
Introduction

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Biographical notes: Rosa Maria Fernandez holds a degree in Economics from the University of Oviedo, Spain and joined UNED (Spain National Distance Education University) as a Lecturer in 2006. She presented her thesis in 2010, entitled 'European Union and climate change. Main economic effects'. Through the last years, she has been a Visiting Researcher at the University of Exeter, UK and York University, Toronto. She has published some articles in her main research interests related to climate change, energy policy and corporate social responsibility. She has been an Associate Tutor for the University of Bradford and is currently working for the University of Birmingham teaching Environmental Economics.

The economic situation Europe is living these days requires deeper understanding of both the causes and the type of solutions that governments are trying to implement. Evidence seems to show that the crisis will stay with us longer than it was forecasted by everyone, and the situation in some of the European Member States is still getting worse instead of better. Without many reasons for optimism about the short-term, it is still possible to think about solutions and innovative ways to get out of the negative path, once accepted that traditional ideas do not seem to work in the current context.

There are many ways to analyse what is going on, but it is obvious that if we do not understand the underlying causes it will be difficult to find an adequate solution, that is, the right combination of measures that help countries with sovereign debt problems without diminishing the opportunities for future growth. It appears also clear that the behaviour of some countries in the past in terms of fiscal discipline has undermined their possibilities of recovery. This brings additional concern in citizens when they see that decisions about national policies need somehow the approval of international institutions, making them feel that their politicians are losing their representativeness and to some extent that democracy is not totally respected.

But this change on the policy making arena is part of the European integration process on one side, and part of the globalisation process on the other. We need to admit that being part of the group, the club, the Europe league of developed countries, requires both commitment and assumption of the club rules, and it is normal to find reluctance if some of the changes are perceived as a loss of national identity. The counterpart of this situation is the strength that being part of the European group brings, and the support expected when one country finds difficulties on reaching some of its goals, particularly those related to economic growth. What some people question now is to what extent it is acceptable that decisions affecting daily citizens lives can be made not only out of the country borders but in some cases out of the European frontiers (when the IMF is called

for assistance). Another issue that brings doubts has to do with the way decisions are made at European level. In this case, concerns appear when there is the perception that decisions are made following one or several countries wishes or guidance, with the possibility of hidden interests, instead of the general European interest.

The purpose of this special issue is to bring a bit of light over some of these aspects and at the same time provide ideas for future action, with emphasis on the different agents who can play important roles on the successful outcome of any initiative undertaken. First of all we are going to present an overview of the decision making process at EU level, pointing out two different perspectives: On one side, the role of the different European institutions and the evolution of this role over time; on the other side, the role of particular member states and the influence of some policy makers on the path that the EU decides to follow (Germany and Angela Merkel are clear examples of this case).

More economic insight is provided with the analysis of relevant sectors: Small and medium enterprises, as creators of employment opportunities, or the functioning of public health systems, as generators of inefficiencies. The points of view expressed here try to highlight the opportunities for improvement and change of path, through instruments such as the corporate responsibility strategies or internationalisation strategies. Even if failures in the market economy can be remarked as the cause of the current crisis situation, it is encouraging to see that good decisions at market level can help overcome the crisis. But it is also important to mention that actors at both the public and private sphere need to intervene and change the short term view of the decision making process by a long-term sustainable one.

As it could not be otherwise, the effect of the crisis on the role of citizenship and the reduced scope for participation and for people's voice to be heard in moments as tense as the current one is also analysed in this special issue.

Without a doubt we are living a complex situation and we will still see some hard measures being taken and of course protests from those more negatively affected. But the idea that the papers here presented try to bring is that even with difficulties it is possible to adopt measures capable to create growth, as long as everybody is willing to renounce to something in order to get a better future. Europe has been in difficult situations before and there is no reason to think that we are not capable to do the same once again. But since the effects of our decisions affect a bigger number of people each time, it would be wise being careful and wonder which is really the path the Europe wants to follow, to avoid the risk of increasing voices against the European project.