Cities as Arenas of Political Innovation in the Strengthening of Deliberative and Participatory Democracy

Results in Brief

Revitalising citizen engagement in local democracy

Strategies that encourage and strengthen democratic participation at the local level could help to reinvigorate citizen trust in democracy, and overcome apathy and illiberalism, according to results of the EU-funded EUARENAS project.

In Europe, there is growing disaffection and a lack of trust in democratic processes, driven by widening inequalities and anxieties concerning social, economic and cultural change.

“Many citizens have the perception that ‘the system’ does not work for them, and that it is too distant to be influenced,” explains James Scott, a professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies at the University of Eastern Finland.

“As a consequence, populist and illiberal alternatives to democratic participation have gained in popularity. While these antidemocratic political forces have increased the degree of political activism, it has been at the expense of a belief in democracy.”
Strengthened democratic participation at the local level

Scott is project coordinator of the EUARENAS project, due for completion in June 2024. Its goal is to identify effective ways of reversing this trend, and to strengthen democratic participation at the local level. To achieve this, the project set out to analyse the effectiveness of a number of local initiatives, all designed to promote a greater and more inclusive sense of civic involvement.

“These experiments include participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, community budgeting, asset-based community development and social hackathons,” says Scott. “We are also looking into how communities can use innovative digital tools, to solve problems in collaboration with citizens.”

Through analysing these activities, the EUARENAS project team has been able to collect valuable data regarding local experiences in promoting more inclusive democracy. Encouragingly, this has confirmed that these initiatives are generating considerable momentum.

“This has occurred in part as a response to the perceived need to ‘open up’ the decision-making process,” adds Scott. “Inevitably though, these initiatives have created challenges, and often tested the limits of local governance capacities.”

Ensuring diversity, inclusiveness and engagement

Initial findings have led to some preliminary recommendations. “Ensuring diversity, inclusiveness and engagement is a complex task that requires a long-term approach,” remarks Scott. “Local government priorities however are often determined by short-term electoral cycles.”

For this reason, trust relationships between local government and citizens need to be developed, as part of achieving functioning co-governance arrangements. Leadership, from both citizens and city officials, is also vital.

“Citizens’ assemblies and panels represent a potentially decisive tool for stimulating participation and co-governance,” says Scott. “However, these need to be used carefully and judiciously. Used improperly, these can incur high costs, while potentially alienating local citizens due to lack of follow-through.”

Another key finding is the need to avoid politics at the local level that sinks into identity politics and polarised political positions. Such policy drift can play into the hands of illiberal populist groups, adds Scott.

A future vision of local democracy
From these initial findings, the project is now building a future vision for local democracies in Europe. This vision includes key elements such as sustainable, long-term thinking and valuing difference and diversity.

“Working towards such a future, cities might want to consider actions that address structural barriers to participation, build relationships of trust, and most of all, make decisions for the long term,” explains Scott. “The main aim of local governance should be to stimulate an inclusive decision-making process that results in practicable decisions.”

As the project nears completion, Scott and his team hope to further strengthen cooperation between academic, civil society and government spheres, in order to generate more knowledge about how democratic participation at the local level can be enhanced.

“EUARENAS has already been able to identify several potential strategies, as well as several potential pitfalls,” says Scott. “Our hope is that this project will provide local governments in Europe with a valuable knowledge source, to help them identify effective governance practices.”

Keywords

EUARENAS, democracy, illiberalism, citizen, democratic, political, governance
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