

# Spain: The Evolution of Associative Life and Shared Networking Spaces

Maria-Angels ROQUE

Civil society organisations in Spain played an important role in the democratic transition process that took place in the 1970s, but their position diminished with the development of governmental institutions. The author highlights how Spaniards today have begun to realise the importance of self-organisation, even though the financial crisis has resulted in a severely underfunded third sector. In this context, the Spanish Network of the Foundation is working towards creating a far-reaching platform for shared projects.

The path of associative life in Spain is broad and fertile, although this phenomenon has been paralysed during the period of repression and dictatorship until its rebound in the 1970s when the authoritarian government was much weaker than before and civil society played an important and necessary role in the process of transition to democracy (Chart 26.1).

A peculiar connection can be noted between the late arrival of democracy and the state of wellbeing that has marked the most recent history of Spanish associative life. This is the brain drain which took place between the late 70s and early 80s when a large proportion of civil society managers and executives became active members of political parties or integrated in the public administration considering that these streams

of influence would be most appropriate to achieve their goals of social transformation and to improve the quality of life of citizens. As a matter of fact, with the arrival of democracy, citizens began to feel represented by government institutions with a consequent loss of leadership of associations in their role of representing collective interests. Since then, the militancy and the ability to mobilise have declined dramatically, in addition to the loss of critical content and objectives within the organisations because of the confusion generated by the primary role of democratic institutions.

## The working model of social organisations

In Spain, organisations strongly depend on the State and autonomous governments and municipalities, since they get almost all of their grant budgets from the public administration. This dependence often leads to prioritise the relationship with the donors over a clear political positioning of the organisations or dealing with the most sensitive affairs of the country. In addition, the bureaucratic requirements of the administration increased the difficulty to report about the grants obtained and generated a disproportionate burden of work on associations reducing their capacity for action.

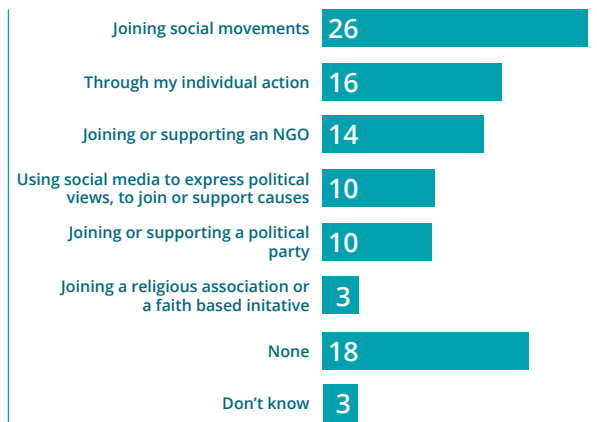
During the years of plenty, the subsidies provided by the state budget reached 4,351 million Euros, as in 2009. This was the result of a constant and committed race towards the goal of devoting 0.7% of the Gross National Product to official development assistance (after the resolution of the United Nations in 1972), which produced an exponential increase in chances for funding and implementation of projects. The civil society sector has been professionalised, and volunteer workers have become paid workers. The constant demand for professionals has popularized the sector replacing in this way the old altruistic militancy. This model based on the transfer of resources and strongly influenced by the demand created a strategic fragmentation. In addition, the lack of visibility in the political sphere and a management based on obtaining public funds has

**Chart 26.1** Characteristics of the Mediterranean region in Spain



**Survey Question:** When somebody is using the word DEMOCRACY, what are the words that come to your mind (what do you think they are referring to)? **Base:** % of all respondents; % of the 10 most frequent mentions are shown (© Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll 2012).

**Chart 26.2**  
**Most efficient ways of solving problems in Spain**



**Survey Question:** How do you think you could most efficiently contribute to solving the problems in your country? **Base:** % of all respondents (© Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll 2012).

significantly reduced the consolidation of a social base and impacted on the public imaginary which considers civil society organisations quite insignificant as a tool for social transformation.

### The consequences of the crisis

Since 2010 - the year following the burst of the global financial crisis - development aids in Spain have been decreasing exponentially every year. Because of this lack of funding, we are witnessing a restructuring, reduction or disappearance of several entities of the third sector. Public and social austerity policies imposed by Brussels generated reactions among citizens. In this regard, it should be noted that the social perception of loss of sovereignty of the State compared to the markets that now run the world order or to supranational institutions such as the European Parliament has led to an unmatched surge of political disaffection among citizens. Spanish society, for the first time since the beginning of democracy, is perceptive of the weakness of the system to provide to its basic necessities and this is making it difficult for citizens to relate with their governors.

As a consequence one might as well talk of a resurgence of organized social mobilisation. One of the most emblematic expressions of this trial is the Indignatos Movement, which gathers people of different origin, track and social status. These people are organised according to common interests: raising political, economic and social changes, taxing the government works, or else requiring the guarantee of basic human rights. These new expressions of citizen mobilization, which are building up citizen platforms, in many cases, revolve around the idea of giving the decisional power to the people and not the elite of governors. In addition,

these movements endorse the concept of voluntary collaboration between people who organise themselves to reach a specific objective, independently, without conditioning their action in order to obtain public funds to cover their expenses. (Chart 26.2)

### The importance of networking

We are in an era full of social upheaval and reorganization of social action practices. Today, the importance of networking is becoming increasingly important, as it is institutional leadership with the ability to create a discourse, to bring positions closer together and give coherence to a group of actors. In this sense, the need to strive towards a common goal, to look for ways of articulation and collaboration among entities and countries, through platforms, meetings for dialogue and major projects, is central.

It is important, therefore, that the Spanish Network of the Anna Lindh Foundation has the ability to develop a working model for networking based on horizontal relationships between its members on the basis of egalitarian ties. The future challenge is to overcome the limitations identified by network members and to adapt to a very complex new scene, full of opportunities and strengths, where old forms associative life, marked by clientelism, and new forms ones, much more autonomous, will coexist. Areas for improvement, according to the data collected through the latest Survey carried out among the members of the Spanish Anna Lindh network (June 2013) highlight the participation and visibility of member organisations. Members called for greater articulation, more unifying criteria, more spaces for debate and more frequency of information exchange. This implies a long-term cultural and political work where the challenge lies in linking movements, citizenship and associations. Working through a network and building a common project involve the development of shared identities and common engagements.

**Maria-Angels ROQUE** is Coordinator of the Anna Lindh Foundation Network in Spain.