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Common Patterns in Coping with Under-Representation in Participatory Processes: Evidence from a Mutual Learning Space for Portuguese Local Authorities (LAs)

Giovanni Allegretti ⬤ *

Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

Over the past decade, Portugal became one of the countries most committed to involving citizens in public decision-making, using 'open door' approaches based on participants' self-selection. To what extent are such practices concerned with inclusiveness? The article is built on the first stage of a two-fold collaborative research to map strategies shaped by Portuguese municipalities for coping with underrepresented actors in participatory processes. The exploratory analysis – funded by the Network of Participatory Municipalities of Portugal (RAP) - reveals common patterns: (1) pursuing inclusion of underrepresented actors is not a policy for fostering a high diversification of actors in spaces of social dialogue, but just a tool for caring of marginalised groups; (2) 'co-design' of inclusionary policies with the targeted social actors is not a common method; (3) there is limited coordination between different policy sectors of each local authority; (4) the majority of 58 participation web-portals are imagined as mere instrumental spaces for organising their democratic innovations, but under-estimate their potential as 'mirrors' of the community and of the different underrepresented groups targeted. The dialogue opened among RAP members on the two surveys reveals a potential for imagining and co-designing shared solutions through the next stages of the collaborative research.

Keywords: participatory processes; inclusiveness; community of practices; Portugal

Fundamentally, inclusion is the principle that we are all entitled to participate fully in all aspects of society; that we all have something to contribute. (…) It is the right of the individual and the responsibility of society as a whole (…). Inclusion is about valued recognition, meaningful engagement and enabling social policy (Jones 2010, 58–59).

1. Introduction

Vast amount of literature – both academic and grey (Auger 1975) – has been dealing with the definition and measurement of 'inclusion' through public policies, along with the pivotal role that committed public institutions have had in the promotion of citizens' participation as a tool to make inclusion effective in every area of life. Participation, in fact,

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* Email: giovanni.allegretti@ces.uc.pt

offers an opportunity to bridge non-discriminatory attitudes of individuals and groups towards people with specificities which they feel are different from their own, with the facilitation of good living conditions for these same people (Jones 2010), thus favouring 'the recognition of self in other, and other in self' (Habermas 1987, 45).

Nevertheless, asymmetries exist between the vast literature on 'inclusion through participation' and the analysis of 'inclusion within participation'. The latter tends to focus specifically on the notion of inclusionary tools and practices, focussing on 'inclusiveness' as the capacity of participatory processes to take charge of the inclusive dimension in the different phases and stages which structure democratic innovations (Smith 2009; Sorice 2019). This is especially true for participatory processes 'by invitation' (Blas and Ibarra 2006), which are promoted by representative institutions as a concession to their fellow citizens. In fact, in relation to such democratic innovations, institutions have a double responsibility: (1) to guarantee that they act as spaces which promote inclusiveness in public policies, and; (2) to guarantee that their architecture incorporates all the necessary features which can prevent them from being felt by some groups or individuals as new spaces of exclusion, unable of compensating the 'unfulfilled promises of democracy' (Bobbio 1987) or, even, capable of aggravating them.

In this perspective, the literature which deals with institutional-based participatory processes, tends to incorporate perspectives related to the 'duty' of organisers (Rioux, Basser, and Jones 2010; Ganuza and Francés 2012b) to guarantee an inclusionary dimension, especially when dealing with the subcategory of 'deliberative experiments', whose organisational design considers the inclusiveness of multiple and diverse voices as a central priority.

Few reflections, up until now, have tried to read these topics from the standpoint of those who – in public institutions – carry the task and responsibility of shaping the 'participatory imperative' (Sintomer and Allegretti 2009), taking into account the 'ideology in practice' of inclusion (Flem and Keller 2000). How is inclusiveness viewed by them? Is it intended as a capacity of incorporating and valuing diversity in participatory processes? If so, is inclusiveness felt as valuable and a priority for those who organise participatory processes in public institutions? Is it embedded into participatory practices, and if so, in which of them? Does a clear conceptualisation about it exist, and is it shared within the broader institutional environment in which they work in? Or is 'inclusion' mainly a rhetoric reference, or even a 'tyranny' (Cooke and Kothari 2001) that they feel compelled to couple up with participation as an 'inseparable combination' that cannot be split?

1.1. *Relevance of the proposed standpoint and the context of analysis*

This article intends to offer a contribution to start filling the above-mentioned gap, taking advantage of a collaborative action-research among Portuguese cities, which started in August 2020, within the Network of Participatory Local Authorities of Portugal (RAP). The latter is an association devoted to mutual learning between 62 local institutions strongly committed to experimenting with different tools of citizens participation. RAP took shape within the *Portugal Participa* project, co-funded by the Gulbenkian Foundation, in 2014–2016. Its origins are rooted in a longer process, started with previous projects coordinated by the NGO In-Loco and the Centre for Social Studies of Coimbra University[1] for supporting local authorities in acquiring skills for structuring and autonomously managing substantive participatory processes at local level (Falanga and Ferrão 2021). RAP represents the capacity of Portuguese local authorities of going beyond the dependence from the initiatives and the technical capacities of their long-

time consultants, and showing an autonomous resourcefulness in shaping innovative arenas for incentivising civic participation in the territories of member cities. This still-informal organisation was able to provide continuity to the externally-funded initiative of *Portugal Participa* project and to build and acquire entrepreneurship for designing an independent strategy of survival and expansion based on self-funding and shared responsibility (Falanga and Ferrão 2021). Since then, RAP has been actively lobbying for mainstreaming participatory devices in the country, at a local, regional and national levels of the State (Falanga and Lüchmann 2019).

The Council of Ministers Resolution n. 130 – issued in September 2021 for regulating the National Participatory Budgeting (OPP) and the new Participatory Budgeting dedicated to Civil Servants (AP Participa)[2] – represents a visible output of RAP main activity, as it owes much to local participatory experiments and to the tight collaboration between the Agency for Administrative Modernization (AMA), several ministerial offices and a committed group of local authorities. The same decree also reveals the limits of RAP lobbying capacity, provided that it creates a brand-new opportunity of multilevel governance for participatory processes in Portugal, but it does not create any system of incentives, monitoring and support for the deliberative and participatory practices. One could point out the same absence in the decentralisation processes which took place in the last three years in thematic sectors as education, planning, social assistance or health (Teles 2021), despite the latter topic has been the object of a bottom-up conquer, which introduced some obligations for all public authorities in relation to listening citizens while structuring policies of prevention and care.[3] An aspect which is fundamental in the construction of RAP image is the commitment in overcoming any suspect of party-based partisanship; therefore, the competing lists running for the election of the RAP board of directors usually have tended to gather mayors belonging to a diverse range of parties, and it would be difficult today to identify specificities of the participatory processes experienced by RAP members strictly linked to party-based streamlines and directives (Dias 2018). Somehow, the political/ideological orientation of RAP members has played as an almost insignificant variable in the promotion of a growing variety of well-conceived and highly-committed participatory processes.

RAP can be identified as a 'community of practices' (Wenger 1998; Schweitzer, Howard, and Doran 2008), that learn and change through the practices that it enact(s), so that 'as long as people are engaged in practices, community is being created, and the character of the practices defines the nature of the community' (Quick and Feldman 2011, 273). In fact, it is a group with visible membership (Brown and Duguid 1991; Bechky 2003; Yanow 2003) and a strategy which enhances internal cohesion and knowledge management (Dawes, Cresswell, and Pardo 2009) as well as organisational capacity building (Snyder and Briggs 2004). Its efforts focus on creating contexts in which public servants, elected officials and observers' organisations use networking among their participatory practices to experiment with new ways of learning about larger issues, such as governance and sustainability (Dotti 2018; Haupt 2018; Vinke-de Kruijf and Pahl-Wostl 2016; Fünfgeld 2015; Gilardi and Radaelli 2012; Tjandradewi and Marcotullio 2009; Kemp and Weehuizen 2005).

To understand why RAP emerged as a significant actor in the consolidation and diffusion of participatory practices in Portugal, it is worth stressing that, during the past decade, the country has abruptly emerged as one of the most committed countries globally to involve citizens in public decision-making (Dias 2018; Alves and Allegretti 2012), particularly with regards to youth policies and Participatory Budgeting (PB). In this frame, RAP has been an important tool in multiplying dissemination and cross-fertilisation in

the field of participatory practices. The last census of Participatory Budgeting (Dias, Enríquez, and Júlio 2019) revealed that there are almost 1686 active experiences of this type in Portugal (36% of the entire European PB critical mass). Out of them, 124 take place in local administrations (LAs), 2 in regional governments, 3 are central government experiments (Falanga 2018). The rest, mostly take place in schools, due to national legislation issued by the Ministry of Education. In 2017, this legislation made the implementation of PBs mandatory in all public high schools (Dias, Enríquez, and Júlio 2019, 47). Other than this exception, Portugal's legal framework neither provides many obligations nor incentives to participatory processes (Allegretti and de Carvalho 2015). Thus, majority of experiences take place at a 'policy level' and are guided by the autonomous goodwill of different elected governments (Allegretti 2018), which feel motivated to fuel administrative practices which directly involve citizens – and organise stakeholders – in the construction of some public decisions, on different thematic areas (housing, green areas, mobility, culture, civil protection, urban planning, etc.).

Provided the absence of institutional, legal and financial incentives to the multiplication and consolidation of participatory processes, one could legitimately wonder what has been the main driver for political institutions to invest in such mainstreaming of participatory practices in Portugal. Literature has mainly converged (Cabral 2014) in stressing that the main hypothesis which could explain this growth can be referred to the need of contrasting, through the offer of committed participatory processes, the growing mistrust of Portuguese citizens in political institutions (Dias 2018; Viegas, Belchior, and Seiceira 2011; Silva, Cabral, and Saraiva 2008; Cabral, Lobo, and Feijó 2009a, 2009b). The latter is clearly reflected in the declining trends of electoral turnouts in the last decade,[4] which the multiplication of participatory processes was not able to stop, even in municipalities where very large audiences are involved in arenas of civic engagement and several participants who declare that never voted continue to be active and committed (OPTAR 2013). In Portugal, the growth of participatory experiments, which took place amid impactful changes due to the contradictory trajectory of decentralisation of State competences (Mendes 2016),[5] goes hand-in-hand with a generational shift of local authorities (Teles 2021),[6] which brought new perspectives on how to involve citizens more effectively in public affairs, and on how to mainstream a new style of governance more carefully attentive to engage in decision-shaping also those who barely feel represented by aggregate movements and civic organisations. These phenomena coupled with a growing consideration in the public discourse for Art. 2 of the Portuguese Constitution, which states that 'deepening participatory democracy' is among the central duties of the State of the Rules of Law, and not only a mere instrument to improve its public policies. Despite such a constitutional framework, few regulatory measures were in practice undertaken by national authorities to incentivise the creation of a participatory culture and initiative was mainly let to local officers. Moreover, when attempts to 'force' an increase of participatory requirements of local policies have been pursued by central authorities, the same municipalities obtained from the Supreme Court the abrogation of the most binding measures (as it was the case of the Law 8/2009 on Municipal Youth Council).[7]

Despite this situation, in the last decade Portugal has experienced a substantial growth in the range and quality of different participatory devices used at local level, which was partially fuelled by the visibility acquired by the main sound practices on the national and local media as in the academic discourse and among the members of international networks related to good governance and democratic innovation. The creation of RAP network – which promotes interchanges among: political officials, experts, technical

personnel and civil servants in charge of participatory processes – could be seen as an important catalyst for such diversification and maturation of participatory experiences. Among other achievements, RAP has created a Best Practice Award and issued guidelines to improve the quality of participatory processes, such as the 'Charter for Quality of Participatory Budgets in Portugal' (2017), which gradually oriented the construction of a LAs' self-evaluation system to measure and monitor the progress of their processes. But, up until 2020, RAP had never promoted specific initiatives about inclusiveness in participation.

In 2020, the COVID-19 emergency paralysed many institutionalised participatory processes (Dias 2020); so, RAP took initiatives to dynamise the national debate on participation, which included: webinars with similar networks to other countries, and some surveys among civil servants and politicians involved in organising participatory processes, which could provide public authorities with ideas to rethink their practices of social dialogue (Allegretti 2020; Falanga and Allegretti 2021). Strategies for wider inclusiveness in participation have become a central topic, due to different pressures – especially those exerted by social movements in central sectors such as housing (Mendes 2020) – and the awareness of new exclusions that have emerged from two prolonged lockdowns and of those which will arise from the forthcoming economic crisis.

This article uses the results of two surveys among RAP members as its main source of data. The first is dedicated to the inclusive image of local websites which support participation, and the second to strategies for inclusion of underrepresented citizens. The author has contributed to shape the initiatives, whose results have been recently published in Serrano et al. (2021). The two intertwined surveys have been presented by RAP as 'collaborative action-research' (RAP 2020a), as they were imagined as the first step in structuring a dialogue among municipalities. This dialogue will include – during 2021 and the start of 2022 – a series of collective discussions of data with the members of RAP, as well as training sessions, analyses of national and international best practices and further inquiries to expand the debate on how to better articulate participation and inclusion.

The umbrella-title that unifies the two surveys ('The inclusion of underrepresented groups in participatory processes') was inspired by COST Action n. 17135,[8] and aimed to maintain definitions within a wider scope, while clearly focussing on the inside-out perspective of institutionalised participatory experiences. Despite this, the two initiatives are quite different. In fact, the one on the websites was conducted as an 'external observation' by a group of professionals who permanently support RAP in its activities (see section 3). It was added to the other inquiry – proposed and structured by the same group of professionals – when it became clear that as only a restricted group of municipalities was going to answer it, thus undermining its degree of representativeness and generalisability. Consequently, the two interlinked studies cannot be considered a proper phase of an action-research, as defined in literature (McNiff 2013; Kaneklin, Piccardo, and Scaratti 2010; Minardi and Cifiello 2005), but a preliminary step which can offer some evidence, interpretations and 'provocations' to later start a larger collaborative research project with and among RAP members. However, this further collective use makes them meaningful, as the interpretation of their results can pave the way for the future involvement of new municipalities and the consequent growth of collected data in terms of statistical significance and interpretative potential.

The exploratory analysis of the preliminary step of RAP collaborative research wants to offer a contribution for its further phases to be conducted in the next months, having the main goal to read what are the main orientations of respondents when approaching the topic of inclusiveness, and what are the main aspects and pattern emerging from

the main literature related to the field, which appear as 'missing dots' from the work of the analysed cities.

With regards to the article's structure, the next section (part 2) will try to insert the two above-mentioned surveys promoted by RAP into a larger debate on inclusiveness in participation; section 3 will focus on better explaining the origin, scope, methodology and main limits of empirical work; sections 4–5 will refer to the deployment of the surveys' results, offering space for interpretative hypotheses, while section 6 will link the main conclusions of this exploratory phase with further steps of collaborative initiative promoted by RAP, which is due to develop during 2021 and 2022 (see also: Falanga and Allegretti 2021).

2. The dialogue between inclusion and participation: some ambiguities emerging from literature

2.1. *About diversity and fairness*

Literature unanimously considers that valuing a *diversity* of perspectives is – *per se* – a thermometer of a well-functioning democracy, and an enriching factor in grounding any debate on policies and projects, as well as on the effectiveness of different public and market institutions (Hunt, Layton, and Prince 2015). Thus, participatory processes would have, as one of their primary functions, to contribute to guarantee it. As ethical philosophy would underline, valuing the plurality and diversity of voices is often a motivation used to justify *deontological* participatory processes – as pluralism is considered an inherent dimension of full democratic practices – but is not enough to sustain *consequentialist practices*, marked by clear goals (such as transparency, redistribution and social justice, among others) which must be coherently translated into action forging their targeted design and the evaluation of their efficacy and success. Sometimes, even the extents to which consequentialist participatory processes aimed at better inclusion are capable to embed adequate practices to support the active presence of a large diversity of participants, it remains unclear. Such practices often interpret 'inclusiveness' as a measure specifically tailored to involve marginalised and vulnerable groups, rather than as a principle that continuously attracts new and diverse social actors, independently from their socioeconomic or cultural specificities and their degree of social activism.

Positions – both in literature as in polity practices – differ substantially it comes to imagine how diversity can be made present and visible in participatory processes. Differences refer to the use of specific methodologies, rules and settings, which can guarantee that a multiplicity of different participants translates into equality of voices and fulfil the epistemological imperative to make expert knowledge dialogue with 'lay' ones, empowering citizens to influence critical collective decisions 'at a time when the weight of science and technology is stronger than ever' (Sintomer and Ganuza 2011, 215).

Some authors (Smith 2009; Saward 2003) have proposed to implement analytical frameworks which could compare different types of democratic innovations based on the manner and extent to which they manage to deliver complementary 'democratic goods', among which 'inclusiveness' represent a central one, together with others interlinked principles (such as popular control, considered judgement and transparency). As Smith underlines (2009, 15), inclusiveness 'turns our attention to the way in which political equality is realised in at least two aspects of participation: presence and voice'. In this frame, authors such as Giusti (1995) have been describing the story of institutionalised participatory practices as an alternance of asymmetric moments in which the capacity

of citizens to impact policy-making was exercised indirectly (via forms of advocacy by representation) or directly (attracting and empowering them in first person, through maieutic techniques which can make every person feel at ease in contributing to a wide collective public dialogue).

As stated by Gould (1996, 171) finding diverse concrete methods in which differences would be adequately recognised and effectively considered in the public domain – as a starting point for building fairer and more equal processes of civic engagement – remain 'undeveloped and problematic'. In fact, complex and sensitive questions must be addressed, such as 'what is the normative rationale for this recognition? What differences ought to be recognised, and why these rather than others? Which differences would it be pernicious to recognise?'. Paraphrasing the title of a famous Scottish-based research (Lightbody et al. 2017): which voices are harder to reach and which are easier to ignore?

As remarked by all *theorists of difference,* a tight relation exists between the presence of specific groups in a polity process and the direction of decisions. Thus, being present is an undeniable need and the first step in granting a society marked by freedom of expression. The notion of 'powerlessness' by Iris Marion Young (2011) – as happened decades before with Sherry Arnstein (1969) – coincides with the absence of certain social groups in spaces where decisions are made, that affect the conditions of their lives and actions. Obviously, the impact on polities of each different actor can never be given for grant, provided that it is moderated by other factors as rules for decision-taking and the fairness of deliberative spaces (Benhabib and Meyer 1996; Vieten et al. 2014). In general, the concrete risks of uneven participation – a persistent concern across various modes of political and civic participation – raise key-questions about how to 'constitute the demos' (Goodin 2007) of each process, and how democratic innovations 'can buck the trend and institutionalise effective incentives for participation by citizens from across different social groups' (Smith 2009, 24). Evidence from recent processes demonstrates that good faith of organisers to find outreach and organisational formulas to maximise the involvement of certain specific groups is not enough to fight the risk of their under-representation, as it is often the consequence of several diverse and intertwined phenomena (Miscoiu and Gherghina 2021; Harris 2021), included the risk of dominance of some participants on others during mixed deliberation events (Strandberg et al. 2021).

If we imagine that any restriction would undermine fairness – i.e. the equal right and opportunity to participate – one could imagine that inclusiveness would be best served through institutions that are 'open to all' and to the different repertoires of collective action. However, a more careful weighting of difference theorists' arguments (Phillips 1995, 13) may convince one that randomised, stratified or semi-random forms of selection, as well as mixed forms that include one or more of these methods, better serve the goal of including diversity. In fact, self-selection tends to simply replicate existing inequalities, and presence (or absence) of specific interests/conditions can have a significant impact on the nature of decisions, especially for those which concern them.

In light of this, authors as Smith (2009) consider the fairness of selection rules and procedures as a central element for granting diversity of voices, considering that 'deliberative designs' (especially the recent ones, which incorporate adjustments to the selection procedures to better represent minorities) more carefully balance the democratic good of considered judgement and that of inclusiveness. Lijphart (1997) went further, remarking that such designs explicitly face the democracy's unresolved dilemma of unequal participation, derived from the fact that 'in the real world some people and groups have significantly greater ability to use democratic processes for their own ends' (Young 2000, 17)

and this is strongly positively correlated to income, wealth, education (Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley 2004; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978) and other 'positional differences'. Under such a perspective, deliberative methodologies more explicitly struggle against the unfair consequences of 'undeserved inequalities' (Rawls 1999, 86), as they face – through different modalities of affirmative action – those asymmetries which undermine the equality of people's opportunities to expose their vision and needs, and incise in polity changes which can improve their quality of life. Nevertheless, 'deliberative settings' have been severely criticised by others, such as Young (2001), for whom democratic inclusion meant sensitivity to the situated and historical contexts that people are born in, but also to the different forms of expressions which, concretely, struggle in a frame of 'shared responsibility for justice' (2011). In her view, those settings are almost artificially created outside the multiple forms of social fights that include networks and collective intermediary bodies. In a convergent perspective, other authors state that, if participation is a matter of guaranteeing a differentiation not only of interests, but also of narratives and cognitive/epistemic diversities (Ganuza and Francés 2012b), it must be conceptualised as an embodied, multimodal process in which language together with bodily senses (vision, hearing, touch, smell and taste) contribute 'to a phenomenon being recognised (as shared)' (Raudaskoski 2013, 103).

The existence of such different positions on how to concretely guarantee and maximise inclusiveness of (more or less formalised) participatory practices, does not undermine the convergences existing in literature on the fact that the abstract universality and individualism of liberal positions on justice (Barry 1973) tend to under-estimate differences other than those of political opinion, overriding and assigning them to the private sphere (Gould 1996, 171). Consequently, a diffuse support has grown around different forms of positive discrimination intended to favour the marginalised and oppressed who are disadvantaged in society and, thus, 'deserve more than others' (Maboloc 2015, 19). These interventions target different persons through different measures, as attention to inclusiveness cannot limit its concerns to the formal characteristics of the selection mechanisms of a participatory arena. For example, they must consider how – in practice – institutional inducements motivate citizen engagement from across different cultural and social groups (Talukder and Pilet 2021): so, they must encompass the agenda setting, such as choosing the political salience of the topic (and its capacity to offer a clear and fast pay-off to participants) can affect the presence of a different range of participants. The latter differ in their political skills, confidence and political efficacy, i.e. the feeling that 'one could have an impact on collective actions if one chose to do so' (Warren 2001, 71). Therefore, leveraging the inclusion of diverse citizens, does not only require attention to the conception of different devices used for social dialogue, but also to the way in which each of such devices is tied to the institutions, in order to grant impact and implementation to the process' outputs and to the social oversight of citizens on them. Some participatory technologies, such as participatory budgeting, are – by default – clearer than others in this respect (Cabannes and Delgado 2015). Finally, the relation between the arenas of social dialogue and the urban spaces where they take place becomes also important. For example, various techniques of 'outreach' can try to bring participation to where people live, avoiding risks of institutional self – referentiality; because, indeed, is in the city space that we can discover and experience the restlessness of otherness and uncommonness (Sennett 2012).

Authors that engaged in analysing vastly different designs of democratic innovations without pre-defined preferences of architectural models (as Trettel 2020; Sorice 2019 or Fung and Wright 2002), tend to recognise that no simple relationship between them

and the reinforcement of differential rates of engagement across social groups exists. At the same time 'realising inclusiveness is clearly tied to the incentive structure embedded within institutional designs' (Smith 2009, 169), as well as to the combination with a fair offer of other democratic goods – such as transparency or popular control – which can affect the interest and/or the continuity of people participating.

2.2.   *The emergence of four meaningful questions*

In view of the debates outlined so far, *one can imagine a first level of interest in analysing the preliminary results of the two RAP surveys* on underrepresented group in participatory processes, which is related to the need of understanding if inclusion strategies conceived by the responding cities are aimed: (1) to reinforce the diversity *tout court* of social actors whose voice is heard by the local institutions (independently from the conditions of marginalisation of the individuals and groups, which are targeted by each democratic innovation), or – conversely – (2) they are more targeted to reverse some patent or more invisible exclusions which characterise the specific socio-territorial milieu and requires to overcome the limits of the 'majority normativity' (Young 2000) and shape affirmative actions for the sake of those which are oppressed by injustice or 'vulnerated' in different ways (Fontes and Martins 2015) by societal rules, the market and the procedures of representative democracy. Actually, the specific survey on the participation websites of the RAP member cities seem particularly interesting, as far as it cast doubts on their capacity to create a space for a bi-directional dialogue with their citizens, in which structures and visual/textual imaginary they could feel represented, according to an idea of participation in permanent tense relation with the notions of 'redistribution' and 'recognition' at the centre of the dialogue between Fraser and Honneth (2002; see also Hansson et al. 2013).

A second interesting question that arises from the RAP surveys may refer to the main typologies of actors targeted by the inclusionary actions, and to the families of methodologies adopted. As a matter of fact, the methodological part of the question (which has been specifically posed by the surveys) is partially answered analysing the general context of Portugal. In fact, the national Constitution (Art.2) has contributed to shape a horizon of 'participatory democracy', which is traditionally based on processes referred to as 'open door' methods, allowing citizens to step in and join in any phase. Thus, it is neither surprising that, in Portugal, any tradition of 'mini-publics' or other deliberative experiences developed,[9] nor that 'sortition' and 'random selection' are concepts that – up till now – have not been at the centre of meaningful political proposals for involving citizens in public affairs or policy-shaping. The few occasions in which such proposals have emerged, were in mainly academic-led document directed to the policy-making community (Allegretti et al. 2021).[10] Furthermore, when some municipality tried to use random selection, it was blocked by bureaucratic obstacles posed by the Privacy Protection Authority.[11] In any case, the main focus of the majority of participatory processes has been on involving citizens as individuals because 'our country has high levels of social mistrust, and the idea of someone representing me is not that attractive, and possibly explains why PB is so successful and spread'.[12] Nevertheless, the trend towards 'disintermediation' of participatory arenas (Wellman 2001 and Haythornthwaite 2009) is balanced by the permanence of traditions of negotiations among governments and organised stakeholders (especially in urban planning, education and social policies), and by the remarkable growth – especially during the financial crisis – of new social collectives and movements (Falanga et al. 2019).

The framework outlined so far allows to see inclusion and participation as two differ-ent but inter-dependent dimensions of public engagement. The first captures the commit-ment to *increasing input for decisions* through engaging multiple ways of knowing (Quick and Feldman, 284), while the second represents the permanent obligation 'to making con-nections among people, across issues, and over time (…) intentionally creating a commu-nity engaged in an ongoing stream of issues' to feed its capacity 'to implement the decisions and tackle related issues' (274). Understood in this way, inclusion does not merely describe the openness of a process to socioeconomically diverse participants, because it favours connections 'not only among individuals' and groups' points of view but [also] across issues, sectors, and engagement efforts' (275), and advocates its presence as a permanent accompaniment of the participatory process, that must act in all phases. As such, inclusion focusses on the continuous construction of conditions of equity, that needs gradual improvements and cyclical revisions.

Interrelating the two components of public engagement mentioned above reduces the risk of further dichotomising the separation between the 'process designer' and 'process participants', or 'government' versus 'public' (Innes and Booher 2004; Roberts 2004). It also emphasises the need to constantly alter the process and sustain its temporal openness to guarantee its capacity to incrementally mature and better respond to the challenges of continuous transformation, of both participants and the hosting environment. This aspect of permanent and incremental reshaping of participatory processes has been a central issue in the past years in the debate among the members of RAP-Portugal, as annual reports of joint-activities underline.[13] From this perspective, *the RAP surveys raise a third pivotal question*, which refers to the presence, or absence, of a 'co-design' approach to the con-struction of inclusion strategies, as a contribution to their effectiveness, efficiency and resilience, through a permanent/incremental transformation of the participatory practices themselves.

An important element of 'pertinence' – which deserves to be stressed about the con-juncture that RAP chose to propose for its surveys – refers to the significant increase in the centrality that technology has had in participation, since the explosion of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, when ICTs became – in several cases – the only usable channel for many pre-existing arenas of social dialogue. Undoubtedly, this added a new layer of complexity to the debate on inclusion. In fact, it crosses both the controversies on the risks and transformations of the digital divide (Chia-Hui et al. 2020; Hargittai and Walejko 2008; Armenta et al. 2012; Warschauer 2002, 2003; Norris 2001), but also significant debates on the capacity of ICTs to promote a diversification of target audiences and institutional arrangements (Rahim 2018; Mellon et al. 2017; Albrecht 2006; Avgerou 2002), or – in contrast – to generate further distanciation and disembeddedness of social relationships (Peixoto and Steinberg 2020), with their spatial, emotional and democratic consequences (Giddens 1990) and new forms of exclusion.

Emerging research on the effects of technology on citizen engagement tends to highlight risks that amplify 'existing participatory biases favouring, for example, the participation of those who are male, have higher income, or educational attainment' (Peixoto and Sifry 2017). So, careful institutional and technological design will become more and more essential if inclusiveness is a value to be pursued. The need to improve the inclusive technological design of participation systems to leverage new citizen engagement practices and more equity in its use possibly needs a substan-tial change of pace in how many public institutions look to them. In fact, they require investments (which can increase inequalities among different places and adminis-trations) and multiple rounds of user-research and user-testing more than the present

approach uses assumptions about what users' needs and habits probably are (Peixoto and Steinberg 2000, 67).

In such framework, a new reflection becomes necessary, on how web portals and web platforms, which support institutional processes of participation – which often becomes their main showcase – are exposing and treating diversity related to their potential participants (Helberger 2012, 68; Lemos 2004; Cogburn 2004; Starobinas 2004). Such an aspect is becoming increasingly important, but still has not been studied much, and remains untreated in political debates among participation promoters. Thus, the RAP survey on the inclusiveness approach emerging – or not – from the municipal portals dedicated to participation, offers a unique opportunity to observe the behaviour of cities strongly committed with organising formalised arenas for citizens' participation. In such a perspective, *it raises a fourth question* that could be answered through the RAP surveys: are these websites somehow 'mirroring' their local communities and trying to favour the consolidation of their diversity, offering languages and tools devoted to the more underrepresented in the participatory processes?

Such a question implies a reflection on how bi-directional dialogue with their citizens is promoted by websites specifically linked to participatory processes, and the space they offer for the 'self-recognition' of some citizens in their target-audience.

Reflecting on this function of 'mirroring' of official portals/websites (in relation to the community, as well as to the fairness of the processes of social dialogue which they support) has barely been studied and assessed by academic literature, and that is why the RAP provocation on that point is a courageous and innovative one.

Somehow, it looks inspired to a specific field of analysis which recently received growing attention in countries like the USA, especially in grey literature linked to Equity Audits. The latter are tools for corporate assessment that – through framing-questions aimed to define and trace diversity, equity, and inclusion – analyse websites, governance structures and main strategic documents of companies or educational institutions under the perspective of their capacity of mirroring the complexity of differences that mark their potential communities of members/users/clients. Such analysis is usually proposed in relation to the demographics of their territories and to the possibility of making them feel comfortable, respected, culturally relevant and possibly empowered within the targeted organisation.[14] Occasionally, academic studies have recently used similar methodologies in their evaluation of school services (Dodman et al. 2018), based on the adaptations provided by Feinberg and Willer (2015) and Skrla et al. (2004, 134) for decision-makers 'to use in their equity-focused work'. But, in general, such literature has not received attention in Europe. So, RAP's attempt at leveraging a debate on the issue with its member cities offers new, meaningful insights by trying to complexify the debate on how local institutions are facing the issue of 'inclusiveness in participation'.

3.   The collection of data and its limits

As mentioned in section 1, the present article was made possible by the preliminary results of two surveys through which the director board and the executive secretariat of the Portuguese Network of Participatory Local Authorities (RAP) intend to leverage further collaborative action-research on the inclusion of underrepresented groups in participatory processes. The exploratory research is part of RAP commitment to remain focused on citizen participation in decision-making despite the tendency of COVID-19 emergency to marginalise its centrality (Falanga and Allegretti 2021; Dias 2020).

The research, carried on in July/September 2020, was imagined as the basis for further debates and training activities, and was shaped by the social enterprise Oficina (Executive Secretariat of RAP) and the Centre for Social Studies (CES) of Coimbra University, with intense negotiations on languages and the need to protect the anonymity of respondents, remarking that the focus is on 'the joint production of knowledge (…) to improve our collective approaches', rather than 'assessing the performance of each municipality' (RAP 2020b).[15]

The main tool was a guiding questionnaire given to member-cities, whose central research was formulated as 'which strategies and tools do members of the Network develop to increase the involvement of underrepresented people and groups in participatory processes?' The decision to start the inquiry from the perspective of the cities, instead of that of the citizens, had two main reasons:

(a) One linked to the statutory role of RAP of promoting the awareness of local authorities (and their governing and technical teams) about their capacities and limits, for promoting coherent and adequate opportunities of training and mutual exchanges;

(b) A second referred to the optimisation of existing resources (as far as a large inquiry would have higher costs, and RAP – as an informal entity – has still difficulties in fund-raising of its activities, relaying a lot on investments of single member cities).

It must be stressed that – in the conception of the research – a future survey among citizens has been explicitly mentioned as a possible second-step to enrich the debate on the topic of underrepresentation in participatory processes with different perspectives and ideas.[16]

The questionnaire to the RAP member cities was broken into four groups of sub-questions,[17] related – in each territory – to: (1) the list of specific profiles considered as 'under-represented subjects'; (2) the description of diverse actions undertaken to include them (and the most successful among them); (3) the main perceived changes in terms of participants profiles, and (4) the existence of effective pro-inclusion dynamics in other areas of institutional intervention. Out of the 20 questions, 8 included sub-questions and 'free text' to incorporate new issues for future internal debate among RAP members to provide detailed descriptions of exemplifying concrete actions carried out by each LA.

The design purposely chose not to inquire civil servants or politician individually, but to ask 'member cities' to delegate someone to respond, so to increase the collective commitment of these abstract entities. The risks of such choice were well know, but carefully calculated, as the survey was intended to 'provoke' a future debate and to responsibilise someone in each member city. From the beginning, it was considered that scarce answers (although with a reduced statistical representativity) could be anyway useful to generate a debate in the imagined spaces of self-learning and training for mutual support which RAP constantly shapes. People who formally filled the questionnaire qualify them as key-informants, as they were all civil servants (63,6% women), with an average age between 35–54,[18] prevalently dedicated to participation (with other administrative tasks, too),[19] 72.7% have dealt with participation for less than 5 years.[20] As they were involved not as individuals, but as speakers for their administrations, 46.7% requested the support of other colleagues; 20% received support from hierarchical superiors on some questions, and 13.3% answered alone.[21]

Unfortunately, only 11 cities out of 62 responded to the survey,[22] despite the high commitment of RAP to stimulate its members to participate. The main justifications exposed by no-responding members, during the first online seminar held to comment on the preliminary results, was mainly related to the difficult period in which the questionnaire was distributed to overburdened teams, its width and complexity, and a certain difficulty in dividing and coordinating internal responsibilities among different officers in charge of participatory processes in each city.

Given the result of the first survey, another research streamline was added in mid-September 2020, using a different methodology (observation by experts), aiming to offer to member cities the opportunity of an external regard on their portals' performance. This new thread was shaped around the recognition that online platforms and websites – as in many others activities during the pandemic – became central components of participatory processes, and, from a future perspective, they deserve more attention in the way in which their content and functionalities are structured and presented to target audiences. Here, 20 different variables were reported in an observation grid (with open spaces for qualitative notes) aiming to understand how – from a functional and textual/visual standpoint – the websites supporting participatory processes are conceived under a pro-inclusion perspective, and to what extent do they contribute to shape an image which pays attention to the perceptions of its users. The variables refer to four macro-areas: (1) existence of Internet pages with information about the process; (2) images used on the websites; (3) content and languages of the website; (4) accessibility according to different potential users and users with poor internet connections. Although 72.4% of LA also have Facebook accompanying their participatory processes (Nitzsche, Pistoia, and Elsäßer 2012), the latter have not been analysed, due to their stiff pre-moulded structures that allow few variations. This observation of the webpages dedicated to RAP members for their participatory processes (under the perspective of their attention to include marginalised/vulnerable potential users) was conducted by an independent research team, to minimise the risk of delayed answers and to maximise the homogeneity of the analysis. The analysis included more judgemental and subjective components which served to compose some 'scenarios' or 'profiles' (as sort of simplified behavioural ideal-types) that could facilitate a thorough discussion among RAP members in future events.

The limits of both research are set in their presentation: in fact, (1) they focus only on 'institutionalised practices'; (2) they limit their scope to RAP members[23]; (3) a solution-oriented perspective gives more relevance to solutions than to ontological problems; (4) emphasis on identifying common behaviours, challenges and capacity to respond to problems reduce the comparability of answers, especially of the 8 'open text questions' whose clustering exercise on the part of the research-team has strong connotations of subjectivity; (5) the anonymisation of the dataset – specific approach of this 'community of practice' – reduced the possibility of cross-analyses, and of 'zooming' on some outputs. Furthermore, some important terms were placed aside on purpose by the research-team (such as multi-layered exclusion, homelessness, etc.) to see if they could emerge spontaneously through the answers.

It must be said that – after the testing phase of the websites' analysis – one target-city started to improve the inclusiveness of its features, observing that 'we learnt from this external regard, and many things we never imagined proved easy to modify, at no cost and within a short time'.[24]

To maintain anonymity, without missing the capacity of analysing some cross-references of the two surveys, RAP members were clustered into categories (A,B and C)

referred to as the 'class of complexity of participatory activity'[25]: 45% of respondents belong to class A (27.7% of the total number of cities comprised in that class), 45.5% to class B (16.6% of the class), while only 1% belongs to class C. Furthermore, 55.5% of them did not entirely suspend they participatory processes during COVID pandemic [26] and 63.3% count on a structured specific department (or at least a uni-personal specific service, in smallest territories) in charge of organising and support participatory processes. Responding LAs represent 58.8% of the total number of RAP members (13/62) which – up to now – invested in a support office for participation. In terms of population, 27.27% of the answering LAs belong to small territories (with less than 30,000 inhabitants), 45.46% to middle-size territories and 27.27% to large territories[27] (with over 90,000 inhabitants). It is worth underling that 90.9% of the city that responded to the survey on inclusionary strategies have an ongoing Participatory Budgeting process: so, they are highly representative of those 124 practices of local level, which characterise Portugal (Dias, Enríquez, and Júlio 2019).

From what said above, it is clear that this exploratory research could not count on a sample of territories with statistical representativity of the different levels of commitment with citizens participation in Portugal. Nevertheless, answers maintain a high degree of significance, as they represent a 'high rank' of LAs that more invest on participation in Portugal. And their high commitment could leverage an important debate on emerging answers, to fuel the next stages of the intended collaborative-research, which had its start in those surveys. The next section will examine them through an 'inductive' approach, in search of common patterns which can enlighten the next steps of the community of practices' collaborative work. A series of interpretative hypothesis will be presented, as a first step for supporting next debates among RAP members.

4.   The main data collected

4.1.   *Selection of data on the inclusive nature of the webpages dedicated to participatory process*

The analysis of the potentially inclusive nature of Internet portals and webpages dedicated to participatory processes, conducted on the overall amount of 62 RAP members, revealed 58 positive occurrences. Only 25.4% are subpages of the main LAs' portals: all the others are autonomous spaces, specifically dedicated to one or more participatory processes, and eventually – as in Cascais's or Valongo's case – hosting an entire 'participatory multi-channel system' (as defined in Spada and Allegretti 2020).

The study, stating that 'the images used to communicate web content are decisive in the message issued and in the way it is perceived by recipients' (RAP 2020a) excluded 1.5% of occurrences, without images or logotypes. Then, four types of *imaginaries* transmitted by the pages in relation to the local community were clustered in order to spark further debates among RAP member easier and more intuitive: (1) the first typology (defined as *generalist* – 53.7% of the occurrences) uses only text and, eventually, the logo of the process; (2) the second, defined as *dedicated* (17.9% of cases), makes use of content taken from image banks/databases; the third (3), called *careful* (9% of cases) use images of local citizens, without ensuring the diversity of profiles; and (4), finally, 17.9% of websites fall into the category named as *integrationist*. The latter uses images of people from their community (often the previous years' winners of public funding decided through participatory processes), ensuring diversity of profiles – in term of ethnic appearance, gender and/or age. Similarly, the analysis done on the language used

in the textual content, revealed only 3 webpages (5.2%) with gender-sensitive language, while 55 (94.8%) tend to use simplified language making it friendly and accessible to people with low levels of literacy.

If most analysed websites tend to show accurate planning of their user-friendly performance,[28] the same cannot be said when it comes to assessing specific functionalities which could make certain types of users' lives easier. The table below shows that websites of participatory processes barely seem conceived to facilitate access to people with visual or hearing impairments, and only 82.8% provide a variety of contact that can guarantee diverse direct forms of biunivocal communication between citizens and administrative services.

Table 1 refers to functionalities, specifically related to the use of websites to support the different phases of a participatory process. 86.2% of the webpages facilitate various activities such as: registering, voting, sending proposals or commenting online[29]; conversely, only 27.6% have additional downloads which provide more information.[30]

Isolating the 10 LAs which were part of both analyses referred to,[31] no significant deviation characterises their behaviour. There are just few exceptions, partially emerging from the last three columns of Table 1.

4.2. *The inquiry on underrepresentation in participatory processes*

Due to the low level of answers collected by this survey (although they were partially compensated by the fact that respondents constitute the highest percentile of committed cities with the most important and innovative participatory processes in Portugal), in the following pages only few tables that recompile the quantitative data collected are exposed. In fact, they can be read in the official publication issued by RAP (Serrano et al. 2021), while a qualitative-oriented reading could help to formulate some exploratory interpretative hypotheses, being useful in the next phases of the collaborative research among RAP members. When quantitative results are exposed, this is because they photograph interesting concentrations or dispersions of answers, offering some useful interpretative insights.

4.2.1. *Who are the underrepresented?*

The first set of qualitative data tried to capture the perception of respondents about the global presence in their local participatory processes of those groups who literature traditionally indicates as at risk of underrepresentation (Gherghina, Mokre, and Miscoiu 2020; Bruell, Mokre, and Siim 2012; Wheatley 2003; Bauböck 2001; Bellamy 2000). As for the perceptions about the existence of specific forms of territory-based underrepresentation, the majority of respondents identified the most significant with places poorly connected to inhabited centres; 1/3 referred to stigmatised neighbourhoods and/or deprived areas; around 10% (all in cities of populational, Class 3) to gated condos and/or areas with high purchasing capacity; few to rural or mountain areas, and other situations such as homeless people who stay overnight in urban areas or single derelict buildings that host families in extreme poverty.[32]

When requested to list 3 types of individual/groups traditionally at risk of underrepresentation, and for which is easier or most difficult to propose, finance and implement actions aimed to increase their inclusion in participatory processes, the answers were the following (Table 2):

Table 1. Existence of functionalities – in the webpages of participatory processes – which can favour a friendly access to some minorities/traditionally under-represented groups.

Target group that could mainly benefit of each functionality	Description of the functionality's goal	Existence of the functionality in the local authorities' webpages (N = 58)			Existence of the functionality in the webpages of the subgroup that also answered to the questionnaire on inclusion strategies (N = 10)		
		YES	NOT	Not applicable	YES	NOT	Not applicable
Citizens with visual impairments	Possibility to enlarge the screen	1.7%	98.3%	-	-	100%	-
	Possibility to enlarge the font's size	-	100%	-	-	100%	-
	Audio option for written contents	-	100%	-	-	100%	-
Citizens with audio impairment	The videos have subtitles (just in Portuguese)	6.9%	12.1%	81% (there are no videos)	20%	30%	50% (there are no videos)
	Audio contents are transcribed	-	10.3%	89.7% (there are no audio contents)	-	30%	70% (there are no audio contents)
	Existence of a sign-language option for contents	-	100%	-	-	100%	-
Foreigners with no fluent understanding of Portuguese	The pages are translated into (at least) another language beyond Portuguese	1.7%	98.3%	-	-	100%	-
	The pages have the option of an automatic translator	5.2%	94.8%	-	10%	90%	-

4.2.2. *Between discourse and action*

A second cluster of questions focussed on the relation between the discursive importance of inclusion of underrepresented groups and the reflexive action to favour it. It shows some disconnections and mismatching between answers, resulting into an interesting topic for the future collective reflection among RAP members involved in the collaborative research. Negotiating the formulation of such questions was the most difficult part of the questionnaire conception, as they include 'judgemental' reflections (Chew-Graham, May, and Perry 2002).[33]

When questioned about whether the importance of the topic inclusion of underrepresented groups in participatory processes is debated within each territory, almost 3/4 of respondents answered 'yes', only 1 said 'no' and around 1/5 selected 'I don't know/I can't answer'. The places where this debate takes place – according to respondents – are mainly: (1) the 'social intervention' department in general; (2) main 'flagship' participatory processes promoted by the LAs (as Participatory Budgeting); (3) specific actor-based institutions (such as Youth Councils, Councils devoted to People with special

Table 2. Social groups at risk of underrepresentation which are considered easier or most difficult to reach through specific inclusion strategies (Q10; Q11).

Groups at risk of underrepresentation	Types of people underrepresented whose proposing, funding and implementing inclusive actions are considered as easier to obtain (Q10) (N = 33)*	Types of people underrepresented whose proposing, funding and implementing inclusive actions are considered as most difficult to obtain (Q11) (N = 33)*
Children (6-13 years)	7	1
Teenagers (14-17 years)	4	-
Young people (18-30 years)	1	-
Senior citizens (65 years and over)	6	1
Women (in different age groups)	3	-
People with reduced mobility	3	-
People with visual impairments	2	1
People with hearing impairment/muteness	1	1
People with mental diseases/psychiatric problems	-	7
Ex-offenders/ released from prisons	-	7
People with low levels of literacy	1	-
People from isolated rural areas	2	-
Extra-EU foreigners (in different age groups)	1	4
EU-nationals from other countries (in different age groups)	-	3
Members of ethnic minorities (including nomads/Roma)	2	4
People with high purchasing power (in different age groups)	-	1
LGBTQI + persons	-	3
People with speech impediments	-	-
People with spina bifida	-	-
Homeless/street dwellers	-	-
People with general physical impairment	-	-
People with high purchase power	-	-

Needs, Fora for Immigrants, Roma People Council); (4) more rarely, specific Research Projects related to participatory practices, or inquiries/polls linked to special events (such as the European Local Democracy Week). One LA specified that the 'co-design'

of rules, done with children, for a participatory process dedicated to them, was an important opportunity to debate about inclusionary strategies.

It is significant that, when asking to what extent three different statements[34] appear to be important to justify the implementation of actions to include underrepresented groups in participatory processes, almost 50% (or more) of respondent chose the option 'I do not know/I can't answer'.

Finally, respondents were requested to state if they consider that all departments/services are equally committed to implementing actions to increase the presence of underrepresented groups in public policies; almost 3/4 of respondents answered 'No'.[35] Addictions specified that departments are usually more sensitive in areas related to education, culture and those that, in urban planning, deal with deprived areas and informal settlements.[36] Such conclusions match with a study done by Falanga in 2013 on different participatory processes in the municipality of Lisbon.

4.2.3.   *Strategies and specific measures for inclusion*

The last cluster of questions, focussed on the strategies which were implemented in each municipality to involve individuals and groups at risk of underrepresentation, had – in general – a more qualitative nature and a wide diversity of answers related to different methodologies and typologies of participatory devices.

Asked to what extent, in the last years, have actions been implemented to promote a greater presence/inclusion of underrepresented people in participatory processes, almost 1/2 of respondents answered that several measures were adopted; nearly 1/4% that a large number of measures were adopted, and an equal number that 'some scattered measures were adopted'. Nobody reported cases with no measures or few measures.

When respondents were asked to depict which level of commitment – in the last years of participatory processes in each LA – their municipality had in relation to the promotion of inclusiveness (Q7), only less than half considered representative the answer 'The local authority invested in a thorough policy to increase the diversity of participants in participatory processes they considered the following statements true', and only 4 out of 11 judged very true that 'the local authority made frequent assessments of the presence and absence of underrepresented groups in participatory processes'. Instead, the majority of answers (6 out of 11) converged on the sentence 'the theme of social inclusion in the local authority seems to be a main concern of the policies of social assistance, but not of the participatory processes'. Instead, even more respondent (8 out of 11) declared that they identify with the sentences 'the policies of social assistance in the municipality always include a participatory strand of dialogue with beneficiaries' and 'the policies dedicated to vulnerable or marginalised territories always include a participatory strand of dialogue with beneficiaries'.

The answers received in the free-text boxes to the question 'Why the usually underrepresented groups listed in Table 2 are easier to reach?', can be reorganised into 6 clusters (Table 3):

The range of reasons that justify why some underrepresented groups are considered 'more difficult' to reach than others can be clustered as in Figure 1:

When questioned about what the main reasons that – in recent years – prevented the implementation of measures to include individual and groups that end up being underrepresented in the participatory processes of each LAs,[37] the respondents mainly pointed out: the limits of technical teams (almost 1/5); the lack of knowledge of appropriate methodologies (almost 1/5) or bureaucratic difficulties and high costs of the measures. For

almost 1/5 of them, this has not been a focus or an issue in the processes; and for 1 respondent the motivation was a lack of response by target-audiences. Three of the motivations proposed where not chosen by any respondents: (a) difficulties in reaching a political consensus; (b) opposition by other social/territorial groups; (c) and negative press-campaigns.

The existence of specific communication strategies and tools used in the context of participatory processes for mobilising underrepresented groups[38] was referred by almost 3/4 of respondents, pointing out a diverse range of solutions. Only 1/4 declared that communication shows no focus at all on underrepresented groups. The majority of answers (almost 1/3) underline the existence of a wide range of complementary means (usually mixing different forms of publicity in the public spaces, with announcements in mass media and social networks, and the involvement of key-resource persons in the communities who can spread information through their contacts and territories); 1/4 of the answers stress the use of a suitable/adaptable language with those target groups, and few quote the use of images that mirror and illustrate the diversity of people and social groups in their local territories. These images are substantially in line with the independent analysis which was conducted on the websites.[39] Conversely, the attention declared here on the adequate use of languages, when communicating with underrepresented target groups, reveals some mismatches in relation to the observation, that demonstrate – at least for the websites – a general lack of attention to provide functionalities that can facilitate the communication and interaction with different categories traditionally at risk of underrepresentation (such as citizens affected by different types of physical impairments).

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the detailed answers to the questionnaires describe a series of face-to-face practices which are complementary to web-based ones. Clustering them into groups that mainly refer to: (1) the production of leaflets, posters and other informative materials in different foreign languages and with images of multicultural environments; (2) informational and explanation sessions organised for some

Table 3. 'Why the usually under-represented groups listed in Table 2 are easier to reach?' (Main Clusters deduced from Q10.4.).

(1) Some groups tend to gather in institutions or spaces which are easily accessible (schools, day centres for seniors or specific settlements where they reside);

(2) "advocacy organisations" or "service-providing institutions" (as IPSS or volunteering associations) facilitate the contact with them, acting as multipliers for disseminating information, or as catalysts in convincing them to play an active role in the participatory processes;

(3) communication with these groups requires specific language skills and translation;

(4) the LA had already or have ongoing projects involving these people (i.e., in the domains of culture, social assistance or urban rehabilitation) and they can take advantage of the parallel pre-existing dialogue to address their presence/commitment also in/to participatory processes;

(5) from past experience of social dialogue with these groups, specific "subgroups" emerged and acquired protagonism;

(6) the parallel existence of specific institutions (hybrids between participatory institutions and "semi-representative entities of the governance system*" – as Youth or Senior Councils, Local Councils for Social Action, or the so-called Social Networks**) can "bridge" the groups which they target to different participatory processes not specifically conceived for them.

* = Interview to a civil servant (OPTAR, 2013).
** = "Social Network" (Rede Social) is a program created by Resolution of the Council of Ministers 197/1997 (regulated by Dec-Law 115/2206) to articulate the efforts made between active social agents in each municipality, to tackle poverty and social exclusion and promote social development (Guerra & Henriques, 2001). Although the Program formally ended in 2012 (Godinho & Henriques, 2013) in many cities the networks survived, using diversified sources of funding (see: https://www.redesocialcascais.net).
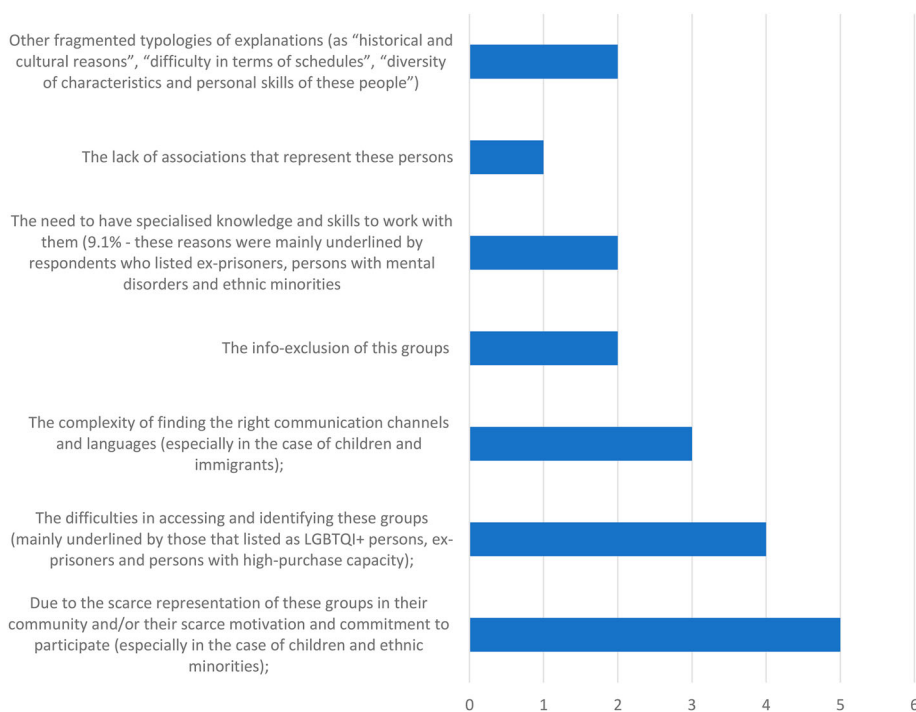
Figure 1.   'Why the usually under-represented groups listed in Table 2 are more difficult to reach?' – Interpretation and clustering of main answers ($N = 19$).

underrepresented categories in collective structures where they use to gather (such as schools, universities and youth associations, day-care centres, clinics for persons with mental diseases, meetings in the squares for favouring the dialogue with homeless people, or 'localised sessions' in deprived areas of the municipal territory); (3) the creation of ballot-boxes for voting in different places (including, shopping centres and elderly associations, libraries and municipal buildings, so to attract the attention of citizens beyond the ICT-based informational spaces); and (4) travelling information-cars or coaches, neighbourhood walks and other forms of 'outreach', that can increase the 'proximity' to target-citizens, and the 'decentralisation' of the communication strategies related to participatory processes.

When requested to list up the names of three participatory processes that have proved most effective in including people/groups traditionally underrepresented (Q9), 5 respondents listed their Participatory Budgeting and 6 their Youth Participatory Budget[40]; 3 quoted other processes of youth involvement (such as, the Child-Friendly City Action Plan; Student Forum and Mini-Presidents Project) or senior-citizens involvement (Clube Idade +); 3 listed thematic local plans, with a social approach (Social diagnostics; Local Plan for the integration of Roma Communities; Municipal Plan for the Integration of Immigrants; Plan for Equality; Social and Health Development Plan) or with a physical planning perspective (urban rehabilitation plans).

Due to this large diversity of the participatory processes which are taking place in the municipalities involved (Q5), a precise mapping of 'reference strategies, with proven success, in involving underrepresented groups listed in Table 2 in participatory processes' is not an easy task. Main clusters summarising the most significant recurrences include:

(1) the direct involvement of schools (including private ones), daycentres for the elderly and private institutions of social solidarity in the mobilisation phases of participatory processes (eventually through the creation of devoted streamlines dedicated to specific social groups, such as Youth or School participatory Budgeting);

(2) the creation of 'spaces of convergence' for different social organisations which work with an advocacy of rights of specific social groups, offering them a place (named as 'Casa Comunitaria/Community Home', or 'Home of Grassroots Organisations' or similar names) to establish their seats and organise their meetings (Especially in deprived neighbourhoods or areas with limited communication with main settlements);

(3) the consolidation of 'outreach initiatives that bring the participatory processes closer to the territories where people live and gather'[41] (with special meetings in single associations, elderly centres, universities, institutions for people with mental disorders etc.);

(4) some specific fora or plans (such as Municipal Youth Plans, Plans for Full Accessibility of the Municipality, Local Health Promotion Strategies or Plans for the Integration of Immigrants and/or Roma Communities) are often the opportunity to explain other participatory processes, and to involve their specific target audience in other wider spaces of civic engagement;

(5) in some cases, questionnaires targeting specific problems of some groups and individuals at risk of underrepresentation, are seen as an effective 'first step' for recontacting them in view of their involvement in more participatory settings;

(6) more rarely, ad hoc symbolic recurrences as the European Local Democracy Week, the Students' Day or similar, are used for 'organising events that somehow work as space for talent-scouting and dialoguing with specific social groups which are often absent from our participatory processes'.[42]

It is worth to note that Participatory Budgeting is – *per se* – listed also among the 'strategies' for inclusiveness of participatory processes, as 'it results in more trust than other processes, because of it grants concrete and visible effects. And this attracts people that usually mistrust institutional action – people who could, by the way, be listed among the underrepresented (…)'.[43] Namely, one answer quotes (by describing a concrete case happened in its municipality) the importance of the administration paying attention to the implementation of proposals that can benefit underrepresented vulnerable groups, which emerged in participatory processes but eventually did not went through and did not managed to receive funding through them. This could 'solidly reinforce the self-confidence of some groups at risk of underrepresentation and make them feel recognised and cared for'.[44]

In relation to this complexity, also clustering the large variety specific actions that – within the inclusionary strategies – were experimented with to specifically include the groups mentioned in Q5 of Table 2 represents a difficult task. However, it is worth to underline some main recurrent typologies, as for example:

(1) Training actions and targeted information sessions;

(2) improvement of the multichannel dynamics of participation (for example, adding online interaction to mainly off-line processes; or adding face-to-face sessions in specific places, for once-mainly-online processes);

(3) adding decentralised sessions in diverse locations and at different hours of the day;

(4) reducing the barriers to the participation of some groups through modifying process' rules (i.e.: decreasing the minimum age for voters in the participatory initiatives; opening more spaces to no-residents; adding languages, etc.);

(5) structuring collaborations with the social assistance department for the 'cross-selling' of participatory processes while offering psychosocial support to specific groups (i.e. ex-prisoners; Roma communities);

(6) offering training and technical support to all citizens who require it ('on-demand' offer of public support: i.e. babysitting sessions for families interested in public meetings; free-of-charge transportation and/or accompanying persons to support individuals with special needs; cultural mediators/translators for supporting foreigners, etc.);

(7) combining participatory processes with playful-pedagogical activities (such as theatre, role-plays and music sessions) to make them more attractive to diverse audiences;

(8) economic-support measures, that can make the groups at risk of underrepresentation feel that 'someone cares about them';

(9) investments in more attentive conditions of participatory settings (chairs in the first-row reserved for people with special needs; voting ballots written in braille, etc.).

Requested to specify if the strategies and specific actions listed above managed to increase the involvement of the target groups listed by each city in Table 2 (Q5), 10 out of 11 respondents answered 'yes'.

To the question 'in which phases of the participatory processes the actions aimed to inclusion tend to concentrate', the majority[45] responded 'Mobilisation of ideas' (around 1/5) and 'Voting/ranking of projects and ideas' (1/5), while other phases were reported as less important (few quoted: 'Preliminary information phase'; 'Selection of actions that can favour inclusion'; 'Analysis of satisfaction of participants and process performance'; and what is usually conceive as the real 'deliberative phase', i.e. the phase of 'Ideas detailing and elaboration'). Less attention was paid to the phases of 'Construction of indicators to assess the process' (1 respondent) and 'Monitoring of process' results and implementation' (2 respondents).

Finally, when asked if the municipality ever used a 'random selection' methodology, as a measure to ensure greater social representation, the respondents gave convergent answers (1/2 never; 1/5 'it was discussed but no implemented'; only 1 out of 11 said 'having used this method', without explaining the context).[46]

5. Emerging common patterns: some hypotheses

Observations collected in the two surveys suggest that, in the last decade, the growth of Portuguese participatory processes was neither accompanied by a refined work for diversifying their participants, nor by the will to flee from what was already experienced (by others). In this frame, the topic of inclusion of underrepresented actors seems more a goal of the overall policies of administrative authorities (so, posing an issue to the improvement of the function of representative democracy) than a specific question – and an imagined mission – of participatory processes. Such a vision seems barely 'problematised' by Portuguese LAs, as proved by the results of the observation conducted on websites. Despite the respondents represent public authorities highly committed with participatory processes, very reduced appears the attention to invest in the monitoring and evaluation of participatory processes, and – even more

– in codesign strategies to include the under-represented citizens who they declare they would like to involve more.

Actually, it must be stressed that the starting phase of the action-research promoted by RAP among (and on) its members, defined – although loosely – the concept of 'under-representation', but the definition of 'participatory process' was left to their autonomous imagination. This gave rise to two major families of interpretations (section 4): some considered all the collective dynamics of social dialogue, both those focussing on specific actors (such as plans for social integration) and the more generalist participatory processes that promote scenario-visioning for a territory, as well as a shared rethinking of different policies and projects. The latter, in contrast, was the main centre of reflection for those respondents who deal with participation as a specific policy and look to actor-based processes (focussed on specific social groups) just as pre-conditions, or preliminary actions, to build a more equal and fair society that could mirror itself in the general audience of large-spectrum participatory processes. Indeed, it is not surprising that this second vision emerges more clearly from those LAs that have a wider complexity of participatory processes (Class A), and a special office or department in charge of participation.

As the questionnaire had no details to depict the quality, articulation and methodological characteristics of each process quoted – some doubt remains about: (1) which processes are sectoral policies with a strand of social dialogue with beneficiaries; (2) which are conceived from the origin as participatory devices used to target specific groups, (3) which are addressed to the whole population of a territory, or a sub-area, and incorporate affirmative actions (Sigal 2015) to revert some absences and enrich the diversity of participants and interests represented. Paraphrasing ethical philosophy, we could say that not only institutionalised participatory practices, in Portugal, tend to coagulate around the macro-categories of: (1) *deontological*; and (2) *consequentialist* ones (Allegretti 2018), but also practices aimed at inclusion (in connection with devices of social dialogue) tend to do the same.

If deontological actions of inclusion are tautologically justified by a generic idea of inclusion of usually underrepresented people as something 'good *per se*', consequentialist actions to promote inclusion within participatory processes focus on translating their strong objectives into action (using specific tools which guarantee consequentiality and coherence between motivations, aims and targeted results, and evaluating them accordingly). But they remain few.

5.1. *Three main asymmetries*

Data shows that 'social inclusion' is declared as an important mission of public LAs, and – as such – is the object of several actions and policies. Combining the RAP researches, one cannot penetrate in any reliable analysis of the quality of Portuguese participatory processes, and their inclusiveness; but interesting dynamics suggest 'asymmetries' in the relation between the two complementary domains of participation and inclusion:

(1) **Asymmetries between the discursive centrality of the topic of underrepresentation, and the investments in reflexive behaviour**. Although the problem of underrepresentation is viewed as meaningful, finding solutions does not belong to the core strategic mission of participatory processes and their organisers. In several cities, it is doubtful if 'inclusion' is a shared concern beyond the 'social assistance department' and a real topic of debates between elected officials and technical personnel. The many 'I don't know' answers, when asking to rate

some definitions to justify inclusion strategies, reveal an absence of reflection, or – at least – its weakness. Therefore, the initiatives presented appear to lack of a level of 'strategic thinking' (Sanders 1998) to conquer a real 'centrality' in the reorganisation of governance and planned actions.

(2) **Asymmetries between the consideration given to different mechanisms that originate the underrepresentation.** Is inclusion imagined for tackling the dynamics of socioeconomic exclusion, or is it a form of self-censorship that can hinder the diversity of participatory processes? Persons 'with high purchase capacity' seem to have emerged in the survey only because of a specific induced question. But – then – they barely reappear as significant actors to which specific actions (or information) must be addressed to. Possibly, (1) respondents consider that they have other 'exit strategies' and that they are not worthy of public investments to be involved; or (2) they are 'ontologically denied' as significant from the perspective of 'inclusion' because the term must be reserved to those 'made vulnerable' (Martins and Fontes 2016). This topic can be an indicator of a lack of reflection on the nature and goals of inclusion. Namely on the value that can be recognised – in itself – to the diversity of profiles, ideas and interests within a participatory arena, as a producer of epistemological significance (Ramos 2018). Is it possible that some underrepresented actors (such as the most powerful social groups) could be useful to produce a richer debate, and be recognised as meaningful – even if it is decided that their 'recognition' will not be associated with any 'redistribution'? Or – in a context of scarce resources – fear grows that certain actors could 'divert' or 'hijack' the participatory process (Abers 2000) to their own interests, so reducing the money at stake for those who need public support more urgently? In Portugal PBs have mainly a competitive nature, and do not provide 'compensative features' (such as bonus, social criteria or other measures existing in other countries[47]) to guarantee a priority lane for those in deeper need. Not investing in efforts to dialogue with groups whose members are difficulty to identify (such as LGBTQI+ persons), participatory processes fail in fulfilling their pivotal duty of 'talent scouts of problems' (Paba 2003).

(3) **Asymmetries between the different streamlines of action and communication**. The previous asymmetries generate a misty decisional environment, where actions and investments happen in a scattered way. All cities listed a large number of actions which they consider effective in mobilising underrepresented groups. Nevertheless, the analysis did not provide clear indications on how frequent, interconnected and repeated these strategies are, and to what extent they contribute just to the mobilisation of underrepresented (to guarantee their 'presence' in participatory processes), or are able to work on empowering them to get policy results and contribute to a larger quality of deliberation, and diverse points of view. How are experiments mainstreamed and accumulate their capacity to further mobilise underrepresented groups and make them meaningful actors? I.e. gender issues look underestimated, and no problematisation is done – unlike in foreign examples (Allegretti and Falanga 2016) – of the risk that timing and spatiality of participatory processes could generate unbearable burden for women (especially for those who are excluded in multiple dimension), thus gradually silencing their voices. If, paraphrasing Fontes and Martins (2015), the *politicisation in the public space* of some characteristics that determine underrepresentation 'is a key element to face the vulnerability imposed by this

individualisation of experience', then there is a risk that many fragmented actions to face underrepresentation fail their major ambitions (if any) in this respect.

Undoubtedly, these three main asymmetries raise questions that could be significantly addressed to RAP members, and possibly be refined to generate a second round of more specific questions towards further steps of action-research promoted by RAP. Hoping that, once the debate among members has started, a larger number of statistically significant answers could be collected, well beyond the small number of 'pioneers' that accepted to take part in this first exploratory exercise.

5.2. *Under-optimising investments on inclusiveness*

The UK-based research '"Hard to reach" or "easy to ignore"?' (Lightbody et al. 2017) showed that ambiguity remains, when interpreting the inclusionary practices that accompany participatory processes in real contexts. In Portugal, the explanatory hypotheses for the 3 asymmetries do not deny the good faith of the public administrations on the importance of inclusiveness. Nevertheless, they unveil difficulties of abandoning the routines of the 'labyrinthic State' (Ruivo, Gomes, and Francisco 2011) that paralyse the reform of public administration (Tavares and de Sousa 2018; de Sousa et al. 2015) towards a more holistic approach. The rhetoric on inclusion in participation cannot be a self-fulfilling prophecy (Biggs 2009; Merton 1948): results only exist if they rely on attention and investments (which are documented, monitored, evaluated, and not just anecdotally reported).

The lack of clarity about goals, definitions and assessment of inclusive policies doubtfully optimises the investments that support them, and develop their full potential.

The analysis of webpages provides a metonymy of this. As most cities have a plan/councillor/commission appointed to equality, the few webpages that adopt a gender-sensitive language (3/58) reveal the merely symbolic relationship between the promotion of gender equality and the dynamization of participatory processes, as a poorly integrated function between the services (RAP 2020a). Similarly, even cities hosting a forum on immigration or disabilities do not provide tools to easily increase the friendliness of their webpages for those individuals.

Indeed, ICT supports are merely seen as showcases and deposits of meaningful information about the processes, but not as real shop-windows which 'mirror' where the community's members can see their 'reflected image' and prove if they are adequately recognised and pampered by institutions. Therefore, contents and functionalities of the portals are not carefully negotiated with service-providers and are often technologically-driven with poor degree of customisation (or expensive ones – Nitzsche, Pistoia, and Elsäßer 2012). Guided by an old-fashioned view of public procurement as 'choosing the lesser price' (Soares and Carvalho 2016), many administrations – especially the smaller ones – have few margins to negotiate more user-friendly functions. If, for public officials, websites are still minimalist investments, it is clear why many potentially user-friendly functionalities are not provided; especially those that – in their view – somehow can be added autonomously by the users (such as enlarging the screen and fonts, transforming written texts in audio files, translating languages, etc.), no matter how difficult this is.

Today, both participation and social inclusion (although clearly inscribed in the constitutional and legal frameworks of the country) remain 'single-issue policies' conceived

as silos that find it difficult to transform themselves into cross-cutting perspectives which could bridge fluidly with other sectors. What is put in check by this inertia, is not the existence of innovative and effective interventions to increase the presence of underrepresented individuals and groups; but their centrality, their cross-cutting transversality, their continuity and their capacity to invest and optimise the impact of investments.

The lack of interest for experimenting new methodologies – as random selection – is not a lack of curiosity and experimental spirit of Portuguese LAs, but enroots in 'the overwhelming titanic effort needed – especially after the financial crisis – for funds on a new methodology, contracting and training new personnel and using performance evaluations not as punishments, but to incentivise new virtuous behaviours and experimental and innovative approaches'.[48] The General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679 added new fears in relation to data-driven devices and randomisation-based techniques of deliberation and participation, feeding the 'inertia to change'. Many strategies of inclusion within participation (especially of those 'most difficult to reach') look marked by 'pathdependence': things that have already been done at least once, make LAs and their technical teams feel more at ease, while investing in new under-represented groups seems a risky adventure into a *terra incognita* (Kama 2000).

Thus, even the LAs most committed to democratic innovation – when it comes to discussing inclusiveness – seem affected by what Tosi (1994) calls 'Administrative Theory of Needs', i.e. a bureaucratised way of acting of many public administrations, that end up losing interest and attention in listening out for and reading about the needs of which they do not have any pre-moulded answer. This reveals a difficulty in carefully 'listening' to people and adopting the solutions they can imagine as more effective; and unveils a tendency to make the perspective of the 'service-supplier' prevail.

Co-designing actions and strategies aimed to include the underrepresented (which rarely exist today) could highlight still unimagined (and 'unimaginable') solutions to bypass such constraints. So, it could be a legitimate focus in the next steps of RAP's action-research, to reduce paternalistic and assistentialistic bias in inclusionary actions. It could help to avoid a passive representation of their recipients, and to 're-centre' the debate around inclusive strategies in participation, starting to work on the 'the importance of recognition' as a first step 'for equal representation' (Hansson 2013).

Such an approach could move from acknowledging a series of 'absences' which emerged clearly in the answers to RAP's research, and need to become central 'presences' (Santos 2002) in the future discourse. Among them, we could list reflections on multidimensional exclusions and intersectionalities (Crenshaw 1989); on how to promote advocacy strategies to overcome 'presentism' (Thompson 2010) and try to represent those who cannot be present in participatory process, because they still do not exist or have no autonomous voice (such as future generations or nature). Also, we could list the risks of 'internal exclusion' (Lightbody et al. 2017) faced by some individuals/groups that look expelled even from the narratives on underrepresentation (as ex-prisoners or homeless people), and on how specific groups (i.e. children) could act as 'multipliers' in reaching others. Other important silences emerging from this research are about equality of opportunities within the different stages of the participatory processes, and the contribution given by different types of affirmative actions (quotas or bonus-incentives combined with targeted forms of training) to reduce the competition-based approach of some participatory devices and guaranteeing a stronger presence of certain actors (at least until those actors are empowered enough to enter in a fair confrontation with others).

A coordinated action to gradually embed such issues, possibly needs a shift towards a 'multichannel systemic vision' of participation and of inclusion (Spada and Allegretti

2020), that can initially take advantage of the major ease requested by structuring single-channel devices (which often target specific area-based or topic-based audiences, or even single typologies of citizens), but then requires additional effort for its inter-connectedness, and systematising making them converge into a coherent direction. The challenge will be combining the *demo-diversity* of the tools of social dialogue (Santos and Mendes 2020) with increasing *the diversity of demos* of the participatory processes, and the equality of voices (and votes) continuously during all their stages, which RAP research shows as an – unpursued goal up until now. Could a major shift toward co-construction of inclusionary policies and tools (which could share visions on inclusion with some of the sub-represented actors) be the first stage of a bright and sustainable change?

6. An open conclusion

In Portugal, the prevalence of a 'participatory' approach to institutionalised spaces of citizens' engagement tends to emphasise principles as popular control over other 'democratic goods' as considered judgement or inclusiveness, whose complementarity is central in more deliberative arenas (Smith 2009).

In the last decade, the large diffusion of Participatory Budgeting and other devices based on an 'open door' approach and on self-selection of participants favoured – on one side – the marginalisation of preorganised groups in relation to spaces where individuals are the main targets of the dialogue with institutions; on the other hand, they have defended the legitimation of processes based on the immediate expression of the will (the co-decision), instead of procedures based on inclusion in the different stages of deliberative processes (Manin 2011).

Common patterns emerging from the collected data and their exploratory analysis show that both participation and inclusion are not mere rhetorical resources in polity vision and performance of the examined LAs. Nevertheless, they are conceived as two 'sectors' of the public action, to the detriment of their value as 'cross-cutting perspectives' and complementary forms of action to reach more equality both in the social dialogue as in the articulation of local policies *tout court*. Thus, inclusiveness does not look like a transversal value would be granted in the different phases of participatory processes, and inclusive strategies are rarely an object of co-design with potential beneficiaries of target actions of inclusion.

The main risk of this combination is – on one side – to wasting inclusion's potential of permanently 'making connections among people, across issues, and over time (…), intentionally creating an engaged community […] to implement the decisions and tackle related issues' (Quick and Feldman 2011, 274). However, it does not pay enough attention to the results and continuity of pro-inclusive strategies and actions. Indeed, by not investing in their monitorisation and assessment, it prevents the possibility of stirring-up a 'virtuous circle' (Ganuza and Francés 2012a) to reinforce further investments on setting inclusiveness as a transversal approach – and not just 'a policy as others' – that could make the city fall into a *consequentialist* behavioural approach category, in relation to the potentially virtuous interaction between participation and inclusion.

In such a framework, a pivotal challenge of the 'communities of practices' that work on exchanging knowledge and reflections on civic engagement, is that of helping to continuously reconceptualise the topic in a critical perspective, structuring spaces of co-learning where 'new members and changes in practices continually reconstitute the community

such that it is not a fixed entity and there is no single authoritative "core-set" of practices' (Wenger 1998).

Here, researchers knew from the beginning the inherent difficulty of targeting RAP 'member cities', instead of collecting the individual point of view of single public officials or citizens. Targeting collective bodies which have no autonomous voice, in fact, could introduce bias related to the uncertainty of respondents on how to fulfil their ethical duty of representation, and solve the dilemmas related to their contribution 'to build the external image of an entity' which 'can never be consider monolithic, but is multifaceted and where there are tense power-relations, hierarchical ranks and different levels of right to talk as the legitimate speakers for their city'.[49] Nevertheless, the choice served its purpose of unveiling – through the high levels of 'I don't know' answers collected when verifying the existence of a shared definition of inclusion of underrepresented actors (and of clear goals related to it) – the need for a more central debate on the role of the common democratic good of inclusiveness (Saward 2003), in each municipality and in the network as a whole.

Collaborative research in a community of practices has an inherent *antibody reactivity*. In fact, it is a process of shared discovery organised *per stages*. Thus, it can 're-centre' a topic and reverse its apparent marginality by relocating it in the agenda of the community targeted by the action-research initiative. Functioning as a 'snowball' methodology, it can open a window of opportunity to deepen the research itself. And it can increase the representativeness of its results, by further increasing the number, coverage and diversity of respondents, and their active involvement in the next phases: interpretation, discussion of results, and the shared creation of co-designed practical solutions which can be experimented with and compared within the community.

Therefore, is expectable that the debate which just started around this first step of RAP reflection on how underrepresentation is tackled in participatory processes could bring a thick increase in the future quality of the processes which member-municipalities are proposing on their territories. Some cities – as for example Cascais Municipality – already have been incorporating changes in their websites during the testing period of the study here analysed, and even in the political campaign for the re-election of their mayors, they have been using a special attention to languages which could make some groups once poorly involved in local politics feel more involved as part of the community.[50] Under this perspective, the partial blockage of some participatory processes during the COVID-19 emergencies could have offered an opportunity for a thorough reflection and self-analysis of existing practices, which had had no space and time to happen previously, due to the usual working rhythm of many civil servants and a poor collective habit on interchanging on such critical issues (Falanga and Allegretti 2021).

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Notes on contributor

Giovanni Allegretti is an Architect, planner and senior researcher at the Centre of Social Studies of Coimbra University, he coordinates the PhD "Democracy in the XXI Century" and does research on participatory processes and insurgent citizenship practices. He coordinates the Horizon Project "PHOENIX: the Rise of Citizens' Voices for a Greener Europe". For the mandate 2014-2019 has been co-chair of the Independent Authority for the Guarantee and Promotion of Participation of Tuscany Region (Italy). As a consultant, evaluator and trainer for the ideation and management of participatory processes, he has been working in more than 50 countries for the World Bank, the Council of Europe, United Cities and Local Governments, and several national cooperation agencies.

Notes

1. See: http://www.in-loco.pt and www.ces.uc.pt.
2. See: https://dre.pt/application/conteudo/171096336.
3. See the Charter for Public Participation in the Health sector, approved through Law n.° 108/ 2019. See: https://www.parlamento.pt/sites/COM/XIVLeg/9CS/Documents/Carta-Participaca oPublica-Saude.pdf.
4. According to CNE data, in the last municipal elections of 2017 the rate of abstention was 45%, while in the 2021 Presidential elections grew to 60,8% (it was 51,3% in 2016 presidential elections). Abstention rate in the local election of September 2021 was 46.35%. See: https://www. pordata.pt/Portugal/Taxa+de+absten%C3%A7%C3%A3o+nas+elei%C3%A7%C3%B5es +para+a+Presid%C3%AAncia+da+Rep%C3%BAblica+total++residentes+em+Portugal+e +residentes+no+estrangeiro-2207.
5. See – for example – the Decree-Law n. 23/2019 (on health competences) and n. 83/2019 (on housing competences).
6. Law n. 46/2005 limited possibilities of successive mandates for Mayors.
7. See: https://www.anmp.pt/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/65-4.pdf.
8. See: https://constdelib.com.
9. The term 'deliberação' describes 'decision-making' and its outputs (by-laws, diplomas, etc.): so, practices based on a co-decisional model, in opposition to 'consultative'.
10. See (1) 'Charter of recommendations for the Parliament and the Regional assemblies of Madeira and Azores. Contributions for the strengthening of participatory democracy in Portugal' (March 2016) by the partners of 'Portugal Participa'; and the 'First Report of the Forum of Citizens' (2017), emerging from a practical pilot supported by the Philosophy Dept. of Nova University-Lisbon.
11. See Odivelas Municipality in 2008 (OPTAR 2013).
12. Author's interview with a Participation Office worker.
13. See: http://portugalparticipa.pt.
14. See: www.wearebeloved.org/equity-audit.
15. Literature on 'anonymity' in participation (Paskuda 2016) shows that allowing to temporary hide identities, can contribute to generate higher trust in the collective process, and lately have been more proactive in generating shared visions and responsibilisation.
16. See the interview with the directress of the department on Participation, Citizens and Youth of Valongo municipality done in April 2021 for preparing the essay published by Falanga and Allegretti (2021).
17. Sub-questions were: a) Who are the least represented people and groups, and which actors are fair or highly represented in each territory?; b) Are there inclusion policies aimed particularly at promoting a greater diversity of people and social groups within participatory processes?; c) what changes have occurred in each local authority - over the past few years - in terms of participants' profiles? Is it possible to identify new inclusions and possible under-representations of people and groups?; d) Are there other areas of institutional action in which pro-inclusion

dynamics have proved effective? e) Which methods showed effectiveness in ensuring greater capacity for inclusion of groups traditionally not highly involved in participatory processes?

18. Q 20.1: Age of respondents: 18,2% in the age-group 24-34; 36,4% 35-44; 36,4% 45–54 and 9,1% over 54.
19. Q 20.3: 54.5% of respondents declared they work prevalently on participation, having other concurrent tasks; 27.3% deal with participation as a minor task; 9.1% don't usually deal with participation and the same % are only devoted to participation.
20. Q 20.5: 45.4% of respondents entered the L.A. less than 5 years ago; 27.3% entered between 5–10 years, and the same % have been working there for > 10 years; 72.7% have been working on participation for <5 years; 18.2% between 5 and 10; and 9.1% for > 10 years.
21. Q.24 allowed multiple choices ($N = 15$), but only few (6,7%) reported they filled in collaboration with other departments. The same % received administrative support or spontaneous collaboration from colleagues of the same department.
22. The 8 municipalities are: Cascais; Fundão; Guimarães; Lagoa – Açores; Lourinhã; Santo Tirso; Torres Vedras; Valongo. The 2 parishes: Agualva/Mira Sintra; Massamá/Monte Abraão. Surprisingly, one respondent (Figueira da Foz) was still not a RAP member, but asked to be part of the research, and it was accepted as this inclusion could leverage a future adhesion of that municipality to the network.
23. To the author's knowledge, almost all municipal governments of Portugal with significative participatory process are members of RAP (59/308 municipalities). The situation differs for the Parish Governments, that only recently, were admitted as full time members of RAP. In 2013, there are reportedly 3,091 parishes in Portugal; of which only 3 belong to RAP.
24. Comment collected by the research team (12/09/2020).
25. The class A represents 18 cities (29.5 of the total), Class B 31 (50.8%); Class C 12 members (19.7%). Classes were discretionarily defined by the author as A (= cities with a systemic approach, and different processes held in parallel, somehow coordinated); B (= cities with a main repeated/cyclical process, at least, and some 'ad hoc or single-issue processes'); C (= No participatory processes in the last 2 years).
26. The classes of continuity of participation during COVID period are: Class 1 = members whose processes had stopped shortly, but then continued (for example, using online components); Class 2 = members where all process stopped until the date of the article; NA (= impossible to find info).
27. Class 1 (= small cities, below 30,000 inhabitants); Class 2 (= medium size cities, between 30,001 and 90,000); Class 3 (= large cities, above 90,001). According to PORDATA (2018), in Portugal, only 26 cities (out of 308) belong to Class 3 (8.44%); 62 to class 2 (20.12%), 220 (71.44%) to Class 1 (114 municipalities – i.e., 36.01% of the total – host less than 10,000 inhabitants).
28. I.e., 65% show high readability in terms of contrast of colours (it decrease to 40% in the sub-group of cities that took part to both analyses); 9.4% offer user-friendly navigation from different devices; 96.6% load the content with few difficulties; 86.2% prove friendly in identifying hyperlinks, bars, buttons; 86% allows easy navigation through all the menus on the page and their sub-items.
29. The detailed analysis of which functions are possible (and if they need previous registration or not) was not part of the study.
30. Such information is of very different nature (from calendars and timelines, to detailed information on proposals; from ruling documents to maps of specific areas), so no conclusion is possible on how these elements could make the reading more complex or unfriendly, or – conversely – support a higher quality of deliberation.
31. In the analysis on webpages is not comprised Figueira da Foz.
32. This addiction came from cities in Populational Class 2 (30,0001/90,000 hab.). This multiple-choice question had $N = 18$.
33. From interviews with 2 respondents, the author got the impression that these questions required a dialogue with colleagues and/or with political officials.
34. The statements were: (1) The need to give a voice to less represented social groups; (2) Fair participatory processes need to rebalance the diversity of participants and to value minorities; (3)To guarantee the quality of participatory processes, it is necessary to increase the diversity of interests and ideas at stake.
35. $N = 11$; only 1 respondent answered 'I don't know'.

36. The latter are called AUGI (Urban Areas of Illegal Genesis); a special law provides their requalification (Raposo and Valente 2010).
37. $N = 23$ in Q8.
38. $Q = 16$, with $N = 18$.
39. 17.6% of webpages of participatory processes corresponds to 'integrationist' type (see section 3.1). The subgroup of the 10 cities that participated in both studies, got a 20% positive answer.
40. 3 respondents listed both their PB and Youth PB, although there are other LAs that have both.
41. Expression used in one of the free text spaces
42. Interview to the Mayor of one of the cities that answered the questionnaire (06/12/2020)
43. Interview with a respondent, after the delivery of the filled questionnaire.
44. Interview with a respondent, after the delivery of the filled questionnaire.
45. $N = 35$ in Q13.
46. Crossing data, it appears that the 18.2% who answered 'they do not know', were recently-contracted workers.
47. Marquetti, Campos, and Pires (2008), Allegretti (2009)
48. Interview with a civil servant.
49. Interview with Luís Guerreiro, participation officer of the Municipality of Palmela (OPTAR; 2013).
50. See the use of Cape Verdian Criole language in some outdoors of Cascais mayoral candidate Carlos Carreiras (included those for thanking voters after the election), which were highlighted by observers as a totally new experience in Portugal for right-wing candidates. See: https://twitter.com/britoguterres/status/1447968775819702279.

ORCID

Giovanni Allegretti http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6234-5168

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