

## Civic dialogue in France

First of all, I will tell you a little bit about the history of civic dialogue in France.

France has always had a strong tradition of democracy, but elections are the main and almost only mean of democratic expression for the French people.

The sixties and seventies have seen the emergence of civic dialogue as a political expression, in the field of urbanisation, through a bottom-up movement, initiated by associations. It also appeared in rural territories in the field of collaborative river management. However these experiences remain isolated, and dedicated to local issues.

In the nineties, citizen participation appeared more as a top-down movement, initiated by institutions, in the environmental and urban development policy. Several laws were adopted in order to give this movement a legislative basis : the "loi d'orientation" adopted in nineteen ninety one, as well as the water act in ninety two, put the dialogue in the centre of urban development and water management policies. In ninety five the "loi Barnier" set up public debate as an obligation for all infrastructure project impacting the environment. It also created the CNDP (I will come back to this later). In two thousand and five, the principles of civic dialogue in the environmental field became constitutional with the adoption of the environment charter.

As I said earlier, the Commission Nationale du Débat Public, an independent public service authority, was created to supervise public debate on infrastructure projects exceeding a certain value, whether it be launched by the State, local authorities, private individuals or public institutions. Although its opinion is only advisory, the CNDP's is a major actor in the spreading of citizen participation, because of its expertise and financial as well as human resources that allows it to reaffirm the principles of transparency, equity and civic dialogue, and develop and experiment new tools.

Even though the legislator shows more and more concern about civic dialogue, the practical implementation of these principles remains poorly specified. In the field, some practices show good results, others don't.

In addition to the legal obligation, in some cases, for public debate there is two other kinds of civic dialogue : local authorities also voluntarily set up measures encouraging citizen participation, and the dynamism of the community network allows the multiplication of bottom-up projects initiated by citizens. It's particularly accurate in the field of public policy in the cities, and in the field of environment, conflict management or local development in rural territories.

Now that we have a clearer, even though synthetic, view of the characteristic of civic dialogue in France, here is some of today's issues and challenges related to citizen participation.

**A first serial of observations would draw a pretty negative view of the state of civic dialogue in France :**

1. there is a lot of legal procedures and obligations, all related to citizen participation, but specific to different fields (environment, water management, nuclear issues...), which makes participation really unclear and incomprehensible for citizens.
2. local authority's budgets are collapsing, which lowers the number and quality of the civic dialogue projects
3. the crisis of public finances leads to a bigger gap between rich and poor territories, and a growing inequality in terms of participation (entre quoi et quoi)
4. there has been an increase of authoritarianism in the way decisions should be made after the recent highlights : the death of an ecologist activist during a protest against the building of a dam in the south of France, the long and violent protest against an airport in the west of France, and the attacks in January, in Paris and Montrouge. All those events lead to radicalization and caused long-term divisions

between citizen, at the heart of the territories (for example, the current opposition in the south of France between the "pro-dam" and the "anti-dam").

**This first serial of pessimistic observations can be put in perspective with some other, more optimistic, observations :**

- a) there is a real spreading of civic dialogue in a lot of fields : in the waste management or the social housing sector, users's consultation is now common.
- b) we can see the emergence of a professional community, fighting to improve and disseminate civic dialogue in a lot of fields (environment, urban development, infrastructures, health,...), the spreading of the knowledge about participation, the professionalisation of public servants in local authorities, the development in the field of research and training, the creation of networks and associations such as l'Institut de la Concertation...
- c) citizen are more aware about civic dialogue and its matters, thanks to the action of associations such as France Nature Environnement, in the environmental field, which communicate with citizens about their rights, about how they can initiate themselves an action (tools...),...
- d) there is also a change in the profile of politicians : a new generation, younger, more feminine, more open to civic dialogue and its issues.

**Lastly, we can observe some long term trends that allow us to be optimistic for our future :**

- i. the national crisis and lack of confidence in politicians and experts encourage a comeback to the local, and the creation of new ways of consuming, of living together, of sharing, with new forms of solidarities and daily organisation. For example, there is a huge development of AMAP (Association pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne) ; those associations come from a realisation that agricultural and alimentation fields are in crisis (waste, feeding inequality, food security...), so they promote peasant farming,

they try to find another type of relationship with the feeding, and another economic, agricultural, food model.

ii. the end of welfare local authorities could urge the elected representatives to develop the dialogue with citizen, the principles of co-responsability, in order to solve together the issues caused by the fall of public finances.

iii. those highlight i talked about earlier forced the government to take a stand on civic dialogue, to reaffirm its importance and to launch workshop on that matters (Commission Monédiaire ou Richard, a coalition of different kind of actors in the field of civic dialogue, that worked together in order to produce suggestions for the government).

iv. there is lot of other practices, in other fields, that are close to civic dialogue or citizen participation, but that we don't really know how or if they will merge : open date, open government, "civic control"...

v. last, but not least, there is an increase of participations process every where in the world, and sharing experiences and good practices, as in Forum Synergie, could be very interesting.