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SUSTAINABILITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY:

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# THE CRITICAL NEIGHBOURHOODS INITIATIVE PROGRAM AS POLICY PROJECT:

## A personal account

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### 1. March 2005: Myself and my circumstances

This presentation intends to give an account of an experience on governmental initiative based on mechanisms of territorial governance and on the conviction of the power of dialogue, with the peculiarity of that account being realized by someone who had the political responsibility of conceiving and carrying it out. I am talking about the *Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative*[1] program and the role I played in it as Secretary of State for Cities and Spatial Planning.

It is, therefore, a first-person narrative, an exercise which can be as interesting as ambiguous. Interesting, due to the fact that my direct participation on the multiple decision-making processes underlying the elaboration, approval and implementation of a complex public action allows me to reconstitute the dynamics and tensions which would be otherwise barely graspable by external observers; ambiguous, because any exercise of reconstitution of decision-making processes by those who had the political responsibility of coordinating them always bears the risk of some revisionism, albeit unconscious. Consequently, I shall endeavour to be "schizophrenically" rigorous, analysing and evaluating the *Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative* as if I was an external observer, but using information which could be accessed only by those directly involved.

Any political decision must be understood starting from contexts of asymmetrical relations of influence, power and trust in which the decision takes place. Hence, it is important to start by understanding my own position regarding those contexts in the moment of conception of the

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[1] Abbreviated designation for the "*Critical Neighborhoods Urban Qualification and Reinsertion Operations*".

*Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative* program. I will do it through a SWOT analysis applied to myself: strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats of a government official with an academic origin and without political experience at the moment of his taking of office as Secretary of State for Cities and Spatial Planning, in 2005.

Let's begin by the weaknesses: not being a member of the government political party and not having political experience. Those who are savvy about the political party corridors know that the status of independent and the academic provenance raise immediate suspicions to many of the party's active members. Independent government officials with an academic provenance are considered unpredictable and exceedingly theoretical, almost always without any party-political capital to protect them, and generally faced as the frail sector of governments. Consequently, they are vulnerable and easily discarded in moments of crisis. As a matter of fact, any public initiative with notoriety by this kind of government officials is susceptible of being interpreted by some of his peers as a personal action pointed at media visibility or even as exhibitionism, carried out without regard for the tacit or formal rules governing the complex relations e hierarchies of power.

But there were also strengths: technical-scientific credibility, based on a vast curriculum in the matters assigned that I was assigned to, and a good knowledge of administration, of its culture and of several of its leaders and technical personnel, in consequence of a long experience in consultancy provided to land-use planning public services. From this point of view, a strong social capital made up for a weak political capital.

In its turn, the area of Spatial Planning, my main context of action, was characterized by a set of well-known threats and opportunities.

The main threat pertaining Spatial Planning was the structurally "weak" nature of the land-use policy in face of policies of a sectoral nature – transportation, economy, agriculture, environment, and so on – and the visions, interests and groups associated to those domains. Any relevant decision in matters of land-use policy will interfere with those visions, interests and groups. But also, and somewhat symmetrically, any profound change in the diverse sectoral policies will trigger land-use impacts, often with consequences that go against the principles and goals pursued by land-use policy.

The existing core opportunity at the time was derived from the generalized consensus regarding the necessity to overcome the limitations of a land-use model considered by many as too rationalist, technocratic and bureaucratic. It is certain that this diagnostic, being relatively consensual, gave rise to diverse and even antagonistic reactions: what some envisaged as the necessity to pursue the same ends through different means, by adopting a more strategic, prospective and procedural vision, others found to be a pretext for the defence of a growing deregulation of land use, occupation and transformation, through a devaluation of the role played by the instruments of land-use management. But the idea that there was a paradigm of land-use whose potentialities seemed exhausted contributed to raise the awareness, by the multiple public and private agents, of the necessity of introducing changes in perspectives, procedures and practices. My academic provenance allowed me to transpose to the domain of public decision-making the debate, very much alive in several countries since the 90's, about the crisis of the "modern" rationalist model of land-use and the emergence of collaborative and participative planning, in which the concept of territorial based governance plays a central role [1].

Therefore, this was my starting context, that is, the potential weaknesses and strengths of my personal characteristics and the threats and opportunities associated to the land-use domain. In short, myself and my circumstances in March 2005, the moment I took office as Secretary of State for Cities and Spatial Planning.

## 2. The Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative as policy project: options

In August 2005 – less than 5 months after my taking of office – the *Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative* program[2] was approved at a meeting of the Council of Ministers [2]. The people directly involved in its preparation had a clear idea of what they wanted, especially my cabinet staff and the staff at the Institute for Housing and Urban Regeneration. Figure 1 presents the guidelines of this program.

First and foremost, the launching of a so-called Policy for the Cities was considered essential. Portugal had had several town planning programs, some of which with national provenance (for instance, Polis), and others with EU origin (Urban), but had never had a true Policy for the Cities, that is, an articulate and coherent set of institutional assignments and legal, financial and fiscal strategic tools that favoured a systemic vision of urban development for the whole country. The Policy for the Cities Polis XXI, as it was named at the time, was based on three pillars [3]. One of those pillars, of an intra-urban nature, amounted to integrated interventions in areas with specific characteristics.

Secondly, there was reasonable knowledge regarding the several kinds of integrated urban interventions previously developed. There was awareness that their fulfilment e supervision had permitted an accumulation of an important set of knowledge and skills by a small, albeit significant, number of technicians. But we were also aware that those interventions had not fully achieved their goals.

Thirdly, the national preparation for the financing programming cycle regarding the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) 2007-2013 would start soon enough, which would allow the Policy for the Cities Polis XXI, conceived in the meantime, to be explicitly reflected in the NSRF document and thus be partially supported by the financial instruments contained by it.

Therefore, the favourable conditions were established in order to formulate a policy for the cities that could benefit from the strategic and programmatic framework of the NSRF. But it was clear that such policy justified the development of an experimental program which could mobilize the memories associated with previous experiences, relatively scattered and endangered by forgetfulness, and which anticipated, at the same time, the rules that would be enforced during the 2007-2013 timeframe.

The goal was that the people involved in the experimental program acquired or reinforced the knowledge, skills and relationships needed for the successful development of the integrated urban interventions that would be supported in the scope of the NSRF and that others would find in the program a relevant reference for action. The launching of an experimental program in this domain and in these conditions envisaged, therefore, a threefold goal: to mobilize and revitalize already existent skills; to widen – through the participation of a wider and more diversified range of actors – and to deepen – through the increase of the intervention domains – those skills around a restrict number of integrated urban interventions; and to produce a reference for action for future participants in integrated urban development interventions.

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*Critical Neighborhoods Initiative* **Program Guidelines**

"The intervention programs in each neighborhood should respond to immediate problems and, at the same time, stimulate the creation of new opportunities based on existing potentialities, through solutions developed according to the following guiding principles:

a) Exemplary, innovative and experimental nature of the interventions to be achieved;

b) Viable mobilizing projects; each intervention should include an action/project with high potential of mobilization of the neighborhood inhabitants and high potential of transformation of the neighborhoods structural conditions;

c) Focus on housing rehabilitation and qualification, in regards to urban development and to the environment;

d) Strategic coordination and civic participation as conditions for success;

e) New resources exploration and mobilization of new financing sources as a sustainability factor;

f) Added value and durability of outcomes and effects."

Figure 1. *Critical Neighborhoods Initiative* Program Guidelines [2].

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[2] Resolution of the Council of Ministers n. 143/2005, 7 September. Point 1 of this resolution states: "The operations to develop intend to stimulate and put to test innovative institutional, procedural and technological solutions in terms of conception, implementation and assessment of public action in critical urban areas, and the gathered experience will be taken into account in the policy for the cities to be carried out".

On the other hand, there was awareness that the members of a government which found itself at the beginning of a new political cycle, the product of the political party alternation logic, would be more open to a not only reformist, but also inter-ministerial cooperation stance, a decisive aspect of interventions that, based on territory, would have to involve domains under the tutelage of different ministries.

There was also awareness that this type of initiative, although experimental and involving a limited number of interventions, would be confronted with difficulties. The informal conversations that had taken place until then with central and local administration leaders and technicians emphasized a recurrent set of obstacles to the development of integrated urban interventions that could not be underestimated.

The referred difficulties were of institutional, social and financial nature. The first ones seemed to me the most important at the time. The issues raised in this domain regarded mainly two aspects: the effective degree of dedication and commitment of the various partners involved in the same intervention and the evolution of the relationship dynamics along the intervention processes.

The first aspect, regarding the degree of dedication and commitment of each of the partners involved, is particularly decisive. The initial enthusiasm could not give place to disenchantment and to progressive withdrawal; voluntarism could not mean a forced presence of sceptical or even critical partners; the conditions created could not give rise to tactical or even opportunistic approximations. But, at the same time, the key agents for change in the intervention areas could not be left out. Between allies – whom we needed to identify and to secure their loyalty –, sceptics – whom we needed to convince –, and disbelievers – whom we needed to attract or, at least, prevent from transforming into difficult obstacles to surmount – there was a complex process of clarification, persuasion and involvement, based on the ingredients present in any politics manual on soft power, from argumentative capacity to the creation of personal empathy relations, from the strict respect for each one's competences to the creation of more or less subtle situations of complicity.

If these are the general rules, the truth is that their management became particularly complex in an intervention which presupposed intense relations between different ministries, central administrations entities (concentrated and deconcentrated), municipalities, and also non-governmental organizations with presence in the intervention areas. The involvement of eight ministries, the existence of a centralized and sectorialized administration, the (normal) existence of political agendas and timings of their own by the municipalities, and also situations of greater or lesser tension e conflict extant in any intervention area allowed to foresee that the survival of initial dedication and commitment implied the construction of processes of reciprocal knowledge and trust in the context of an adequate management model and the joint elaboration of a common strategy.

Regarding the relations inside the government, the fundamental preoccupation was to create relations of a complementary nature and synergies that were not perceived as abusive intromissions in domains under the tutelage of other ministries. That stance was generically understood, but with distinct degrees and timings of acceptance.

Concerning the relations with central administration services, the main issue – truth be told, never solved – was to guarantee that the representatives of the various ministries intervened effectively in that condition and not individually, that is, that their positions translated – or were translated to – the practices of the services to which they belonged. However, that was not always the tendency, with the result that some of the entities formally integrated in the execution of the program never felt bound in relation to the decisions being made.

The relation with the administration services under my tutelage raised a different problem. Is this case, to someone coming from a academic career and, for that reason, with specific knowledge about the matters being discussed, the question was to try to disassociate the technical issues – a prerogative of the services decision-making – from the political issues – my responsibility. That dissociation effort was as important as I was aware that an excessive intervention on entities under my tutelage in meetings that counted on the presence of services from other ministries would always be interpreted by the representatives of the latter as a disempowerment of leaders that I had chosen myself.

The relation with the municipalities was a peculiar one and, in a sense, the most fascinating, for it put face to face political decision-makers with the same democratic legitimacy, but with visions and priorities which did not necessarily coincide. On the other hand, I was aware that not only the majority of the program's intervention domains was under municipal tutelage, but also that the involvement of municipalities in complex participatory processes always created some level of discomfort, or even raise disagreement, in some mayors.

Lastly, the relation with non-governmental organizations was less intense and continuous. Moreover, that relationship raised some issues different from the previous, particularly in regards to the necessity of a treatment that could not be interpreted locally as privileging some entities in detriment of others, nourishing local stories of tensions and conflict that had nothing to do with the *Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative*, but which could endanger a good pursuance of the interventions to be developed in those areas.

The answer to this set of difficulties was conceived out of three components: scope (focus); processes (inclusion and trust); and critical monitoring (knowledge).

The first concern justified the option for a rather restricted number of interventions, but nonetheless with some geographical and party representativeness. Three areas were chosen, one in Oporto (*Bairro do Lagarteiro*) and two others in Lisbon's metropolitan area (*Cova da Moura*, *Amadora* municipality, and *Vale de Amoreira*, *Moita* municipality), with leaderships divided between the three political parties with higher expression at the local government's level. The selection of a small, but rather diversified number of intervention areas intended to conciliate the experimental nature of the Initiative with the existence of distinct contexts of action.

The second concern pertained the necessity of building inclusive processes, based on relations of trust. For that reason, a great centrality was assigned to the participatory, collaborative and deliberative processes involving the various partners of each of the interventions. These processes were developed having three framing elements as reference:

- A partnership protocol for intervention area, which envisaged to grant transparency to the pursued goals and to establish a public and lasting commitment between the various partners subscribing the operation;
- An Intervention Plan for each of the areas, conceived during a period of nine months with the participation not only of the partners, but also of local populations, envisaging the collaborative production of an agenda for common intervention;
- A multilevel Governance Model (inter-ministerial working group, executive commission, local monitoring committees and technical groups of the project), envisaging the assurance of good conditions of communication, dialogue, articulation and institutional coordination during the several stages of the interventions [4].

Finally, there was the concern of monitoring the program's execution out of a solid knowledge about this kind of operations, taking place both in Portugal and in other countries, involving a group of specialists whose mission was to critically monitor the evolution of the interventions in their many components.

Given the identified obstacles and the expected difficulties, this was the response found to adaptively manage the evolution of the interventions. The choice made followed the conviction that the fulfilment of adequate forms of territorial governance is essential for the development of integrated urban interventions based in a perspective of inclusion, learning, capacity building and empowerment, institutionally as well as individually.

### 3. The *Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative* as praxis: tensions

This presentation does not intend to carry out a balance of the interventions developed in the scope of the *Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative* program. But it will be useful to express, being politically responsible for this program's conception, a personal interpretation of the main tensions present during the first years of its execution. Truth be told, the way the program was conceived and developed contained six tensions whose meaning and implications is important to understand and consider.

The first tension stems from the *nature* of the program: does it make sense to centrally develop, by governmental initiative (*top-down* logic), an experimental program based on local mobilization and participation, and in collaborative and horizontal forms of deliberation (*bottom-up* logic)?

The second tension concerns the program's *ambition*: does it make sense to try to coordinate agents, values, interests, powers and capabilities so different in contexts marked by a persistent culture of institutional fragmentation and by the occurrence of sometimes significant conflicts between entities and groups of a same area?

The third tension pertains to the *execution conditions* of the interventions: is it possible to fulfil actions which presuppose processes of social innovation, demanding in terms of learning and capacity building and, therefore, in terms of time, in the context of interventions with relatively short deadlines and tightly defined calendars?

The fourth tension refers back to the skills to be mobilized: is it possible to ensure, in the middle of one and the same intervention and in view of the human and financial resources available at the partnering entities, technical skills (mostly of on a basis of areas of study: economy, engineering, architecture, sociology, geography, psychology, etc.) and general skills (conflict management, mediation, facilitation and consensus-building)?

The fifth tension regards the kind of *results* to value: does it make sense to value the quality of the participation, dialogue and coordination processes in detriment of the results obtained (institutional vision of learning, capacity building and empowerment), or, inversely, to assign priority to the tangible results obtained in disregard of the quality of the underlying processes (intervention efficacy vision)?

Finally, the sixth tension emphasizes the issue of the *stability* of the interventions: is the complexity of the interventions an inevitable source of disruption, in the extent that it increases the degree of exposition and sensitivity to unpredictable circumstances, worsening its vulnerability and increasing the possibilities of failure?

These tensions are present in the *Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative* program, not in an unexpected way, but in a structural fashion, in the extent that they are part of the program's conception itself. The issue is, therefore, to know how to manage them and what are the minimal indispensable conditions (institutional, social, financial, etc.) which is necessary to ensure in order to give meaning and feasibility to the action programs built in a participatory and collaborative fashion.

## 4. The *Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative* as political experience: illations

Initially, the *Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative* program was conceived with a limited time span in mind (2005-2007), given its experimental nature and the intention of constituting a reference for action for integrated urban interventions to be supported in the scope of the NSRF programming for 2007-2013. Due to delays motivated by factors of various order, the deadline was extended later on until 2013. Remaining in office until October 2009, I held the political responsibility for the program during a period which roughly coincided with the first four years of its execution.

From its beginning, the *Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative* was subjected to several assessments by independent national and foreign entities. On the other hand, its context of application changed, in accordance with the political guidelines adopted since 2009 (XVIII constitutional government) and, most of all, 2011 (XIX government).

It is not my task to carry out an evaluation of the current situation of the interventions developed at *Bairro do Lagarteiro*, *Cova da Moura* and *Vale de Amoreira*: I don't possess the required information nor is this the appropriate place to perform such task. But I would like to finish this presentation with some remarks, considering the curious paradox which consists in this program's abandonment by government officials coinciding with a proposal, presented by the European Commission for the next community programming cycle 2014-2020, of integrated territorial development instruments based exactly on the kind of philosophy which underlies the *Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative*.

Any appraisal of the *Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative* program cannot be polarized between the enchantment of those who conceived it politically and technically and who contributed to it with energy and tremendous commitment, in its diverse and eventful stages of execution, the disappointment of those whose expectations built in the meantime were let down, and the criticism of those who limited themselves to underscoring that the proposed goals were not fully accomplished. Between alluring enchantment, demobilizing disappointment and crushing criticism there is an immense room for analysis, assessment and learning.

From a more technical point of view, we would have to go further: to perform a counterfactual assessment, that allowed the identification of the value, tangible and intangible, created by the interventions and, as a counterpoint, to estimate the costs of inaction for the communities at stake, in social, economic and financial terms, resulting from the program's inexistence. It would be important, also, to clearly differentiate the results, impacts and effects of the interventions, taking into account the fact that these make themselves felt over the course of time. Lastly, it would be justified to conduct a study on the social construction of the processes of perception and change and innovation awareness by the partners involved and by local communities which took place at the intervention areas.

The *Critical Neighbourhoods Initiative* program puts at the core of its existence the mechanisms of territorial governance and the advantages and power of dialogue. But its history, on its own, does not possess enough strength or representativeness to confirm or disprove the validity of the assumptions adopted. Furthermore, the theoretical debate on the efficiency of governance mechanisms as an instrument for application of public policy is not itself conclusive. Believers, sceptics and critics evoke arguments which suggest they are right. Such distinct and even contradictory results and appraisals demand prudence as to emitting any definite opinion. But that does not prevent us from identifying the focus of the question to be clarified: what are the political, institutional, cultural, and social conditions capable of stimulating ways of territorial governance which, being based on participation, on collaboration between different entities, and on institutional coordination, will allow to achieve results that would not be achievable otherwise?

The answer to the question laid out demands that a voice be given to the several leading figures of this kind of interventions: national and local political leaders, central and local administration technicians, non-governmental organization's leaders and associates, business companies, and, of course, citizens. They will all have their personal reports, built out of a significant diversity of goals, expectations and experiences. It is that polyhedron of testimonies that we must come to know and understand.

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