The Netherlands: Local democracy agenda

The Local Democracy Agenda was recently launched in the Netherlands. This provides the initial impetus for a wide-ranging discussion about a vital local democracy.

The Local Democracy Agenda is a response to the developments and growth in initiatives; the agenda provides scope to work with citizens, social partners and local government on thinking about democratic renewal. It is the next step on the path towards a new relationship between central and local government.

The starting point is to provide space and confidence for the developments and initiatives in order thus to strengthen citizens' engagement.

A system of participative democracy is developing alongside the traditional system of representative democracy. Citizens are thereby increasingly addressing social issues themselves without the intervention of a public authority. In the Netherlands we call this 'action democracy'. This is not a form of democracy which is designed to replace all other forms; it involves recognising that directly and actively shaping one's own environment is an equally valid form of democracy alongside other forms.

How is this expressed?

1. **Applying laws and regulations more flexibly**
   Example: Enabling experimentation. The idea behind this is that local government can renew its approach and can also respond better to residents' wishes.

2. **Supporting experimental forms of democracy at local government level**
   Example: Open Data
   A lot of government information is not accessible to everyone, such as information about precisely how much something costs. If you know how much money is being spent on - for example - rubbish collection or creating a community playing field, it is not such a great leap to think about other and cheaper ways to do this.

3. **Thirdly: allowing municipal councils the room to make their own decisions at local level**
   Example: municipal councils are being allocated more tasks and responsibilities. It is thereby appropriate for municipal councils to be given greater control over their own income.
Current issues in the Netherlands around e-democracy
- For what types of citizen participation could forms of e-democracy be used? Which citizens could become more engaged with democracy through digital participation? Is there a difference from the citizens who currently already participate?

- How is representativeness safeguarded within e-democracy? Are checks carried out on which citizens are participating; is there a form of identification (in the way that one currently has to identify oneself at the polling station)?

- How is the security of forms of e-democracy safeguarded (privacy of participants, protection against hackers)?

- The use of forms of e-democracy could result in less direct contact between citizen and the public administration. What consequences does this have for the gap between citizen and government?

- What potential do digital developments have for the provision of information to citizens (e.g. through local and regional media)? How can the active publication of government information (decisions, financial data etc.) contribute to democracy? How can this data be made accessible without detracting from the objectivity?