

# Future Challenges of democracy

The last decades have seen an unprecedented level of innovation in participative and democratic methodologies; however a number of key challenges remain. Participative practice in the 1980s and 90s was heavily focussed on developing methodologies of engagement and making the case for this new way of working. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the focus of activity shifted more towards demonstrating that engagement was possible at larger scale, with more people and on more complex issues, and also towards incorporating engagement into protocols and policies. Today I argue that one of the big tasks of participative practitioners is to institutionalise the practice of engagement, without killing creativity and innovation.

In my view the coming decade will see a number of trends and challenges converge to create meta-challenges for democracy. It is likely that the teenage years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be a time of challenge and troubles, much like the teenage years of human beings!

Here is a list of some of the most considerable challenges ahead:

## Culture change

On a certain level it could be said that all engagement is about culture change. However culture change has become more important as we move from individual projects towards embedding engagement within and across institutions. Participation requires a different skillset from civil servants compared to what they have traditionally needed and experience shows that where engagement is carried out within organisational cultures which do not support it the impact is greatly reduced. In practice this means that local authorities and other organisations will need to look at changing the way they operate day to day, rather than see engagement as an add on activity. Efforts such as mentoring, peer learning, expert resource centres and other similar interventions are likely to remain important.

## Practicing what we preach

Traditionally the design of engagement processes has not been very transparent. The set up and design has been done behind closed doors by the policy holders and (possibly) experts in participation. As the value of co-production has become more widely acknowledged, and as expectations of openness and transparency have become more commonplace it is clear that participatory practitioners will to a much greater degree need to design 'in the open'. This may make the initial process messier, but it can have a positive impact on the buy in to the process. Organisations in the public sector will need to be prepared to be challenged on the methods they use for engagement and to do more 'consultations about consultation'.

## Decline of party politics

The foundation for mass politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was mass parties. Representative democracy is built on the assumption that mass parties are able to reflect the identities and values of citizens and can channel these into the political process. Over the last decades, with the significant decline in party membership across most western democracies, the ability of parties to carry out these functions (and the trust they command amongst the overall population) has been reduced. As strong party adherence and deference has become less common there has been an increase in political volatility, especially at the local level. New populist parties (often based around a charismatic leader)

rise and fall with increasingly speed. In many cases independent politicians or one issue parties see success at the ballot box. Engagement is often put forward as a way of overcoming the growing weaknesses in representative democracy –yet the relationship between participative and representative democracy remains complicated and fraught with difficulty. Reluctant politicians often see participation as a threat rather than an opportunity.

## Digital

The development of the Internet and related digital technologies has changed most areas of human activity over the last decades. However, compared to other areas of the public sector the use of digital tools in the democratic process seems to be lagging behind. As web technologies change the expectations of the public when it comes to transparency and interactivity, local authorities and others may well find themselves unable to keep pace. A lot of vital conversations are happening in social networks where public bodies struggle to be heard and to understand others.

## Deliberation

Participative processes which involve ‘deliberative mini-publics’ are important, especially where issues are complex and/or where conflict is rife. Experience shows that through face to face deliberation it is possible for the public to discuss difficult topics in a meaningful way. The issues with deliberative processes are that they are usually very small, expensive, time consuming and do not necessarily interface with larger public debates or decision making. Taking deliberative engagement to scale is one of the big challenges of the coming years.

## Debate and Media

The role of the media is often ‘the elephant in the room’ – the topic that is often thought about but rarely mentioned. Traditional mass media does not have a strong track record of reporting on engagement in a meaningful manner. Often engagement processes are not seen as newsworthy and the media can sometimes support a confrontational discourse at odds with most engagement. News coverage has occasionally undermined engagement efforts. Another factors is the growth of citizen journalism and how this interacts with participation practices.

## Embedding engagement

Engagement is still by and large mostly carried out as discrete projects or programmes. It is still largely seen as a side activity within the public sector. I do not believe that engagement can be completely mainstreamed –there will remain a need for distinct engagement specialists and capacity builders, especially for complex and contentious issues. However, engagement does need to become more ‘business as usual’ than it is today. This has been a slow process, but will need to speed up in the coming years.