



District Administration from a Perspective of Social Inclusion: The Case of Saint-Denis¹

This narrative is one out of 15 that were originally developed in 2007 as part of a project on innovative policies for social inclusion jointly developed by the Development Planning Unit (DPU), University College London with the Committee on Social Inclusion and Participatory Democracy (CSIPD) of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). This narrative was complemented and edited in 2010 by the Centre for Social Studies, Coimbra University (CES), to a standard format for the Observatory on Social Inclusion and Participatory Democracy.

Name of the policy: Direct Administration

Start date: 1985

Completion date: Ongoing to the present

CONTEXT

GOVERNMENTAL CONTEXT

The traditional French system of territorial administration is based on the principle of administrative uniformity and the presence of a strong central State. Since the end of the 1970s, a localist

¹ The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** is a space for analysis and reflection on local social inclusion policies. It contains over sixty case studies on innovative policies for community development, access to basic services, gender equality, environmental protection and the eradication of poverty, among others. The initiative has been developed with the scientific support of Prof. Yves Cabannes from the University College of London (15 case studies) and a team of researchers from the Centre for Social Studies (CES) at the University of Coimbra, which has worked under the supervision of Prof. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (50 study cases). This Observatory aims to identify and investigate successful experiences that might inspire other cities to design and implement their own social inclusion policies.

The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** has been created by the Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights of UCLG. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is the global platform that represents and defends the interests of local governments before the international community and works to give cities more political influence on global governance. The **Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights** aims to contribute to building a common voice for the cities of UCLG in the areas of social inclusion, participatory democracy and human rights. It also aims to guide local governments in designing these policies and to that end, fosters political debates, the exchange of experiences and peer learning among cities around the world.

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perspective has gained momentum, leading up to the decentralization reform of 1982-1983. The latter created elected regional councils, enhanced decision-making powers for departmental councils and communes, generally recognized local authorities as fully operational legal entities, and enlarged the scope of policy areas including social affairs, economic development and education. Since a revision of decentralization in 2003, four levels of local authority are recognised: the commune, the department, the region and territories with a special status.

Institutional level of policy development: Municipal and District

COMPREHENSIVE NARRATIVE

Description of the policy

Direct administration offers a free and open venue of encounter between the municipality and its residents. Involving 14 districts of the city of Saint-Denis in the French Île de France Region (pop. 100 000), Direct Administration is run by an elected official and a district/neighbourhood councillor. The district councillor organises regular plenary meetings as well as consultation sessions concerning numerous municipal projects in the realm of planning, housing and social services. Direct administration also represents a level of coordination among actors in the neighbourhood providing for a territorial implementation of public policies and opening up a space favouring experimental and participative projects. Thus, district councillors instigate, favour or support social development projects on the initiative of the municipal governments, associations and/or town residents. They set themselves up in the position of 'creators of relationships' between territorial and administrative entities and the town residents, mobilising various partnerships involving different levels of the administration and associations.

Background / Origins

Direct administration was started up within a context of economic and social transformation in a city with a strong working class identity.

As a result of the restructuring of the economic fabric from industrial activities to services workers, the youth, single parent families and foreigners were particularly affected by poverty and unemployment. In 1999 the city had an employment rate of around 20% that was almost twice as high as the national average, with figures particularly high for young people from 15 to 24 (30% compared to 25% on the national level). Currently, 26% of the population is of foreign origin (the majority from outside the EEC), out of which a not inconsiderable part is especially affected by the phenomena of sub-employment or unemployment. These persons do not participate in the different local and national elections. In a context of penury of social or more accessible housing for the more modest households, family units of foreign origin are particularly affected by unhealthy habitats. Within this context, the question of women's activity is of special importance, particularly in the single-parent households that represent 26% of the families having at least one child younger than 19.

Starting in 1985, direct administration first involved 12 neighbourhoods and was expanded in 2002 to include 14. It began within a context of reflection on how to create a new economic structure in the



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area and elaborate a plan for redesigning the city which would include marginalised neighbourhoods. The basic issue was how to combine policies relating to economic activity, social problems and urban planning. Direct administration was clearly influenced by a team led by an innovative mayor who had previously set up a planning office in the 1970s. Having continuously evolved since its creation, the practice was submitted to an evaluation process in 2003, which led to a series of improvements concerning the dimension of social inclusion.

Policy objectives and structure

The aims attributed to district/neighbourhood administrations follow three basic objectives: (1) to improve knowledge on the districts and the preoccupations of their residents, and to disseminate information on municipal projects and actions; (2) to provide the possibility for all opinions to be heard and to assess the evolution of social demand in the preparation of public policy; and (3) to increase the effectiveness of public action by favouring proximity and transversal action. To these aims one could add the overall will to integrate social, economic and urban planning policies that had traditionally evolved along parallel lines.

At present, direct administration at the level of districts/neighbourhoods lies at the heart of the city's system of participative democracy. It is integrated into the city's political and administrative culture providing a basis for residents to participate in the elaboration of numerous municipal projects. Within an overall orientation towards rooting public policy within local territorial contexts, direct administration makes it possible to question municipal policy and its implementation from another point of view, and thus underscore the problem areas within current policies which have not been taken into consideration. Because of this, district administration participates in the development of public policy. The interpellation of the administrative system by the district councillors makes it possible to situate the residents' daily lives and the difficulties they experience in the district environment at the core of local public action.

Participation processes implemented

The system of district administration is very informal. Its organisation is open and allows each and every one to come and go when s/he sees fit without any commitment whatsoever. District administrations do not operate on the basis of mode of representation and thus do not make use of representatives: "every individual counts." This choice aims to limit the effects of the impositions of some residents on others, as well as those effects arising from a "professionalization" of residents. From the district administrations, however, it is possible to elect delegates as representatives in relation to other authorities; for example, within the context of the participative budget, or in the framework of the consultation committee for the Local Urban Plan.

This system reaffirms the importance of the keystone figure of the "resident" alongside the more traditional figure of the user of public services. This semantic distinction bears witness to a desire to favour a global approach based on the daily lives of individuals, no longer segmented in accordance with the domain of competence of the administrative department involved. This affirmation finds its counterpart in the municipal administration, with the transformation of the district administration representatives into district managers, charged simultaneously with the construction of participative democracy in district administration territories and equally with the coherence of public action in these territories.



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Overall assessment and improvements of the practice

If the open character of district administration cannot be denied, its assessment by neighbourhood councillors reflects the need to be more rigorous with regards to its procedures on information and the vitality of its management (agenda, report verification, granting the floor at meetings, etc.), guaranteeing information and access to everybody at meetings and the right to be heard. The question of better access to the administration on the part of the residents has been raised as a crucial issue. Who defines the agenda and what place is given to municipal projects vis-à-vis the problems voiced by the residents? As a response, since 2004 district councils composed of residents have been created with the objective of becoming the true venues of the vitality of district administration.

The forms adopted for participation within direct administration were likewise questioned: the plenary session or the technical working group on urban projects do not always allow the more excluded population groups to express themselves. Likewise, in certain cases, situations of complicity arise amongst participants, between them and with the group, which do not favour the open character of the practice. Moreover, if the concept “district” gives rise to a proximity in the sense of a greater audience of residents, favours accessibility to meetings and makes it possible to mobilise resources from the territory to construct other approaches to social questions, it privileges subjects of consultation who are strongly linked to the public space of the neighbourhood. The discussed matters mobilise a certain type of resident and scarcely interest others. Little is said on issues affecting equality of opportunities and social development. This is clearly reflected in a structure of participation that points to the difficulties of attaining social inclusion.

In fact, at district administration plenary sessions, some population categories are more represented than others. The majority of individuals who participate at the meetings are usually aged more than 45 and up to 65 or 70, although some persons in their 30s are more active in some district administrations. Granting that there is an overall balance between men and women in district administrations, the participants are largely of French origin, and immigrant residents account for the most noteworthy absence from the benefits of district administrations, even when they are relatively active in certain districts. The upper categories and intermediate professions are over-represented (33% of high executives and intermediate professions vs. 18% in the “city” sample) along with the pensioners’ category (39% vs. 18%). The “active members in district administration” are very often homeowners (42% of homeowners vs. 12% in the “city” sample). Those who have been living in Saint-Denis for some time are also generally more numerous. The participants in district administration have greater territorial roots in the city (homeowners, seniority of residence).

This situation raises the issue of self-exclusion amongst participants, which in turn is related to the fact that questions of economic and social exclusion are rarely tackled. What emerges is a dichotomy between the participants of district administration “sufficiently involved in collective life, who rather come from the middle classes, who are always there when there is an action occurring in the district, including actions more central to the city,” while individuals who are having more difficulty – at times users of municipal services – are excluded from these procedures.

Facing these problems, direct administration has sought to develop its activities beyond the organisation of plenary sessions or consultation groups with respect to urban projects. In parallel, district councillors try to favour other spaces that make it possible to work on this question of social inclusion. Thus, other projects are handled within the framework of district administration with a view





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to restoring the objective of social development to the territorial scheme. The active agents of the territory are mobilised as resources to achieve the project.

Two cases of social inclusion through direct administration

In order to illustrate the social inclusion dimension among the many projects that have been realized within the direct administration framework, the following two projects may be considered as exemplary.

The first is located in the Semard district, to the north of the city. This social housing district has a significant proportion of women living alone with children. Some years ago, a study conducted on the district revealed the importance of child care modalities for the women of the district, whether they were employed (early morning or late night needs, for questions of reconciliation) or not (specific needs owing to job interviews or training). A project was prepared with the women from the district who wanted it, which would allow them to prioritise their needs and think of solutions in relation to the district resources (municipal equipment, child-care assistants). The local government, strongly mobilised on this issue, has made it possible to establish a territorial scheme around this project, mobilising the district population and its professionals.

The second project was initiated by the unit of the municipality called “city health.” Challenged for questions of hygiene by the residents of a private building unfit for habitation where the water had been cut off, the health authority of the Plaine district desired to reach a collective response with the residents of the building based on their capacity to take responsibility for its collective management. The district councillor rapidly supported the project, organizing a territorial mobilisation around the affair. It became possible to give rise to a broader experience with respect to other deteriorated buildings, also based on the participation of its residents – both tenants and co-owners – resulting in a more general proposal on the prevention of deterioration in co-owned buildings.

These two projects have in common the fact that they made it possible for marginalised people to enter into a participative transaction. They propose to work on subjects of participation that are different from those usually debated, and which lie at the heart of social questions: employment among women and deteriorated housing. The district councillors in both cases had the function of questioning the administration regarding the progress of social demand, and, as such, occupied the position of a link between residents and the local group in order to think differently about social questions and prepare innovative responses. Certainly, it is not always easy to achieve an evolution in local policy. Apart from the fact that the complexities between levels of competence and responsibility are usually complex, the sharing of analyses and the legitimacy of expression of residents take place over rather long time periods; hence, the importance of a long-lived district administration. In this sense, district administration becomes an authentic venue for the construction of social demand; i.e., for preparation between political project, resident participation, and the analysis of social needs and difficulties.

Replicability or adaptation of policy elsewhere

In terms of its duration of more than three decades and its territorial scope covering 14 neighbourhoods, direct administration represents a quite unique experiment. Direct administration has clearly proven to be an adequate means towards providing a participatory interface between, on one hand, residents and local councillors and, on the other hand, the local councillors and various levels of



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the administration on the communal, district and regional levels. Assessments of the practice have shown a clear commitment to issues of social inclusion.

Policies comparable to direct administration have sprung up over the past 15 years in various French municipalities. However, the case of Saint-Denis points to a fundamental precondition for its evolution along a social inclusion axis. This precondition concerns the presence of the kind of political sensibility regarding processes of social exclusion and inequalities that has been shown by a consistently left-wing municipal government and administration. More generally, a practice such as direct administration is closely conditioned by the effective implementation of decentralization as a means of transferring funding and room for autonomous initiatives to local governments. In this respect, it can be seen as an adequate response to the ever-increasing interrelation among different levels of policy-making and the challenge of supporting a locally driven bottom-up dynamic within the system.

SUMMARY

Direct administration, begun in 1985, offers a free and open venue of encounter between the municipality and its residents. Involving 14 districts of the city of Saint-Denis in the French Île de France Region, direct administration is run by an elected official and a district/neighbourhood councillor. The district councillor organises regular plenary meetings as well as consultation sessions concerning numerous municipal projects in the realm of planning, housing and social services. Direct administration represents a level of coordination among actors in the neighbourhood, providing for a territorial implementation of public policies and opening up a space favouring experimental and participative projects. It mobilises various partnerships involving different levels of the administration and associations.

The program's objectives are: (1) to improve knowledge on the districts and the preoccupations of their residents, and disseminate information on municipal projects and actions; (2) to provide the possibility for all opinions to be heard and assess the evolution of social demand in the preparation of public policy; and (3) to increase the effectiveness of public action by favouring proximity and transversal action. The main beneficiaries are: neighbourhood residents, unemployed people, single parents, and migrants. Participation processes implemented are: Plenary meetings, workshops, and community-driven projects. The process has been institutionalized through municipal administrative policy.

Main results have been: creating a participative interface between neighbourhood residents and the municipal administration; involving people in urban planning and social policy-making; and providing for the inclusion of marginalised people such as unemployed workers, youth, women, single parents and migrants within participative processes.

Main obstacles have been: reaching marginalised people as compared to long-term residents with a middle-class background; and keeping the practice open by preventing the formation of insider-outsider relationships.





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Acknowledgements / Credits

The narrative was written in 2007 by Christine Bellavoine, Head of local studies at City of Saint-Denis under the coordination and edition of Prof. Cabannes assisted by Yasar Adnan Adanali, at the Development Planning Unit, University College London, UK.

All narratives compiled in 2007 including this one were revised by a DPU editorial committee composed of Ernesto Jose Lopez Morales, Sonia Roitman, Michelle Pletsch, Steffen Lajoie, Luisa Dornelas, Iyad Issa and Pechladda Pechpakdee.

The original text was edited to a standard CISDP Observatory format in 2010 by Dr. Clemens Zobel at the Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal.

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