GOVERNING WITH CITIZENS

Embedding democratic innovations into societies

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Executive Summary

In an era of increasing democratic fragility, citizens have expressed persistently growing dissatisfaction with how representative democracy is practiced. While democratic forms of governance remain widely supported across the globe, the gaps between democratic ideals and their implementation by institutions and democratic actors is unsustainably increasing. Beyond a responsive posture, the virtues and limits of democratic innovations are increasingly seen as a response to structural trends of democratic malaise. Yet they may also be an essential part of the arsenal needed to face the emergent, complex and structural crises being faced by societies across the globe. Crises and transitions that unevenly distribute harms across communities, societies and nations.[1] It is on these terrains of democratic resilience and societal transformations that democratic innovations must contribute to egalitarian democratic futures.

Democratic innovations — participatory and deliberative processes aimed at increasing meaningful citizen engagement — have gained traction across Europe. However, the incorporation of these new democratic practices and innovations in public administrations and their acceptance in society remains a critical challenge. This report investigates how democratic innovations can be effectively embedded into both public administrations and society simultaneously.

Drawing on insights from 17 in-depth interviews with senior civil servants across local, national, and European Union (EU) governance levels across eight countries across geographical Europe, held between late 2023-May 2024, this study maps existing trends, identifies challenges, and proposes recommendations for strengthening democratic participation. It is aimed at enhancing the practices and tactics of policymakers, practitioners, advocates, and civil society.

Our findings, learnings and recommendations can be summarised as follows

Six trends on the evolution & spread of democratic innovations across Europe

1. **Receding transformative possibilities**: the use of democratic innovations to transform lived societal conditions, deepen democracy and pursue forms socio-economic justice have receded. Today's innovations often pursue the goals of policy efficacy, legitimation of existing representative institutions and democratic resilience.

2. **Slowing growth:** both deliberative innovations and participatory budgeting have grown considerably in Europe over the last decades, but this growth shows signs of slowing down since 2021.

3. **Hyper-localised democracy**: the overwhelming majority of democratic innovations occur within local government, though both what is considered "local" is being reconceived. There is increasing use of innovations in national government and in EU institutions.

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[1] On the range of short and long-term risks and perceived abilities of governments to respond to these, see World Economic Forum (2024) 6–11, 85–6.

4. **Institutionalization is well underway**: participatory budgeting initiatives have arguably been institutionalized for some time and the rate at which deliberative innovations have been institutionalized has increased dramatically since 2020.

5. **Uneven geographies**: different types of democratic innovations are asymmetrically spread and geographically clustered around certain political systems across Europe.

6. **Social problems of varied complexity and relevance:** different democratic innovations are increasingly being used to address long-term, complex, technical and intractable social problems. Their success is evident in some cases, unclear in others.

Embedding democratic innovations into public administrations

Key Learnings

1. Learning 1: **Civil servants are motivated by long-term cultural change**

    Participatory civil servants are often dedicated to participatory governance for the long-haul; they are motivated by a long-term, strategic, commitment to transforming the governance cultures of their administrative environments.

2. Learning 2: **Civil servants who practiced participatory forms of governance identified 5 structural challenges** to promoting citizen participation in administrations:

    (i)   organisational inertia;

    (ii)   financial constraints and competence constraints at lower levels of governance;

    (iii) civil servants, policymakers and politicians are deeply sceptical of citizens' capacities, resulting in lack of authorising environments;

    (iv)   institutional and professional marginalisation and co-option of participation process;

    (v)   burnout amongst participatory civil servants.

Key Recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, advocates, civil society and politicians

Recommendation 1: build and sustain truly diverse inter-institutional alliances, ones fully cognisant of their knowledge blindspots.

Local, national and EU policymakers need to create and join existing inter-institutional alliances of participatory policymakers. These need to better incorporate a diversity of perspectives (especially the capacity of European policymakers to learn from long-standing practices across the Global South) to improve standards, elevate good practices through knowledge sharing, experimentation and the ability to build enthusiasm and movements within administrative contexts, whilst guarding against burnout and personnel turnover.

Recommendation 2: build a persuasive contemporary case for democratic innovations by tactically using narratives of policy efficacy, legitimation and resilience.

The contemporary persuasive case for advancing democratic innovations may not rest in making a better case for democracy. Policymakers, advocates, civil society and capacity building organisations should, depending heavily on context, centre narratives of policy efficacy, legitimation of existing leadership or institutions and systemic resilience amidst complex challenges. These narratives, in contrast to those that centre democracy or participation, are capable of building broad alliances.

Recommendation 3: build and use a robust evidence base for the efficacy of democratic innovations to demonstrate their financial feasibility and long-term societal impact.

A robust and well-rounded evidence base of the efficacy and impact of democratic innovations is needed to make the case for their increased use in administrations. An suitable impact model will allow policymakers and politicians to not only evaluate the financial feasibility of innovations, but weigh these against social costs potentially saved. It also allows policymakers to identify the appropriate participatory process for given sets of policy problems, feeds into their evaluation of that participatory process and can be used to iteratively improve both the process, delivery and societal effects of democratic innovations.

Recommendation 4: develop a nuanced understanding of existing and often complex regulatory and legislative environments to use these tools proactively rather than with ambivalence.

Regulation, legislation and soft norms already shape the environments in which participatory policymakers function. They both hinder and enable citizen engagement, yet are often tangential and always insufficient in helping create a cultural change within administrations. Policymakers need to develop a nuanced understanding of this regulatory environment in order to shift their stance from one of ambivalence to proactiveness.

Recommendation 5: public administrations need to build in-house governance systems, capabilities and resources.

Local, national and EU public administrations need to build in-house expertise for the design and delivery of different forms of citizen participation, ensure that diverse skill-sets are secured in participation units that are effectively embedded across administrative siloes, transparently determine and use appropriate standards for design and implementation and build these into procurement protocols, practical tool-kits and skills training, and above all, ensuring democratic innovations are implemented effectively with equity, inclusivity and propriety in mind.

Transforming societies: equitably embedding democratic innovations into communities and societies

Key Learnings:

1. Learning 1: **Civil servants wish to support bottom-up approaches to and uses for democratic innovations.**

   Civil servants wish to both enable and support civil society actors in their ability to set or frame the terms of political debate. Yet their capacity to do so is severely constrained, but not entirely absent. Fully cognisant of the structural constraints by civil society, social movements and other intermediary actors, there is little knowledge on how to strategically redirect resources with equity in mind, to these actors.

2. Learning 2: **Civil servants identified 4 core obstacles to embedding meaningful engagement across societies**.

   These obstacles are also faced by participation practitioners when attempting to embed citizen engagement in administrations.

   (i)   Inadequate cognisance of the 'dark sides' of advancing citizen participation can result in neglecting questions of contextualisation, suitability and maladaption.

   (ii) Struggles for representation and an inadequate grasp of power-shifts between democratic actors.

   (iii) Democratic innovations can fail to engage society at large.

   (iv) Lack of long-term perspective on systemic societal transformations that can result from democratic innovations.

Key Recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, social movements and civil society

Recommendation 6: enable bottom-up approaches and where possible, combine these with top-down approaches, to embed democratic innovations across different democratic spaces and actors.

For long-term system change and energised democracies, policymakers, advocates, civil society and social movements should encourage a *dynamic relationship* between bottom-up mobilisations and top-down processes of democratic innovations. These may, at times, conflict. There is however an intrinsic value in enabling a robust public sphere. Strategic commissioning and redirection of resources for respected civil society actors can pluralise democratic debate between public institutions and multiple publics.

Recommendation 7: administrations should enable civil society and local public actors to undertake both large-scale and localised democratic innovations without requiring direct policy instrumentalisation.

A thriving democracy depends on supporting different and diverse *demoi*. Civil society in certain examples have reached considerable numbers of the citizenry when using democratic innovations. Here the function of democratic innovations is to improve the trust between citizens to collectively articulate their political projects (in contrast to trust in public institutions), to shape directions of public debate, to shape election discourses and explicitly challenge government policies. These ventures can be both enabled (in a variety of ways) and strategically commissioned by policymakers.

Recommendation 8: local, representative and respected civil society, leaders and core associations must be properly integrated into the proper design and implementation of democratic innovations, whilst ensuring integrity, if their results are to be sustainable.

To ensure that participatory processes empower communities and their results are sustainable, intermediary actors such as civil society, leaders, associations and trade unions need to be mobilised and engaged with, rather than circumvented. At the same time policymakers need to ensure that existing interests do not hijack democratic innovations.

Recommendation 9: mix and combine democratic innovations to address problems of scale and to centre equity.

Policymakers need to consider how best to combine democratic innovations such as participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies. This allows for the deficiencies and possibilities of each innovation to be addressed and allows deficits of scale to be overcome. There are examples where long-term socio-economic equity considerations are centered.

Recommendation 10: sustainably devolve to and share power with local communities, coupling this with increased social infrastructure investment to empower citizens and nurture a local ecosystem responsive to local needs.

Administrations need to selectively and sustainably devolve decision-making power and some financial resources to local communities. This should not extend to key public service provisions or other public safety nets provided by governments, but relates to increased social infrastructure investment that would empower local communities and citizens to participate in and shape their future. Common examples of this include decision-making on Community Wealth Funds. This is increasingly needed in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and regions.

Four future policy directions to explore

Interviewed civil servants also identified four policy areas that are in urgent need of exploration, many of which work has begun in the field of democratic innovations.

1. **Multi-level governance**: there is a need to better grasp how democratic innovations can function effectively across multiple levels of governance. For instance, how can local concerns be effectively linked to national and supranational levels? For instance, how are democratic innovations and policy advances achieved at city levels of governance limited by national governance constraints?

2. **Governance, policy and societal impacts of democratic innovations**: how should we conceive of the impact of democratic innovations that best enable iterative learning about their design and implementation, as well as their long-term potential to transform societal realities?

3. **Legislative tactics:** while there is increased use of legal norms to enable participation within government institutions, a nuanced appreciation of the different types of norms and places for use in institutional development is still underdeveloped.

4. **Functions in illiberal, autocratic and authoritarian regimes**: what functions can democratic innovations serve in illiberal, autocratic and authoritarian regimes? Can they guard against democratic erosion, what are the dangers of co-option in their use? And what are the effects of their considerable use in these contexts?