

SALAR Democracy Forum

SALAR's Democracy Forum took place at Lidingö near Stockholm in June 2014. It brought together nine 'experts' in democracy and democratic engagement with eight of SALAR's staff working in areas of democratic support. The experts came from the UK, Germany, Italy, Finland, Iceland and Sweden. The format for the three days, facilitated by myself and Martin Sande, was one of intensive conversation; less about presenting and more about sharing, talking and listening. The aim was to hear international perspectives, talk about the challenges and opportunities facing Swedish local government and then, together, develop high-level themes. Going forward, these themes will hopefully inform SALAR's strategic direction as they embark on developing this for the years ahead. This is an account of what emerged from that conversation.

Process

This Forum was about dialogue, so presentations were kept short and simple. The international guests were asked to give brief, ten minute, presentations in groups of two or three. Following each set of presentations, we used a facilitated 'fishbowl' format, where SALAR attendees discussed the ideas and issues raised and the others listened. On one occasion we switched this around so that the 'experts' were in the fishbowl. This intensive day was surrounded by more social events that were designed to elicit conversation, connect people and share ideas. The facilitators drew out themes as the presentations and reflections went on and presented these back to the whole group. All agreed on the key themes and these were used to frame two 'world café' style sessions at the start of the final day. By now, we had built a strong group dynamic, a lot of shared understanding (about both the opportunities and the issues facing Sweden) and so each large group (experts and SALAR) went off to identify the actions to take for themselves. The final session of the three days brought all of this together, presenting ideas for action that SALAR could take away to ignite their internal planning process.

Context

Our lives are changing, not just more online and connected but also more physically mobile. We are now more likely to move away from where we grew up, more likely to move around during our working lives and more likely to live and work in different places. We are facing an ageing population, changing the priorities of local government but also challenging the affordability of expected levels of health and social care.

It is hard for local government to decrease services, yet economic conditions will force this decision. Shifts in the control of services too can affect not just a more focussed locally-relevant delivery but also control of tax revenue. This is a time of change in local government, not just for Sweden but for most countries in the EU. It is vital to embrace positive change but also critically important to work with and build on the strengths of the system.

The public demand is to make things fast and simple, but legislation (local, national and EU) often contradicts this, creating a challenge for managing effective engagement. It used to be believed that problems could be solved 'top down' but not anymore and our communities will decreasingly tolerate

the imposition of decision making. The scale of the challenge this presents feels overwhelming for many in local government.

If we are to build participation and restore trust, we have to make democracy attractive to the people it affects, which is all of us. To do this we need new ways of working, new skills and a willingness to let go of control. We have to accept that democracy is not a 'one size fits all' commodity and that no one has all the answers. New solutions must emerge from the collective and so we must:

- reconsider our relationship with people and place;
- challenge the elitism of democracy;
- understand that process and interface affect the outcomes of engagement; and
- build spaces for courageous leadership

Issues and Challenges

Modern democracy is complex and complicated. Different places have different challenges, problems and solutions, democracy is at its heart culturally constructed around where we live and reflects our wider societal concerns, norms and expectations. But it is also remarkable that, across Europe at least, we share many of the same concerns and challenges. Trust is falling, voter turnout is falling and, as we saw in the 2014 elections to the European Parliament, there is an increasing disconnect between traditional politics and issues-based democracy.

Has democracy become segmented? Has it become little more than an attribute of the comfortable middle-class, a pointless luxury in the lives of the poor and disadvantaged, irrelevant to the wealthy? Is this a reflection on the arrogance of institutions who are 'doing to' citizens, not seen as 'doing with'?

Our lives have changed dramatically, mediated by new technologies, particularly the internet and mobile. But democracy and our systems of governance have changed more slowly. In many cases they have been perceived as resistant to the opportunities of a more pro-social, networked society. Technological revolution has, whether we like it or not, brought about a democratic evolution. Shifts are occurring as the balance of power moves from systems to networks, from powerful elites to ordinary people. The same people who have lost faith in politics and distrust government are able to harness new networked and social tools to connect, converse and convene democratic action, if they choose to. Our democratic institutions cannot ignore this.

Digital and particularly mobile erodes distance across both space and time but it does not change our motivation to engage. What it can do is lower the barriers for participation, making it easier for us to take part. However, digital is no panacea and it can just as readily create a new digital elite to replace the old political elites. We have to ensure that, along with new digital tools, we include strategies to support their ubiquity and effective use by all. We have to consider that digital alone is unlikely to solve the problem of mass dis-engagement. Digital tools are powerful ways to network, connect, share and aggregate. They help to spread participation more widely. But they are less effective at large scale deliberation and this means we have to adopt and blend a range of on- and offline tools to ensure that engagement is appropriate, effective and accessible.

For all this rising tide of grass roots activism, the processes of governance all too often remain fixed. We talk about 'engaging' or 'consulting' citizens but it happens after the key decisions have been made. This reflects an underlying current of technocracy, where the opinion of the expert and the elite is more valued (and more readily accessible) than the voice of a wider public. Changing this requires

a significant change in the culture of democracy. It requires us to think collectively across the network, dissolving the silos of government and cliques of power.

The majority of government services are designed 'for' people, not 'with' people. Even where consultation occurs this is usually a closed-loop process, rarely is it at the heart of service design or delivery. Yet, involving people in the design of the services that affect their lives is a potential on-ramp to democratic re-engagement. Too often we make participation too complex, so people feel unable to contribute, lack the confidence to engage or don't see the point because they don't believe that anything they say will make a difference. Conversely, it is dangerous for politicians to always ask others what they would do as they perceive it makes them look weak and indecisive.

Complexity can be created but in the case of democracy it has more often than not emerged unchecked. Even in relative healthy democracies, complexity of systems and processes is a barrier to participation. Systems are inherently arrogant because they lack an ability to empathise with individuals and communities. They see the needs and veracity of the 'system' as paramount even where this impedes greater involvement in it. The nature of the interface with our democratic systems will always affect the nature, quality and value of the engagement.

This lack of engagement in the democratic process and in the design of public services builds friction and it risks the legitimacy of our democratic model in the future. It re-enforces a culture of 'us and them'. It makes the process competitive and adversarial, forcing us into a tyranny of diluted consensus. Is democracy about winning or is it about finding the right solutions and accepting, even valuing, difference? Certainly the emergence of more direct forms of engagement and deliberation suggests that the public appetite for working together is increasing. It's perhaps more challenging that some civil servants and politicians still see participation as problematic, as an obstacle challenging their decision making power.

Opportunities

To change we must have courage. There are clear trends emerging in our democracies that can be harnessed to help us overcome distrust and dislocation. These are partly digital but digital is only an enabler, they are primarily social and cultural. We need to create spaces for the courageous individuals who believe in the necessity of change and to generate new ways of doing democracy.

Having the courage to change means having the courage to change our roles and relationships. To move from the traditional hierarchies of power to the much flatter and energised model of a networked democracies. Collaboration and networking re-enforce the need to end siloed thinking and to break down power systems that protect an elite and exclude our communities from the decisions that affect them.

We have seen a big increase in the use of collaborative, co-creational and co-productive models and this is starting to permeate the public sector. Co-production only works when we re-align the power structures and treat everyone as having an equal role in the process. This drives a levelling of authority and a re-definition of 'expert' to recognise narrative and lived experience, as well as formal research, as valuable inputs into policy and service design.

Our changing concepts of place, community and of global citizenship, where issues not ideology drive our actions, irrevocably changes our perceptions and expectations of democracy. People will get involved if they care about the issue. They will get involved if they believe that they can make a difference. Collaborative networked models give us the potential to have that voice. Social media lets us maintain 'weak ties' with our networks too, encouraging light touch, long term and intermittent

connections based on mutuality. This changes our attitude to leadership and, in turn, about who controls the engagement process. It's no longer top down but can emerge from anywhere in the network. Leadership is about bridging different actors and agendas rather than holding on to power and controlling the agenda. All of this challenges the arrogance of incumbency, so to grasp these opportunities we have to create a powerful narrative for the future democracy we want. This requires us to:

- make 'low friction' participation the default;
- build networks not hierarchies; and
- co-design and co-produce policy, practice and services.

Themes to Pursue

The future of democracy is networked. It is open and collaborative. Above all, democracy is personal and, if we're to get involved, we've got to see the value. New technologies enable new ways of working but cultural change is needed to. During the Democracy Forum, we identified five key themes. These emerged from the conversations we had and were the ones that the group believed would be pivotal in building new networked, active democracies:

1. Designing active citizenship.
2. Re-framing legitimacy.
3. Leading through transition in a meaningful way.
4. Co-designing the future democracy.
5. Starting to experiment, turning experiments into actions and learning from them.

These are briefly explored and described below.

Active Citizenship

Active citizenship means giving everyone the skills, information and opportunity to be involved in designing and deciding their own and their community's future. We have to step outside the current structures of democracy to achieve this. It's important to develop new ways of working together and to share the process. Democracy isn't something 'done to' but 'done with', delivered by a variety of organisations, in a range of places, when it's needed. Active citizens value democracy, understand their role in it and find it beneficial and easy to take part.

Reframing Legitimacy

In the old world, legitimacy comes from elections and political manifestos, but falling party membership and shrinking voter turnout seriously challenges this. The value of the network lies in its connections, in its membership. In a networked democracy we can bring people together to legitimate ideas. Models such as citizen panels, whether physical, digital or combined, can draw on evidence from a wide range of sources and make open decisions. New models don't invalidate representative democracy but they do suggest that, for it to remain legitimate, it must adapt to be more inclusive, listening and responsive. In the future decision making must be fully transparent, the decision makers accountable and the process subject to public scrutiny (including through the use of open data).

Leading Through Transition

Leadership on the journey towards the networked democracy is about much more than politics, it's about vision and energising co-production. Above all, it requires bold people with the courage to

change the way democracy works. This can and will come from all sides and leadership in this space will be fluid and recognised because it brings people together, eschewing personal power for collective process. Leaders in this context are legitimated by the community they serve and the work they do, not by their position or title.

Co-Designing our Future

Enabling a culture of co-design requires new definitions for our roles: citizen, politician, civil servant. It requires us to step back from assumptions and accept that the process can be chaotic and often feel like a leap into the unknown. The language matters, so we must frame these processes in open, collaborative ways that encourage free-thinking but also recognise that there must be a process and an outcome. Initially there is likely to be scepticism and resistance (from all sides) but this can be overcome if the experience is positive. It's important to recognise that collaboration doesn't mean involving everyone in everything, some focus can be necessary. We have to ensure balance of representation too, avoiding the 'usual suspects' or domination of the debate. Above all good facilitation and strong but open leadership will help ensure good outcomes.

Experimentation

If we're to co-design our democratic future then we also need a process to instantiate the ideas. Taking an open and agile approach, using prototyping and experimentation with a strong focus on usability, user journeys and small steps helps the deliverable stay true to the concept. It also helps us accept that failure is a core part of learning and that to improve democracy for all of us, we have to be prepared to try and fail. Failure in this context is not the end, simply an input into the active learning culture that we have to build to surround co-design and experimentation.

Conclusion

To overcome inertia and incumbency we need a new narrative, a new vision of why democracy matters. And we need to write this narrative together. This is a journey of discovery, it's far from simple and it will take courage and new forms of leadership. We are moving to an age of active, networked democracy, supported and made possible by digital tools but above all requiring us to change our democratic culture to be open, accessible and co-productive by default, not exception.

Existing structures can get in the way and, when they do, they have to change, evolve or be replaced. Existing power-based structures don't work in a networked world, where collaboration and inclusivity matter most of all. It's time to break down the silos that have served the past and design the new networks together. The challenges though are to ensure that no one is left behind. To ensure that we all have the digital and information literacy skills and sufficient access to the tools and media we need to take part effectively in democracy.

This is a journey into the unknown and requires courageous leaders to take us forward. But embracing the unknown creates the space for discovery. We have to learn to be experimental and to embrace both failure and active learning as core facets of the way we work. If we are to shift power and build resilient democracies for everyone, we must accept that the power of crowd-sourced solutions is always greater than anything individuals are capable of. And if we can do this, we can start to re-engage people in democracy and re-build trust by creating new democratic structures and institutions to reflect the lives we now live.

To summarise the 2014 Democracy Forum, our democratic future is networked and it will be co-created together.

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