

Intense debate in Barcelona on volunteering, participation and associative life

Submitted by F Pere Tarrés on Dv, 16/05/2014 - 10:30

The [Association Spring Forum](#) has taken place from 8th to 10th May within the framework of the '[European Volunteering Capital 2014](#) Distinction' awarded to Barcelona. This edition's slogan was "Associative Life is crucial". The debates and round tables highlighted the need to complement public policies of social cohesion with a strong and independent social fabric and powerful civic participatory processes.

The opening lectures by [Gerry Stoker](#) (Southampton University) and [Joan Font](#) (CSIC Director) were particularly interesting and introduced some topics for discussion. Both presented several studies on the reality of **participation and of the social entities**. They emphasized the tension affecting relations in the triangle "**Citizenry – Associative Life – Public Institutions**", as civic participation is never perfect. However, this precisely represents a good opportunity for improvement. We must learn from the mistakes of participatory processes that raise too many expectations and, above all, our institutions must learn to justify rejections. Citizens can understand their requests not being satisfied. But they will never tolerate being ignored or cheated upon.

It also became clear that there are several models to promote civic participation and associative life. A good mean to improve is to analyse these models and to evaluate the experiences made. Professor Stoker introduced the [CLEAR model](#) as an effective tool to evaluate the democratic quality of municipalities and civic participation. Another good way to learn about good practices is going through the database ([Case Studies](#)) of the [International Observatory on Participatory Democracy](#) (IOPD).

During the two days of meetings several experiences from different European cities were compared. Depending on the political culture of each country, different emphasis was put on fostering of **volunteering**, of **associative life** or of **civic participation**. These three different approaches normally belong together, but they are not necessarily the same thing. For instance, **the Catalan volunteering model**, inherent to Barcelona, has a lot in common with the model promoted in cities such as Rennes (France), which is mainly based on the support of social entities. In contrast, other experiences such as the one of Madrid (Spain) stress civic volunteering promoted by public institutions. Finally, there are other models that stand for civic participation, whether through social organizations or directly together with the citizenry.

Navigating between theory and practice, reference was made in many occasions to the concept of "common pool resources", promoted by [Nobel Prize Winner Elinor Ostrom](#), who defends and studies the communal management of public goods. Some even ventured on the [social networks](#) that with this we already have the subject for our next Spring Forum!

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Resum:

During three days, experts, administrations and associations from several European countries have been discussing about how to foster social cohesion in the cities supported by voluntary work and by associations.





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