



Final Statement on Towards a Participatory Society: new roads to social and cultural integration



The Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences held its Plenary Session on 28 April – 2 May 2017 to address the theme “*Towards a Participatory Society: new roads to social and cultural integration*”. Pope Francis sent a special message, dated 24 April and published in *L’Osservatore Romano* on 29 April, which provided the backdrop and guideline for the workshop.

The participants in the Plenary addressed the theme of “participatory society” by first defining the concepts of social participation, combating exclusion and social and cultural integration, and then considering the empirical phenomena, their causes and possible solutions. These are multidimensional concepts and processes that are not identical to each other, and yet are related in many ways.

Participation can be institutional or spontaneous. Exclusion can be active (desired, as in the case of ethnic or religious discrimination) or passive (due to unintentional causes, such as a major economic crisis). In both cases it is the fruit of processes that have been analysed in their generative mechanisms, since social and cultural integration is the result of the modification of these mechanisms, which are economic, social, cultural and political. The aim of including people and communities in society cannot be pursued with forced measures or in a standardized way (for instance, with school systems that do not take into account cultural differences and local cultures). Real social participation is only possible if religious freedom is guaranteed as the basis of the other freedoms, human dignity and peace.

The proceedings highlighted concerns over the spread of social fragmentation, on the one hand, and the concomitant inability of political systems to govern society, on the other. These two situations are spreading in many countries, causing major social disintegration and making it increasingly difficult to implement forms of social participation inspired by principles of justice, solidarity and fraternity.

The causes of these disruptive tendencies, which work against a more participatory society, are a crisis of political representation, increasing social inequalities, global demographic imbalances, rising migration and high numbers of refugees, the ambivalent role of information and communication technologies, and religious and cultural conflicts.

Certainly the most significant factor that thwarts social participation is growing social inequality between a small elite and the mass of the population. Statistics on the distribution of wealth and life opportunities indicate enormous gaps both between and within countries. Whereas in some countries, such as India and China, the middle class has grown, meaning less inequality at global level, worryingly in Europe and the USA the middle class has been greatly weakened and the working class and upper middle class are disappearing. The answer cannot be the rejection of globalization, but rather a fairer distribution of the profits generated by globalization, also within the developed countries themselves. Indeed, it must be recognised that democratic stability presupposes both a strong middle class and a clear stance against populisms that offer simplistic solutions that are incompatible with the moral responsibility for the common good of humanity.

In spite of all this, it is possible to work in favour of a better “participatory society” when genuine subsidiary cooperation is established between a political system that is sensitive to the voice of those who are not represented, and when there is a civilized market economy and civil society associations based on reciprocity networks. Top-down and bottom-up forms of participation must be made circular, enhancing the intermediate institutions on the basis of the principle of collegiality and subsidiarity.

In essence, a participatory society is one that enhanced relational goods, starting with friendship, fraternity and the family, and promotes human rights, knowing that human rights legislation cannot achieve any utopian social transformation project but can only create the positive conditions within which people and groups can act in an ethical way, that is, being given the opportunity to devote themselves to the mutual good of the members of the community, and to develop new social initiatives capable of generating greater social inclusion. The role of national legislation and regulation is essential in promoting a participatory society and encouraging good practice. Confronted by the dominance of “top-down” policies, said to promote social participation, on the part of national governments, especially those supportive of multinational enterprises, it was encouraging to note that Pope Francis was promoting a “bottom-up” alternative: namely, the use of INGOs to represent the views of the Church (such as the newly designated Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Climate Change Agreement both of 2015). Certainly these

require national ratification and subsequent legislation, but generically can out-manoeuvre the powers of national resistance or, at least, reduce them to standing out as a minority against the majority consensus.