

# Democracy and participation in the face of global changes

## The role of citizenship and human rights education

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### Workshop report

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The NECE Workshop was held during the last days of June 2012 in Madrid in order to make preparations and collect ideas for the upcoming NECE Conference. Under the title “Participation Now! Citizenship Education and Democracy in Times of Change”, the conference will be held in Córdoba from 21-24 November 2012.

The expert workshop’s main objective was to reflect on the role of citizenship and human rights education in light of the worldwide processes of change that are taking place *hic et nunc*, and the ambivalent position in which they seem to be placing democracy today.

Diagnosed in crisis in a Europe that is living the worst breach of confidence in history, and that is expressing its dissatisfactions through new forms of participation such as the 15-M or the Occupy movements; or claimed by the revolutionary processes taking place in the Arab countries around the Mediterranean. These new forms of participation express not dissatisfaction but hope. Current changes and citizenship education were thus bridged by the concept of participation, and all three themes – participation, citizenship education and political change – were addressed in the entire meeting.

With these issues in mind, it is not surprising that the workshop showed an eminent interdisciplinary character. Theory merged with practice; Continental, Southern and Eastern Europe were intertwined with the Maghreb in a challenging and respectful dialogue; and conventional political participation was discussed with continuous reference to 2.0 mechanisms. Academics, activists, women and men as well as youngster and professionals all shared their distinct point of views. All this variety

however, under the general appreciation that, in one way or another, citizenship and human rights education play a prominent role in the worldwide processes which are reshaping politics, economy and civil society.

The theoretical framework was established by the presentations of Fernando Vallespín, Pablo Oñate and May Elmahdi. Fernando and Pablo, as professors in political theory and political science, outlined the current democratic crisis that is widespread in Europe. They framed it as a question of unfulfilled expectations – a “democratic fatigue” for which the political class is held responsible, and in the face of which political participation appears to be experiencing a paradigmatic change. One that is structural in nature and hence more permanent than temporary. A similar change was explained by May, not in Europe however, but in Egypt. Against general presuppositions, May – a journalist with a political science formation– stressed the importance of not analyzing the revolutionary processes of the Arab world from the perspective of the Western democratic model. This would help to avoid judging them firstly, as bursting from nothing – a deeply seated resistant spirit was the backbone of the uprisings, she argued together with Barbara Bishay and Nelly Corbell – and secondly, as inherently Islamic.

Together with the rest of participants, a preliminary conclusion was agreed upon: the importance of confronting the matter of citizenship education, participation and political transitions with realism and caution. This meant firstly, being aware of the potentialities but also the limitations of these new social movements. And secondly, avoiding all elements of intellectual, conceptual and practical ‘colonialism’. This translated into highlighting the importance of concepts and their adequate application to concrete practices in order to avoid any stereotyping in mutual perceptions.

From this theoretical starting point, the presentations of Peter Kirchschräger and Daniel Reichert, introduced two important debates: the role of Human Rights in citizenship education and the important effect of new social media on political participation. The role of Human Rights as a base for universal agreement was pointed out by Peter, as well as its utility for the construction of a new and global definition of democracy, as Human Rights are getting more important for the definition of citizenship. Nonetheless this gave way to a crucial debate between the universalistic and communitarian foundations of Human Rights discourse, in which opposing positions were recognized, but not however reconciled. New social media, on the other hand, was considered unanimously as having already transformed the meaning of democracy. Daniel outlined the advantages of online participation: transparency, open data and many-to-many communication, exemplifying them with references to his own project of Liquid Democracy. However, the risks of e-Democracy becoming nothing different from the actual political spheres and it was therefore concluded that *virtual* politics needed always to be combined with *real* politics. Examples are the Arab spring uprisings and the new social movements that spread across Europe and beyond.

All the debates outlined above materialized when the rest of participants referred to their own citizen education programmes. From the implementation of such programmes in places as different as Estonia, Egypt, Siberia, Tunisia and Slovenia, multiple conclusions were drawn. Firstly, as explained by Nelly Corbel, manager of University-based civic engagement in the American University of Cairo, the maxim of 'non-colonization' in theory, must be translated into practice in the form of the adaptation of all citizen education programmes to local conditions. Secondly, as reinforced by Elena Bobrovskaya, coordinator of a cooperation programme in Siberia, the local is the best starting point for citizenship education, even though the global may be the objective. And lastly, as the presentation of Fouad Hamdan, manager of Vote Match in Tunisia in 2011, showed, when speaking of citizenship education programmes, or any political initiative that has citizenship as its guide line, a great limitation, even greater than cultural or political differences, can be that of funding, and more importantly, that of the disagreement of political institutions. These conclusions were further enhanced by the contributions of those participants who analyzed them from the key outlook of *teaching* citizenship, that is, from the educational perspective, which concluded that yes, it is possible to teach citizen values and practices.

In conclusion, the workshop set the framework within which the NECE Conference will take place. The themes were delineated and the ways they should be treated were established. Firstly, the importance of avoiding a colonial perspective was stressed once again, and it was therefore concluded that a broad definition of democracy and citizenship – always linked to the Human Rights discourse – has to be the starting point of all discussions. This will allow an inclusive definition, in which the focus is placed on common concerns more than on differences, although common concerns constructed out of diversity. Secondly, it was decided that citizen education should be understood as a practical skill which is a mechanism of individual and communal empowerment oriented towards the acquisition of certain competences and skills. In this way citizen education can have a real impact in transforming real people's lives. With respect to the themes that are to be treated in Córdoba, it was decided that global changes, citizenship education and participation would be the main topics around which the Conference should pivot. Other topics, such as that of political transitions and transitional justice, the changing role of leadership, and the importance of teaching were also mentioned to complement the main topics.

The expert workshop came out with fruitful results and definitely will lead to a successful conference in Córdoba.