DEBATES

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Democratic innovations (DI) are a large family of structured practices shaped to directly involve citizens in taking decisions on the places where they live, which often combine bottom-up and top-down approaches, and a strong deliberative approach (to improve the quality of ideas and arguments for defending them) with the goal of creating co-decisional mechanisms, which could try to rebalance some asymmetries of powers in society.

Under this perspective, democratic innovations are hinged on mediation and articulate debates, rather than on reductionisms to mere yes-or-no dualisms. Thus, such processes are very different from the instruments of so-called “direct democracy” (as referenda, acts for revoking political/administrative mandates, etc.) which – not by coincidence – are often mythised by populists for their capacity of banalising and sloganising complex choices, favouring a shift from democratic cultures to leader-based deviations.

In the end of the ’80s (when many dictatorships were being overthrown), especially in Latin America democratic innovations were massively used to reactivate a virtuous circle of mutual trust between citizens and the new re-democratised institutions. In these experiments, it was clear that citizens become quickly intolerant to any participatory exercise

Involving citizens in choosing policy priorities has proven able to increase their quality of life. When the discussion between institutions and citizens focuses on resources, spaces to discuss different scenarios for increasing wealth and rationalising the expenditures of the places where we live emerge. Participatory Budgeting is a democratic innovation that over the last 30 years has produced strong effects. In the Global South first, but increasingly in Europe, inspiration is coming from elsewhere – notably from Latin America.

Online Participatory Democracy tools allow citizens to easily connect to the debates in their communities.

LEARNING ABOUT INTENSIFYING DEMOCRACY FROM OTHER CONTINENTS

by Giovanni Allegretti

NEXT DEMOCRACY

‘Power to the people’ - Participatory Budget & Direct Democracy

by Giovanni Allegretti

Online Participatory Democracy tools allow citizens to easily connect to the debates in their communities.
Thirty years of PB experiments show clearly that their high potential for reverting the crisis of representative institutions is still to be fully exploited. Switching the concept of “decision-makers” and restoring trust in institutions, PB has been able to obtain different goals in different realities: from reducing child mortality to increasing transparency of public accounts; from including vulnerable groups in decision-making to increasing the resources of public budgets through a discussion on partnerships and revenues, and not only on expenditures.

The EU can still do a lot for outing democratic innovations central and help to establish a direct dialogue with citizens on very concrete matters. But avoiding the mistakes of the European Citizens Initiative (ECI) is important. With the ECI, the super-position of strong “gatekeepers” allows these gatekeepers to jeopardise all the efforts of citizens at the final stage, or to cherry-pick their ideas. This only frustrates citizens, when they realise that the much-declared centrality of their role in transforming Europe is just a rhetorical artifice for greenwashing the worn-out image of institutions and make technocratic and market-driven choices more ‘acceptable’.

So, PB is not only going beyond the barriers of local administrations, but is cross-pollinating other institutions, such as schools, university departments, housing or development agencies, and even prisons.

At the same time, in several cities and regions PBs are being coordinated with other tools (as participatory planning, community-based monitoring, citizens observatories, public debate on large infrastructures), often getting inspired (again!) by Latin American examples aimed at creating more effective “participatory systems”, where interconnected but different channels of social dialogue could attract different target groups, and communication technologies could reduce costs of participation both for organisers and participants.