

Research-Action Applied to Territorial Development

Lecturer *Tomás RODRÍGUEZ VILLASANTE, Ph. D.*

University lecturer Mr Rodríguez Villasante started his illustrative intervention citing another colleague, lecturer and economist José Luis Corallo, when he referred to the need for regulation or self-regulation of the “market of the public” (public or private organizations with public aim) to achieve “life accumulation” rather than “capital accumulation”. This is the framework of the speaker’s work at the Complutense University. From this institution he has been making agreements for over ten years with several Spanish municipalities. These have been low-cost agreements, beneficial both for the councils and the University, where collective learning for civil servants, associations and other actors in the municipality is provided. Also the University benefits from this learning because the participatory research-action developed within the framework of these projects allows experiences and knowledge to be exchanged.

Based on this, he suggested the audience discuss the efficiency and efficacy of public initiatives when they are generated on the basis of social participation and control, not by the political class, but rather by citizens themselves, by the civil society, as could be the case of a neighbourhood. Referring to the previous speech, general concepts in this debate such as ‘governance’, ‘sustainable development’, ‘social capital’, among others, he stated, “are rather beautiful and form part of what is politically correct, and therefore, may be equally used by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the universities, or you and me, Brazil’s Landless Movement, the Anti-globalisation Movement...”. However, for these concepts to be useful, they need be specified (“landed”) in order to establish operational differences, both from the scientific point of view and from their practical application in the transformation of communities, cities or countries.

To exemplify this issue he made reference to Portoalegre in Brazil, a city with one and a half million inhabitants which has become worldwide reference both for its local and global nature, or rather, for its ‘anti-globalisation’ nature. On the local scale, it is outstanding for its supportive thriving economy and the presence of ecological economy, but mainly for the development of its participatory budgets (which have set an example for other Latin American and even Spanish cities, such as Córdoba and Sevilla), where key issues such as whether General Motors and Ford should be settled in the territory and the conditions thereof were discussed publicly. (Finally, he pointed out, General Motors accepted the conditions and settled down, but Ford didn’t). Rodríguez Villasante stated that the example of this city, and other cases such as those in some communities in India, prove that, in some cases, and whenever they are properly raised, participatory democracy methodologies enable public debate.

Following with the example he explained that in Portoalegre the theoretical debate on governance, participatory democracy, social capital, and sustainable development is being developed not on the basis of theoretical academic concepts but in relation with its link with practical, specific indicators that measure the levels of redistribution between rich and poor districts (these indicators are not only measured by a scientific committee, but also by

the citizens). The same happens in the city of Sevilla, in Spain, where the preparation of participatory budgets involves the discussion of life quality indicators in the various districts: equal opportunities, participation, immigrants' integration, etc. These indicators are used to assess whether a sustainable city is being constructed. They start from "a citizenship participatory system and then we can add the theory that we want, and then the Universities, with their technical-scientific capacity, can measure the criteria suggested by the citizens themselves".

With the help of some charts available on a DVD showed during the conference, with copies available for the participants who requested them, Mr Rodríguez Villasante presented the four steps into which social sciences merge when it comes to using the term 'participatory methodologies'.

First, the lecturer emphasized the importance of the initial question of the process, stating that not every question is valid. The starting point must be the demands made from the territory (local councils, various organizations, associated citizens...) but, he specified, it is necessary to check whether it is a real demand or just a symptom from which to start. In the speaker's own words, "a first self-critical process must be done, from which double meanings (underlying real meaning) in those processes can be uncovered. It is not a question of acting as judges, but of working more deeply on the demands proposed. It is as if you go to the doctor and tell him that you have a pain in your liver, but the doctor says some tests must be done in order to find the causes related to the malaise. The focus of the research must be raised when the problem is detected to see the implicit and explicit interests, to see the latent reasons underlying the reasons given by public authorities, citizens... In a different position, also the (public and private) experts involved have double meanings which must be considered, too".

As a result, he continued, "at first we distrust two traditional methodologies of the natural and social sciences, the deductive and inductive methodologies, and we bet on the **transductive methodology**⁴, which comes from the natural sciences [...]and was transferred into the social sciences. We can see that in the transductive method what appears is not the deduction of pure theory, nor the induction based on those first symptoms that we observe in social leaders, experts, local councils, etc, but rather, we have to move onto that second level of hidden meanings, where certain guidelines of what is really posed in the initial negotiation will appear".

The techniques with which his team works, he explained, go from Social Psychology techniques such as role playing, socio-drama, transepts in Participatory Rural Diagnosis, which are a number of methodologies pointing to what the Chaos Theory and the Complexity Theory have identified as the researcher's self-reflectiveness, especially in cybernetics.

⁴ Transducer would be an agent that transmits or carries (ductor-oris) an object which, because it is transmitted, it is also transformed as a result of the involvement or interaction with the medium in which it appears. As a Latin cultism, the use of the term first appears in the natural sciences, and not in the human sciences. Note of the editor

Thus, in a first phase which –according to the speaker– usually lasts one month, they work with public authorities, promoters, specialists and experts, social organizations and citizens’ informal networks, and try to go deep into political (not party) commitments to reach agreement on a programme.

The second graph he showed was the representation of an X-ray of a community drawn on a three-axis chart, “one for social class, one for social proposals made by the people, and a third internally related axis which are the emotions of trust and fear within the communities and which also play a role in social processes (for example, rivalries between leaders of different organizations)”. He explained that, sometimes, even with the same objective needs, programmes do not carry on due to internal rivalries, etc. He pointed out that “one of the key issues is to be able to perform strategies that have to do with class needs, with explicit proposals and with the negotiation of confidence and distrust historically caused by daily culture. These X-rays are done not only by experts, but together with the community. With groups of 20-30 people and in one and a half or up to two hours a small self-diagnosis is generated on where are the difficulties to help the process succeed. People give us their perceptions, also ours are taken into account (statistical analyses, etc.), but we are in this transductive process of knowledge exchange”.

The drawing up of these maps, he summarized, provides the clues to work with that part of the community which does not attend the meetings: “what is important is how the people attending (they make up the action groups) enter the circuits from which they don’t come. What we must do is a group dynamic (motor groups and technical support) as is done, for example, in Sevilla, multiplying the participation of children aged 12-14, women and men who do not belong to any association but who have specific motivations, to which, they understand, we are going to give response. These people are never going to become members of an association but they are going to get involved with their initiatives in these processes of community budgets or plans (the “Tres Mil Viviendas” district in Sevilla, or the 5th District in Huelva)”.

At this point the speaker warned about the importance of not focusing on what is “noisiest” in majority responses, because there we find well organized discourses as a response to the politically correct, removing important creativity. He set the example of Medellín, where he personally carried out a kind of survey on the problem of violence. The initial proposal here was “we want more police”, but when speaking to the people later, he was told that when the police arrived, it was all a mess. “The qualitative tells me they want more police, the quantitative tells me they don’t want it, so some days later I consulted with them and they reached the conclusion of the need for a preventive police”.

He concluded this section stating that participatory processes need time, they need to go beyond the traditional ways of research, providing specific ad hoc solutions, making suggestions adjusted to the various realities. “Community plans are the only real restraint to avoid what happened in Paris some years ago. It’s useless just to provide more experts (social workers, pedagogues, etc.). Rather, it is a question of proposing participatory methodologies that teach these experts, politicians and social leaders –who are often demanding but not co-responsible of the programme– to develop what that community really proposes.

The third moment of the method, he claimed, is to move from “emerging ideas” to “strength ideas”, i.e., from self-diagnosis to planning. Here he suggested a technique called NEXA, a prioritizing system (votes for and against) in planning with no need for one option to win over the other, but which makes it possible to add the two or three aspects voted. It is a weighted voting system that implies a binding commitment for local councils. He said that this is also related with another technique by a Chilean economist, Carlos Matus, who developed a way to explaining public decisions, the Flow diagram, a technique within Situational Strategic Planning that tries to solve the following questions regarding economic, cultural, organizational and spatial aspects: what can we solve?, what can we do with alliances and supports?, what is offside? “Playing with these charts, in an hour and a half people is able to design an action programme prioritizing the three or four critical knots where key causes and effects meet. This technique is better than WTSO-SWAT and allows progressing in public commitments to make the process more effective and efficient”.

For this plan to be developed, he emphasized, it is important that it is the strength idea that coordinates the plan. “This idea must overcome the specificities of each working table or we won’t be able to develop the plan. The question is how involvement can be encouraged among citizens to solve the problem beyond what is proposed by one sectoral table and another”. He illustrated this question with the example of what happened in Spain in 1992 with the World Exhibition in Sevilla and the Olympic Games in Barcelona. The former needed greater investment and had less transformation capacity than the latter, since for the World Exhibition the population did not assume the strength idea. The key, always according to the speaker, lies in “the commitment of the citizens to support and be proud of what is being done. The achievement of this participatory scheme has creativity effects and *a posteriori* effects because this remains in the international memory”.

The fourth aspect remarked by Rodríguez Villasante is the one concerning community organization for decision making. “It is not just an assembly problem; assemblies are not the most democratic thing; well, they are when, for example, a group of 200 people is divided into smaller groups of, let’s say, ten people, so that everyone can speak, since in a big group not everybody speaks, but rather just a few do, and as a result we miss the creativity and initiatives of community sectors. As some theorists state, the main issue of the new democracies is to be able to recover those little daily initiatives which can, if they are given the opportunity, go beyond those common places manipulated by the television, the correct thought, etc. The question is: how are these processes raised? How are these new elements of decision making introduced? In Spain it has been achieved, for example, that some mayors listen for hours to the citizens of a certain district presenting their proposals of action”.

In this line, he stated, it is possible to advance in bottom-up decision making, although it is true that the highest level that has been reached is that of small states.

In the last chart, he presented a summary of the process: taking symptoms as the starting point, an analysis of social networks is performed; then, proposals are verified by action, and action itself leads to a symptom, and so in some years different generations are educated in new democratic and political forms. The speaker set some examples, like the

case of Santa Lucía in Gran Canaria, where they have been working in this way for four terms, or like the case of Villa Salvador in Peru, where this methodology is also in operation.

To finish his speech, lecturer Rodríguez Villasante presented the audience his last reflection: “in natural systems, based on what I’ve read (I come from the field of Physics, then moved to city planning, and now I’m on Social Sciences), the generalization evolutionary system, not that of linear evolution of some Darwinisms but that of punctual evolution, saltation evolution, in Lamarckian systems, which can be checked is that nature has a certain creativity which allows it to learn from small systems that can jump and extend to the whole ecosystem. This would mean that the social sciences can do something similar, that is, if we are able to experience goodness, efficacy and efficiency, from a social or public point of view, of some of these politic-economical, social or cultural mechanisms in small but increasingly relative bigger communities. Will it be possible to generalize this to the state system and the global system? This is our bid, emerging self-regulatory systems. I think that the market has many failures, but it also has some advantages from which we should learn. At a given moment and for some specific cases, it is useful for self-regulating the interests of capital accumulation, but this is self-regulation. In progressive alternative systems there are not such efficient self-regulatory systems. And the key scientific challenge, the university challenge that we want to build is: which are the self-regulatory systems emerging from the citizens that do not imply buying a product but proposing initiatives which can be taken into account and end up being public decision making which show the efficient benefits for the whole community, country and, hopefully, the whole world?