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Regarding what is at stake on how excluded persons can participate in local debates, I shall first present some elements which characterize French national policy against exclusion.

1. France has a high figure of unemployment, most of the unemployed concentrating on the outskirts of metropolis. Many keep being unemployed for months or even years and have no continuous activity whatsoever. More and more unemployed are young people.  
Now, the state minimum insertion income (M.I.I.) was created almost 20 years ago. Roughly, the unemployed receive a certain amount of benefit provided they indulge in some activity which is supposed to help them get a job in the end. People can assess this public policy has proved not to be quite a success.
2. What we call “the Town policy” copes with exclusion by taking into account the excluded, but more specifically by aiming at developing territories through investments on substantial amounts of financial and human means on these territories. Besides, the Town policy struggle against exclusion focuses on trying to make people from different origins live together, on one hand, and to have them speak up for themselves in local debates, on the other end.  
As a result, the Town policy has influenced the way social workers deal with people experiencing difficulties and has paved the way for implementing various local participation plans of action, mainly thanks to the involvement of local associations.
3. Last main element, the “decentralisation”, that’s to say, the important transfer of power from the state to the area levels. Nowadays, all powers regarding the struggle against exclusion have been transferred from the state to the departments.

### **Talking about the excluded**

One must also be aware of the fact that in France, citizens cannot directly participate in local democracy. They only can do it through associations. As a result, there’s a question to be asked : what does implementing the participation of the excluded mean then ?



Now, we have to bear in mind several other points.

Firstly, the excluded are not homogeneous. Inequality and domination divide them (e.g. the relationship between excluded men and women ; e.g. the more precarious state of the young ; e.g. the dismal situation of the immigrants).

Secondly, the excluded do not “naturally” wish to participate. They do not participate for the mere sake of it. To have the excluded participate, one must consider what is at stake, according to and with the excluded. They possibly will wish to participate only when they consider themselves as stakeholders. What is at stakes can be as geographically limited as an action on a block of flats or can also mean intervening upon a town district.

Thirdly, combining social mixity and participation of the excluded is far from being easy to achieve, taking into account the inhabitants diversity of knowledge or of social networks or incomes. Theses differences put the participation of the excluded at risk, as well as democratic life, inside these mixed groups.

On the other end, considering that social mixity is too difficult to achieve means leaving room to the constitution of participation ghettos !!!

Fourthly, I believe one should not refer to the representativity of the groups or to the persons one is working with. This seems a wrong issue to me. One should just stand by individuals who wish to better their living conditions. Every living condition is specific and must be dwelt with accordingly, no less, no more.

### **But what do I mean by “Participation” ?**

Participation has many meanings. It may mean participating to the social life of an district. It may mean that the inhabitants are asked to give their opinions on some topic. It may be that the excluded are parts of a decision process. Lastly, it may be that the inhabitants are asked to make an assessment on what have been implemented to ameliorate their living conditions. For that matter, France state policy is clearly to give the beneficiaries of state programmes the opportunity of participating to the assessment of what have been implemented for them.



## **Participation and legitimacy**

I consider there are several kinds of legitimacy, as far as local decision taking is concerned. There is the legitimacy of the elected members, the legitimacy of the State services, the legitimacy of the skilled social workers, lastly the legitimacy of the associations supporting the excluded, which is adding to the legitimacy of the excluded themselves.

This legitimacy is based upon the knowledge from the inside of the unsatisfactory situations the excluded endure. They, of course, may find it difficult to express themselves : the participation process is there to help them to do so, and to cross their legitimacy with the other legitimacies.

## **Participation and partnerships**

On a broader point of view now, I've noticed many times that participation alters the classic configurations of partnerships. Usually partnerships, on a territory scale, will gather elected members, civil servants, skilled workers. When the inhabitants participate, there's a (broader) clash of legitimacies.

The professional ways of understanding the situations and of doing things get to be questioned by the inhabitants, when the skilled workers, (for instance the social workers) had no problems of that kind when the inhabitants had no room to give their opinion. On the other hand, some skilled workers sometimes indicate that they appreciate to have bottom up informations.

Whatever the case may be, participation requires partnership, some collective organisation, groups involvement to support the weakest, to make the excluded feel they are no longer alone, that they are linked, and that they have a real chance of making it. It's, in my opinion, a sine qua non condition to a step towards insertion.

## **Participation and strategy**

The excluded are frequently appealed to give their opinions on minor issues .On the contrary, strategic orientations seem not to belong to their span of legitimacy ! Thus, the local system of decision is not altered.



Now, my experiment at La Courneuve allows me to assert strongly what follows : with training sessions “strengthening” their capacities to analyse what is going on, the excluded are capable of thinking their situations from a strategic point of view.

Subsequently, you will easily conclude, as I have concluded myself, that a participation process and system concerning the excluded absolutely requires to be prepared carefully, so that the excluded feel capable to express themselves.

On the other hand, a wrong way of dealing with the participation of the excluded consists in asserting that they can be part of multi dimensional projects. Being part of a big project requires a capacity to imagine living another situation. This capacity is all but natural. In my opinion, the excluded need to experiment down to earth situations and to realize they can cope with them. Only then will they step toward participating to bigger projects.

However, when a participation process is being launched, even if the excluded seem ready to follow it, the social workers or whoever accompany the process must talk clear and answer to the following questions : What is the aim of the process ? What can the inhabitants expect from participating ? Who is entitled to decide, and on what (so that the inhabitants know what is worth talking about or working on and what is not) ? What is the duration of the process ? What down to earth results are expected ?

Not only must one anticipate that kind of questions, but also one must make sure that what has been promised is done. Otherwise, the excluded will most probably decide that they won’t be caught that way again. The chances are, it will be very difficult to launch that kind of process on the same area and with the same public.

### **What are the outcomes of participation ?**

In France, we’ve been having difficulties in harmonizing the participation of inhabitants through the associations and a direct participation of the excluded. I don’t mean that the legitimacy of the associations, their experience and knowledge are to be denied. I’m just concerned by trying to make room to more direct forms of participation.



1. But it may be wondered why this direct participation of the excluded is so important. In fact, the process of participating in itself is a process which conveys effects of learning, and effects of identity construction as well. In other words, there is something more than reaching the official goal of the participation that lies in the mere fact of taking part to a process of participation. The excluded inhabitants experiment that they can master part of their future, that fate is not the only key word to be spoken. And that is also why, on the other end, a failure of the process may be really bad for the excluded population.
2. But moreover, the process of participation allows other positive effects to be noticed.

The skilled workers, as for them, do not look at the excluded population the way they used to, any longer. They realize much better who the excluded are, how logical their ways of acting can really be. How responsible and reliable they can prove to be too. I would say that the skilled workers realize the excluded are not merely theoretically but in effect full members of our common world.

The elected members' representations tend to modify as well. I remember how the energy and inventiveness of disadvantaged teenagers had impressed some elected members when they had met them.

And participating neighbours change their ways of looking at the casts away too. When debriefing or during non formal discussions with better off inhabitants I noticed they now understood better who the excluded really were. I realized that they appreciated their will to contribute, to take a real part in participating to the common projects.

3. Participating for the most disadvantaged persons is already a step towards insertion, since they are involved in the local citizen life. It may come out into some capacities recognitions and even in the long run allow the persons to find a job (though rarely, I must admit). I thus remember these women who had organized themselves so that they got able to participate to the life of the district they were living in. As a result, they ended by creating several small firms which still exist after a few years now.



4. Those participating structures allow the individuals to cross learn from one another. But one question arises immediately : how does society acknowledge for the training by doing and experiencing relationship ? No satisfactory answer's up to this day. Though in Aubervilliers we had delivered a certificate testifying that teenagers had taken part in a participation study on the district, no official recognition has taken place.
5. Lastly, these participation experiments prompt wide expectations on the area. But a question similar to last one arises : what follow up is it possible to propose ?

Not only the excluded populations but the skilled workers develop expectations. How is the good, innovative work done acknowledged ? How do we take into account the fact that the excluded persons could help getting in touch with other excluded individuals ? What institutional capitalisation is made of it ? What transfer too ? These are questions upon which we could reflect together.

However that may be, we should avoid promising the moon, we should avoid deluding people when participation processes are under way.