

Portugal: reflections about the *Águeda* Movement and the Effectiveness Initiative

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Nobody is born, or grows up, completely alone

Following the fall of the dictatorship in April 1974, Portugal entered an epoch of social explosion, especially in the big cities, in the industrial heartlands of Lisbon and Porto, in the fields of the South and – not least – in many of the urban centres of the coast and the interior. It was a time of great enthusiasm: people joined together spontaneously, believing that, by their will to do and act, they would bring about the end of exploitation and oppression. And in this way efforts multiplied, here to support the redistribution of land or the fight against illiteracy; there to counter the power of a manager from the old regime.

It was at this time, in this climate, and with this spirit, that the *Águeda* Movement was born in the barrios of the town of *Águeda*, organising itself around specific objectives that included the support of handicapped young children. Unlike most groups in other parts of the country, it wasn’t rooted in the political forces that were born and began to develop at that time: its supporters were independent of political parties. But like so many others, it is undoubtedly a true son of what we call the ‘Revolution of the carnations’, of the energies that were freed, of the ‘Enough is enough’ attitude that emerged after 50 years of a lack of freedom, of repression and of fear. Like the others, it was fed by generosity, by delivering, by belief in change – and it too cut through legal constraints (by occupying a house for the benefit of young children),

confronted resistance (by writing articles for newspapers and intervening in meetings), and pushed for support (by organising petitions and putting forwards its demands).

And as the country stirred and began to recreate itself, so the *Águeda* Movement began to grow, sometimes contributing to new ways that the country was mapping out, sometimes using the models of others.

That was how it was ...

The social explosion that followed the 25th of April was carried forward two years later when the State achieved political control, reorganised itself and sought political definition in all the various areas in which it operates. And, as it did so, it sought out those who had

been operating successfully so it could learn from their experiences.

The *Águeda* Movement was one such source of know-how. Its perspectives on integrating handicapped infants into society were much valued; and its promoters were invited to act rather like trainers in the fora and gatherings that were helping to outline new legislation. It was a time in which the *Águeda* Movement enjoyed a recognition that reinforced its identity, its self-esteem and the confidence between its members; and that gave it more opportunities for reflection.

But realities change. The State tends to consolidate things, to replace models that offer options with models that impose, that are stereotyped or adulterated, and that owe little to the

essence of the models that it originally found so inspiring. Like other groups in other domains who saw their proposals stripped of their sense, the Águeda Movement was confronted with an official policy for the integration of disadvantaged children that, in practice, was centred on bringing them into line with non-handicapped young children. It had little to do with integrating them in ways that drew on what they could contribute.

The Águeda Movement did not give up. Instead, it recreated itself and – like other groups – disassociated itself from the State to seek community-based alternatives to official policies on integration that it saw as non-viable. In the barrios of the town of Águeda, where higher than average numbers of handicapped children are born, community groups function *de facto* as spaces for the development of alternatives in integrated development.

A case of effectiveness

The Águeda Movement can be seen as unique in comparison with many other groups that were born in 1974. Unique not just because it has survived but

because it has stayed true to its original nature: its spirit of seeking; its non-conformity; its independence; and its innovation. In my opinion, it is still too early to fully understand this longevity – that is one of the results that we expect from the investigations within the Effectiveness Initiative (EI). But, from reflections so far, it is possible to propose at least three sets of reasons for the Águeda Movement's survival and success.

In the first place, there is the undoubted contribution of subjectivity and emotion to the life of the Movement, right from the beginning. Other groups born at the same time were structured around political battles. It wasn't so much that passion was absent from such groups, more that their underlying motivation was to do with a concept, a vision of society. In contrast, the Águeda Movement included the inconvenient: the emotions of the people who generated and worked along with the programme. Reason was there, but a reason made subjective by emotion, by the emotional rejection of the injustice that exclusion represents.

A second set of explanations for the longevity of the Movement is to do

with the close relationships between all those who benefited – the handicapped young people themselves. This stems from a concern for the well-being of another person, and from recognising the strengths and abilities of that other person. This is what has guided the Movement's promoters from the first. More than being something *for people*, the Movement was *with people*. Linked to this is the fact that people grew within the programme and became confident by constructing solutions and ways of acting or reacting. In doing so, they also became more committed to the programme.

The majority of the organisations that started out at the same time as the Águeda Movement wanted power. But, in contrast with the Águeda Movement, they sought to do so through the ideas and proposals that they had come up with, not so much through the people whom they sought to benefit.

A third set of reasons centres on the fact that the character of the programme was justified by, and grew out of, what it did and how it did it. One core factor is that the Águeda Movement organised itself for concrete

action, finding immediate solutions that derived from the local circumstances, needs and possibilities. These were solutions that did not depend on options imposed from outside, or the decisions of people who were external to the context. In this way, the Movement grew both in what it achieved and in how it achieved that.

In many other organisations, even those that focused on concrete concerns (for example: ending the colonial war in Mozambique; or redistribution of lands), solutions came not from the local level but from above. Such solutions were short term rather than long term, and also worked against community mobilisation.

Naturally, there are other factors that need to be taken into account – for example, the Movement's non-conformity and the perseverance of its promoters in the face of all the difficulties they encountered. All these factors contribute to explaining the Movement's longevity, its ability to change 'No' into 'Yes', and its attempts to overcome obstacles through innovation and development. Other groups knew about such factors too but



Portugal: support to families from Timor (Instituto das Comunidades Educativas – ICE)
photo: Teresa Moreno, Bernard van Leer Foundation

An external look at an internal process

After an initial process that defined and built the Águeda Movement, it was launched as a kind of fabric that consisted of autonomous but interwoven initiatives, formal and informal, that were made up of spaces and times (some programmed in, some *ad hoc*) for action and reflection. In addition – and unlike what happened in other groups and organisations – the financial support that it received (for example, that from the Aga Khan Foundation) helped it to grow and to keep going.

It is because of such attributes that the Águeda Movement almost had a duty to take part in the EI

did not really take them to heart or give them their due importance. As a result, these factors did not have the influence that they should have had.

as an example of effectiveness. But, curiously, the call to participate in the EI coincided with a time in which the Movement was passing through a crisis:

people were getting stuck in routines, separated from each other by the demands of the mass of activities that they had to animate, and dulled by the daily rhythm of meetings and exchanges. Also the sharing of passion and affection that had helped to make the Movement what it was, was fading away.

Given these conditions, the participation of the Águeda Movement in the EI had to take two worries into account, or rather, had to pursue two objectives simultaneously. Handled badly, this could have led to conflict.

On the one hand there was the need to re-link the Movement again with its own unique identity. For the members of the Águeda Movement, therefore, the EI was not seen as a research project but an opportunity to (re)construct the emotions, intentions, values and actions of the Movement. It was not enough to just involve all the actors, they had to be promoted as the owners of the knowledge, knowledge that was not merely *about* action but that was actually *for* action, that was not just about the past but also about the future that it would help to weave.

In short, it was necessary to embed the EI in the Águeda Movement in ways that would allow the (re)creation of its synergies and power.

On the other hand there was the need for distance, for the external view that any enquiry implies. It was a matter of bringing outside perspectives to bear, and creating more objective spaces in which the results of these could be reflected on.

Resolving these contradictory objectives involved blending enquiry with strategic action. To use Andaloussi's terminology:

... a collective work that conceives, organises, carries out, analyses and evaluates the process that is going on.¹

In this, the 'process' is not just that of the EI but more that of the Águeda Movement; and the intention was an enquiry that would ...

... articulate explanations, commitments and applications.²

What is meant by this is the reasons, the affection and the actions.

In practice, what was proposed and carried out was that people involved in the investigation should grow through the solutions that they produced, feel ownership of them, and feed them back into the realities in which they work. But they should also rediscover what had united them in the past: that affection that was once central to the Movement, and that they consciously recovered during their journey of investigation. Throughout the process, they also had to hold the balance between what was emerging from the perspective of insiders, and what was emerging from the outsider's viewpoint.

From group to team: the role of the outsider

From the beginning, the EI encountered problems in working with an Águeda EI team. The Águeda Movement always functioned as a kind of 'extended family' whose members met each other when problems arose and tried to find solutions to them. There wasn't a core group, and it wasn't easy to create one. That meant that the EI lacked a nucleus to sustain the continuity of its investigation. But, in truth, to have had a core group would

have been against the culture of the organisation.

The solution was a challenge: an open group, flexible in composition, that was directed by ongoing reflections about the processes and outcomes of the investigation, rather than by any imposed preconceptions. But it produced results: despite rotation among its eight to ten members, it was stable and moved forward progressively and cohesively.

The group questioned the need for outsiders, as proposed by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. It felt that the presence of outsiders would distort the investigation. This was not because they were outsiders *per se* but, above all, because of the weight that the views of outsiders could have – especially if an outsider was given the role of team leader, as the Foundation proposed.

This was resolved by a mixture of good sense, learning about the kinds of attitudes that outsiders might have, and then reinforcing in all members of the EI team a set of standpoints that would help to keep the investigation balanced.

These were:

- identification with the objectives and problems of the Movement;
- emotional empathy with the Movement;
- holding a balance between the external and the internal in the group's reflection (sometimes returning findings for reflection, sometimes reflecting on the findings themselves);
- maintaining respect in listening to each member of the group, and respecting their rhythms; and
- successfully facing the challenge of the ongoing effort of taking the 'problemising' approach to action and reality.

Last words

Through its participation in the EI, the Águeda Movement has reconstructed its identity. It recognises itself, once again, in the battle against the exclusion of handicapped young people. This has allowed it to reposition itself in that battle, as it has devised collective reactions to new forms of exclusion. Today, it can be said to have an almost mystical sense of duty, one that welcomes challenges.

The Movement seized the opportunity that the EI offered and, as the agent of its own development, transformed itself in line with what it has discovered about itself through the EI.

In looking for the always unfinished and always unique story of the Águeda Movement, I am reminded – mischievously – of Cervantes' words:

*There is no power on earth
That could possibly aspire
To change the world
Once time has passed ...*



references

1. Andaloussi K (2000) *Recherches-actions. Sciences, développement, démocratie*; Publisud; Paris.
2. Morin A (1992) *Recherche-action intégrale et participation cooperative*; Agence d'Arc; Ottawa.