



Democracy in cities and territories

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This paper has been produced as an Issue-Based Contribution to the sixth Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD VI): the flagship publication of the organized constituency of local and regional governments represented in United Cities and Local Governments. The GOLD VI report has been produced in partnership with the Development Planning Unit (University College London), through the programme Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality (KNOW). GOLD VI focuses on how local and regional governments can address the local manifestations of growing inequalities and contribute to create 'Pathways toward urban and territorial equality'. The GOLD VI report has been produced through a large-scale international co-production process, bringing together over a hundred representatives of local and regional governments, academics and civil society organizations. This paper is an outcome of this process and is part of the GOLD VI Working Paper series, which collects the 22 Issue-Based Contributions produced as part of the GOLD VI process.

In particular, the present paper has contributed to Chapter 9 on 'Democratizing', which focuses on the challenges and opportunities for local and regional governments in implementing meaningful participatory processes, and democratizing decision-making, unpacking asymmetries of power and the underpinning trends affecting processes of democratization. Through the lens of 'democratizing', the chapter explores how local and regional governments can promote more egalitarian, participatory and democratic processes, giving voice to marginalized groups of society, minorities and other groups, and thus contribute to urban and territorial equality.

This paper has been produced by Laura Roth. She is a post-doctoral researcher at Universitat Jaume I in Castelló de la Plana. She is also an activist and a consultant, and focuses on local democracy, political culture and feminism.

Introduction

The local level¹ is a wonderful place to make progress in the process of democratizing society and politics and local authorities throughout the world have engaged in thousands of experiences of citizen participation. But does participation necessarily generate more democracy? More specifically: can citizen participation move beyond simple consultation, to foster the co-creation of a space that will contribute to rebalancing the distribution of decision-making powers in society and to reduce inequalities? Answering these questions is the main aim of this Working Paper.

This Working Paper departs from the usual focus of discussions about participation at the local level in two different ways. First, it adopts a way of connecting democracy with equality that is not based on instrumental relationships. Unlike mainstream discourses about local democracy, this text neither views democracy as a mere instrument for equality, nor equality as a mere precondition for democracy. The reason is that the following pages look at the ideal of democracy as a notion of deep political equality and as sharing power beyond voting and consultation. This Working Paper does not look at whether basic material equality improves participation and it does not analyse whether participation generates material equality either. These are certainly interesting and important questions and they have received a lot of attention in the past. **The text focuses on whether participation generates more democracy, this is, more political equality in self-government.**

The second way in which the focus differs from more mainstream debates is that the good practices mentioned in the text do not merely describe instances of participatory mechanisms such as participatory budgets, consultations, councils, transparency mechanisms, etc. Too often listing these processes without looking at the details of their design runs the risk of becoming mere *participation-washing* when actually no real sharing of power is taking place. Instead of telling stories about participatory mechanisms, this text collects features of some

participatory institutions as illustrations of good practices. **It looks at the *how* and not so much at the *what*.** “The devil is in the details”, they say, and this is certainly the case when it comes to institutional design.

The Working Paper is divided into several parts. In the second section the methodology is briefly explained. Then, in the third one, the relationship between democracy and equality is conceptually analysed. The fourth part focuses on representative and participatory democracy and how political equality is realized in each of them. In the fifth part, some of the dangers of participation are addressed before the domains of democracy are distinguished in section 6. Section seven focuses on what a democratization agenda could look like, from the point of view of democracy as political equality. It includes examples of good practices but also “further challenges” that the reader might want to consider or explore in the future. Several conclusions are drawn in section 8.

1. In order to simplify the reading, this Working Paper talks about “local governments/authorities” and the “local level”. Nevertheless, the aim is not to refer necessarily to city/town institutions necessarily, but to different subnational/sub-State levels of decision-making. The relevant criterion is scale, not actual distribution of competences.

The qualitative research that is reflected in this Working Paper started with a workshop with key representatives of local governments

The second and final part of the qualitative research was based on interviews with experts and desktop research on the good practices. This activity was possible thanks to the support of the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) and the United Cities and Local Governments Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights (UCLG CSIPDHR).

Participatory democracy
to advance urban equality:
Exploring transformative
approaches by UCLG CSIPDHR
and IOPD members
Source: UCLG CSIPDHR

KEY IDEAS / IDEAS CLAVE / IDÉES CLÉS

How can we redesign institutional structures to share decision-making power and therefore contribute to more urban equality?

¿Cómo rediseñar las estructuras institucionales para co-crear el toma de decisiones y contribuir así a una mayor igualdad urbana?

Comment redéfinir les structures institutionnelles pour partager le pouvoir de décision et contribuer à une plus grande égalité urbaine ?

How can we strengthen our communities so we generate a democracy where people participate as equals in decision-making?

¿Cómo fortalecer la comunidad para generar una democracia en la que las personas participen como iguales en el toma de decisiones?

Comment pouvons nous renforcer nos communautés afin de générer une démocratie où les gens participent d'égal à égal à la prise de décision ?

PRACTICES / PRÁCTICAS / PRATIQUES

2. Democracy and equality

According to a famous definition offered by Tom Christiano,³ **democracy is “a method of group decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the collective decision making”**. As one can easily detect, the relationship between democracy and equality is a direct one from the outset. Nevertheless, the author qualifies this definition by adding the following four remarks:

- 1) Democracy concerns collective decision making: [...] decisions that are made for groups and that are binding on all the members of the group.
- 2) This definition means to cover a lot of different kinds of groups that may be called democratic. So there can be democracy in families, voluntary organizations, economic firms, as well as in states and transnational and global organizations.
- 3) The definition is not intended to carry any normative weight to it, this

is, whether all groups/institutions should be democratic. So the definition of democracy does not settle any normative questions.

- 4) The equality required by the definition of democracy may be more or less deep. It may be the mere formal equality of one-person one-vote in an election for representatives to an assembly where there is competition among candidates for the position. Or it may be more robust, including equality in the processes of deliberation and coalition building. “Democracy” may refer to any of these political arrangements. It may involve direct participation of the members of a society in deciding on the laws and policies of the society or it may involve the participation of those members in selecting representatives to make the decisions.

However, the relationship between democracy and equality can go deeper and it can also be reflected in other ways:

2.1 Democracy as an instrument for social equality

Democratic mechanisms of decision-making can support more material/socioeconomic equality. **If some people are less able to participate in decision-making, then it is also less likely that their life conditions will be improved.** In other words, those deciding (in their name or in the name of others) will probably favour their own interests and views instead of the one of those excluded.

This is certainly an important question but, as we all know, this relationship is not that simple. We can have decisions that are made through democratic mechanisms and which produce egalitarian outputs (sometimes even for those who participate if they cannot articulate their views or make them prevail) and also decisions made in less democratic ways that generate more social equality (e.g. a benevolent dictatorship or group of experts). In the end, **whether democracy generates social equality is an empirical question and depends on the context.**

3. Tom Christiano. “Democracy”. In *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Zalta (2018). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/democracy>

2.2 Equality as an instrument for democracy

Another possible connection is that in a society with social/material inequalities, those who are in a more disadvantaged position will have a harder time participating in collective decision-making, and therefore democracy will be weaker. **Even in situations where electoral and participatory channels are open, some people will use them more and/or better, while some others will not or will not have such a great impact.** At the same time, those who have a lot of material resources will often be able to have a disproportionate impact on political decisions (the typical example would be lobbyists who can influence government or public institutions).

But again, although this can be true in some cases, it is difficult to make absolute generalizations. For instance, poor people who are well organized can have a greater capacity to impact political decision-making than people with more material resources but

who lack collective power. And this is true both for representative and participatory democracy. In the electoral game the capacity to create or influence political parties is key. Actually belonging to a group with fewer material resources can sometimes even be an asset if a party wants to address that constituency. **In the particular case of participatory mechanisms, the capacity to influence decision-making depends on resources such as time, willingness to engage and certain capacities (understanding information, speaking in public, etc.). And these features are often, but not always, directly linked to material wellbeing.** In spite of those complexities, most people would also agree that normally we cannot expect people to participate if we do not also make sure their basic material needs are covered. In that regard, some basic equality is necessary for democracy, even if the relationship is not a direct one.

2.3 Democracy as political equality (equality is intrinsic to democracy)

The relationship between democracy or democratization and equality is not only based on the socioeconomic dimension of the latter. As explained before, although there is a bidirectional dependence between democracy and material/socioeconomic equality, a) that relationship is not always direct and b) political equality can be promoted also with relative autonomy from the socioeconomic dimension.

In other words, and this is a central argument here, **in order to advance democracy, it is not enough to focus on the basic needs of those participating and on the egalitarian dimension of the socioeconomic outputs of decisions.** The first will not be enough for democratic decision-making and the second might be achieved through non-democratic means. As Christiano stresses, democracy is about sharing political power in an egalitarian way and establishing decision-making mechanisms, institutions and structures that allow this to happen. This does not mean merely establishing

formal rules to allow for people's participation (voting in elections, voting in a referendum, participating in a deliberation, etc.), but actually **going deeper into the different dynamics and elements within formal and informal institutions that can produce more or less political equality and looking at how political power is built and shared within the community.**

Moreover, achieving equality is not only a matter of distributing non-material resources, in addition to material ones. In our societies there are structures, cultural elements and institutions that reinforce certain kinds of inequality and oppression. As explained by Young: "disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society".⁴ As a consequence, **in order to deal with injustice in our societies, looking at the structures, practices, culture and institutions becomes paramount.**

4. Iris Marion Young. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 1990, 41.

3. Representative and participatory democracy

The most common device to connect democracy with political equality is, quite obviously, the “one person one vote” rule. Nevertheless, electoral and representative institutions are not enough to achieve a strong democracy because they generate many inequalities in terms of how political power is actually distributed. These are just some examples:

- ▶ the inequality between representatives and those represented,
- ▶ the inequality between those who just vote and those who also have other ways of influencing government,
- ▶ the inequality between those who can make their voice heard (e.g. on the media) and influence public opinion and those who cannot,
- ▶ the inequality (already mentioned before) between those who are able to organise and perhaps influence political parties or government policies and those who are not.

These issues are important because they remind us that, **even in a society with a certain degree of basic equality and a government that is generating policies that produce more socioeconomic equality, there can be something missing: sharing political power in a way that all the members of the community are treated as equals in political terms.**

But even in the real world, where there is no basic equality and no experts or elected officials who always make decisions that produce material equality, defending “more robust” accounts of political equality (following the terminology of Christiano) becomes necessary if the aim is to democratise our political systems in a deeper sense. When more participatory institutions are established, then power can be shared between representatives, bureaucracies, governments, civil society associations, social movements and individual citizens. When this happens, one can argue that a political community can become more democratic because - ideally - **the more voices are included, the more likely it becomes for power to be shared.**

4. The dangers of participation

Participation as such, however, does not necessarily translate into more democracy. Transforming participatory practices into political equality faces many diverse challenges. If democracy entails some degree of equality between members of the community in decision-making, then many participatory processes are not able to achieve that (although we will come back to some of the ways in which progress can actually be made in “the democratization agenda” section, below). Moreover, participation can often also become a danger in itself and it can even generate results that are similar or more negative in terms of political equality, compared to representative mechanisms.

One of the first challenges - often mentioned by public officials - is that decisions made by political and

bureaucratic actors are too complex and that ordinary citizens do not have the time or even the capacity to understand what the stakes are and how to deal with the issues. In close relation to that, if participatory processes are opened in such contexts, then they will be too slow and/or the quality of the output will be poor. Experts such as politicians and public officials - the argument goes - are better positioned to make quick and complex decisions and this is actually beneficial for ordinary citizens themselves. Rather than having to spend a lot of time figuring out what to decide about matters that are too difficult to understand and finally making a decision that is not better than the one made by public officials, leaving the process in their hands (and voting for representatives that share their basic views) is a smarter choice.

As one can clearly see, this challenge presents an argument for representative democracy, but the problem is that then the inequality between representatives, bureaucrats and constituencies appears again. The reasons why representative democracies often fail to deliver what they promise are various and well known (some of them were mentioned in the previous section). However, there are numerous ways of addressing that distance, although often the solutions, in turn, generate more new challenges. One of the ways in which the inequality between those inside the local state and those outside of it is addressed is using participation as a consultation device. This still saves everyone's time to a certain extent, but also helps feed officials with information about what are the actual preferences, needs and values of citizens. But **the difficulties of "using" citizens as mere sources of information are various and they include the disappointment of people when the decisions made do not represent their views** or when there is a lack of information about what happened with their inputs. In general, **the fact that decisions are non-binding for public officials makes it more likely for people to lose interest.**

In addition, different kinds of obstacles appear in relation to who is invited to these consultation spaces. Should they be open to individual people

and/or to organizations? If groups or organizations are invited, which ones? More generally, who has the legitimacy to have a say? Do people need to defend public interest when they join these spaces or can they speak in their own name? Who has the legitimacy to speak in the name of others?

Finally, another additional, and more general, challenge is the one mentioned by Ganuza and Baiocchi.⁵ The authors argue that "[participation] has become an imperative of our time", but also that **"participation is certainly no longer a counterpower; it has decisively become part of the planning of power itself"**.⁶ Unlike in previous decades, it is no longer the domain of citizens, but of governments and multilateral agencies. Actually, on many occasions participation has simply become "a channel of communication between service providers and clients rather than a space for collective self-determination".⁷ Cornwall raised a similar point and stressed that the effect of implementing participatory arrangements in institutions cannot be equal in every place, and it is embedded in the already existing reality: political relationships, political culture, etc.⁸ This means, among other things, that **new participatory spaces are often created and used in ways that simply reinforce existing dynamics and relationships, including not questioning who is already in power.**

5. Baiocchi, Gianpaolo, and Ernesto Ganuza. *Popular Democracy. The Paradox of Participation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017, p. 3.

6. Ibid, 4.

7. Ibid, 7.

8. Andrea Cornwall. "Introduction: New Democratic Spaces? The Politics and Dynamics of Institutionalised Participation". *IDS Bulletin* 35, no. 2 (2009): 1–10.



Grenoble, France
(Source: Benjamin Bellier, www.pixabay.com)

5. The domains of democracy

Going back to the definition offered by Christiano, democracy, that is, equality in collective decision-making, can take place in different domains: families, groups, schools, associations, public institutions, etc. When thinking about the role of local governments (which is the focus of the GOLD VI report⁹ and of this Working Paper), three domains are of special relevance: the public institution as such, civil society, and those in between or “the commons”.

Sometimes distinguishing between these three domains is not an easy task. Actually, talking about the commons offers an alternative framework to the traditional analysis, which distinguishes between public and private, or institutions and communities. The framework of the commons provides an analysis, not only of who has a say, but also of who should be entitled to have it. Chapter 4 of the GOLD VI report offers an account of some of the dimensions of the commons, but here it is also worth mentioning that this approach can be useful to understand democracy as such by distorting the traditional boundaries between

what is inside institutions and what is outside. In a nutshell, the idea of the commons is that there should be no strict separation between the two, their roles and functions, but more of a joint collaboration that helps making decisions about issues that affect a certain community. **The political and the public are understood as something more than the state and connected to the community as well.**

Within the traditional understanding of institutions vs. communities, distinguishing between three spaces where power is built can also be useful to understand how participation can come to happen (or not). Cornwall distinguishes between *closed*, *invited* and *popular* spaces.¹⁰ The first are those spaces with no participation of civil society and where decisions are made by representatives and bureaucracies. The second are spaces opened by public institutions where civil society is invited. The third ones are spaces where people are framing alternatives and mobilizing themselves.¹¹ Political equality can be improved in the three spaces.

6. The democratization agenda

Making progress in political equality and, therefore, in the democratization of different levels of government is complex. In spite of this, many local authorities are implementing innovative measures and reforms in that regard. In this section, two main questions are addressed: How to redesign institutional structures to advance political equality and share decision-making power? And how to strengthen democracy within the

community? The first part analyses issues and concrete examples of how to improve political equality in closed spaces (representative democracy), but also in invited spaces (participatory democracy). The second part focuses on different measures that can be implemented in relation to communities (popular spaces) with the aim of strengthening them, but without interfering with their autonomy.

9. To be published soon in 2022.

10. Andrea Cornwall. ‘Making spaces, changing places: situating participation in development’, IDS Working Paper 173, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2002; Andrea Cornwall. ‘Introduction: New Democratic Spaces? The Politics and Dynamics of Institutionalised Participation’. IDS Bulletin 35, no. 2, 2009: 1–10.

11. See also the *Power Cube* approach for a useful framework to analyse spaces, forms and levels of power. See <https://www.powercube.net/analyse-power/what-is-the-powercube/background-to-the-powercube/>

6.1 How to work with institutional structures to advance political equality and share decision-making power?

When working towards the democratization of institutional structures, there are at least two main trade-offs that need to be considered.

First, an ideal democracy where everyone can participate as an equal in each decision that affects their lives is not possible in practice. Because of that, local governments need to work with the resources they already have. On occasions, they will choose to reform existing institutions. But sometimes they will prefer creating new institutions or processes instead. There are pros and cons in both options. On the one hand, **creating new processes can be a wonderful idea in order to innovate in the development of spaces of shared power and decision-making.** They also have a greater chance of creating a sort of “blank slate” that does not simply reproduce old dynamics, cultures and inequalities. On the other hand, **new institutions can require the use of more resources (budget, time, etc.) and they can also generate stronger resistances that are often hard to overcome by those advocating for change.** What is the wisest choice between one option and the other will depend on the context and the political will.

Second, there is the question of the level of institutionalization of new decision-making processes and infrastructures. Are the new/reformed rules or devices just at the mercy of the changing political will of local authorities or will they be institutionalized in the sense that they become part of the mandatory public procedures that will need to be followed by anyone in government (in the present or in the future)? Sometimes this latter choice will need to be based on legal changes that are harder to make (e.g. because the political majorities at the local level are not enough to change local norms or because they depend on “higher” levels of government). Moreover, **it can also be argued that institutionalization can “dry up” the energy and spontaneity of more informal processes.** What the best solution is in a specific case will again depend on contextual factors and generalizations are not useful in this regard.

Keeping these two sets of trade-offs in mind, the following are some of the main points of an agenda of democratization of institutions in terms of sharing political power and advancing political equality.

6.1.1 Closing the gap between representatives and ordinary people

Increasing accountability is the very basis of any attempt to bring representatives closer to people. And transparency is the most fundamental element. **But transparency means not only producing data but also supporting and training people to understand that data.**

Digital platforms are a typical candidate for this kind of task because information can easily be posted and updated so everyone can access the information. Nevertheless, if that is the chosen path, at least three elements need to be considered:

- data should be processed and explained, and not websites should not simply be a repository of official documents,

- information should be clear, accessible and up to date, and

- local authorities should not simply update information, but also make a proactive attempt to help people understand that information.

Another way of increasing accountability is the celebration of transparency sessions where public officials explain decisions that are going to be made or have already been made. They can also answer questions from citizens, or even to set up citizen-led monitoring systems. In spite of these benefits, it is worth keeping in mind that one of the main risks is that these mechanisms become a political battlefield against targeted officials. In order to avoid that, facilitation and participation methodologies are key.

Going beyond accountability and opening the whole plan of government to citizens at the beginning of a term in office is another way of tuning the actions of elected officials with the will of ordinary people. The benefits of such a process is that discussions can go beyond the logics of electoral competition (which sometimes distorts the definition of what is best for the political community) and go into details regarding the actual priorities of the community at a given moment.

In addition, **opening specific consultative spaces can be useful, especially in areas where those affected by the resulting decisions are not usually present in the different spaces of local politics. This is the**

case for many disadvantaged groups like migrants, young people, disabled people, etc.

Finally, **many kinds of measures can be implemented in order to avoid the hyper-professionalization of representatives and their disconnection from the real experiences of ordinary people.** Some examples are the limitation of the number of office terms, the limitation of salaries, etc.

GOOD PRACTICES

► In **Grenoble** (France) the local government organises municipal budget training meetings so citizens can understand how local finances work and can have an opinion about them.

► In **Quilmes** (Argentina) the local government opened a process of co-creation of the government programme.

► In **Bogota** (Colombia) the Ombudsman office has established a “social control mechanism” with the aim of detecting corruption and administrative inefficiencies. It is based on three elements: training, support and monitoring.¹²

► The city of **Sao Paulo** (Brazil) has a Municipal Migrants Council that includes representatives of public institutions and of civil society. Regarding the latter, they belong to three groups: migrants’ associations and collectives, collectives that support migrants and individual immigrants. The Council has a say in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of the local migrants policy.¹³

► In **Sousse** (Tunisia) the local government established a Municipal Youth Council.¹⁴

FURTHER CHALLENGES

► What are the conditions that allow the opening of consultative spaces without instrumentalizing citizens for institutional/electoral purposes?

► What other measures can be taken in order to ensure ethical behaviour on the part of public officials?

12. See: <https://uclg-cisdp.org/en/news/bogota-social-control-mechanism-promotes-transparency-and-citizen-participation-government>

13. See: https://www.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/cidade/secretarias/direitos_humanos/imigrantes_e_trabalho_decente/conselho_municipal_de_imigrantes/index.php

14. See: <https://medcities.org/fr/project/set-up-and-consolidation-of-a-local-youth-council-in-msaken-tunisia/>

6.1.2 Making representation more representative

Fair representation is a challenge in most places: often middle-to-high class people (mainly CIS men) are the ones running for elections, and there are certain groups that are usually infrarepresented, compared to their place in society. The clearest example is women. They are half of the population but, with some exceptions, only occupy a small percentage of the seats in local representative institutions.¹⁵ The same is true for other numerous collectives, like the poor, racial/ethnic groups, religious groups, etc.

Quite often, the fact that a person belongs to a certain group not only makes it more likely that they will be discriminated or oppressed.¹⁶ It also makes it less likely for that person to have an impact on changing the social structures that can generate change in society.¹⁷ Discussions about whether it takes someone from a group to represent the interests of that group are complex,¹⁸ but the opposite argument is hard to defend. In the particular case of women (and the argument also applies to other groups), it has been argued that **fair representation is both a matter of diversity (having a “sample” of this group) and of justice (people having a right to be equally represented).**¹⁹

In addition to these challenges of fair representation within the local state, in some places the situation is even more complex because people engage in politics through the traditional/religious groups they belong to. The representation of groups in those contexts becomes important **to develop democratic ways of integrating the demands of these sections of the population into decision-making structures without co-opting them but also without subjecting the public interest to the will of any concrete group.** Nevertheless, “any attempt to integrate traditional authorities needs careful examination of the socio-political structure at the local level”.²⁰

Finally, it is worth considering the challenge of **going beyond formal representation and quotas and looking at how the real cultural dynamics give more voice to some people compared to others. Many informal rules like who speaks, who does the administrative work, what is the tone of discussions, how are people seated in rooms, what are the dressing codes, etc. have an impact on how political power is generated and also whether it is shared or not.** Addressing these issues in order to give a greater space to disadvantaged individuals and groups becomes key if fair representation is to go beyond a mere formality aimed at superficially legitimizing inequalitarian decision-making institutions.

GOOD PRACTICES

► In **Quilmes** (Argentina) the government developed public mechanisms to encourage participation of women and diversities in institutions

FURTHER CHALLENGES

- How to increase fair representation without tokenizing members of certain sections of society?
- Do groups need to be democratically organized in order to have a legitimate voice in the political system?
- How to define which groups need to have a special place in the distribution of seats?
- How to implement changes in informal practices of decision-making from the inside of those same institutions, marked by unequal power relations?

15. Barbara Pini. *Women and Representation in Local Government. International Case Studies*. Routledge, 2011.

16. Amy Gutmann. “Responding to Racial Injustice”. In *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, edited by Kwame Anthony Appiah, Amy Gutmann, and David B. Wilkins, (1996); Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.

17. Anne Phillips. *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

18. Jane Mansbridge. “Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent ‘Yes’”. *The Journal of Politics*, 61, no. 3 (1999): 628–657.

19. Lovenduski, Joni. *Feminizing Politics*. Polity, 2005.

20. Jarat Chopra and Tanja Hohe. “Participatory Intervention.” *Global Governance* 10, no. 3 (2004).

6.1.3 Addressing inequality between non-institutional actors

When opening participatory processes of any sort, nothing can ensure that the inequalities of power and the political culture that exist in any concrete society will not be simply replicated in the new open spaces, affecting the chances of achieving more political equality. As mentioned above, material inequalities between people are one of the first obstacles, because those who do not have their very basic needs covered will have a hard time participating in politics. But any analysis of the factors generating inequality between non-institutional actors needs to go beyond those material issues and look at the capacity of citizens and groups to articulate their views and to actually have an impact on the collective decisions that are made.

Some of the most common axes of inequality in this regard are the ones between the following actors:

- ▶ citizens with less time and resources (including political culture) and citizens with more time and resources,
- ▶ people from oppressed groups and people from privileged ones,
- ▶ individual citizens and organized citizens,
- ▶ organizations with fewer resources and organizations with more resources,
- ▶ social organizations with fewer economic resources and private lobbies with greater economic resources.

One of the first issues in the agenda is **the creation of diverse channels and forms of participation that can adapt to the circumstances of as many people as possible, paying special attention to those who are usually excluded.**

These channels can be more or less demanding in terms of time, skills and level of engagement. In part due to the COVID-19 pandemic, nowadays it is critical to think how to connect digital and face-to-face participatory processes so that different citizens can participate through different channels. Some interesting options are to replicate in-person events online, or to explain online events in face-to-face sessions.

Another important point is that **attention needs to be paid to the**

potential conflict between groups and those citizens who are not organized.

Those who are organized often resist the participation of individuals in their own name claiming that these people defend particular interests instead of common ones. At the same time, these organizations do not want to lose their seat at the decision-making table or their legitimacy to speak in the name of certain groups, and individual participation challenges these prerogatives. These are challenges which are difficult to resolve, but at least three main elements can be helpful:

- ▶ making sure that the claims that are brought to the public debate are put in terms of the common good, even if this will be harder to articulate for some people,
- ▶ establishing mechanisms to deal with conflicts when they arise. Making sure that the process is taking care of relationships within the community and that it contributes to generating consensus and keeping everyone on board, and
- ▶ combining (or not) the participation of groups with the participation of individuals, making sure that none of the two has the capacity to trump the other.

Finally, the role of private lobbies needs to be addressed. First of all, transparency is needed regarding all the contacts between lobbyists and public officials, but also direct interactions should be minimized. What is the use of participation mechanisms if decisions are made behind closed doors by public officials and lobbies? Instead, **public fora where consultation with different actors can be done in an open way looks like a promising alternative, not only because the contents of the claims can be accessed, but also because they could be contrasted by different actors and decisions can be based on a broader consensus.**

Furthermore, the role of private lobbies can also be counterbalanced by publicly supporting civil society associations (e.g. with public resources) and/or counterbalancing the weight of organized actors with other citizen-based decision-making or consultative organs.

GOOD PRACTICES

► In **Cotacachi** (Ecuador) indigenous women were included in participatory budgeting processes through the creation of safe spaces (where they could overcome traditional passivity toward public issues) and also the use of native languages.²¹

► In **Taoyuan** the city government created participatory budgeting processes for migrant workers where they can intervene in their mother tongue; also, the Facebook page is multilingual.²²

► In **Wonosobo** (Indonesia) because of the COVID-19 crisis, local authorities had to make sure people had different ways to access the human rights violations mechanisms (where they can challenge the local administration for committing human rights violations). Local authorities created an online tool and also opened physical spaces across the territory.

FURTHER CHALLENGES

► How to define the right balance between the weight of the views of individual citizens, civil society associations and lobbies?

► In which ways can local governments make sure that a dynamic balance is reviewed and adjusted periodically?

6.1.4 Improving the quality and legitimacy of decisions

Citizen assemblies are a kind of participatory process that can be traced back to Ancient Greece. They mainly consist of a deliberation by randomly selected citizens around a specific issue. The roles can be of different kinds and they range from agenda-setting, issue-framing, consulting, or even decision-making. These kinds of assemblies can improve both the

quality and legitimacy of decisions. And they can also advance political equality: **because of how the assemblies are designed, they have a high probability of proposing solutions that generate consensus in the community. In addition, because participants are selected by sortition, everyone has the same chances of having a say.**²³

GOOD PRACTICES

► In **Ostbelgien** (Belgium) the local government has institutionalized this kind of process by creating a Citizen Council and Citizen Assemblies.²⁴ The first one is a permanent council of citizens selected by lot, which can in turn initiate citizen assemblies that can deliberate on assigned issues. The assemblies make recommendations to the representative institutions and these are discussed in a joint commission, to be later implemented.

FURTHER CHALLENGES

► How to ensure that the decisions of the assembly will be implemented?

► Are there incentives for local governments to institutionalise such decision-making devices when they have the potential of taking a lot of power from the hands of representatives?

► In which ways can local governments make sure these assemblies are not simply created as a *participation-washing* strategy?

21. See: <https://uclg-cisd.org/en/observatory/inclusion-indigenous-women-local-participatory-budgeting-process>.

22. See: <https://oidp.net/distinction/en/record01.2018.php>.

23. Usually some diversity criteria are included so that the final selection is a representative sample of the population.

24. See: <https://dial.uclouvain.be/pr/boreal/object/boreal:229726>.

6.1.5 Making sure decisions have a real impact

Maybe the greatest challenge in the project of transforming mere participation into a deeper democracy is going from listening to people to actually obeying them. Quite often, political representatives and other public officials are aware that consulting citizens about their interests and views can be a powerful tool in order to a) make decisions that are objectively more adequate (in terms of a set of criteria such as efficiency, quality, cost, impact, etc.) and b) satisfying their desires and aims (even if the results are not objectively the best policy).

There are, however, many challenges in this way of understanding participation as mere consultation. Mainly, the views of the citizens can be different from the ones of the representatives, and then it becomes unlikely for these views to be implemented. In close relation to that, which views are taken into account and how they are processed (simply adding them up, through discussion, etc.) is also relevant. Finally, **citizens can become frustrated if they take the time to participate, they develop**

high expectations, and then those expectations are not met. On many occasions, they become disenchanted and reluctant to participate in the future. What was a tool to engage citizens becomes the reason why they become even more disengaged.

Unlike consultative processes, there are other kinds of mechanisms and institutional designs that are mandatory for public authorities, such as participatory budgeting, referenda and citizen initiative. Of course, there are many ways of manipulating these procedures in order to adapt them to the aims of self-interested public officials, but they are nevertheless an interesting tool. As always, the key is to look at how they are designed.

An interesting way of generating broad decision-making processes that are based on different kinds of methods (mobilization, deliberation, voting) is the Citizen Initiative Review²⁵ processes, becoming popular in the United States and other places.

GOOD PRACTICES

► In **Saillans** (France) the local council implemented an ambitious participatory process that is aimed at deciding over every area of the local action. Except for the percent allocated to compulsory competences and investments, the rest of the budget has been opened to consultation and in the first year 24% of the population participated in the decision-making process.

► In the State of **Oregon** (United States), citizen initiatives are discussed by a panel of citizens selected by sortition. They receive inputs from experts and prepare arguments for and against the initiative. Finally, the proposal is opened to referendum and, before going to the ballot box, citizens receive those arguments for and against, making the decision much more informed than the one they could make on the basis of biased news and social media.

FURTHER CHALLENGES

► How is it possible to engage local civil society organizations, as well as individual citizens?

► What are the strategies to communicate these processes in a way that changes the perception people have about decision-making at the local level?

► How to design these processes in a way that does not privilege one political party over another, and becomes an open political tool that incentivises the inclusion of all views?

25. See: <https://healthydemocracy.org/cir/>.

6.1.6 Use of participation channels to strengthen a democratic political culture

Without practice, it is very hard for people to develop the skills that are necessary to participate in decision-making. This means that the development of these skills needs to be understood as a long-term process that is related to participatory processes in a circular way: the more participation spaces are created, the better people get at participating, the more it makes sense to open new participation spaces. But it also means that at the beginning it might be very frustrating. New channels are opened, but people do not really know how to use them.

Local authorities can use participation processes and channels to promote a more democratic political culture by paying attention to the specific design. These processes can include training, support groups, safe spaces (see the example of **Cotacachi**, above), and facilitation mechanisms, among others. In any case, **the key is to find innovative methodologies that are able to connect with people and incentivise their engagement instead of simply opening channels and waiting for people to come.**

GOOD PRACTICES

► In **Iztapalapa** (Mexico) the *Planning and Transforming Iztapalapa* programme has been used as a tool to strengthen a democratic political culture through creative methodologies that include traditions, art and culture, in addition to deliberation and co-management. It has also fostered community organization and cohesion through the creation of *Planning Collectives*.²⁶

FURTHER CHALLENGES

- In which way can local governments find a balance between leading the processes and allowing people to lead?
- How can they give space to criticism and improvement (key elements of a democratic political culture)?

6.2 How to strengthen democracy within the community?

A strong civil society where people trust each other and cooperate with each other is important on its own, but also helps institutional democracy. The same is true for a community where people develop their political culture and the necessary capacities to participate in decision-making not only by taking part in invited spaces, but also in popular spaces: the groups

and collectives where they make decisions and build power in ways that are autonomous from the local state.

Local governments can strengthen communities in different ways without generating new spaces of participation. This will, in turn, result in a more vigorous civil society and a deeper democracy as a whole.

26. See: <https://participate.oidp.net/processes/award2021/f/246/proposals/2894?page=2>.

6.2.1 Support to existing projects and activities of associations, informal groups and social movements

Perhaps the main way in which local governments can strengthen the community is by letting it be (not making their activities more difficult), asking groups what they need (without expecting something in return) and listening to them when they ask for support. When available, local

governments can also offer resources such as training, legal advice and other services for people to organise and cooperate in any way they want. Groups do not need to be politically oriented in order to be a source of positive impact on a political culture based on trust, responsibility and solidarity.

GOOD PRACTICES

► The city of **Barcelona** (Spain) has a centre that supports more than 16.000 associations in the city. Called *Torre Jussana*, it offers training, information, advice, spaces, funding and other services. The centre also produces an annual report of the situation of civil society associations in the city.²⁷

FURTHER CHALLENGES

- How to offer support to all groups and not only those which are already more visible or better organized?
- Can local and regional governments stay neutral regarding the aims of these groups (within the framework of human rights)?

6.2.2 Democratization of associations, informal groups and social movements

As mentioned before, in order for civil society organizations to make a positive contribution to local democracy they need to be internally democratic in the first place. Giving a special voice in local affairs to organizations that are organized in hierarchic or authoritarian structures will not be likely to promote more democracy beyond the group, even if those organizations are able to

bring the interests and views of their members into the public debate. In addition, **having local organizations that base their functioning on democratic decision-making practices also becomes a school of democracy and is likely to have a deep impact on the political culture of the local community.**

GOOD PRACTICES

- In **Quilmes** (Argentina) the local government organises training workshops on gender equality and gender violence for associations and institutions of civil society.²⁸
- In **Sousse** (Tunisia) a programme for institutional strengthening and support to local democracy has been implemented.²⁹

FURTHER CHALLENGES

- How to support internal democracy without affecting the autonomy of groups?
- Which mechanisms are available to accept internal democracy as a dynamic process where the ideal might be a moving target, and to adapt to that situation?
- In what manner can local governments raise awareness about the lack of internal democracy as a first step?

27. See: <http://www.tjussana.cat/oferim.php>.

28. See: https://quilmes.gov.ar/gestion/mujeres_y_diversidades.php.

29. See: <http://www.commune-sousse.gov.tn/fr>.

7. Conclusions

Democratization can be a messy project. The spaces in which it can happen and the ways in which it can be achieved are as diverse as the contexts. In this chapter the aim has been twofold: a) to focus on how democracy is closely linked to political equality and not simply to basic equality or equality in the outputs of decision-making, and b) to offer some analysis of key issues and questions that can be taken into account when embarking on such an enterprise as a local government.

The description of several challenges and limitations in this regard could be seen as an invitation to abandon the project of deep democratization and to fall back on representative democratic institutions. Nevertheless, the stakes are too high, and in the 21st century the legitimacy of government no longer depends on their performance only. People expect institutions to be open and supportive, and to share the power they received from the community in the first place. In other words, **democratization is a question of principles (achieving more equality) but also a question of strategy (those who do not embrace it will probably lose legitimacy).**

Nowadays most local governments seem to realise that this is a fact. The dissemination of participatory practices in many places can be interpreted as a reaction to the disaffection of people with representative democracy. But, as it was mentioned a few times along the chapter, participation runs the risk of becoming just a way of reinforcing the position of those already in power. It can become a tool for governments to know more about people's preferences and to make citizens feel they are being listened to, even in cases where no one is taking them seriously. But **the expectations on the side of ordinary people are high and instrumentalizing participation has become a risky business.**

If there can be any final conclusions after the numerous reflections presented above, this would be among them: one of the ways in which we can make sure democratization is going in the right direction is by asking the question about political equality and sharing power. **Opening participatory processes, producing decisions that generate more material equality and promoting basic equality are fundamental projects, but if we want to call them democratization, they need to be assessed through the lens of political equality.**



Los Angeles, United States
(Source: Eric Yeich, www.pexels.com)

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