

LOOKING BACK THROUGH A NEW PAIR OF GLASSES: CONFLICT AND MEDIATION IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

UMA ABORDAGEM AO CONFLITO E À MEDIAÇÃO NO DESENVOLVIMENTO LOCAL

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ABSTRACT

Local development processes include a complex social dynamic where, frequently, conflicts has an important role, namely blocking the cooperation modes between social actors or institutions. Mediation can have an important role in local development processes. In this paper we analyse data from long lasting processes of local development, focusing on the mediation structure in order to highlight some conclusive reflections.

Keywords: “Local development”, “conflict”, “mediation”, “social change”.

RESUMO

Os processos de desenvolvimento local incluem dinâmicas sociais complexas nas quais, frequentemente, o conflito tem um papel importante, nomeadamente bloqueando as formas de cooperação entre os actores sociais ou as instituições. Neste artigo analisámos dados de um longo processo de desenvolvimento local, focando-nos na sua estrutura de mediação, com a finalidade de sublinhar algumas reflexões conclusivas.

Palavras-chave: “Desenvolvimento Local”, “conflito”, “mediação”, “mudança social”.

JEL Classification: I29

1. CONFLICT AND UNPREDICTABILITY IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

Local development is a type of social intervention in which people, with or without the help of external social actors or institutions, try to make concrete the processes that would promote their vision for the future of a certain territory. We could point out a considerable number of characteristics that currently define local development as we see it¹. But, in this paper, we focus on a small number of features: the beginning of processes around community problems as defined by the community (Amaro, 1998; Reszohazy, 1998), the participation of social actors at all levels of these processes (Nogueiras, 1996). Local development is mainly made up of educational processes, including formal, nonformal and informal processes (Santos, 1990). Finally, social change is one of the central aims of local development, as broadly defined by Luque (1995).

¹ For a more complete analysis of local development characteristics, see Fragoso (2009).

Regarding the endogenous character of local development, it is common to state that the resources (human, economic and environmental) existing in a certain territory are enough to build knowledge that could be used to address the needs of a community. In this sense, endogenous processes of development could be said to be based on the internal impulse to start the dynamics of social change. Yet, several authors, such as Melo (1988), point out that deprived communities do not have the dynamics for spontaneous change. Moreover, external initiation is fundamental to trigger development processes. Furthermore, Vachon (2000) shows that endogenous development often needs external contributions, provided that central change dynamics come from within.

The fact that we take participation, in a nonpaternalistic way, as a central value of local development has other types of consequences. Experts and researchers may think that the particular directions that people take are wrong. But, if we truly believe in participation, then people possess the control of the processes. Being external researchers or field agents, we can debate and advise. But, we cannot force people to take specific actions that theoretically are thought to be ideal. As we have argued in Fragoso & Lucio-Villegas (2004a), there is no way to predict the particular directions that local development changes could take. Such processes are, in fact, insecure and unpredictable—characteristics that frequently enervate community educators or other social actors.

These characteristics lead to the conclusion that local development processes are often complex and involve important collective dynamics. To be involved in local development dynamics means, for the most part, to be permanently debating what is being done by a number of individuals and groups. What is more critical and difficult is developing a clear view of the strategic dimensions and problems that should be tackled, with what instruments, by whom and how. In this type of setting, conflicts between people or entities occur frequently. Taking for granted that conflict can have a blocking effect on local development processes, mediation could surely be highlighted as a possible solution to this problem.

According to Williams, mediation can be defined as (a) finding a central point between two opposites, (b) describing the interaction between two opposed concepts or forces within the totality and (c) describing such interactions as substantial [...] but also as a process in which the form of the mediation alters the things mediated (1989, p. 205). This definition does not resolve the issue. Rather, several questions emerge that we should be able to answer: Who is responsible for the mediation processes? Can it be an external mediator or a community or collective member? Does mediation bear different meanings, dimensions or other factors not directly present in William's definition? Which factors are attributable to influencing mediation processes?

2. CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Our research was conducted during the period from 1998 to 2002 in a rural area called Cachopo, located in northern, mountainous Algarve, south of Portugal. This area, since the Second World War, has been subjected to gradual episodes of economic, social, and economic crisis. The structural causes of this decay are basically the tensions and contradictions that arise from the transition between tradition and modernisation. These major factors and others have also caused the mass emigration of the population to other European countries and a mass exodus to national coastal cities experiencing tourism booms. Paramount to these disruptions has been the aging of the population, the bankruptcy of traditional agriculture (subsistence agriculture used to be the main economic activity) and a strong devaluation of cultural traditions.

For research purposes, it is important to understand some elements around the social space of Cachopo. The city is in a mountainous area of about 200 Km², which today has around 1,000 inhabitants (every ten years the population decreases by 25-29%). The social organisation of the space is very important. In fact, the main population area that concentrates all of the existing services is a small village with 200 people. The remaining 800 live in very small clusters² of houses spread throughout the field, which in some cases today have no inhabitants at all. The biggest cluster (Mealha) has only around 50 people.

The main purpose of the research was to examine the processes of local development in this area from 1985 until 2002. We tried to identify major changes caused by the actions of the people involved. Our research consisted of five case studies (Yin, 1993) that had a strong conceptual component directed to the holistic comprehension of development processes. Our study was mainly interpretative (Merriam, 1998). The techniques used were document analysis, nonparticipating observation and, mainly, nonstructured interviews as defined by Ruiz Olabuénaga (1999). In a second phase, in which we were looking for specific information as we better understood the context, we conducted some interviews that were semistructured, in accordance with the work of Gighlione and Matalon (1992).

Although we ended this research in 2003, we had never included mediation in the analysis of our data. The main aim of this paper is, therefore, to review some of the data and to change the basic theoretical perspective in an attempt to reveal different patterns and points of interest.

3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES IN CACHOPO

In Cachopo, the processes of local development began in 1985, when the Radial³ team (an external team) initiated a participative project that involved some local groups interested in solving problems they felt to be urgent. This external institution stayed in the field for six years. During that period, this group, together with groups from Cachopo, launched a number of initiatives: *i*) two training programmes for women designed to build two microenterprises in which people could create their own jobs; *ii*) the creation of an infant centre for children between 3-12 years, which conveyed the need to design an in-service, action-research training programme for educators; and *iii*) an organisational process involving local groups, aiming both to prepare them to manage the projects and to open the possibility of future development processes.

In this context, we can only point out the major evolutions of the case, and, to do so, we are going to divide the main events into four phases (Fragoso & Lucio-Villegas, 2004b).

We considered the period from 1985 to 1991 as a **learning phase**, in which community groups had the chance to access specific knowledge and to see their skills grow. Three different types of learning processes were in progress: *i*) *The first learning process involved* two years of nonformal professional training programmes, directed at the creation of self-employment and structured around small units of production with close links between theoretical training and productive work. *ii*) The second learning process consisted of an in-service, action-research training programme for infant educators of the four centres that had begun functioning. The process lasted three and a half years and depended on collaboration with the University of Algarve. It alternated formal learning with nonformal learning. *iii*) The third learning process entailed nonformal and informal learning efforts based on the organisation of groups, on the construction of collective structures (associations) and on the valuable lessons of participation that were derived from it. The process was fed by

² These clusters are called in Portuguese *Montes*. There are about 56 *Montes* in the area.

³ Support Network for the Integrated Development of Algarve.

conscientisation. The project was participative. Autonomy was embryonic, and dependence on the external entity was significant.

The second phase (1991-1993) was a **transition** that began when the external institution left the field. This time was important for personal and collective ruptures (even in the psychological dimensions) that forced local social actors to assume their growing autonomy in all dimensions. During this period, there was a certain stabilization of the successful experiences. But, one of the created workshops closed down because it could not achieve economic viability, and there were no local spontaneous actions. This period was also important in that social actors began to assume the new technical cultures they had gained, and accordingly, they experienced some changes in their social roles. In the beginning, the defence mechanisms of the community were so strong that it denied those persons a corresponding social status. But, gradually, this situation showed some signs of change. Finally, a new external institution entered the field with the firm purposes of staying and acting as part of the community, which soon became a fact.

We have called the third phase (1994-1999) the **dichotomic phase** because the pattern of changes included opposite tendencies:

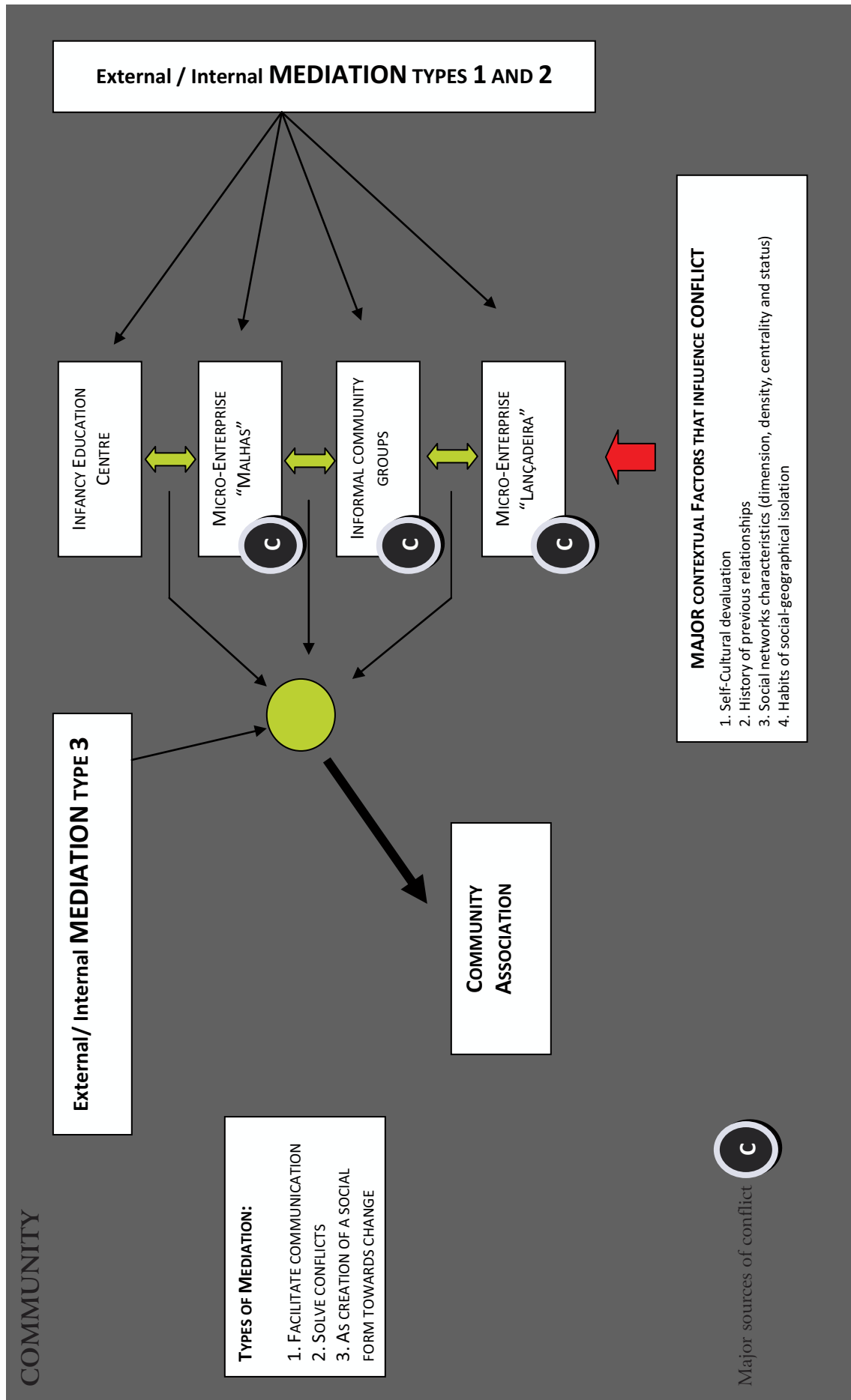
- On the one hand, people had already gained the awareness that, through their actions, change was possible. Hence, endogenous processes of local development emerged. New groups and initiatives arose, and some changes extended to the community, especially the ones related to gender roles. People who had participated in former processes were now being the “engines” of development activities.
- On the other hand, it was clear that some things were not evolving as “expected”. For instance, the level of fragmentation within the core groups was growing, and conflicts that were less visible before were now clear. The local equilibria of power were definitely moving. In this phase, the speed of change seemed to accelerate, and the circumstances in the region were unpredictable.

Finally, in the phase of **stabilisation** (2000/2003), the patterns of some local development actions were maintained. These patterns showed tendencies that can be seen in their negative and positive aspects. The internal territories of social action seemed to be clearer, and so were the status and centrality of some actors. It also became clear that individual protagonists were in some cases much more important and visible than the ones from the groups. The levels of fragmentation were apparent, and individual actors recognised that the ideal for the future of Cachopo would not be fulfilled. In short, the idea of the different groups from Cachopo speaking with one collective voice was a shattered dream.

4. THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN CONFLICT AND MEDIATION

This very brief summary compresses an immense number of events. But, we think that the elements discussed are sufficient to understand the case. Next, we will look at these phases, considering conflict and its consequences, together with the context factors that allowed conflict to appear. Figure 1 will help us in that task.

Figure 1. Learning Phase (1985-1991)



In figure 1, we can see that the external project team (Radial) that launched the processes of local development in Cachopo worked with informal groups in the community to build some experiences: an infancy education centre and two training courses aimed at building microenterprises (“Malhas” and “Lançadeira”). Within these groups, conflict was frequent due to several factors. First, this was a community with a long history of abandonment and isolation, a rural world in destruction; the inland communities of Algarve had no chance of making the transition from a subsistence form of agriculture to a modern one based on mechanisation. Hence, we witnessed not only the bankruptcy of agriculture and the traditional professions linked to it but also the threat to the cultural characteristics of this rural identity. The community itself believed that its culture was not adequate to face modern world challenges. In the three initiatives listed here, the linking of the traditional and the modern was a departure point. In the children centre, the in-service training process designed for educators tried to focus on modern pedagogy. But, in attempting that focus, the educators departed from local culture in building specific activities for the kids. In Lançadeira (a small weaving enterprise), the challenge was to innovate in techniques and to create more modern products in an aesthetic sense while preserving local cultural elements (in the colours or patterns of the used fabrics). Malhas was dedicated to producing sweaters, combining traditions old and new. To conclude, a task that seemed logical—joining the traditional and the modern—was difficult in this phase. People reacted strongly against it in some cases. Therefore, we can say that *self-cultural devaluation* was a factor of conflict.

There are two major sources of conflict that are deeply intertwined: social network characteristics and the history of previous relationships. Let us begin with social networks. According to Walker et al. (1994), the factors that influence the social support that individuals can receive and give in their networks are as follows:

1. The *dimension* of the network. The bigger the networks, the greater the number of members who provide others with emotional help, goods and services is. The bigger the networks, the greater the percentage of members who receive social support is. Hence, people within larger networks have greater advantages.
2. The *density* of the network is measured by the proportion of the constructed links over all of the possible links that social actors could create. Dense networks facilitate communication and coordination, thus allowing better social support. But, the authors also warn that low density networks can be more satisfactory to individuals, especially if network links are formed by friendship relations.
3. *Centrality* and *status*. The terms refer to the prominence or importance of individuals in their own network. A certain person is central if he or she is involved in many relationships—thus, the most simple measure of centrality lies in the number of connections that a member of a particular network maintains with other members of that network.

The primary characteristics of the social networks in Cachopo are the following: small networks in dimension; high density relative to the number of persons who have a personalised knowledge of the other; but low density when it comes to friendship relationships. In this first phase of the investigation, there were no central or high status social local actors. That is, centrality and status were given to the external team that triggered the processes (Radial). Even if they were external, their continuous, everyday presence in the location made this possible.

Under these conditions, we can say that the opportunities for obtaining social support were not the best. The fact that centrality and status were given to Radial team members indicated that people from Cachopo entertained a significant number of preconceptions and assumptions about them. For instance, the people from Cachopo said that Radial members “were communists” who “only came to Cachopo because they earned a lot of money from

the fees paid to them”. For some years, this type of information circulated freely among local actors without knowledge of the Radial team. It is our interpretation that this situation had consequences: *i*) some sectors of the population kept a distance from the processes going on; and *ii*) the “outside” information and opportunities that Radial brought had begun to circulate in smaller zones of the network.

The *history of previous relationships* was a determinant in this phase. The different experiences joined people from the community. Some former conflicts were transported to different and smaller contexts, such as the microenterprises and the infancy centre, which in some cases made conflict harder to manage.

The Radial team provided two different types of mediation during this phase. First, the team operated inside the individual groups, creating moments and spaces for people to debate and make common decisions on the issues important to the groups. It was very important that conflicts were not hidden. When conflicts between persons emerged, Radial members gathered people around a table, debated and contributed to resolving the conflict. The Radial team created a second type of mediation made in a very sensible, strategic dimension: the uniting of members of these groups to form a new association. This community association should be the one to assume the future common strategy for development issues, generally speaking. Also, mediation was an attempt to make people completely responsible for the development processes. Ideally, the external entity Radial would have been dispensable after a short period. In this phase, this type of mediation (we call it creation of a social form towards change) seemed to work well; the association was built and several members of the individual groups were active in it.

But, circumstances changed significantly during the transition phase, as we can see in **figure 2**. As we mentioned before, the Radial team had to terminate its direct intervention in Cachopo. Mediation was left to community local actors who, due to a number of factors, could not follow the same type of mediation. Except for cultural devaluation, which was not a problem anymore, the same factors influencing conflict were present. For a number of reasons, local actors focused their mediation actions only on one type in trying to resolve the emerging conflicts between people. That is equivalent to saying that the mediation towards more general strategic aims disappeared (mediation type 3), and the same situation occurred with the types of mediation intended for better communication between persons. It is not strange, therefore, that the fragile bonds existing inside the community association broke in several directions. This association, from this moment on, managed the infancy education centre effectively (in 1992, a new centre was inaugurated), but it abandoned all the other areas of action.

It is notable that, during this phase, the fragmentation of the groups increased. In addition, in 1991, a new association emerged. Two young adults accepted an invitation from the bishop of Algarve. They came to live in Cachopo and were devoted, not only to making the Catholic Church visible, but also, in these first years, to building services for older adults. This new Catholic association would grow quickly and influence greatly the future power distribution at a local level.

Figure 2: Transition Phase (1991-1993)

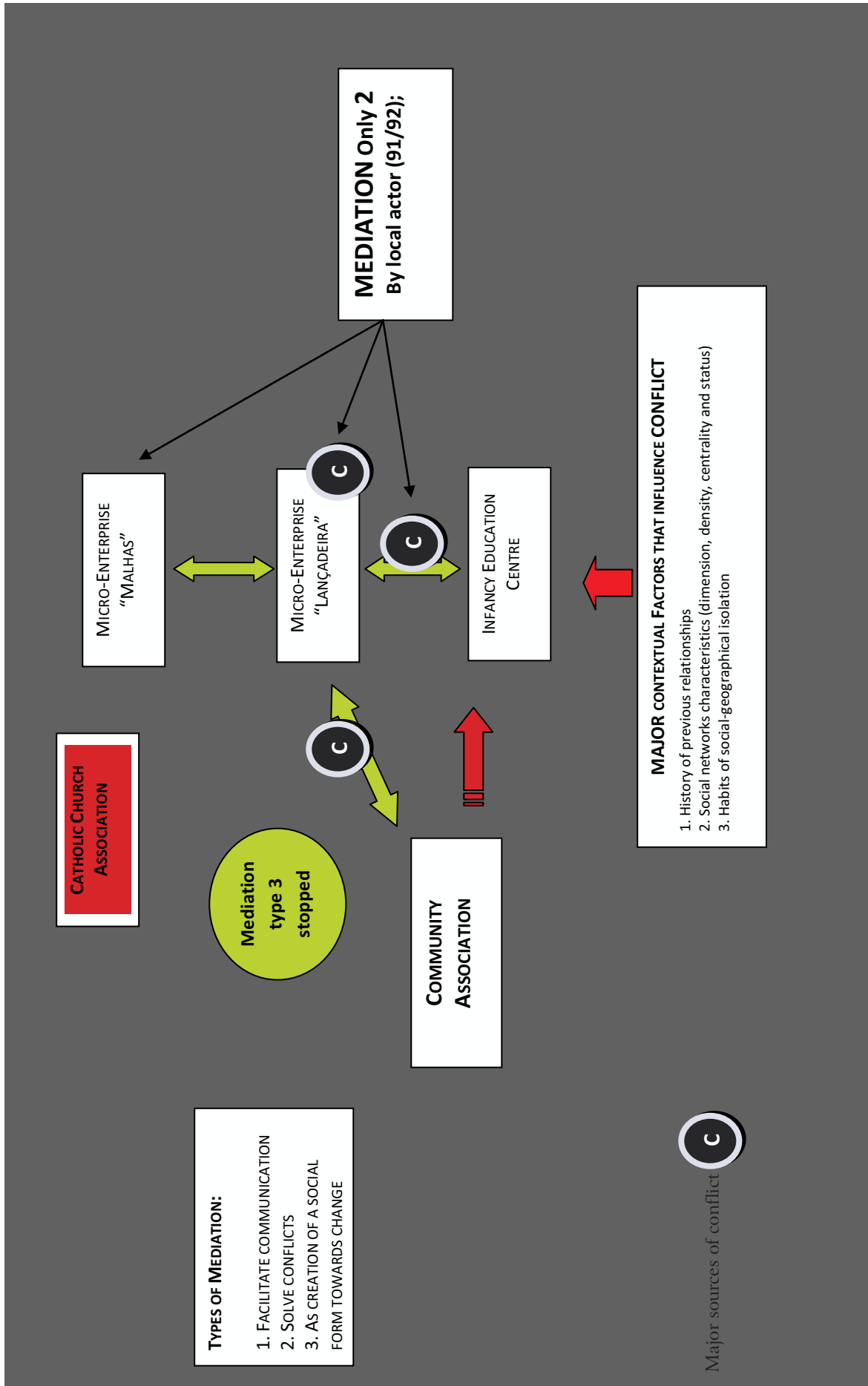


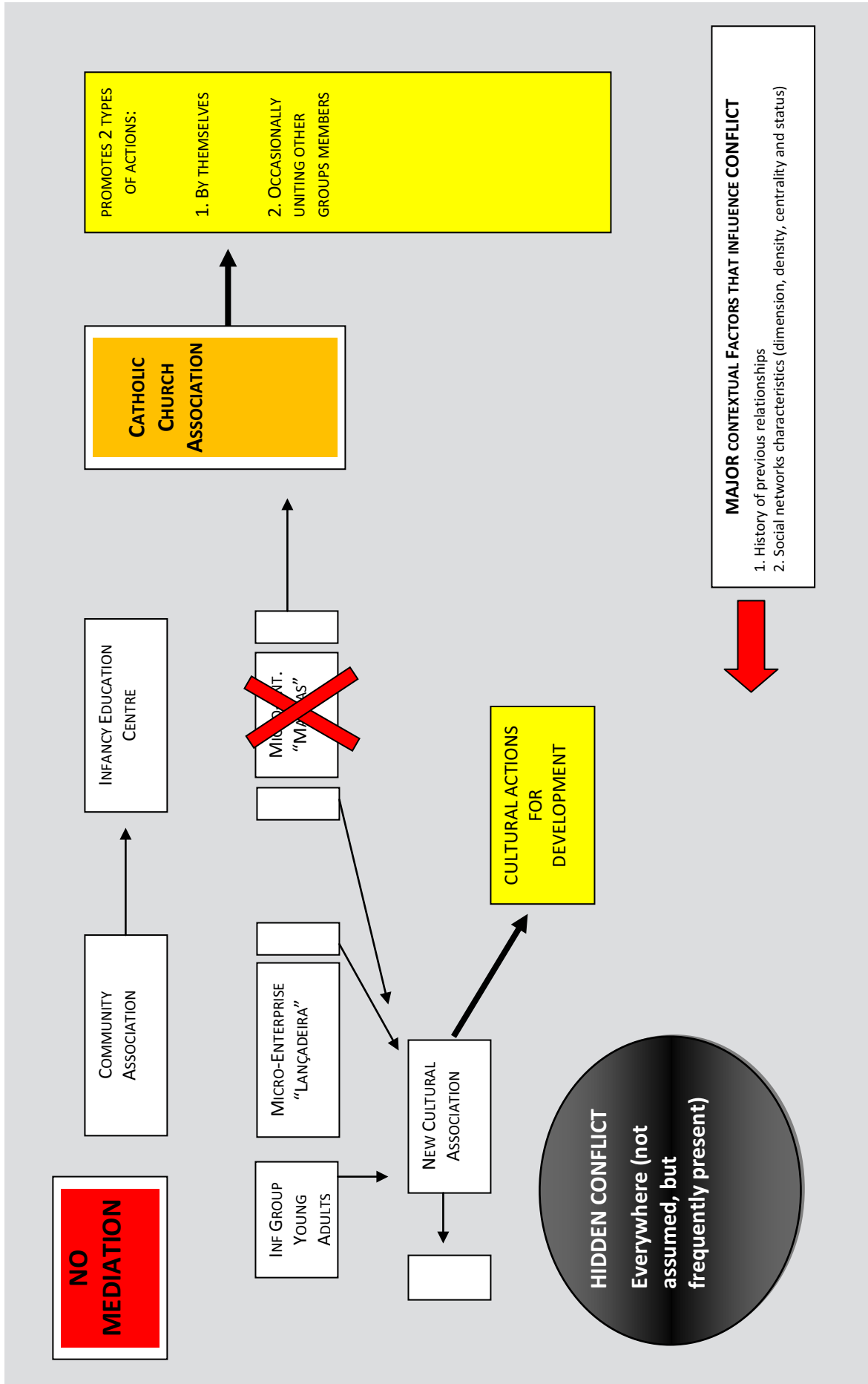
Figure 3 shows the evolution of events between 1994 and 2002, in a context in which mediation disappeared completely. The community association stood isolated, confined to its role of managing the infancy education centre. The Catholic Church association grew significantly in importance at several different levels:

- IV. In its actions with the older adults. This initiative included a day centre, a service for older adults in their homes and literacy courses.
- V. Expanding its actions to other dimensions. The association built a library for young adults and started a programme for helping them with their school studies.
- VI. Joining, from time to time, the other increasingly fragmented groups. Although this participation was not done intentionally or strategically, some initiatives (relative to local producers, for instance) would never have been possible without this association.
- VII. This association began to be identified through one person; it became visible through the importance of individual protagonists.

This was the period in which conflict emerged in its more destructive forms, only possible by a special configuration of social networks. We mentioned before that some sectors of the community were at an early stage detached from sectors engaged in local development activities. That is, privileged information and other information now circulates in more narrow parts of the social network which, consequently, diminishes the social network even more. At the same time, the circulation of information in this particular area of the network is very fluid. Sensible information is therefore blocked; a person will not share sensible information knowing that in the next day, it will circulate quickly. In these conditions (and with no mediation actions occurring to stop it), a new type of conflict emerges: a hidden conflict that everybody knows but no one assumes. When a conflict emerges, people do not debate, share or try to resolve it through dialogue; they simply leave the group, increasing the levels of fragmentation.

Figure 3 shows this occurrence clearly. There is a first fragmentation in Lançadeira; there is a second one in Malhas. Some elements from Malhas and Lançadeira, together with young adults from the community, start a new and strong association. But, a couple years later, there is a new fragmentation. Time will force some young adults to leave the community (searching for studies or simply for jobs), leaving this new association without any strength. Individual protagonists are now much more visible than before. The collective work was each time more difficult because conflict without mediation blocked the cooperation modes between the social actors of the community. From this moment on, there is no hope that the community of Cachopo will be capable of uniting. The central notions of collective action to benefit community were shattered.

Figure 3: Dichotomic / Stabilisation Phases (1994-2002)



5. CONCLUSIONS

There are some very brief conclusions from the analysis of this case:

First, conflict is a very important factor in local development processes. It can block the processes at its core, mainly because it breaks the cooperation forms between social actors or institutions. Conflict undermines the collective, which represents a central value in local development.

Second, there are a number of factors that influence the emergence of conflict. Some of these are contextual. They are deeply connected with the community's history, culture and evolution. Some of the factors influencing conflict depend more on the nature of the group and the dynamics and social relations that the group establishes.

Third, mediation seems to be a central instrument in preventing or resolving conflict. It is therefore fundamental to integrate the processes of local development. We have identified three different types of mediation. The first two are more instrumental. The main aim of its use is to prevent or to solve problems that naturally arise in every process where social relations are crucial. The third type—mediation as the creation of a social form towards change—represents, nevertheless, a strategic dimension. It points to the future and aims at guiding social life towards social change.

It is not the first time that we have identified the importance of mediation in development or adult education processes. In Lucio-Villegas & Fragoso (2009), we mentioned the programme *Adult Education and Citizenship*, interconnected with the Participatory Budget in Seville (Lucio-Villegas, Cowe & Garcia Goncet, 2008), where experts adopted an educational role in a Freirean perspective. In this case, experts have always had their starting point in real people's situations. Needs—as a social construction—have been described as stemming from a participatory process involving people and experts. Therefore, when we face participatory, unpredictable processes, it seems fundamental to have a mediation system that can not only prevent the blocking effects of conflict but also steer social change to a level where the lives of those involved can have real improvements. However, it is important to take into account that mediation tasks represent very complex dynamics and should be studied further. For instance, sometimes mediation can promote dependency between social actors. To conclude must not be a limitation to participation; on the contrary it must encourage it. In this sense, the role of the mediator is not to be a new experts but an educator in a Freirean sense.

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