

Political participation of immigrants through new urban policies in Brussels: constraints and small opportunities

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ABSTRACT

The political participation of immigrants is an important gauge of their integration into the receiving society more generally, as well as an indicator of the degree of openness of political elites towards ethnic minorities. With the restructuring of State intervention and the diffusion of civic culture, the role that immigrant associations play in shaping urban social policies has become another important form of political participation. As the Belgian city with the highest percentage of migrants and naturalized foreigners and benchmarked as multicultural by the regional government, Brussels presents a test case. Since the beginning of the nineties, new public policies including participative tools have been introduced in Brussels. However, immigrant associations are not adequately involved in these processes. Why is such little space given to migrant associations in the participative procedures of these new urban policies? The neo-institutionalist perspective will be helpful in identifying the major factors that explain the relatively low participation of immigrant associations.

KEY WORDS: urban social policies, participative tools, immigrant associations, integration, local governance, Brussels

RÉSUMÉ

PARTICIPATION POLITIQUE DES IMMIGRÉS À TRAVERS LES NOUVELLES POLITIQUES URBAINES À BRUXELLES: CONTRAINTES ET MANQUE D'OPPORTUNITÉS

La participation politique des immigrés est un indicateur important à la fois de leur intégration dans la société d'accueil et du degré d'ouverture des élites politiques à l'égard des minorités ethniques. Avec les mutations de l'intervention de l'Etat et la diffusion d'une culture civique, les espaces participatifs des politiques socio-urbaines offrent une forme de participation politique nouvelle pour les associations d'immigrés. Bruxelles est un cas intéressant. D'une part, la capitale est la ville belge qui accueille le plus haut pourcentage de personnes étrangères et d'origine étrangère et est présentée comme ville multiculturelle par le gouvernement régional. D'autre part, depuis les années 1990, des nouvelles politiques publiques incluant des outils participatifs ont été implémentées à Bruxelles. Cependant, les associations d'immigrés ne sont pas adéquatement intégrées dans ces espaces. Pourquoi réserve-t-on si peu d'espace à ces associations? La perspective néo-institutionnaliste est utile pour identifier les facteurs expliquant cette faible participation des associations d'immigrés.

MOTS-CLÉS: politiques socio-urbaines, mécanismes participatives, associations d'immigrés, intégration, gouvernance locale, Bruxelles

INTRODUCTION

The political participation of immigrants is an important gauge of their integration into the receiving society more generally, as well as an indicator of the degree of openness of political elites towards ethnic minorities. Belgian social scientists have therefore dealt extensively with the question of electoral participation by migrants, either as voters or candidates, as one possible form of political activity for residents of foreign origin in Belgium (Rea *et al.*, 2010). However, not only does electoral participation represent just a small subset of possible political behaviours in which individuals engage; migrant participation is also more significant in local organizations and activities than in electoral politics (Marschall, 2001, p. 227). And with the restructuring of State intervention (Brenner, 2004) and the diffusion of civic culture, the role that immigrant associations play in shaping urban social policies has become another important form of political participation. Two aspects of the design of these new public policies highlight the pertinence of this aspect. Firstly, many such policies depend on participative devices and bottom-up procedures, which means that a greater diversity of actors are encouraged to take part in the policy-making process as they attempt to include their target publics. Secondly, based on the principle of territorial concentration, these new public policies are often targeted at transforming the physical and social environment of deprived neighbourhoods, which tend to have a particularly high proportion of migrants or Belgian nationals of foreign origin among their residents. As the Belgian city with the highest percentage of migrants and naturalized foreigners and defined as multicultural by the regional government, Brussels presents a test case for these questions. Since the beginning of the nineties, new public policies including participative

tools have been introduced in Brussels. However, immigrant associations are not adequately involved in these processes. Why is such little space given to migrant associations in the participative procedures of these new urban policies? The neo-institutionalist perspective will be helpful in identifying the major factors that explain the relatively low participation of immigrant associations. On the one hand, the impact of associative participation in general is limited in these policies. On the other, migrant participation in particular is hampered by major political constraints and a lack of political opportunities. Consequently, this contribution intends to focus on how the broader social and institutional environment shapes the behaviours and attitudes that ultimately foster (or not) both political engagement (Marschall, 2001, p. 227) and organizing processes led by immigrants (Vermeulen and Berger, 2009).

The article takes as its starting point the elaboration process of the District Contracts (*Contrats de Quartier*) in Cureghem and Anneessens. Located in two different municipalities, Cureghem and Anneessens are two central neighbourhoods of Brussels with a high concentration of residents of foreign origin and many immigrant associations formed by old and new migrant groups. These two case studies illustrate how participatory mechanisms deal with immigrant associations in Brussels. The dataset used in this article is made up of semi-directed interviews about the necessity of including migrant organizations in participatory arrangements conducted with representatives of associations, local and regional bureaucrats, and politicians involved in policy-making, as well as an analysis of the minutes of participatory meetings. I have also conducted observations in line with a more inductive

method of political ethnography in order to grasp the daily entanglements and implicit meanings of politics (Joseph *et al.*, 2007).

The paper will be divided into three sections. In the first, I give a general insight of the processes which have led to the emer-

gence of participatory mechanisms. Then, using the analysis of the two target neighbourhoods, I sketch the impact of participatory mechanisms on the District Contracts; and finally, I describe the constraints on the participation of immigrant associations in participatory mechanisms.

PARTICIPATORY MECHANISMS AND THE CONCEPTION OF THE CITY

Since the end of the 1960s, urban movements in Western cities have demanded a more democratic decisional process in order to tackle the destruction of urban residential buildings and promote the preservation of town centre architecture and heritage. In the Keynesian era, the city was used to drive national economic growth (Brenner, 2004). Political attention was focused on the economic role of cities in the process of redistributing financial resources in order to reduce regional inequalities. Functionalist urban planning prioritized the concentration of service industries in city centres and the suburbanization of residential housing, commerce and heavy industry. It implied the destruction of large residential areas in city centres to create sky scrapers. These urban policies reflected a hierarchical and top-down process driven by the State and its bureaucracies. In this context, urban movements promoted a more communicative urbanism and a focus on residents' needs.

The claims of urban movements converged with economic transformations and the restructuring of the state, and led to new ways of policy-making and city-making. The combined effect of economic and social change generated new political regulations, a pluralization of the actors involved (Pinson, 2006) – including private, community, political or administrative actors, and inhabitants – and a rescaling from the national to the local level in order to improve the legitimacy of public decisions and better anticipate risks. This shift was supposed to encourage the introduction of democratic innovations and a more negotiated approach, or a coproduction of policy-making attempting

to recognize the role of residents as active political participants (Plees, 2005).

Crises of local and national political regulation of urban policy emphasize the urgency of introducing participative mechanisms and associations, such as partners and local actors, in the policy process. However, the new configurations and networks bring together actors with divergent interests, powers, conceptions, representations, positions and resources. The structure of the configuration of actors is reflected in the weight given to the outcomes of participatory mechanisms, because associations and inhabitants are often involved at this stage. It depends on the distribution of power, as well as the equilibrium and institutionalization of participatory mechanisms. Referring to governance and policy network literature, Beaumont (2003, p. 192) elaborates a new typology made up of three models of local governance related to popular inclusion. The hierarchical model is used to define situations in which a small group of bureaucrats, administrative and other local elites make decisions without consulting the target public. This top-down process is also called government. The networking model, meanwhile, is a more horizontal process, including a large range of associations related to the grassroots level. The participatory model is a bottom-up process that aims to involve the target public.

In this new era of policy-making and global cities, some authors predict the increasing participation of immigrant associations in local governance. According to Garbaye (2005, p. 167), immigrants are becoming essential constituents of urban societies and associative action thus con-

stitutes a form of political participation in which immigrant associations may take part as local actors. Indeed, these associations can be considered either as experts, thanks to their field knowledge, or as the most capable of conquering the trust of their public, because of their legitimacy. According to Arnaud and Pinson (2006, p. 209): "This kind of ethnic minority involvement in the process of public action constitutes a new type of integration path in which legal status becomes a

less central question". Therefore, neighbourhoods and "new public policies" should offer windows of opportunity for the social and political incorporation as well as the participation of immigrant organizations in the local public sphere. In the next sections, I will argue that the structure of these regulative interactions is path dependent. I focus on demonstrating how the inherited framework of political and institutional legacy shapes policy change.

PARTICIPATORY MECHANISMS AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN BRUSSELS

Firstly, immigrant participation in new urban policies must be considered from the more general point of view of resident participation. As highlighted by Kazepov (2005), context matters. The shape of participatory mechanisms depends on the institutional framework which influences actors' resources such as specific expertise, interest and power as well as their openness, representations and skills. This approach provides an insight into the kind of participatory tools which are implemented, but also into the constraints and opportunities that define debate among inhabitants and associations about the optimum framework for immigrant participation.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the District Contract aimed to regenerate the physical environment and improve infrastructure and public services in deprived areas. This new policy, implemented by the recently created Region of Brussels, was an alternative and innovative method of addressing these complex issues. The District Contracts introduced participatory mechanisms at the macro level; but participative culture was not a feature of local political life. Little if any systematic or methodological knowledge or practices had been developed previously. Some experiments had been made, but they were not cohesive and lacked impact on the decision-making process. Firstly, at the end of the 1960s, the Consultative Commissions of Foreigners (*Commissions Consultatives des étrangers*) were creat-

ed at the local level to collect opinions on policy issues relevant to immigrant issues. As Martiniello and Hily note (1998, p. 125), they were very formal institutions with only weak connections to effective political power. Then, in the 1980s, urban movements obtained the introduction of public enquiry and a consultative commission to issue planning permissions.

The District Contracts have instigated a local commission of integrated development (CLDI) and a general assembly (AG). The CLDI is composed of administrative, political, private and associative actors and residents, and gives recommendations on the content of the regeneration program and its further revisions. The general assembly has an advisory role only. Touzri (2008) highlights the severely limited impact of participatory mechanisms, which can be explained by several factors.

Firstly, regional government holds the main decision-making power for the local program. The majority of regional funding is assigned to housing, infrastructure and creation of public spaces while only a small percentage is devoted to social development. The selection of building projects is decided through a negotiation between regional and municipal actors, according to their conception of the city and their best interests. Therefore, citizens and associative groups can only propose social projects. But these social issues are more and more shaped by the regional government, which has decided to con-

vert the social portfolio into a socio-economic one (Comhaire and Sacco, 2007). The regional level has also gradually imposed best practices in this field.

Secondly, even if it is a pyramidal process, implementation actors also shape policy. Indeed, municipalities define the margins given to local civil society for two reasons: they are responsible for the organization of participatory mechanisms and they relay the invitation to inhabitants and associations. The methods chosen to reach out to inhabitants and associations, and to manage participatory mechanisms, are important to encourage their presence. These skills allow them to select the participants.

Thirdly, confusion has persisted about the value of the opinions expressed through participatory mechanisms. Indeed, reflecting the tension between representative and participative democracy and the political interest in preserving a hierarchical model of local governance, local authorities have long ascribed consultative value only to the outcomes, and therefore regard the recommendations of the CLDI as non-binding. Although regional authorities have twice revised the mechanism, most of its content is still defined by a top-down process. Other signs of the reluctance of public authorities are the relatively small number of participatory mechanisms in other urban policies or local government, the difficulty of access to information and so on. But as the case studies show, some contexts are more conducive to participation than others.

In Cureghem, the District Contracts were preceded by a European pilot project, Social Development of Neighbourhoods (*Développement Social des Quartiers*), which was based on participatory practices and procedures to create resident committees and coordinate the activities of local actors towards the regeneration of the neighbourhood. The experiment did not receive enough political support from the municipal majority and exacerbated the conflict between the municipality and the associative sector. It therefore had little influence on municipal policies. With the District Contracts, the new alderwoman⁽¹⁾ was hesitant in dealing with

associative participation and the status of participatory mechanisms. This ambiguity increased conflicts and tensions between the municipality, associations and the residents of Cureghem. Given the historical political and financial disinvestment of the neighbourhood, these new conflicts were considered by residents and associations as proof of a continued lack of municipal interest. Openness to participatory procedures progressively emerged in the municipality of Anderlecht, but came from politicians, aldermen and bureaucrats who did not have to power to transform municipal participative practices. Change has happened very gradually.

In Anneessens, although the alderman in charge of the District Contracts was developing the House of Participation (*La maison de la participation*) as a tool of a greater transparency and accountability – a project supported by the municipal majority – he was not convinced of the civic virtues or the efficacy of participation. He questioned the awareness and the ability of residents to conceive the regeneration of a neighbourhood, to take full account of collective interest and to have a forward-looking vision. He pointed out their lack of skills and knowledge, the limits of participatory democracy and the risk of 'Nimby' protests. That is why participatory mechanisms could in his view be used merely to inform and consult rather than as a means of official participation or deliberation. However, following the first experiment with neighbourhood contracts in the 1990s, some associations have coordinated forces to challenge municipal authorities over the continued decline of the neighbourhood and the limited professional opportunities for its youngsters. Based on a certain degree of openness to participatory culture, a dialogue between local authorities and neighbourhood associations began and was institutionalized. During the second District Contract, these associations proposed several projects defined through internal consultation.

Moreover, in both cases, there was a lack of knowledge and experience with participatory tools, which has led to a flawed process of participant selection. In both

cases, technical problems hampered the long-term involvement of residents. Indeed, during the first months of implementation of the participatory mechanisms, the schedule and the location did not foster participation because they were adapted to administrative needs. Meetings were advertised unsuccessfully or too late. As well as the well-known problem of self-exclusion by the speaker, the subjects under discussion were too technical to facilitate intervention by associative actors or residents.

IMMIGRANT ASSOCIATIONS IN NEW URBAN POLICIES

The Chicago school of sociology demonstrated that the city is the main area where immigrants are concentrated and that certain areas play a particularly important function in their integration. On arrival, they find a solidarity network, which provides cultural security, help and affordable housing. These transitional neighbourhoods offer a gateway to the city for new migrants waiting for an improvement in their socio-economic situation. In Brussels, Cureghem and Anneessens play this role. The economic crisis and deindustrialization have prevented many migrants from leaving these neighbourhoods. Immigrants have also created cultural associations to promote their homeland culture and to provide social services in these areas (Rea, 2000). For decades, these neighbourhoods have been politically abandoned and local elites have displayed institutional and political racism (Rea, 2000). The District Contracts reflect a change in the treatment of these neighbourhoods from political disinvestment to renovation.

In Anneessens and Cureghem, the lists of participants in the CLDI and AG show the presence of people of foreign origin. They are politicians, civil servants, experts, residents or representatives of “generalist” associations, but rarely representatives of migrant associations. Essentially, the regeneration of these neighbourhoods is planned by public authorities without official consultation with the representatives of migrant associations, which constitutes

an implicit discrimination and an inequality between associative actors. The in-depth analysis of the functioning of these policies shows that in comparison with “generalist” associations, two additional factors weigh against immigrant associations in participatory mechanisms. The political reluctance to target migrants expressed in the policy framework and the political and social risks associated with the concentration of immigrants in the mind of policy actors combine to limit the participation of immigrant associations in decision-making.

POLICY FRAMEWORK

The framework of the District Contracts focuses on living environment and the social integration of residents in these deprived neighbourhoods rather than on the ethnic dimension. These policies were created during the 1990s, when immigration questions were at the top of the political agenda because of two key events: urban riots in certain areas of Brussels and the electoral success of the Flemish extreme right party, the Vlaams Blok. These events revealed a crisis of legitimacy of administrative and political authorities, leading politicians to promise rapid and visible changes – particularly in the quality of services and the living environment – in order to restore their legitimacy. Nevertheless, the causes considered to be at the root of these new social and urban policies were numerous: unemployment, deterioration of living conditions, deprivation of urban areas and a feeling of insecurity; increasing impoverishment of neighbourhoods in the large conglomerations, concentration of the immigrant population in inner-city neighbourhoods coupled with suburbanization of the middle class (Kesteloot *et al.*, 1997, p. 35), and failure of public policy to address the demands emerging in certain districts. The new policies urged politicians to address the precariousness of these areas and their residents, and the targeted areas were therefore those with a strong immigrant presence.

Although many immigrants have acquired Belgian nationality, the concentration of

people of foreign origin in the target areas puts this programme in the category of policies for integration and social compensation, insofar as they initially provided access to sports activities to parts of the population that would not otherwise have the means. However, the paradigm of migrant integration policy and the political context of Francophone Belgium made it impossible to express these objectives openly or to state public policies in these terms. Therefore, policymakers introduced a way of dealing with integration by using the French concept of social exclusion (Rea, 2000). This framework emphasizes social and professional integration, together with the physical renovation of these areas, rather than the cultural emancipation of immigrants (Rea, 2000). The priorities of the policy were therefore tailored to these goals. From the very beginning, the issues of residential segregation and social exclusion faced by immigrant populations have been conceptualized on more general models than that of immigration. This way of thinking has defined the key topics as residential segregation and social exclusion of "underprivileged people", thus including Belgians as much as immigrants (Rea, 2000). The "territorialization" of these policies allows for the targeting of populations without naming them (Jacobs, Swyngedouw, 2006, p. 136). Therefore, I follow S. Morel (2002) when she acknowledges that "the categories of intervention used for public action will be adapted to the constraints of dominant political discourse".

This framework is a selective filter: it does not encourage ethnic or migrant associations to get involved in the policy process as immigrant associations. The stakes of consultation do not really allow for the expression of specific interests: there is no space to express religious, cultural or ethnic particularities, and the socio-cultural dimension tends to disappear. These constraints thus reflect the path dependency of the political context.

THE AGENTS OF IMPLEMENTATION

In addition to the political context described above, the agents of implemen-

tation are important because they are responsible for the material organization of participatory mechanisms. Consequently, the policy framework is reinforced by these agents' own preconceptions (Young, 1990). While there are differences between Cureghem and Anneessens in terms of political openness to participatory mechanisms, both cases show similar attitudes towards immigrant associations.

Project managers and experts are mostly aware of the obligation and, sometimes, the need to instigate participation of associative actors. As the participation of immigrant associations is often seen (when it is considered at all) in terms of risks of "ethnic ghettoization", most of the agents interviewed immediately associate ethnic homogeneity with enclosure and ethnic heterogeneity with social mix. That is why they have not considered immigrant associations as a means to communicate with ethnic communities which are not reachable by traditional channels such as local newspapers, mails or emails, or to improve the knowledge of local communities. They do not identify migrant associations as key actors or consider it important to mobilize them, whereas some associations with a more general scope and dealing with an ethnically homogeneous public are involved in participatory mechanisms. Associative organization is not seen as a path of emancipation and incorporation for immigrants as it is for the associative involvement of other residents, nor as a matter of regulation for the migrant community, nor as a channel between local authorities and immigrant communities. In many respects, the fear of "ethnic ghettoization" is a form of discrimination, because it associates immigrant organizations with enclosure. If migrants come to participatory mechanisms of their own accord as representatives of an immigrant association, however, they are not excluded if they want to participate. The constraints of the context merely limit the invitation of actors to participate, not actual participation in mechanisms.

This negative representation of immigrant associations is due to the fact that administrative services mainly employ certain cate-

gories of experts – engineers, architects, town planners, geographers, etc. – of which only a few have a social background or knowledge in the issues related to ethnic minorities. They also lack experience because project managers are often recruited at the same time as political programs are being implemented. They are generally complete novices in municipal administration, the associative sector or the social realities of these neighbourhoods, and thus bring no prior experience of relevant political questions to their function. These representations are incoherent with other practices. Indeed, the “ethnic origin” of the social worker is sometimes used to enhance the participation of young people in these mechanisms. Moreover, the ethnicity of the inhabitants is implicitly acknowledged. For instance, the approach used to address the problems some young people with foreign origins encounter is to engage and consult social workers also of foreign origin.

SMALL OPPORTUNITIES

Several factors lead us to believe that the participation of immigrant associations is possible. Firstly, repeated manifestations of urban discontent and the continued decline of these neighbourhoods have led some associations and local civil servants to make drastic revisions of partici-

patory mechanisms. On the one hand, the improvement of local diagnosis of problems is increasingly linked with the cooperation of all the actors in the area, including migrant associations. On the other hand, the demand is for further improvement their links with local diagnosis and the local program of regeneration. Local actors are gradually learning participative culture.

The neighbourhoods targeted by the new urban public policies have remained transitional areas for new immigrants. Since the beginning of the 2000s neighbourhoods, planning offices (which are experts in the process) and associative groups have formed coalitions to draw attention to the extremely precarious housing conditions of refugees and illegal immigrants who are staying in these deprived neighbourhoods. In this specific field, administrative agents and planning offices have difficulty in identifying the extent of the problem and the solutions available. One of their key problems is that they lack precise knowledge of the living conditions or associations formed by new migrants. Migrant associations would have a much greater impact on the process if they showed their ambition to be representative of their communities, and if they were able to propose solid expertise in specific social or political problems related to their communities.

CONCLUSION

While the District Contracts constitute an attempt to pluralize and institutionalize the role of “generalist” associative actors in policy-making, the hierarchical model described by Beaumont’s governance typology still exists, revealing a path-dependent change. Indeed, policy accords only minimal influence to participatory mechanisms, as coproduction concerns only small aspects of it. But the comparison of the case studies shows that municipalities and associations have some latitude to reinforce or make inroads into the top-down principle. Municipalities have long vetoed participatory mechanisms. In the long run, policy-learning

effects have appeared which result not from a change in the core beliefs of political and administrative actors, but rather from the arrival in these roles of new agents familiar, through education or professional experience, with the new civic culture. The renewal of political culture is dependent on the renewal of key executive actors and their ideas. That is why the turn from a hierarchical model to a network model of local governance in Brussels has proved very gradual. Regarding the internal dynamics of participatory mechanisms in the District Contracts, associations are not equal. Although Cureghem and Anneessens are

immigrant neighbourhoods, the analysis shows that immigrant associations are not really mobilized by public authorities. In a negative context for participatory mechanisms, two additional elements must be considered to understand the limited participation of immigrant associations in both neighbourhoods. The policy framework reflects a certain mistrust towards immigrants, partly inherited from the insti-

tutional racism of the 1980s, in the exclusion of cultural projects or associations as eligible candidates. Furthermore, executive agents are insufficiently sensitized to immigration issues, and therefore often fail to take migrant associations into account because they consider them a threat to social cohesion and do not regard their expertise as legitimate.

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