The S. Pedro da Cova Community Knowledge Centre, a local example of empowerment through technology

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ABSTRACT

S. Pedro da Cova (Gondomar), located ten kilometres from the city centre of Porto (Portugal), is considerate a depressed territory, with a large spectrum of social, economic and urban problems, but also with local positive aspects capable to reach the different development opportunities.

In the ambit of the regeneration process for this area, the local authority draw a strategy based in the empowerment of the citizens, where the Information Communication Technologies (ICT's) assumed a major role. With this purpose, it was intended to build a Community Technology Centre for the disfavoured children.

From the building construction till the first activities, it is our conviction that to break the differences between the have and the have not's it will be very important to conciliate the new technologies and the local characteristics.

The children will be the active agents in the dissemination of the project through the development of the different activities, sensitising the families to adopt a healthy life and announce situations of risk, for example. To validate the project will be created an permanent observatory that propose a moment of reflection and auto-valuation about the evolution of the different activities, the changes to do, and the identification of new problems and the redefinition of new methodologies.

The aim of the article is not only to show the positive aspects, indeed significant, but also to bring into discussion some questions; in order to understand the possibility of defining an empowerment strategy based in the ICT's. How to conciliate the individual perspectives of the future into a common objective? How to show to all community that information and knowledge are fundamental to build a more liveable and equity neighbourhood? How to transfer the results to a larger strategy for the entire city? And, at the end, how to explain that people is the most important "infrastructure" to build a better future?

Key words: social exclusion, informal urban structure, empowerment, spaces of knowledge.

1 INTRODUCTION

During the last twenty years the surround areas of the city of Porto experienced an unstructured urban growth, without the consequent planning instruments capable to give a relative coherence between the new spaces of expansion, and the traditional structures of the small urban areas. The city expands it limits, by a process that adds the small rural areas into the metropolitan space. The final result is a non homogeneous large spot. Also, because of the dimension of the city of Porto, very reduced comparing to other European cities, this kind of urban satellites presents a relative autonomy, for example, that concerns to the neighbourhood logics, but at the same time a strong dependence concerning to services, employment and collective equipments.

S. Pedro da Cova, is one of these territories, that suffered the pressures of this type of urban growth. A traditional area that had as the major economic activity the mining. Almost a century, the logic was working and living in the same area. The housing areas, the collective equipments were done for this specific activity. However, during the sixties, and also because of the economic problems concerned to this activity, S. Pedro da Cova started to suffer the pressure of the Porto's urban growth. Today, the historical reminiscences of the traditional activity are confined to symbolic architectural elements and to a sort of collective memory. From a place with a very strong identity, now this place suffer from some of the contemporary problems of the peripheries: informal urban structure, a deficit of collective equipments, illegal housing and, concerning to social aspects: problems related with social exclusion, poverty, lost of collective values, illiteracy, unemployment among others.

This area presents all the characteristics of a depressed area. So, the Municipality of Gondomar decided to candidate it to the European program *Urban*. And in the 1999, it was decided to create the Local Technical Authority of S. Pedro da Cova, with the objective to draw different strategies in order to create local activities and structures capable to generate synergies that permits to give a positive image of the area, in order to improve the quality of life of the citizens of the area.

The present article it can be considered like the report of a very specific activity of the Local Technical Authority. It is an attempt to theorise, and (re)thinking about the quotidian activity of an urban planner, and also an attempt to show that is possible to work together, even if the subject (the Information and Communication Technologies) is a sort of *strange body* to the most part of the inhabitants of the S. Pedro da Cova.

2 FROM THE DIAGNOSIS TO THE FIRST ACTIVITIES: AN HOLISTIC APPROACH FOR THE KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITY CENTRE

From the beginning, and not only for the specific implementation of the activities of the Knowledge Community Centre, it was a major concern of the local technical team to analyse the different problems in an holistic perspective, because to solve specific problems it is necessary to implement activities that have the potentiality to give an answer to more than one problem (catalitic efects).

So, the first phase of the project, was a very detailed analyses of the different weakness of the area. We decided to do interviews to the local agents, like for example, local authorities, civic associations and enquires to the local population. In a very generic way we identified the fowling social problems: the existence of marginalized groups, problems of social exclusion, related with a very low

income and low technical and educational skills, a very high rate of young unemployment (related also to the fact that the area doesn't present significant economic activities) and a sort of lost of the traditional familiar structure. The physical environment of the area also contributes to increase the degree of the self-esteem, because of the housing quality, most of them illegal houses (around 60%), the absence of infrastructures, and the inexistence of quality of the public and green spaces.

In this context, the most disfavoured group are: the children, without collective spaces to develop their imagination, to interact in group and to learn and have fun outside the school; the old population, because of the very reduced mobility, consequence of the topographic characteristics of the area and the absence of collective urban transports; and finally the females, with more difficulty to find a job outside the area, and still very implicated with the housing activities.

However, there are some local positive aspects, for example the large number of local civic associations and the perspective of a political support from the local municipality, and from the central administration in order to promote partnerships between the different collective associations and the private agents.

Defined the weaknesses, identified the major affected social groups, and the local associations capable and interested to work together, the next step was to elaborate a strategy that, simultaneously, was responsible to give some possible solutions for the problems identified before and to give a better quality of life to the specific groups in cooperation with valid development agents. The idea it is to create a place where can be provided pedagogical activities to the residents, children and young people, together with the old ones, and sensitising the families to modify their habits, to be more attempt to new opportunities, to develop new capacities that aren't conditioned by the actual limitations of the area.

2.1.1 THE GLOBAL STRUCTURE OF THE PROJECT AND *THE ENTER INFORMATICS! DELETE CHILD WORK* ATTIVITY

The project is based in this holistic perspective, that the empowerment of the local community through the increase of the knowledge capacities, should be based in different activities, but interrelated between them, and with the capacity to generate synergies between every different activities. So, it is important to develop the individual skills, in order to create a collective sense of place and an idea of community, like we saw before, that are disappearing in the most recent years. The three different domains of the project are: the Ego centred – to promote the intellectual development throw the lecture and writing activities; the Social centred – to stimulate the activities in group and sociability and the Family – to qualify educational dimension of the all family. To support this division, it is proposed a group of seven major actions. They are: Atelier of Literacy; Sports; Informatics Community Centre; Vocation Atelier; Knowledge and experiences exchange; The family in the community and the Observatory.

The local technical team decided to start with the Informatics Community Centre. In the base of this decision was a previous enquiry to the technological habitudes of the local population, in conjugation with the political openness to implement development technological policies to the all municipality.

The first conclusion of the enquiry was that the habitudes of the inhabitants to use the informatics tools (ex.: computer, computer related tools (printers, scanners…), internet and digital cameras) were very reduced, not only because of the inexistence at home, but also because of the inexistence of collective equipments or associations that provides this kind of services. The only use of the computer and internet is at schools and without a direct connection with the children studies. The adults and the oldest age groups almost doesn't use the computer and the internet at all. However, they recognise the importance of them. We can considerer a sort of abstract importance, because, when it was enquirer the relevance of this tool to the day to day life, they can't give a valid answer.

The second one is the difficulty of inhabitants to interconnect the different sources of information (ex.: newspapers, radio, TV, libraries, schools, theatre/cinema, internet…) and transformed them into useful knowledge to the day to day life. They are seeing as separated parts, and they still emphasis the distinction between the practical knowledge and the theoretic one, seen, the last ones, the most of the time as matters without importance.

The last major conclusion is that the frequently users of the computer and internet seen them with a strictly vision, and not profiting this possibility to create and to develop the imagination. Using the computer to writing texts and the internet to surf or to send emails were the most frequently answers, when asked about the use that they do of the computer.

According to the results of the interviews, the political engagement in order to developed an expansion policy of the informatics habits and the active role of the local civic associations to work together in direct contact with the population and the intension to diversify their activities, it was decided to profit of the intrinsic value of the information and communication technologies to give answer to some problems of the community, even if the problem with the infrastructures and the insufficient know-how suggested actions of other nature.

One of the most dramatic Portuguese social problem is the child work, and because of this fact it was decided that the first activity of the Informatics Centre of the Community Knowledge Centre was the *Enter Informatics! Delete child work.* This activity was the result of a partnership between the Local Technical Authority, the local school, the Child Commission Protection of Gondomar, and the Cultural Association of Silvierinhos. During the course it was distribute information about the consequences of the child work. The participants in this course functioned as a vehicle to the divulgation of the project at the schools and in the neighbourhood and to the risk situations that could occurred.

It was decided to build a internet page and also to edit a brochure, in order to transmit the information easily and to amplify the positive aspects of the project. With this decision, suggested by the participants of the course, it started to be solve some of the problems detected, the gap of the information in the community, the incapacity to transform the information received into knowledge and the changing of attitude in relation with the informatics, from a passive one to a more active and participative, for one hand and by the other hand, to promote a more responsible attitude and increase the commitment of the community to the common problems.

Social and cultural debilities	Technological and Information access debilities
drug addiction	lecture habits very reduced
alcoholism	reduced number of bocks, magazines and other sources of information at home
low educational skills and disqualified work force	reduced number of personal computer at home, and also other technological equipments (ex. – printers, scanners, cameras…)
youth unemployment	inexistence of collective equipments (ex. libraries, cultural centres, …)
low income population and situations of extreme poverty	inadequate infrastructures (electricity and telecommunication)
changes in the traditional family structure and large number of single mothers	private investments almost inexistent in order to support cultural activities
reduced self stem	

(intervention of the Local Technical Authority of S. Pedro da Cova – diagnosis, congregate the social agents)

Social Agents
local administration, civic associations, schools

Domains	Ego centred (intellectual development)	Social centred (collective activities and sociability)	Family (educational dimension)
Actions	*Atelier of Litercy*		
	Sports		
	Informatics Centre *(Enter Informatics! Delete child work)*		
			The family and the community
	Vocation Atelier		
		Knowledge and experiences exchange	
	Observatory		

general structure of the S. Pedro da Cova Community Knowledge Centre

Populations involved
(disfavoured groups – children, families, third age)

Table 2: The bottom up methodology, the base for the S. Pedro da Cova Knowledge Centre

The flexibility of the structure responsible for the implementation of the different actions, and the positive response of the local agents stimulated the born of other activities, and beome necessary to generate complementary dynamics to maintain the positive externalities.

The second range of activities had the intention to consolidate the positive effects of the *Enter informatics! Delete child work* activity, and to be more ambitious in order to define activities capable to give possible answers to the social problems of the area. Another ones were to publicise the cultural activities and to promote the local economic activities of the area. Its is expected that can helps to diminish the social exclusion in the children group, to promote common activities in the family, give them social personal competences that allowed them to developed the self-esteem and the civic responsibility, as well as to give the necessary autonomy to take the decisions about their future.

3 CONCLUSION

The Knowledge Community Centre is giving the first steps, however it is considered very important to the local technical team to proceed to a first evaluation of the process.

The most important, is that to solve so very dramatic problems and so very diversified it is necessary to proceed to a very accurate analyses, based in three specific points – the problems, the social groups most affected by the problems detected and the local agents more open to work together with the authorities and the local population. Then, it is necessary to be imaginative to propose some activities that have a strong impact to the community, for example using the surprise factor, and simultaneously that have the capacity to propose solutions to two or more problems detected. And finally, to start with a very specific activity that transmits a kind of *shorts messages*, to the global systems, that serves as guidelines to orientate the process, to correct the negative aspects of the activities and to increase the positive ones.

The Knowledge Community Centre was one of the first attempts of the local technicians implement an holistic strategy. Knowledge is not confined to the access of information, and is also not confined to a specific activity. Literature, sports, domestic activities, and for the most part of the population the first contact to the technologies of information and communication, are all parts of a global strategy, to increase the cultural levels of the community and to use the culture as a toll to increase the quality of life, the return of the sense of the place, the valorisation of the specific characteristics of the area, to implement activities with a very practical significance and give to local agents the role of protagonists were the most important results.

Another positive aspect, is the fact that the process was elaborated in strategy bottom-up, instead of a strong oriented philosophy (top-down), in two significant ways, one, is that the actions of the local team served more to conduct, than to impose, and by the other side, the social groups implicated in the actions, they had a very important role in the definition of the different activities, and they decided what was the most relevant to the common activities and to the day to day life. The success of the Informatics Centre is directly linked with the participation of the local population. An oriented participation, and the possibility to the local groups express their concerns and expectations are one of the conditions to guarantee a large number of inhabitants directly or indirectly involved.

At the end, it is very motivating that we assist now to, what we can considerer the third stage of the local associativism of the S. Pedro da Cova. In the beginning it was directly related with the problems of the major economic activity (the mining), they served as collective equipments to the miners, more concerned with the leisure activities (football, dance, table games...), the second phase accompanied the social transformations of the area. The local associations served and support a large spectrum of more diversified activities - sports, cultural and leisure. Now, with the support of the local technical team, and with the advent of the technologies of the information and communication, they are trying to elaborate more integrated and more diversified activities, that congregates different social groups, starting to construct partnerships (local administration, local association, schools, local economic agents...) with implication with the day to day life, for example, the increase of the local characteristics, the increase of the interchanges experiences between different groups in order to draw development strategies, that can be of two kinds – to avoid the negative aspects of the area (social exclusion, drugs, unemployment), and by the other side to promote what they have as their own – a very strong sense of community.

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