

The Challenges of Citizen Participation and Communicative Democracy

Left Forum 01/06/2006 Helsinki

Eeva Luhtakallio M.Soc.Sc
eeva.luhtakallio@helsinki.fi
Department of Sociology P.O.Box 18
00014 University of Helsinki
www.valt.helsinki.fi/staff/luhtakal

All politics is local, it has been said. In the Nordic countries, and especially in Finland, the autonomy of local politics has for long been one of the cornerstones of democracy. The local level, notably municipalities, form a solid basis for functioning democracy both as “schools of democracy” in which people can learn the ways of influencing decision making, and as the grass root level of party politics. Therefore, the local level is an important barometer for higher levels of political decision making, when we want to know how democracy is doing.

Findings of recent research concerning the functioning of local democracy can be summed up, without much exaggeration, in a claim that the arena is currently labelled by a two-way distrust. Citizens don't trust politicians, and the political elite does not trust citizens. In hearing events organised by the officials, the atmosphere is generally hostile and suspicious, and the smallest of sparks can light the fuse into an aggressive quarrel between the citizens and the politicians or officials. In debates organised by citizen groups, politicians are rarely present in great numbers, and the few that are, often have the ungrateful role of receiving all the dissatisfaction, regardless of their actual responsibility of each issue. Among politicians, civic actors are often stamped as ignorant and their claims as unrealistic. In sum, encounters and relations between civic actors and politicians often end up resembling occasions of mutual moping rather than the Habermasian ideal of a consensus-driven public conversation of the common good between equals. Why is this the case and what could be done about it?

The state of democracy has been a subject of worry during the past years in practically all Western democracies. Democracy is not only voting, and the weaknesses and deficiencies of the representative system have been brought up

widely in both research and civil society arenas. In order to enhance the functioning of democracy, we need to take steps in other directions. We need civic organisations, citizen participation, debates and discussions, sometimes even civil disobedience. In democracy theory, these elements are part of communicative democracy. In this presentation, I found principally on Iris Marion Young's ideas of inclusion and *communicative democracy*. In communicative democracy, different kinds of voices and ways of communication can easily enter the arena of democratic discussion – from bad Finnish to sign language and from argumentation to storytelling. The goal is not a thin consensus but the widest possible communication over the thing to decide. As the maximum of viewpoints gets heard and included, Young claims, the decisions are better informed, and closer to “common good”, than those made through a narrower process.

In this presentation, I will reflect the successfulness of efforts made to enhance democracy at the local level in Finland and France, in order to show two different cases of the more or less same problematic of reforming democracy. I will then sketch some possible guidelines for the future.

- - -

In many countries, the triumphal march of New Public Management has led to competition regulations, privatisation booms and introduction of market-like or market-driven practices in public governance and services. At the same time, it has meant demands of “good governance”, transparency, and new regulations aiming at widening the possibilities of citizens' – or, as often seems to suit better the rhetoric of new public management, clients' – participation. This has led to different sets of new

practices. In Finland, one of the practices is the compulsory organisation of hearings, in which a municipality is obliged to hear its citizens opinions in advance in for example planning and construction issues. In France, one of the concrete new practices is the creation of neighbourhood councils in cities. These councils are constituted of politicians and the town block's inhabitants, associative actors and entrepreneurs, and they are subordinate to the city councils.

Citizens' experiences of these kinds of official-run practices of participatory democracy are often coloured with disappointment. Mostly, the disappointment is due to lack of actual power of influence. In the case on the Finnish hearings, citizens often find out during the event that instead of being heard, they are actually only being informed. In the French neighbourhood councils, the issues that the council is let to treat are trivial, to say the least. The councils are often referred to as "the dog poo councils", as the presence of canine excrement on the streets is one of the classical issues on their agenda.

- - -

Officials and politicians have not been the only ones to think about citizen participation in local issues. Numerous civic associations and citizen networks work in order to have a say in local affairs. What happens, then, when the initiative to participate comes from the citizens? I will give you two examples.

Pro Municipal Services is a citizen network from Helsinki that emerged criticizing the claimed neo-liberalisation of municipal services and their gradual fall of quality.

In Helsinki, social services budget has been subject to continuous cut politics, or, as some claim, a conscious under budgeting – the political rhetoric prevailing in the city has for several years been that of scarcity of resources. Pro Municipal services

network was shocked by the cuts in the social service budget of the city of Helsinki in 2004, and at the same time they discovered the profit figures of Helsingin Energia, the city-owned power company. They wrote to newspapers and lobbied politicians claiming that the city should transfer money from the power company to the budget of social services. The reactions to their efforts were unenthusiastic, to say the least, and the response to their demand from the part of the city executive was negative. Finally, the network took the case to the National Competition Office that in the end gave a decision backing up the network's claim and stated that indeed the city can transfer money from the power company to for example social service budget without violating competition legislation.

There are, however, controversial opinions about the network's success; the activists think the case is an important victory, while most of the local politicians either totally nullify or ignore the network's part. There are only few councillors that recognise the role the network played in the case.

Conclusion: This network struggles to be acknowledged and recognized for their *expertise* in local economy and service production.

Non à Big Brother is a citizen group from Lyon that resists the increasing camera surveillance in the city.

Lyon is the most filmed city in Europe –the mayor takes pride in the fact that his city is a forerunner in installing a dense network of cameras all over the city and developing new technologies and strategies of surveillance in order to increase street security.

Non à Big Brother network emerged within the libertarian milieu of Lyon as a reaction to installation of new cameras in 2002. According to them, camera surveillance violates citizen rights, is extremely expensive, and does not help to decrease crime.

They distributed flyers, organized public performances – for instance a carnival-like show in which masked and disguised group of people set off bouquets of balloons that blocked the “view” of the surveillance cameras.

The city representatives – those who recognize the group's existence – tend to question their claims and there seems to be a tension vis-à-vis this group; they don't have a cooperative reputation and therefore the politicians tend to neglect them.

Conclusion: This group struggles for contention's sake, in order to express resistance following the traditional French *logique de la lutte*.

There are differences between the countries. In sum, officially proposed and lead participatory practices tend to be somewhat more successful in Finland, due to traditions of participation and consensual decision-making. In France, the political elite is often much more reluctant to communicate with citizens than their Finnish colleagues. Also citizen-initiated activities gain access more easily, though with certain reservations, to the awareness of politicians. The reservations are related to the

forms of presenting the claims: the more consensual and peaceful the actions, the more seriously the claims tend to be taken, even though taking into account of the claims is still far from acting according to them. In France, the repertoires of making claims is traditionally less consensual, and there is a chance of putting successful pressure on leaders by being loud, troubling and stubborn.

- - -

Examples of both top-down and grass-root initiated encounters between citizens and the established power show that in order to promote communicative democracy, there is work to be done. What could be a starting point for a discussion on a democratic reform?

In my view, there are three myths concerning participation and local democracy that should be unraveled. The continuous renewal of these myths stagnate debate on reforms.

First, the claim that is often heard as a justification to reluctance to enhance citizen participation: citizens don't care, or they only care about NIMBY issues that touch them closely and personally. There are successful examples of inclusive and participatory practices, and they all have one thing in common: citizens have been given real power of influence and real responsibility over the issues treated. One of the most famous examples is the case of participatory budgeting started by the city of Porto Alegre, in Brazil.

Second, the myth of unsurmountable complexity of political issues. Certainly, in local politics, as elsewhere, we are constantly said to be witnessing a growth of complexity. At least a part of this complexity is, however, a fallacy. The complexity of, for example, market-driven organisation of public services, is more an ideological claim than an actual state of the art. As citizens tend to oppose privatisation of public services, the easiest way out that is often used is to say that citizens just can't understand.

Third, the refrain of the representative democracy as the only possibility of democratic governance. Rather, it is clear that it needs alternatives, reforming and open-minded evaluation.

- - -

Inspired by the idea of communicative democracy, I have sketched a few concrete propositions for promoting it in Finnish local politics.

Citizen jury:

In order to make decision making more inclusive, but at the same time to guarantee sustainability, the municipal council should be constituted of 50% of councillors elected by a popular vote, and of 50% of ordinary citizens called in by a random poll. The system obviously borrows features from the American justice system.

Board of associations:

Different associations already take part in local decision making. Their means and power of influence, however, vary greatly. Some are important partners with fairly good possibilities to influence, while others, despite their indispensable role as for example service providers, have practically no say in the decision making processes. Therefore a special board for civic associations should be formed to work in close cooperation with the municipal board. Like the citizen jury, the board would work as the partner of the municipal board, and it should include a vast combination of local associations of all sizes.

A few propositions to brush up politics:

- Gender quotas in candidate recruitment and evaluations of the political culture from gender perspective: gender is the most flagrant source of discriminatory practices in politics, and the parties should take responsibility of it.
- Ban of party discipline decisions: the rule of unanimity tames political debate both inside the parties and between them.
- Limit of mandates per person in order to guarantee the renewal of the political crew.

- - -

I welcome you all to discuss these matters further, and freely use these ideas if you wish. I also wish the new think tank the best of luck and energy. It will be needed, I think, since I agree with an American colleague Francesca Polletta whose answer to the question “what is democracy?”, in the title of her book, is: Democracy is an endless meeting.