

Article

## The Art of Governing Youth: Empowerment, Protagonism, and Citizen Participation

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### Abstract

This article discusses social inclusion policies for youth from vulnerable socioeconomic contexts, based on the ethnographic monitoring of an associative experience promoted by the Choices Programme (“Programa Escolhas”) on the outskirts of Lisbon. Considered the main public policy directed at poor, racialised, and peripheral youth in Portugal, the Choices Programme is driven by strategies of empowerment and protagonism with a view to engaging youngsters in resolving the problems faced in the neighbourhoods in which they live. Both strategies call for citizen participation but restrict the youth’s field of political action to the rules drawn up by the state, discouraging emancipatory and subversive discourse. The result is biopolitical control and management of marginalised youth, masking a domination that has domesticated their collective action. By recreating the meetings and activities that sought to inspire in these youngsters the virtues of associativism, I discuss how the discourses of empowerment and protagonism are incorporated as new devices of agency and community governmentality. In particular, I question the limits of citizen participation as a means to stimulate the political engagement of youth when this is tied to individualist ideologies distant from a grammar of rights.

### Keywords

citizen participation; empowerment; outskirts; Programa Escolhas; public policy; social inclusion; youth

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The social inclusion policies directed at youth underwent considerable changes from the late 19th century up to today. Currently, these youth are not mere objects of care and control programmes, but rather participants of government strategies that seek to instil in them a sense of responsibility for resolving the social problems that affect them and the neighbourhoods in which they live (De Tommasi, 2014; Souza, 2008). The use of empowerment and protagonism has become central in this type of approach which perceives poor, racialised, and peripheral youth in the dual position of subjects “at-risk” and subject to change (Kwon, 2013). This article does not aim to summarise the social inclusion policies directed at youth, whose manifold approaches vary

according to geographic, historical, and political contexts. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that over the last few decades their interventions have shifted to prioritising the active participation of the youngsters, no longer framing them in a passive position of mere beneficiaries. Encouraged to participate in citizen responsibility projects in their neighbourhoods, the previously labelled “problem youth” have been converted into current “solution youth” (De Tommasi, 2013; Souza, 2008), some performing the role of mediators in community-centred social inclusion projects (Raposo & Aderaldo, 2019).

This article will address this new role that young people are performing in social interventions, focusing on the Choices Programme (“Programa Escolhas”), considered to be the main inclusion public policy directed at youth from vulnerable socioeconomic contexts in

Portugal. Through ethnographic monitoring of activities aimed at reinvigorating a youth association under this programme on the outskirts of Lisbon, I discuss how the call for citizen engagement of youngsters is incorporated as a new device of agency and management of segregated territories. In particular, I question the effects of the strategies of empowerment and protagonism on fostering youth associativism. As this article reveals, both are formulations of a discourse of power, promoter of a community governmentality that regulates youth participation according to the interests defined by state and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), restricting young people's field of political action.

The ethnographic fieldwork in a project named Skills, funded by the Choices Programme, was crucial to understanding the implementation of this public policy "from the bottom up," in a neighbourhood where the experiences of the youth took place, going beyond the merely institutional perspective (Trouillot, 2011). My first field trip was in 2015, but it was only in February 2016 that I started to visit the neighbourhood on a regular basis, an ethnographic immersion that required 48 field trips up to August 2018. The ethnographic monitoring of the "Youth Meetings" and other activities organised by the Skills project opened the door to an extremely fertile situational context, where I was not only (a) offered "privileged" vision of the Choices Programme's mode of operation, but also (b) able to grasp the impact of that policy in terms of youth associativism; on the other hand, this allowed me (c) to observe the control and management mechanisms in the project's activities, whose encouragement towards the youngsters' participation left little room for their emancipation, conditioning them to the interests of the programme. A total of twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with youngsters, community leaders, Skills project technical staff, and other workers from the Choices Programme. In addition to the analysis of the recorded interviews, the field diary records of observations were very important, embodying an efficient means of organising my experiences in the field. Due to ethical precautions, I decided not to reveal the real name of the project or my interlocutors, thus assuring their right to anonymity. Consequently, I used false names to avoid revealing information that could unveil the neighbourhood's location, allowing me to describe my observations without harming them.

## 2. Representations, Policies, and Strategies of Youth Governance

Youth populations became a category of governance and intervention since youth became a "social fact," at the turn of the 19th century into the 20th century (De Tommasi, 2014; Kwon, 2013). Problematised through the viewpoint of crisis and conflict, youth (or adolescence) was understood as an intermediary stage between childhood and adulthood, a portrayal that is still commonly accepted today. The work of Hall

(1904/2004) was a forerunner in the theoretical development of this type of approach, in framing youth in the Darwinist paradigm of biological evolution. From his point of view, the hormonal and emotional turmoil experienced by adolescents would reveal, in organic terms, the supposed evolution of human beings: from savagery to civilization (Feixa, 1999). Influenced by these formulations, the so-called "crisis of youth," was theorised by functionalist sociology through the lens of deviation and anomie, arising from maladjusted socialisation, meaning the adolescents, primarily the poorest, were unable to assimilate roles considered legitimate in society (Raposo & Aderaldo, 2019). From this adult-centric perspective, the association of youth with crime and incivility continued to be a recurrent practice (De Tommasi, 2013), escalating the social concern with this part of the population, in addition to the growing number of institutions, social programmes, and public policies directed at their control, punishment, and/or social inclusion.

Combating delinquency based on the behavioural and ecological components inaugurated the first experiences of intervention with youth coming from vulnerable socioeconomic contexts in the USA, in the mid-19th century (Mennel, 1973). A series of institutions (judicial, correctional, and welfare) were created by social reformers to bring moral order to a youth considered susceptible to deviant behaviour. The first juvenile court of the USA, created in Chicago in 1899, clearly illustrates the transformations of an era undergoing rapid urban growth, in which youth embodied a category that required urgent intervention (Kwon, 2013). For some scholars (Boyer, 1978; Schlossman, 1977/2005), in creating these institutions, the social reformers' intention was both to prevent youngsters from falling victim to the world of crime, and ensure "the best interest of deprived children particularly and the dispossessed classes generally" (Mennel, 1973, p. 278). More critical of the network of juvenile institutions that was forming at that time, other researchers considered it an instrument of social control (Platt, 1969; Ryerson, 1978; Shelden, 1993), aimed at imposing normative behaviour on youth, especially immigrant-background youth from the lower classes (Chavez-Garcia, 2007). The Hull Houses, founded by Jane Addams and Ellen Starr in Chicago, at the end of the 19th century, became a model experiment in "social work" with marginalised youth (and children) for the entire globe (Brieland, 1990). Supported by prosperous social reformers of what is known as the progressive era, the Hull Houses was an educational and philanthropic venture set up in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where recreational activities through art and culture were fostered with a view to poor adolescents of immigrant origin overcoming "the overwhelming temptation of illicit and soul-destroying pleasures" (Addams, 1909/2005, p. 107). Even endorsing innovative practices, the "youth-saver" attitude reproduced the moralist discourse of the time (Platt, 1969), normalising the idea that the immigrant-background youth from the

working classes were devoid of civilization. Accordingly, the care and control procedures at the Hull Houses aspired to rehabilitate them to be better citizens and thus avoid a path towards delinquency.

These interventions with youth were strongly influenced by the notion of anomie, theorised by the Chicago School. For Robert Park, one of the advocates of this current of thought anomie behaviours would emerge in certain “moral regions” of the city, fostered by social contagion:

Social contagion tends to stimulate in divergent types the common temperamental differences, and to suppress characters which unite them with the normal types about them. Association with others of their own ilk provides also not merely a stimulus, but a moral support for the traits they have in common which they would not find in a less select society. In the great city the poor, the vicious, and the delinquent, crushed together in an unhealthful and contagious intimacy, breed in and in soul and body....We must then accept these “moral regions” and the more or less eccentric and exceptional people who inhabit them, in a sense, at least as part of the natural, if not the normal, life of a city. (Park, 1925/1984, p. 45)

For Park, it was compelling to spatially situate certain deviant behaviours and sociabilities, particularly those with a prevailing morality crisis, in which customs, traditional values, family and neighbourhood ties would be weakened. The social disorganisation caused by the migratory flows to specific areas of the city, marked by poverty, marginality, and segregation, would be responsible for generating a social context of anomie, producing the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency.

The social inclusion strategy of that time, as well as others of punitive nature, is described by Kwon (2013, pp. 47) through the “kid-fixing” metaphor, as imbued with the overriding idea that problem youth need to be “repaired” or “saved” by charitable souls. According to the author, this model follows the premise of “youth as risk” (Kwon, 2013, p. 48), in which youngsters are characterised as vulnerable people prone to violent behaviour, symptomatic of an inner disquiet understood as inevitable at a stage of life marked by turbulent psychological changes (Mead, 1939/1993). This generalist conception of youth was progressively replaced by another, focused on certain young people, particularly those who are supposedly exposed to a “culture of poverty” (Lewis, 1959/1975), living in broken families and inhabiting neighbourhoods considered “problematic.” A series of terms were created to describe these problem youngsters in need of intervention, among which “culturally disadvantaged,” “culturally deprived” (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990), and “at-risk” youth. Dominant from the 1980s onwards, this last term is consistent with the new social approach aimed at youth nowadays,

in which social risks or problems are transformed into opportunities. This shift of approach was investigated by Kwon based on the reality in the USA during the 1990s, when numerous youth organisations became partners of public and private institutions advocating the construction of a model of “positive youth development” (Kwon, 2013, p. 52). Based on this new strategy, youth empowerment and community accountability became central to safeguard youngsters against risks. The report *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours*, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (1992), played an important role in the reconfiguration of these youth policies in the USA, according to Kwon (2013), where the skills of the youngsters were perceived as a resource in the search for solutions to the problems faced in their living areas.

The International Youth Year, proclaimed by the United Nations (1985) under the theme of “participation, development and peace,” was a decisive milestone in the shift of certain paradigms that, up to then, characterised the interventions directed at the sector, by boosting a set of understandings and initiatives in different nation-states with a view to youth being covered by specific public policies. As demonstrated by the sociologist Regina Souza, a series of international treaties and documents were produced between 1985–2005 aimed at encouraging the implementation of public policies, in which youngsters are in the dual position of object and agent of the interventions (Souza, 2008; United Nations, 1985, 1995). The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and UNESCO performed an important role in converting youth into participants of governmental care and control programmes in Latin America. Referred to as “social leader” (ECLAC & UNESCO, 2001, p. 74) or “strategic development actors” (UNESCO, 2004, p. 129), the new hegemonic discourse was based on the premise that youngsters should be encouraged to play an active role in social responsibility projects through “youth empowerment to exercise leadership and participation in the preparation and monitoring—social control of public policies” (UNESCO, 2004, p. 115). In Brazil, the statement of youth empowerment and protagonism gained significance after the turn of the millennium, sustained both by philanthropic foundations and government entities, and the actual youth organisations, attracted by a discourse that promised them visibility and acknowledgement (De Tommasi, 2014; Souza, 2008). In Portugal, it was following the Choices Programme, created in 2001, that youth participation in inclusion projects would become public policy, when statements on empowerment and protagonism began to be disseminated. The Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes (United Nations, 1998/2001a) and the Braga Youth Action Plan (United Nations, 1998/2001b) greatly contributed, with both being committed to the need to implement national public policies fostering “youth participation,” “sustainable development,” and the “prevention of conflict” and

“crime,” primarily among those in situations of “social and economic vulnerability.”

Moving at different rates, the statements on empowerment and protagonism have become cornerstones in the youth policies of various countries, promoting a positive vision of what was formerly perceived as synonymous with a social problem. However, this positive vision is only assigned to part of the youngsters: the part able to become empowered and be a protagonist via social inclusion programmes. As for the youngsters not covered by these programmes or who fail to absorb their principles of citizenship, based on individual accountability and self-empowerment (Cruikshank, 1999; Kwon, 2013), a criminal framework is applicable, legitimating punitive state measures in the eyes of society (Raposo et al., 2019).

What is crucial in the guidelines of the new social inclusion policies for youth from vulnerable socioeconomic contexts is that the discourses of empowerment and protagonism depend on their willingness to develop skills, influence and leadership to affirm their interests (Cruikshank, 1999). Both instrumentalise the youngsters’ desire to gain positive visibility, calling upon citizen participation to motivate them to carry out activities for the benefit of their communities (Rose, 1996; Souza, 2008). However, this does not entail participation aimed at political action or the affirmation of collective interests based on social rights, but rather taking a particular route of inclusion that is profoundly individual and meritocratic. Seduced by these discourses, the youngsters join social inclusion projects that seek to empower them to exercise responsibility and self-government, in what Kwon (2013, p. 9) coins “affirmative governmentality.” This technology of power appropriates the strength, creativity, and rebelliousness of the youngsters, and “seeks solutions to political problems in the governmentalization of the everyday lives of citizen-subjects” (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 123). This is a governance model that promotes the figure of youth, especially those in poverty and social vulnerability, as a driver and beneficiary of change through a discursive grammar moulded by government interests (Souza, 2008).

The art of governing the youth labelled as “at-risk” also employs other terms in its lexicon, prescribing values and guiding their conduct (De Tommasi, 2014; Rose, 2011). Entrepreneurism, voluntary action, leadership and resilience, combined with the afore-cited empowerment and protagonism, reaffirm entwined relationships of power and knowledge serving the internalisation of social control (Foucault, 1977). Involved in that community governmentality, poor, racialised and peripheral youngsters are called upon to manage the structural inequalities of neoliberalism, turning them into protagonists of poverty management programmes. This is an effective strategy to dilute antagonisms, mask injustices, and ensure social peace, restricting the sphere of political action of marginalised youth to the norms of solidarity drawn up by the State (Kwon, 2013; Raposo &

Aderaldo, 2019). Depoliticising the reproductive mechanisms of inequality is crucial for the success of this biopower, which governs in a horizontal fashion through the subjection of the youngsters’ subjectivities.

### **3. Inclusion Policies for Racialised Youth: The Portuguese Case**

Public policies aimed at youth from vulnerable socioeconomic contexts in Portugal are relatively recent, initially being linked to education strategies against academic underachievement at a time of massification of public education enforced after the Revolution of 25 April in 1974 (Ferreira & Teixeira, 2010; Seabra et al., 2016). At that time, the portrayals of youth were circumscribed to middle and high-class university students engaged in student movements, a restricted sector of the Portuguese population assigned the imagery of “militant,” “conscientious,” and “compassionate” (Cruz et al., 1984; Pais, 1990). Those belonging to the working class were simply absent in the sociological or journalistic incursions in the incipient Portuguese democracy. These youth would only gain a public image from the 1990s onwards through their association with criminality and certain territories on the outskirts of Lisbon perceived as predatory, in particular the “shanty towns” inhabited by black and Roma populations (Raposo et al., 2019). The discovery of these peripheral suburbs as precarious, uncivilised, and dangerous places occurred simultaneously with their association with immigration, primarily African, in the early 1990s (Alves, 2013; Raposo & Varela, 2017). This period experienced a severe housing crisis combined with increased migratory flows in Portugal, forcing thousands of families, many of which were of African origin, to live in the self-built shanties that cropped up around the country’s capital city. Racially connotated, these territories gained hypervisibility due to their young population, when the political agendas and media joined forces to blame the black youth and those of African descent for the problem of urban violence (Raposo et al., 2019). These stereotypes were fuelled by an avalanche of newspaper and television reports aligned with the poverty-blackness-violence-neighbourhood equation (Raposo, 2007), generating a narrative that connected the poor ecological (and cultural) conditions to deviant behaviour. Thus, the peripheral neighbourhoods in which they lived were considered areas of ecological and moral debasement, “lawless” territories justifying repressive state action (Raposo et al., 2019). The outcome of this criminalising scenario was the transformation of black youngsters into the archetype of the new dangerous classes, a stigma that classified them as a threat to Portuguese societal values.

The Choices Programme was created in these circumstances of “social alarm,” in which the media massively conveyed distorted and damaging portrayals of the black youth of the suburbs. One incident in particular was striking in the criminalisation of black youth in the country.

The sequential robbery of three fuel stations and the alleged attempted rape of an actress, well-known among the general public in Portugal, lent credibility to the discourses of racialisation of crime, inciting tougher measures to combat the supposed increase of youth delinquency. The article published in the broadsheet *Público* newspaper clearly reveals the atmosphere of that time:

Violent robberies paraded along the motorway of Greater Lisbon. All very fast. All terrifying. All very clean. Seven to nine black youths, transported in fast cars robbed three fuel stations, five car drivers, and a food and drink truck. Everything in two hours. Along the way, they also robbed people and almost raped an actress. The police forces (PSP, PJ and GNR) immediately set up an impressive operation encircling them. There were Hollywood-style chases. But the robbers escaped. (Viana & Felner, 2000)

The widespread media exposure of this episode, which occurred in the summer of 2000, consolidated a transgressive view in the public sphere of black youth of the suburbs, perceived as inherently incapable of integrating into Portuguese society and associated with the phenomenon of so-called gangs. The Choices Programme was designed in that context of fear, when numerous voices clamoured for public policies to control and manage these youth labelled as “at-risk” (Raposo & Aderaldo, 2019).

Under the wings of the High Commissioner for Migrations (ACM), the Choices Programme was launched in 2001 aimed at the “prevention of youth criminality” and the “insertion of youth from the most problematic neighbourhoods,” as stated in Council of Ministers Resolution 4/2001 (Council of Ministers, 2001). Years later, the premises of this programme were redirected towards boosting the “social inclusion” of “children and youth coming from vulnerable socioeconomic contexts” (Azevedo, et al., 2014), extending the target group to children and youth aged 6 to 24 years old. Despite the greater coverage of the Choices Programme’s target group nowadays, the purpose of that public policy largely continues to be to prevent the real and potential risks of young people acquiring delinquent behaviour, especially those of African descent from the outskirts. The fact that the Choices Programme is under the ACM—the reference state institution for citizenship issues associated with immigrants and “ethnic minorities”—is illustrative of how political institutions comprehend youth inclusion, circumscribing their difficulties to those they consider to be the “other” in Portuguese society: Roma, black people, and immigrants.

Currently with 105 projects spread over 68 municipalities countrywide, and an estimated 27,704 participants for the two-year period 2021–2022, the Choices Programme is in its eighth phase of implementation: 8th generation. Empowerment and protagonism have become pivotal elements in its governance model, prin-

ciples that seek to implicate youth from vulnerable socioeconomic contexts in the resolution and management of the problems that affect their neighbourhoods, recruiting them as partners of social inclusion projects. However, this partnership presupposes a staged and restricted participation, as well as the concealment of the systems that underpin their marginalisation.

#### 4. The Invention of a Youth Association

Support to youth associativism was one of the purposes of the Skills project, funded by the Choices Programme in a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Lisbon. Based on a top-down approach, this project’s staff wanted to promote a youth association in the neighbourhood, underpinned by the concepts of empowerment and protagonism advocated by the Choices Programme. Various young people accepted the challenge of joining this association, participating in the Skills project activities to this end.

Primarily black, they were children of parents born in Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP)—Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, and São Tomé e Príncipe—who had emigrated to Portugal in search of better living conditions. The racialised neighbourhood in which they lived was one of the first to be covered by the Choices Programme in 2001, being associated with an image of youth delinquency. At that time, the neighbourhood had just been built and experienced severe problems of urban segregation and family breakdown, thus summarised by the rapper Kiluange (interviewed in 2016):

The fact was that there was nothing around us, the neighbourhood was isolated....That, of course, had some negative consequences: People felt isolated, marginalised, everything bad that happened was blamed on the neighbourhood. The police would swing by due to any problem, it was easier, because everything was caused by the youngsters here....There began to be many problems of youth delinquency, broken families and lots of conflicts with those outside.

A participant of the Skills project since his adolescence, Kiluange, 28 years old, became a leader for the neighbourhood’s youth, having been invited in 2006 to enter the Choices Programme’s technical team as an urban mediator, a position created since the beginning of this public policy. Over the six years that he was there, he promoted various activities for the benefit of the community and recalls that time with satisfaction. However, Kiluange did not conceal the various mistakes of that public policy, such as the pressure to attain a growing number of youngsters to the detriment of the quality of the interventions:

The Choices Programme lives off numbers, it has to show results to get funding. And in that drive for

results it started to treat people as numbers. Basically, this is where its superficiality emerged. It no longer showed a human nature....The field staff are almost enslaved to get numbers, to show results.

From the 4th generation (2010–2012) onwards, the Choices Programme established a minimum quota of participants in each project, dividing them into “receivers” (“at-risk” youth) and “beneficiaries” (youngsters exposed to lower risks). The expansion of the Choices Programme’s target group was consolidated during this generation, when the areas of vocational training, entrepreneurship and civic participation were strengthened. At the same time, the engagement of youngsters as agents of interventions was bolstered in this public policy by the introduction of the community facilitator in the Choices Programme’s technical team: “youngsters from communities with a positive leadership profile” and “strong potential to create positive reference models” (Council of Ministers, 2009). Kiluange’s tasks included attracting the “receivers” to the project activities, those whom the Choices Programme classifies as in “pre-delinquency situations” (Guerra et al., 2010, p. 8), supporting them in their transition to adult life. The information gathered about the project participants was subsequently entered into a specific database to generate statistical data to “show results” (and the effectiveness) of the Choices Programme.

Due to the “preventive” focus of the Choices Programme towards children, Kiluange experienced great difficulty in working with older youth. In fact, many of its staff complained that the Choices Programme developed few structured activities for the older youth, given its emphasis on children and adolescents. Seeking to overcome this gap, Kiluange and his colleagues created the Associação Juvenil Semear o Futuro (AJSF, literally meaning “sowing the future youth association”) in 2011, in partnership with the Skills project. The underfunding of the Choices Programme projects was also criticised, as the scarcity of resources compromised the interventions in the field and the payment of staff salaries. Worn down by the precarious working conditions, Kiluange moved away from the Choices Programme in professional terms, although he continued to cooperate with the Skills project as a volunteer.

The AJSF operated in the first two years of its existence but became inactive as its members no longer had time for associativism. The transition to adult life led many of them to assume responsibilities they did not have in the past, creating conflicts between working/family time and leisure/associativism time. Nevertheless, this youth association proved effective in what it had set out to do: inspire youth in the virtues of citizen participation. Invited by the Skills project in 2015, Kiluange began to informally promote one of its activities: Empower Jovem (“empower youth”). The plan was to stimulate empowerment, community spirit, and protagonism aimed at preparing young people to take over

the association that he helped set up. In one of the Empower Youth dynamics I attended with ten youngsters, Kiluange exhibited the photographs of four historic figures—Amílcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Nelson Mandela—to highlight what they had in common:

These people broke the silence and started to do things in benefit of the collective. Rather than just criticising, doing is very important....Many people here in the neighbourhood don’t do anything, but there’s a lot to do. We can’t just wait for others to do it for us....These are people who went beyond their comfort zone, they’re not superheroes, because they don’t exist. We are the superheroes....Everyone has a place in this society, we are all useful. We just have to find our place in society. (field diary, 2016)

At the end of this presentation, Kiluange asked the youngsters to write down the names of the people they considered to be their superheroes. One referred to the neighbourhood’s postman, others pointed to Barack Obama or the Minister of Justice Francisca Van Dunem, of Angolan origin, while others wrote down the names of family members or Skills project staff. The appeal for empowerment and protagonism was the essence of Empower Youth. By encouraging youngsters to leave their “comfort zone” through self-reliance and “doing things” to solve problems, it proposed an inclusion model that did not address the inequalities and injustices of their social environment. Decontextualised from the political struggles they fought, the historic figures served as a backdrop to encourage youngsters to be superheroes of their community, whose enhanced agency and self-empowerment was stimulated for the exercise of domesticated citizenship.

In the middle of the Skills project room, where the activity was taking place, a poster displayed the rules at Empower Youth: (a) when a monitor is speaking everyone should be silent and listening; (b) respect the opinions of your colleagues and monitors; (c) raise your finger before speaking; (d) tidy up the room before leaving; (e) attend the sessions until the end; and (f) no swearing. Other messages on the wall testified to the project’s disciplinary nature: tidy up the room and materials, speak one at a time, always eat everything, participate with interest in the activities, etc. A “behaviour table” with the name of those attending the Skills project recorded the number of green or red balls according to compliance with the established rules. This table was used as criteria to choose the young people who would participate in activities such as excursions and beach trips, especially when the number of registrants was higher than the available places. Alongside this, the youngsters who accumulated too many red balls were suspended from project activities. Signatures were collected at the beginning or the end of these activities, a usual practice aimed at recording the number of youngsters covered

by the Skills project and generating statistics for the Choices Programme.

Shortly after, a meeting promoted by the Skills project with 20 people would give rise to the first Youth Meeting. This was a mandatory initiative of the Choices Programme, aimed at legitimising the project's actions, engaging youngsters in its initiatives and nurturing their civic awareness through a democratic experience. As would be explained by a Skills project staff member:

[The Youth Meeting] is a space of citizenship where the neighbourhood's youth who are linked to the Skills project meet to talk about various issues related to the project, your own realities and needs. You may ask questions or offer suggestions, give your contribution. The aim is to have representatives. (field diary, 2016)

In that activity, Kiluange sought to raise the youngsters' awareness of the importance of becoming leaders, challenging them to join the AJSF, an instrument to accomplish beneficial actions for the neighbourhood. The importance of this meeting for the neighbourhood's youth was also debated and three representatives for the Youth Meeting's board were elected. Lacking time for an in-depth discussion on youth associativism, a debate on this topic was scheduled for the next Empower Youth sessions.

I participated in three other sessions of Empower Youth, when future AJSF activities and the need to elect a new management board were discussed. Some of the ideas shared by the youngsters were: graffiti workshop and organisation of a street art festival; creation of a music studio; parties; foreign language courses; and identification of urban facilities requiring maintenance. Skills project staff who accompanied the debate reminded them of the fundamental principles on which such proposals should be based: (a) promotion of activities for occupation and capacity-building of the neighbourhood youth; (b) opening of the neighbourhood to outside youth; (c) neighbourhood enhancement and strengthening of community spirit. The sustainability of the association and the proposed activities was one of the core concerns of the staff, who reiterated the importance of their members' financial contribution. Delighted with the impetus of the discussion, one of the staff members stressed the youngsters' sense of self-reliance, viewing them as "examples" for others:

The association should work on raising the awareness in youngsters that they must not wreck the neighbourhood's infrastructures but preserve them. Especially as you are the examples of the neighbourhood's youth. (field diary, 2016)

The second Meeting Youth was well publicised and attended by more than thirty people, mostly boys aged 13 to 16 years old. The Youth Meeting board was chaired

by Nuno, 27, who called upon Kiluange to present the main goals of the AJSF: (a) engage youth, foster cohesion, and change the image of the youth and neighbourhood; (b) work on skills concerning associativism, entrepreneurship, and innovation; and (c) occupy free time and create sustainable projects for the community. After listing the ideas of activities drawn up by the youth for the AJSF (music studio, language course, parties, street art festival), he summarised the association's purpose as follows: "Work with the youngsters, and not for the youngsters, so as to make this happen in the neighbourhood." Subsequently, Kiluange recalled some of the activities previously organized by the association: swimming pool, football tournaments, the Zero Poverty Festival, etc. The exhibition of a graffiti of a black boy with the phrase "proud of what I am" served as the motto for Kiluange to appeal to youngsters to mobilise in favour of the neighbourhood and counteracts the territorial stigma to which they were exposed on a daily basis:

I chose this image for a purpose. In the old days, our parents or even us when we went to school or were job-searching, we didn't say that we were from this neighbourhood, but from other places. That image is the opposite of that. When we were outside the neighbourhood, we didn't acknowledge who we were or where we came from. And what I propose is that none of us go through that ever again: being ashamed of where we come from. None of us should be ashamed of who we are. (field diary, 2016)

For Nuno it was essential to have "new blood in the association," as Kiluange would not be able to make it work alone. The first steps would be the creation of an election committee and the scheduling of elections for the AJSF board members. After debating the bureaucratic aspects of the election committee's operation, the election date was scheduled for the summer holidays. Upon closing the meeting, the youngsters hastily departed. Kiluange said he was enjoying this initiative, as he had not seen the youngsters so excited around a common goal for a long time. He would not join any list of board members, confessing a certain fatigue of his leadership role:

Although I am not part of any list, my idea will always be to supervise the association's progress. I know that if I were a board member of the association, I wouldn't do anything else, space must be made for new members....Being a leader requires lots of resilience and the ability to suffer. I sacrifice myself a little to help others....Sometimes I ask myself if it's worth it to give up so much of my time to work for the community. (field diary, 2016)

The election of the new AJSF board did not go ahead because the youngsters stopped participating in the election process. Although the Skills project staff had taken on various bureaucratic tasks, the youth

protagonism required to resuscitate the association was not strong enough.

The third Youth Meeting was held at the end of 2016. With much lower attendance than the previous meeting, its discussion focused on the activities of the Skills project, spotlighting Mundar, a youth entrepreneurship competition of the Choices Programme that funded the winning ideas. The inexistence of competing projects of the neighbourhood's youth in that year was a "missed opportunity," according to one of the project staff members, who encouraged those present to deepen their engagement in the Empower Youth and Ideas Factory sessions devoted, respectively, to empowerment and youth entrepreneurship. This was followed by a discussion on the difficulties of organising the AJSF elections, raising the possibility of the youngsters creating another association. Failing to reach a defined strategy on how to develop youth associativism in the neighbourhood, the meeting ended in a disheartening tone for its participants. The no-show of Kiluange, one of the few youngsters who spoke in public, threw further light on the bureaucratic framework of the meetings, whose dynamics were of the meeting were firmly in the hands of the project staff. It was the staff, as a rule, that spoke and decided on the paths to be followed, with the Youth Meeting's board playing a minor role. With little room for the issues of interest to the youngsters, the meetings imparted notions of associativism and citizenship that were rather unrelated to their everyday lives. Topics related to the youngsters' specific problems like poverty, violence, sexuality, drugs, leisure, racism, or the history of Africa were rarely addressed in those meetings that remained impermeable to the youth experiences outside the institutional environment. Other Youth Meetings, held in the following year to revive the AJSF, were unsuccessful due to the disaffection of the participants. The members of the Youth Meeting's board at that time drifted away, meaning that a substantial part of the time spent in the meetings was absorbed by the election of new representatives who successively failed to attend subsequent meetings. Unappealing, these bureaucratic discussions were increasingly irrelevant to the aspirations and needs of the youngsters who progressively stopped participating in the Skills project.

In view of the distancing of the youngsters, the Skills project staff involved another group in the project's activities, where the creation of a new association was decided. These youngsters chose to embark on a new associativist pathway, delineating the goals, statutes, and name of the future youth association. However, the protagonism that was given to them in this process, like in the Youth Meetings, did not allow room for emancipatory discourses, being constrained by the governance structure of the Choices Programme. In the meeting I attended in 2018, the topics under discussion and the speeches followed the roadmap previously established by the Skills project staff, a staging of participation that kept them in a situation of dependency. That was the

opinion expressed by one of the founders of this youth association years later (interviewed in 2021):

We were always waiting for the staff to be able to move, but why? Because we regarded them as more experienced, but that led to dependency. When you are always dependent on someone or an entity, you don't think freely, you lack freedom or initiative to talk to the community, or even hold meetings with the youngsters without any staff orders. And when it's too artificial, the community has no faith....My conclusion was that it's artificial, it's not being real or organic, it's not true.

Devoid of a militant strength, the youngsters' associative engagement was stimulated by the principles of empowerment and protagonism, whose accountability for resolving the neighbourhood's problems was embodied in actions not defined by them. The absence of the autonomous discourse made the young people objects of policy, "not subjects," as their subjectivities were placed at the service of the purposes of the Skills project managers and Choices Programme. Not by chance, partnership with the Skills project would occur in all the activities held by the association, many of them of a charitable nature: neighbourhood cleaning campaign, Christmas party, and youth fitness.

In that simulacrum of citizen participation, the majority of the founders moved away as their initial enthusiasm faded and the responsibilities of adult life curtailed their time for associativism. A few months after its creation, the association ceased functioning. Despite its negligible impact on the neighbourhood's daily life, this association generated precious statistics for the Skills project and Choices Programme, constituting an output legitimating the supposed success of this public policy.

## 5. Conclusions

The ethnographic reconstitution of an associative experience in the outskirts of Lisbon gave me an insider's understanding of some of the control and management mechanisms linked to the social inclusion policies directed at poor, racialised and peripheral youth. Differently from what was done in the past, these youngsters are encouraged to undertake responsibilities in confronting the adversities that affect their community, no longer being "problem youths" but transformed into "solution youth" in delinquency prevention projects (De Tommasi, 2013; Souza, 2008). Discourses of youth empowerment and protagonism are crucial to encourage youngsters to become engines of change in their neighbourhoods, in which citizen participation is converted into a community governmentality resource. This is because that participation does not aim to raise awareness on the structures underpinning their marginalisation in society, nor claim rights, but rather to stimulate self-reliance and self-government among youth,



voluntarily involving them in neoliberal structures of governance (Kwon, 2013; Rose, 1996).

A follower of this model, the Choices Programme appropriates the talents of youngsters to secure them as partners in the implementation of welfare projects, whose individualist and meritocratic principles underlie the transfer of the responsibility for the community's harsh living conditions to the "shoulders" of that community. This strategy not only masks the contradictions generating the inequalities (of class, race, and territory) affecting them, but also subdues their subjectivities, by naturalizing the regime of subalternity in which they are immersed. Instigated to empower themselves to "do their part" for the benefit of the community, the youngsters are entreated to manage poverty, diluting antagonisms, pacifying conflicts, and hindering the emergence of an activism hostile to the interests of the state.

The fostering of youth meetings and youth associations under the Choices Programme proved to be a highly effective strategy of social control of youth, embodying a citizen participation model amounting to what Souza (2008, p. 12) considers to be "political annulment." The protagonism given to the youngsters under the Skills project tacitly implied a limited and unauthentic participation, disguising a domination that tamed their ideals. Stemming from the fake youth meetings and associations, the youngsters' participation was reduced to the mere implementation of tasks whose contents had previously been decided by the upper echelons of the Choices Programme. In this biopolitical operation, the state seized the youngsters' desire for more social justice, aligning their collective actions to the neoliberal strategies of youth empowerment and protagonism. It is in this analytical framework that we should understand not only the artificiality of the youth meetings and association promoted by the Skills project but also the actual premises mediating the current youth social inclusion policies. Without wishing to devalue the beneficial effects of the political-associative engagement of poor and racialised youth, this takes the form of a "citizen technology" when subordinated to individualistic ideologies distant from a grammar of rights.

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### Conflict of Interests

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