Sustainability and Participation
The Role of Municipal Executives in Involving Populations

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1 – Introductory Note

In a context of interaction and cooperation between different levels and grades of administration (whether supranational, national, regional or local) and civil society (associations, companies, citizens…), the idea of governance and participative democracy that has been gaining ground in many parts of the world seems to stem from, or is at least related to, the incapacity of administrative institution to deal with the political challenges resulting from the growing complexity of decision-making processes. This complexity has grown out of the global socio-economic and socio-political transformations that have taken place in recent decades (i.e. deregulation and state withdrawals leading to the privatisation and reduction of public services and the increased dependence of the public sector on decisions taken by the private sector). This has often resulted in uncontrolled and disorderly development focused on massive urban conglomerations, affecting the overall condition of the physical environment and levels of social inequality, criminality, urban violence etc. (Frey, 2001).

It is due to the impact of environmental degradation on the quality of life of populations and the increased social complexity previously described - in which different actors and agents possess unequal and diverging powers and resources, but potentially support each other - that the tools of public participation (e.g. participative budgets, Local Agenda 21 plans…) gain room for manoeuvre in the area of confluence that this paper sets out to analyse. This is the area where, as Stoker suggests, governing becomes an interactive process because no actor has by himself the knowledge, the capacity and resources to resolve problems unilaterally (2000).

2 – Governance and sustainability – two sides of the same coin

Sustainability and governance emerge in the 21st century as two sides of the same coin. It is no longer enough to address environmental questions with urgency or to relate them to socio-economic issues. It is first of all necessary to understand who decides what the priority issues are, and how, and who decides, and how, the best way to deal with them.

It is, thus, from the outset, a problem of governance. This explains the increasing interest in more sustainable forms of development, the paradigmatic example of the growing prominence that instruments of international governance have gained in this area. In regard to Portugal, the National Council for the Environment and Sustainable Development emphasised in a 2003 document called a *Reflexion on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making Processes and Access to Justice* that "national and international experience emphatically shows that participation is vital for the success of political initiatives. (…) In fact, it is as a result of the development of environmental policies over the past three decades that the urgency of ensuring the participation of citizens in decision-making processes has become an increasingly clear and unavoidable political, theoretical and practical trend" (CNADS, 2003:12).

The necessary interconnection between the idea of sustainable development, the efforts that have emerged to implement it and the best way to do so - the sharing of responsibilities, knowledge and decision-making powers — are rarely contested, although the practical results obtained would perhaps lead us to conclude the opposite. This makes it important for us to focus our attention, even if just for a moment, on two conceptual areas involved in this process: *i)* sustainable development and *ii)* governance and/or participation.

In the area of sustainability and sustainable development, it will be noted that numerous announcements have been made since the publication of the Bruntland Report. In fact, reflecting the diversity of initiatives that have proliferated on the ground (whether local or global), these concepts have become imprecise social constructs, adapted to the particular demands of each social and geographical context, but ineffective in achieving the social transformation to which they lay claim. The definition given in "Our Common Future" - "development that responds to present needs without compromising the possibility of future generations to respond to their needs" (WCED/CMAD, 1987:54) — remains the most

widely recognised and provides the inspiration for a large number of alternative definitions based on particular objectives. This results in emphasis being given to one or another particular aspect of the concept, at one moment relating it to general imperatives and realities - such as development (sustainable development), society (sustainable society), ecology (ecological sustainability), strategy (strategic sustainability) … - and at other times to more specific ideas and contexts, such as community (sustainable community), mobility (sustainable mobility), energy (sustainable energy) or even growth (sustainable growth).

This versatility implies multiple definitions of sustainability and sustainable development, but they all, nevertheless, share a number of common characteristics. First, we are dealing with a contextualised view of environmental problems that relates them to the economy and to society. This produces a network of interdependencies that prevents both social and economic development from assuming ecological sustainability is guaranteed and underlines the social and economic dependencies of existing natural eco-systems. These complex interrelations between the economy, society and the environment are usually described as a 'triangle', a 'tripod', or the overlapping of circles in a Venn diagram (…) and while the specific elements, as well as the emphasis given to each of them, may change, what characterises sustainability is the attention given to systemic interconnections and the idea that the different elements can and should support and strengthen each other in a chain of reciprocal relations (Vos, 2007).

Second, as emphasised in the Bruntland definition, a focus on intra- and intergenerational equity is another characteristic fulcrum of the concept of sustainable development that (at least in terms of discourse) tends to be consensual. From this perspective, space-time horizons broaden to include: *i)* the whole system, every country and every community with their differing, but interdependent levels of development, production and resource consumption and *ii)* all current and future generations, using history and previous generations as an example.

An emphasis on individual and collective commitment beyond merely complying with laws and regulations is the third shared characteristic of most definitions of sustainability. Political decision makers are expected to show imagination and innovation in the administration of public affairs and a level of commitment that exceeds minimum legal

requirements. Business managers and companies are expected go further than required by administrative standards and regulations to ensure short/medium-term comparative advantages and, at the same time, take on a previously (and perhaps still) unaccustomed social responsibilities. Citizens and civil society in general are expected to participate more actively and with greater commitment to the discussion and defence of the environment and quality of life, which depend on the balance achieved between the different vertices of the sustainability triangle. It is for these reasons that the participation and involvement of all social agents (whatever their status or role in society) has become central to the issues of sustainability and sustainable development — to the point that some authors believe it will be impossible to achieve sustainable development without the prior implementation of participative governance processes (Zeijl-Rozema *et al*, 2007).

Disseminated, as we have seen, alongside and almost in unison with the notion of sustainable development, ideas involving participation and governance have been applied in a wide range of social situations and contexts and by a large number of theoretical schools and disciplines. The concept of governance entered the realm of political science and sociology long ago as a result of the debate on global governance, leading to the use of the formula "governance without government" in the analysis of processes of collective action (in which a central state authority may withdraw or at least share its powers with partners that do no usually exercise power) in contexts involving urban or regional development, the environment or sustainable local development. In general, the term governance is used to refer to the different changes that have occurred in the practice and meaning of administrative and government processes used to manage public affairs and further the common good, with special emphasis on the role of emerging networks of social agents acting on the basis of interacting constellations of interests together with the self-regulation that this usually involves (Heinelt *et al*, 2006).

As a result, public administrations has increasingly come to be seen less as the most important centres of power and decision-making, but rather as just one among many other agents with the capacity to influence and take part in formulating and implementing public policies. This is why encouraging the participation of citizens in decision-making processes (individually, collectively, or through networks of partners and interest groups often created by administrations themselves) is increasingly seen as a potential means of solving social

problems. The participative process helps achieve, with a greater probability of success, required levels of consensus and social acquiescence through involvement in decision-making, through a form of organisation that tends to be non-hierarchical, of, from the outset, other public administration institutions, businesses, other economic agents and, certainly, ordinary citizens and other representatives of civil society. From this perspective, the idea of governance we seek describe could be defined as a better way of coordinating social action, based on mechanisms of horizontal cooperation, replacing, as far as possible, the direct intervention and, above all, the uncontested control of state institutions (Haus & Heinelt 2005).

However, the governance debate also leads in other directions that may seek to include less ingenuous or passionate views of such processes. Davies (2003) makes a clear distinction between "orthodox positions" and "sceptical positions" in the debate on governance, associating the "orthodox" approach mainly with the work of Rhodes and the idea of inter-institutional and self-organised networks of governance. Although, in a narrow sense, the term governance refers mainly to the means for managing processes that are essentially non-hierarchical, decentralised and consensus-seeking, critics of this approach believe dialects of power and conflicts of interest and position continue to operate within these processes. However, as a number of authors have noted, decentralisation and an increased number of local partnerships in a range of local and regional development processes, although partially autonomous, are the result of interventions made by state powers with a more centralised and hierarchical nature (Davies 2003: 325; Heinelt *et al*, 2006).

Thus, if the use of the term governance generally suggest changes in the institutional mechanisms of action and coordination, limiting the state and its institutions to a considerably more marginal and contingent role, our aim is, like Heinelt, to extend the concept to cover broader and more inclusive areas so as to include forms that are more or less hierarchical and more or less conditioned by the powers that certain institutions and/or stakeholders may exercise over their partners. If, in theory, participative governance processes can be characterised as attempts at the horizontal coordination of social interactions — seeking through these processes to influence decisions — it is no less true that societies respond (albeit involuntarily) "to the 'dark side' of the market, i.e., by

imposing restraints and capacities to (inter)act" (Heinelt *et al*, 2006: 26) in accordance with the varying resources that each group or agent is able to mobilise.

This means, depending on the contexts in which they occur, that each process of participation will take on individual characteristics based on the specificities of the context in question. As the authors state, no form of governance or governance solution can be considered as uniquely appropriate to every situation and context. Real life imposes a multiplicity of situations for which it is essential to ensure an appropriate combination of governance strategies and forms of governance best suited to integrating available skills and knowledge with different means of implementation with a view to developing a holistic approach to sustainability that arises out of a specific context and is widely recognised as legitimate (Heinelt *et al*, 2006: 27). It is above all important to bear in mind that participation initiatives will have individual characteristics arising out of the specificities of the contexts in which the processes are being implemented.

3 – Municipalities, participation and sustainability
The points described above make it important to focus on the position of Portuguese municipalities in the implementation of sustainable local development and to clarify how citizens are involved in this process. The results presented here are based on a survey made by sending a questionnaire by post to all of Portugal's 308 municipalities in June 2008, together with several follow-up communications by email and telephone to the mayor or the mayor's office. Given that these are preliminary results (the result presented here represent about one-third of Portuguese municipalities), it should be noted that the survey results are complimented by research made using Local Agenda 21 (LA21) processes involving an actual presence on the ground (participating in a number of participative sessions and meetings) and through the consultation of documentation and the pages of official municipal sites dedicated to participative processes.

Obtaining responses from municipalities proved a difficult and lengthy process and, in spite of intensive efforts and successive contacts, it was not always successful. During this arduous process, which dragged on for a whole year (from June 2008 to June 2009), it became evident that many of the participative process we had located had lost energy and

were not producing the desired public participation and involvement in the administration of public affairs, nor were they having any real impact on ensuing forms and practices of government. More often than is to be desired, the need to ensure effective results that would bring about real changes in government practices previously unreceptive to participation and which are deeply-rooted at all levels of administrations were overlooked. As a result, many of the municipalities where we had previously located LA21 processes in progress proved reluctant to share their experiences. In fact, many of them appear to have ended these processes and assigned the officials supervising LA21 plans to other duties without replacing them.

Let us examine in more detail how the respondents (municipal officials and politicians) position themselves in regard to a number of issues relating to participation and local sustainability. We begin with attitudes to citizen participation in decision-making processes.

Figure 1 – Attitude towards participation in decision-making processes according to the role of respondents

As shown in Figure 1, only 13.2% of the municipalities that responded to the survey accept the inclusion of the public in decision-making processes without reservation. The overwhelming majority (76.5%) reject public participation on the grounds of the technical complexity of the problems concerned; 10.3% are of the opinion that decision-making in their municipalities should be restricted to the politicians elected for this purpose and to technical specialists with the necessary skills.

Can any difference be noted between the attitude of the politicians and the technical specialists who responded to the survey? In a previous study (although the data-collection methods used were different), we had ascertained that local politicians were more open in their attitudes to this issue. Could it be that it was the responses of the technical specialists

who accounted for 50% of replies, that responsible for the apparent reduction in the level of openness to participation? The data presented in Figure 1 indicates that this does not appear to have been the case and that, if the specialists did exert any influence, it appears to have been in the opposite direction[1].
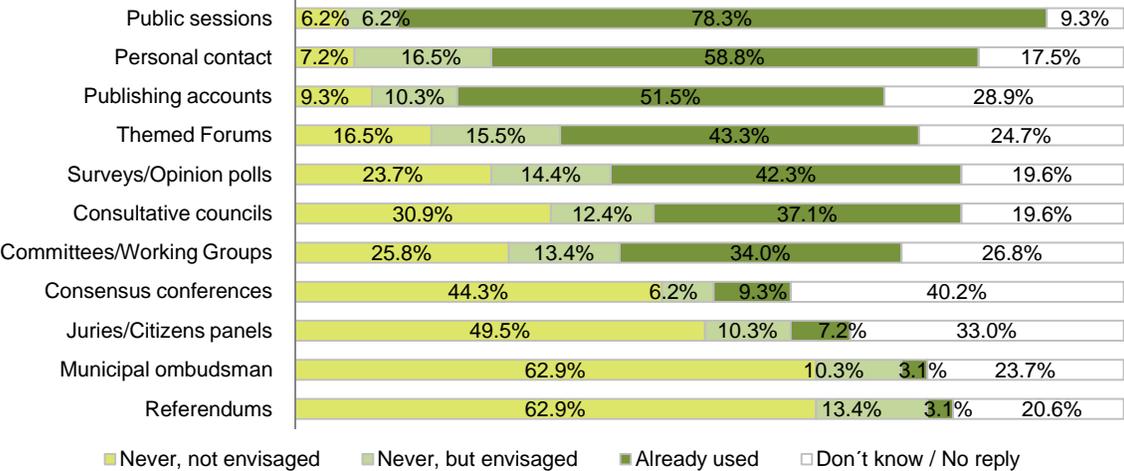

Figure 2 – Methods and forms of citizen involvement

We also sought to find out what forms and methods Portuguese municipalities use to implement public participation. Responses to this question (Figure 2) show that the use of referendums and municipal ombudsmen remains rare in Portugal; in fact, they are used by less than 1% of survey respondents. However, public sessions, with a score of 78.3%, personal contact with 58.8% and the publication of local government accounts (usually on the municipalities' websites) with 51.5%, together with themed forums, surveys and opinion polls, consultative councils, committees and working groups (with percentages above 34%) emerge as instruments that are used to a considerable degree.

Is there any significant relationship between these particular forms of citizen involvement and participation and specific characteristics of the municipalities in question? According to the chi-square test, there is no statistical evidence of such a relationship in regard to region (NUTS 2) or the political party in power. The three categories that show some statistically significant relationship with the population of the municipality concerned are: the existence of citizen juries/panels; the existence of consultative councils; and the existence of a municipal ombudsman. In each case, there appears to be a greater tendency

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[1]The chi-square test (χ^2 (4) = 4,341; p = 0,362) confirms that there is no significant relationship.

to develop this type of citizen involvement in larger municipalities, which, of course, are the municipalities with the more resources to implement such processes.

Size (Thousands of inhabitants)	Referendums	Public Sessions	Surveys / Opinion Polls	Committees / Working Groups	Themed Forums	Juries / Citizens Panels	Consultative Councils	Municipal Ombudsman	Personal contact	Publishing Accounts	Consensus Conferences
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Total	3,1	78,4	42,3	34,0	43,3	7,2	37,1	3,1	58,8	51,5	9,3
< 5	10,0	70,0	40,0	20,0	30,0	20,0	0,0	0,0	50,0	60,0	0,0
5/10	4,8	61,9	33,3	28,6	42,9	4,8	28,6	0,0	52,4	38,1	4,8
10/25	3,6	92,9	50,0	39,3	50,0	3,6	42,9	0,0	67,9	60,7	14,3
25/50	3,6	78,6	35,7	35,7	35,7	0,0	35,7	0,0	64,3	57,1	7,1
50/100	0,0	78.6	35,7	35,7	35,7	7,1	50,0	0,0	50,0	28,6	14,3
100/200	0,0	71,4	57,1	42,9	42,9	0,0	42,9	28,6	85,7	71,4	14,3
> 200	0,0	100,0	66,7	33,3	100,0	66,7	100,0	33,3	33,3	66,7	0,0
χ^2	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	a)	b)	c)	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
		a) 20,654 $p < 0,01$		b) 13,144 $p < 0,05$			c) 27,092 $p< 0,001$				

Table 1 – Methods and form of citizen involvement according to municipality size

In accordance with the data shown in Figure 3, we can conclude that while the majority of municipalities use some of these instruments and forms of citizen participation and involvement, most of them make use of only some of the tools available. A total of 85.4% of respondents said they used at least three of the different categories, but only 35.4% said they used at least five and fewer than a quarter use at least seven of the possible methods. The number of municipalities who use a larger number of the different instruments available are in a minority and only a residual number simultaneously use nine or 10.
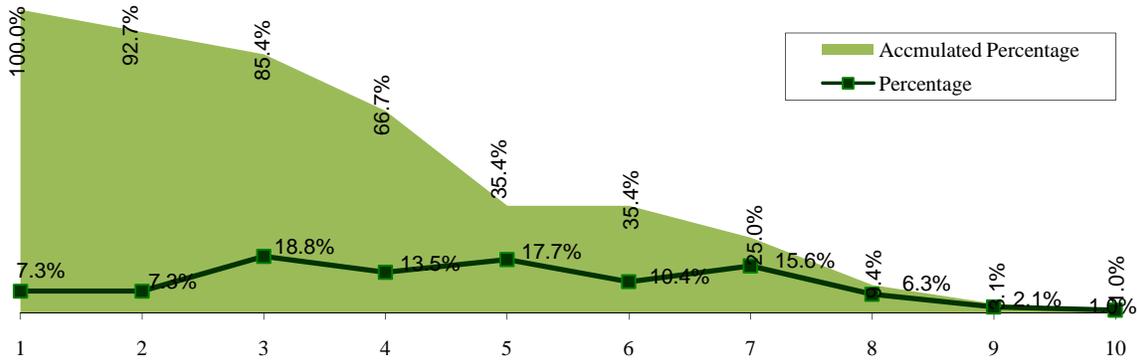

Figure 3 – Number of instruments used to involve citizens

Let us now examine the attitude of Portuguese municipalities to issues more directly related to sustainable development. As shown in Figure 4, 35% of municipalities deal with

sustainable development issues through their environmental departments. A slightly smaller percentage (31%) say they have departments that are responsible for these matters, but that also have other functions not directly related with questions of local sustainability. The municipalities with a department specially created for this purpose are limited to 18% of the total, 11% having an interdepartmental committee and 7% a specific department. Only 16% of respondents said they had no department responsible for the implementation of local sustainability.
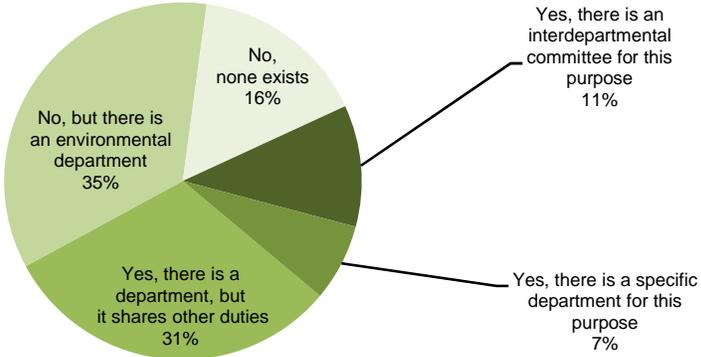

Figure 4 – Existence of departments responsible for implementing sustainable development in municipalities

In regard to the existence of programmes and/or other local sustainability initiatives, the data, as expected, was even less encouraging. Fewer than half the municipalities that responded (46%) said they were not running any local sustainability programme or initiative in their area.
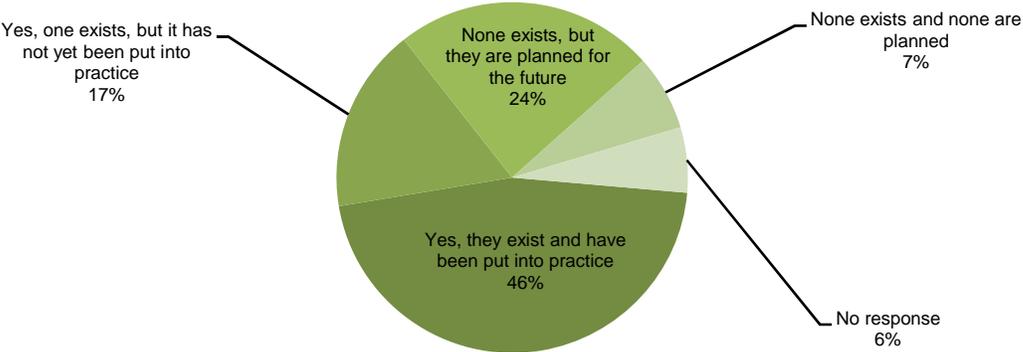

Figure 5 – Existence of programmes or initiatives to implement sustainable development in municipalities

Of the remaining 54% of Portuguese municipalities, 17% referred to the existence of a programme that had not yet been put into practice; 24% referred to a programme that was

in the planning phase; 7% acknowledged that they had no plans or projects for the present or the future; and 6% failed to respond. Although the majority of municipalities appear to see value in this type of local initiative, the majority have not yet taken any action in this direction, in spite of the discourse and ideas relating to sustainability disseminated by international and Portuguese institutions and government bodies.
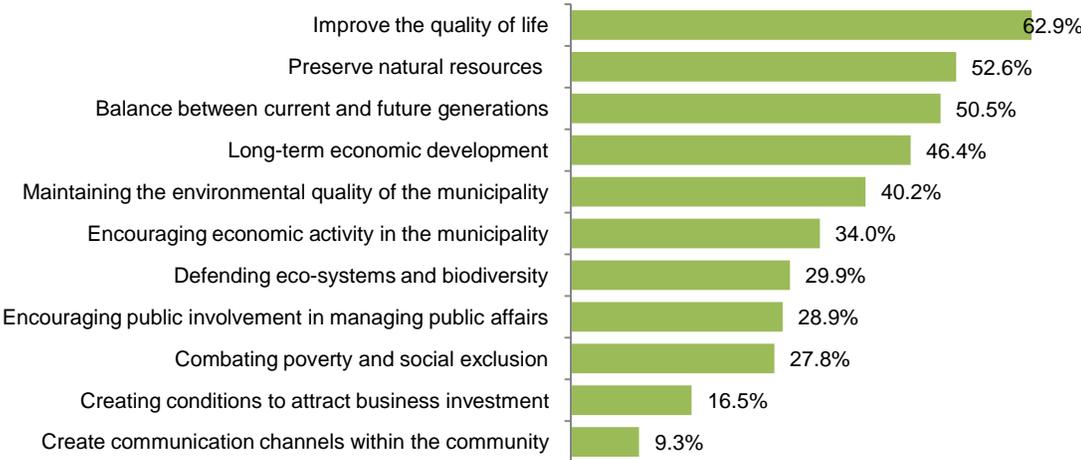
Goal	Percentage
Improve the quality of life	62.9%
Preserve natural resources	52.6%
Balance between current and future generations	50.5%
Long-term economic development	46.4%
Maintaining the environmental quality of the municipality	40.2%
Encouraging economic activity in the municipality	34.0%
Defending eco-systems and biodiversity	29.9%
Encouraging public involvement in managing public affairs	28.9%
Combating poverty and social exclusion	27.8%
Creating conditions to attract business investment	16.5%
Create communication channels within the community	9.3%

Figure 6 – The main goals of sustainable development according to respondents

What do the respondents see as the main goals of sustainable development? As shown in Figure 6, the idea of limiting sustainable development to environmental issues seems definitively to have been put aside. For the respondents, improving the quality of life (that is, a social imperative) was the most frequent objective cited, representing almost 70% of municipalities. This is followed by the protection of natural resources (52.6%), just ahead of intergenerational balance (50.2%) and long-term economic development (46.4%).

A more complete idea of sustainable development that seeks to involve not only ecological issues, as was the norm some years ago, seems to have become a definitive element in the discourse of the municipal politicians and technical specialists who responded to the survey. However, it remains to be seen up to what point this discourse results in real changes in behaviour that will lead to integrated development that extends to all local areas and covers all the different dimensions of sustainable development.

In light of this new discourse, let us examine how far Portuguese municipalities have gone in responding to the challenge by implementing, or otherwise, some of the instruments of local sustainability most recommended by supporters of participative environmental governance: Local Agenda 21 plans, and, for comparison, participative budgets. In fact,

both have been developed in a number of places across Portugal (in a similar way to their development in other parts of the world), focusing on public involvement and citizen participation as the central elements for achieving desired outcomes.
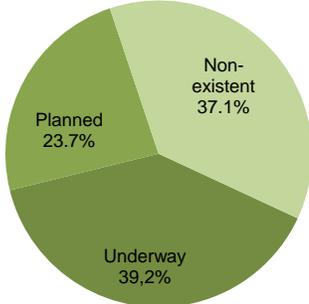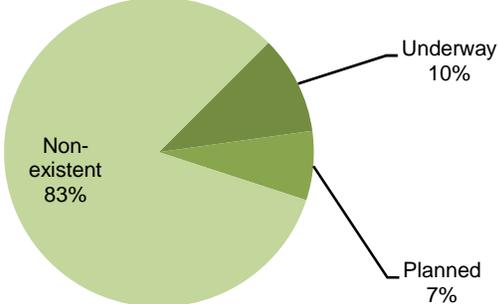

Figure 7 – Local Agenda 21   **Figure 8 – Participative Budgets**

By using these participative instruments, municipalities are, according to supporters of these tools, better prepared to face multifaceted problems with diverse and multiple causes and to deal with the ambiguities that the concept of sustainable development entails. Differing perceptions of sustainable development and a multiplicity of ways of dealing with processes of social change can be included within the participative processes for local sustainability now being implemented on the ground.

As shown in Figures 7 and 8, Local Agenda 21 processes are underway in almost 40% of Portuguese municipalities. Given that the survey is focused (although not exclusively) on participative processes aimed at local sustainability, it is natural that this concept is higher than would be expected in the universe of Portuguese municipalities, where the presence of LA21 projects does not go beyond 35%. Even so, 27.7% of respondents acknowledge that they have not yet put a Local Agenda 21 process into practice, but plan to do so; while 37.1% confirm they have no LA21 processes in progress (nor any future plans to implement one).

On the other hand, and as would be expected given the differences in Portugal in the implementation of these two deliberative instruments, the number of participative budgets is substantially lower. Only 10.3% of respondents refer to using such an instrument and 7.2% to projects planned for the future. The large majority of Portuguese municipalities have not implemented participative budgets or similar instruments and currently have no plans to do so.
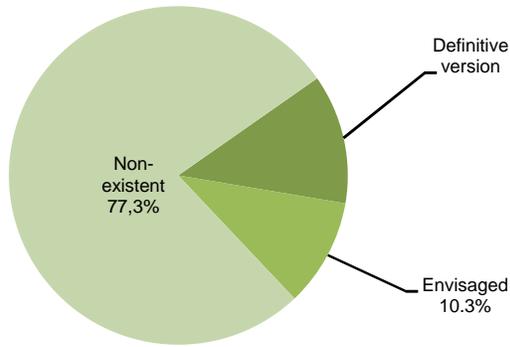
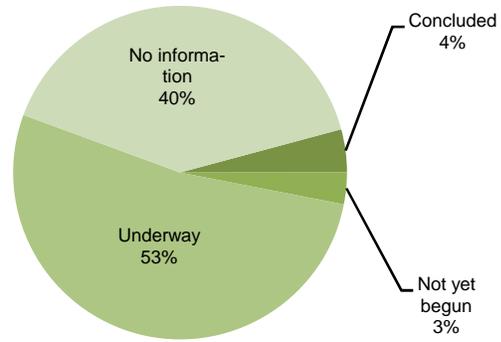**Figure 9 – Existence of Municipal Environmental Plans (PMAs)**

Figure 10 – Revision Processes of Municipal Master Plans (PDMs)

We also sought to gain an understanding of the extent to which municipalities continue to invest in the development and revision of Municipal Master Plans (PMAs), not only because they are important instruments for territorial planning, but also because, as instruments that are more clearly defined and regulated in institutional terms, they can be used as counterpoints to LA21 and participative budget initiatives (which are assumed to be more demanding in terms of investing in the participation and involvement of the public, but, at the same time, are less subject to regulatory restrictions imposed by central administration).

It became immediately clear that PMAs have lost the position they held some year ago and have been replaced by the more integrated LA21 processes. In regard to processes for revising PDMs, the small number of completed processes (only 4%) was notable, together with the even lower number of processes not yet begun (3%). Most respondents said revision processes were underway, while 40% of municipalities failed to provide any information for this area.

4 – Concluding notes

Despite signs of change in a substantial number of municipal administrations, which, according to the survey results, have adopted new approaches and new participative instruments, the necessary conditions for the normal functioning of participative processes

appears to remain limited. The emergence of a civil society in Portugal dates from the 1974 revolution. For this reason, the evidence of participative citizenship in Portuguese society, as indeed is the case for participation in the mechanisms and institutions of representative democracy itself, cannot be dissociated from the new social, political and economic conditions of the country (the institutionalisation of a democratic state, membership of the European Community/Union, a return to international political and economic life…), nor from the legacy of the past in the tendency for rather closed municipal administrations to show some unwillingness to cooperating with citizens.

In seeking to understand why there is sometimes a lack of interest in publicising municipal and regional LA21 processes (usually processes in which municipalities tend to pride themselves), we note a clear divestment from LA21 processes, caused, partly, by a change in the endogenous conditions of the municipalities involved and, above all, by elected municipal politicians. Changes in political power often result in a change in direction that seeks to highlight how differences with the policies of the previous political party in office, not through advanced qualitative improvements of inherited processes, but by rejecting previous values and achievements in order to assert differences. This means that many of the local protagonists more committed to determined phases of implementing LA21 or similar processes (both technical specialists and politicians), eventually give up, lose their motivation or are pushed to one side, resulting in the loss of a large part of the dynamism and energy that had been created.

On the other hand, while it might be expected that regional LA21 processes, because of the synergy gains they represent, would prove more appropriate for dealing with the specifics of multiple urban imbalances, in fact, the data collected to date in regard to the implementation of LA21 processes in Portugal, appear to indicate much less auspicious results. The leadership of regional processes by associations of municipalities appears to have given rise to a degree of disinterest, or, at least, to have led a less committed involvement by municipal administrations, who often fail to assume these processes as their own.

In these cases, not exclusively, but perhaps more frequently than in other instances developed though their own initiative and, especially, when involving mayors, projects are

often created and developed over a limited timeframe. Set up to meet the bureaucratic demands of applications for European funds, the termination of the application deadline almost invariably produced a "job done" attitude, with some municipalities going so far as to declare the existence of LA21 plans after the activities envisaged for the stipulated period had ended. LA21 processes were viewed, in these types of responses, as finished products comprising a number of activities, meetings and actions (participated in by and involving local citizens to a lesser or greater degree) already implemented and, therefore, closed and completed.

The key to successful LA21 processes in Portugal that go beyond mere compliance with formalities and commitments undertaken to obtain funds would appear to reside in the clear engagement of executive municipal administrations and the unreserved involvement of political authorities, together with an effective transfer of power, a clarification of deliberative methodologies and efficient regulation of the instruments for sharing decision-making powers.

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