Can *democracy by doing* deepen democracy?

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Published by Hivos, ISS and WRR

An English translation of 'DOEN. Nieuwe vormen van democratie'

Preface

A one off publication by Hivos, ISS and WRR

Can *democracy by doing* deepen democracy?

They're springing up out of nowhere these days: Little Free Libraries or community book exchanges. They consist of small containers set up along public roads where people can leave books they no longer want for others to collect and read.

UNESCO believes that libraries are very important for democracy: "Constructive participation and the development of democracy depend on satisfactory education as well as on free and unlimited access to knowledge, thought, culture and information. The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups." (www.unesco.org/webworld/libraries/manifestos/libraman.html)

But where UNESCO calls on governments to support public libraries, the Little Free Libraries are being set up by ordinary people who believe in the power of a good idea: just do it, is their motto. In 2012 Hivos, ISS and the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) organised a symposium about this theme, called: *Can 'do-ocracy' deepen democracy?*. Marcia Luyten chaired a debate on questions about the connection between citizens and government and the role of upcoming citizen initiatives in representative democracies by Marlies Glasius (Amsterdam University) Rakesh Rajani (TWAWEZA) and Manu Claeys (stRaten Generaal). Starting point was the WRR report *Confidence in citizens*.

Are these examples a symbol of this confidence and a new form of democracy: the 'do-democracy?' That's what this magazine is about. We hope that it is every bit as interesting as the contents of a Little Free Library and that you enjoy reading it.

Remko Berkhout (Hivos)
Kees Biekart (ISS)
Annemarth Idenburg (WRR)

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Hivos is an international development organisation guided by humanist values. Together with local civil society organisations in developing countries, Hivos wants to contribute to a free, fair and sustainable world.
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ISS is an international graduate school of policy-oriented critical social science. It brings together students and teachers from the Global South and the North in a European environment.
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The Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) is an independent advisory body for the Dutch government.
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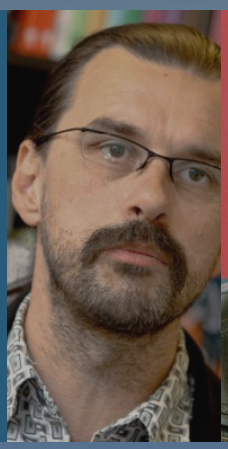

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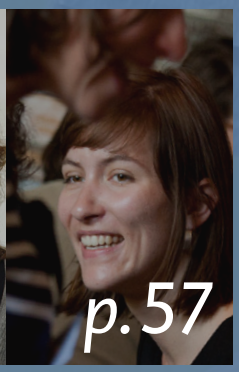

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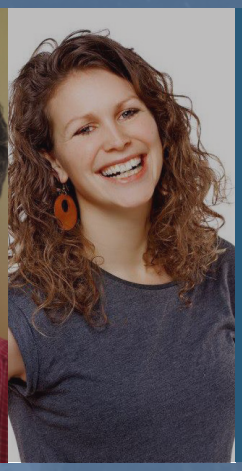

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IN PURSUING CITIZEN-DRIVEN CHANGE, AT TIMES WE NEED TO DARE TO SAY, 'I DON'T HAVE A CLUE'

"Instead of trying to solve intractable problems directly, which can feel like banging one's head against a wall, we can build on what citizens are already doing to make a difference."

Introduction

Author

Jona Specker

Jona Specker was involved in developing the report *'Vertrouwen in burgers'* (Confidence in citizens) (2012) as a researcher for the Scientific Council for Government Policy. She investigated democratic representation and direct forms of democracy for this project and interviewed dozens of people active in protest movements, citizen activism or social enterprises to find out their motivations and reasons. Jona studied philosophy in Rotterdam.

Jona Specker

CAN *DEMOCRACY BY DOING* DEEPEN DEMOCRACY?

In an old hamam in the city of Rotterdam, the Netherlands, a community-led reading room (Leeszaal West [1]) has been established. As protesting against the decision by the authorities to close down 15 of the 23 local libraries had proved fruitless, the community decided to create the Reading Room themselves. Its initiators are careful not to call it a library, because they want to define it on its own terms and create space for innovation. The more than 35 hosts are volunteers, the 3,500 books are donations, and the programme offers lectures and debates, dinners, film screenings and children activities.

We are witness to the rise of a new generation of self-organising citizens who are bypassing formal routes of democratic participation. Perhaps less visible than the mass protests in Egypt, Tunisia and Spain, but no less radical in their effects, are the myriad ways in which people are shaping their everyday environments *by doing*. **'Guerrilla' or 'street' journalists are experimenting with new ways of data collection and exchange, designing new arenas for public debate, and offering alternatives to the traditional news media.**

Activists, for example within the Occupy and Indignados movements, have largely abandoned previously preferred methods ("marching under banners, chanting pre-decided slogans and returning home" [2]). Instead, spaces are being claimed to practice horizontal, non-programmatic, leaderless forms of organisation. And all around the world, communities are initiating and executing public services that were previously considered to be predominantly the responsibility of states: community-led libraries such as the one described above, but also cooperative nurseries, alternative energy supply, children's services and elderly care. The common theme appears to be that people everywhere are designing and implementing alternatives themselves, instead of waiting for the powers that be to act on their demands for change.

The action repertoires of social movements and the ways in which people express their democratic involvement are in transition.[3] Understanding the motives, drivers and

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1. Links (Dutch)
Homepage (http://www.leeszaalrotterdamwest.nl)
Brief impression on film (http://vimeo.com/54183732)
Interview with co-founder Maurice Specht (in Dutch) (http://versbeton.nl/2013/01/de-makers-van-rotterdam-2-maurice-specht-over-de-leeszaal-rotterdam-west/)
Community Lover's Guide to the Universe (http://communityloversguide.org)

2. Pantazidou, Maro (2012) 'Trading new ground: A changing moment for citizen action in Greece', Hivos Knowledge Programma Civil Society Building, p. 19

ensuing dynamics is proving to be no easy task. The Dutch *Scientific Council for Government Policy* (WRR) reflects in its report *Confidence in Citizens* [4] on the potential of citizens' involvement in the Netherlands and on the challenge for policymakers to nurture the positive effects of that involvement. During the course of this research, which consisted of both a literature study and over 200 interviews with citizens, policymakers and researchers, we came across the research programmes of Hivos and the Institute for Social Studies (ISS) focusing on new manifestations of social mobilisation and 'civic-driven change' worldwide.[5] When it transpired that the questions we were asking were very similar, Hivos, the WRR and ISS decided to join forces and organise a seminar to reflect on how to assess this new generation of self-organising citizens. The seminar purposefully brought together a set of cases and panellists from the global North and the global South. The key question asked - 'Can *democracy by doing* deepen democracy?' - sought to explore whether and how citizens' actions can invigorate democratic processes and promote democratic outcomes.

This publication is both a continuation of the lively conversations that took place throughout that day and an inspiration for further reflection on the prospects for *democracy by doing*. It brings together reflections by several participants in the symposium held in December 2012, and provides resources for those interested to read and observe further.

Research on citizens' actions worldwide

Despite the many parallels and the global interconnectedness of citizens' actions, the bodies of academic discourse describing and analysing these phenomena have, until recently, been separated to a surprisingly high extent. Development studies have traditionally focused on democratisation processes, while democratic theory in established democracies has focused primarily on declines in political trust. Increasingly, however, it is being recognised that in many respects, similar questions apply. In established democracies, attention for democratic deficits has increased, sparking debate on the need for democratic innovation.[6] And in development practices, we are seeing a stronger focus not only on the realisation of political and civic rights, but also on citizen engagement, associations at the grassroots level and alternative, more participatory forms of political action.[7] Mariz Tadros blames the strict boundaries between academic disciplines – 'silos' – for the fact that political and social scientists largely failed to notice the potential of citizen uprisings, for example in Egypt, prior to 2011.[8] Overcoming these academic silos would thus seem to bes paramount in understanding the 'changing face of citizen action' around the world.

RADICALISING DEMOCRACY

In the report *Confidence in citizens*, the concept of the 'do-democracy' is advanced, first developed by the Dutch political scientist Ted van

de Wijdeven.[9] It stresses *concrete action* over voting, negotiation and deliberation as a way of influencing and shaping the public sphere. In democratic theory, several forms of democracy are closely related to the idea of 'do-democracy': collaborative democracy [10] , participatory democracy [11] , deliberative democracy, action democracy, direct democracy, grassroots democracy, etcetera. Despite the many differences between them, these concepts all emphasise the democratic potential of citizen engagement and seek to strengthen the role of citizens in political decision-making processes. In pushing for a fuller realisation of democratic values than can arguably be accomplished by competitive representation – regular election cycles in which citizens choose representatives –they are all forms of *radical* or *deep democracy*.[12]

> *Joshua Cohen and Archon Fung: "Radical democrats have recommended participation and deliberation to increase political equality: deliberation, because it blunts the power of greater resources with the force of better arguments; participation, because shifting the basis of political contestation from organized money to organized people is the most promising antidote to the influence conferred by wealth."* [13]

Radical or deepening democracy approaches focus on more than the enjoyment of legal rights and the election of representatives.[14] They ask how 'watchdog' functions in society can be strengthened, and how citizens can advocate special interests and frame new agendas. They are concerned with social mobilisation that challenges

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3. **Pantazidou, Maro (2012) 'Trading new ground: A changing moment for citizen action in Greece', Hivos Knowledge Programma Civil Society Building. Available at** (http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Civic-Explorations/Publications/A-Changing-Moment-for-Citizen-Action-in-Greece)
Tilly, C. and S.G. Tarrow (2007) Contentious politics, Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

4. **Link to full report** (http://www.wrr.nl/fileadmin/nl/publicaties/PDF-Rapporten/Vertrouwen_in_burgers.pdf)
English summary (http://www.wrr.nl/fileadmin/en/publicaties/PDF-samenvattingen/Confidence_in_Citizens.pdf)

5. **Hivos** (http://www.hivos.net/civicexplorations)
ISS (http://www.iss.nl/research/research_programmes/civic_innovation_research_initiative/grants_projects/civic_driven_change/)

6. **Norris, P. (2011) Democratic deficit, critical citizens revisited, New York: Cambridge University Press**

7. **Benequista, N. (2011) Blurring the boundaries: Citizen action across states and societies, Brighton: Citizenship DRC.** (http://www.drc-citizenship.org/system/assets/1052734700/original/1052734700-cdrc.2011-blurring.pdf?1302515701)

8. **Tadros, Mariz (2012) 'Introduction: The pulse of the Arab revolt' in: Tadros, M. (ed.) 'Special issue: the pulse of Egypt's Revolt', IDS Bulletin, 43(1), pp. 1-15.**

9. **Wijdeven, T. van de (2012) Doe-democratie. Over actief burgerschap in stadswijken, Delft: Eburon.** (http://books.google.nl/books?hl=en&lr=&id=jSPhdV6n1AsC&oi=fnd&pg=PA9&dq=ted+van+de+wijdeven+democracy&ots=FDTnK4dp5d&sig=xPk8e190fn1GTD_KU5H6TBXYhPY&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false)
Casper Geurtz & Ted Van de Wijdeven (2010): Making Citizen Participation Work: The Challenging Search for New Forms of Local Democracy in The Netherlands, Local Government Studies, 36:4, 531-549.

10. **Noveck, B.S. (2009) Wiki Government. How technology can make government better, democracy stronger, and citizens more powerful, Washington DC: Brookings Institute Press.**

11. **Fung, A. (2006) 'Varieties of participation in complex governance', Public Administration Review, special issue December, pp. 66-75.**

12. **Cohen, J. and A. Fung (2004) 'Radical democracy', Swiss Political Science Review, 10:4, pp. 23-34. Available at** (http://www.archonfung.com/docs/articles/2004/Cohen_Fung_Debate_SPSR2004.pdf)

13. **Cohen, J. and A. Fung (2004) 'Radical democracy', Swiss Political Science Review, 10:4, p. 25.**

14. **Schatten Coelho, Vera and Bettina von Lieres (eds) (2010) Mobilizing for democracy: Citizen action and the politics of public participation, London/New York: Zed Books, pp. 1-3.**

clientelism, patronage and the powers that be. And they strive for more inclusive, open and deliberate decision-making processes. [15]

Uniquely characteristic of *democracy by doing*, and perhaps what sets it apart from other manifestations of deepening democracy, is its a-political nature. Those involved are often careful to distance themselves from any suggestions that they are in some way politically involved, and instead emphasise the practical, hands-on character of their actions.

"Uniquely characteristic of democracy by doing, and perhaps what sets it apart from other manifestations of deepening democracy, is its a-political nature."

The pragmatic, activist approaches characteristic of *democracy by doing* recognise that the less ordered and lived realities which characterise people's day-to-day lives seldom live up to the ideals as propagated in democratic theories, nor do they match their assumptions. The Australian professor of politics John Keane describes how conventional, representative forms of democracy have come to be supplemented (and hence complicated) by a variety of democratic innovations that are applied to organisations underneath and beyond governments. [16] The result is a dynamic, inherently imperfect and disorienting mix of forms of democracy, which reflects the inherently pluralistic and hybrid nature of democracy in action. [17]

Should *democracy by doing* lead to voting or deliberation being abolished altogether and provide a blueprint for how modern democracies should function from now on? Those engaged in *democracy by doing* do not necessarily aspire to do away with representative democracy altogether. They can acknowledge its merits, but still bypass its institutions. In doing so, spaces are claimed for experimentation and learning, for contestation, for the production of alternatives.

PRACTICES

Maurice Specht and Joke van der Zwaard, the initiators of *Leeszaal West* in Rotterdam, describe the development of the Reading Room, as well as the various functions it performs today. They maintain that the Reading Room allows residents to rehearse various

democratic skills, while at the same time challenging the functioning of existing social arrangements. Key is that the community's own ideals and visions are the main drivers, not the policy priorities as formulated by administrative and political bodies.

Josien Pieterse writes about her experiences with the development of a cooperative housing community in Amsterdam, and her group's confrontations with an often rigid and uncooperative city administration. She observes that old policy frameworks are hardly compatible with new models based on self-organisation. Manu Claeys, chairman of the Antwerp citizen collective "stRaten-generaal" ('Street Parliament'), maintains that traditional political worlds are struggling with what he calls the 'energetic society' [18], a society that fundamentally questions top-down decision-making processes. He argues that citizens see themselves more explicitly as participants in politics and assume democratic roles that go beyond being onlookers at a spectacle, as activists, advocates, protesters.

On the basis of Manu Claeys' experiences and the lively discussions during the December 2012 symposium in The Hague, Kees Biekart (ISS) formulates a number of do's and don'ts to enable citizens' actions to achieve their goals. They include adopting a differentiated strategy, using multiple tools and media platforms to put their message across – while not underestimating the power of the older media– and being careful not to be played off against each other.

DOWNSIDES

Albert Jan Kruiter observes that – in the Netherlands at least – administrators' attempts at facilitating *democracy by doing* are financially, not democratically motivated. Citizens are called upon to take care of each other and of public spaces, not because these goals are democratically desirable, but because existing welfare arrangements can no longer be financed.

Marlies Glasius remarks in her essay that stressing the novelty of a phenomenon may contribute to its being hyped. These 'outbreaks of

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15. Schatten Coelho, Vera and Bettina von Lieres (eds.) (2010) Mobilizing for democracy: Citizen action and the politics of public participation, London/New York: Zed Books, p. 2.

16. Keane, J.C. (2009) The life and death of democracy, London: Simon and Schuster, p. xxvii. See also this website (http://www.thelifeanddeathofdemocracy.org)

17. Hendriks, F. (2006) Vitale democratie. Theorie van democratie in actie, Amsterdam University Press. Hendriks, F. (2010) Vital democracy. Theory of democracy in action, Oxford University Press.

18. See Hajer, M.A. (2011) De energieke samenleving. Op zoek naar een sturingsfilosofie voor een schone economie, Den Haag: Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving. **Dutch** (http://www.pbl.nl/sites/default/files/cms/publicaties/Signalenrapport_web.pdf), **English** (http://www.pbl.nl/sites/default/files/publications/Energetic_society/WEB.pdf)

democracy', as Ricardo Blaug [19] calls them, can stir up an enormous amount of enthusiasm, energy and hope, but are often quickly co-opted until, sooner or later, normal life takes over again.

Chris Aalberts criticises the lack of conceptual clarity that characterises the debates about deepening democracy. Various examples and experiments are grouped together under the umbrella of *democracy by doing*. Aalberts is also concerned that *democracy by doing* will undermine a number of important achievements of 'good old' representative democracy, notably equal political access and the right to elect and dismiss political representatives. Both he and Marlies Glasius caution against losing sight of the merits of representative democracy, as it has been able to secure a level of equality among citizens and means of conflict resolution that many instances of *democracy by doing* simply cannot match.

Both Marlies Glasius and Chris Aalberts draw attention to a question that is easily overlooked: "What about those instances that are destructive and violent?" As John Gaventa (Institute of Development Studies) sums up: "elite capture, manipulation and uses of citizen mobilization for non-democratic ends" [20] can be unwanted consequences of democracy by doing.

Photo Maro Pantazidou (by Marieke Wijntjes - Kennisland)

A helpful distinction in this regard is that between unruly and uncivil citizens' actions. Prime examples of violent, uncivil citizens' actions are those of the Greek right-wing political party Golden Dawn. In their (citizens'!) initiative to 'clean up' a fish market in Athens in September 2012, market stalls that were run by immigrants were violently trashed. Unruly citizens' actions [21] however, are more ambiguous and harder to classify, and refer to those initiatives that – knowingly and willingly –transgress 'the rules of the political game' or seek out the limits of the law. Notable examples are the (international) networks of people assisting undocumented immigrants.

looking for those spaces and events where citizen action is channelled and nurtured beyond formal structures. What forms of participation did people look for when they felt the need to share their concerns and defend their rights and needs? A world of collectivities, citizen initiatives and acts of disobedience and solidarity revealed itself – which some research participants argued is the 'real civil society'.

People started moving away from the old repertoires of protest that had become largely predictable and consequently easy for the powerful to manipulate (in framing the public discourse) and to ignore (in making actual decisions). Citizens started rejecting old, representative and professionalised tactics for organising and progressively engaged with a political culture of unmediated presence via direct democracy practices in assemblies and a direct voice in social media.

Citizen Action in Greece

As in most of the movements that swept the world in 2011, traditional civil-society actors did not play a crucial role in developing new civic practices in Greece. Instead, citizens turned to informal, spontaneous, self- governed forms of organisation. Maro Pantazidou[22] takes a closer look at moments of citizen organisation in Greece in order to elicit an understanding of these new civic practices. She argues that the Greek 'movement' is shaped by an actual movement away from traditional, representative, recognised forms of citizen organisation to citizen-led, anti-hierarchical, horizontal networks that both resist the consequences of the crisis and create alternatives to the current democratic and economic model.

Pantazidou set about this research consciously

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19. Blaug, R. (2000) 'Outbreaks of democracy', Socialist Register, 36, pp. 145-160. (http://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5739/2634#.UVyQH794FyY)
Perhaps of interest for further reading (http://blaug.net/2012/07/12/what-does-the-net-do-for-democracy-2/)

20. Gaventa, John (2010) 'Foreword' In: Schatten Coelho, Vera and Bettina von Lieres (eds) Mobilizing for democracy: Citizen action and the politics of public participation, London/New York: Zed Books, p. xiii-xvi.

21. Khanna, A. (2012) 'Seeing citizen action through an 'unruly' lens', Development, 55(2), pp. 162-172. (http://www.palgrave-journals.com/development/journal/v55/n2/full/dev201221a.html)
Also: Special Issue Krisis on Civil Disobedience (Krisis, Journal for Contemporary Democracy, Issue 3, 2012: http://www.krisis.eu/content/2012-3/krisis-2012-3-00-complete-issue.pdf)

22. Pantazidou, Maro (2012) 'Trading new ground: A changing moment for citizen action in Greece', Hivos Knowledge Programme:a Civil Society Building. Available at (http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Civic-Explorations/Publications/A-Changing-Moment-for-Citizen-Action-in-Greece)

RESISTING FORMALISATION

Annemarth Idenburg and Jona Specker observe that from a policy perspective, expressions of *democracy by doing* often present themselves in 'inconvenient' ways. Those who felt more or less comfortable with the old ways of 'doing democracy' are confronted with an ever- increasing diversity and density of actors and forms of action. For researchers and supporters of civic action, "the game is only becoming more complex"[23] – and this applies to those working in government as well. According to Annemarth Idenburg and Jona Specker, key in understanding the discomfort among government representatives is the mismatch between the hierarchical culture of governments and the increasingly globally connected and technologically mediated network culture of society.

> "The change that is the goal of these initiatives is tangible and practical, and not primarily targeted at formal political decision-making processes."

As part of Margit van Wessel's research in recent years, she has interviewed many Dutch citizens on the disconnect they experience between their everyday lives and 'Big Politics'. For her, the real challenge is to make citizens' everyday experiences relevant for political decision-makers, and to scale up citizen 'noises' – utterances that are unhelpful and irrelevant to the policy process – into proper citizen voices.

Whether *democracy by doing* should actually be scaled up is however the subject of debate. Chris Sigaloff and Remko Berkhout draw parallels between current calls to scale up successful citizen initiatives and similar demands for scaling in international development some 30 years ago. They warn against repeating the same mistakes, such as applying private- sector management techniques to the public sector and mistakenly assuming the easy transferability of existing good practices and innovations. More important than finding a one-size-fits-all recipe for social change, they argue, is the need to strengthen and enhance spaces for learning, experimentation and knowledge-sharing.

Rakesh Rajani and Merit Hindriks express a similar concern in their essay, based on their experiences with often well-intended but either short-lived or mistakenly standardised reforms of

public institutions in East Africa. When assessing efforts to make institutions more open and participatory, we should not forget the age-old question of ownership. A more promising approach than standardised, top-down implementation of institutional reform is building on those institutions with which people are engaging already: "the madrasah and the church, the food kiosk and the radio". They observe that although connecting to the lived realities of people is key, a realistic view of what motivates people is often lacking in development practices.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Democracy by doing is real and alive. Although endlessly diverse and situated in local contexts, striking parallels can be identified in instances that on the face of it seem radically different: crowdsourcing websites such as Ushahidi that monitor safe election processes, cooperative housing communities, or locally self-organised social security arrangements (Breadfund). The change that is the goal of these initiatives is tangible and practical, and not primarily targeted at formal political decision-making processes. Those involved do not aspire to play along within the context of existing structures, but challenge them indirectly, purposefully evading formal procedures and timetables. Partners are found in both the public and private sector, among professionals and volunteers. And, finally, many start from the confidence that by focusing on strengthening connections between people first – by providing a place to meet, for example – the 'fixing of problems' will follow.

As a consequence, we see a renewed enthusiasm for citizen-centred thinking. Unfortunately, enthusiasm may reflect more opportunistic drivers as well. There is a risk of that enthusiasm being used to avoid government responsibility. The recognition that communities are sometimes capable of organising some public services themselves has been (mis)used in justifying budget cuts. Big Society empowerment rhetoric may serve as an example of this.

Based on the Antwerp case, Kees Biekart comes to the gloomy bottom-line conclusion that citizens and action groups inevitably have fewer resources and shorter staying power than the bodies they are up against. These more pessimistic conclusions allude

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23. As Remko Berkhout and Fieke Jansen remark in their introduction to a special issue of Development on 'Citizenship for change'. See: Berkhout, R. and F. Jansen (2012) 'Introduction: The changing face of citizen action', Development, 55(2), p. 156. The table of contents of this special issue on 'Citizenship for Change', which is freely available online, is available here (http://www.palgrave-journals.com/development/journal/v55/n2/index.html#Upfront)

to discussions that are well known in social movement studies about what constitutes success. The success of social movements is often expressed much more in a change in the climate of ideas, which in turn can facilitate change in the longer run. Thus in Manu Claeys's case, for example, many of the immediate objectives of citizen action were not achieved, and those results that did emerge are fragile. But what happened in Antwerp did strengthen an emergent narrative that challenges the primacy of politics and current democratic systems, something that is vital for democratic renewal in the long term.

To return to the main question: can *democracy by doing* deepen democracy? The democratic *effects* of the multiform practices that we classify under the label of *democracy by doing* are not necessarily always positive. As many commentators confirm, we should not romanticise citizens' actions. Yet, in *Confidence in citizens*, we maintained that centralised, large-scale and necessarily abstract representative systems should ideally be grounded in vibrant, participatory and direct democracy practices at the local level.[24] In that sense, the answer to the question must be positive. The challenge is to connect these emerging democratic arenas to the more formalised and established ones, without subsuming the one to the other. As Rakash Rajani remarked during the symposium, more citizen action does not by definition imply less state action. Increased agency in the local domain demands more imagination on a larger scale. For states, this is not a moment to sit back.

Jona Specker

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Rotterdam West Reading Room as democratic rehearsal

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The decision taken by the Rotterdam Library (*Bibliotheek Rotterdam*) in September 2011 to close 15 of the 21 library branches was greeted with the expected protest from the city's Oude Westen district, with more than 1,000 signatures soon being collected in the vain hope of reversing the decision. Joke van der Zwaard and Maurice Specht thought of another democratic response, one that focused on the public's ability to create its own library rather than trying to influence the government's decision-making process. The result: the Rotterdam West Reading Room [*Leeszaal Rotterdam West*] ("the Reading Room").

The Reading Room is an example of an emerging phenomenon that has people organising to address issues affecting their community. These endeavours are premised on residents' own priorities and ideas, rather than on how those residents can help resolve the quality of life issues formulated by government/professionals. Not only are people organising to improve public facilities, but they are also tackling issues such as energy and care. There is a growing gap between public interests and public (read: the government) responsibilities. That gap is being filled by a group of new, socially minded "doers": enterprising citizens, social entrepreneurs, and commercial suppliers. This article uses the Reading Room as a case study to examine the meaning and effect of enterprising citizenship.

ROTTERDAM WEST READING ROOM

From the outset, we focused on developing plans and creating commitment *simultaneously*. In other words, instead of drafting a plan that people could respond or contribute to, we held meetings at existing meeting places in Oude Westen with existing residents' associations. At these meetings, we asked questions such as "What would your ideal Reading Room be like?" and "What are you prepared to do to make that idea a reality?". That is how we arrived at a collective image of the future Reading Room. To see whether that image was viable, we organised a five-day festival in November to test it (will people come, and are they actually prepared to do something?), present it (to let as many people as possible know what we were doing), and convince sceptics (it is harder to ignore an actual event than something written down on paper).

A new theme was highlighted on each day of the festival: learning, reading, reading aloud, meeting people, and sharing. About 70 volunteers worked their hearts out to create the Reading Room in a former Turkish bath made available to us by the Woonstad housing corporation. During the festival, the Reading Room added a programme of workshops, lectures, presentations, and performances to its collection of more than 1,000 books, five newspapers, WiFi access, computers, and coffee corner. Although the festival was a big success for both the volunteers and the visitors, we were still left with the question of whether and how we would go forward. Two months later we had the answer. The Reading Room reopened with another festive celebration on 29 January. More than 150 guests attended the official opening, which was presided over by Abdelkader Kenali (who frequently visited the Oude Westen library as a child) and Heleen Flier (who ran the former library). We are now open five days a week from 10 a.m. until 8 p.m. Our collection has grown to more than 3,500 books. We have literary dinners, film screenings, debates, breakfasts for self-employed entrepreneurs, and children's afternoons.

To clarify the value or meaning of this place, we apply Sennett's distinction between practising and rehearsing (2012). Practising is necessary to master your technique and instrument. In rehearsals, the members of the orchestra work together to arrive at the best result. They have to attune themselves to one another and, while they play, develop of an idea of how the whole performance could and should sound. The same is true for the Reading Room, in that while we operate our facility, we are always examining where the idea, the people, the building and the location could lead. You could consider the Reading Room to be a democratic rehearsal space for people to develop a public place as well as themselves. A public place, moreover, that is designed to motivate people to

develop themselves. How does such a place come to be?

THE RAW MATERIALS OF A DEMOCRATIC REHEARSAL SPACE

The Reading Room was created by gathering, connecting, and capitalising on a long list of items that are available free of charge. We use what Nils Roemen refers to as "surplus social value": "something that is leftover or won't be missed at a place where it has no current value, but that can be made useful again by using it in another way in another location. These are not monetary items, but either tangible things or intangible things such as ideas, access, or assistance" (www.socialeoverwaarde.nl).

In the context of the Reading Room, these things include:

» Time: because it is operated entirely by volunteers, the Reading Room is dependent on the amount of time people are willing to put into it. Because we are opened so many hours a week, we need about 35 men and women to volunteer to work at the Reading Room each week. Without people like Ritsaart, Jan, Satchen, Marcelina, Alexander and Angelique, the Reading Room would not exist.

» Books and other items: our entire collection consists of donations. At the beginning, we worried that we would only get the items that people were unable to sell at used book stores or online. That turned out not to be the case. People would rather give their books to an organisation that really means something to their community than have the tiny bit of money they would get from selling them. And it was the same for the tables, chairs, computers, projector, and lots of other items.

» Professional skills: we add professional skills and expertise to all of the items we are "coincidentally" given. For example, the building team was led by Ruud, who is also an interior architect. His expertise ensured that all these separate items were combined to create an attractive, high-quality public area. As a result, the people who work as volunteers at the Reading Room also meet people there in their off hours. For example, Karin, a graphic artist, handles our house style and posters, and Rinia, who worked as a tram conductor for 15 years, teaches us how to deal with groups of unruly kids and teens, while Arda and Christine, who both have experience working with books, make our collection accessible.

Because people donate their time, things, and expertise, we have been able to create the kind of quality that attracts more time, things, and expertise. In other words, we don't just consume surplus social value, we create it as well.

LEARNING WHILE DOING

As noted above, the Reading Room exists only because of the efforts of a very large group of volunteers. The question is: why do they volunteer? We know from studies of volunteer work and action groups that people generally have social or altruistic reasons, or they may be committed to a certain cause or interested in a particular issue, or they may simply enjoy the volunteer work and the way it improves their self-image (Hustinx, et al., 2011). Our volunteers reflect all of these motives. They also consider it important that people in their neighbourhood have a place where they can meet. They want to contribute to making a meaningful public place a reality.

The volunteers are not paid, but they can use the Reading Room as a place to work on self-improvement. We do this every day, for example, by pairing volunteers who do not speak fluent Dutch with those who do. In this way, the Reading Room is literally a rehearsal space. Another group of volunteers is very interested in gaining experience in catering. They can do this by providing luncheons or catering dinners at the Reading Room on special occasions. They receive a small fee for this, which they contribute to a communal fund that will be used to pay for courses leading to their official certification as caterers. Finally – inspired by Learning Dreams in Minnesota (Stein, 2010) and Pendrecht University on the south side of

Rotterdam (Westrik and Hofman, 2012) – we are busy taking stock of what our individual volunteers would like to learn. Based on the knowledge and expertise available at the Reading Room or other locations, we will be looking for someone who can help them achieve this goal. In this way, people can acquire the knowledge and skills they need to become more well-rounded individuals and involved citizens (for a more in-depth discussion of volunteers learning while doing, see Specht, 2012, and Van der Zwaard and Kreuk, 2012).

FINAL NOTE

The Reading Room is an example of an emerging phenomenon – cloaking social criticism and political demands in ordinary forms of public participation and volunteer work. Some people refer to this as "militant optimism" (Barrie, 2010), while others call it "blended social action" (Sampson, *et al.*, 2005) or "Doing Democracy" (Van de Wijdeven, 2012). Members of the public do not express their preference for certain policy options by completing a checklist, raising their hands, or hanging banners. Instead, they show where they stand by taking action. The Reading Room enables residents to develop all of the skills this type of democracy demands, while at the same time challenging community and government representatives to take a position (for an overview of the skills required of citizens

and the government, see Van der Zwaard and Specht, 2013).

These initiatives lead to both social and democratic benefits. The question is how we can ensure the sustainability of these types of initiatives. Resident initiatives are often no longer eligible for subsidies after two years, or projects lose their momentum when people stop volunteering. If we consider these types of initiatives to be important for society, we will need an administrative, financial, and social context that can and will support them. As Reijndorp (2012) phrases it: "What we need is a new public domain, a new form of civic society; a form in which the countless social, economic, and cultural initiatives can again be firmly embedded." Achieving this goal will require the government and professional institutions to devote themselves to practising and rehearsing.

Maurice Specht & Joke van der Zwaard

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- Community lover's guide to the universe »

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One of the thematic Knowledge Programmes is 'Civic explorations'. Within this programme, Hivos zooms in on how citizens across the globe are claiming their rights in an increasingly interconnected world. Questions about citizen action and self-organizing citizens operating outside the formal spheres of government, their role in global politics and the role of social media as the alleged new magic bullet, and the changing face and pace of citizen action are central within this theme.

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Collective construction projects and the limits of *democ*

Author

Josien Pieterse

Josien Pieterse graduated *cum laude* in political science and gender studies. She worked as a programme maker for the Felix Meritis debate centre and TUMULT and as coordinator of the Forum for Democratic Development (FDO). She became an independent oral historian in 2007 and currently works as a researcher for Atria Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History. She is also co-initiator of Framer Framed, a platform for ethnographic, heritage and contemporary art institutions that explores the changing role of museums (framerframed.nl). In 2011, she and Mieke van Heesewijk set up the Network Democracy Platform for Democratic Innovation (netdem.nl).

Nautilus - www.nautilus-amsterdam.nl

Netwerkdemocratie - www.netdem.nl

@ NetwerkDem

Framer Framed - www.framerframed.nl

Nautilus is the name of a residential structure to be completed on Zeeburgereiland in Amsterdam in 2014. The building is being constructed by an organisation called Collectief Particulier Opdrachtgeverschap, a group of private individuals who are collectively undertaking this construction project. We are developing our own combined residential and commercial space, which will contain 42 flats for people who fall into the cracks of the housing market: those whose income is too low to buy a home elsewhere but too high to qualify for subsidised rental properties.

Zeeburgereiland, a small sand flat a stone's throw from the centre of Amsterdam, has been lying unused since 2010. When we were allocated the land, we thought our building would eventually be surrounded by sport facilities, cultural meeting places, self-build lots, schools, and subsidised housing. Since then, most of those projects have come to a standstill or been permanently scrapped. Thanks to the crisis, it will be at least 10 years before development of the area can be resumed. The fact that construction has continued at all is thus partly due to private initiatives.

Nautilus is a typical example of a "doing democracy" initiative. "Doing democracy" has become an umbrella term for initiatives undertaken by private individuals or grassroots organisations to achieve

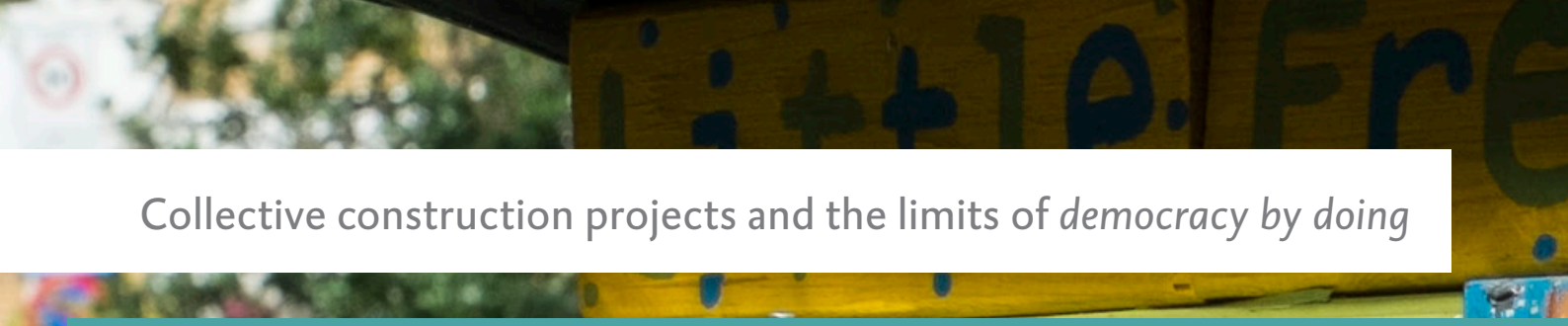
something that meets a community need. These needs may involve care, education, insurance, or housing, for example. They are met not by the market, not by the government, but by self-reliant collectives consisting of members of the public. Many public administrators consider doing democracy to be brilliantly simple, like Columbus' egg; citizens participate more in their community, but rather than looking to the government for all the answers, they shoulder part of the responsibility for the initiatives themselves.

"The fact that construction has continued at all is thus partly due to private initiatives."

The doing democracy concept has caught on quickly for several reasons. First, the economic crisis has made it more necessary for citizens to be self-reliant and has demonstrated that "the market" does not automatically serve their interests. Second, government is cutting back on its responsibilities, leaving the public to assume them in its stead. Third, modern technology is playing a significant role in changing how people relate to one another, to society as a whole, and to government. New types of media have led to new types of organisations, the more rapid exchange of information, and opportunities for the public to appropriate and reuse this information, even outside normal government channels.

The public have shown themselves eager to take the reins on these initiatives and have founded their own organisations to advance a wide range of social causes. Some of these include construction projects, care or energy cooperatives, food-distribution networks, or self-funded disability insurance for the self-employed (known in Dutch as *broodfondsen*). Besides members of the public, government officials and politicians are also talking about "citizens' own responsibility" and "empowerment".

The explosive growth in doing democracy can also be explained by the broad political support that it enjoys. Politicians of every stripe are embracing it. Left-leaning organisations see it as a new form of society that is breathing new life into their belief that self-governance – being in charge – leads to emancipation. These initiatives must be democratically organised from the inside, and they must provide leeway for alternative visions of society based firmly on sustainability, respect, and diversity. Shifting responsibilities from the state to the public is also consistent with neoliberal philosophy, which advocates relieving the government of its burdens through "private initiatives" and entrepreneurial spirit.



Collective construction projects and the limits of *democracy by doing*

The development of doing democracy has also spawned new questions. Do citizen initiatives have to conform to market practice, such as when inviting tenders with regard to their accounting work? And how different are they from other private service providers? Should the government use public funds to support these types of initiatives, and would that entitle citizens who are not members of a particular initiative to benefit from that initiative's results? Does the term "doing democracy" translate into an actual transfer of control and supervision from the authorities to the public? At a meeting concerning the abolition of Amsterdam's borough councils, Reinder Rustema, founder of www.petities.nl, posed a question regarding the actual role citizens play in doing democracy: *"Do we simply carry out government policy, or can we make policy ourselves?"* (Rustema, 2013). Citizens' *obligations* are being redefined, but very little is being said about their new *rights*. Citizens must be afforded sufficient leeway to pursue their personal development and collective welfare in accordance with their own beliefs, but, in practice, the existing systems define the parameters. Government still resists sharing the power to take decisions and being transparent about its own actions (see Verhoeven and Oude Vrielink, 2012).

"Citizens must be afforded sufficient leeway to pursue their personal development and collective welfare in accordance with their own beliefs, but, in practice, the existing systems define the parameters. Government still resists sharing the power to take decisions and being transparent about its own actions."

As co-initiators of the Nautilus project, the government's continued discomfort with citizen self-reliance is something we see examples of every day. At the time this article was written, for example, setting up a green energy collective in the Netherlands was still an impossibility. Citizens can already generate their own energy, tax-free, using solar panels. The technical term is "offsetting". Once you produce more clean energy than you use, you can send that extra energy to the grid. If the sun stays behind the clouds, you purchase energy from the grid. At the end of the year, the power you sent to the grid is offset against your utility bill. This relieves you of paying energy tax

and at the same time you receive the market price for the green energy you supply to the grid. This offset only applies up to 5,000 kWh (kilowatt hours), which is sufficient for an average household but insufficient for a group of citizens who want to generate clean energy together in the form of a cooperative or homeowners' association. In essence, this means that while there is a theoretical possibility of combining collective residential and energy-generation projects, it remains a practical impossibility.

Despite the broad political support for doing democracy, the model often only permits citizens to participate as policy enforcers rather than policymakers. The authorities are more than willing to let citizens maintain a neighbourhood park or get the shopping in for their elderly neighbours, or, as Verhoeven and Oude Vrielink (2012) put it: "They are 'good citizens' if they loyally cooperate on resolving social problems and those efforts benefit government. In addition, this policy consensus implicitly leads to a 'depoliticisation' of participation, which only facilitates those citizen initiatives that will not require a policy change." More and more citizens want to be able to monitor the conduct engaged in by their government officials. New technological advances are making this possible, for example, by making it possible to publish government files. "Open legislative data increases transparency, accountability, effectiveness,

and public support. It boosts the innovative capabilities of both government and citizens," according to Professor of ICT and Social Change Valerie Frissen (Frissen, 2012). Very few of the more comprehensive tools for participation in policymaking are being offered to citizens, but they could still fundamentally change the relationship between citizen and government, and thus democracy itself.

"Despite the broad political support for doing democracy, the model often only permits citizens to participate as policy enforcers rather than policymakers."

An example from Iceland shows just how capable citizens are of accepting this challenge. In 2011, the new government experimented with crowd-sourcing the Icelandic Constitution. A broadly representative citizens' council and open discussion through social media garnered the two-thirds majority vote by the citizens of Iceland that was needed to adopt a new Constitution in October 2012. The proposed Constitution specifically provided for protected national ownership of the island's natural resources, including the fishing grounds and thermal energy sources. Practical examples like this one show that actually involving citizens in

decision-making processes can result in a fundamental shift in a society's balance of power.

Josien Pieterse

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Lessons learned from public resistance and government

Authors

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Manu Claeys is the chairperson of the Antwerp citizen's collective *stRaten-generaal*, in which he has been active since 2004. *stRaten-generaal* and the civic action group *Ademloos* received the 2010 *Prijs voor de Democratie*, awarded every year in the city of Ghent to a person or organisation that has made an outstanding effort to safeguard democracy. The author is an award-winning essayist. His most recent book was published in March 2013 and is entitled *Stilstand. Over machtspolitiek, betweterbestuur en achterkamerdemocratie. Het Oosterweeldossier* (Standstill. On power politics, wise-guy administrators and backroom democracy. The Oosterweel dossier).

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www.iss.nl/biekart

Introduction

The setting was the comfortable boardroom in a pre-eminent museum in The Hague. The topics at hand, however, were quite subversive: How can citizens enforce their rights through legal means? What is the most intelligent way to use modern means of communication to achieve political goals? And where does the centre of power really lie? The introductory remarks were provided by Manu Claeys, leader of the Antwerp-based citizen-action group called "Streets General". He reported on the new power structures revealed by widespread public resistance to the construction of a new motorway. Around the table in the boardroom, a dozen political animals debated the issue. The debaters included journalists, members of the youth movement, trade union members, representatives of the squatters' movement, and even a former MP! The dialogue was lively, the flip chart was filled with wonderful diagrams, and emotions ran high.

Below, Manu Claeys summarises the issue, and Kees Biekart formulates ten lessons that it teaches us about public resistance and government arrogance.

arrogance

The ninth power

By Manu Claeys

On 27 October 1998, at 5 a.m., bulldozers operating under police protection began uprooting a stand of Japanese cherry blossom trees in front of Antwerp's Fine Arts Museum. The authorities claimed that the trees were sick and would be replaced by a surfaced square. Local people had questioned this assessment and called in a tree expert. The trees turned out to be healthy after all. The court of first instance was scheduled to decide on the trees' fate that same day in preliminary relief proceedings. But by the time the court was in session, the trees had already been felled. *Case closed.*

Some of the local residents considered such government conduct unacceptable in this day and age. They organised a mass public meeting, a grassroots "People's Assembly". The meeting led to the founding of *stRaten-generaal*[1], a community cooperative that has struggled ever since to improve citizen involvement and public participation in political decision-making on spatial planning projects. In other words, it wants public participation procedures that are timely, transparent, efficient, allow room for debate about alternatives, and "consider the impact of spatial planning on community development and vice versa", as the group's website states, "and does so through a combination of philosophy, strategy and practical matters".

Since then, *stRaten-generaal* has tracked a number of symbolic projects in Antwerp, in close cooperation with local action groups. It has discovered that the same mechanisms arise, time and again: political agreements are made in advance behind closed doors, pressure from above is put on local public administrators, laws and regulations are ignored, and there are no independent audits or environmental impact assessments. The result has been a series of missed opportunities for urban planning *and* for democracy.

Community action groups often get started in the same sort of context: public authorities define the framework for building plans, the plans meet with resistance, and citizens then organise to try to maintain or improve the quality of life in their community. The existential nature of this ("my" neighbourhood) turns out, in each case, to motivate people to take action. They have to "stick up for themselves" because no one else will. In addition to being motivated by a "product" (a specific spatial planning project), they are also, in each case, motivated by a process: they want to be taken

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1. The Council of representatives of the Seventeen Provinces in the Low Countries used to be called the Staten-Generaal or States General. The bicamerial legislative body in the Netherlands still carries that name.By adding an "r", the group turned *staten* or "states" into *straten*, meaning "streets": the "Streets General".

seriously. Their wanting to participate in improving a spatial planning project is also fuelling growing calls for a "different" kind of decision-making, for new relationships between the people and politicians, the economy and the research world.

THE KIEVIT DISTRICT

In the spring of 2005, eight diverse community action groups – ranging from traditional neighbourhood associations to local parish groups to squatters occupying an abandoned monastery – joined forces with *stRaten-generaal* against a major spatial planning project in Antwerp's Kievit District. The focus of the battle was not the size of the buildings but the new development's relationship to its surroundings. The new area would be very self-contained. The danger was that the 10,000 square metre development would end up being entirely isolated from the surrounding neighbourhood. Local residents were worried about being able to move freely through the new development; they did not like the zoning mix (too many offices and not enough housing), the "dead" nature of the buildings, or the hard surfacing in public spaces. They debated the project with so much passion that a few months later, the whole city was listening, thanks to media exposure.

"In addition to being motivated by a 'product' (a specific spatial planning project), they are also, in each case, motivated by a process: they want to be taken seriously. Their wanting to participate in improving a spatial planning project is also fuelling growing calls for a 'different' kind of decision-making, for new relationships between the people and politicians, the economy and the research world."

On 20 April 2005, the property developer and *De Ploeg* ("The Team"), the umbrella organisation for the various community groups, unexpectedly called a joint press conferences. The construction work had already begun, but the property developer would be submitting a new building permit that took the local residents' concerns into account. What is striking about this case is that the property developer and *De Ploeg* had held a series of meetings in the previous weeks without the authorities' involvement. At the suggestion

of local residents, the property developer hired a second architectural firm to amend the existing plans. After many meetings, the property developer submitted the new plans to the authorities, and no objections to the plans were forthcoming from the neighbourhood. The signal had gotten through to the authorities: they approved the new application and would impose other criteria for the project's second phase, in line with local residents' arguments during their struggle. They would also map out a new public participation process for a new spatial implementation plan and for the design of public areas.

Representative democracy had given free rein to the construction of a negative spatial planning project in the Kievit District. Politicians had shown that they were not interested in dialogue with civil society. The dialogue (between the property developer and local residents) finally came about *despite* the authorities. The battle for the Kievit District is a good example of a broad movement that was described as follows in the invitation to a recent symposium "Can do-ocracy save democracy?":

Citizens speak of mounting disillusionment with government and the institutions of representative democracy. Less visible, but no less relevant and equally global in scope, has been the rise of a new generation of self-organizing citizens that operates outside the formal spheres of government.

THE OOSTERWEEL CROSSTOWN MOTORWAY

Between 2005 and the present, *stRaten-generaal* invested considerable energy in another symbolic project, the controversial Oosterweel crosstown motorway, which would run straight through the city of Antwerp and would also be the largest infrastructure project ever undertaken in Belgium. *stRaten-generaal* organised information evenings, drew up official objections, held press conference and gave interviews, forged alliances with other action groups, forced the authorities to hold a referendum, dug up government data (traffic modelling, project maps and contracts), wrote opinion pieces for newspapers, communicated on social media, organised public events, and called an endless series of meetings. In other words, it left no stone unturned. As a result, the plans to construct a viaduct were scrapped. The next challenge was to get the authorities to cancel the motorway altogether.

But once again, the case took an unexpected turn: after the referendum, Antwerp's captains of industry and transport economists asked *stRaten-generaal* to take a few months to come up with a realistic alternative plan. They explained that the authorities had reached a political stalemate and would never be able to think out-of-the-box, and that the city desperately needed a good solution for its mobility problem. On 24

Lessons learned from public resistance and government arrogance

February, the Antwerp Region 2020 Mobility Forum launched the alternative plan. The following day, national newspaper *De Morgen* **noted:**

The plans are the result of a remarkable combination. Ten prominent citizens of Antwerp – port authorities, economists and professors – joined forces with a number of action groups, most importantly stRaten-generaal. The two groups are almost always on opposite sides of the fence: the business people are usually in favour of a controversial project, and the action groups are usually against it. That's an oversimplification, but it is easily true of 99 per cent of all spatial planning cases that lead to public unrest. In the case of the Oosterweel crosstown motorway – the mother of all controversial projects – they are, remarkably enough, in the same camp. And their joining forces is precisely what makes it especially hard for the Flemish government to ignore the new plans, as it did before with another alternative plan developed by stRaten-generaal.

In the Belgian context, the Oosterweel case is a fantastic example of how a group of articulate citizens can organise "horizontally", alongside the traditional civil society channels. By organising in this way, they can develop into a new kind of force in the democratic debate. In its report Trust in Citizens, the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) correctly advises the authorities as follows:

Citizen participation requires belief in the resilience of a network society, where citizens – the pioneers

Design Oosterweelverbinding Antwerp (Architect: Ney & Partners) Photo: Noriant

and networkers in the vanguard – have enough leeway to join together in ever more effective alliances. The vast numbers of such initiatives and channels for involvement, and the fact that they overlap, are leading to an 'energetic society', in the words of Maarten Haijer, i.e. a creative, learning society of articulate citizens that can react to events with unparalleled speed.

NINE POLITICAL POWERS

The world of traditional politics is struggling with this "energetic society", which has raised fundamental doubts about top-down decision-making. In challenging old practices, the new network society should be regarded from an historical perspective. The trias politica principle – the idea that government should be divided into three branches, an executive, a legislative and a judiciary – arose in the second half of the eighteenth century and has survived to this day. In the course of the nineteenth century, a second tripartite power system was grafted onto the original one and serves as a contractor to the executive branch: public administration (public servants), government enterprises (the "public sector") and external experts who conduct research at the request of government. They include the military, the police force, the health care system, education, utilities companies and so on.

After the Second World War, and in particular since the 1960s, a third tripartite system that operates beyond the confines of the state gained political influence: the press, the private sector and organised citizens. Those citizens mainly want to have a say within new forms of organised consultation and debate. Civil society – which constitutes the ninth power in this way – interprets the desire of citizens to be more than mere "election fodder", in other words the electorate.

After all, in a democracy citizens play a dual role. As voters, they determine the balance of power in government. But they have no input into specific cases or policy implementation, nor do they have a say about such matters in the voting booth. Elections force individual, anonymous citizens into a passive role. The only "actors" are the political candidates who present themselves to the people. And every so many years, the people sit in judgement over the politicians.

But citizens don't simply disappear between two elections. Quite the contrary: they increasingly figure as participants in the political arena – much more than mere witnesses to the political spectacle. As activists, advocates, demonstrators, opinion makers or clients, they insist that specific issues be debated, at times ad hoc and temporarily, and at other times permanently. Modern democracy can only truly flourish when citizens play both roles – representation and participation – properly.

Lessons learned from public resistance and government arrogance

TEN LESSONS

The notion that democracy is made up of nine political powers is new. It has already given *stRaten-generaal* a strategic framework for activism. It paints a clearer picture of the relevant parties, their roles and the context, helps maximise efforts and understand failures. It is also useful in the broader sense, because it helps explain how democracy functions.

For example, it clarifies:

• How and why each of the nine powers plays a specific role in the democratic process and forms shifting alliances with the others in that process;

•That the first eight powers act by virtue of their profession, whereas the ninth – organised civil society – depends mainly on volunteers;

• That each of the eight professional powers can also become an activist at any time, or incorporate elements of activism into their own profession, something that can be seen as a qualitative move to some extent;

• That the system of checks and balances is not only seeing a rise in the number of actors involved but also a qualitative shift from horizontal and hierarchical to vertical and networked;

• That the representative democracy of elected politicians (circulation of power) is enhanced by a deliberative democracy of

Manu Claeys

unelected citizens (deliberation free from power);

• That "politics", by definition, means certain forms of conflict – at the very least, debate – because each of the parties involved uses its own logic, context, objectives and so on as the basis for its action;

• That a society "derives its astonishing resilience not from normality but from the way in which it deals with conflict" (quote from *Confidence in Citizens*);

• That organised citizens are key players in a network democracy;

• That democracy is deficient when it does not make optimal use of collective expertise;

• That organised civil society charts the direction and the authorities set the pace;

• That democracy is constantly refining itself, even when it seems to be static.

Links

- Antwerpen aan 't woord (www.antwerpenaantwoord.be)
- Center for deliberative democracy (http://cdd.stanford.edu/)
- G1000 (www.g1000.org)
- Gedicht van Joke van Leeuwen, 'Na het ARUP rapport' (www.stadsdichterjokevanleeuwen.be)
- stRaten-generaal (www.stratengeneraal.be)

Lees & kijk verder

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- Hendriks, F., A. Lidström and J. Loughlin (red.) (2010) Oxford Handbook of Local and Regional Democracy in Europe, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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Ten tested propositions on citizen action (based on the Antwerp 'street parliament')

By Kees Biekart

The case of the Antwerp citizens' group *stRaten-generaal* (which can be loosely translated as 'street parliament') against the construction of a new highway through a historic part of the city was an inspiring case study in one of the group discussions at the December 2012 conference *Can do-ocracy save democracy? (Exploring the motives and implications for citizen action)*. On the basis of a dynamic introduction by Manu Claeys (member of the 'Street Parliament') and the subsequent discussion in the subgroup, a set of ten propositions was generated and presented in the plenary session:

1. Citizen's action requires a differentiated strategy to tackle complex structures

Citizen action operates on different levels, and citizens thus have to target their efforts in a differentiated manner. This is one of the key findings of the WRR report, and the group underlined that this complexity has to be taken into account. It can be an obstacle, but also an asset in extra-parliamentary struggles. The citizens' group 'De Ploeg' in Antwerp was very conscious of the need

Kees Biekart

to negotiate with commercial builders and private companies (Alcatel) whilst at the same time promoting 'social economy projects' in the squatted building. It was engaged in illegal occupations, whilst also starting legal court cases, etc.

"Apply a division of labour among citizen action groups"

2. Apply a division of labour among citizen action groups

In fact, there were several groups apart from De Ploeg (which developed alternative proposals). There was also the *StRaten-Generaal* ('Street Parliament', carrying out the advocacy and lobbying work vis-à-vis the local authorities), and the group *Ademloos* ('Breathless') set up by a marketing specialist which started public campaigns and staged street protests against the 'fine dust' which would be generated by the increase of motorised traffic. The radicalism of the street protest by *Ademloos* facilitated the position of the more moderate *StRaten Generaal*, as it was more readily accepted as a partner in the dialogue with the authorities.

3. Do something else apart from just street mobilisations

The Antwerp citizen action groups emphasised the importance of communication: a large banner was designed and put up as a dust screen in front of a renovated building in the centre of Antwerp. The banner was expensive (EUR 15,000), but was financed using funds raised with a benefit concert, which also had the function of raising awareness among citizens. The message was that it is necessary to explore other forms of protest which generate a more effective outcome than simply marching in the streets and hoping a picture will make it into the news. Moreover, street protests can easily be disrupted by others (or by the police), generating negative publicity and thus achieving the opposite effect to that intended.

4. The (local) government is the worst partner for dialogue

Formal meetings with local councillors did not produce any results. Citizen groups were delegated to round table 'consultations' that had no impact. In fact, local authorities and the judiciary had absolutely no influence on the process of stopping the building of the road. By contrast, informal contacts with key public servants or with specific influential experts were often very effective. In the Antwerp case it was also helpful that the protest coincided with a political movement to curb the populist conservatives (Vlaams Blok).

Lessons learned from public resistance and government arrogance

5. Explore new instruments and avenues for inserting citizen action into power structures

The G1000 initiative that created a large and vocal group of concerned citizens 'from the ground up' was a powerful response to the closed and manipulative decision-making by the local authorities. In the Antwerp case it had wide resonance and also contributed to a range of other creative citizen initiatives (could be expanded a little with examples from Manu).

6. Governments prefer polarisation to deliberative models

Local governments (at least in Belgium) prefer chaos and polarisation over more deliberative models such as that promoted by the G1000 citizen initiative. This is a problem, since governments can play the 'dirty game' of polarising (and setting local actors against each other) for longer than citizen groups but also for longer than individual citizen activists. Together with point 4, therefore, it seems that dialogue with the authorities can be a 'trap', of which activists have to be very conscious.

"Television exposure is still powerful: a politician can acquire more influence from sitting in a television studio (such as the Dutch 'Pauw & Witteman' show) than in Parliament."

7. We have become part of a 'wiki-society'

The mobile telephone and Internet revolution have totally changed the communication landscape over the past decade, and this in turn has had a major impact on the way in which activist groups can be effective political players. Social media have become very important, if not the most important platforms for the generation of activism, for opinion-forming, for mobilising people and for mutual communication. This implies that the role of the 'old media' has changed substantially – though the printed press, radio or television should not be ruled out!

8. Television exposure is still powerful: a politician can acquire more influence from sitting in a television studio (such as the Dutch 'Pauw & Witteman' show) than in Parliament.

The point is that many political issues have become so complex that it is often impossible to see the whole picture and to understand all positions. Politicians know that their voters would rather process simplified one-

liners than having to digest long explanations about complex problems. Consequently, late-night TV shows offer them a better platform to communicate with the electorate than Parliamentary debate.

9. Try to support politicians in what they need most: to be re-elected.

Political parties as key intermediaries in the representative democratic system, and Parliamentary politicians are the most prominent members of those parties. Even if we dislike many of their ideas, or dynamics, or language and/or attitudes, we can also make use of them, according to our discussion group. Do not (yet) rule out or do away with politicians, as they can be useful not just in supporting our particular case, but also in strengthening the relationship between Parliament and government.

10. Try to be professional in your methods of political participation

In the Antwerp case, but often in other cases too, citizen activists are operating in a setting in which those who shout loudest are heard most. If it comes down to a 'shouting game', therefore, remember that it is still a game and that you have to act professionally in order to be heard. For example, do not shout too loudly when others are lowering their voices: there is no need to swear, make threats or use violent means, as this will very likely undermine your message.

More information on this topic

- Biekart, K. & Fowler, A.F. (2012). A civic agency perspective on change. Development, 55(2), 181-189
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The end of helping-hand government

Author

Albert Jan Kruiter

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Website Instituut voor Publieke Waarden
» www.publiekewaarden.nl

Website Sociaal Hospitaal
» www.sociaalhospitaal.nl

Several years ago, I received a pair of gardening gloves in the post. They were new and well made. I hadn't ordered any gardening gloves. Moreover, I didn't even have a garden. That didn't matter, according to the sender. It would be nice if I would make more of an effort to clean up the leaves that had fallen in the street in front of my house. Best wishes, Your Municipal Government.

This was the municipal government's way of giving me a helping hand with maintaining the physical space that local officials and representatives no doubt had defined as my responsibility. I'll be honest about it. I never used the gloves and I didn't see too many of my neighbours use them either. A few weeks later, though, I received a letter from the same municipality informing me that municipal taxes had been increased. "That's why they did it!", I thought immediately. I gave the gloves to an acquaintance who enjoys pottering about his garden.

Now, several years later, this anecdote reinforces the cliché image of a helping-hand government. Governments still want to do it all, but they can't afford it anymore. Under the guise of empowerment and citizenship, they "help" citizens who suddenly want the same things they want at city hall. Look, a public

initiative! It's a cliché image that is headed for extinction. Because the helping-hand government is heading for extinction as well.

The helping-hand government concept was born during a period of economic growth. Public participation was primarily encouraged from a democratic standpoint: having citizens participate is a good thing! Times have changed since then. Financing for the welfare state must be cut, because we can't afford it anymore. The welfare schemes that were developed when we still had money are springing leaks. Those leaks have to be patched up one way or another, and by the citizens themselves. "We" have to begin taking care of one another again. Not because it's the right thing to do in a *democracy*, but because we want to maintain our *welfare state*.

'We' have to begin taking care of one another again. Not because it's the right thing to do in a democracy, but because we want to maintain our welfare state.

All this means that municipal governments, driven by decentralisations and transition, will have to come up with ways to keep the welfare state going at the local level. It entails making choices about who to include and exclude, how to allocate scarce funds to handle public problems, and the extent to which citizens should be involved. It involves choices about legitimacy, efficiency, and justice. That role is not one that can be played by a "neutral" helping-hand government, but by a government that makes explicit and clear decisions in the public's interest. A government that announces, if need be, that it will no longer be cleaning up the leaves in my street. I can get my own gloves and borrow the neighbours' wheelbarrow. That has to be possible after living all of my 37 years in the world's best welfare state. Even if the municipality doesn't give me a helping hand!

Albert Jan Kruiter

THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES OF ERASMUS UNIVERSITY ROTTERDAM

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Transnational Citizen Action: Practices and Demands

Author

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UvA » Marlies Glasius

Social scientists often tend to see the empirical world as a glass half-empty. In the field of social movements and civil society studies, they have complained that government policy tends to ignore citizen activism, but the moment government takes an interest (for instance through David Cameron's idea of the Big Society in the UK, or the report by the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) *Confidence in Citizens*, they start worrying about instrumentalisation or co-optation of citizen initiatives.

It is a very, very good thing that policymakers are beginning to take citizen action more seriously. What is particularly noteworthy about *Confidence in Citizens* is that the report does not take as its point of departure an implicit attempt to make citizen action more orderly in order to fit it around the policymakers' processes and timelines. Instead, in this report contestation and even a certain level of distrust are explicitly considered as at least potentially useful and helpful for the ultimate quality of governance.

Nonetheless, I would like to voice three interrelated concerns about the new-found confidence in citizens and their activism, before discussing some early findings of research I am currently undertaking together with Armine Ishkanian (London School of Economics) and Geoffrey Pleyers (Université Catholique de

Louvain) in which we compare Western and non-Western street activism IN 2011 and 2012, with a particular focus on Cairo, Athens, Madrid and Moscow. The three concerns can also be read as disclaimers in relation to the later, more rose-tinted view of these recent social movements. The three issues are co-optation, organisational form and civility.

CO-OPTATION

The *Confidence in Citizens* report makes mention of the environmental movement as a formerly vibrant and radical movement that became professionalised and co-opted. But this is not something that is exclusive to the environmental movement; it is part of a typical trajectory from how citizen action starts off to where it ends up: from 19th-century revolutionary workers movements to trade unions in the welfare state; from 1968 movements to today's Non-Governmental Organizations. Another example, less critically addressed in the same report, is that of the International Criminal Court, which quickly turned from an unachievable utopia to combat repression into a new hegemonic institution, in turn spawning its own resistance. Old-leftist social movement scholars tend to mourn the taming of the movements of their own youth, but this is a natural process, as is the emergence, sooner or later, of a 'new outside' after previous citizen activism has become co-opted. The alter-globalisation movement, once regarded as a loony fringe, is, in its incarnation as Occupy, finding much wider acceptance for its critiques of capitalism. Policymakers are naturally part of such 'taming' processes, which they cannot and should not try to stop, but they can try to be aware of such processes, and not get too comfortable with familiar 'partners' in civil society, but instead always keep an eye open for 'new outside' initiatives.

"...it is part of a typical trajectory from how citizen action starts off to where it ends up: from 19th-century revolutionary workers movements to trade unions in the welfare state; from 1968 movements to today's Non-Governmental Organizations."

ORGANISATION

The point of departure of the *Confidence in Citizens* report, and Hivos' interest in citizen initiatives, is that citizens everywhere are running up against the limits of representative democracy, democracy as merely offering a handful of half-predictable package deals to choose from every four

years. Instead we celebrate experimentation with new forms of small-scale participatory decision-making, or what Ricardo Blaug has called 'outbreaks of democracy':

"The primary characteristic must be the noise. All accounts note that speech becomes animated, and debate heated. This sudden increase in discussion follows upon the discovery of a common preoccupation. Now, people are keen to be heard, they listen to others with interest, and concern is expressed to elicit all views. Exclusionary tactics are directly challenged, as are attempts to distort the needs and interests of others..."

Other elements of the outbreak which Blaug notes are a suspicion of all authority, an acceptance of productive conflict, an overriding concern with fairness, and fluid leadership. But as he recognises, one cannot remain in a permanent outbreak. Sooner or later, 'normal life takes over'. Initiatives either fizzle out, or on the contrary are taken seriously by power-holders. When that happens, there is a danger that decision-making will actually become less transparent, less democratic than the familiar procedural democracy. Spontaneous citizen networks can be horizontal, dynamic and flexible, but they can also be fragile and ephemeral, or they may in fact obscure rather than erase power relations. Feminists have long referred to such a phenomenon as the 'tyranny of structurelessness'. When networks are transnational, the risk of obscured rather than erased inequalities of power is even greater, for even with the best of intentions, they are plugged into and do not necessarily transcend global power structures. Hivos is a donor organisation; even it sometimes likes to be in denial of its character.

CIVILITY

My third concern is civility. The *Confidence in Citizens* report clearly works from the assumption that the citizen action on which it focuses is basically both well-intentioned and for the common good, whatever that may mean. In other words, it assumes 'civil society' to be civil. Yet there are various ways in which citizen action, using similar organisational forms and action repertoires to those we all applaud, can be uncivil: it may be exclusivist, focused on a distinction between an often ethnically or religiously defined 'us' and 'them' and the threat 'they' pose to us. I do not need to elaborate for it to be clear this is not just, say, a Nigerian but equally a Dutch phenomenon. Citizen initiatives may be dogmatic, for instance being committed to a very strict scriptural interpretation of a sacred text, or very strict interpretations of neoliberal economic dogmas. They may be manipulated by charismatic leaders, who combine discourses of public good with practices of private gain. They may be breakers of the law, although

not all law-breaking is necessarily uncivil, even in democratic countries. There may be instances of 'vandalism', which can only rarely be argued to be civil (for instance, the destruction of British fighter planes bound for sale to Indonesia under Suharto). Finally, citizen action can be violent. This is not very often the case in Netherlands, which is in many ways a non-violent culture, but the squat riots of the 1980s could nonetheless be given the label 'citizen action', even though some of that action was violent. And this same example brings to mind the very frequent phenomenon of police violence and the manipulation of 'spontaneous violence' by *agents provocateurs*. In actual war situations, we should be more alert to another form of citizen action: the ways in which people who are beyond the reach of 'humanitarian intervention' protect themselves. While we tend to celebrate the bravery of non-violent action in violent and repressive circumstances – and while social scientists are beginning to investigate these phenomena more seriously – taking up arms may be a sensible option from a citizen's perspective. The surprise about the protests in Syria is not that it eventually turned into a civil war, but rather how long, in the face of severe repression, it remained both visible and non-violent. We do not know enough about how people make choices for or against violence in these kinds of circumstances, but we do know that stark moral differentiation does not help. According to Petr Kopecky, editor of a study on 'uncivil movements' in Eastern Europe, there are five reasons not to make a superficial attempt to exclude the 'uncivil' from our understanding of citizen action.

1) To some extent, all civil society manifestations are exclusivist in that they claim the moral high ground for their own position in opposition to all others.

2) Civility towards the 'uncivil' has historically been limited and hypocritical.

3) Adherence to liberal democratic goals does not necessarily equate with internal democracy. Uncivil movements may have civil outcomes and vice versa.

4) In non-democratic societies, adherence to legal or even societal norms is far from desirable. Even in democratic societies, it proscribes challenges to the status quo.

5) Finally, "narrow conceptions of civil society screen off potentially vital ingredients of associational life and democratic politics." Inclusion is therefore necessary to progress in empirical knowledge.[1]

Having made these three caveats to the excessive celebration of 'do-ocracy' or citizen action, I would like to focus some attention on the unprecedented levels of transnational protest mobilisation that we have seen in the last few years. The point of departure of

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the research we are carrying out on what we provisionally call the 'post-2010 movements' is that it is not entirely accidental and locally determined that the Arab revolts of 2011 were followed by the Occupy movement, the anti-austerity movements of Southern Europe and the democracy movement in Russia. At the superficial level we know there has been so-called 'repertoire adoption' in the form of occupations of squares, but we are currently investigating whether the phenomenon goes deeper than that. We are studying the extent to which the recent mobilisations are built on a common 'vocabulary': a set of values held that are simultaneously practices and demands. We do not pretend to accurately describe the entire diversity of recent movements, but rather focus on the existence of a particular type of commonalities. We are observing three interrelated practices and demands which appear to resonate across Athens, Cairo, Madrid and Moscow, and possibly beyond.

"We are studying the extent to which the recent mobilisations are built on a common 'vocabulary': a set of values held that are simultaneously practices and demands."

DEMOCRACY AS DEMAND AND PRACTICE

First, there appears to be an obsession with democracy as practice, which has a longer history in the social forums of the alter-globalisation movement, and which predates and now even upstages democracy as a demand. While this is well known to have been a feature of the Occupy camps, it undoubtedly also manifested itself, albeit in more contested form, in Cairo's Tahrir Square, However, it did not go beyond the outbreak stage, and this richer understanding of democracy lost out as politics – as usual – took over the Egyptian 'transition process' – which is not to say it left Egyptian society untouched.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social justice as a demand has been an obvious feature of Occupy and the Indignados, but its role in the Arab Spring has not been seen in the same light. We posit that the current movements erase the distinction in social movement studies between material and post-material values. These are –, and this is an element missing in *Confidence in Citizens* – movements involving activists who are part of a precariously placed generation that cannot take either employment or social services for granted, even in a wealthy country such as the Netherlands. Social justice as a demand is still lacking in articulation, but it differs

from old demands for redistribution in that it is simultaneously transnational, and prioritises sustainability over growth. Again, social justice is not just a demand but also a practice, as illustrated for instance by the soul-searching in the Occupy camps over how to deal with the – occasionally disruptive – homeless people they attracted.

DIGNITY

Finally, there is a new discourse of dignity, rooted in the subjective experience of both material deprivation and lack of respect for citizens. Dignity has been demanded in the Arab world, in Occupy, but also in Moscow. But again, it is not just demanded, but also attempted in practice. A Yemeni mother and demonstrator reported that "coming into the square was like going to a paradise of respect and compassion."

A German activist connects dignity back to democracy, and practice back to demand:

"[Dignity] was just something people talked about because there were so many situations in this world in which dignity was ignored … And therefore I like the first article in the German basic law (the Constitution): Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority." (Erik, Occupy Frankfurt, e-mail communication)

Marlies Glasius

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Democracy by doing is not democratic

Author

Chris Aalberts

Chris Aalberts teaches political communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam. He has published books about populism in the Netherlands and how politicians and the public use social media. His research has convinced him that such concepts as "doing democracy" are mere fads and mainly lead to "diploma democracy".

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I recently spoke to the floor leader for the Labour Party (*PvdA*) on the council of a large municipality. He was sick and tired of bureaucracy and wanted to get rid of it. According to this Labour Party representative, there is nothing whatsoever to be gained from bureaucracy. He reacted with surprise to my suggestion that the government was bureaucratically organised so that all citizens could be treated equally.

This discussion illustrates the fact that many politicians lack basic knowledge about the foundations, goals, and organisation of the political system and the government. Only those who lack this knowledge can embrace fads such as "doing democracy". The only people who can be enthusiastic about this concept are those who have not thought it through and who only consider the positive aspects of citizen involvement.

In order to thoroughly evaluate doing democracy, it must be compared with today's representative democracy. In our system of representation, citizens are afforded the opportunity to affect political decisions by voting. They all have a vote, and they can vote their representatives out of office if they disagree with those representatives' decisions. Doing democracy offers no alternatives on either point.

First, a democracy is inherently defined by equal rights. In a doing democracy, citizens organise themselves, which results in inequality. Citizens establish a self-funded disability insurance pool for the self-employed (known in Dutch as *broodfonds*), but they exclude the chronically ill from membership. Citizens can participate in a mini-housing association by maintaining their communal garden, but those who do not have the time to invest in that maintenance cannot live there. The principle of equality is eliminated by the fact that not everyone can or will participate, or participate to the same extent. The only thing they can do is accept this new reality.

Second, citizens must be able to influence decisions. In a representative democracy, citizens can vote their representatives out of office. In a doing democracy, the chronically ill may apply for membership of a *broodfonds*, but they have no form of redress if that application is ignored. Do people throwing a street party show any consideration for their neighbour who sleeps during the day because he works the night shift? In a doing democracy, conflicts that were once resolved through the political process will instead be fought out in the street.

There are significant "cons" in a representative democracy, and things have not been going well for a long time. Nevertheless, we at least know that our current political system treats citizens equally and furnishes them with remedies if their interests are compromised. Neither can be said of doing democracy.

Ultimately, representative democracy itself is in jeopardy of being compromised because, in the public's eye, the political system will continue to be responsible for all of the problems citizens cannot resolve or even cause by themselves. A doing democracy will make some people happy: their confidence in representative democracy will increase because politicians show themselves willing to "let go". But you do not have to be a fortune teller to know that not everyone will benefit from this new form of "democracy". There is a reasonable chance that a doing democracy will foster political mistrust in certain groups. Sooner or later, their representatives will end up facing the consequences.

Chris Aalberts

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Democracy and networked citizens: renew the connecti

Authors

Annemarth Idenburg

Annemarth Idenburg was involved in developing the report *Vertrouwen in burgers* (Confidence in citizens) (2012) as a project coordinator for the Scientific Council for Government Policy. Since the report's publication, she has given frequent lectures on the relationship between representative democracy and new forms of citizen participation.

Annemarth Idenburg

More info (WRR) »

Jona Specker

Jona Specker was involved in developing the report *Vertrouwen in burgers* (Confidence in citizens) (2012) as a researcher for the Scientific Council for Government Policy. She investigated democratic representation and direct forms of democracy for this project and interviewed dozens of people active in protest movements, citizen activism or social enterprises to find out their motivations and reasons. Jona studied philosophy in Rotterdam.

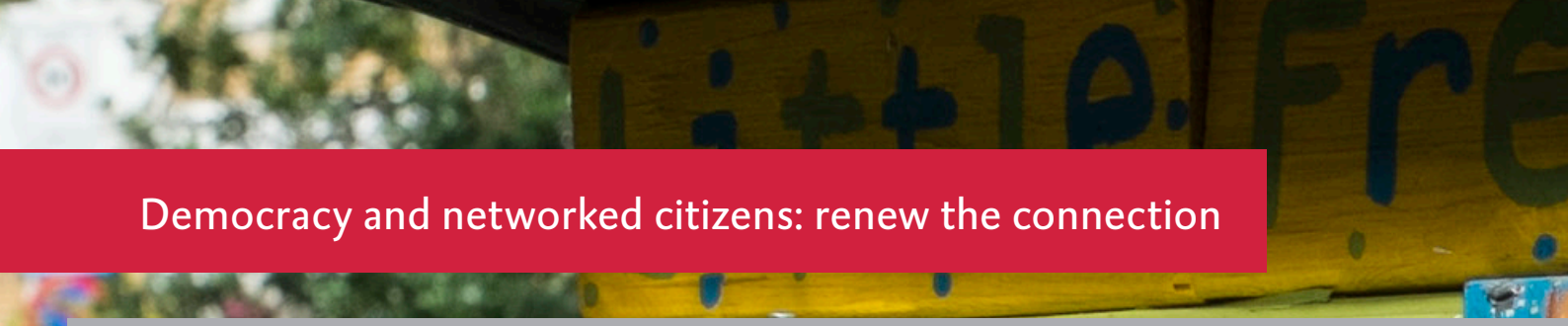
Jona Specker

All over the world, people seem to be re-inventing collective action in search of solutions for problems they share. People take initiatives for communal gardens, soup kitchens, local sustainable energy cooperatives, day-care for the elderly or schools for children with special needs, or are involved in large-scale protests. Sometimes many people are engaged and the action receives international attention, for example the Occupy movement (www.occupytogether.org), the G1000 Citizens' Summit in Belgium (www.g1000.org), the 'Lets Do It 2008' initiative to clean up Estonia (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5GryIDloqY). Many more people are engaged in smaller, local actions that, when combined, can have a major impact (see e.g. www.nabuur.org, www.guerillagardening.org, www.hieropgewekt.nl, http://www.1procentclub.nl). Sometimes politicians and government representatives support and embrace these initiatives, but often they do not. Citizens' actions are often simply disregarded or even accidentally or intentionally sabotaged. Some governments use more violence to suppress citizens' actions than others. But Western democratic governments, local and national, are no exception when it comes to the deliberate frustration and suppression of citizens' initiatives in less 'democratic' manners. This leads inexorably to mounting disillusion with government and the institutions of representative democracy.

Bewildered politicians, civil servants and academics are trying to make sense of this new generation of self-organizing and discontented citizens. During a three-year project by the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy we had the privilege of speaking to citizens, civil servants, politicians and academics about the interaction between involved citizens and government representatives. This project started from the premise that deep democracy relies on the active involvement of citizens. They keep political representatives and government agencies on their toes and play an important part in the life of society: they provide broad-based support for policy implementation, operationalise it in their day-to-day actions and, by proposing ideas, topics and approaches, they bring about social innovation. Over the past few decades, policymakers have made many efforts to enhance civic involvement. Unfortunately, they also tell a long story of lots of projects, little learning and inadequate structural embedding. Although the WRR report is based on Dutch practices, citizens and policymakers in other countries could tell similar stories. Citizens seem less and less interested in being involved in ways that have been carefully designed by policymakers; instead they are becoming increasingly involved with society through their own initiatives. Meanwhile, societies everywhere are changing in fast and unpredictable ways.

"Citizens seem less and less interested in being involved in ways that have been carefully designed by policymakers; instead they are becoming increasingly involved with society through their own initiatives."

Fortunately, new ways of collaborating are emerging. *Confidence in citizens* describes the lessons learned by those who have engaged in those experiments. One of the key lessons is that people will take action when the challenge they face is matched by their resources and capabilities. Different people are challenged by different issues. They become involved because their interests are at stake, or because they are unhappy about something. People can also be inspired by a vision, an idea for improvement. They ask themselves "What if?" and "Why not?". Often people become active because they value a fair decision-making process, and they want to be heard. And many people became active simply because someone asked for their help, and because of the sheer fun of participating.



Democracy and networked citizens: renew the connection

When it comes to resources and capabilities, skills and knowledge are important. But at least as important - and perhaps even more important - are practical means. Time, budget, a place to meet with partners and safe means of communication are the tools for active citizens. Clearly, these resources are not equally available to all citizens around the world, either in general or within countries or even within a single municipality.

When challenge, capabilities and resources are properly balanced, a passive involvement can turn into an active one.

The ways in which citizens can act in relation to the public sphere and governments are bounded by all kinds of official and unofficial rules. Often there is a mismatch between the way governments would *like* citizens to be active and the way citizens *actually* become active. In our report, we suggest that this uneasiness is largely due to a mismatch in cultures. The growing incompatibility between government policy and citizens' actions should not be attributed to an unwillingness or a lack of skills on the part of citizens or civil servants, but to an increasing mismatch between the hierarchical culture of governments and the network culture of society.

"When it comes to resources and capabilities, skills and knowledge are important. But at least as important - and perhaps even more important - are practical means. Time, budget, a place to meet with partners and safe means of communication are the tools for active citizens."

Let us elaborate on that. We distinguish between four types of culture: the hierarchy, the market, the commune and the network, and argue that each culture matches a particular model of democracy best.

Clear vertical relationships characterise hierarchies. Hierarchies are best known for their top-down management style, based on top-down instruction and bottom-up accountability. Hierarchies make institutions powerful when many are needed to implement decisions made by 'the top', for example in armies. From a democratic point of view, the strength of hierarchies lies in the bottom-up representation of interests. Representatives are expected to take all interests into account (and strike a balance between them) when taking decisions

on behalf of the hierarchy. Therefore the hierarchy fits representative democracy and its institutions best.

The market culture relies on individuals who are able to decide and act for themselves. Relationships within a market are extremely flexible and based on the exchange of goods and services. Markets are best known in a commercial setting, serving to accommodate the exchange of property rights, but can also be detected in other contexts. Direct democratic systems match this type of culture. Elections and referenda are based on the assumption that people are able to decide independently on matters that are in their interest.

The commune culture is based on commonly shared values. It is known for its strong bonds and mutual care among the members of the commune. Decision-making within a commune is based on consensus. The deliberative democracy model therefore fits this type of culture well. Town hall meetings work well for small villages. But unfortunately communes often have little interaction with outsiders. As a result, communes can become socially isolated, and views may harden.

Efforts to improve the interaction between government and society have often looked at strengthening one of these cultures. This has led to calls for 'strong leadership' and for the restoration of the 'primacy

of politics', to reinstall clear hierarchical relations within representative democracy. Another strategy has been to stimulate the market culture, focussing on a 'customer-friendly' government, the implementation of all kinds of public inquiry procedures, improving possibilities for appeal, and direct democracy tools such as local referenda. Finally, in an effort to strengthen the culture of communes, the focus has been on social cohesion, taking neighbourhoods as a point of departure, implementing codes of conduct and organising national debates on shared values.

Meanwhile, a fourth type of culture is gaining in significance. Networks are appearing around shared interests, and the acknowledgement of the importance of the contributions of all involved. In comparison to the culture of communes, networks have fewer problems with deviant values and motives. Working towards a shared goal is more important than debating differences of opinion. One's influence in a network culture is not based on the number of people one represents, but on one's contribution to a shared goal. Those putting the most effort into a project will have the biggest impact on the outcome. Many of the citizens' actions described in the report *Confidence in Citizens* are characterised by this type of culture. In the Dutch city of Amersfoort, for example, a group of citizens seeking to preserve the city's industrial heritage initiated the development of historic railway workshops into a lively space for creative businesses and social activities (www.wagenwerkplaats.eu). Initially the focus was mainly on protesting against the demolition of the historically significant buildings. Over the years, however, more and more people became involved and achieved not only the conservation and restoration of the old premises, but also developed a communal playground, a nature trail, community markets and much more. (http://www.duurzaamsoesterkwartier.nl/)

The network culture is not a recent phenomenon. Since ancient times communities have behaved like networks, not like communes. Until recently, however, it was generally thought that this model of collaboration does not function beyond small communities. Information and communication technology, however, has helped overcome many (geographical, social, logistical) limitations and made collaboration on a larger scale possible.

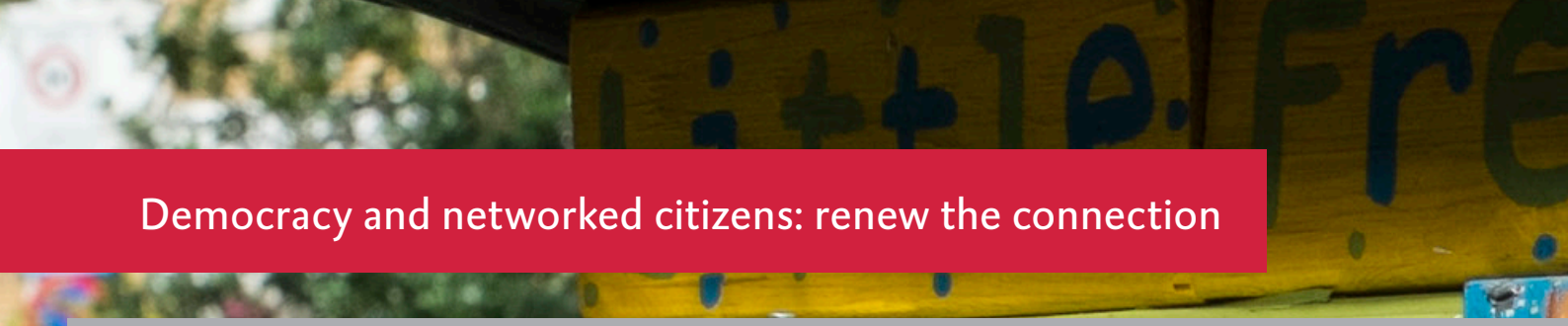
Clearly, through self-organizing alternatives in the public sphere, citizens' actions confront and challenge existing institutional arrangements. When a group of enthusiasts take control, questions arise about inclusion, representation and accountability. The biggest challenge is not to see the - obvious - positive and negative aspects of networked citizens' actions, but to find a new balance

"Since ancient times communities have behaved like networks, not like communes. Until recently, however, it was generally thought that this model of collaboration does not function beyond small communities. Information and communication technology, however, has helped overcome many (geographical, social, logistical) limitations and made collaboration on a larger scale possible."

between representative democracy and its institutions on the one hand and new forms of community organising on the other. Is it possible to find a democratic model that matches collaboration in networks? A democratic model, not based on representation, direct voting or deliberation, but on what people are actually doing: *democracy by doing*.

Over the years politicians and scientist have thought about ways of involving citizens in democratic processes. They have focused on improved direct and indirect voting systems and on the design of methods to involve citizens in the political debate. These improvements are however based on established democratic decision-making arrangements. Recently another way of thinking has been attracting attention. Based on the way people collaborate online (Noveck, 2009) and in neighbourhoods (Van der Wijdeven, 2012), scholars are calling for a broadening of our thinking about democratic involvement to include this active manner of democratic participation.

As a result of this change of perspective, taking citizens' actions as a starting point instead of democratic institutions, those who fulfil a role in a representative democracy are faced with the challenge of finding a new balance between representative democracy and this *democracy by doing*.



Democracy and networked citizens: renew the connection

Unfortunately there is no easy answer to this challenge. For those who fulfil a role in representative democracy professionally – either in administration or in those organizations whose primary goal is to influence government policy - self-organising citizens can be troublesome and inconvenient. Privately they may recognise the desire to let actions speak on those issues that people care about or feel connected to most, instead of passively waiting for others to solve problems. But citizens' actions are often bothersome for those who want to perform their formal and professional roles properly. In many conversations, citizens' representatives expressed the view that they would rather have no contact at all with citizens after being elected: 'let me do my job properly, and let them judge me afterwards, when the elections come around'.

Nonetheless, in order to act on behalf of and stand for the citizenry they represent, political representatives need to be aware of the main concerns and ideals in society. In the networked society in which we live today, this task may be more difficult than ever. Fortunately, we also interviewed many political representatives who fulfilled their representative role in a 'networked' way. They did not rely solely on their own contacts, but successfully tapped into connections from those working in schools, housing associations, welfare institutions, etc. They showed that it is possible to renew the connection between citizens and democratic institutions, an approach that fits this new generation of self-organising and networked citizens.

"For those who fulfil a role in representative democracy professionally – either in administration or in those organizations whose primary goal is to influence government policy – self-organising citizens can be troublesome and inconvenient."

Annemarth Idenburg
& Jona Specker

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Participatory democracy for a better democracy?

Author

Margit van Wessel

Margit van Wessel is an assistant professor at Wageningen University. She works with the Chair of the Strategic Communication group, part of the Communication, Philosophy and Technology – Centre for Integrative Development. Her main interests lie in the role of communication in shaping relations between government and citizens and in policy making. Projects focus on questions of citizen engagement with democracy and politics, government-citizen relations and communicative dimensions of policymaking. The central issue in these projects is how to give shape to democracy in a complex, networked society.

Wageningen UR » Margit van Wessel

The term 'participatory democracy' suggests a new way of expressing democracy: by doing. It builds on the notion that democracy can take shape through citizen action: 'Do you want a cleaner street? Sweep it, then!' In many discussions of participatory democracy, we see this action situated in citizens' everyday living environment. It is largely here that participatory democracy can find its expression. And logically so: it is here that citizens are in the best position to identify priorities and opportunities, and to see that their situational and experiential expertise is of value. This does not mean that participatory democracy cannot connect to the larger questions our societies face. Locally envisaged and developed ways of enabling the growing population of senior citizens to enjoy a good old age are clearly linked to the larger policy question of how to deal with the challenge of ageing populations. Locally grounded (but transnationally networked) community initiatives to confront climate change, such as *Transition Network*, act locally but with the future of the globe in mind.

But to what degree can participatory democracy help reinvigorate democracy? What expectations can we have on this front? The problem here lies in the link between the more informal citizen politics and the formal institutions through which many of the important decisions that shape citizens lives continue to be made. We need to realise here that important problems facing democracy in many societies are rooted in a disconnect

between the everyday lives of citizens and political decision-making. Citizens often feel that their everyday, life-focused priorities do not seem to matter to the political decision-makers who they discover are ruling over them. Citizens often experience policies stemming from 'government', 'politics', 'the elite' as something they have to undergo, passively. 'Flexible' labour arrangements, crumbling care arrangements, failing school systems, and the consequences of the these developments, appear to them to be invisible or unimportant to those who govern them. They feel that they lack a 'voice' when it comes to matters that are key to the quality of their everyday lives. In my own research in recent years I have been seeking to understand citizen engagement with democracy, and in particular the nature of the disconnect from democracy that many citizens experience. I have learned that such citizens' interpretations often have in common that they relegate institutions and processes of representative democracy to the margins of how government works. Much of their perception of being disconnected is rooted in interpretations of day-to-day living conditions, constructed in interaction with others around them, while also drawing, selectively, on the public debate. This disconnect can be seen, for example, in the fact that the Dutch government has been supporting Greece, 'even though we have our own problems here, which should be taken care of first'. It can also be seen in care for the elderly, leading to situations that are morally unacceptable: 'I visited my aunt at four o'clock in the afternoon, and she was still in her pyjamas. Because there are no staff'. And it can be seen in the fact that it has become so much harder for people to make ends meet: 'it's as if they don't want us to live a normal life anymore'.

> "It builds on the notion that democracy can take shape through citizen action: 'Do you want a cleaner street? Sweep it, then!'"

The connection between government and citizens is thus hardly evaluated on the basis of the workings of democratic institutions, processes. There is in fact little talk of what government actually decides and does, and the processes through which this happens hardly make sense. Government is experienced through its consequences. Why certain measures were taken, which considerations, power equations, political battles and practical limitations and conditions led to certain outcomes, remains unclear. Respondents expect the government to make sense in 'their' terms, diffusely constructed as meaning

the public at large. Failure to do so implies failure to connect with citizens. For many disgruntled citizens, a connection between citizens and government would mean that their expectations rooted in their sense of their rights and entitlements are adequately met.

Participatory democracy has been hailed as a way of reconnecting citizens and government. In interesting ways, this idea matches the above analysis. It can be seen as a form of involvement with the public good that can help make the quality of our lives a shared responsibility, with citizens gaining a measure of control over what happens in their lives. What they want becomes relevant, and they can act on it. So far, so good. But what does it mean for democracy? One way in which participatory democracy can help revitalise democracy is through the development of citizen capacity: citizens can develop abilities to engage with institutions, can learn to organise, to cope with the complexities of policy processes – and to develop new forms of engagement with democracy. But the development of such engagement through participatory democracy can only be deemed realistic when the way government relates to participatory democracy allows for differences to have import and legitimacy. Democracy is about making citizen opinions matter, in a process through which differences in viewpoint and interest are identified, confronted and balanced.

"Government is experienced through its consequences. Why certain measures were taken, which considerations, power equations, political battles and practical limitations and conditions led to certain outcomes, remains unclear."

Participatory democracy can be about the things 'we all agree on'. The realisation of public goods, through cooperation between citizens and their rulers. It can be about solving problems that government alone cannot fix. But then we arguably should not speak of participatory democracy as a dimension of democracy; perhaps citizen-assisted or citizen-led administration would be more apt terms. And surely, the problems many citizens are concerned about, such as care for the disabled and the elderly, and social cohesion in neighbourhoods, can be confronted at least in part through participatory democracy. However, in much of what citizens speak of when they talk

about their disconnect from government, differences matter. The future of the welfare state, to name a prominent example, is not (just) a question for participatory democracy. Yet it is one of the key questions that citizens, when looking at their own lives and the lives of those around them, mention when they talk about disconnect. More fundamentally, therefore, we need to ask ourselves in what sense we are engaging with the challenges of realising democracy through participatory democracy. To what extent and in what sense can democracy be achieved through citizen engagement with issues they care about through action? Participatory democracy has thus far remained largely focused on the 'everyday', mostly homing in on the options that citizens see for action in their everyday living environment. But does this revitalise democracy? Or are we rather encouraging the 'maximum level of minimal participation' (Crouch 2004: 12), with little or no effect on 'Big Politics'?

We need to realise that, for many citizens, democracy is lacking, in the way that 'Big Politics' is out of touch with their everyday lives. For many citizens, democracy is not about taking responsibility through action, but about the way in which faraway power-holders do that – or fail to do so. And the problems of democracy are about the way this happens: out of sight, incomprehensibly, illegitimately, apparently irrationally – at least for many citizens I spoke with who

concluded that government doesn't care, doesn't know and doesn't even explain how the present situation arose. Participatory democracy in terms of 'action' does not solve this problem. Citizens will continue to feel, for example, that the measures chosen to counter the economic crisis are something to be undergone and suffered, and not a matter of democratic decision-making. We need to look long and deep at how a reconnect with citizens' everyday lives could involve a reconnect between those everyday lives and political decision-makers.

Focusing on what citizens can do to revitalise democracy seems like a good idea. But revitalisation of democracy demands more than citizen engagement through action. Participatory democracy in terms of active engagement with politics *through* action, with action being a starting point towards bigger issues and processes, could be a potentially interesting extension of the concept of participatory democracy. The question then becomes: how can 'Big Politics' take the everyday into account? Let us consider participatory democracy from this other angle: how can we make citizen perspectives on their everyday lives relevant for 'Big Politics', the higher level decision-making networks that largely leave citizens out of the loop?

"Truly connecting with citizens as actors in democracy, and with the problems of democracy as they experience them, demands a change in this status quo: in all their rootedness in the everyday, citizen 'noises' need to become audible as citizen voices."

The values, experiences and ideas of citizens, rooted in their everyday lives, articulated in stories that circulated among citizens, now often appear disconnected from the complexities of policymaking – to them, but also to political decision-makers. These stories currently often appear to be little more than 'noises' – utterances that are unhelpful and irrelevant to the policy process – and largely not worthy of a response, so out of touch with the complexities of 'Big Politics' are they. Truly connecting with citizens as actors in democracy, and with the problems of democracy as they experience them, demands a change in this status quo: in all their rootedness in the everyday, citizen 'noises' need to become audible as citizen voices. Let participatory democracy be made part of the exploration

and discussion of alternatives. Let us think of ways to 'scale up' the experiences and initiatives through which citizens engage with democracy. It could broaden citizens' experiences with democracy, as something which open the way for an actual engagement with differences. And it could help turn 'Big Politics' into something that is not just there to be undergone, but something that citizens can see as theirs.

Margit van Wessel

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Confidence in citizens

In 2012, Pieter Winsemius presented the advisory report *Vertrouwen in burgers* [Confidence in citizens] to Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte. The main message of the report was summarised as follows: "Citizen engagement in society requires public servants and politicians to play a different role. Policymakers must be more open to the idea of citizens participating actively in society. How can we increase citizen participation in politics and policymaking? What opportunities does ICT offer that did not exist before? Can mistrustful citizens be won over? And what does that mean for the role of policymakers?"

> See an English summary of the report Confidence in Citizens

Government's response

The Dutch Government believes that there should in fact be more scope for civil society initiatives. The national government's role is to initiate change, create the right conditions for it, and offer as much leeway as possible.

> See the Government's response here (in Dutch)

In addition to presenting its report to the Dutch Government, the WRR also offered it to the European Union in cooperation with the Flemish-Dutch Institute and the Permanent Representation of the Netherlands to the EU. The media discussed the contents of the WRR's report in a number of series, background articles and specials. The report also drew responses from a variety of organisations, for example Movisie Netherlands Centre for Social Development, Aedes association of social housing organisations, the National Ombudsman of the Netherlands, and countless "front-liners" to whom the research group had spoken. Interest in the report also became clear in the many requests for lectures and presentations. For example, Annemarth Idenburg gave a lecture about the significance of "public support" in a network society during the *Draagvlak 2020* workshop organised by the Political Legitimacy research profile area at Leiden University.

On 9 July 2013, the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, Mr Ronald Plasterk, submitted his policy memorandum *De doe democratie* [The doing

democracy] to the Dutch House of Representatives (BZK 2013). The immediate reason for his memorandum lay in the various advisory reports drawn up by the WRR, the Council for Public Administration (ROB), the Council for Social Development (RMO), and the chairpersons of nine advisory bodies, as well as in the Voortman motion on "the inclusive society". These reports all make the same point, according to the Government: "the changing relationship between government, citizens and market require 'the' authorities to actively trust and offer scope for citizen activism in the public domain while loosening its grip on governance somewhat and transferring authority". Hivos, the WRR and the International Institute of Social Studies organised a symposium on 6 December 2012 on the question "Can do-ocracy deepen democracy?".

WRR LINKS

Report by WRR

VERTROUWEN IN BURGERS (CONFIDENCE IN CITIZENS)

WRR report (rapport) nr. 88 (2012)

Jan 22, 2013 YouTube

PRESENTATION *VERTROUWEN IN BURGERS* (CONFIDENCE IN CITIZENS) - 22 MEI 2012 - AT KYOCERA STADION ADO DEN HAAG

Other publications

- **VERTROUWEN IN DE BUURT**
- **VERTROUWEN IN DE SCHOOL**

WRR report (rapport) nr. 72 (2005) & nr. 83 (2009)

Scaling social innovation through learning

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In its report *Confidence in citizens*, the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) identifies a steadily growing movement of promising citizen-driven innovations, encompassing initiatives ranging from creative car-sharing schemes to new solidarity arrangements around elderly care, child support and CO_2 reduction. Dubbed *do-democracy*, these findings echo an international trend of viewing citizens as the alleged drivers of 21st-century change .[1]

Can citizens really fill the gaps and needs left by the withdrawal of cash-strapped governments? And can they, in the process, drive the systemic solutions to society's grand challenges, such as an affordable welfare state, carbon-neutrality and youth unemployment? Can their actions re-invigorate democratic processes and outcomes? Expectations among politicians, policymakers and funders alike are running high. And the world over, there is no shortage of programmes and policies aimed at finding and funding initiatives that work and scaling them up.

Alternating between the worlds of social innovation and international development, we argue that the dominant thinking model about scale is inadequate for the wicked nature of our most pressing social problems. We argue that the McDonaldisation of whatever seems to work is a waste of energy that would be better spent on promoting an enabling environment that combines spaces and funds for experiments and learning.

"We argue that the McDonaldisation of whatever seems to work is a waste of energy that would be better spent on promoting an enabling environment that combines spaces and funds for experiments and learning."

WICKED PROBLEMS AND SYSTEMS INNOVATION

Systems innovation is a useful lens for taking a closer look at the grand challenges of our time. Mulgan[2] defines systems innovation as "an interconnected set of innovations, where each influences the other, with innovation both in the parts of the system and in the ways in which they interconnect." Many of our contemporary institutional arrangements (the education system, the political system, the financial system, the

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1. Biekart, K. & A.F. Fowler (2012) 'A civic agency perspective on change', Development, 55(2), pp. 181-189;Fowler, A.F. & K. Biekart (2012) 'Citizenship and the politics of Civic Driven Change', in C. MacFarland & D. Petty (Eds.) Citizenship: practices, types and challenges (America in the 21st Century: Political and Economic Issues) (pp. 77-90). Hauppage, NY: Nova Publishers.

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2. Mulgan, G. & C. Leadbeater(2013)'Systems Innovation', Nesta Last accessed on 05-04—2013. (http://www.nesta.org.uk/library/documents/Systemsinnovationv8.pdf)

health system) are starting to fail and need to be redesigned. According to this view there are great potential benefits from connecting, aligning or joining up innovative projects and programmes so that the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

However, setting out to change an entire system, in all its complexity, appears a hopelessly complex undertaking. Many top-down and large-scale innovations do little more than temporarily shake up the system before returning to the status quo. A well-known example are the many reforms and restructuring programmes that have taken place within education systems across the globe.

There is a growing recognition that small-scale alternatives emerging at the margins of systems may be more promising. There are two distinct policy agendas driving central government interest in local social innovation: first, the desire to better meet the specific needs of individuals as citizens and service-users; and second, growing political interest in localism and decentralization.

Although there are many of these small-scale innovations (and there number is growing), they seldom really manage to pervade the dominant system, and if they do their effect often diminishes. The common response to this dilemma is the need for scale.[3] Scale often refers to the efforts of organisations to replicate and disseminate their programmes, products, ideas and innovative approaches.[4]

"Back to the NGO-era in international development… This is not an unfamiliar tune to practitioners and researchers of international development. 30 years ago, in the heyday of the Washington consensus, 'civil society' emerged as the sector of choice for the international aid community."

BACK TO THE NGO-ERA IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT…

This is not an unfamiliar tune to practitioners and researchers of international development. 30 years ago, in the heyday of the Washington consensus, 'civil society' emerged as the sector of choice for the international aid community. NGOs, so the story line went, would both remedy and complement state and market failures to deliver services to the poor, hold politicians to account and come up with alternative solutions for rampant poverty and inequality in the global South. In what was to become a veritable NGO-decade, donors and policymakers jumped on the civil society

bandwagon *en masse* and invested billions of dollars in it, leading to a widespread proliferation of civil-society projects and (intermediary) NGOs. Developing countries such as Kenya, Zambia and Tanzania saw the number of registered NGOs increase from dozens to thousands, often with project budgets running well into millions of dollars. By the turn of the century, NGOs had become a force to be reckoned with on the global stage, shining at the World Social Forum, global HIV/AIDS conferences and platforms for the millennium development goals.

What difference has it made? 30 years on, the jury is still out. Notwithstanding the ample evidence of successful NGO projects that have made a difference, there are valid concerns about the extent to which NGOs have lived up to the high expectations of substantial systemic change. We know now that one of the flaws then was the very linear and physical concept of scale: a project that works in one village is only successful if it can be replicated in 40 villages; a new idea or solution in one province is only effective to the extent that it can be translated into national policy, and so on. But of course it rarely happened that way in practice. There is a rich body of literature available which suggests that the almost obsessive efforts of donors and policymakers to push 'solutions at scale' might have made things worse instead of better. [5]

Back to the global North: now that structural adjustment has 'come home', cash-strapped governments are bestowing high levels of ambition on the ability of citizens and entrepreneurs to take care of their own and come up with new welfare arrangements. And once again, support for such initiatives very much depends on their demonstrable value for money and scalability. The old civil society discourse may have been pimped with new terms such as 'social innovation', 'collective impact', 'prize-backed challenges', and so on, but as history seems to be repeating itself, flawed conceptions of how scale works are about to be reproduced.

These dominant approaches to scaling innovation, including metrics for monitoring and evaluation, are derived from the so-called New Public Management thinking. Beyond privatisation, this approach

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3. Westley, F., N. Antadze, D.J. Riddell, K. Robinson & S. Geobey (2011) 'Working paper: pathways to system change', available at (http://sig.uwaterloo.ca/sites/default/files/documents/Pathways%20to%20System%20Change%20Working%20Paper_0.pdf)

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5. See for an extensive overview for example: Bebbington et. al. (2008) Can NGOs make a difference, the challenge of Development Alternatives, Zed Books; Brouwers, R. (2011) When civics go governance, Synthesis report, Hivos knowledge programme (http://www.hivos.nl/dut/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Civil-Society-Building/Publications/Synthesis-studies/When-Civics-go-Governance last accessed on 5-4-2013)

promotes the introduction of private-sector management techniques into the public sector. Private-sector innovation is a relatively straightforward mantra: you develop a new product, lower the cost through standardisation, replicate the product so you can produce in volume, set up a marketing campaign and distribute the product all over the world. Something that starts small can very quickly grow large and infiltrate the current system.

This view of creating impact often turns sour in the social domain. Solutions that work well in one place often do not work in another context, mainly because straight copying leads to other effects, other behaviours and other outcomes in a different context. Innovations cannot be treated as standardised models that can be easily implemented in new places. Industrial reflex – roll out innovations through policy – often throws out the baby with the bathwater, because it denies the fundamentally wicked nature of social challenges.

A RADICAL ALTERNATIVE: VIRAL GROWTH

Scale is a valid concern, then, and more organic models are called for. What alternatives are on offer?

One alternative to the industrial reflex of linear and physical scaling is viral spreading.[6] Spreading is another approach

to scaling innovation. Innovations are not scaled top-down and from a central point, but spread horizontally like a virus. The process is driven more by a 'tipping point'[7] dynamic than a diffusion pattern, and is more dependent on sudden cascades of change. As a result of the differences between the economy and the social domain, the spread of a social innovation tends to be a more complex, flow-like process of interaction and modification that is almost impossible to plan or to predict. It has been termed fission (?), contagion, translation and dissemination. It is also referred to as 'generative diffusion' – 'generative' because the adoption of an innovation will take different forms rather than replicate a given model, 'diffusion' because it spreads, sometimes chaotically, along multiple paths.[8]

Westley et al. compare the simple process of baking a cake, where meticulously following a recipe will lead to automatic success, and raising children, for which no simple recipe can be given: "success with one is not a guarantee of success with another, and recipes or blueprints are of limited value. Managing an ever-evolving and emerging relationship between parent, child, and the broader social context lies at the heart of this process. Unforeseen shocks or discontinuities can derail the relationship, changing the rules at any point. Outcomes remain uncertain".[9]

A good example is Ushahidi[10], a Kenyan open source platform for online citizen engagement, developed in the wake of the Kenyan election violence in 2007. Across the country, witnesses to violence and civic action submitted information, via the Web and mobile 'phones, to build up a map of where there were violent clashes and where there was peace. Ushahidi grew quickly to 45,000 users in Kenya. From there it spread to the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Africa and thence to Asia and South America, where activists used it to monitor elections in Mexico and India. In less than four years, the Ushahidi platform was deployed more than 35,000 times in 156 countries, enabling citizens to directly monitor elections, coordinate earthquake responses and support different deployments of the platform – during elections, following disasters or on crucial governance issues (allowing citizens to monitor and take action on everything

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6. Brafman, O. & R.A. Beckstrom (2006) The starfish hand the Spider: the unstoppable power of leaderless organizations, New York: Portfolio Books; Johnson, S. (2012) Future perfect: the case for progress in a networked age, New York: Riverhead.

7. Gladwell, M. (2000) The tipping point. How little things can make a big difference, New York: Black Bay Books.

8. Murray, R., J. Caulier-Grice & G. Mulgan (2010) The open book of social innovation, Nesta. (http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/assets/features/the_open_book_of_social_innovation)

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10. http://www.ushahidi.com

from bribes to bushfires). Ushahidi has been translated into over 30 languages. 360 developers have contributed to its code and 4,275 community members continuously refine the platform.

The growth of Ushahidi illustrates how some innovations can spread organically. Unlike the more traditional concept of scaling, it illustrates the *viral* way that innovations spread through our networked society. Unpredictable, chaotic and decentralised, viral growth has the capacity to inspire, surprise and disrupt. Yet by its very nature, it often plays out in ways that are not necessarily harmonious, representative and equitable. And although the private sector is starting to understand this form of innovation[11], public policymakers still find it difficult to deal with this unplanned, dispersed and self-organised way of spreading innovation.

THE FERTILE MIDDLE GROUND: SCALE THROUGH LEARNING

The middle ground between these two approaches is covered by a number of more recent approaches to scaling innovation that focus on learning, experimentation and the emulation of 'principles' rather than 'recipes'. Drawing strongly from design thinking and emergence theory, the focus here is on constructing and connecting experiments and documenting and spreading lessons about what works and what does not. It is about being explicit and open about the underlying assumptions, principles and ambitions and about sharing these with others. This approach combines tackling concrete wicked problems with the enhancement of the problem-solving capacity present in systems and in societies at large.

One such approach concerns the emergence of experimental spaces for co-creation and innovation.[12] These include the rapid growth of social change and design labs around the world. Deliberately set at arms length from government[13], examples such as the Danish Mindlab, the Public Lab at Nesta in the UK and Nairobi's I-hub are manifesting a global trend to provide spaces for innovators from various sectors to analyse problems, co-create new combinations, incubate experiments and learn from results.

CONCLUSION

In cooperation with the Dutch weekly *Vrij Nederland*, Kennisland recently published an overview of 23 radical social innovations. Dubbed 'laboratories of hope' by Herman Wijffels, the most exciting of these initiatives – ranging from 'fair phones' to energy solutions based on sea-level fluctuation – clearly have the capacity to grow and inspire and ignite other new initiatives. But for every success-story there are ten initiatives that do

not make it. By the time the WRR researchers published their report about 'confidence in citizens' they found that over half the initiatives were either struggling or had already perished…

If we are serious about the urgency and wickedness of the social challenges facing us, then we are going to need far more of these radical experiments and to learn a lot faster about their workings

This is where both government and the funders of social change can make a crucial difference. Instead of breathing down the necks of small-scale initiatives, pressing them to deliver value for money on an appropriate scale 'or else', the future might be better served by the creation of an enabling environment and policies for social innovation. Winning elements of such policies would include measures such as enabling spaces for experimentation and learning, a framework for capacity-building and knowledge-sharing and creating a more dynamic model of evaluation and impact assessment.

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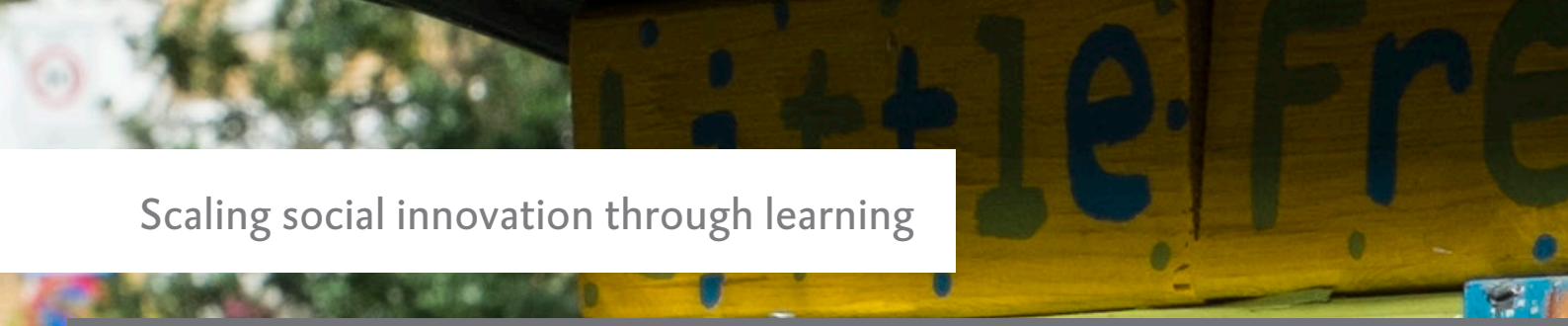
11. Brafman, O. & R.A. Beckstrom (2006) The starfish hand the Spider: the unstoppable power of leaderless organizations, New York: Portfolio Books.

12. Nordstokka, K. (2012) 'Experimental spaces for social innovation'. (http://www.socialinnovationexchange.org/home/blog/experimental-spaces-social-innovation)

13. In Obama's 2011 State of the Union he mentioned the setting up of five laboratories to re-invent manufacturing. (http://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2011)



Scaling social innovation through learning

In some countries, trends are hopeful. The Scandinavian countries, Canada and the UK, for example, have designed ambitious social innovation agendas, matched with modest support for citizen initiatives and spaces for co-creation and learning. These countries seem to understand that new solutions to wicked problems do indeed come from outside the system, but also understand that they have a crucial role to play in stimulating their emergence and penetration into dominant structures and narratives. While the WRR report advocates similar approaches in the Netherlands, the Dutch government now seems to be lagging behind. While international attention for social innovation is growing and a strong European policy framework is emerging, the Dutch approach to innovation through 'top-sectors policy' seems to be bogged down in the old paradigm of economic growth and established institutional arrangements.

Similar dynamics are at play in international development. While the Dutch government is cutting spending on high-quality civilateral aid, Sweden, the UK and the US continue to place substantial bets on non-state actors as drivers for change. They are facilitating the blossoming of initiatives like the Hivos-managed 'Making all voices count' fund and programmes like Twaweza, which are heading a new generation of ambitious international development programmes that are constructed as *de facto* spaces for experimentation and learning. Twaweza, for example, dedicates up to a quarter of its budget to learning and connects grass-roots experiments with global centres of excellence on real-time (quantitative) research.

It does not have to be this way: the Dutch polder approach has delivered a high potential eco-system for new cooperative agreements – open government, strong internationally oriented civil society organisations, high-quality research. And as the WRR has noted, there is no shortage of inspiring citizen initiatives. It is therefore high time for us to work out new arrangements to enable these initiatives to blossom and to deliver new solutions for the grand challenges of our time…

Chris Sigaloff & Remko Berkhout

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Links

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In pursuing citizen-driven change, at times we need to dare to sa

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y, 'I don't have a clue'

East Africa is no exception to the global breakdown of trust between citizens and the formal institutions of democracy. But citizens are not just sitting idly by. As in the Netherlands, we are witnessing a refreshing trend of citizens acknowledging that they themselves have to make things happen, solve problems, create innovation and connect with each other to make life better.

This reality presents an opportunity. Instead of trying to solve intractable problems directly, which can feel like banging one's head against a wall, we can build on what citizens are already doing to make a difference. This perspective is inspiring because it takes as its starting point the idea that ordinary people can drive change, that action does not depend only on the gods, kings and queens. It also offers the promise of being more rooted and sustainable, because it is defined by what matters to people.

This promise, however, is easier said than done. In East Africa, governments, civil society organisations and donors have attempted over the years to increase the ways in which citizens can hold their governments to account. The emphasis has been on reforming formal government institutions to make them more answerable to their citizens. At the same time, civil society organisations have tried to engage citizens, creating opportunities for them to reach out to their governments.

While laudable in their intention, these efforts to 'reform' public institutions to make them more participatory and 'build the capacity' of citizens to engage have often failed to live up to their promise. There is often agreement at policy and document level, but execution has proved to be another matter. Where these efforts do work, their reach is often limited to a few 'boutique' sites, or their success is short-lived. Where sufficient scale is achieved, such as in the expansion of citizen engagement in basic education, on closer scrutiny the gains are found to have been hollowed out in terms of purpose and content, a mimicry of the ideal rather than something authentic. So while citizens are indeed involved in the expansion of schooling and its governance, this involvement is expressed in their being compelled to make cash contributions that are neither transparent nor accountable, and taking part in school committee meetings to rubber-stamp decisions made by others. In

> **"At the heart of the matter is the simple age-old question of ownership: Whose agenda? Who cares for it to succeed? Who drives it?"**

In pursuing citizen-driven change, at times we need to dare to say, 'I don't have a clue'

these circumstances, it should come as no surprise that exhortations for further citizen engagement are met with cynicism and low energy, and that the project fizzles out as soon as the donor funds dry up.

At the heart of the matter is the simple age-old question of ownership: Whose agenda? Who cares for it to succeed? Who drives it?

"The institutions they will use are not those of formal governance, which feel too distant, unresponsive and captured, but the proximate ones that enjoy more citizen trust and confidence, such as the madrasah and the church, the food kiosk and the radio."

Given the inevitably lopsided power dynamics of development, particularly in relation to policy setting, governance and the control of public funds, it is difficult for citizens to claim ownership. Might the answer then be to 'abandon' formal development projects and processes, at least for a moment, and to build on the local and private, non-governmental domains where citizens have more control?

Just as in the Netherlands, where members of a community may organise themselves to restore defaced public art, in Tanzania a community may join forces to clean up the neighbourhood or protect its only source of water. The institutions they will use are not those of formal governance, which feel too distant, unresponsive and captured, but the proximate ones that enjoy more citizen trust and confidence, such as the madrasah and the church, the food kiosk and the radio.

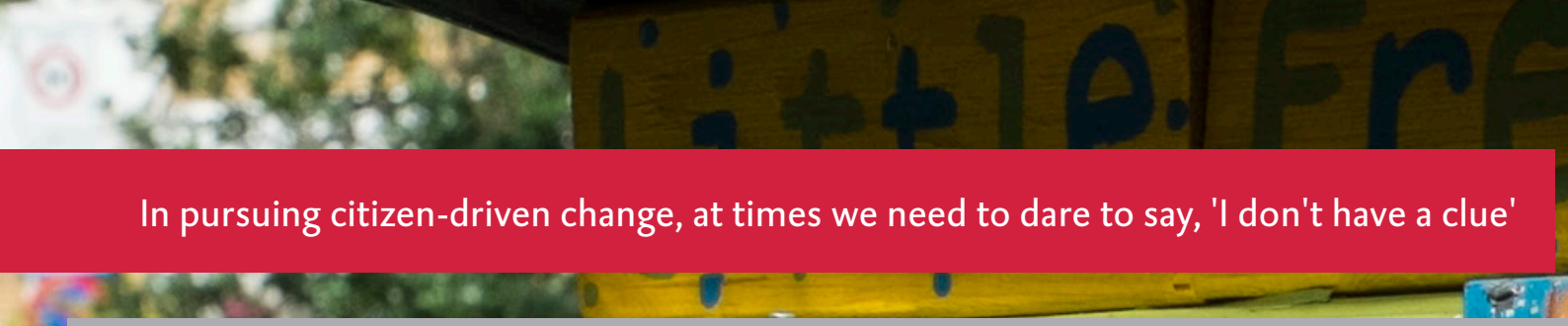
This is less a claim of theory than an empirical observation, which is repeated every day in cities and rural communities across Eastern Africa. That being so, what would it be like to 'do development' starting from people's comfort zones; to boost the citizen actions and pathways that are already working? A boat is already sailing; how do we put more wind behind its sails; a wave is cresting, how do we ride it higher?

The question is how to connect these formal initiatives to the lived realities in which people engage with each other and where there is genuine and vibrant action, creativity and energy to solve problems and make things happen?

This is the approach taken by our organisation (www.twaweza.org) in East Africa. We have identified five key networks that matter to and are trusted by citizens (religion, mass media, mobile telephony, the fast-moving consumer goods chain and teachers (and their union)), and have sought to expand the ways in which citizens use these networks to gain and transmit information. The initiative has brokered powerful, creative partnerships that have succeeded in expanding citizen options, as well as experiencing failure in other projects. It is too early to conclude whether the overall theory of change 'works'.

"The question is how to connect these formal initiatives to the lived realities in which people engage with each other and where there is genuine and vibrant action, creativity and energy to solve problems and make things happen?"

That said, a citizen-centred perspective raises many questions. What can citizens actually do and what can they not do? Is this turning to citizens a way of letting the state off the hook? Does this perspective place too much confidence in what citizens will do when most people may simply not care? Is the generalised view of citizens analytically weak and in need of more nuanced ideas of



In pursuing citizen-driven change, at times we need to dare to say, 'I don't have a clue'

early adopters or outliers? And even where it happens, do we understand what triggers, motivates and sustains citizen action?

These questions do not have easy answers, and are part of the research and evaluation aspects of Twaweza's work. Learning is ongoing, using a variety of methods, designed from the outset rather than asked at the end of the initiative. The lessons are used to inform, tweak and adapt the programmes and partnerships under way, and to gradually contribute to a body of rigorous global knowledge.

A mark of learning is the openness to being surprised. Let me therefore highlight two reflections that give pause to our enthusiasm.

First, while it is clear that lack of transparency can easily lead to accountability failures, as in the case of the management of oil and other natural resources or the delivery of basic social services, the converse is not necessarily true: more transparency does not necessarily mean more accountability. When information is made available it is often not used, or it is insufficient to overcome other constraints to action. The key thing is not to conclude, as some too readily do, that information is not that important, but rather to understand both what types of information are needed and how that information can be used to gain leverage over other constraints.

Second, we should not romanticise citizen action as something that is always wonderful. Mob violence meted out against suspected thieves, systematic sexual harassment, and xenophobic scapegoating of immigrants are also expressions of citizens taking matters into their own hands. Asking the people for views can just as readily generate insights and innovations as prejudice and poorly thought-through solutions. Too often we do not pay sufficient attention to creating a more informed public debate and the rigor of deliberative process that can challenge cherished views.

In conclusion, then, perhaps the most important attribute we need in advocating citizen-driven change is humility. A humility that acknowledges that we know less than we sometimes claim, and that the realities of citizen motivations are more complex than we often depict. We should dare at times to say: 'I really don't have a clue'. The key here is not one day perhaps to work out the true pathway to development, but rather to develop a posture of abiding curiosity, that does not tire of the desire to understand ever more keenly. This requires credible and nimble feedback loops, which are taken seriously even – or especially – when what we hear is surprising, and which we can use to adapt our world views. That is about as good as it gets.

Rakesh Rajani & Merit Hindriks

More information on this topic

- Recent blog: Nu zijn wij aan zet! »

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