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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/factsreports/3619>

ISSN: 1867-8521

Publisher

Institut Veolia

Electronic reference

Ivan Crouzel, « Democratic innovations: reshaping public governance? », *Field Actions Science Reports* [Online], Special Issue 11 | 2014, Online since 05 November 2014, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/factsreports/3619>

Democratic innovations: reshaping public governance?



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From Europe to Latin America, from Asia to Africa, and across the Arab world, the news is full of examples of disconnect between governments and citizens. Public institutions are not meeting—or are no longer meeting—the needs and expectations of the population. At the same time, the increase in social demands echoes a desire among citizens to take control of their own destiny, to have their say, and to be given their due. But it also reflects a new aspiration: to go beyond representative democracy alone, punctuated by periodic elections, towards a democracy of “content”, seen as a continuous process, with the aim of bringing public policies more into line with social demands. That requires a change in the way public policies are devised, implemented, and monitored, and a reshaping of public governance to make it more democratic and more legitimate.

Numerous initiatives have been developed around the world, over the last 10 years and more, to meet these goals and build a more participatory democracy, more receptive to people’s demands. This special issue of *FACTS Reports*—compiled in partnership with CIVICUS, World Alliance for Citizen Participation—sets out to identify these “democratic innovations”, to understand them better, to learn actionable lessons from them and, above all, to share them. The objective of *FACTS* is to test these ideas rigorously, and to facilitate their dissemination on a larger scale.

The initiatives presented here, taken from a very wide range of sectors and geographies, focus on transparency, on consultation and deliberation, and on control over public policy. They all seek to reinforce responsibility for public action, a founding principle of democracy, which entails that governments should be accountable to the governed for the actions they take.

Several of the salient features of these innovative democratic experiences emerge from reading the papers in this issue.

Democratic innovation implies greater participation. Making that participation a reality, beyond a purely rhetorical mobilization, means giving a louder voice to citizens and to the organizations of civil society and enhancing their capacity for engagement in public affairs. As the various papers stress, participation demands preparation: to be credible and effective, it has to be thought through in advance. Depending on the situation, this may mean citizen education, or it may mean the development of the necessary expertise to act as a credible interlocutor with the authorities.

Democratic innovation seeks to resolve a particular public problem. It is not an end in itself. This issue underlines the effects and impacts that democratic innovations have on public policy and on the

distribution of public services. Participatory mechanisms enable greater responsiveness to popular demands, such as in Madagascar, for example, where they have improved the water supply in certain districts. Participation helps to reinforce the effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy of public policy, by gaining community buy-in.

Democratic innovation flows from the synergies generated between different types of actor (public institutions, civil society organizations, private sector, citizens, the media). It is by getting these diverse actors to work together that the greatest leverage is obtained on public policy. In Niger, the establishment of a partnership between different local actors facilitates the peaceful settlement of conflicts between farmers and pastoralists. This multi-actor dimension of governance underlines the importance of building collective intelligence and collaboration in public action. In this respect, the innovative democratic mechanisms presented here are factors for reinforcing social bonds and social cohesion.

Democratic innovations have to be won, step by step. The road that leads to democratic innovations is neither short nor easy: they are embedded in power struggles between the different stakeholders of public action. While they may, in some cases—such as in the state of Oregon or the *Atelier Climat*

in France— be initiated by the public authorities, they are usually the result of demands by civil society. They come up against crystallized situations, against resistance to change. Their participatory mechanisms bring about a transformation in power relations, instilling a popular culture of “holding government to account”. Because they touch on the deepest aspects of society and their relationship to the political, democratic innovations cannot emerge suddenly. They are the outcome of complex step-by-step processes, edging their way forward over time.

Democratic innovations are, above all, contextual. They result from collective dynamics specific to a particular place and time. The experiences presented in this issue are all characterized by their rootedness in local realities. The innovative character of these local initiatives derives primarily from their ability to drive social change in a particular context.

Though it develops in a specific context, innovation is also the result of exchange and cross-fertilization. In the field of democracy, especially, it often grows from a local adaptation of practices observed elsewhere, which is why disseminating and sharing these experiences is so important. That is the purpose of this issue, which consciously adopts this particular dynamic of democratic innovations.

Faithful to the *FACTS Reports* methodology, the papers that follow begin with the accounts provided by the field-workers. This they have done without pretense, without embellishment, with the sole aim of sharing their experience. The scientific rigor of their reasoning, and the relevance of their reports, have been validated and confirmed by peer review. Therein lies the purpose and usefulness of the *FACTS* approach: helping to create a “science of field action” and giving these concrete experiences their rightful place in our knowledge.

The themes addressed in this issue are central to the work and the philosophy of the Institute for Research and Debate on Governance (IRG) on democratic governance and the co-production of public action. We are delighted, therefore, to have been associated with this issue, which illustrates the diversity of governance practices around the world, their constant evolution, and the lessons they can teach us in terms of public policy-making. We believe it is essential to compare these innovative experiences, to share them, and to draw conclusions from them that have truly universal application.