [joan.font@uab.es](mailto:joan.font@uab.es)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Strategic Plans, Citizen Juries, Participatory Budgets or Children Councils are some of the labels used to refer to processes that incorporate a certain component of citizen participation that have been taking place over the last few years. These processes have also become more common in Spanish local governments, especially since the nineties. The main aim of this chapter is to analyse what they mean and what they involve with respect to other formal mechanisms of participation that have been in operation in European cities for decades, and which were largely based on the role given to associations.

We shall avoid here the justification of why it is necessary to open more forums to citizen participation in the design of public policies, a subject that we have already discussed in other papers (Font, 2001)<sup>1</sup>. Working therefore on the basis that this participation is necessary, the argument developed here refers to how these participatory processes work and who leads them<sup>2</sup>. Specifically, we want to analyse a series of experiences which have in common the fact that they go beyond the instruments of associative democracy which most Spanish and European town councils have adopted for many years (Navarro, 1999). That is, here we shall study all those participation mechanisms involving some innovation with respect to the municipal consultative councils, the presence of which has become generalised in our large and medium-sized municipalities<sup>3</sup>.

To do this, we shall structure the work into two main sections. In the first one we shall attempt to justify the interest in setting up this kind of instruments of participation that generally consist in extending the participatory subjects beyond organised groups, giving voice to citizens individually. In the second part, we will use the same arguments developed to justify the advantages of these participation mechanisms for the analysis

of about 50 innovative experiences that have been carried out over the last few years in Catalan town councils.

## 2. WHY GO BEYOND MUNICIPAL CONSULTATIVE COUNCILS?

In-depth analyses of the performance of Spanish Municipal consultative councils are still very scarce, although there is a growing volume of research on the subject (Navarro, 1999; Brugué et al, 2001; Sarasa and Guiu, 2001). It would certainly be necessary to have access to a much broader and more varied input in order to make a reliable appraisal of the extent to which these councils have been useful instruments and to what ends. Most of them have a similar formal structure, but in fact, they all work in very different ways. For example, the vast majority is made up of representatives of the municipality and of local associations; they meet in plenary sessions, have a standing committee and working groups, and play a fundamentally consultative role. In practice, however, the representation of these associations can be extremely broad and fragmented or very concentrated in few groups. The working groups can play a marginal role or be the true working forum of the Council, and the Council can just serve to keep the associations informed of the municipal actions or become a true policy-making forum.

But in any case, it does seem clear that even in those Councils that have worked relatively well and have been useful, there are certain generalised criticisms of the way they work or some limitations that could be necessary to overcome. Performance of Councils could improve in three main aspects: representativity of participants, their capacity to influence public local policies, and their potential as an instrument of empowerment<sup>4</sup>.

One of the main functions of electoral processes in representative democracies is to guarantee the representation of the interests of the different citizens and social groups in the processes of government. The introduction of formulas of citizen participation beyond elections should not only preserve but also foster the **capacity of representation** of these diverse interests in public decisions<sup>5</sup>. Nonetheless, once we open new

forums to participation, the question of representation is not automatically resolved. On the one hand, participation mechanisms can be affected by intense participatory biases derived, among other things, from the requirement of resources from the participants that are distributed unequally among the population. In this sense, one of the main risks of the formulas of non-electoral participation would be to reward the opinions and interests of those citizens or groups that have the most resources to participate. On the other hand, it is not clear what type of citizens we are interested in integrating in the participatory processes, i.e., which voice or voices should be heard in the processes of citizen participation. In the different participatory mechanisms that we shall analyse we will find different answers to these questions.

The predominant participation model has fostered the participation of organised groups to the detriment of the capacity of non-organised citizens to have an effect on government processes. There are a number of different reasons for this. On the one hand, local governments have conceived associations as valid interlocutors of the interests, needs and demands present among the population. On the other hand, it is easier for them to dialogue with organised groups than with citizens that can only represent themselves, and which are in most cases very ill-informed. Furthermore, governments have understood that the stronger disruptive potential comes from organised groups, with strong interests and expectations about the action of government, and with the capacity to influence and mobilise public opinion. That is why they are the first ones to be listened to.

Since the late eighties, the associative participation model has shown greater limitations, most of which refer to the concept of representativity. Firstly, the practical development of this participation model allows us in many cases to doubt about the representativity of the participating groups in relation to the associative fabric as a whole. Secondly, some of the examples analysed show that the participants in the participatory bodies cannot always be presented as representative of the

actual groups they belong to. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the groups have genuine problems in guaranteeing their capacity of representation of the interests present in the population in a context of low associative participation.

In general, not all the groups that are part of the associative fabric of a territory or of a subject area manage to be represented in the participatory bodies. One type of association tends to be more favoured than others in these participatory forums, forums created according to the political interests of the local government. Throughout the eighties, municipal governments tended to favour the participation of groups that were ideologically closest, and with greater capacity for social mobilisation. Over the last few years the trend is to reward those groups with greater management capacity and those that agree in the way government manages services (Navarro, 1999). The case of Barcelona exemplifies the existence of this new type of bias, both in the sectorial councils and in the district participatory bodies. In such bodies, associations that have best co-operated with the administration in the provision of public services have been most favoured (Brugué et al., 2001).

There are also many cases in which the capacity of participants to represent their own entities in the participatory bodies is doubtful. The case of Barcelona is again a good example of the problem of the increasing age and lack of renewal of participants. In part, this problem of representativity can be due to a lack of interest of the entities in the activities of these bodies, but above all, to the difficulties in finding available and well-prepared people, and to the insufficient internal democracy within these associations. Therefore, it is common to find associations that do not envisage any type of forum of communication and interaction between the supposed representatives and members of the organisation, which means that participants acquire full autonomy with respect to the social group that they aim to represent.

Finally, another relevant problem besetting this participation model is the weakness of the associative fabric itself, a problem which affects

most western democracies, but which is more important in Spain due to low group membership. Against a backdrop of low associative participation, one could doubt about the capacity of the groups that are part of this associative fabric, to represent the voice of all citizens<sup>6</sup>.

In any case, a participatory model that generates frustration and bureaucratisation has fostered many of the limitations of the associative world. Thus, we should perhaps conclude that recovering a participation model that stresses the critical and democratic control role of associations, together with a profound renewal of these, could solve the problems of representativity.

In relation to the deficits of associative-based participation, over the last few years a trend that seeks new formulas of participation that give a leading role to the non-organised citizens, be it via a mixed participation model or on an exclusively individual basis, has emerged. The case of strategic planning would be an illustrative example of this trend. Whilst in its early versions it enjoyed the participation of the companies linked to the socio-economic development of the territory, it later began to favour the participation of associations and in the last few years, in most processes of strategic planning, participation has opened up to non-organised citizens.

When we speak of the deficits of consultative councils, experts and local politicians often point to the problems of representativity, and the associative world repeatedly points out the difficulties in achieving a significant impact of their debates and decisions on **local public policies**. In those Councils that have worked properly there is, at least, an effect on the shared detection of needs and the establishment of forums of dialogue, along with the setting up of certain mechanisms of accountability. Through these procedures, participants have been able to become aware of the extent to which local government was or was not considering their recommendations. However, these cases are more the exception than the rule and in general, the relative frustration detected is due to the lack of compensation between the great effort that associations must make to

remain active in the councils and the scarce real results that they manage to produce.

It is true that the limited results of these councils in influencing policies are due to the fact that this was never their function. They have always been conceived as forums for informing the associative movement or, in the best of cases, for consulting and discussing envisaged policies with them. Likewise, from a government institution based on a representative logic, the incorporation of functions that go further than the strictly consultative ones can come into apparent contradiction with the mandate given to the elected representatives.

However, there are arguments of all different kinds that lead us to think that the setting up of participatory mechanisms that do not have a certain real capacity for influencing the decision-making process is an absurd exercise and can only lead to frustration. Perhaps the main reason is the difficulty in convincing participants to play an active role if it is not at all clear what this participation is really in aid of. It is not a question of having to give guarantees beforehand that all their recommendations will be followed, but it is one of saying that their work will be taken seriously and that they are not merely participating in a purely ritual exercise. At least, some analyses of participants' motivations point in this direction, as some of Olson's critics have shown: the will to influence policies is the main motivating element in taking part, even if this comes into apparent contradiction with the logic of the free-rider (Schlozman, Verba and Brady, 1999).

One key subject is the link between these mechanisms and a decision-making process, where the elected representatives will always have the last word. From this perspective, the participatory process needs a series of characteristics. First, that representatives also play a role and that their voice is heard sufficiently loudly. Second, that the rules and responsibilities of each one are clearly delimited and, finally, that there are the appropriate accounting mechanisms so that the representatives can later explain their decisions to the participants. When these conditions are

fulfilled, it is possible that participation and representation can become processes that are more complementary than contradictory.

In these cases, the responsibility of the representatives may not only not be threatened, but may even be strengthened. The cycle of the Porto Alegre participatory budget starts with the mayor accounting for the discharge of the budget for the previous year (Abers, 2000). Also, the first annual meeting of the CMBS (Municipal Social Welfare Council) of Barcelona uses exactly the same procedure (first meeting devoted to the previous year's accountability). Again, some experiences of juries such as that of Camden (London) incorporate a later session in which politicians explain the proposals that will derive from the recommendations of those people who made them up, and why other recommendations will not be followed.

In any case, the way participation translates into policies will be very unequal, and will depend on two factors. First, the type of instruments used will be important, because while participatory budgets or Spanish citizen juries are very much oriented to making decisions, Municipal Councils can also do this, but have a format that gives priority to dialogue and exchange over decision-making capacity. But, secondly, the political will to make one or other use of the mechanisms will be decisive and will make a municipal council a purely ritual forum, while in other cases they may make operative proposals, which are heard and receive a public response from the municipal government. In the same way, citizen juries can be taken as a firm mandate or as one of the many voices that are heard in a political process. In any case, and although in many of the experiences that we shall analyse below there may not be an explicit will to go beyond merely consultative functions, their potential impact on local policies could be one of the arguments for going beyond consultative councils.

Finally, the third main aspect that we have pointed out is the capacity that participatory processes can show to generate "better citizens", from the point of view of their interest and their involvement with the

collective subjects (O'Neil, this volume). It would be difficult to limit the substantive performances of the participatory processes to specific decision-making, forgetting its potential role as **a school of citizenship** (Akkerman et al, 1999; Barnes, 2000). That is, whether the participants, once they have finished the experience, indicate a greater willingness to take part again, with a greater degree of trust in the virtues of co-operation with the others, and with a greater confidence in their own capacity to make themselves heard. Linking up to one of the most popular lines of work of the last few years we could say that participatory mechanisms would play a role as instruments that create social capital<sup>7</sup>.

This educational potential has appeared more or less explicitly in the analysis of very different participatory experiences. In the case of the CMBS, for example, one of their main virtues is the capacity they have had to generate dynamics of dialogue and consensus among the participants, and to contribute to generating a welfare culture (Sarasa and Guiu, 2001). However, the educational effects of this type of instruments only reach a small part of the population, which precisely because it is part of the associative fabric, can already be considered as highly politicised. The challenge will lie in the individually based participation mechanisms, and especially in those that aim not only to reach those citizens interested or involved in the subjects but also, or above all, to citizens with less information. Experiences such as that of the citizen juries show that people who are not prepared to take part in an ongoing way do accept to do so in one-off mechanisms. The participatory practice in this type of forums increases the respect for authorities and helps participants to understand the complexity of collective life, and can contribute to their education in the values and practices of democracy.

Nonetheless, the usual limitations of the participation instruments in their educational effects are also clear. Basically, most of these instruments only reach a small group of citizens, which means that it is difficult for the educational effects to spread to the population as a whole. The participatory budget is one of the mechanisms that in some of the Brazilian

experiences has achieved a higher percentage of participation, reaching only a very small percent of the population. Two conditions will be important in order to overcome this handicap. Firstly, increasing the visibility of the participatory mechanisms, and informing people via the media of their existence outside the participating groups. For example, the participatory budget process is known to 50% of the Porto Alegre population, whilst the results of the citizen juries or the consultative councils in this sense are very irregular. Secondly, giving continuity to the participatory processes so that these educating effects can have an accumulative function through different experiences. After the initial euphoria of taking part in an interesting process that has generated a greater will to collective involvement, this will gradually dilute over time as the subject gets back to “business as usual”, i.e. to the everyday reality of a political life, with no forums envisaged to listen to the voice of the citizens. This process will gradually turn that participatory experience into a more and more distant and irrelevant memory (Giménez et al., 2001).

In sum, although in many cases the municipal consultative councils have had a very positive function in their respective localities, they usually present deficits in terms of representativity, capacity to influence in policies and to become large schools of citizens. In the next section we shall see to what extent those instruments of participation that have tried to innovate with respect to the usual working of such councils manage to overcome these limitations.

### **3. HOW DO YOU GO BEYOND MUNICIPAL CONSULTATIVE COUNCILS?**

The empirical work described below is taken from a study carried out for the School of Public Administration of the Catalan Regional Government, the fieldwork for which was done in spring 2000. This work includes an extensive study of any experience that had been done in this field in the Catalan municipalities of more than 50,000 inhabitants, as well as a selection of some especially significant experiences carried out in

smaller municipalities<sup>8</sup>. In total, there are 50 experiences of citizen participation, which despite their very different formats have precisely in common the fact that they are not consultative councils with the traditional format<sup>9</sup>. In most cases, the analysis was principally based on an interview with a local organiser of the process (expert or politician), as well as on the analysis of the existing documentation, although for some experiences complementary interviews were held with other actors<sup>10</sup>. We shall begin by giving an overview of the main types of experiences that appear in the sample, and then analyse these in the light of the three criteria mentioned above.

### **3.1. Types of Mechanisms**

Although each of the experiences has been named with different criteria and has taken into account local circumstances, in a number of cases we can find processes, which are based on a limited number of methodologies. Thus, the most frequent mechanism in the sample involves local Agenda 21, which appears in 10 municipalities. This is due to the coincidence between the fieldwork and a period of great expansion of these participatory processes (Font and Subirats, 2001), making it difficult to know what their degree of consolidation could be in ten years time.

The second most usual instruments are the consultative councils with an innovative format. That is, those which to a large extent follow the model of the local consultative councils, but bringing in some significant change in the way they work. This change can be either in the selection mechanisms of the participants, with the presence of individual citizens, or in the groups that they aim to incorporate (children). In fact, we could divide the group according to this criterion, between the most frequent experiences (children councils), with respect to those councils that incorporate citizens chosen at random, which are a more recent phenomenon (Sant Feliu de Llobregat).

There are also six cases of participatory elaboration of strategic plans. As in the case of Agenda 21, here is a process that can adopt different working procedures, as proved by the cases analysed here, which

range from a very intense to a very weak participatory component. In any case, it is a mechanism in a less experimental phase, which will very probably continue to be important in the mid-term. In addition, there are six cases of citizen juries, although two of them take place in the same municipality. This is again an innovative mechanism that reaches Catalonia in the mid-90's, following various experiences carried out in the Basque Country.

The last instrument with a significant presence receives very different names, but responds to what we could call Neighbourhood Committees. They all have in common the will to bring the municipal debate closer to each of the neighbourhoods of the municipality. Other participatory mechanisms with a lesser presence (two experiences in each case) are referendums, integrated plans, sectorial strategic plans, and participatory budgets.

In this sample of experiences, we find two significantly distinct realities. First, there is what we could consider participation mechanisms in the strict sense, that is, created exclusively to channel citizen participation, be it one-off (citizen juries) or permanent (children councils). However, almost half of the experiences described here are at the same time more and less than participatory mechanisms, given that they deal with broader processes of debate and the drawing up of policies. This is the case of strategic plans, Agendas 21 and others, which are not specific mechanisms but processes which integrate very different dynamics of citizen participation.

Furthermore, many of these processes integrate very different participatory methodologies. Thus, for the drawing up of the participatory budgets of Sabadell a strategy of Participatory Action Research was used, but so was the EASW methodology (European Awareness Scenario Workshops). Also, in some Agendas 21 or strategic plans there was a combination of holding forums with surveys or interactive web sites. Therefore, in the following pages we shall be talking about a very varied

reality, not only in terms of organisational details, but also in terms of their own logic and *raison d'être*.

### **3.2. REPRESENTATIVITY OF PARTICIPANTS**

In this section, we wish to analyse the people taking part in these participatory mechanisms, i.e. the groups to be listened to and involved in the process. Who they are, what volume of participants or what similarities and differences there are between the real participants and the whole of the group to which they intend to listen will be some of the subjects that we shall examine. We shall begin by drawing a very basic distinction on the grounds of which groups are intended to take part: organised groups, individual citizens or a combination both. Later we shall analyse in detail each of these three possibilities to see how the combination of citizens and groups has worked in practice or what has been the degree of success when mobilising citizens.

The instruments aimed exclusively at associations are a minority in this research (six cases). Obviously, this it is not a representative reality of instruments of local participation, but the result of the definition of our object of study. Therefore, the mechanisms that appear here, made up only of associations are exceptional experiences that lie outside the format of the consultative council. Among the rest, we find a significant number of experiences of both types: mixed (associations and citizens, twenty-six cases), and only individual citizens (15).

The diversity of working models is much greater when we look at the mixed participation instruments (Table 1). The most rigid formula is also the least used, i.e., the one that attributes a certain quota to citizens and another to groups. This option allows to introduce the desired dose of each group and avoid the domination of any one of them, but at the same time obliges us to set criteria which are *a priori* difficult to establish. Thus, while in the neighborhood Councils of Sant Feliu they have opted for the coexistence of both groups (citizens and organised groups) in equal share, in the Council of 100 young people of Barcelona there is a broad majority of

randomly chosen young individuals. In this case, the option has been the *de facto* existence of two representation bodies of the young people of Barcelona: individually in this body and through the associations in the local Youth Council.

In the remaining cases, the organisers have opted not to establish any specific number, which means the free access of people from both groups. Although it could seem that this would generate a much greater presence of people as individuals, the effect is exactly the opposite: the combination of a lack of information, interest or practical experience leads to an overwhelming majority presence of associations. This is often reinforced by the use of different mechanisms of mobilisation, so that while a letter of invitation is often sent to associations, it is supposed that the remaining citizens will take part as a result of posters or ads in the local press. Thus, the individual participants were a small minority of about 5% of the total in experiences like the Strategic Plan of Viladecans or the Agenda 21 of Manresa. In mechanisms that envisage a continued participation over time, there also tends to be a more continued presence of the associative sector, whilst individual attendance is more one-off, with the consequences that this entails both for the information and the capacity to influence in the making of decisions.

**Table 1**  
**Type of Mechanisms with Mixed Participation, a Few Examples (Number of Cases)**

Fixed proportion of participants (4)	Open participation (15)	Open participation, with complementary methods (5)
Neighborhood councils (Sant Feliu)	Agenda 21 (nearly all)	Strategic plan (Girona)
Citizen jury ( Montornès-I)	City educational project (Reus)	Integrated youth plan (Mataró)

There are two variants to this majority pattern, which attempt to boost the voices of individual citizens. One of them is the extension to them (or to part of them) of the personalised invitation mechanisms. Another, the setting up of parallel consultation mechanisms to this sector, in the form of surveys, websites, telephone line suggestions or other one-off mechanisms

such as the postcards used by the Youth Strategic Plan of Mataró. This diversity of mechanisms causes disparate results in the final capacity of mobilisation. As for active and personal participation, many of the relatively successful activities involve between 100 and 200 people, although there are exceptional cases like the 700 participants in the Agenda 21 of Manlleu or the Strategic Plan of Rubí. The figures grow if we incorporate less costly ways of involvement such as surveys, which often involve figures of 800-1,000 participants.

Among the mechanisms that only envisage the participation of citizens at the individual level, there is also a great diversity of criteria with respect to how to select the participants (Table 2). The first main difference separates the mechanisms that do not restrict participation and those that do. Among the first we can distinguish between those that are clearly based on universal participation (referendums) and those with an open character, but which would no longer be viable if most of the sectors, which the organisers aimed to consult were to take part. Among these, the degree of real mobilisation is very diverse and can go from a few people in the case of the Barcelona EEP, up to more than 300 in the first citizen's forum of Sant Boi. If in none of these "open" mechanisms it has ever been possible to mobilise 1% of the potential audience, in the two cases of referendum, the participation reached 56% of the census in Palamós and 38% in Sant Andreu. As well as having a more limited participation, in the "open" mechanisms there is often a participation, which, although it takes place individually, is led almost exclusively by members of associations.

**Table 2**  
**Mechanisms with Individual Participation: Who Takes Part?**

All	Open	Elected representatives	Random representatives	Designates
Referendums (2)	Citizen forums (3)	Children councils (4)	Citizen juries (5)	Coffee with the Mayor (Reus)

In the other mechanisms, the number of participants is limited and so it is necessary to establish criteria to decide who these will be. The three procedures used were the same as those that have worked throughout

history to elect the people's representatives: designation by the authorities, lottery and election. In the first category we can only find the experience of the Coffee with the Mayor of Reus, in which in each session the citizens representatives considered to be most appropriate were chosen on the grounds of the subject to be debated. Random selection is the mechanism used in the experiences of citizen juries, thus seeking a certain sociological representativity of the participants, i.e., turning the small number of participants (from 48 to 93) into a small-scale reproduction of the social composition of each municipality. This criterion has also been used in mechanisms already mentioned such as the Council of 100 young people of Barcelona or in the opinion polls carried out in the framework of certain strategic plans. Finally, there are mechanisms in which the representatives have been elected, as in some of the children councils, although in a number of cases this election may have combined democratic criteria based on merits.

What relationship is there between two desirable objectives such as extension of participation and representativity of the participants? Is there a contradiction in the fact that if we maximise one, we sacrifice the other? Or rather, do they mutually strengthen each other? The information coming from these experiences rather points towards the lack of relationship between both dimensions, but to the existence of a relationship between both aspects and the methodology used (table 3). Thus, if referendums are able to generate a considerable level of participation it is probable that they also provoke a fairly representative result, whilst in citizen juries, if the recruiting process works well, a representative result will be produced, although generally with a fairly low participation. What does seem clear is that mechanisms with open participation can give rise to more participants than others, but at the same time they will tend to be less representative of the population as a whole.

**Table 3**  
**Representativity and Number of Participants (mechanisms with exclusively individual participation)**

Number of participants
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Representativity	Few	Some	Many
Low	Coffee with the Mayor (Reus) Children council (Viladecans)	Open council meetings (Arbúcies) Citizen forums (Sant Boi)	
Medium	Children councils (2)		
High	5 Citizen juries children council (Reus)		Referendums (2)

In sum, the debate on which voices should be heard has been resolved in many different ways, in some cases from the conviction that the formula adopted is the most appropriate and in others as a result of negotiation with other local actors. The tendency to give a leading role to the non-organised citizens, a role they had not traditionally had, is clear; but at the same time, the role of the associations has continued to be important in the majority group of experiences that combined individual with associative participation. Tensions have appeared both in the search for the appropriate formula for combining both types of participation and in the will to maximise at the same time the number and representativity of participants.

### 3.3. Impact on Policies

Table 4 intends to classify the degree and type of influence on the policies of the instruments analysed here. On the one hand, we establish a grading system with respect to the degree of influence, although we do not have strong empirical information, and we are basing ourselves on the statements made by those interviewed. On the other hand, we use the distinction between those instruments that intend first and foremost to contribute to define priorities and identify problems, over those that wish to act upon the more specific decisions of the policies to adopt.

**Table 4**  
**Degree and Type of Influence in Policies. Some Examples (total number of cases)**

	Low	Medium	High
Definition	Coffee with the Mayor (Reus) Citizen jury (St Quirze) (4)	Agenda 21 (Rubí) Participatory budget (Sabadell) (8)	Urban programme (Santa Coloma) Integral youth plan (Mataró) (3)

Decision	3 Children councils Neighborhood councils (Sant Feliu) (4)	Council of 100 young People (Barcelona) Citizen jury (Corbera) (5)	Referendums 2 Citizen juries (Montornès) (4)
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Are there mechanisms with more capacity of influence than others?

There do appear to be clear tendencies in some cases, although there is a great diversity of situations for the same mechanism, indicating that the political will is at least as decisive as the type of instrument used. The clearest and most heterogeneous case is that of the citizen juries. Whilst in two municipalities, the change of the governing team has led to dismiss the conclusions of the process, in Rubí and Corbera there are signs of partial compliance, and in Montornès they are already implementing the resolutions of the first council. A less extreme case, but one in which one can also appreciate a certain diversity would be that of the innovative consultative councils. Thus, there are signs of a greater capacity of influence of the Council of 100 young people of Barcelona (extension of the night timetable of the Metro, new night bus line) than of the Councils of Sant Feliu. The same occurs with the children councils, which have had some impact on a couple of municipalities, but in the rest they have been relegated to a purely ritual or educational role.

In other mechanisms, more than speaking of an unequal impact in the policies, we find a situation in which the resolutions are so broad or generalised that it is difficult to analyse their real degree of compliance. This happens in some Agendas 21, but also in the participatory budget of Sabadell, producing a long list of needs that are neither well specified nor prioritised, so that they commit the governing authorities to very little. On the other hand, although it may be difficult to speak with authority as we are only basing ourselves on two cases, there seems to be one mechanism whose high public profile and the clarity of the alternatives discussed give it a mandate that is difficult to contradict: referendums. In both cases, even if the legal character of the consultation were not binding, no local actor has claimed that the results should not be respected.

In sum, the participatory format is not the only determining element making a process more or less influential at the moment of truth. A mechanism that produces almost binding effects is the Brazilian case as the participatory budget has caused a marginal impact on the only similar case analysed here. In other cases we have observed that the same mechanism offers very different results depending on the degree of support given by the different local actors. However, the format does count. A clearer resolution favours this being more easily defended publicly, in the same way as a greater visibility of the process gives greater moral force to its conclusions.

### **3.4. Educational Effects**

People behind many of these participation experiences insist on pointing out that their main aim was more to contribute to create citizenship that would lead to social capital building in the municipality, than to incorporate participation to collective decision-making. Are there indications of any progress being made in this direction?

In most experiences, we can speak of a positive response although much of the effects are limited. If we start with those cases in which it seems clear that this effect has not taken place, we can detect two types of situations. First, experiences with a very limited number of participants who already knew each other and where therefore this specific mechanism has not supposed any significant advance from the point of view of creating trust. Second, one-off actions, which therefore did not even intend to leave any kind of cultural legacy. In most of the remaining cases, we can point to some kind of effects, although these are of very different kinds. Thus, the Badalona seminars contributed to create a greater degree of co-ordination between the participating associations, and the process of drawing up the Strategic Plan of Rubí contributed decisively to the formation of the Federation of Neighbours Associations and of the Local Federation of Shopkeepers. This same process of improvement in the political climate has taken place in Mataró since the Strategic Plan on Youth, but in this case, among the local political forces, which went from treating this subject

from a perspective of greater confrontation to a scenario of dialogue and cooperation.

In other cases, as well as the possible learning on democracy there has been a rise in participants' awareness on the subjects dealt with, as is the case of the Information Society Plan of Terrassa. But perhaps the most interesting cases are those in which the visibility of the process has made it possible to transcend the frontiers of the participants and reach other sectors of citizens. This process has come about by bringing the debates of the children councils to the schools in some of the municipalities involved or provoking an internal debate in the associations from the public debate of the PAM in Manresa.

With regard to the relationship between the type of instrument and its educational effects, we find a very small correlation. The political environment surrounding the participatory process has emerged as the predominant variable, over and above the specific methodology adopted. Thus, for example, the Palamós referendum, with a greater degree of involvement of the local actors, has a much greater capacity to create social capital than an experience much more controlled by the City Council, as is the case of Sant Andreu. In the case of children councils, we observe that the key factor is the relationship of these with the outside world, i.e., to what extent the children's representatives carry out their function of intermediation and explain the process in the educational centres that have elected them. Finally, citizen juries would be an example of a mechanism with relatively homogeneous effects and with a moderate capacity to foster a growing interest in local subjects among the participants. However, they often have little capacity to create complicity with the associative movement, which perceives them as mechanisms in which they lose their leading role.

In sum, the participatory mechanisms have provoked a whole set of positive consequences in the network of relationships between citizens, associations and local government, affecting the relationships within or among several of these categories. Furthermore, the types of effects have

a certain relationship with the instruments adopted, but these show a wide range of results. The specific characteristics of their application, as well as the environment in which they were applied, and the reaction of support or opposition that they generated appear as variables that were decisive to understand their potential educational effect.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

In this paper, we have analysed a whole group of new citizen participation mechanisms introduced over the last few years. Their fundamental distinctive feature was that in most of the cases they went beyond the usual process of giving a voice to organised groups, in order to try to incorporate citizens individually as well. All of this took place within the framework of very different methodological formulas, some created fundamentally as participatory mechanisms and others developed as broader processes of strategic planning, incorporating participatory forums to a greater or lesser extent.

But have these new mechanisms been useful in any way? Have they served to overcome the limitations of traditional participatory formulas? To answer these questions we started by trying to point out which were the usual main limitations of the consultative councils and we identified three main fields: their representativity, the low impact on the process of drawing up public policies and the mechanisms' capacity of democratic education. The list may not be extensive; the seriousness of these problems may be very diverse depending on the specific case or the perspective of each actor. But it would seem hard to refute that these are three areas in which it is possible to go beyond the everyday results of many local consultative councils. Without a doubt, this does not mean an overall disqualification of the work done by these councils. Their work has been extremely diverse, has still not been studied in any depth, and in many cases has generated interesting returns.

We have tried to analyse the overcoming of these deficits in other local participation mechanisms, from a study of fifty Catalan experiences,

most of which took place in large or medium-sized municipalities. There have been attempts to improve representativity with very different formulas. In some cases there was a total change of strategy, and the leading role was given to the citizens individually, in others they were given a role in a common forum with the associative movement, and in others parallel spaces were provided to allow for both realities. The move in favour of giving a voice to citizens constitutes an important step forward with respect to the capacity of representation that the associations in the municipal councils have in practice. However, the practice analysed indicates very unequal results in which it is not possible to maximise all the desirable aims. Thus, in some instruments, the theoretical coexistence of citizens and groups in practice becomes a clearly hegemonic situation in favour of the second group. In others, there is a move towards a generalised participation (referendums) or a random one (citizen juries), which makes it possible to listen in a representative but occasional way to the voice of the non-organised citizens. The attempts to permanently combine the voice of citizens and associations have not been successful yet. Finally, the formulas that point towards the creation of parallel spaces for both groups open up the great question of how the results of both approaches can be integrated after the event.

As for their influence on policies, these experiences provide unequal results that are sometimes too early to evaluate. In any case, it does seem that quite a few of these processes have gone beyond what is usual in most consultative councils, as far as the capacity of influence on policies is concerned, be it in the way they are drawn up or in more specific aspects linked to their implementation. Participatory processes with clear and specific results and with greater public visibility will have a much greater capacity of real incidence on policies than those that give rise to a broad catalogue of general recommendations.

In the area of the capacity for democratic education, some of these instruments have two big advantages with respect to the dynamics of most of the consultative councils. First of all, they open the door to a greater

number of participants, many of whom habitually have fewer opportunities to take part, which means that the public liable to learn the ways of democracy is much more present. Secondly, working rules where the hierarchical distances are small and in which a horizontal dialogue is fostered between the participants themselves and sometimes with the politicians, also create a more fertile seedbed for this type of learning.

Although, as we have seen, most of the methodologies mentioned have been applied in a very flexible way, so that we find a great diversity in their implementation, we observe that each one contributes in greater measure to solving one or other problems. Thus, a long and continuous process can be more favourable to creating social capital (strategic plan), but at the same time can lead to dilute and make the decision-making character of the process less visible than in an experience with a very limited timetable (referendum, citizen jury). In the same way, a very large emphasis on representativity can lead us to value random-type formulas with the result that the educational impact is limited to a very small number of participants. In any case, this group of experiences does seem to indicate that setting up participatory mechanisms that go beyond a strictly associative participation can contribute to overcome some of the limits of the consultative councils, especially of those aspects more roundly criticised by the associative movement.

## NOTES

Previous versions of this chapter were presented at a Seminar on New Politics at the CCCB, at the Spanish Political Association Conference (La Laguna, September 2001) and at the International Conference Developments in Public Participation and Innovations in Community Governance (Bellaterra, June 2001). I want to thank all the participants in these meetings for their comments, which have contributed to improve the content of the chapter.

1. This research should be understood as the result of a team effort by the citizen participation team in the Equip d'Anàlisi Política. Specifically, the first part is based on arguments similar to those that we gave in Font and Blanco (2001a

and 2001b), whilst the material of the second part comes from a collective work (EAP, 2000).

2. We shall also avoid another fundamental debate for a full understanding of these mechanisms: What leads those who set them up to do so? These motivations are probably very different and in many cases have a strong instrumental component (Navarro, 1999), but we consider that the arguments developed below are valid whatever the original motivation, as long as the participatory process involves some kind of results beyond simply ones of publicity.
3. We shall use the concept of associative democracy and its institutional expression in form of local consultative councils as synonyms, although these are words used in two very different fields (theoretical in one case and empirical in the other). For the concept of associative democracy, see for example Cohen and Rogers (1995).
4. For more in-depth argumentation on why these three aims would be desirable in a process of participation, see Font and Blanco (1991b). Of course, other criteria could be added, for example, the availability of information and the chance of deliberation. See, for example, Fishkin (1995 and in this volume).
5. We are using the concept of representativity in its more sociologically accepted sense, i.e., that participants make up a good small-scale snapshot of the group of population we aim to listen to.
6. Basically we are recovering Olson's argument: most collective interests do not find expression in any type of organisation, because of the problems of collective action that he seeks to explain in his contribution.
7. We take the perspective that defends the possibility of creating structurally induced social capital (Maloney et al, 1999) and disagrees with the notion of Putnam (1993) that attributes it more historical roots and an interminably long creation process.
8. In Catalonia there are 19 municipalities of more than 50,000 inhabitants. 41 of the 50 experiences are taken from these, whilst the remaining experiences are from 8 other smaller municipalities. Only one of the 19 municipalities had not carried out any experience of those covered here, whilst for 2 of them there was no response available. Despite the desire to be exhaustive in these 19 municipalities, we have doubtlessly failed to locate certain specific experiences, which were especially complex to track down in large municipalities like Barcelona, where there is not one single information provider aware of the activities carried out by the different departments.
9. We have always attempted to include experiences that would have had some kind of institutional recognition and therefore we have excluded citizens' initiatives that have no formal recognition. We have understood participation

processes to mean that the participants and/or the people organising the process had wanted it to serve to influence, either directly or indirectly, in the drawing up of local public policies.

10. Without a doubt the exclusive use of these sources involves a risk of possible biases, given that some of the people interviewed showed a very positive and rose-tinted view of the processes. Precisely for that reason we have avoided the analysis of some aspects in which we had access to less reliable information and we have gone into greater depth in the experiences in which we have been able to have a broader range of information

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