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The Interdependency of Democracy and Social Cohesion: Strengthening representation and democratic participation through public dialogue and civic engagement

Issue paper for Working Session 2A:
**Creating and Improving Processes for
Participation by all Members of Society**

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*The views expressed in this paper are the responsibility of the author
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Introduction

This paper looks first at processes for participation and considers how different methods can be matched to different purposes. It then considers what makes participation effective for members of society as well as for public authorities. Next, it examines the opportunities for participation in service design and delivery, with particular reference to ‘co-production’. Finally, it focuses on how all members of society can participate effectively.

1. Processes for participation

The scope and intensity of participation may range across a spectrum from passive to active and from powerless to powerful. The table below sets out some examples of different approaches to participation. As it indicates, different methods can be matched with the nature or purpose of the exercise: the ‘how’ is best determined by the ‘why’. People may be involved in different roles, for example as actual or potential consumers of services, as co-producers of a shared intervention, as citizens shaping or defending a common good, or as advocates or agents of change.

There is an important distinction between the first four levels of participation and the final one. The former assume that power remains with an official body, which initiates the process and chooses the method (which includes the option of choosing to co-design the method with participants). Here, the motivation is likely to be about building consensus, generating political support, managing conflict, improving the quality of decisions and actions in the public realm – or a combination of these. Where people take direct control, this may be to fill a vacuum where there is no official presence or activity, or where the motivation is to challenge an official body that is resisting change: in this case, conflict is a driver of empowerment and change, rather than something to be managed.

Electronic media offer new means of participation and open up new opportunities. These include spreading information, consulting and mobilising people through blogging, twitter feeds, social media, podcasts, real-time on-line discussions and web-based question and answer sessions; on-line surveys and voting; electronic town meetings and ‘crowd sourcing’. New mobile technologies make it possible for many more people in many more places to exchange information, to air their views, to participate in decisions and to join others in shared actions. Alongside these potential benefits, there are severe problems of unequal access (see below). In any case, it would be unwise to underestimate the extent to which these technologies could change the character of democracy in general and participation in particular.

Intensity/extent of participation	Approaches and methods	
	Approaches	Examples of methods
1. Informing	Information is provided directly to individuals and groups by post, or via electronic or conventional media	Public information campaigns Advertising Public service broadcasting Dissemination through social media
2. Consulting	People’s views are canvassed about possible policies or actions, where they may be asked to consider options and make recommendations to others, who retain power to make the final decision	Opinion polling; qualitative and quantitative research; meetings that are open to the general public or invited groups only, including neighbourhood forums and citizens’ panels; interactive electronic communication such as ‘crowd sourcing’

3. Co-producing	Shared decisions and actions by individuals, professionals and others, pooling different kinds of knowledge and skill, to meet objectives that are jointly defined	Deliberative dialogue by citizens' juries; asset-based community development; time banking and other models of reciprocal exchange; co-produced services; participatory budgeting and planning
4. Delegated power	People are given resources and responsibility for deploying them to meet objectives agreed with those who delegate to them.	Local groups or neighbourhood forums are given devolved budgets and/or are commissioned by public authorities to achieve specific outcomes; individual 'service users' are given control over budgets designated for their care.
5. Direct control	People decide for themselves to take action to achieve objectives they have defined.	Independent community-based actions and campaigns; transition towns movement; revolutionary action such as those described as the 'Arab Spring'

2. What makes participation effective?

The quality of participation may well depend on who decides on the scope and intensity of participation, who determines what processes are deployed and whose interests are taken into account in these decisions. This in turn depends on how power is distributed among members of society. A useful starting point for creating and improving processes for participation is for all those involved to have a strong grasp of the range of methods available, including their strengths and limitations. It is important for individuals and groups who are likely to be affected by the decisions or actions in question to have a say in deciding which methods are deployed, and for bodies initiating participation to be clear and transparent about their underlying intention.

The lists of approaches and methods set out in the table above are indicative rather than definitive. How strongly the methods in the right-hand column of the table achieve the scope and intensity in the left hand column will depend on how they are played out in practice. Thus, a 'citizens' jury' may be an example of 'thin' participation if jurors have inadequate time or information to deliberate fully, or have little or no control over the agenda, or find that their conclusions are wholly or partly ignored by the authority making the final decision. Similarly, delegating power to people who use public services by giving them control over the budget allocated to them (for example, for social care) may in fact leave individuals in a state of isolation, burdened with responsibility for making poorly-informed decisions while the value of their 'personal budget' diminishes over time.

The point here is not that some methods are 'bad' and others 'good' but that people on all sides need to know what the purpose is, why they are participating and what is the range of possible outcomes. If people expect to be actively engaged in making a decision and then find themselves treated as objects of opinion research (for example), they will feel disempowered, disconnected and probably also seriously misled. When people have such contradictory experiences, the chances of their accepting, trusting or actively supporting decisions and/or actions are likely to be undermined.

'Consultation fatigue' is an increasingly common problem in some countries, where people find they are often consulted, but rarely see any sign that their views have been taken into account. As a result, they lose confidence in the process and ultimately become cynical and disengaged. There will be similarly counter-productive effects if communities are told they will be 'empowered' to take direct action and then find that they have been left to fend for themselves without sufficient capacity or resources to take action that is meaningful to them.

Effective participation depends on a wide range of factors. Sometimes, individuals act as catalysts or there is a shared history of organisation that helps to galvanise action. It is therefore hard to generalise, but the following factors are more likely than not to help ensure that participation is meaningful and works to the benefit of those involved.

Some ingredients of effective participation

- Clarity and transparency: everyone knows what the participation is for, what contributions they can make and how, and what are the possible outcomes.
- Inclusion: everyone with an interest in the decision and/or action has equal access to the processes of participation.
- Purpose matched to method: all those with an interest have a say in which approaches and methods are used in order for the method to be appropriate for the purpose of participation.
- Capacity and control: those who participate have the capacity to do so and share control over the process and the agenda.
- Information and time: participants are well-informed about the issues at stake and have enough time to participate fully.
- Mutual respect: it is understood between the participants that everyone has something of value to contribute.
- Feedback: participants receive honest and transparent reports of decisions in which they have participated, how these are interpreted and what actions are subsequently taken.
- Investment: Adequate resources are committed to ensure that participation is inclusive; that all participants are properly informed and have capacity to contribute on an equal footing, that sufficient time is available and that the desired outcomes of shared decisions and actions are achievable.

3. Participation in service design and delivery: towards co-production

A participatory approach to defining and meeting social needs in a modern democracy provides a powerful counterpoint to the neoliberal approach of marketising services. Within the neoliberal paradigm, individuals become customers or consumers who choose from a range of services on offer from providers who may be in the public, commercial or non-profit sectors. Competition between providers is supposed to raise the quality of services and lower prices. Yet there is no evidence that this approach can deliver services to all on an equitable basis according to need, especially where commercial providers have stronger incentives to satisfy their shareholders than to improve the lives of those who need their services. Furthermore, the combination of choice and competition does little to empower individual service users, because – to extend the metaphor – they can only choose from what is there on the shelves of the market place; they cannot determine how products are designed or constructed or what range of products is available. They participate individually, according to their own preferences, as best they are able. What happens to others as a consequence is rarely taken into account. And while resources are unequally distributed among consumers, they are bound to have unequal power to choose.

The marketisation of services is intended to challenge post-war welfare systems that are based on a collective model of spending shared resources to meet – and insure against – needs and risks that cannot easily or equitably be dealt with on an individual basis. Yet these systems have earned some

valid criticism for tending to settle into an inflexible mode of top-down provision by qualified professionals to passive, needy and (it is hoped) grateful recipients. This tendency is said to undervalue human assets, create a culture of dependency and do little to prevent needs arising in the first place. Responsibility is assumed by public authorities, rather than shared with the public.

Informing, advising and consulting (which can be taken as components of a participatory approach) can do little on their own to shift power towards those who are supposed to benefit from services. This brings us to co-production, which has more to offer. The term is used to describe a model of activity that has been applied to defining needs, to designing interventions or other activities to meet those needs and to delivering them. It describes a partnership between, on the one hand, citizens and service users and, on the other, officials, experts and professionals. Rather than people in the latter group doing things to or for people in the former group, they work together to produce ideas, insights, decisions, services and/or other activities.

Co-production deepens the concept of participation by fostering the principle of equal partnership. It draws on a long history of self-help, mutual aid and community development, and it is, quintessentially, about sharing responsibility between people who are regarded – and treat each other – as having equal worth and being able to make contributions of equal value to a shared enterprise. It enables people to pool and share a range of human assets that are too often overlooked, undervalued and under-utilised. These are embedded in people’s everyday lives and relationships (time, energy, knowledge, skills, wisdom, love, care, teaching, learning, empathy and much more). At the best of times, tapping into these assets through co-production will enrich the process of identifying and meeting social needs; in times of austerity, it can help to compensate for increasingly scarce public resources. There is a growing body of evidence that co-production can add value and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of services.

Co-production can redefine and transform public services and other activities of the state. It strongly implies a need for professionals and other service employees to change the way they think and behave – shifting the balance of power and becoming brokers, facilitators, mediators and enablers, rather than dominant providers. It is not a definitive model, but includes a set of key features that can be further developed, amended and applied to suit different circumstances.

Key features of co-production

- Recognising people as assets rather than problems
- Building on people’s existing capabilities
- Promoting mutual and reciprocal relationships
- Developing peer support networks
- Breaking down barriers between professionals and ‘service users’
- Professionals becoming facilitators rather than service providers

4. Participation for all

The value of participation for democracy and social cohesion depends entirely on whether and how far it is inclusive. Can all members of society participate on a fair and equitable basis? This is partly about whether opportunities to participate are available to everyone, and whether everyone is aware of the opportunities and has access to participatory processes. It depends on how far people are willing to participate and are motivated by a belief that it will make a difference to their lives; it depends on

whether they have sufficient capacity and resources – such as knowledge, autonomy, time, confidence, energy – and how far they are deterred by problems such as ill-health, physical or mental disability, language or communications difficulties, or overriding family responsibilities.

All these factors are unequally distributed across populations. This suggests that inclusive participation calls for a range of social, economic and constitutional policies aimed at creating conditions for inclusion: among much else, these include measures to ensure equitable access to education, a fair living income, employment, healthcare, housing and other local services, mobile digital technologies and civil liberties. The first and most important step is to understand the range of factors that enable or deter participation and to address the underlying causes of inequality.

In addition, public authorities will need to make special efforts to reach out to marginalised groups. This will include: identifying and locating those whose voices are seldom heard, using outreach and other community development techniques; enabling marginalised groups to participate on their own territory and on their own terms; involving them in designing the process ; sharing their language (literally and metaphorically); making sure they have access to computers; avoiding tokenism and one-off gestures; treating them as equals, respecting their wisdom and experience; enabling participants to reflect and learn from each other; and investing in building their capacity.

In conclusion

In this short paper I have dealt with only four dimensions of creating and improving processes for participation. They are all interlinked and need to be brought together as part of a coherent and consistent approach. It is within the power of national governments to promote participation by all members of society – both in democratic decision-making and in actions to promote sustainable social justice and well-being for all. Inclusive participation, democracy and social cohesion are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. All three are essential for forging political and welfare systems that are capable of meeting the challenges of the 21st century.