EUARENAS

EC PRELIMINARY POLICY BRIEF: ACCESSING DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

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EUARENAS investigates the ways in which social movements coupled with local government reform initiatives, manifesting themselves in local-level experiments, create momentum for political change that include more inclusive and participatory forms of governance.

For more information:

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About the document:

1. Summary

The **EUARENAS** project sees the participation of different stakeholders in the development of deliberative democratic initiatives at the local level. The project follows a circular process that links the research phases to the implementing ones in a continuous confrontation among the various actors involved. From research institutions to cities, the project can map and deal with the various needs and difficulties that can be encountered when developing and implementing a deliberative democracy initiative. The following policy brief is built upon the results of the early phases of the project. While more results will be available once the following phases are undertaken, it is still possible to identify some core criticalities as well as some policy provision to improve the general framework of local deliberative democracy

2. Introduction

The following policy brief develops within the framework of the **EUARENAS** project. The Project sees the participation at different levels of research units and cities in order to understand how deliberative democracy at the local level can enhance a series of issues related to civic life, from participation to development, from diversity inclusion to welfare.

The combination of research units and local administrations, allows for a cyclical approach that brings with itself a continuous confrontation, bridging the academic debate with the more pragmatic approach of those that have a contact approach with the reality studies. In a circle that goes from theoretical debates to the elaboration of Piloting initiatives, passing through a comparison among selected case studies, the project analyses multiple dimensions and actors that interconnect in the process cycle of a shared governance. This approach, beyond the benefits that it produces in terms of contribution to the debate and implementation of innovative practices, allows for a wide monitoring of different policy areas where criticalities can be identified and addressed in terms of proposed solutions.

This document summarizes the challenges identified during the early stages of the project, and it serves as a preliminary outcome to develop further and more detailed policy intervention. The brief identifies areas of interest, criticalities, as well as stakeholders affected by them and policy levels solutions might start from.

3. Key Findings

The main findings emerging from the early research and activities of the project focus on a series of specific dimensions that have been identified as crucial for an effective implementation of deliberative democratic initiatives at the local level. These dimensions include: diversity, inclusiveness and engagement. Although apparently similar, these dimensions describe different requirements that deliberative processes need in order to be recognized as just and efficient.

- **Diversity** describes the need to include stakeholders from different backgrounds, including minorities and usually underrepresented constituency as well as removing barriers that can prevent the contribution of various participants.

- **Inclusiveness** summarizes the idea that participants should not only be included in the process as count check, but their needs and ideas need to be heard through the process. While diversity focuses more on the "physical" aspect of participation, inclusiveness relates more to the actual participatory power that is recognized to the stakeholders.

- **Engagement** underlines the importance of maintaining participants involved in the deliberative process through all the different phases that an initiative foresees. Relations with the stakeholders should be created not only in moments of deliberation but also in the various steps that guide the implementation and the monitoring of the initiative.

Results emerged from the early stages of the project, as well as from dedicated reflection and discussion moments among the members show a plurality of factors that help in better defining the beforementioned dimensions.

Processes that are diverse, inclusive and that manage to actively engage with the various stakeholders, are those that are able to remove barriers to their access, including groups from different cultural, social and economic backgrounds. Moreover, stakeholders should be empowered involving in the process groups that otherwise won't be able to participate or that rarely communicate to each other.

Tools identified to achieve these goals range from the selection of suitable and selected physical and digital spaces, communication, direct contact with the constituencies and the use of civil society's organizations that are already active on the territory and can therefore provide insights on local groups and their obstacles to participation.

In addition, a process should also be focused on the real needs of people and it should aim at resolving them, thus maintaining an extremely pragmatic approach and a continuous feedback and revision practice with the stakeholders involved.

Diversification of strategies is also found to be a possible solution to maximize participation. The use of multiple techniques and tools at the same time can result in the capacity to involve groups that could face limitation in accessing a specific one of them. When this is the case, trying to make a single solution or tool diverse, inclusive and engaging might be costlier than setting several coordinated spaces to allow a wider access.

A second part of the findings can be derived by the preliminary activities conducted with regards to the piloting phase of the program. These preliminary activities have focused around the identification of initial core needs of the pilot cities that in the advanced phases of the project will be called to implement the projects that have been developed within the program's framework.

The first needs identified relate to the concept of deliberative democracy, the need to understand the theoretical concept and its transfer to practice. The passage between theory and practice is a core aspect not only of the EUARENAS project, but of the wider academic environment, that often struggles in producing results accessible to practitioners and the wider public.

 The use of a circular process, as well as the engagement of multiple stakeholders throughout the entirety of such a process, represent the crucial tool that the EUARENAS project implements to try to link the research phases to the implementation ones in the smoothest and clearest way possible. Such a practice doesn't present limits of application, thus allowing for its exportation in other initiatives as well. Still in relation to the knowledge of deliberative democracy, cities have shown the need to learn more about the local legal frameworks concerning this topic. The variation of legal contexts when developing international initiatives results to be a core issue to consider.

Moreover, cities seem to confirm some of the needs resulted from the preliminary research activities of the project. In these regards, they have remarked the importance of implementing tools and practices to include all the various components of the target constituencies, actively removing barriers to access. At the same time, cities need to identify specific tools to achieve these goals. These tools are identified to be both digital and physical (reducing digital divide and rethinking urban spaces).

Finally, cities have highlighted how the use of deliberative democratic initiatives is often limited to an extremely limited local level (departments or municipalities), and they have underlined the need to expand these initiatives at the wider city level. Under this perspective, deliberative democratic initiatives need to become systemic. This cannot be achieved without a reinforcement of the cooperation and the subsidiarity among different levels of administration.

4. Policy Recommendations

European and National institutions can foster diversity and inclusive initiatives in developing core clauses in their funding programs. These clauses should consider the respect of the requirements throughout the whole initiatives in order to prevent "formal" rather than substantial strategies of inclusion.

Institutions should develop legal tools that recognize the validity of deliberative processes at the local level. These tools should both facilitate the implementation of such initiatives at the local level, and they should also grant their effectiveness providing them with the right legal legitimation they deserve.

When providing resources to enhance democratic participation at the local level, institutions should consider allocating part of these resources to the development and use of tools that are needed by local authorities in order to remove barriers to access. At the same time, a more consistent action at the national and European level to tackle these barriers on the long run is also strongly supported.

European institutions should encourage the implementation of multi-stakeholder initiatives favoring collaboration across different sectors of society. Such an approach can provide better expertise, especially when including actors close to the realties where projects are developed and implemented. At the same time, this also helps in identifying and engaging with stakeholders that otherwise might be left out from the initiative.

At the European level, an homogenization of the member states' legal frameworks in relation to local deliberative democracy initiatives should also be pursued, in order to allow for better knowledge sharing across local authorities, nationally and internationally.