

Local Agenda 21 and Citizenship: The Portuguese Case within European Context

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OBSERVA is a social research centre on environmental issues, run by *ISCTE - Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa* (University Institute for Social and Business Sciences) and *Instituto de Ciências Sociais* (ICS-UL) (Research Institute for Social Sciences - University of Lisbon). OBSERVA was founded in 1996 by social researchers from both institutes, in order to jointly launch and give rise to a social research field on environmental issues in Portugal.

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Abstract

Local Agenda 21 is essentially a process of democratic practicing, in so far as it involves sharing political competencies in decision-making by the local authorities and the mobilisation of all citizens and civil society organisations in the process. It is, thus, a course of action in which the willingness and openness of local political leaders is as important as the ability of citizens to take the initiative of learning about and getting involved in local public life.

Unfortunately, there are no more than twenty *LA21* processes running through in Portugal, and most of them not fulfilling all parameters required (for instance, concerning the participation of local citizens, the involvement of stakeholders, or the articulation of economic, social and ecological dimensions of local development...).

This paper discusses some hypothesis on the lack of success of *LA21* in Portugal, which are related to structural political conditions for local governance and public participation. Resorting to some surveys on environmental policy issues (applied to both the municipal leaders and the population), the aim is to characterize the trends of mobilisation on local sustainability in Portuguese society, particularly with regard to the citizenry and local administrations.

Key Words: Local Agenda 21, Sustainable Development, Citizenship, Portugal.

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1 – Primary conditions for Local Agenda 21 in Portugal

The 10th principle of the Declaration of Rio — 1992 recognized “social participation” as a primary condition for sustainable development. Today this belief still remains as priority. On the one hand, the making of sustainable development requires a collective commitment by the citizens in demanding and supporting pro-sustainability measures and putting pressure on political and economic authorities (a bottom-up process). On the other hand, it requires the openness of decision-makers in regard to social movements and collective action, while taking themselves the initiative of measures calling for collective action and civil society participation (a top-down process). Co-operation, mutual acceptance and confidence are key words in sustainable development.

From this point of view, political will and self-determination by local administrations, particularly by elected leaders of municipalities, is a crucial means for success in initiatives for local sustainability, as is the case Agenda Local 21 processes already in move all around the world after the Earth Summit of 1992 (Agenda XXI). The central role of local administrations in these processes is widely emphasised by United Nations organizations for the environment and development. The Agenda XXI document itself, in the first paragraph of Chapter 28, argues that “as the level of governance closest to the people, they [local administrations] play a vital role in educating, mobilising, and responding to the public to promote sustainable development” (UNCED, 1992).

The *International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives* clearly defines Local Agenda 21 as a “participatory, multistakeholder process to achieve the goals of Agenda 21 at the local level through the preparation and implementation of a long-term, strategic plan that addresses priority local sustainable development concerns” (ICLEI, 2002: 6). In any case, the efforts of both the governing and the governed are critical for achieving initiatives aiming at the take off of sustainable development. Local Agenda 21 is unquestionably an opportunity to provide a decisive impetus to this endeavour.

This is why late comer countries to democracy tend mostly to meet poor levels of implementation with respect to participatory processes for local sustainability. Essentially, difficulties are related to the fact that while the governing persist

embarrassed in dealing with public participation, the governed still remain unresponsive to attempts of self-organisation so as to allow and enhance participation. This is clearly the case of Portugal, whose particular status in the EU context, well behind countries with long-consolidated democracies such as the European Community founders themselves, makes it in this sense to stay much more close to former Eastern-block countries, where democracy just started after the Berlin Wall fall in 1989.

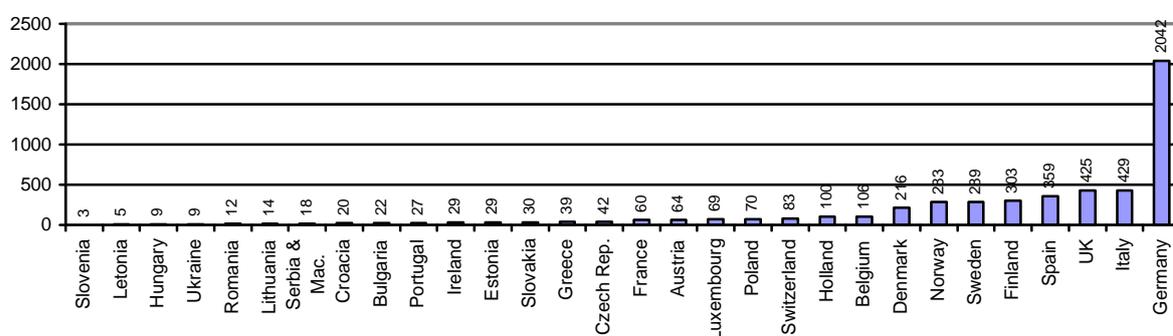
As a matter of fact, Portugal lived under dictatorship for the most of 20th century, opening a new democratic path after the Revolution of April 1974. Only after then, local government gained political autonomy and the right to be directly elected by local citizens, stop being nominated by the government at the top level in Lisbon. However, by comparison with Eastern Europe countries, there are also many important differences. In the first place, the Portuguese case characterized having been ruled by a right wing, anti-communist dictatorship (not a Communist or pro-Soviet one). Moreover, the Southern Europe condition of Portugal makes it to share the kind of characteristics that Mediterranean cultures convey to democratic practices and political systems.¹ But there is a curious path of similarities to be found between Portugal and the former Eastern-block countries, be it rather between countries where democracy is a recent process within a context of weak economies.

Maybe, this is why the functioning of both civil society organisations and government institutions, at either central or local level, must be viewed in context, that is, as a result of recent structural changes allowing the conditions for increasing civic mobilisation and participation, but still revealing persistent vestiges of ancient authoritarian regime conditions. For the Portuguese case, more than three decades later, there is still very modest signs of public participation, as well as striking centralist trends at the institutional level, where decision-makers and decision-making organisations firmly resist to interaction with, and participation of, the citizenry in decision-making. The lack of tradition in discussing publicly the problems of communities and practical obstacles inhibiting the access to information are still common ground.

¹ For around 5 decades (1926-1974) Portugal lived under an authoritarian regime, which like Franco's Regime in Spain survived to the end of Second World War and to the following consolidation of democratic regimes in Western Europe. Closed onto itself and supported on self-centred economic system, Portugal finished involving in a three front colonial war from the early 60's onwards, all under the leadership and the tutelage of a single man (the dictator Salazar) and his followers, organized within a political party (União Nacional) and a one-party political system.

In this context, Local Agenda 21 makes a good scrutiny path for democratic maturity. Basically, it may represent an opening opportunity to enhance new democratic practices, since it requires the direct involvement of citizens and civil society organisations; it compels changing in governance and administration; it further implies open access to information; and finally promotes wide and new forms of listening to the people at the local level. As a matter of fact, analysing the implementation of Local Agenda 21 (LA21) in Europe, according to the ICLEI survey (2002), the number of LA21 cases are much higher in countries where democracy has longer processes of sedimentation and is anchored in stronger economies (see Fig.1).

Figure 1 - Local Agenda 21s in Europe (ICLEI, Second Survey - 2002)



Source: ICLEI (2002)

Ordering the countries by the number of LA21 cases (see Fig.1), we see only former Eastern-block countries behind Portugal, and some of them are actually much more LA21 active, as is the case of Estonia, Slovakia or the Czech Republic. Moreover, the number of Local Agenda 21 cases tends to vary according to how consolidated and mature is democracy in each country. Late comers to democracy have a propensity to lack reforms in administration structures and methods, as well as in political institutions and democratic practices. Thereby, local sustainability tends to face more difficulties and obstacles in order to involve and mobilise all social sectors and local administration actors.

However, these trends also vary according to economic conditions of each country. Those enjoying stronger advanced economies, independently of how recent is democracy in the country, as the case of Spain, are faster in launching off processes of local sustainable development – if only because they have already resolved all basic development problems at local level.

Quoting another study on LA21 (see Table 1), it is noticeable that in Nordic countries – particularly Sweden – LA21 has been practically fully achieved, while in the

south the process has just begun. In this case, Portugal is positioned outside the table, firstly because it was not included in the study, but also because LA21 processes began much later and are still emerging. In fact, while most countries officially start Local Agenda 21 before 1999, in Portugal only in 2002, shortly before the Johannesburg Conference, the National Strategy for Sustainable Development (NSSD) assumed for the first time a state commitment to pursue the dissemination and implementation of LA21.

Table 1 - Implementation of Local Agendas 21 in 12 European countries²

Percentage of municipalities covered by a Local Agenda 21 or similar process	Year of beginning of process and growth tendency			<i>Portuguese situation</i>
	In 1999			
	1992 – 1994	1995 – 1996	1997 – 1999	
More than 60%	Sweden î	Denmark ì		<i>In 2004</i>
From 20% to 60%	United Kingdom î Holland ç è	Finland ç è Norway î		<i>2002 - 2004</i>
Less than 20%		Austria ì Germany ç è	France ç è Italy ì Spain ì Ireland ì	
Less than 10%				<i>Portugal ç è</i>

Adapted from Lafferty, 2001

The stationary arrow means that Portugal still lacks direct efforts from public administration aiming at the implementation of LA21. This reflects the weak influence and articulation of environmental issues in political agendas (a factor determining the advance of LA21 in the other countries). It means also both the lack of LA21 initiatives at local level, and the short of attention paid by political parties (from right to left wing) to the issue, which is practically ignored by all party cultures. Moreover, there is no policy or co-ordinated programme for the implementation of LA21s at supra- municipal level. Curiously, the only initiatives more recently registered are in border regions and resulted from co-operation with Spanish municipalities, as the case of “Eixo Atlântico” and “Raia 21”³. Nevertheless, in spite of these cross-border co-operation cases and other

² The arrows indicate the trends for general growth in the different countries: ì = growing; î = in decline; ç è = stable situation.

³ The “Eixo Atlântico” is a jointly effort by 9 municipalities in Northern Portugal and 9 municipalities in Galicia. “Raia 21” associates municipalities of a depressed cross-border region in the interior of the Iberic Peninsula, 2 from Andalucia, Spain (Aroche and Rosal de la Frontera) and 4 from Alentejo, Portugal (Barrancos, Mértola, Moura and Serpa).

single cases where occasionally more active local leaders are found, the profile of the LA21s is very, very poor, indeed.

Differing from the majority of European countries in Table 1, the case of Portugal is characterized at state level by:

- Lack of governmental support and framework (there is no state entity competent to take in charge the implementation of LA21);
- Lack of stimulation measures, technical support, and campaigns for dissemination of LA21 initiatives;
- Lack of financial or any other kinds of resource incentive.

Let us look, thus, at some concrete data on the implementation of LA21 in Portugal, firstly from the point of view of local leaders, then from the point of view of the citizenry.

2 – Local government, public participation and Local Agenda 21

The case of other southern countries (e.g. Spain, France) has shown that the personal fervour and zeal of local authority leaders is a critical factor for the embracing and success of LA21. It determines

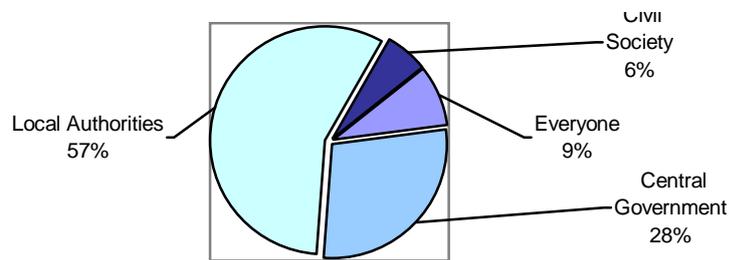
- i)* The capacity and efforts to mobilise resources;
- ii)* The projection and visibility of programmes within local politics;
- iii)* The enhance of institutional legitimacy resulting from direct efforts of local government leadership;
- iv)* The ability to impose ruptures to standard patterns, that is, new values, new areas of intervention and new methods of action;
- v)* To achieve greater and wider range of influence, which the local environment department would find difficult to achieve on its own.

In order to know the extent to which Portuguese mayors are favourably and plan to launch LA21 processes in their municipalities, we resort to a survey directly applied to a wide sample of Mayors. Lets have a look to some outputs of the survey.

When local leaders were asked about who has more responsibility for the implementation of Sustainable Development at local level, the majority (57%) agree in assuming themselves, that is, the municipality, as responsible in first place for this task. Above all, they certainly claim to be closer to and to know better most local problems and, consequently, to be in a better and more informed position to confront them. Around 28% assign the main responsibility for implementing Sustainable Development at local level to state government, since it is the entity in position to provide technical

means and resources. Only a very low percentage (9%) of them have an inclusive view of Sustainable Development so as to consider that it is a task for “everyone”.

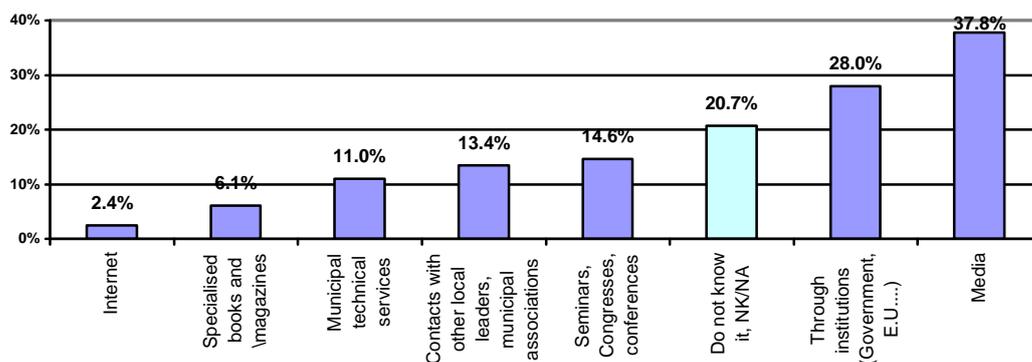
Figure 2 - Responsibility for the implementation of Local Sustainable Development



Source: Observa – Survey on local environmental policy (2004)

When asked about how they have known about Local Agenda 21 for the first time, 38% of the respondents refer to the media as main source of information, although it would be expected that local leaders would themselves be a media source for information on the issue. Only 28% of the respondents said they heard about it for the first time from institutional sources (governmental organisations, national and EU legislation, and so on), and 21% confessed they really do not know what it is about. Others heard about LA21 at congresses and conferences they had participated in (15%); or they received information about it in talks with other local leaders (13%) and from municipal technical services (11%); finally from books, reviews, and Internet (9%).

Figure 3 - How did you learn about the existence of Local Agenda 21?

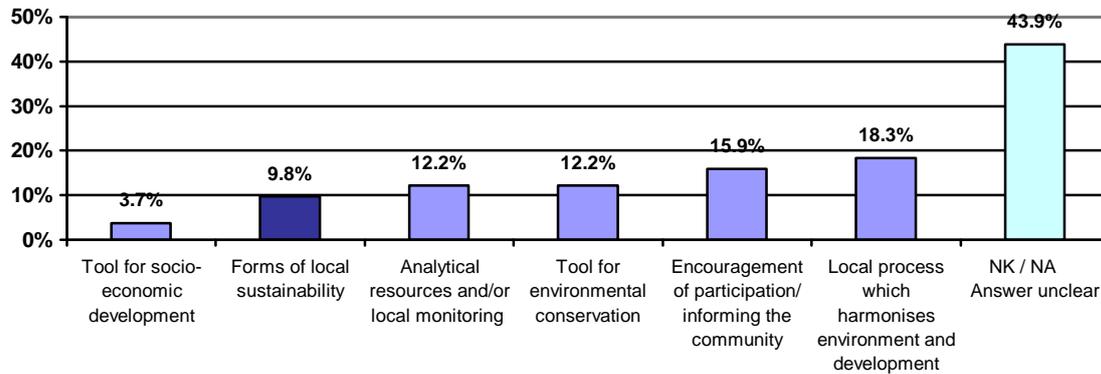


Source: Observa – Survey on local environmental policy (2004)

Thinking that the definition of LA21 proposed, for instance, by the ICLEI is a participatory process integrating the different local interest groups and the implementation of a strategic plan of Sustainable Development involving all its three dimensions (social, economic and environmental), we find that only 10% of respondents fit with the main principles of this description. On the contrary, almost 44% of respondents show they are practically ignorant on the issue. Still others tend to reduce

Local Agenda 21 to merely an environmental issue, when the standard definition stands this dimension as so important as the economic or social ones. At the same time, they also relegate the civic dimension to secondary importance, when in fact it is a priority and an indispensable characteristic of the standard concept of LA21.

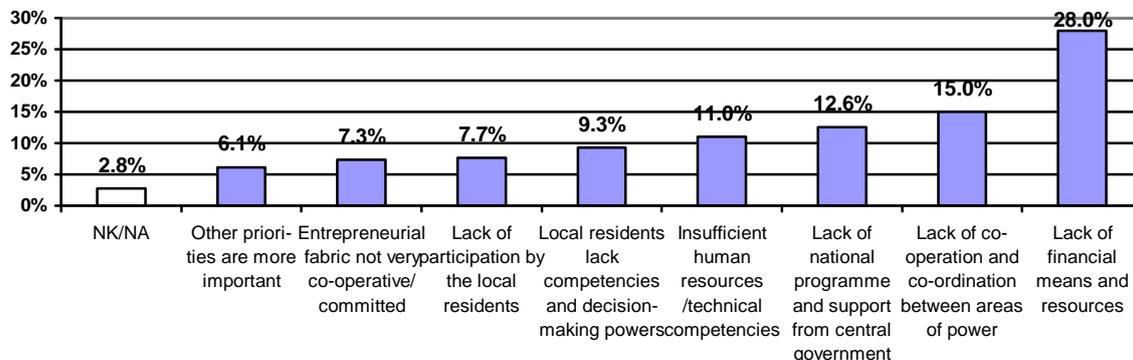
Figure 4 - How would you describe a Local Agenda 21?



Source: Observa – Survey on local environmental policy (2004)

On difficulties found by local Portuguese leaders to implement local processes of Sustainable Development, they refer mainly *insufficient financial means and resources* (28%) and the *scarcity of human resources* (11%), which come up as the main obstacles. Further difficulties are found related again to national policy and the central government: the *lack of a national programme* able to map out strategies and support initiatives (13%), the *lack of co-ordination between the different areas of power* (15%) and lastly *the lack of competencies and decision-making empowerment of municipalities*. Or rather, the local leaders resent the lack of articulation between central and local governments, as if the former did not recognise in the latter an efficient interlocutor to which resources and competencies could be ascribed.

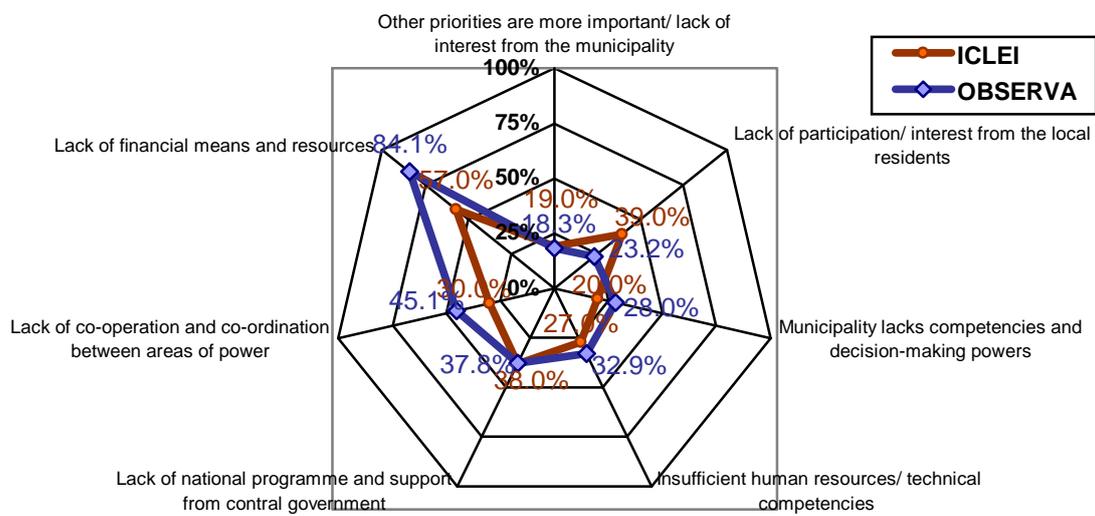
Figure 5 - The three greatest obstacles to the implementation of Local Sustainable Development



Source: Observa – Survey on local environmental policy (2004)

Comparing difficulties for the implementation of sustainable development referred to by local leaders according to our survey and the ICLEI survey of 2001 (ICLEI, 2002)⁴, we find practically the same difficulties (lack of financial and technical resources, lack of national programme, etc.) with the same level of intensity. Only the “lack of participation / lack of interest from the locals” receive less adhesion by the Portuguese local leaders, which is consistent with their underestimation of the social dimension in their own definition of sustainable development.

Figure 6 - Main Difficulties for the implementation of Sustainable Development, according to surveys by OBSERVA and ICLEI.

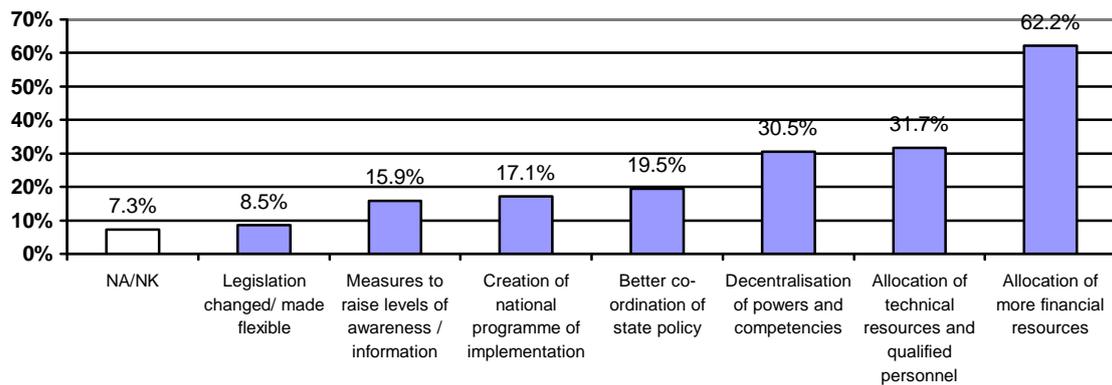


Source: ICLEI (2002) and Observa – Survey on local environmental policy (2004)

When asked about what measures they would suggest for overcoming the difficulties of implementing processes of sustainable development, a clear majority of local leaders cites the need for more financial resources. However, we must note that one third of the respondents claim for the *allocation of more technical resources and qualified personnel*, while another third demands for the *decentralisation of powers and competencies*. While 20% call for a *better co-ordination of public policies*, other 17% calls for the creation of a *national programme of implementation*. Finally, this time directly focusing on their own local residents, around 16% suggested measures to *raise levels of awareness and provide information* as a way of involving the local populations.

⁴ The ICLEI carried out a survey to 633 local authorities in 113 countries between 2000 and 2001, aiming to identify and characterize LA21 processes around the world.

Figure 7 - Measures for overcoming obstacles to the implementation of sustainable development (spontaneous answer)



Source: Observa – Survey on local environmental policy (2004)

When asked about the role reserved for local population in decision-making processes, only 30% of respondents seems to accept unconditionally the principle public participation in decision-making by local citizens, while 31% claim that the complexity of the issues makes it difficult for the people to play an active role in decision-making, and almost 40% clearly defend that the decision-making processes should be reserved for those specifically elected for this purpose, supported by the necessary technical assistance.

In what concerns how mayors evaluate the actual levels of participation by their own local citizens, 45% declare it is very low or non-existent at all, while other 47% consider it to be an average level. Only 4% think it is high. This confirms what we have described previously. Mostly, they have a negative view of their local residents' ability to participate in decision-making about collective issues, finding they are ill-informed and unprepared to play a more active role in local governance. That the Portuguese are not very participative in public affairs is a widely accepted assertion. However, there is not high consensus about the reasons for this.

Figure 8 - According to their experience, the participation of local residents in the SD processes and environmental programmes has been:

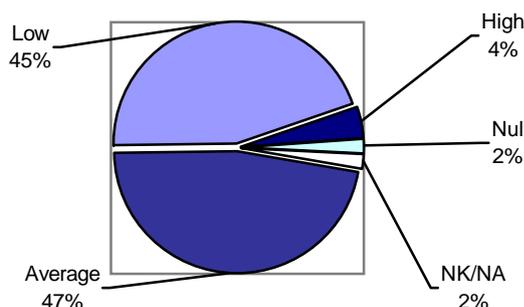
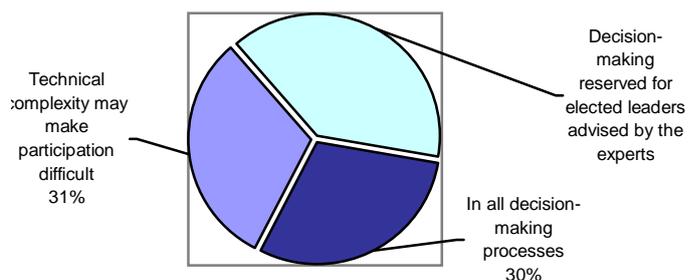


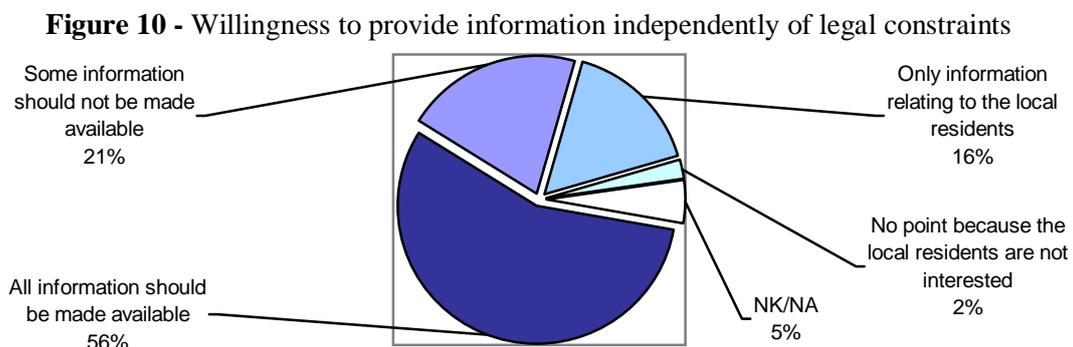
Figure 9 - Role ascribed to the participation of the local population in decision-making processes



Source: Observa – Survey on local environmental policy (2004)

Let us have also a look at the opinion of the Portuguese local leaders when asked about the right local populations to have access to information held by the municipal services. In general, they showed some openness to the need to make information more available to citizens, 56% of the respondents willing to make information held by the municipal services available without restrictions. However, some 21% admitted that some information should not be made available, and 16% argued that only information relevant to the applicant should be made available.

Despite some confessed reserve on the part of some local leaders, one has to find that this openness is somewhat surprising, given the signs in real situation suggesting that, on the contrary, still persists in public services in general and particularly in local administrations an enormous resistance to open access to administrative data by the current citizen. For instance, there are a growing number of claims by the Portuguese to the *Comissão de Acesso a Documentos Administrativos* – Committee for the Access to Administrative Documentation (CADA) — an independent public entity, which operates at the Parliament supervising legal compliance in access to administrative information by the local residents.

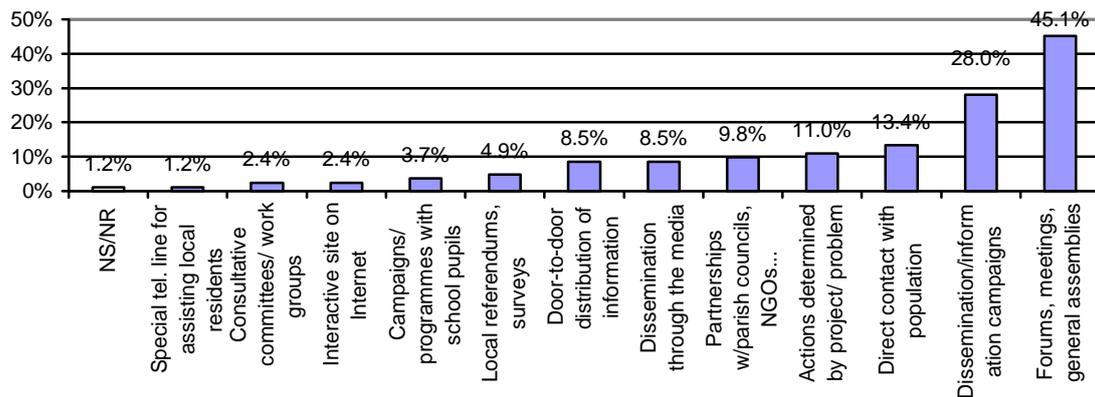


Source: Observa – Survey on local environmental policy (2004)

Since Mayors themselves have said to feel how levels of public participation in sustainable development issues are very low, what measures would they recommend for motivating and promoting the civic involvement of local populations?

Forums, meetings, and general assemblies are the mechanisms most cited for stimulating participation (45%), followed by campaigns to disseminate and raise awareness on the issue (28%). Lagging behind these two, we could mention direct contact with the locals (13%), concrete programmes adapted to each project/problem (11%), partnerships (10%), and dissemination of information either through the media (9%) or through the door-to-door distribution of informative leaflets (9%).

Figure 11 - What mechanisms/instruments you would consider appropriate for motivating public participation

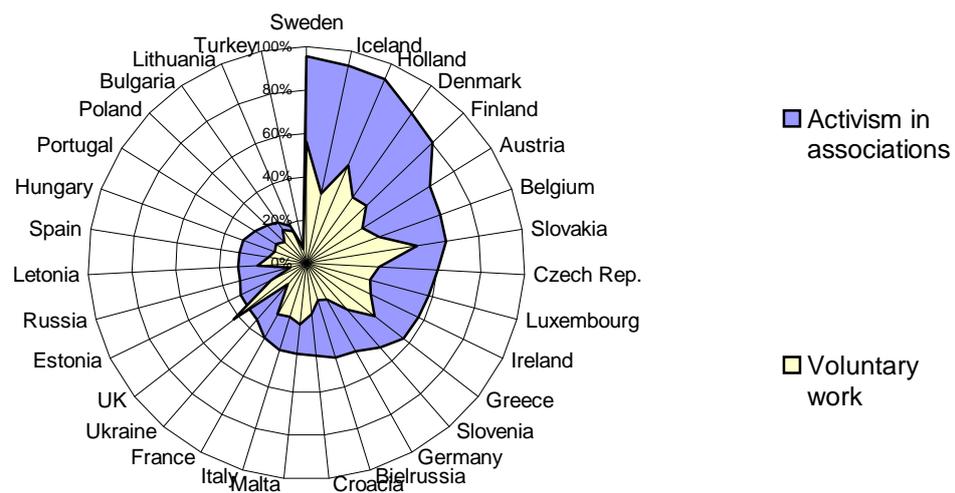


Source: Observa – Survey on local environmental policy (2004)

3 – Citizens and public participation in Local Agenda 21

Let us now consider civil society and look at how participation of the public is being processed. Resorting to comparative data on different European countries [e.g. surveys like the European Values Study (EVS) or the European Social Survey (ESS)] it is not difficult to confirm the poorest levels of public participation in southern countries, as the case of Portugal and, to a lesser extent, also Spain. The same can be said for the case of former Eastern-block countries, in contrast to the committed activism found in the Nordic countries, particularly Sweden and Holland.

Figure 12 - Activism and voluntary work in associations in Europe

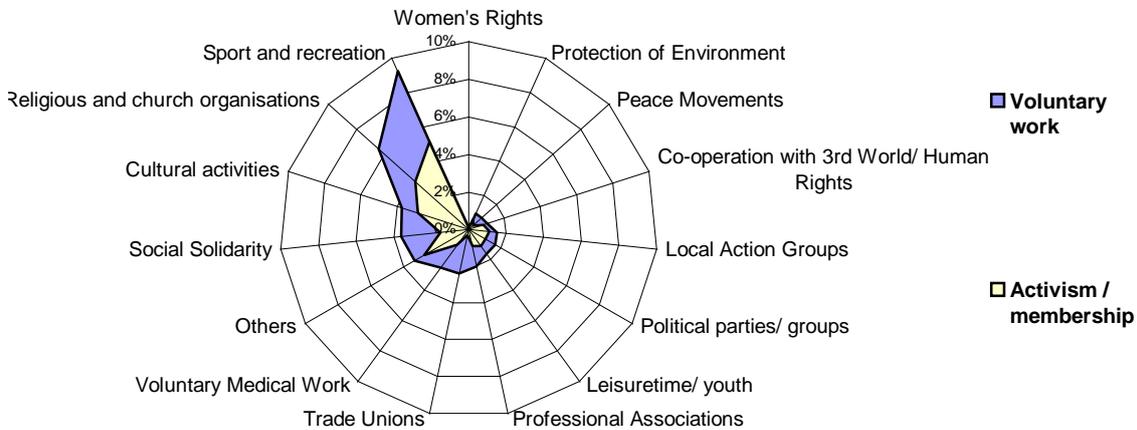


Source: European Values Study (1999 - 2000)

This deficit of participation seems to replicate in every kind of associations. In the Portuguese case, however, it is accentuated concerning organisations involved in the community problems, although participation is guaranteed in sports/recreational

associations and religious associations. Activism and voluntary action in other kinds of associations, even in those traditionally more conventional, such as trade unions or professional associations, do not appear to receive the any preference by the Portuguese.

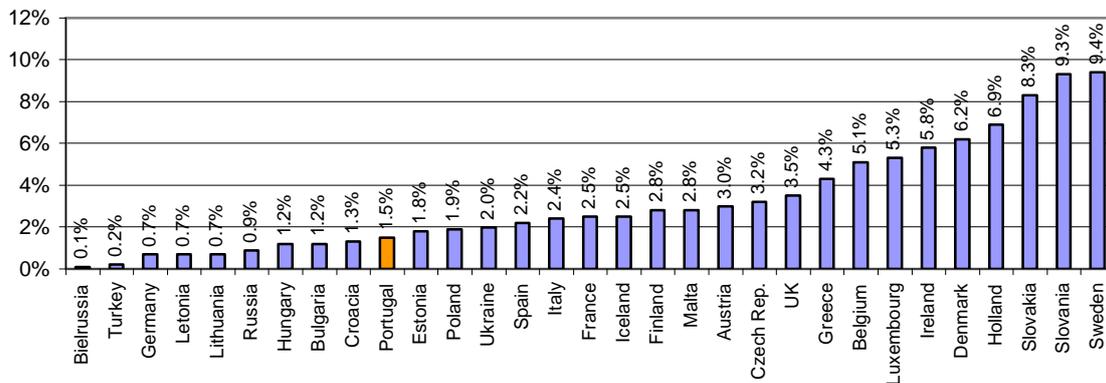
Figure 13 - Activism and voluntary work in associations in Portugal



Source: European Values Study (1999 - 2000)

The aim of this study, however, is to understand better how citizens do relate to issues of Local Agenda 21. Let's have a look, thus, to how Europeans respond when asked about their participation in local action groups and/or associations for the protection of the environment.

Figure 14 - Participation in local action groups in various European countries

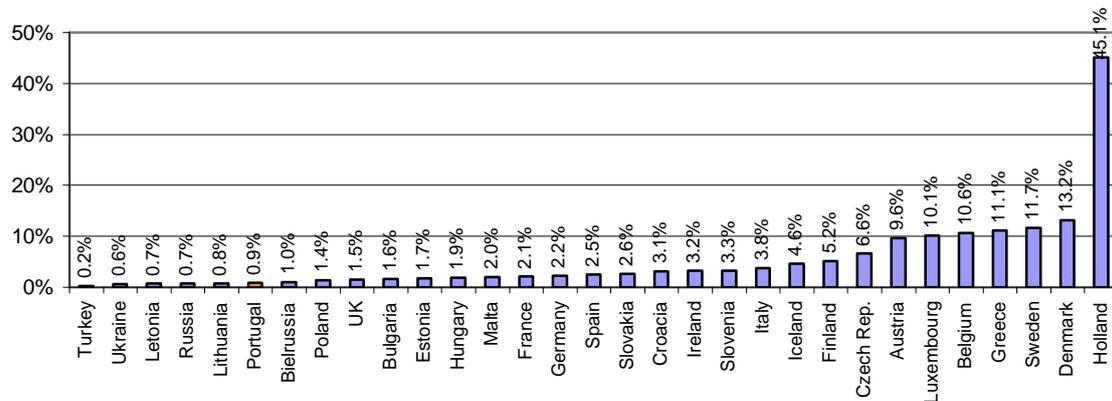


Source: European Values Study (1999 - 2000)

Different social realities and, as we have already noted, different democratic paths tend to mark distinctively the civic behaviour of citizens. Even so, maybe a recent past marked by authoritarianism cannot explain all in respect to European countries, and there is maybe some kinds of practical interferences related to the surveys themselves, such as different interpretations of local action group purposes. For instance, take the cases of Slovakia, Slovenia or the Czech Republic, which tend to be part of the group of

most dedicated to participation and activism in these associations. In the case of the Portuguese respondents however, nothing changes significantly, and they keep fitting to the group of less motivated on these issues, joining some other countries from the former Eastern-block – all of which have under 1.5% of respondents declaring to take part in local action groups. These populations appear to be excluded from any action aiming at explicitly defending or protecting their collective interests, even at the closest level to their daily life and own community. At the other end of the scale, we find the Swedish, who play role of the most active at local level, which coincides with the fact that the Local Agenda 21s have reached successfully in all of their municipalities.

Figure 15 - Activism in Associations for the Protection of the Environment in different European Countries



Source: European Values Study (1999 - 2000)

Looking at the numbers concerning the protection of the environment, as one might have guessed, the situation does not change substantially, the Portuguese and their partners in the former Eastern-block remaining as the less available to play an active role in associations for the protection of the environment (with under 1% of the respondents). At the opposite extreme, there come again the Northern nations, this time the Nordic together with the Dutch, who do indeed appear to be far more committed than any other people in Europe to activism in groups for the protection of the environment and in the ecologist movement in general (45%). For all of the indicators, countries like Portugal, and once again some of the Eastern European countries persistently show low levels of participation and involvement within community collective interests.

Let us have now a look at another survey, which sought this time to find out whether participation resorting to other kinds of action, in any case, outside the field of activism within the association movement, has the same profile.

Figure 16 - Contacted a politician from central or local Government

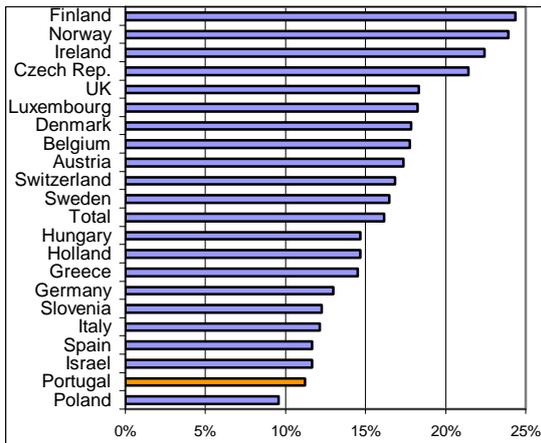
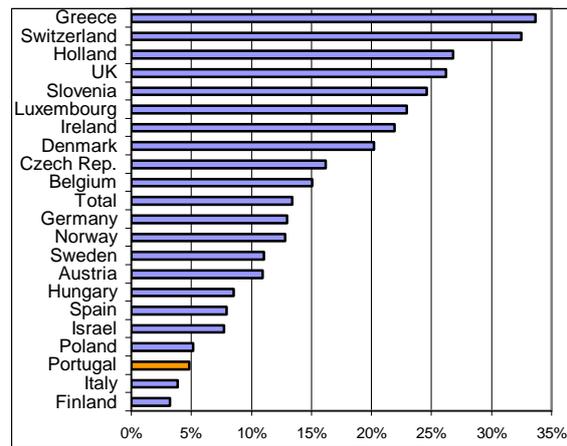


Figure 17 - Signed a petition

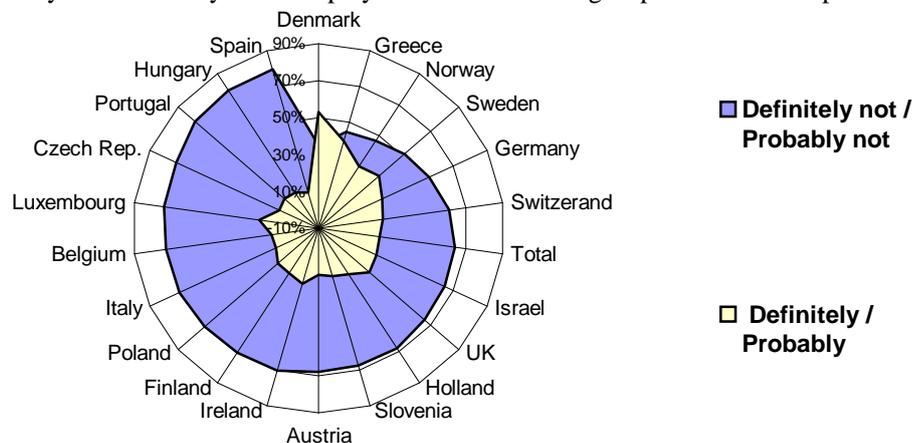


Source: European Social Survey 2002/2003

From an extensive group of issues, we concentrated our attention on two we thought were good indicators of active citizenship: “to have contacted a politician” or “to have signed a petition” over the previous 12 months. Once again, despite some changes concerning other countries, the Portuguese still maintain the less active stance, since relatively few had actually taken any of the actions. As a matter of fact, by comparison to their fellow European citizens, those who contacted a politician to express or talk about their or collective problems were very rare, and there are still fewer who had signed a petition. The same is the case for other ad hoc actions like “participating in demonstrations” or “boycotting a certain product for civic reasons” – actions in which the Portuguese keep being relegated to last place in the list of European countries.

We therefore essayed to improve our understanding of how the Portuguese relates to politics and have confidence in politicians.

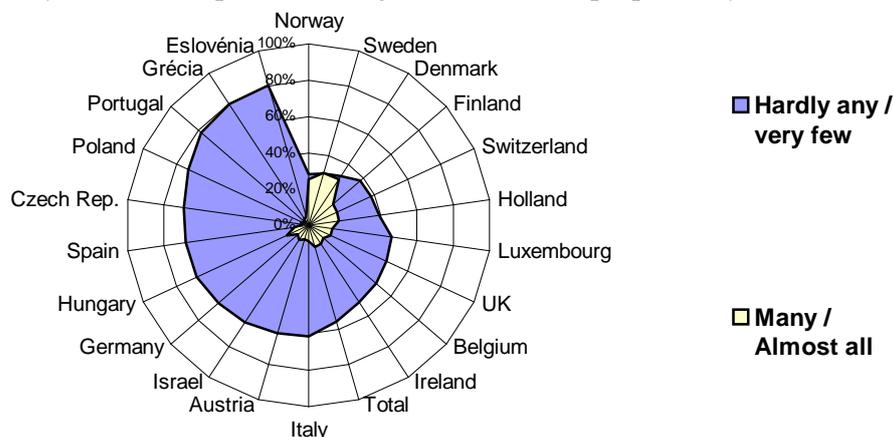
Figure 18 - Do you think that you could play an active role in a group involved with political issues?



Source: European Social Survey 2002/2003

Fig. 18 shows how distant the Portuguese are from political activity, in this case, being joined by their Spanish neighbours, the Hungarians and the Czechs. In any case, the Portuguese come up among the least active Europeans in parties or other kinds of groups involved with political issues.

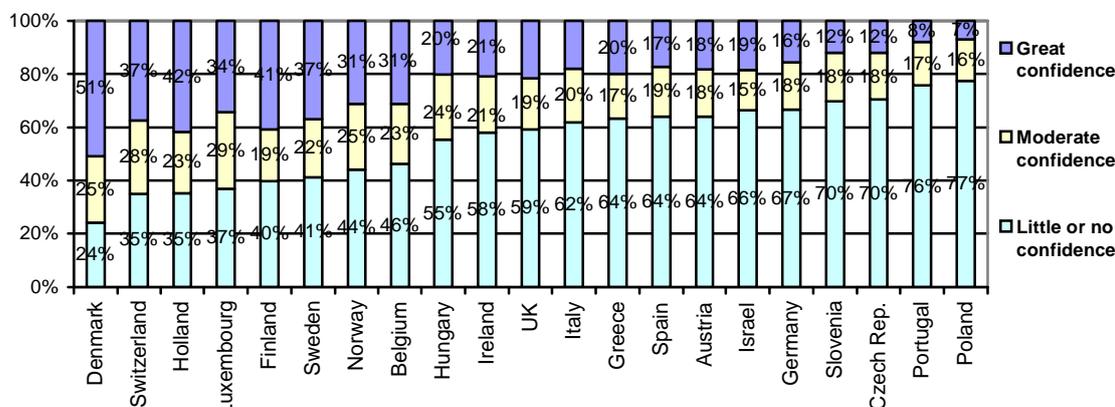
Figure 19 - Do you think that politicians in general care what people like you think?



Source: European Social Survey 2002/2003

Maybe this is because they do not believe in main political protagonists, finding they are actually not very interested in what is really important for the people. In this case, along with the Slovenians, Greeks, Poles and Czechs, the Portuguese are among those who less expect the politicians to be truly interested in their opinions and therefore to act according to the needs that they themselves would express. The distance between the politicians and the citizens, the governing and the governed, caused by mixed feelings of indifference and disinterest, results in an increasing lack of confidence in political activity and institutions, and in authority in general, which very much the case of justice and the Court system, as we will see later.

Figure 20 - Confidence in politicians in the different countries of Europe

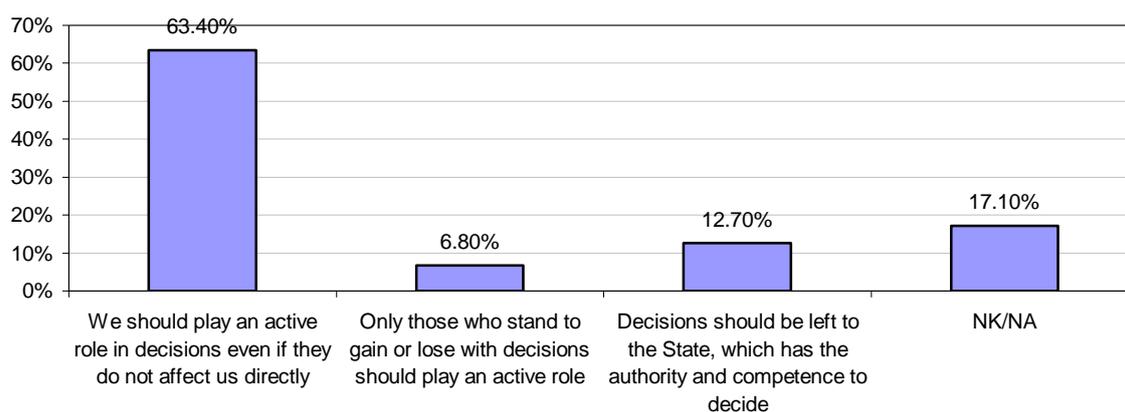


Source: European Social Survey 2002/2003

In the graph above (Fig. 20), we see again Portugal more close the highest levels for lack of confidence in politicians, only surpassed by Poland. And once again more confidence in politicians comes over all from the Nordic countries. The same happens in what concerns National Parliaments and more seriously still the Court system, which is absolutely crucial for an healthy democracy (although, in the Portuguese case, bureaucratic stifling and procedure delays greatly contribute for the discredit of justice and the courts).

In a whole, these kinds of factors – discredit of and lack of confidence in the authorities and the distance to decision-makers – do create a vicious circle of civic and political demobilisation. This does not necessarily mean that civil society is completely missing concerning these issues. Actually, some surveys shown that, though people in general are not very active in public issues, they do generally like to be well informed about them and want to keep the right take part in decision-making.

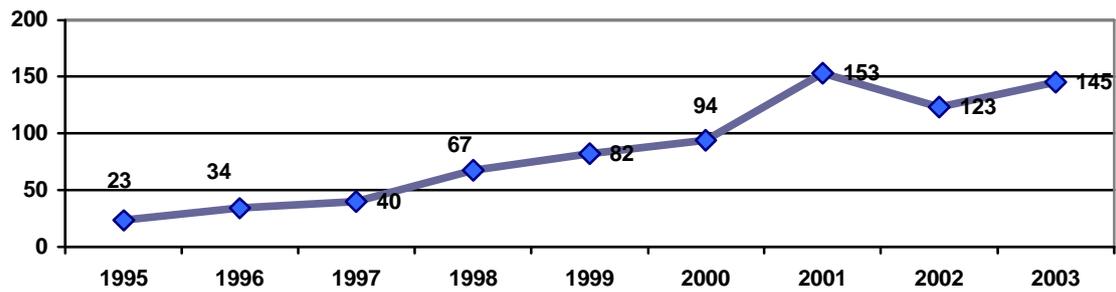
Figure 21 - Opinion on the role of citizens in decision-making processes



Source: OBSERVA – Second survey on environmental issues (2000)

As a matter of fact, the graph above (Fig.21) clearly shows that over 63% of the Portuguese consider that playing an active role in decision-making is both a duty and a right to all citizens, even concerning decisions that do not affect each one directly. Another good indicator of this will is expressed by complaints to the *Comissão de Acesso aos Documentos Administrativos (CADA)* (Committee for the Access to Documentation of the Administration), whose number is increasing. As we have already said, this suggests a growing interest and mobilisation of citizens in defence of their rights and interests. Actually, complaints to CADA quadrupled between 1997 and 2001, and most (33%) of complaints about access to administrative documents were made against local authorities (see Fig.22).

Figure 22 - Evolution of the Number of Complaints to CADA, since it began functioning



Source: CADA, 2005

In short, considering most and widely different forms of civic and political participation, they seem not to enter the daily experience of democracy by the Portuguese. This can be due, on the one hand, to the structural issue of the old lack of democratic tradition, given the context of a long running authoritarian regime for the most of 20th century, which meant around 40 years preventing people from joining any kind of association that could play an active role in society. On the other hand, there are still high levels of structural illiteracy in the country (still and again close to the highest in all Europe), which certainly highly contributes also to this apathy.

Today, a culture of secrecy still prevails in public administration, and access to information is blocked, while, at the same time, the system is completely incapable of responding to claims that participation requires. As a result, the Portuguese population tends to feel very distant from the political power, whose counterpart is the deficit of participation in politics and in community public affairs: no confidence in collective action, no participation, and no part in decision-making.

4 - Conclusions

It seems that the post-Rio 92 initiatives, particularly the arrival of Local Agenda 21 on the world political agenda, had less repercussions in the European countries where democracy came later. The political, civic, social and economic priorities of such countries led political authorities to relegate sustainable development issues to secondary levels of priority place. The commitment of national administrations showed to be a critical factor for the advance of Agenda 21 processes at the local level.

LA21 is essentially a process of democratic practicing, in so far as it involves sharing political competencies in decision-making by the local authorities and, on the other hand, the mobilisation of all citizens and civil society organisations in the process. It is, thus, a course of action in which the willingness and openness of political leaders

is as important as the ability of citizens to take the initiative of learning about and getting involved in public life. Or rather, it is vital to find human resources at the highest and the lowest levels, with *capacity building* to respond to this challenge. A more productive and effective mobilisation is not so much a case of ad hoc and momentary action (demonstrations, protests, etc.), but the ability to collaborate, cooperate and construct new models for running and ameliorating democracy.

In countries where democracy is a more recent process and profound administrative reforms have not taken place (e.g., where high levels of bureaucracy still stand) problems of democratic entropy tend to rise, which contribute to hinder and delay LA21 processes. This is the case of Portugal, as we have seen, and it also appears to be the case of many countries from the former Eastern-block, where there is some disenchantment with formal participation — be it through political parties, or through the more traditional associations (e.g., trade unions) — and where the practice of democracy is far from achieving an optimum level. This is true from the point of view of both the decision-makers at local level and the citizens in general. The former because they tend to imitate central authorities and rise obstacles to participation, for instance restricting access to information and undermining the confidence of the locals. The latter because they do not believe in their own ability to influence decisions, tending to keep distance from problems of the public domain and the public sphere where they are discussed, and solutions found and decided. As we have seen, resorting to several European public opinion surveys, lack of confidence in decision-makers is a characteristic of this type of society and polity. Among the reasons suggested to explain this civic and political demobilisation, are the feeling that action by ones own initiative does not have any effect, that distance to the authorities is unsurpassable, and the high levels of illiteracy in the country. This is all particularly true for the Portuguese case.

However, other more informal types of participation tend to emerge (debates, petitions, public consultations...) showing that the people in these societies also do want and have potential to come soon play a more active role, suggesting a more plausible scale of intervention at local level. According to an OBSERVA survey, the Portuguese have the opinion that local authorities should have more influence in the national politico-administrative domain. As the state itself is becoming more European and the scale of national decision-making goes beyond the country and towards the EU, people are turning and looking again to their own communities and regions, to the local space they frequent; because it is there they can better assess political protagonists. The

“kingdom” of local authorities is therefore an ideal field of action for exercising citizenship, and it is from there that qualitative change can be expected. The desire of the people to play an active role and the conditions that may allow to enhance civic participation and participatory processes, as the case of LA21’s, appear to have reached a real turning point.

For this reason, national programmes are necessary and urge. They can provide the framework, impetus, and stimulation for LA21 processes. This has already proved effective in other contexts. But to fully succeed they still have to be anchored in the local level, above all, because in they have to make policies of proximity possible and guarantee better knowledge in the field. They have to make possible that measures are well better adapted and fit to local realities, particular to the wants and needs of local populations. LA21 has to be clear and simple, and to point out aspects, which need to be clear, understandable, and visible in the daily life of the citizens. It contributes to the increase of mutual confidence, closing the current gap between the governing and the governed. Furthermore, discussing and debating different and complementary points of view, makes action and implementation of local policies to be more efficient in context.

Obviously, there is not the one and unique solution, a miraculous prescription for LA21. This is, in itself, a process of experimentation, of trial and error. But there is no doubt it is a challenge for the consolidation of sustainable development in the future. And this is so much the case that experiences seem to suggest a reciprocal reinforcement of all and different components of the process: greater availability of information and more openness from local administrations tend to guarantee greater confidence among the citizens – the confidence being the basis for a committed and motivated participation in causes fighting for the quality of life within the community and for the imperatives of sustainable development.

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