

LETTER FROM PORTO ALEGRE

The 12th International Observatory on Participatory Democracy Conference was held in Porto Alegre, coinciding with the twentieth anniversary of **Eco 92** and on the eve of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, **Rio+20**.

The theme of the 12th **OIDP Conference** –Democracy in the City and Major Urban Transformations– is directly related to humanity’s most urgent challenge, that of providing, through citizen’s participation, new meaning to the development model of countries and their towns and cities, and universally accepting the paradigm that is sustained by democracy, freedom, human rights, social inclusion and environmental balance.

We live in an age of paradox: on the one hand most countries are suffering the consequences of a development model that is worn out and has, since 2008, led to unemployment, hunger, the closing of companies and the bankrupting of national states.

The American crisis propagated itself across most of the continents and is currently of such a scale that it is threatening the future of the Eurozone and human survival in Africa, as well as weakening trust and social cohesion in thousands of communities. Financial capital, which originated the tragedy, has now reconstituted itself as the creditor of the governments that are in crisis.

On the other hand, this global crisis has also brought creative energies to the fore in the streets of many countries. In reality the Arab Springs, the Indignant Europeans and the diversified Occupy Movements have not only been bringing down governments they have also been demanding the return of public space in order that it can be reinvented. The co-creation of a new democracy and, above all, of new institutions is being written by many thousand hands in the political agenda of the 21st century.

This reality is no different throughout the towns and cities, in permanent social and environmental crisis, where urban development models based on exclusion have, along with territorial speculation, entered into a vicious circle that has subordinated territorial management to the accumulation of profits, rather than any attempt to improve the quality of life of its inhabitants. Now more than ever major urban transformations have come to form an active part of this perverse game. As a consequence of this, giving new meaning to this model of development has become vital and is framed within a worldwide political project that the different societies have still not co-created.

The 12th OIDP Conference, held from the 11th to the 13th of June, was based on a series of debates and discussions, entered into by social stakeholders, academics, local authorities, technicians and students throughout their activities, as well as the experiences that had been gained, some of which are now well established while others are newly formed, in our towns and cities, and proposed a number of routes to be followed:

- 1) The reassertion of a commitment to the different forms of participatory democracy as a way of confronting the political, economic and social crisis, as well as developing new forms of local governance.
- 2) An increase in the number of Participatory Democracy Observatories in towns and cities, for the purpose of democratising information and stimulating the production of knowledge, so as to provide a diagnosis of the social reality and make it understandable, while also contributing to the construction of public policies that are sustainable.
- 3) Stimulation for the creation of legislation that is in line with a new development paradigm, one that regulates the territorial frontiers between public and private spaces and that indicates areas of social and cultural interest, environmental preservation, etc., taking advantage of the rich experience of Brazil's City Statute.

- 4) The promotion of social alliances that can co-create public spaces for participation and that include the actions of formulation, planning and decision making with regard to sustainable public and private policies: participatory budgets, forums, meetings, collaborative social networks, etc. In the case of “public spaces for virtual participation” stimulating the development and use of open platforms.
- 5) The creation of mechanisms that can guarantee that the construction work scheduled for megaprojects will be suitable with regard to the short, medium and long term planning of our towns and cities, and will respect the pace of life and customs of the local people.
- 6) An improvement in the promotion of different cultural tools that will help to ensure that participatory processes are more attractive for the new generations, as well as more accessible in terms of the capacities for cultural creation of different individuals.
- 7) Given the urgency of citizens’ participation, both horizontal and network based (virtual or presential), the encouragement of governments to develop policies that include education, culture and technology, paving the way for creative processes that are sustained by the reconquest of public spaces for participation and public coexistence and friendship.

Porto Alegre, 13th June 2012