

Learning from Innovation in social practices with young people

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9. Conclusions

1. Follow the thread

Civilization has crossed from one society to another, has changed and has been added to or lost... the contact was a contact of beads on a thread, though... without any thread”¹

Thinking and acting in a network ... rebuilding social ties... strengthening cultural fabric... reinforcing the social weave. Net... tie... fabric... weave. Current metaphors that encourage us to imagine social living as an interweaving of relationships with multiple threads that cross, knot together, converge, exchange colours, compete in textures, cancel each other out, reinforce each other, accompany each other.

This paper is put together as a fabric in which the theoretical concepts are interwoven with social practices that demonstrate the capacity for innovation of young people in the world today. The thread used to weave it is a plaiting of three main strands: youth, social practices and public policies. This study is based on the Latin American context; but beyond its history and its meaning, what is important to notice is the strength of its involvement and the wealth that comes from its continuous feedback.

We thread the needle analysing the socio-economic situation of Latin America and the Caribbean from the point of view of globalization and the processes of mundialization. The first practices we present are aimed at counteracting the negative effects of these tendencies. The analysis stresses the ways in which culture adapts and modifies itself in the face of the new trends and revises the place that young people occupy within these transformations. Our interest will be in young people as protagonists of social practices that generate changes in the social weave and looks closely at the socialization processes that make up their collective identity by creating other social ties.

¹ Worsley Peter, *El Tercer Mundo*, Ed. Siglo XXI, México, 1978



To what extent do the social practices that young people take part in influence the transformations in their contexts? Could it be said that these practices attenuate exclusion processes? What impact do they have on the network of social, economic and political relationships? Do they influence the cultural fabric?

Such questions help us to unravel the tangle and continue weaving our work which, at this point, becomes enriched with a new warp: the public policy dimension. What happens in this area when young people begin to be socialized on the basis of the codes, experiences and expectations of the social practices? How are policies organized on this plane? What happens with the territorialization of these cultural and social construction processes?

The end of the fabric is woven with four new fibres that give volume and colour to all the cloth: autonomy, leadership, knowledge and power. All of these in contrast to a background of violence and possibilities of hope.

Beyond apocalyptic or utopian visions, it is true that the conceptual tools and social practices presented here open up alternatives for imagining new subjectivities reconstructed on the loom of inclusion. Their dissemination and replicability will largely condition the colour of the future.

2. Threading the needle of globalization

“... Objectively the world had always been one, long before world-wide social relations were established, long before the Spaniards seized America or the British India. Even the most primitive hunters and collectors had never been isolated.”²

With these words, **Worsley** is referring to a historical phenomenon that is variable and loaded with contradictions: **globalization**. The predominant features of this phenomenon are: capitalism as a form of production, capital concentration and centralization, the emergence of supranational regions, the opening-up of internal and external borders, the constitution of economic and political poles of power, the lack of protection of local production, privatizations, market deregulation, among others.

For Gorz, globalization is a process in which competition is increased in all markets with the following aims: *“the reduction of real wages, the dismantling of social protections, the explosion of unemployment, the precariousness of all jobs, the deterioration of working conditions, etc.”³*

One of the consequences of this process is polarization, the asymmetry of conditions and insecurity that come as a consequence of incomplete integration to world trade and the ineffectiveness of state apparatus that lack instruments to respond to social demands in the face of those of the new owners of privatized public companies. This is aggravated by the reduction of the direct roles of the State and by the increase in social inequity as a consequence of free market forces.

The high rates of innovation in the economic sphere in the face of the competitive and expansive nature of the capitalist enterprise bring with them a

² Worsley Peter, *El Tercer Mundo*, Ed. Siglo XXI, México, 1978

³ Gorz André, *Miserias del presente, riqueza de lo posible*. Cap.1: *Del Estado social al Estado del capital*, Bs.As, 1998

significant influence in economic relations over other institutions. The culture suffers the impact of economic processes occurring on a world scale linked to political and financial agreements.

In this power fabric, what is the place of Latin America and the Caribbean?

To answer this question, we must mention the process of **mundialization** produced in the context of modernity. According to **Giddens**, this process is related with the intensification of social relations in the whole world, the linking up of distant places in such a way that local events are configured by things that happen many kilometres away and vice versa⁴. As a result, every local transformation is part of mundialization and of the lateral extension of connections through time and space. As **Alain Touraine** would say, this is a matter of a move from a State-controlled national economy to a mundialized world economy. In cultural terms, this change may be described as the passage from modern societies with an egalitarian state culture to post-modern, individualistic and competitive societies. And, in political terms, as overcoming the civil-military cycle and passing to democratic-representative regimes, making up fragmentary democracies.⁵

What are the consequences in the region?

The 80s is called the “lost decade” in Latin America not only as regards its economic growth, but also for its social decay.

“At the start of the ´80s, 112 million Latin American and Caribbean people (35% of all households) were poor; by the middle of the decade, the poor were 164

⁴ Giddens Anthony, *Consecuencias de la modernidad*, Ed. Alianza Universidad, España, 1993

⁵ Delgado, Daniel García, *Jóvenes en las estructuras: cultura, educación, familia y política*. In: *La juventud latinoamericana en los procesos de globalización*. FLACSO, EUDEBA, Ed. Universitaria, Buenos Aires, 1998

million totalling 38% of households. To have an idea of the speed of this growth of poverty, we should point out that the total population of the region (in absolute terms) had grown less than the number of poor people. From then on the trend kept rising; every day “new poor” join an ever narrower and more austere table”⁶.

The Latin American democracies of the 80s arose in this context, conditioned by such a reality. For that reason, Latin America is considered as the region with the highest levels of inequality in the world. The figures show that income distribution, traditionally unequal in the region, which had improved in the 70s, worsened seriously in the 80s and has not only not improved but continued deteriorating in the 90s.⁷

Some of the problems currently facing the region are marginalization, stigmatization, exclusion, social alienation, domination, the increase in unemployment and under-employment, the installation of precariousness in jobs, the destructuring of labour relations, the destabilization of those that were stable, the increase in market segmentation, the lack of urban and regional planning, the lack of technology and infrastructure, gender inequity, contamination, new forms of anomy and weakness in relationship networks. These problems emerged in the 90s and are linked to socio-economic and labour changes that occurred in the post-war period, enabling the break-up of social inclusion processes, such as the Welfare State. These ruptures, produced by a historical process of work transformation and destructuring, have been creating new forms of subjectivity and suffering. At the same time, the collapse of the economic model based on industrialization provoked a crisis for the identities supporting this kind of work. Thus the end of the Fordist society

⁶ Casalla, Mario, *Globalización e Identidad Cultural*. In *Globalización e identidad cultural*, Ed. Ciccus, Buenos Aires, 1997

⁷ Klisberg, Bernardo, *Inequidad y Crecimiento. Nuevos hallazgos de investigación*, in *De Igual a Igual. El desafío del Estado ante los nuevos problemas sociales*, Fondo de Cultura económica Argentina, Brasil, 1999.

meant not only a change in the production apparatus but also an increase in job precarisation and exploitation.

We are witnessing the development of a “*culture of randomness*” (Laurence Rouleau-Berger, 1995) and uncertainty about tomorrow. This produces two consequences that potentiate each other: on the one hand, instability through unemployment and the precarisation of working conditions; and on the other, the weakening of the forms of socialization, where the motto “nothing long-term” disorients planned activity, dissolves links of trust and commitment and separates will from behaviour⁸.

As **Bauman** (2000) points out, we live in the era of liquid modernity and “fluidity”, the metaphor used to understand the new scenarios, where capital travels light, powers are diluted and redistributed and processes of domination are closely linked with the speed of movement and possibilities of access to means of communication, so that social disintegration is one of the results of these new techniques of power. Modern society exists by its incessant “individualizing” activity; individualization appears as destiny⁹.

In societies where capitalism and individualism go hand in hand, where competition between individuals is an intrinsic element, it is not difficult to imagine that the result is the fragmentation of networks of solidarity and cooperation and the weakening of cultural fabrics.

3. Good Social Practices: resistant fibre

Culture, influenced by the new relationships of modernity, seems to be the weakest thread of this fabric of powers. However, out of the same context emerges a new fibre, resistant to the fragmentation processes that are taking

⁸ Sennett Richard, *La corrosión del carácter. Las consecuencias personales del trabajo en el nuevo capitalismo*, Ed. Anagrama, Barcelona, 2000

⁹ Bauman, Zygmunt, *Modernidad Líquida*, Ed. Fondo de Cultura Económica, Argentina, 2000

place, a fibre that manages to stand up to the wear and tear of neoliberal logic: social practices, sustainable from a cultural, social, economic and environmental point of view.

Through a variety of insertion strategies, Good Practices are starting to transform and, in some places, to halt **marginalization** and **stigmatization**, phenomena that are characteristic of the exclusion processes we have referred to.

R. Castel defines marginalization as *social production originating in the dominant base structures of society, organization of work and value systems...*¹⁰ Considering that profound marginality is the extreme of a process of social isolation and distancing from work, we want to stress here a practice that has helped to reduce levels of marginality, breaking with the typifications of origin and social approbation. This is the case of the “**Experimental programme for improving housing**” of Colombia:

The project concentrated on activities that foster the consolidation of community and improving the quality of living. It focused on a sector characterized for its illegality, the inhabitants of decrepit houses in poor conditions. The women of the target population took charge of the construction of the houses. One of the main achievements of the project, as well as solving the housing problem, was the strengthening of community ties and the improvement of the job situation with 90% of the target families obtaining work.

This social practice showed that it is possible to reverse situations of “disaffiliation” such as living in poor housing, in a precarious work situation and/or unemployment and with weak community networks. It also sends out signals that can be picked up in the ambit of social policies, as for example, that

it is essential to relate the struggle against marginality with job options, housing solutions and the reinforcing of social networks, fostering reparative and preventive actions that must be mutually complementary.

To analyse **stigmatization**, another aspect linked to exclusion processes, we use Goffman's words, that stigma appears as a deeply discrediting attribute that stains all aspects of the person. **Becker** warns us that, once a person has been labelled as "deviant", this label imposes itself on the other identifications involved. Society thus establishes the means to characterize people and the attributes that are perceived as natural within each of these categories¹¹. Stigmatization, then, could be said to be a historical product.

The Project ***Education in HIV/AIDS and Accompanying People living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA)*** being carried out in Peru has helped to reduce the stigmatization suffered by an ever-increasing social group: carriers of HIV/AIDS.

The aim of this practice was to improve the quality of life of people living with HIV/AIDS and their families, offering them: a) information and emotional support for comprehensive health care; b) negotiation of the supply of antiretroviral drugs and adequate, continuous laboratory monitoring; c) promotion and defence of their human rights; d) education for the prevention of HIV/AIDS, especially to groups of young men and women in sectors with fewer resources.

We have seen how some social practices are effective for counteracting problems related to marginalization and stigmatization. Now we want to analyze the influence of Good Practices on the culture of young people. For this we must keep in mind, on the one hand, the elements that constitute youth culture, the changes and transformations of their symbolic universes and modes of

¹⁰ Castel, Robert, *La lógica de la exclusión social*. In: *Todos entran*, Ed. Santillana, UNICEF, Argentina, 1998

¹¹ Bonaldi, Pablo, *Identidades Sociales* In: *Nuevas identidades y juventudes*, Carrera de Especialización de postgrado, Buenos Aires, 2006

socialization; and on the other, we ask ourselves if the social practices can be identified as ambits of socialization, of strengthening social ties and as generators of opportunities for inclusion.

4. Youth: protagonist of social practices

“Youth culture occurs in the context of a profound change, related economically to neoliberalism and culturally to postmodernism”¹². As a bundle of possible significations, created and to be created, culture is constantly modified by the changes that take place in the relations of production, in modes of organization, in politics, etc. Simultaneously it influences these dimensions and on certain occasions it comes into conflict with them.

Before analyzing to what extent Social Practices influence youth culture, it is necessary to limit the scope of the terms **Culture** and **Youth**.

In the words of **Margulis**, **Culture** *“refers to the codes of signification, historically constituted and in a permanent state of change, shared by a social group, that make communication, interaction, and the intelligibility of social behaviours possible”¹³. **Daniel García Delgado** considers that the predominant features of post-modern culture are closely related to the radicality at which the velocity occurs, i.e., the understanding of time and space, and with the disappearance of grand collective projects and of the wish for global transformation (absence of ideals, utopias, and the decline of public life), which has contaminated social links with the idea of competitiveness.*

The term **Youth** emerged in the context of Western society at the time when a process of certain democratization and of mass production started. It was in this environment that, for the first time, it was defined what it is to be young,

¹² Delgado, Daniel García, *Jóvenes en las estructuras: cultura, educación, familia y política*. En: *La juventud latinoamericana en los procesos de globalización*. FLACSO, EUDEBA, Ed. Universitaria, Bs.As., 1998

¹³ Margulis Mario, *Juventud, Cultura y Sexualidad*. Ed. Biblos, Buenos Aires, 2003

*“differentiating between those who will study and have time for leisure and those who will be the workforce for the new driving force of industry”*¹⁴. In this sense, *youth* is a socially and historically constructed concept, which varies according to the political, social, economic and cultural context.

Youth cultures are not homogeneous or static; their heterogeneity enables multiple appropriations, even within the same style. The consolidation of youth cultures in the different social sectors, in rural and urban environments, and taking into account gender differences, opens up a range of possibilities that warn us that not all live this stage of life in the same way¹⁵.

*“Youth becomes the vanguard, the carrier of – noticeable or imperceptible – transformations in the codes of culture, and incorporates naturally the changes in customs and in significations that were the object of struggles and controversies in earlier generations”*¹⁶.

So, if in speaking of youth we are looking at a material base linked with a condition of age, processed by history and culture, we must also refer to the concept of **Generation**. For Margulis, this concept *“alludes to the period in which each individual is socialized and along with this to the accelerated cultural changes that characterize our times”*¹⁷.

There are Good Practices that not only generate but also reconstruct fruitful links between two generations. One example is the project **“Grandmothers Tell Stories”**, carried out in the Chaco, Argentina.

¹⁴ Nuñez, Pedro, *Los conceptos de infancia y adolescencia como constructos sociales e históricos*. En: *Nuevas identidades y juventudes*, Carrera de Especialización de postgrado, Buenos Aires, 2006

¹⁵ Mario Margulis

¹⁶ Margulis Mario, *Juventud, Cultura y Sexualidad*, Ed. Biblos, Buenos Aires, 2003

¹⁷ Margulis Mario, *La Juventud es más que una palabra*, Biblos, Buenos Aires, 1996

Grandmothers and grandfathers read stories for children from urban and marginal areas, encouraging reading from early childhood. This meeting place between generations fosters a varied range of activities in many types of establishments: schools, hospitals, canteens, parishes, etc. The practice aids the reconstitution of social links and the recovery of the cultural fabric, transmitting values and knowledge through reading. To this is added the promotion of books as cultural objects of high symbolic value.

The next point looks at some experiences that put the stress on youth as the protagonist of social practices that bear in mind two main dimensions: the cultural, related to the socialization of young people; and the socio-economic, that sees young people as an age group related to the transformation of social structure.

Practices that build identity

Even though all generations are socialized, *young people show up cultural changes with more intensity and variety than the generations preceding them and it is in the plane of culture, rather than in that of economics or politics, where the new codes and new modalities that youth adopt are seen*¹⁸

Current social exclusion invades a great variety of scenarios where young people circulate, from belonging to a context marked by extreme poverty, lack of insertion in the labour market and in the education system, lack of information for taking decisions, or gender inequity to the lack of social services. Each of these areas shows up the weak link uniting young people with the life of society, and reveals the profound crisis of socialization structures (family, school, full employment).

¹⁸ Margulis Mario, Juventud, *Cultura y Sexualidad*, Ed. Biblos, Buenos Aires, 2003

Faced with this panorama, some Good Practices are strengthening socialization processes of groups of young people who, despite using different codes are establishing a **collective identity**. This concept brings us to the forms in which social ties are constituted, who we relate with, who we consider equals and who different. To speak of collective identity is to speak of belonging, of trust and community. It refers to processes through which individuals construct their world-view, processes fundamentally conditioned by the position each person has in the social space, the result of a plurality of identifications produced in the interlocking of cultural, social, family and personal variables.

Finding an absence of stable and predetermined norms, the sociologist **Zigmunt Bauman** characterizes the nature of the links that are currently generated as *liquid*. He considers that we are not always sure of the place where we belong, and that “*identity is a name given to the search for a way out of this uncertainty*” (2003). For **Graciela Frigerio** (2004), identity is trace, name, inheritance, creation, continuity and rupture, but also desire for enrolment and recognition.

A large part of the construction of juvenile identity is based on the difficulty of thinking otherness, bearing in mind that identity ascriptions also imply frontiers between an inside and an outside. “*To some extent, the mark of identity is the importance that appearance acquires as one’s presentation before others*”¹⁹.

Facing up to the uncertainty produced by the changing of the spaces in which identity was traditionally formed, some social practices are successfully responding to the establishment of a new collective identity by young people. In this kind of experiences they find a way out of uncertainty, finding the possibility of constructing a subjectivised collective identity, appropriated under the form of

¹⁹ Nuñez, Pedro, Los conceptos de infancia y adolescencia como constructos sociales e históricos. En: Nuevas identidades y juventudes, Carrera de Especialización de postgrado, Bs.As., 2006

self-awareness in the context of an unlimited field of significations shared with others²⁰.

The practice “**Civic Commitment and Cultural Vitality**” realized in Chile is an example of this.

This integrative programme took place in a small community in the Cordillera of the Andes: The target was a population with its local identity, a high permanence of the inhabitants in the community and traditional work organizations. The aim of the practice was to create a base of values directed towards a more human, just, fair, united and democratic life, where it would be possible to “keep on dreaming”, communicate, build spaces for interaction and strengthen identity processes.

Through such social practices, young people can live in all areas of their daily lives a greater cohesion as the result of sharing common feelings, experiences, values, places or ideals. Through these experiences, their socialization begins to occur in a context where there are codes different from the dominant ones, imposed by an exclusive model, characteristic of the "liquid modernity" of Bauman.

We can say then that good practices are moulding new socialization processes, characterized by other experiences and expectations which act on constantly changing codes of signification. Since social practices respond to needs of the community, these transformations have a profound influence on the generation of new cultural forms.

²⁰ Gorosito Kramer Ana María, *Identidad, Cultura y Nacionalidad*. En *Globalización e Identidad Cultural*. Ed. Ciccus, Buenos Aires, 1997

Another experience that, from an environmental dimension, affects socialization processes and cultural forms is “**Ecoparque**” from the city of Tijuana, Mexico.

Its main aim was to reduce water pollution in the town and the environment. The practice showed that “recycled” water is a valuable resource that can be obtained by creating a park and transferring the recycling operation to the schools. The environmental educational programme in the region can also operate through activities linked with health, energy and other environmental topics. The practice generated economic, social and cultural benefits, and turned into the most important centre for environmental education, information and research in the region.

This example shows how the solution to the water problem in low-income communities affects the construction of values related with the environment and confirms that, even starting from experiences centred on the care of the environment, new forms of socialization can be generated within the population involved.

Practices that promote social inclusion

Tackling the topic of young people from a socio-economic dimension, we can see the high degree of vulnerability they have, to the extent that they may be one of the social groups at greatest risk of social exclusion, affected by the lack and precarisation of jobs and by the increasing fragility of social links. In most countries of Latin America, young people are a social group with serious situations of exclusion, especially in the economic and social area.

Available studies agree that the new jobs created during the 90s were unstable and with low wages, generally recruiting young people of the middle classes with an average level of education. This confirms that the crisis in our social and labour context excludes the vast majority of this social group. The absence of

prospects of success in life generates feelings of disappointment, scepticism and frustration and brings segregation as a consequence²¹.

Social practices construct other proposals and enable a glimpse of a horizon of possible hopes and of actions that are effective in mobilizing young people. Their participation, whatever the practice – whether of social inclusion, poverty reduction, housing, etc. – opens up a means of social insertion and increases the possibility of developing new life-stories, either as participants or as coordinators for implementing and later transferring them.

This occurred in the practice called ***Circo Volador [Flying Circus]*** made in Mexico City.

This practice sought to integrate values and reconstruct the social fabric between different social sectors, by strengthening youth identities. In a common space, workshops and various activities related with theatre, cinema, radio, music, etc. were held. The “Flying Circus” became a common space between young people of various social groups, enabling them to occupy an important place in their environment by creating interaction and inclusion strategies that helped to reverse social exclusion and discrimination processes.

Another similar social practice is ***En un lugar mejor [In a better place]*** run in Mendoza, Argentina.

²¹ Jacinto Claudia, Bessega Carla, *Un lugar en el mundo. Jóvenes vulnerables en búsqueda de espacios de inclusión social*. En: De la exclusión a la organización. Ed. Ciccus, Argentina

Here, social and work insertion tools are offered to a group of young people who work in the streets, as door-to-door salespeople, looking after cars and cleaning windshields on corners. The possibility of choosing a job, training and incorporating skills, meant that they were brought closer to the formal labour market, and this helped to attenuate the state of exclusion they found themselves in.

Bearing in mind that nowadays social exclusion is not a passing moment within Latin America and the Caribbean, but is a constituent part of their social process, the role that social practices can play in the cultural area is significant, influencing customs and values and transforming everyday language.

Practices that transform contexts

To what extent do young people incorporate in their socialization new codes and skills, languages and ways of perceiving, appreciating, classifying and distinguishing?²²

To what extent do the social practices in which they are protagonists influence the transformation of their contexts?

We can say that social practices have influence within an imaginary that is seen in the particular forms of cultural matrices. Through networks of social relations, these matrices gradually constitute, in a common-sense way, ways of thinking, feeling, acting, reflecting, interpreting, etc. That is, good practices foster the formation of a world-view that is linked to the collective imaginary in particular material conditions of social production and reproduction. They begin to weave a new language within the cultural fabric, overlapping the social, where attitudes, subsistence strategies, positionings and behaviours are generated that improve the conditions of social, economic, political, cultural and environmental life.

²² Virilio Paul, *Velocidad y Fragmentación de las imágenes*. In *Fahrenheit 450* nro. 4, Bs. A.s, 1988
Córdoba: Laprida 175 - Argentina - tel/fax: (54) 351 - 4210060
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web: www.elagora.org.ar - email: elagora@arnet.com.ar

This does not imply that there is a universal way of thinking for all Latin America and/or the Caribbean, but that, as **Parker** points out (1993), there are thinking processes that are analogous in correspondence with historical structural situations, equally analogous, that are the origin of a particular style, a particular type of mentality²³. Those taking part in the practice begin to “belong” to society, and from this context they feel members on an equal footing with others. This is the case of *El Ceibo* run in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

This is a group of unemployed women, either single or with unemployed husbands, with a family to keep, and squatting. Their homes were expropriated by the dictatorship for building a highway that was never made. Their economic activity, “rag-picking”, did not give them sufficient income to feed their children. Concerned to improve their quality of life, and as an extension of the activity they already had, they joined in a socio-environmental project that reversed their situation with consequences that brought not only stable employment but also new norms of daily behaviour and a sense of belonging and usefulness.

This practice encouraged the construction of identity on the basis of strengthening of personal and group self-esteem, of the culture in which the people taking part in it are inserted, and of the activity they carried out.

Thus, faced with the homogenizing process of globalization that imposes a single way of thinking, with de-historicized events, the social practices begin to produce their own history, founding new codes and modalities that are adopted by young people.

5. Social Practices in the warp of public policies.

²³ Parker Cristián, *Otra lógica en América Latina. Religión Popular y Modernización Capitalista*. Ed. Fondo de Cultura Económica, Stgo. de Chile, 1993

What happens in the area of public policies when young people begin to be socialized by the codes, experiences and expectations of new social practices? What happens with the territorialization of cultural and social construction processes?

We could speak of a kind of articulation between particular and global instances with contradictions which, in these cases, seem to become integrated. The most recent debates stress that, along with the process of territorialization and specialization of relationships, individuals seek the lost (civil or work) security in the community, by generating protective links in the neighbourhood, the group of belonging or in the family. Thus, selective forms of socialization predominate²⁴. From this point of view, taking part in social practice could be seen as a new form of socialization.

“The struggle for identity and territory is not a matter of the past but of political expressions that aim to defend social variability, self-determination and sovereignty, all manifestations which are threatening for the new world order... What is important is to think how this diversity is organized today with the power relations involved and their effects on the new territorializations”²⁵.

So, following **Touraine** (1994) *there are actors only if they combine an interiorized awareness of personal and collective rights, the recognition of plurality of interests and ideas and (...) each person’s responsibility in relation to common cultural orientations.”*

Speaking of **Public Policies**, we are referring to *“the allocation of means and resources for realizing certain products, for generating some effect or impact”²⁶.*

²⁴ Svampa (2005) and Merklen (2005), among others, have analysed these issues.

²⁵ Safa Patricia., *De las historias locales al estudio de la diversidad en las grandes ciudades: una propuesta metodológica*. En *Globalización e Identidad Cultural*, Ed. Ciccus, Buenos Aires, 1997

²⁶ Díaz Cristina, *El ciclo de las políticas públicas: notas para su abordaje y reconstrucción*, Centro de estudios interdisciplinarios institucionales de desarrollo regional, Rosario, 1998

That is, we consider them as a means for achieving ends, a set of goals that define lines of action, a collection of programmes and projects broken down from norms, a global process implying modifications of reality. And moreover, as well as being characterized by their intervention strategies, public policies “include both the ties constructed within the state fabric as well as the links that are established with the other social sectors”²⁷.

Practices that drive the exercise of citizenship

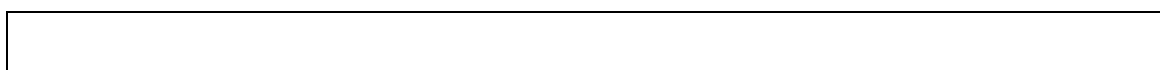
People and groups that manage to realize Good Practices produce two results:

- a. They fill a vacuum left by the inadequacies of public policies.
- b. They help to modify the culture and thus transform society and the economy.

Let’s look at arguments and examples of each of these consequences.

- a. **They fill a vacuum left by the inadequacies of public policies.** Social practices become particularly important in the face of current discontent with the State, enabling the invention and creation of alternative forms of local development and of social interventions. Many community organizations, committed to local development, develop strategies that respond to particular needs of each particular population, surpassing the general orientation of government programmes.

As an example, we can look at the practice, ***EnREDando jóvenes para el desarrollo [Networking young people for development]*** being carried out in Buenos Aires, Argentina:



²⁷ Díaz Cristina, *El ciclo de las políticas públicas: notas para su abordaje y reconstrucción*, Centro de estudios interdisciplinarios institucionales de desarrollo regional, Rosario, 1998

This experience aims to generate local development processes, involving young people planning and running projects to transform community problems, thus improving their quality of life. It consists in a competition for local development planning projects generated as from an educational process in which young people and organizations from the community and from different cities take part. This informal teaching process is organized through face-to-face training meetings and distance production processes. It implies an Associated Management model between levels of the State (national, provincial and local) and various levels of the organized community.

Among the most important achievements of this initiative are the promotion of young people's networks, the formation of human resources with skills in development project planning and management, the creation of reference points on working with young people in the communities and the establishment of a view of young people as necessary actors in local development.

Another similar practice is ***Citizens of the Planet – Young Entrepreneurs*** in Brazil:

This experience aims to generate jobs and income for young people between 15 and 25 in order to raise their self-esteem and their management ability as a driving force for local development in outer city areas. The aim of the practice was to influence public policies specifically directed at the education of young people, the creation of companies in the form of cooperatives, the promotion of the first job and income generation through self-sustaining firms. The young people involved achieved a job and/or profession, the improvement of their working conditions, and an increase in self-esteem. The programme also helped to enhance the young people's educational expectations.

The emergence of social practices to improve the quality of living and the sustainability of our cities and communications is thus building bridges to insert those who are excluded, working against the inadequate *public policies* and the difficulty of governments to implement programmes that respond to their overcrowded agendas.

- b. **They help to modify culture and thus transform society and the economy.** The emergence of sustainable social practices opens the way to creating new modes of participation that produce significant modifications in culture. Social networks expand and foster collective learning, improving conditions for the exercise of citizenship, increasing civic commitment and cultural vitality and circulating information on individual and social rights; all of these are basic conditions for the functioning of democratic systems.

The ***Youth Participative Budget (PPJoven)***, a practice run in Rosario, Argentina, is an example of this learning.

This initiative is aimed at young people between 13 and 18, encouraging their incorporation in public affairs, giving them the incentive to take part in discussing the priorities for the investment of the municipal budget. The participative budget mechanism involves a component of urban pedagogy, since it involves young men and women in politics starting from the micro-sphere of their everyday life and their territory. Their participation is strengthened within a formal decision-making context, broadening their knowledge and the exercise of their citizen's rights. Among the most important achievements of this project have been the incorporation of a generational approach in the Participative Budget, the building of citizenship among the young people and the execution of local works or projects.

Another important element to be stressed is that the impact of the social practices is greater in the ambit of weakened States that often look to privatization as a way out of their society's problems. In opposition to this option, the practices foster the re-valuation of the local as a space for social and political participation²⁸ when aiming for an improvement in the quality of living.

So we could say that, when they affect public policies, social practices produce an increase in social equity, creating more favourable conditions for developing social capital, a capital that is enriched when there are shared values, capacity for building networks, consensus on social norms, more solid institutions, etc. So we can assert that the strengthening of equity has a positive impact on the creation of conditions for stimulating people's participation in civil society base organizations.

Practices that increase the margins of governability

Another important element to be considered in this point is the relation between social inequity and governability. Faced with the low credibility of the ruling classes and the loss of legitimacy of representative institutions, the margins of effective governability are considerably reduced. Social practices help to increase the margins of effective governability.

The practice ***Reinforcing cultural aspects of peripheral settlements*** run in Nicaragua by the University Volunteer Service manages to foster institutional strengthening processes and develop construction capabilities and governability.

²⁸ Safa Patricia., *De las historias locales al estudio de la diversidad en las grandes ciudades: una propuesta metodológica*. In: *Globalización e Identidad Cultural*, Ed. Ciccus, Buenos Aires, 1997

This experience promotes the use of architecture for preserving culture and traditions. On the one hand it gives university graduates the chance to carry out their projects; and on the other, it provides the settlements with local actors who are trained in the government framework to plan their projects in a participative way.

In contrast to most conventional government strategies for fighting poverty, centred on growth, with social programmes focusing on the poor and on safety nets, with pre-established interventions that often drift away from the real needs of the people, social practices arise within community organizations that try to reverse the disenchantment of groups of young people with social programmes. These concrete experiences turn out to be an opportunity for some young people and spark off inclusion processes that transcend social sectors and levels of education.

The government strategies mentioned generally have limited results because they do not affect the bases of the inequality that conditions growth and its effects. In contrast, Good Practices reinforce feelings of social usefulness, widen the network of relationships, and increase the formation of capabilities.

To sum up, these experiences provide new instruments for improving public policies, rehearsing social, economic and environmental type solutions that are being taken on by youth groups that, in turn, create original forms of participation and open up new possibilities for exchanging knowledge that improve, at micro level, the quality of life in the region.

6. Autonomy, Leadership, Knowledge and Power: four dies to give volume and colour to the fabric

The term **Autonomy** refers to people's capacity to manage their projects independently. This capacity is engendered in the development of social practices that require both the interest of the people and objective recognition,

i.e., awareness of their situation and of the conditions that led them to develop this practice.

The greater the level of autonomy acquired by a group, the more possibilities there are that new leaders will appear, as increasing the participation of young people generates an accumulative learning enriching all levels of social participation, through the variety of different group or individual experiences.

Practices that increase knowledge and power

One practice that managed to increase the level of autonomy is ***Social inclusion and integration of young people*** run in Mendoza, Argentina.

This experience gives young people the chance of constructing a life-project linked to the exercise of their rights. Participating in this practice, young people acquire confidence – subjective interest – and also start learning about human rights, which leads them to the objective knowledge of legal resources for acting and demanding better living conditions, such as study opportunities.

The growth of the capabilities of autonomy inevitably leads to higher levels of ***Knowledge*** and ***Power***. According to **Giddens**, the relationships between knowledge and power are influenced by knowledge shared between those who are competent in taking part or in recognising the appropriate realization of a social practice. For this reason, what individuals become depends on the reconstructive efforts they make: self-knowledge is subordinated to the more inclusive and fundamental purpose of reconstructing a coherent and beneficial sense of identity²⁹.

²⁹ Giddens, Anthony, *Modernidad e identidad del yo*, Ediciones Península, Barcelona, 1995

The practice **Active Theatre** run in Asunción, Paraguay, is based on reconstructing the sense of identity through increasing knowledge and power, in this case by means of theatre.

It consists in running Theatre and Reflection sessions, aimed at fostering participation and promoting individual development and personal commitment in the building of a society founded on justice, respect for human dignity and democracy.

The proposal is based on education for democracy, encouraging the development of knowledge, skills and values necessary for defending and consolidating participatory systems and procedures, as a way of life and of living together. It uses theatre as a strategy for generating a civic-citizen dialogue based on art, a model integrating lived experiences, intuitions, creativity and reflection in the collective construction of alternatives.

This initiative has constituted a space for reflection for 21 000 students, developing behaviours of harmonious sharing in solidarity. The sessions have been held in 90 educational institutions and enabled young leaders to be identified who, using the experience acquired, went on to replicate the proposal in 26 localities in Argentina.

Practices that enrich social, cultural and symbolic capital

For Bourdieu “*social space is inscribed at the same time in spatial structures and in mental structures, which are partly the product of incorporating the former; space is one of the areas where power is affirmed and exercised...*”⁸⁰. If knowledge is constituted on the basis of space and space is related with social identity, as we described earlier, we can infer the process of constituting the

³⁰ Bourdieu, Pierre, *Las miserias del mundo*. Ed. Fondo de Cultura Económica, Argentina, 1999

archaeological layers of knowledge³¹. In this sense there is nothing predefined, as every historical relationship implies a social construction that, in turn, is composed of power relationships that are variable. These power relationships explain the conditions of possibility of the emergence of certain forms of knowing, that affect the birth of particular forms of culture of a given time.

In brief, following Bourdieu, we can see good practices as strategies through which social actors, in this case the young people taking part, increase their capital for exercising their power, their influence and, therefore, for existing in a particular field.

The practices enrich the social, cultural, economic and/or symbolic capital of the young people, strengthening their volume as well as their structure, which enables them to improve their positions in the fields (social spaces) in which they interact.

The transmission of social capital to the least-privileged sector of society reverses in part the reproduction that occurs in the education system, the phenomenon by which the "successful" pupils are those that have a greater cultural capital transmitted by the family. A social practice carried out in Argentina, ***Social inclusion and development of the community participation of adolescents and young people in a state of poverty*** has managed to attenuate exclusion processes in the education system.

The aim of the practice was to set up community study groups to accompany young people in enrolling in and following the third cycle of the middle school (age 16-18). The experience worked as a stimulus for those who had more difficulty in continuing their studies and helped them not to abandon school. It

³¹ Foucault, Michel, *La arqueología del Saber*. Editorial Siglo XXI, Buenos Aires, 2002. Introducción, Cap. II.I, II.II

also managed to encourage study among young people from deprived neighbourhoods, reducing the risks of school drop-out as well as the repetition rates. It promoted the commitment of the young people with their personal and community reality and encouraged the creation of networks of organizations closer to the centre of the neighbourhood community.

7. Violence and hope: threads interwoven in Latin American social imaginaries.

Violence is a historical phenomenon that is related with economic, social, juridical, political, cultural and psychological processes and conditions. The particular forms it takes in each society are translated in different ways in institutional weaknesses and breakdowns, alterations in the predominant ethical values and in family and social decomposition³².

Another of the worrying facets of youth exclusion is linked with the participation of young people – as victims and/or as perpetrators – in various forms of violence. According to World Bank and IDB studies, Latin America is the most violent region in the world, given that the annual register of deaths is more than twice that of any other region on the planet, with Colombia the most violent country in the world and Brazil the one with the highest growth rate in indices of violence, followed by Venezuela, especially Caracas.

We can also speak of another kind of violence. And that is the perspective that we are interested in developing in this work in which we are exploring the effect of social practices on various phenomena in contemporary society.

³² Rodríguez, Ernesto, *Los jóvenes Latinoamericanos: heterogeneidades y diversidades*. In: *La juventud latinoamericana en los procesos de globalización, Opción por los jóvenes*, FLACSO, EUDEBA, Ed. Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1998

We will use as a starting point the concept of **totalitarian violence** coined by **Jürgen Habermas** in reference to the frustration resolved in aggressiveness, which arises from the lack of prospects of realization, either individually or collectively. The feelings of emptiness and uncertainty and the daily struggle to survive grow strongly in the midst of societies in which the criteria of equality and solidarity are broken down, and give way to the appearance of different forms of violence³³. **Philippe Bourgois** (2005) proposes a conceptual distinction between four types of violence, a distinction which serves for this analysis since in practice they are found related.

- **Political violence** alludes to that which is exercised in the name of an ideology, movement or political state. The violation of citizen's rights during many years as a result of military governments penetrated the imaginary of young people's action, generating anomic behaviour.
- **Structural violence** refers to the economic-political organization of society that consolidates profound inequalities.
- **Symbolic violence** appears in the works of Bourdieu to show up how domination works at an intimate level, through the lack of recognition of power structures, such as legitimation of inequality and internalized hierarchies.
- **Intra-generational violence and towards others:** names crimes, domestic aggression, sexual attacks, self-destructive behaviours, etc.

Recent studies indicate that young people today are more conservative in their projections than previous ones, more violent in their expressions, more distant

³³ Gómez, Mónica, *El siglo XXI, entre la utopía y la violencia*. In: *Globalización e Identidad Cultural*. Ed. Ciccus, Buenos Aires, 1997

from and sceptical about politics, more individualistic and more excluded than anomic³⁴.

Practices that give back hope

The degree of violence installed in the culture of Latin American and Caribbean societies is a product of the lack of prospects as a result of the economic crisis, isolation, the lack of work, instability, disillusion and uncertainty. The exercise of social practice encourages in the social imaginary a feeling of hope that counter-balances these feelings.

Good practices generally produce feelings of hope that are able to countervail against violence. One such is the practice ***Rumo-Forte educating with sports*** in Brazil:

This practice aims to integrate vulnerable children and young people through cultural, sporting, school tuition, nutritional support, professional training, health education and artistic expression. These activities strengthen cultural identity and make solid social links that are not provided by formal education. The experience has helped to take young people out of risk situations, developing their potentialities, awakening other interests and giving them back the hope of a better life.

The design and management of Good Social Practices represents the mobilisation of resources, waking up, passing from the violence of utopia to hope³⁵ giving way to a new subjectivity in the imaginary of young people.

³⁴ Latorre Carmen Cruz, Nájera Eusebio, *Los programas de formación de jóvenes de sectores de pobreza: el papel del Estado y su relación con las ONG*, RedEtis, Unesco

³⁵ Armando Lilia, Schmucler Natalio, *De la violencia de la utopía a la posibilidad de la esperanza*. En: *Donde va la gente cuando llueve*. Pobreza y exclusión en un mundo en transición.

As a PAHO study points out, it is essential to recognise that we are facing a structural problem that is highly complex and rooted in the very culture of the region, and it is necessary to overcome the predominant simplistic approaches that are limited to responses of the kind mechanically assimilating “poverty” and “delinquency”. Fortunately, Good Practices break with these approaches, generating different kinds of intervention.

We know the world through subjective interpretations that depend on the place we occupy and on the reservoir of ideas that is a product of our own lived experiences. This is how our subjectivity is constructed, in the interior of social relationships where a multiplicity of life experiences, modes of perception and action, of values, expectations, etc. all intervene.

Despite being immersed in a culture in which subjectivity is constructed from competitive individualism and market values, there are new experiences that try to counter-balance these trends. Social practices construct new subjectivities reconstituted from the place of inclusion, necessary for the constitution of the ego. “Being” and “doing” are enriched when the perception of oneself is modified and the capacity for collective planning is developed. Thus, the young people can think of themselves as “we”, founded on collective experiences in which they feel recognised and dignified by their activity.

To sum up, these new forms of cooperation converge in a recomposition of the social fabric through codes and modalities whose main characteristics are opposed to “*liquid modernity*”, to use Bauman’s terms.

10. Practices that replicate practices

Going back to Bourdieu, the social positions of individuals in social space depend on the volume and structure of the global capital they possess. Their social position and the environment around them build their **habitus**, i.e., their

mental schema of vision, perception, classification, which enable them to have a structure of dispositions for acting. The habitus fulfils the role of *generative formulas found at the basis of each of the classes of practices and properties, i.e., of the transformation of a different style of living, distinctive of the needs and skills characteristic of a position*"³⁶

Transferring this analysis to the micro-plane of the social practices of inclusion, we can say that the "**success**" and "**distinction**" of individuals – whether from a social, cultural, economic or environmental dimension – are found closely dependent on the *habitus* they have, their capacity for mobility, the strategies and instruments of reproduction. Good Practices provide individuals with the possibility of acquiring social, cultural, economic or cultural capital, to be “successfully” included in society.

The transfer of Good Practices is an essential requirement for these to be able to multiply and potentiate their power and influence in ever broader sectors of society. The practice “**Art as a generator of social capital: consolidation and multiplication of the experience of the communities of cultural centres for social and artistic organization**” run by the organization Crear Vale la Pena in Buenos Aires, Argentina, is an example of a Good Social Practice that has achieved replicability.

The experience aimed to consolidate the programme “Art + Social Organization” as a viable model for development to improve the quality of life. The objective was the integration of the population in a situation of social exclusion and the recovery of the value of culture as a source of social life. The cultural community centres, which began precariously in very poor communities, are nowadays transferring and strengthening this option of institutional

³⁶ Bourdieu, Pierre, *La Distinción. Criterio y bases sociales del gusto*. Editorial Taurus, Madrid, 1991
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participation. Activities are encouraged that foster the integration of the excluded population through building social identity, promoting individual and collective life projects. The community centres are run by young people. The practice, which started in 1992 in the context of a social integration programme for young people through artistic and community activities, has been replicated in a network of organizations, expanding to the rest of Latin America and Europe. Its core projects are community cultural centres, the formation of young people as cultural agents for social change, a programme of multiplying the experience “Creating is worth it”, institutional development and the generation of sustainability. Today, “Crear vale la pena” is part of the Latin American Art and Social Transformation Network, made up of 25 organizations from Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru and Bolivia, with the objective of installing art as a driving force of social integration.

Enredando Jóvenes para el desarrollo (Argentina), already described in this paper, is another example of positive transfer. The idea was transferred to four Argentine provinces and won the participation of around 100 groups of young people in each of them and a total impact of 1000 young people trained, multiplying into approximately 6,600 young people, and an indirect benefit to 51 municipalities.

9. Conclusions

In societies that are democratic but in crisis, in contexts in which a great part of the population is deprived of stable jobs and minimal security, living from day to day in situations of all kinds of vulnerability and uncertainty, the participation of young people in social practices is essential, both for their effectiveness and for the renewal of approaches.

From the analysis in this paper, it seems that good practices carried out in the region are beginning to turn into channels for developing youth policies through which young people are seen not as mere targets of policies, but also as agents and protagonists of alternative strategies that will also be implemented in the future. Young people thus appear as a core component for designing and implementing innovative development strategies.

When the practices take young people into account, they open the way to a gradual process that passes through several levels³⁷:

- **Taking Part:** fostering a minimal degree of interest and permanence.
- **Being Consulted** about the definition of a programme or project.
- **Co-managing it:** enables their direct intervention in defining and running the practice.
- **Self-developing them:** encouraging negotiated and agreed decision-making to respond to their needs.

It is important that these participative social practices in which young people are protagonists are:

- **Comprehensive** in the sense of covering education, employment, health, access to housing, etc., which inevitably leads to raising awareness of their situation.
- **Specific** in that they are directed to a particular population, giving priority to the most vulnerable groups, both in urban and rural environments.

These characteristics do not imply the implementation of rigidly-planned “pre-fabricated” practices, but ones adapted to the local realities with effective concern for the problems and expectations of the young people who feel that

³⁷ Latorre Carmen Cruz, Nájera Eusebio, *Los programas de formación de jóvenes de sectores de pobreza: el papel del Estado y su relación con las ONG*, RedEtis, Unesco

the institutions and channels of representation are not available to them. That is to say, it is necessary for the social practices to be articulated with social needs.

Throughout this work, we have shown how the cultural fabric is strengthened through practices that influence the recovery of individual and group identity and that of the State and the society:

- **At individual level** it impacts the self-image, in new modes of perception, in attitudes and feelings about their own needs, customs, projects, culture, etc.
- **At collective level**, faced with the contemporary weakness of ambits of socialization, the practice has a socializing role that constructs or reconstructs identity in the context of the activity carried out; it forms a “we”, a sense of belonging to the group that then extends to other areas of the lives of the young people.
- At State level, and therefore, at that of society as a whole, the practices work as satisfiers of need for social integration, helping to overcome urban marginality, developing educational training, recomposing the social fabric, constituting spaces for “generational expression”, places where young people can transcend differences and adversities. We are not talking about a "homogenisation of culture", but about specific sectors of young people within each social sector that acquire spaces in which they can project collective or individual proposals and present and channel their needs and demands.

When social practices are adapted to the particularities of youth culture and identity, they increase their effectiveness and are in a better state to make better use of their resources, which in turn has a positive effect on the development of effective local development policies.



It is necessary for States to know and interconnect with good social practices in order to potentiate the initiatives that they are successfully carrying out at local level. This will lead to a growing process of democratization and an increase in the population's autonomy in taking decisions about matters that affect their quality of life as well as greater inclusion of all the social groups. It will also increase the levels at which information circulates between State, civil society and NGOs, cooperatives, civil associations, etc. easing the transfer of original and innovative responses for solving the multiple problems of the Latin American and Caribbean societies

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