Critical Trends of Citizen Participation in Policymaking Insights from Portugal

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Research question

- Invited spaces of citizen participation in policymaking address both normative and instrumental goals. These spaces are disseminating around the globe, and Portugal is a case in point. However, a grey zone persists: while participation spreads, neoliberalism (read: austerity) worsens socioeconomic conditions of the most vulnerable.

- **What connections between global, national and local agents of participation are reproducing global critical trends in Portugal?**

Framework

- Convergence between neoliberalism and citizen participation agendas from 2000s: replacing state reform and social justice

- Three emerging trends:
  - detachment of local participatory practices from global issues;
  - shift towards technocratic approaches in detriment of a political-oriented discourse;
  - scarcity of evaluation in contrast to the mushrooming of pilots.

Case-study

- Portugal: record of local processes (=186) and the first national participatory budget in 2017 (38 winning projects)
- International endorsement of citizen participation in Portugal before, through, and after the crisis/austerity

- Coincidence of global agencies behind citizen participation and austerity (EU, IMF/WB after the Washington Consensus)
- Divorce of social groups (grassroots, militants, and the most vulnerable) from processes despite the 'political momentum' (political abstention, protests in 2011-2012)

Insights

- Critical trends:

    - Local: weak scaling up; reproduction of local methodological bias; no articulation with local authorities

    - Technocratic: non-binding (no institutionalisation); discretionary inclusiveness (one-to-one deliberation on larger scales)

    - Non-evaluation: neither culture nor evidence of evaluation

If participation means that the voiceless gain a voice, we should expect this to bring some conflict. [...] The absence of conflict in many supposedly 'participatory' programmes is something that should raise our suspicions (White, 1996, 15)