

A CRITICAL LOOK AT CITIZEN PARTICIPATION PROCESSES IN KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETIES WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF REPRESENTATIVE (PARLIAMENTARY) DEMOCRACIES

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Abstract:

The great complexity of problems that modern local, regional and national governments are faced with in the current knowledge intensive context of open societies in a globalized world, force these governments to become more creative in designing and implementing effective policy solutions in which creative citizens actively contribute toward the proper functioning of society and societal change. We live in an 'enlightened' era in which societies function as 'knowledge democracies' but without adequate mechanisms to address complex and often far reaching challenges in the field of citizen participation. It is clear that the overall structure and guiding principles and processes of traditional representative democracies offer limited options for active and successful citizen participation. To close the democratic gap in traditional representative structures, many governments have sought participation in top down processes resulting in temporary representational structures for citizen participation. Other initiatives such as deliberative structures focus on participation in decision-making processes. The knowledge democracy dominated by the creative class however, does not require top down and incidental, but bottom up and continuous involvement that interplays with the reality of constant change of the knowledge society and the individualism of the creative class. An analysis based on organizational change theory of the top down 'vision/decision making perspective' with the bottom up 'knowledge/participation perspective' shows substantial differences in governance context, structure and process approach, indicating that a transitional change is currently taking place, however not the transformative change that is required in the knowledge democracy.

Keywords: knowledge, active citizenship, citizen participation, knowledge democracy, collective wisdom.

1. INTRODUCTION

The great complexity of problems that modern local, regional and national governments are faced with in the current knowledge intensive context of open societies in a globalized world, force these governments to become more creative in designing and implementing effective policy solutions in which creative citizens actively contribute toward the proper functioning of society and societal change. We live in an almost paradoxical era in which our societies make the transition towards 'knowledge democracies' but without adequate mechanisms (structures and/or processes) to address complex and often far reaching challenges in the field of citizen participation. In many societies already a degree of discontent among well-educated citizens exists towards the inability of governments 'to allow them their say', resulting in citizens who feel detached. In many ways they experience that everyday problems at the local level are not adequately addressed, while alternative 'bodies of knowledge' are largely disregarded, for lack of adequate planning and decision making mechanisms.

1.1. Transformation to the knowledge democracy

Taking into consideration that the western political era is in a state of transformation from stabile structured and ideologically segmented to individually dispersed and direct, we cannot yet identify or describe an encompassing picture of what the knowledge driven development of our societies will bring in terms of the effective public involvement of citizens. The changes currently taking place towards the knowledge-based society so far indicate that this transformation is characterized by exploration and research across -instead of within- scientific disciplines, by the breaking up of mental borders and by the emotional as well as cognitive forging of new democratic models and matches. In summarizing these phenomena within a broader societal context, we can identify among other things:

- **Worldwide connectivity** – digital technology provides for instant connectivity across organizations, communities and borders, including digital variations of face-to-face contact, facilitating connections based on shared interests and knowledge. This leads to an availability and transparency of information that contributes to a shift of power (based on knowledge) from organizations (including governments) to individuals;
- **Redefining organizations** – an increase of 'free form' organizations; while traditional organizations are seeking ways to adapt to the requirements and motivating factors of 'knowledge workers';
- **Increase in and new forms of competition** – knowledge is a major competitive factor for businesses as well as cities; knowledge driven (service) sectors have low entry levels; competition takes place on a global scale across borders and continents;
- **Mass innovation through the wisdom of crowds** – increased user-driven and mass innovation take place outside traditional R&D facilities and through collaboration in communities of interest and communities of practice;
- **Increased participation through borderless communities** – people tend to active participation in several digital and or physical communities, using tailor made platforms fitted to their personal value system and variety of interests, instead of being satisfied by broad and general representation through democratic or hierarchic structures. Citizens actively seek participation in several aspects of their life through different platforms, such as consumer behavior (f.e. online consumer reviews and forums), political affiliation, and professional and personal interests;
- **Cycle of new technologies** – rapidly changing technologies and development of new technologies (f.e. nano-technology, 3-D printing), combined with a constant launch of new products and new combinations;

Table 1: Shifts that characterize the transformation to the knowledge era

From	To
Hierarchical organization	Communities
Representation	Participation
Separation	Collaboration
Sovereignty	Interdependence
Ideologies	Individual values
Mechanization	Humanization
Expert knowledge	Wisdom of crowds
Enhanced technologies	New technologies

We can try to characterize this phase also on a more abstract level by describing the shifts taking place in a conceptual comparison, as shown in table 1.

2. MISFIT OF DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES WITH THE KNOWLEDGE ERA

An increasingly important topic arising from the potential ‘policy clash’ between knowledge and society, is how a country, region or city can and should be governed, for it to effectively deal with the dynamic challenges presented by citizens who are both knowledgeable and connected, as well as demanding of recognition, more specifically of the way they see their society moving in the right or wrong direction. The key question arising from this is how governments can deal with citizen participation, when many and often conflicting views exist with regard to the right solution, for the right problem at the right moment in time.

It is gradually becoming clear that the customary structures and guiding principles and processes of traditional representative democracies, offer limited options for active citizen participation in the transformation towards the knowledge democracy. Traditional electoral systems seem not to be entirely satisfactory anymore to deal with the dynamic involvement needs and aspirations of creative citizens.

In’t Veld (2010, p 3-4) argues that representation has become “*gradually the predominant mechanism by which the population at large, through elections, provides a body with a general authorization to take decisions in all public domains for a certain period of time.*” But he signals that it is apparent that the current political frameworks of our society appear deficient in the knowledge era. This is influenced by factors that are intertwined and take place simultaneously on the micro-, meso- and macrolevel:

- *Micro* – individual values patterns are no longer connected through broad ideological principles; this leads to individualization and the impossibility of being represented in a general way by a single representative in a political setting;
- *Meso* – political parties are not dedicated anymore to developing consistent broad political strategies, but apply marketing techniques by leveraging standpoints on issues, depending on the supposed voters preferences;
- *Macro* – politics has turned into media-politics by trying to maximize the numbers of voters through the “selling” of personalities via mass media, thereby creating a structural and reciprocal dependence between media and politics, leaving room for only short-term agenda’s and with the focus on personalities instead of programs, thus destroying the original meaning of representation.

On top of that, the representative value of traditional parliamentary democracies can be subdued by political mechanisms, which offer individual representatives in parliament the freedom to change political party after they are elected in parliament, while holding on to their seat in parliament, effectively resulting in a disconnect between the people that elected them and their mandate for representation. This phenomenon of ‘floor crossing’ or ‘party switching’ is visible in both Western democracies and emergent democracies in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. But also the USA and Canada have a documented history on the occurrence of this phenomena. Even in European countries we see a good deal of party switching, including Italy, where almost one-fourth of the members of the lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, switched parties at least once between 1996 and 2001 (Janda, 2009). Scholars hold different opinions about whether crossing the floor poses a threat to democratic systems, or whether it simply contributes to a process of increased democratic maturity over time. But the fact is that the voter is left in uncertainty about the value of his vote for representation when the link between his elected representative and a party affiliation is cut short, since political parties are the structural link between voters and political representatives in parliamentary democracies.

Learning for Local Democracy

A Study of Local Citizen Participation in Europe

“Of course, this extension of democratic politics beyond elections is to be welcomed. It reflects an acknowledgement that classical state institutions, political structures and representative democracy are limited in their capacity to accommodate the growing range of interests, beliefs, problems and solutions that come with ever more differentiated societies and global interdependencies of the post-modern age. It suggests a new centrality of citizens and their directly voiced concerns, and it highlights their continuous initiative and importance in public debate and decision-making. It expresses a hope that new forms of political participation and a stronger role for civil society can help to re-energize contemporary democracy in Europe: by re-connecting politics and societies where democratic institutions and citizens seem to have grown apart, by challenging political elites where these close in on power and office, and by enhancing the civic grass-roots and its potential for detecting and solving pressing social issues.”

(Forbrig, 2011)

2.1. Discontented citizens: in search of new governance

Taking these developments in our representative democratic systems into account, it is no surprise that a recent extensive study into citizen participation across Europe by the Central and Eastern European Citizens Network signals a *“genuine concern among a growing number of citizens about the workings of democracy in their home countries and the continent as a whole”* (Forbrig, 2011).

The study signals that the agitation of citizens:

“is much more fundamental than the occasional protest vote in elections or mass demonstration in public places. These ordinary Europeans are seeking constructive ways of engaging in public discourse and influencing decision-making as a means of addressing social problems outside of and alternative to the classical, and clearly limited, arenas of political parties, elections and parliaments.”

Considering the erosion of representative democratic structures In’t Veld (2010) concludes that a new type of governance is needed for the knowledge era. Forbrig (2011) concludes that the local level is the best suited arena for a broader understanding, cementing and practicing of democracy.

“It is here, in communities, municipalities and regions, that citizens live their lives, find anchorage for much of their identity, encounter concrete social problems, and expect the delivery of effective policies and solutions. The immediate local context is what citizens understand best, what affects them most, and with which they are most likely to engage, far more likely than with the more faraway and abstract politics of the national and European levels.”

Cities, individually as well as in networks, are already claiming a more influential role in many of the world’s international forums and organizations¹. If we want to solve the problem of the representative democracy in which most citizens do not feel represented anymore by a small number of parliamentarians because their interests are dispersed among many areas of interest, cities are the ideal place where platforms or communities can be formed that meet the needs of citizens and their dispersed interests.

In the broader context of the knowledge era it is increasingly recognized that cities can have an identifiable and even ‘manageable’ human-economic potential, in the form of democratic ‘powerhouses’ (Amin and Graham, 1997). Some theorists in the urban field find it quite logical to concentrate on cities, since cities are a much older economic entity than nations, and each city has unique development options. Jane Jacobs was one of the early urban thinkers who looked at cities for their potential instead of for their problems (Jacobs, 1961) and considered cities as driving forces for economic development and as windows of opportunity for building vibrant, socially stable and economically diverse communities. Currently economically strong cities and regions are considered as important driving forces which indeed can support and sustain successful national strategies towards (inter)national competitiveness, as acknowledged by the European Council on Urban Policy “Cities Empower Europe” (2004). The implementation of the Lisbon agenda indeed emphasizes the role of urban regions and cities in becoming basic building blocks for economic growth.

“So what does it take to transform? Simply stated, our thinking is mostly what it is today. And then we have a choice. If we want to hold on to our traditio we will make incremental process improvements and not “rock the boat.” In this mode we are content, complacent, arrogant, or unaware. If the world is changing in any significant way, it’s only a matter of time before we do not survive. The timing of irrelevance (death) depends upon our industry or competition, whether that be global terrorists or another company. But we will not know if we have three months, three years, or 30 years to survive. If we want to move to the next level of change, yet be safe, we make transitions and change from State A to State B. We know where we are going (we go from manually taking inventory to bar coding.) There is comfort in certainty. In transition, we can plan the change and work the plan. But if we want to create a better future, we have to let go and reach for the unknown. We need transformation. We adopt the most difficult and challenging strategy because we must.”
From: Theory of Transformation
(Daszko and Scheinberg, 2005)

¹ In a special edition of the magazine “The Broker” about the role of cities in December 2009, it was outlined that on issues about for instance climate change and sustainability, cities play a leading role. They have organized in several city-networks that work together with international organizations such as the World Bank and the UN. “The Broker” is a publication of the foundation International Development Publications, funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research and Science for Global Development.

3. TRANSFORMATIONAL APPROACH TO THE KNOWLEDGE DEMOCRACY

The question arises if cities and the many public initiatives that are taken on that level, are on the right track towards citizen participation and in doing so creating a new governance that fits the needs of creative citizens in the knowledge democracy. When considering the context of the knowledge era, it is evident that we are entering a period that is identified by major and very significant dynamic changes in our societies and economic landscape. These impacting dynamics require clear leadership and direction towards fundamental new governance. Daszko and Scheinberg (2005) from an organizational theory approach, identify three types of changes with incremental impact: traditional change, transitional change, and transformational change. In light of the knowledge era, the best suited change in governance seems to be a transformational change, that fundamentally changes the way both governments and people interact with each other on societal issues:

“Transformation is what happens when people see the world through a new lens of knowledge and are able to create an infrastructure, never before envisioned, to the future. Transformation is motivated by survival, by the realization that everything needs to change or the organization will die; that a significant breakthrough in mindset is needed in order to pursue new opportunities.” (Daszko and Scheinberg, 2005)

In their “Theory of Transformation” Daszko and Scheinberg (2005) provide a model for organizational change that describes three types of changes and what each type of change means with respect to motivation for change, degree of change, thinking about change, the destination, the change this requires and the outcomes of the change. In table 2 this model is adapted to the three options for change in governance in the context of the knowledge democracy.

Table 2. Transformational approach to knowledge democracy

	Traditional change	Transition	Transformation
Motivation for change	Better, faster, cheaper	Fix a problem	Survival, environment, world changes, breakthrough needed
Degree of change in Governance: 1. institutions 2. instruments 3. processes 4. actors	Incremental improvement of existing institutions, instruments, processes or actors, not necessarily through an integral approach	Transition from old to new institutions, instruments, processes or actors through redesign	Revolutionary system change, complete overhaul of mindset, paradigms, culture, communications, strategy, structure, actions, systems and processes
Thinking about Knowledge	Knowledge is considered an extra aspect to existing assets	New systems, processes, and instruments are used, aimed at knowledge sharing	Dynamic drive for continuous knowledge co-creation and sharing
Actions with respect to policies	Improvements on existing policies	New policies	Fundamental new system of policy development based on a complete overhaul of mindset, paradigms, culture, communications, strategy, structure, actions, systems and processes, use of data, aimed at continuous learning
Destination w.r.t. how to accommodate participation of citizens	Improvements are made and mistakes corrected in existing systems	Projects are initiated to accommodate the participation needs of creative citizens	Fundamentally new approach through processes of continuous participation, co-creation and learning without an end state
Change requires	Improvement of skills, practices and performance; often limited to focusing on individual performance rather than the whole system to make significant differences	Controlled process / projects managed / assigned	Senior leadership is committed to new thinking, learning and actions, with coaching from outside; “a system cannot see itself”, with show of courage
Outcomes	Limited improvements in citizen participation	Limited changes in citizen participation	Sustainable change in citizen participation, with clear leadership and continual learning. Actions within a new system that is agile, adaptable, flexible, intelligent, emerging, connected, involved, creative, and moving forward; with the ability to sense and respond to dynamic change in the community

Daszko and Scheinberg (2005) underscore the necessity of leadership that is dedicated to transformation. They conclude that without clear intention, there can be no transformation, and that without such clear intention, change is reduced to traditional or transitional change. If the city in the knowledge democracy functions as a transformational learning organization it requires from the leadership that it fulfills a “designer-role” in new policies, strategies and systems, but also through an integrative approach and by creating a shared vision and belief-system. In essence it means designing the learning processes (Senge, 1990). Von Krogh, Ichijo and Nonaka (2000) referred to the design role as the five “knowledge enablers” that are required for knowledge creation: instill a knowledge vision, manage conversations, mobilize knowledge activists, create the right context, and globalize local knowledge, thus putting human relationships and care as a focal point in leadership.

4. DECISION MAKING PROCESSES VERSUS PARTICIPATION PROCESSES

To close the democratic gap with respect to citizen participation in a traditional representative structure, many governments have sought their participation in top down processes like ‘vision development’, resulting in temporary representational structures for citizen participation in the decision making about (long term) development. Other initiatives such as deliberative structures focus on participation in decision making processes on specific issues. The knowledge democracy dominated by the creative class however, in line with the transformational shifts in the knowledge era as reflected in table 1 and 2, requires not top down and incidental, but bottom up and continuous processes that interplay with the reality of constant change of the knowledge society and the individualism of the creative class. This requires flexible and continuous participation processes, not just in the decision making phase, but specifically in the phase of policy development and implementation.

An analysis of the top down ‘vision/decision making perspective’ with the bottom up ‘knowledge/participation perspective’ shows fundamental differences in governmental context, in structure and in process approach. The top down perspective serves the need of public executives/politicians for an integral long term policy agenda. It often requires a selection of appointed people and representative organizations to function in participatory processes, which is not an “opt in” option, but more an “obliged to / must be in” option. The result is a broad policy agenda that is further refined by a planned approach towards the execution. It thus represents a planned and structured process within defined boundaries. The process often focuses on aiming for consensus and thus suppressing tensions. These processes are often heavily data driven and appeal to the explicit knowledge of representatives, with the aim to unlock the ‘collective intelligence’ from an ‘outside in’ approach. Examples of such top-down processes are future planning and long term visioning processes that take place in cities around the world, such as the “Community Visioning” project that was started in over 60 cities in the USA and in Curacao (Vishon Korsou, 1999) to involve citizens, and very often representative organizations instead of individuals, in the choices and priorities for future development along a structured and data driven process within a set timeframe.

The bottom up approach from the knowledge/participation perspective serves the need of citizens to influence their daily lives and future, and the need of politicians for citizen participation and priority setting in the policy agenda. The approach is not ‘one-size-fits-all’, but offers customized participation depending on individual needs, and as such is an “opt-in” on a voluntary basis. The process works with mechanisms that are responsive to flexibility and change, so as to adapt to changing needs; the knowledge perspective can be considered an emergent and fluent process, in which tensions are not avoided but can be effectively used for new creations. The approach appeals not just to explicit, but also to the implicit knowledge of participants and thus aims to unlock the ‘collective wisdom’ from an ‘inside out’ approach. Examples of such processes are Large Scale Interventions (Van der Zouwen, 2011) with methods such as Open Space technology, and Future Search facilitation. Other examples are the ‘crowd sourcing’ approach such as applied in the formulation of the new Icelandic Constitution (Bani, 2012), and the ‘Wise Democracy’ approach (Rough, 2010) with instruments such as Wisdom Councils, Creative Insight Councils, and Dynamic Facilitation.

Table 3 : Vision perspective versus Knowledge perspective

Vision perspective (decision making processes)	Knowledge perspective (participation processes)
serves the need of public executives/politicians for an integral long term policy agenda	serves the need of citizens to influence their daily lives and future, and the need of politicians for citizen participation and priority setting in the policy agenda

requires a selection of appointed people/ and representative organizations to function in decision making processes, which is not an “opt in” option, but more an “obliged to / must be in” option	customized participation depending on individual needs, and as such is an “opt-in” on a voluntary basis
result is a broad policy agenda that is further refined by a planned approach towards the execution	Mechanisms that are responsive to flexibility and change, so as to adapt to changing needs
Planned / structured process (within defined boundaries)	Emergent process (fluent)
Suppress/flatten tensions by aiming for consensus	Use tensions for new creations
Embedded in organizational structure and planning in traditional meeting settings	Holistic approach: open space, emphasis on dialogue, human networks, non-traditional facilitation of meetings
Aim to expose the explicit knowledge of the representatives	Aim to also appeal to the implicit knowledge of participants
Collective intelligence (data and facts)	Collective wisdom (knowledge)
Outside in	Inside out

5. CONCLUSION

The transformation to the knowledge democracy requires new governance structures and processes that fit the transformational changes of this new era, characterized by major shifts in the way communities and organizations work. To tap into the needs and desires of creative citizens for participation, cities and regions have applied both vision driven and knowledge driven processes. Based on a comparative model for organizational change, with incremental change impacts from traditional, to transitional and transformational change, it becomes clear that the approach towards citizen participation in vision driven/decision making processes mostly reflects transitional change, but do not reflect the intention of fundamental transformation to a new form of governance for the knowledge democracy. Fundamental transformation of governance implies that we do not do the same things differently, but that we do new things, comparable to the difference between leading (‘doing the right things’) versus managing (‘doing things right’), which also stresses the need for courageous leadership towards new governance. If cities or regions want to step up to the plate and create new governance that fits the knowledge democracy, innovative leadership is required that aims for transformational change to fill the clear gaps in citizen participation within the current democratic framework of representative democracies.

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