

## **Questioning Participation: Interactions between Communities and Local Institutions in the Terrassa Neighborhood Plan, Spain**

### **Introduction**

Terrassa is a city with 200,000 inhabitants situated in the northern part of the Barcelona Metropolitan Region. The city is characterized by the wide variety of economic activities it is home to, and which are important for the region's growth. As a consequence many workers have been drawn to the city in recent decades. Two important waves of immigration (1) can be identified: one in the 1950s, the other in the 1990s.

The first wave brought people from southern Spain (in particular from the regions of Andalusia and Murcia). The socio-economic and political context of this immigration has greatly marked the city and in particular the four neighborhoods that comprise the current District II of Terrassa (Ca n'Anglada, Torre-sana, Vilardell and Montserrat). This area became home to a large part of the immigrant population because of the reduced cost of land there. At the same time the construction of the district (and in particular the Ca n'Anglada neighborhood) was influenced by the immigrants: there is a close relationship between immigration dynamics and so-called "auto-construction". The neighborhood was constructed by the immigrants themselves with little support from local government. This helped form a specific identity and define the neighborhood's character; it is perceived as a somewhat different neighborhood within the city. This was not only due to where the immigrants came from (as opposed to the Catalans) but also due to their socio-cultural and political character. Above all, there was a strong anti-Franco feeling within the immigrant population. Ca n'Anglada Square, for example, is still known colloquially as "Red Square".

All these factors produced the neighborhood's very specific identity and constitution. Local institutions were created (the Neighborhood Associations) and played a fundamental role in the development of the district. In this period the whole community was constantly involved and a real social consciousness was developed. Urban construction in the district was accompanied by the inhabitants' socio-political development; a development stunted by economic vulnerability, cultural differences with the local Catalans and the anti-democratic and repressive context.

The second major wave of immigration into Terrassa, in the 1990s, had completely different consequences for the neighborhoods in the same district. Many people from the northern part of Morocco came to the city. At the same time the presence of other non-EU nationals (particularly, sub-Saharan Africans, Chinese and Eastern European Gypsies) grew in the district. The social situation in the neighborhoods changed considerably. The relative poverty of the newly arrived immigrants compared to those from the first wave of immigration (who were still not completely integrated into the local Catalan society) caused fractures within the neighborhoods. These social divisions can also be seen in the spatial distribution of the communities within the district (2).

This second wave of immigration immediately proved to be conflictive. For the first immigrants, appropriating territory and the problem of integrating the Andalusian community into the city went together with the process of constructing neighborhoods. These conditions, coupled with a socio-political context (3) that contributed to creating a participative process, brought the population together. However, the second wave of immigrants did not live through the same process. A person's arrival in the city and the neighborhood was strictly related to the dynamics of one single specific community. The incorporation of newcomers into the territory was highly dependent on their family ties and where they were from. This contributed to the formation of closed communities that developed separate existences within the neighborhoods, with their own rules and dynamics (Larios and Nadal, 2006)..

These changes in the urban fabric also played a key role in defining a condition of urban fragmentation in District II. On the one hand, the northern part of Ca n'Anglada is characterized by its increasing population density, while on the other hand, the Torre-sana

neighborhood expands outwards into the outskirts of the city (Pla de Barris, 2004). The neighborhoods of Vilardell and Montserrat were characterized by different processes: the key intervention there was the occasional construction of high-density social housing performed by a public company (ADIGSA) working in partnership with the private sector. This radically changed this part of the urban fabric. Thus, a plurality of urban policies has contributed to the spatial fragmentation of the District. Geographically this fragmentation is accentuated by the presence of the “*Riera*”, a gully that divides Ca n’Anglada from the other three neighborhoods.

The socio-economic differences between District II and the rest of the city, and also the internal spatial fractures, are accompanied by cultural conflicts with elements of socio-political fragmentation. The different approaches of the communities to urban life, their opposing uses and occupation of public spaces (Torres Perez, 2002), the tendency to form small closed groups, and the different social categories and ages all combine to create separation and a general context of tension within the neighborhoods that negatively influences the possibilities of living together harmoniously within the district.

The worsening of this strained atmosphere became evident in the incidences of July 1999 when, in one night, “local” people destroyed North African shops in Ca n’Anglada and perpetrated acts of vandalism. Paradoxically, this was followed by a xenophobic demonstration against the North African presence in the city (4). All of this had a great impact in Terrassa and forced the public authorities and political institutions to develop specific intervention plans for District II.

### **Drawing up the Terrassa Neighborhood Plan**

Terrassa’s District II was characterized by widespread tension within its neighborhoods which prompted the City Council (*Ajuntament*) to implement urban rehabilitation. The most important intervention is the Terrassa Neighborhood Plan (*Pla de Barris*); an integrated plan of action that came into being in 2004 and will end in 2008. This Plan is an application of a regional law, the Neighborhood Act (*Llei de Barris*), that supports the socio-economic rehabilitation and urban redesign of degraded parts of Catalan cities through financing mechanisms.

The Plan is divided in two main parts and is composed of twelve programs: the first part includes three urban action plans. The principal objective is the rehabilitation of the Ca n’Anglada neighborhood and the integration of the four neighborhoods in District II into the dynamics of the city. It attempts to resolve the physical separation of District II from the rest of the city (caused by the *Riera* gully) and to upgrade the quality of the public spaces, urban services and amenities in the district.

The second part of the Terrassa Neighborhood Plan includes nine socio-economic strategies for very different fields (5). It includes economic measures for development, immigration policies, and welfare activities for young and old people.

The total resources for the Plan are about 17 million euros (increased in 2007 by a further million, for additional intervention by the regional government). The distribution of these resources in the case of Terrassa is very interesting. For the first time in Catalonia, in the context of the Neighborhood Act, more than 25% of the budget (more than 4 million euros) was assigned to social programs. Part of this budget was invested in the generation of micro-economic activities that constitute the basic economic network of the neighborhoods, in particular of Ca n’Anglada, including the numerous North African shops and restaurants. Normally in Catalonia, 90% of Neighborhood Act budgets are awarded for urban programs, and only 10% goes to socio-economic initiatives.

This considerable difference in the case of Terrassa reflects the need to tackle the district’s main problem; the principal urban governance issue in the neighborhoods of Ca n’Anglada, Torre-sana, Vilardell and Montserrat is not the state of the urban fabric. Infrastructures, public spaces and urban services are degraded but not dramatically so. Other places in the Barcelona Metropolitan Region (such as *la Mina* in Barcelona) or other towns in Catalonia suffer much greater levels of urban degradation than District II in Terrassa. On the contrary,

the key action for upgrading the neighborhoods in the district is changing the link between urban policies and society. The strategies adopted in the Plan concern the relationship between the change in the urban spaces, the renovation of amenities, upgrading urban services, and the active participation and involvement of the local communities for a real local development and “appropriation” of the dynamics of urban change. These are the strategies that characterize District II in the four years of the Plan. The construction of a sense of community in the neighborhoods and the creation (or re-creation) of participative processes in decision making is a fundamental step towards the principal objective of the Neighborhood Plan; the social cohesion and local development of District II.

To meet these aims, Terrassa City Council submitted a grant proposal to the regional government of Catalonia, through the Neighborhood Act. The proposal for the Terrassa Neighborhood Plan was drawn up by a private consulting agency. They analyzed the socio-economic situation of the neighborhoods and assessed the communities’ principal problems in order to define the urban interventions that the city council should carry out to include District II as a part of the city.

This stage of the Plan highlights the lack of participation in the Terrassa Neighborhood Plan. The analysis carried out by the private agency took a direction independent of the work of the city council employees. The agency’s proposal was drawn up without the collaboration of the different city council departments. In this way the decision makers at the city council obtained a vision of the district’s problems from outside. However, city council workers perceived the Plan as a theoretical structure imposed from the top, bearing no relationship to the recent local government work in the field.

This discontinuity in drawing up the Plan actually represents a limit in the development of the activities in the twelve programs that form the Plan. It is not possible to generalize conclusions for all the programs (because of their very different aims and internal structure) but we can note the differences between the urban policies developed by local government officers, and the Agency’s proposals.

In fact, the consulting agency only considered some of the city council strategies. The most important differences concern the socio-economic area of the Terrassa Neighborhood Plan. First of all, the proposal contains new aspects and areas that the council had not considered (in particular in the sections concerning immigrants and activities in the program called “living together”). On another level, the issues related to the lines of intervention already drawn up and developed by the council for the four neighborhoods (such as participation and sports) were not linked to the people already working in the area. In some cases this discontinuity in the participation process caused only a revision of the main lines of the program (as in the case of the activities aimed at young people). In this case, activities developed in the 1990s and in the early years of the new century (in particular in the Ca n’Anglada neighborhood) (6) simply had the new lines defined in the Plan (Pla de Barris, 2005) superimposed on them.

The lack of continuity between the initiatives proposed in the Plan and the activities underway in the different departments is the principal problem for the efficacy of District II urban policies. However, in the socio-economic section of the Plan, the specific actions that produce good results in terms of participation and upgrading neighborhoods are strictly related to the link between new activities and the experience of local government employees working in the field.

The most efficient policies developed in the nine socio-economic programs (7), independently of the kind of activity, are actions constructed as working tools: a very elastic structure that can be molded to suit each case. Here then, a single department (or technical unit) can propose and draw up initiatives in the Plan, acting with a high degree of freedom, and build on previous projects. This flexible structure theoretically characterizes how the Plan is drawn up and developed through participative methods aimed at involving people. In practice however, despite the general and specific objectives of each program, written as very open declarations of intentions, only part of the socio-economic programs of the Terrassa Neighborhood Plan can adapt to the different situations that the changing dynamics of District II require.

## Development of the Plan

After the Plan had been drawn up and approved in 2005, the twelve programs started. Different initiatives advanced at different rates: grants were not all released at the same time or evenly (8). This conditioned the development of the Plan; some programs did not start in 2005 and the three planned urban initiatives, which required most resources, were delayed. The distribution of resources also caused problems in terms of defining the teams that lead the different activities. The small number of groups working in some sectors (such as education and culture) and frequent substitutions and changes of personnel limited continuity in the development of the Plan.

In analyzing the development of the Plan we find a clear separation between the urban and the socio-economic programs. They should not really be divided at all; there are too many cause-effect relationships between the transformation of the public spaces in Ca n'Anglada or improving connections between Torre-sana and the rest of the city, and the development of activities such as generating small-scale businesses in District II. However, the distribution of resources makes the consequent redesign of the chronology of implementing the Plan unavoidable (with some urban initiatives being delayed). This forces a reevaluation of the two parts of the Plan (urban and socio-economic) and raises questions regarding participation in the different initiatives by the different communities in the neighborhoods, and impacts on the perception of the Plan by the local media, and those living in District II and the rest of Terrassa.

This makes it difficult to analyze in depth the impact of the different programs in the Plan on the urban fabric and on local social dynamics. However, we can examine the different levels of participation of the communities in District II in the proposed activities.

The "native" community, composed of both Catalans and other Spanish people (9), is the most relevant social group in terms of numbers and its influence is fundamental in meetings and debates about the participative evaluation and definition of the state of the Plan's initiatives (Michelutti and Alvarez, 2007). This does not mean that the level (and even less so, the quality) of participation in the different initiatives and steps of the Plan has been good (10): only a small group of neighbors takes part in the "construction and permanent change" activities in the Plan programs. More concerning even than the number of people involved is the distribution of participation between the different neighborhoods (in particular the strong prevalence of the Ca n'Anglada neighborhood compared to Torre-sana, Montserrat and Vilardell) and in the city of Terrassa in general. The Catalan and Spanish communities are also the majority in the other institutions that work in the neighborhoods. For example, the "traditional" Neighborhood Associations that played a key role after the first wave of immigrants arrived in Terrassa and in the period of transition from dictatorship to the present democracy—but which are now less important in defining urban policies and social life (11)—are almost totally comprised of these communities. The "native" communities are also more directly linked to the political parties that could play an important role in the behavior of part of the community, in a direct or indirect way (12).

Despite these links between the native communities and the institutions that are present in the territory, overall, relations between the inhabitants of District II and the institutions are not easy. Researchers, local government workers and the majority of politicians complain of a lack of participation and the evident distance between the community and political organizations (as is visible in much of the Terrassa Neighborhood Plan). This failure of the socio-political mechanisms for interaction holds not only for the Catalan and Spanish communities, but also (and increasingly) for the non-EU immigrants who live in the neighborhoods. Participation of the North African, Gypsy, sub-Saharan African or Asian communities is very limited or non-existent. Few programs in the Plan have been able to involve sections of these groups and, often, only for short periods, with the consequent problems for continuity.

In many cases this state of affairs has clearly been influenced by cultural background (as in the case of the North African community) since men are the only, few, participants in many of

the activities. There is little possibility of any real participation by the women who represent a marginal group, and remain totally unknown to the other people in the neighborhoods (13). Similar reactions characterize the other foreign communities of District II. In the case of the gipsy community, which has inherited a long tradition of exclusion and segregation, the participation process represents a totally external structure and as such exerts no influence over them. There is no connection between this community and the others and some sections, in particular young girls, are only affected by a few activities of the Plan (14). The sub-Saharan and Asian communities also have marginal positions in the dynamics of re-design and development of the Plan programs. Despite the efforts of local government, it is possible to see that the exclusion of the foreign communities from the redevelopment processes of the neighborhoods (forced by the context or determined by internal issues) is accompanied by segregation dynamics in District II and an increasing distance from the institutional fabric of the zone.

## Conclusions

The case study of Terrassa is an example of a general trend that is apparent in Catalonia but it is also comparable to a general phenomenon that is occurring all over the world: tension generated by fragmentation within the urban fabric and social tissue. Though there are visible consequences for the spatial and social situation caused by this fragmentation (Navez-Bouchanine, 2002), there is still no agreement on its roots, or on its economic, political and cultural aspects (Cusinato, 2005).

If we consider the institutional issues that characterize the urban fragmentation in the case of Terrassa, we can see how the participative mechanisms that are applied to the communities of District II and represent the principal structure of the Neighborhoods Plan underline the social conflicts present in the city, the exclusion of the communities (or part of them), the difficult interactions between the inhabitants and the institutions that are working in the territory.

A more in-depth assessment of the Plan's impact on District II is currently unviable due to the internal-external factors that have influenced the development of the Plan's programs (15). However, if a definitive measure of the outcomes of the Plan is not possible (which in any case will terminate its activities at the end of 2008), we could consider some lessons learned from the actions that have been carried out in the zone and, on another level, from the reactions of the neighborhood communities.

Regarding the construction and development of the Plan and its impact on the urban fabric and neighborhood society, it is possible to underline that:

- The participation process in the definition and implementation of the different activities of the Plan was (and is) influenced by small "power" groups (of the "native" community) that have taken over the participative mechanisms and indirectly increased the partial exclusion of other common citizens (16);
- The participative action and the special activities implemented by the Plan were only able to involve the communities of foreign people that represent the most segregated part of the neighborhood society on a few occasions: the principal objective of the Plan, the "social cohesion and local development of District II" has not yet been met;
- The interaction between the local government and the associations of the Ca N'Anglada, Torre-sana, Vilardell and Montserrat neighborhoods is not sufficiently developed: the institutional fractures between the actors working in District II underlines the distance between the urban policies implemented and the communities (17);

Despite this scenario, which raises concern about the future of the neighborhoods, the Terrassa Neighborhoods Plan remains a fundamental opportunity both for the zone and for the communities involved as stakeholders. The construction of the Plan is flexible. A change in the definition of the urban policies and the partial outcomes of the Plan has pushed the politicians and technicians to propose alternative activities in order to increase the quality of the actions and the participation of the inhabitants. The municipality believes in the

importance of the Plan as a key tool in empowering the community and the social fabric of District II. Furthermore, a considerable part of the neighborhood population perceives the Plan as an instrument for regaining the territory and raising community awareness. With these conditions, the Terrassa Neighborhoods Plan can play a key role in the real change and development of Ca N'Anglada, Torre-sana, Vilardell and Montserrat.

## Endnotes

- (1) Some authors identify another wave of immigration in the 1970s, but this was fairly irrelevant for the development of District II in Terrassa.
- (2) The communities are clearly divided into areas: most of the North African community is in the north of the Ca n'Anglada neighborhood; the gipsy community is situated in Vilardell; the sub-Saharan community is mainly in Montserrat.
- (3) The need to respond to the constrictions of the dictatorial government together with socio-economic vulnerability led to a process of social fusion.
- (4) The demonstration was organized by the far-right Catalan political movements and mobilized a lot of people from the district and from Terrassa in general. In contrast, a demonstration organized by local NGOs and associations in support of the North Africans passed almost unnoticed.
- (5) The nine socio-economic programs are: the "welcome" program for foreign people; the "living together" program; the young people's program; the sports program; the old people's program; the business program; the participation program; the cultural activities program and the communication program.
- (6) The neighborhood is historically characterized by the presence of different young people's associations and organizations that are organized and promoted directly by young people. The Terrassa Neighborhood Plan tries to empower this preexistent associative fabric, but the perception of the social actors and of the young volunteers that work in the field was just the opposite: there is a widespread idea that the Plan is an "official" instrument that cannot interpret the actions historically at work in the neighborhoods.
- (7) It is not possible to evaluate the three interventions that work directly on the urban fabric. These activities are in their very first steps.
- (8) This problem characterizes the whole process of drawing up and developing the Terrassa Neighborhoods Plan. For example, in the original socio-economic plan there were twelve programs, but three of them (the Childhood Support Program; the Program for the Transition to Active Life and the Social Integration Program) were not financed.
- (9) In this case it has been possible to bring together the two communities. This does not mean that integration is complete and that there is no tension now.
- (10) For this reason the structure of the analysis (and of the research project that involved the City Council and the UNESCO Chair on Sustainable Development) is based on qualitative methods of research (in-depth interviews, etc.). The quantitative approach, used in the past, could not explain the participation processes and gave no answers to the complex dynamics present in the neighborhood.
- (11) This is the case of the Ca n'Anglada Women's Association, sponsored by and connected to the political party in opposition in the current local government of Terrassa.
- (12) The four Neighborhood Associations that had a fundamental role in the construction of the political and social consciousness of the district (in particular in the case of Ca n'Anglada) have become no more than lobby groups that demand resources and action by local government but that do not play a role in defining urban policies in the district.
- (13) The "living together" program tried to involve North African women in specific activities, but despite the mediators' work, the results were disappointing. The women usually drop out of the activities under pressure from their husbands. These fractures do not only characterize the relationships between this particular group and local government (represented via the Plan) but also between North African women and the other people in the neighborhood: a situation of internal tension in District II that limits the possibility of developing a common consciousness of living together in harmony in the city.
- (14) This group has demonstrated a high level of participation in the Neighborhoods Plan (for example in the Youth Program). However, this link between the community and the municipal institutions has been shown to be very weak and inconstant: a lot of girls who play an important role as counselors in the Youth Program or who participate actively in the Educational Program break off their work for personal or family reasons.

(15) These factors include the delay in assigning the financial resources which limited the urban intervention and its consequences on the neighborhoods, and the fact that the outcomes of the socio-economic activities (cohabitation and participation in particular) are only visible in the long term.

(16) These "power" groups from the "native" community have a high participation in all the decision-making steps of the Plan and have a close relationship with the associations of the zone (in particular with the Neighborhood Associations) and with political parties.

(17) This distance creates a general lack of trust in the communities. This in turn leads them to not participate in the Plan's actions or, in the worst case, to totally ignore the Municipality's activities and its existence in District II, as the problems of the Communication Program have shown (many people in the neighborhoods are unaware of the activities of the Plan, and the impact of the media coverage of the Plan in journals, newspapers, etc. is very marginal on the ground).

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