

Keynote speaker Professor Vivien Lowndes: Prospects for Citizen Participation under Austerity: Retrenchment, Continuity or Innovation?

Is citizen participation a luxury that cannot be afforded as local authorities confront budget cuts and a general climate of austerity? Or is it part of a response to meeting funding gaps and addressing the new social and economic challenges? The presentation focuses on this question, whilst also considering changes to the forms taken by citizen participation in environments of austerity. Drawing on research findings from the UK and Spain, the presentation contrasts scenarios of retrenchment, continuity and innovation – what they look like, and why certain scenarios emerge in different contexts. Even where citizen participation remains strong, it is taking different forms – civic volunteerism, stakeholder managerialism, service co-production, and social movements that combine critique with prefigurative forms of social action. The presentation finishes by returning to a Council of Europe study conducted by Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker in 2006 (which included Finland) to analyse changes in both ‘supply’ (why citizens participate) and ‘demand’ (how local authorities stimulate and manage participation). The combined effects of these changes will shape whether prospects for citizen participation lie in retrenchment, continuity or innovation.

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