

Social Network Programme and Social Cohesion

The Contribution of the CQIMLSN Project for the Promotion of Social Cohesion in Minho-Lima Territory

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Abstract— This article intends to analyse the impact of implementation of the Social Network Programme in a Portuguese Territory (Minho-Lima) in the promotion of the social cohesion of the citizens, taking into consideration the work developed by Project “Capacitate for Qualification and Innovation in Minho-Lima Social Networks” in the capacitation for the use of participatory methodologies within the professionals of the Municipal Social Networks in the construction of the strategic documents of the SNP (Social Diagnosis and Social Development Plans). We concluded that the correct use of these strategies in the elaboration of the strategic documents, and in the planning of social intervention, leads to a promotion of the public participation of citizens, addressing all the components of social cohesion.

Keywords— *Social Cohesion, Social Network, Minho-Lima, participatory methodologies, strategic planning*

I. Social Cohesion

Although the term "social cohesion" is increasingly present in the political and social discourse and actions, it turns out that there is no clear definition of what this concept implies, and has been targeted at various theoretical attempts to explain.

According to the Council of Europe [1], social cohesion should be understood as a dynamic, active and integrated process to social justice, democratic security and sustainable development, in which the society is able by itself to promote well-being of all its citizens and its long-term stability. Nevertheless, this definition requires even greater explicitness in terms of its components and practices that allow a better operationalization of this concept.

Thus, according Cianciardo [2] we must assume that there are five major dimensions:

- Productive-occupational dimension: universal access to employment and beneficial consequences of economic growth (i.e. through the promotion of vocational training as boosting the local economy through);

- Social dimension: universal access to basic social services (i.e. the quantitative and qualitative expansion of public policies in education, health and social security, implying a public-private partnership);
- Territorial dimension: reducing territorial imbalances (i.e. promoting the reduction of discriminatory factors from underprivileged groups, at the level of urban planning, and its consequent integration);
- Civic Dimension: building a social and cultural identity (i.e. encouraging the active participation of citizens at all moments of the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies);
- Institutional dimension; inter-sectorial strategic planning (i.e. through capacitation of local institutions and the promotion of private participation in management).

In addition to these dimensions, social cohesion may also be encapsulated and operationalized into three main components [3]:

- Inclusion (socio-economic component) are present here not only inclusion programs and policies concerning the promotion of employment and local development, as also equal opportunities for all disadvantaged groups;
- Participation and Legitimacy (political component): Here fall into aspects related to the appreciation of the active participation of citizens in society, particularly in decision-making, in a perspective of approach of governments (national, regional or local) to the population ;
- Recognition and Belonging (cultural components): Are included in this component situations relating to cultural, political, religious or ethnic matters that can endanger society, aiming a peaceful coexistence by creating mechanisms for the recognition of differences and mediation. Beyond this aspect, is also present here the sense of identity and belonging, through the promotion of culture as a social heritage.

Based on these assumptions, we believe that social cohesion should be characterized in a manner similar to that proposed by Rimez [4], i.e., while overall situation in which there is a sense of belonging and inclusion of all citizens, where there is an active participation of them in public life and

affairs. For this, it is also necessary to have equal access to public services, recognizing and accepting differences, in an environment where institutions are presented as confidence-building and legitimate.

ii. The Social Network Programme and the Minho-Lima Territory

It is in the context of claim trends of decentralization and territorialisation in combating poverty and social exclusion and promote social local development based on strengthening the participation of civil society, especially of those who are in a situation of social exclusion or vulnerability that arises Social Network Programme, contributing to greater accountability and mobilization of society and the reduction of territorial disparities that characterizes it [5].

The Social Network Programme was created by the Council of Ministers Resolution no. 197/97 of November 18th [6], affirming the trends of decentralization and territorialisation in combating poverty and social exclusion, based on accountability and mobilization of the whole society, including greater accountability of local authorities in developing active local policies.

This program is based on developing a culture of partnership, understood as the systematic involvement of all public and private entities that operate in the community, looking for optimization and effectiveness of all measures and projects created as well as a real and conscious involvement development agents. With the implementation of the Social Network Programme was intended to promote the coordination of efforts between the entities with social intervention at the local level for the study of the problems and their solutions, the profitability of responses and existing equipment with local social development objectives [7].

The Social Network Programme is defined as well as being a forum for coordination and pooling of efforts and is based on free participation by local authorities, public or non-profit entities willing to take part. Thus, these entities concerted their efforts to eradicate or alleviate poverty and social exclusion and promote social development. It is a social development program based on a territorialized vision of social problems and resources, with the aim of contributing to each community to create and experiment new forms of joint and combined efforts, setting priorities and planning, in an integrated and shared way, the joint effort of the diagnostic problems, looking at, in local partnership, the paths and strategies that meet the needs of the population [7].

Others objectives of the Social Network Programme are to promote the integrated development through the mobilization of institutional and community resources in order to ensure greater effectiveness of local social responses, specifically leading to diagnosis and planning participated and promote coordination of interventions at local level.

In an operational perspective and in a logic of participated and integrated planning by working in partnership, the Social Network Programme tries to understand the local reality through the production of (1) Social Diagnostics, which act as a support to the prioritization and definition of strategies intervention aimed at social development of municipalities, as defined in (2) Social Development Plan, and effected through (3) Action Plans.

In a legislative plan, it is also intended that the information produced locally be systematized by the supra-municipality platform, in order to contribute to a better understanding at the regional and national level, of the different territorial realities and the consequent definition of policy measures more in line with the same [8]. All this is driven in accordance with the principles of action defined for the Social Network Programme and is based on an information system that integrates two dimensions: the national and the local one [9]

The Social Network Programme is an innovative initiative as focusing on participatory methodologies as tools for planning and intervention for local social development. Participation, assumed as methodological principle, implies accountability and empowerment of different stakeholders, towards an active and responsible citizenship. The Social Network Programme as a measure of active social policy to combat poverty and social exclusion in Portugal, produced, therefore, significant changes in the level, not only of methodologies and practices, but also of mentalities.

A. Implementation of the Social Network Programme in the Territory

FIGURE 1. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCALIZATION OF MINHO-LIMA TERRITORY



The Minho-Lima territory is composed by 10 municipalities (Arcos de Valdevez, Caminha, Melgaço, Monção, Paredes de Coura, Ponte da Barca, Ponte de Lima, Valença, Viana do Castelo and Cerveira) presenting itself, predominantly, as a territorial space with rural characteristics, having urban characteristics (or semi-urban) in the various municipalities capitals, and it is limited geographically by two urban centres of great importance (Oporto, in Portugal, and Vigo, in Spain).

As stated in the Policy and Territory Planning National Plan [10], it is an area that should be understood as an 'intermediate space between the urban-metropolitan region of north western and Galicia', and a transition region between metropolitan areas of Porto and Vigo, This "seam effect" may be responsible for a restraint to its development.

The Minho-Lima territory began his adherence to the Social Network Programme in 2000, having not assumed a common methodology, especially due to the local character of its implementation, and consequently with different implementation phases and different ways of functioning [11].

It is in this context that in 2012, appears the project "Capacitate for the Qualification and Innovation in Minho-Lima Social Networks" (CQIMLSN), involving the Social Networks of the ten municipalities of the territory, that considered urgent to work with Social Networks, namely by the importance of working in partnership, based on the same assumptions and methodologies, as an promoting social and local development strategy and throughout a logic of articulation.

The CQIMLSN Project believes that development should not be planned centrally, but within its own territory, by contacting the various views of the same reality in order to be achieved articulated and consensual solutions [12]. The aim is to contribute to (local and regional) social development in a perspective of participation, integration and coordination with the Minho-Lima Territory. In this ambit, it must be taken in consideration that the CQIMLSN Project believes that effective participation only exists if there is negotiation and compromise between all the local agents [13], understanding as very important the harmonization of perspectives and instruments in a supra-municipality level, never neglecting the local particularities of each municipality [5].

III. The Social Network Programme, Territorialisation and Participatory Methodologies

The "local" is assumed as privileged territory in this new generation of active social policies, in a new logic of proximity to citizens. Following this, we agree that the study of social transformations should give equal weight to the local and the global, never forgetting the national and regional levels. Understand the local experience at the level of social sphere requires specific approaches. Here it is necessary to realize that the methods are not neutral, the type of

methodology that is used influence the process, results and perspective to the level of development [14]. Thus, it is considered that is necessary to attend carefully to the type of method that is used in the context of social intervention and it is imperative that its agents are committed to and deeply identify with him. In social planning, the philosophy of participation may not be a trend or an abstract concept, it should be an institutional brand [15].

Isabel Guerra [16] considered planning as a model that allows self-regulation of society, a form of collective action that involves strategic play of actors, with a view to achieving a desirable future. Thus, strategic planning is characterized as a method for managing change, open to social innovation, participation, mediation and conflict management. Strategic planning is therefore a continuous, flexible and interactive, also susceptible to changes occurring in the territory. Being involved and monitored by institutional and multidisciplinary partnerships, assumes as main aim the reaching of a consensus on the objectives, strategies and results to be achieved [17].

The partnerships formed under the Municipal Social Networking, have been involved in various participated planning processes, such as the development of Social Diagnostics, Social Development Plans or Action Plans, achieving consensus and co-responsibility by the aims and strategies of the social intervention. This program is innovative in that it induces territorialized processes of strategic planning, able to find solutions (also territorialized), to the local social problems and needs, promoting the participation of partners and of the community, enhancing the coordination of national policy measures [5]. However, this methodology also presents constraints in planning and priority setting, including the lack of tradition of territorial planning in the social area and the lack of specific training of local professionals to implement this kind of methodologies.

According to Guerra [18], in social area, participation calls for a compromise between all stakeholders, particularly those who are recipients of the intervention. In this connection, it is further understood [19] that a participatory approach should allow to reach a negotiated agreement between all parties involved, allowing the integration of different perspectives. These authors also point out that the presence of stakeholders in moments of decision gives transparency to all the process. This participatory process, in the social sphere, passes through several stages ranging from the identification of key stakeholders to be included in activities, through the identification of problems, to the planning and implementation of the action [20], and this should be done with all rigor and evaluation [21].

According to Gomes, Souza and Carvalho [22], "participation" is take part of the decisions, and be part of the results. In this logic, the most important is not the result itself but the process of exercise participation. In this sense, the principles governing participation are: (1) the human need and people's rights, (2) the justification for itself and not by its results, (3) the ability to create and develop critical awareness and acquisition power, (4) appropriation of the same by the population, (5) be learned and perfected through practice, (6) be encouraged and organized without it being synonymous

with manipulation, (7) to be facilitated by flows communication organization and creation, (8) to demand respect for individual differences, (9) have the ability to resolve conflicts, but also generate them, (10) not be sanctified: it is not necessary or indispensable at all times.

The introduction of participatory methodologies in the context of social planning, finds its roots in new conceptions of development. The development seen in a logic of "bottom-up" and the extension of democratic processes are cornerstones of participatory methodologies of the project. The development of a participatory methodology should ensure that social intervention projects have as premises the capacity of a community to intervene on itself, as well as recognition of the ability of individuals to organize themselves [18].

Schiefer and colleagues [19] have developed a number of initiatives in participatory methodologies. According to these authors, any intervention should be guided by a strategic vision, which articulates the strategic planning and operational planning. The first set and guides the second. Strategic planning is related to long-term objectives and must be flexible enough to accommodate changes that compromise the overall objective, encompassed in the vision. The operational planning concerns issues more limited: time, resources and objectives.

iv. Conclusion

Taking into account all the theoretical review presented in this paper, the first conclusion that can be reached, even with a general character is that, effectively, the Social Network Programme can have a strong impact on the social cohesion of the population of municipalities where it was (and is) implemented.

In fact, and as noted above, having this social policy as specific objectives, lead to the diagnosis and participated planning and promoting coordination of interventions at the local level, it is easy to recognize that all dimensions (productive-occupational, social, territorial, civic and institutional) and components (inclusion, participation and legitimacy as well as recognition and belonging) of social cohesion can be promoted and achieved in a clear way, thus leveraging a global situation in which there is a sense of belonging and inclusion of all citizens, where there is an active participation of population in public life and affairs, and also generating equity in public services.

This first and general conclusion is not something totally guaranteed only if it not met a set of assumptions inherent in the creation of this social policy, as defined by law and/or if the application of participatory methodology present there is not idealized and held in a correctly, efficiently and effectively manner.

And this is where it is also possible to see, clearly, the potential and powerful impact that the development and the

intervention of the CQIMLSN Project had (and has) in the promotion of that social cohesion.

This, because taking into account the results obtained in the first action of the CQIMLSN Project (as well as other studies mentioned) where are reflected the needs and difficulties, felt by the professionals involved and that implement this program and its participatory methodologies, it appears that Program Social Network might not have the expected effectiveness.

However, the work done by CQIMLSN Project, together with Municipal Social Networks professionals, under the capacitation for the use of these same participatory methods and the monitoring that it held among professionals, aims exactly that correct, efficient and effective implementation, enabling a social intervention, at local level, more coordinated, and thus the attainment of all these components and dimensions of social cohesion.

To this approach to the Municipal Social Networks (which allowed for the first time, that the whole of Municipal Social Networks of an Portuguese territory have a Social Development Plan with a common timeline of application), is also associated with the work that is be performed by the CQIMLSN Project team, in a supra-municipal level, leaving from these same participatory methodologies applied locally, to support the creation of a Social Diagnostic and of an Action Plan for the all territory of Minho-Lima, where the needs of people are present, and where it is promoted a more rational management of resources in the territory, always in a perspective of intervention, also participated and based on partnerships with existing institutions in the territory.

Finally, it should also be noted that the CQIMLSN Project considers (as well as our partnerships) that, even taking into account all the achievements that go far beyond the initial assumptions will require a continuation of the monitoring of Municipal Social Networks, either for the consolidation of the results obtained, and for promote capacitation for the methods of implementation of activities that are resulting from Social Diagnostics and Social Development Plans, built in this methodological basis.

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