

The democratic challenge: reclaiming the city

Democracy is still in the making in most parts of the world. The Democracy Index⁽¹⁾ states that only 6,4% of the world population lives in full democracies, 39,3% in flawed democracies, 17,2% in hybrid regimes and 37,1% in authoritarian regimes. There remains a lot to do in countries as a whole, but democracy is a vital challenge for urban governance. The complexity and urgency of the challenges in the urban system, such as climate collapse, loss of biodiversity, social inequality, poverty, lack of affordable housing, migration, need for preserving cultural and ethnic diversity, and so on cannot be tackled without consent, support and collaboration of the population. Urban democracy is about institutions, but also about practices. To make the transition urban democracy is key to creating sustainable and livable cities.

1. Democratizing institutions

- Cities' scale, diversity, density, and dynamism make the practice of urban democracy foundational in strengthening democracy at the regional, national, and global scales. Urban democracy entails engaging with elected officials over everyday needs, such as transportation, sanitation, and public safety. It can foster alternative perspectives and coalitions from those that define national politics and can generate democratic pluralism reflective of the population. It can serve as a check on corruption and disenfranchisement, and a bulwark against authoritarianism.
- Governance and its related institutions should express the will of the people. This results from

public debate, providing options and choices and designating leaders who are accepted. Organizing representative democracy implies free elections where political parties are guaranteed free expression and where the composition of the city council as the legislative body is representative. The executive body should be led by an elected mayor and be supported by a majority of councilors. The city institutions and public administration represents both continuity and reflects the priorities chosen. Urban politics and governance have differing formats, some are hybrid forms that adapt to local traditions, the national context and the organization of civil society as a whole. Nowhere is there a fully representative urban democracy with elected officers in all positions, for instance, mayors are sometimes not elected. International comparative research and global benchmarking could improve models. An Urban Democracy Index would be a good indicator.

- Local governance is mostly considered as part of the regional or national state. It is subject to national law or customs and has more or lesser autonomous competences, it is largely dependent on the central state financially. Urban governance is different from national governance, as a city is not a country. The country has the authority to develop the overarching regulatory framework whereas a city has greater legitimacy as it is closer to citizens and to the local complexity. Often there is a tension between the local and the national. That tension is part of the democratic challenge.
- Democratic rule is bounded within a specific territory, such as the organization of the local state or that of the municipality or the city. Yet urbanity always cuts across borders. Every city has an intensive interaction with its immediate hinterland which is part of its local ecosystem - the metropolitan area. The urban region must be integrated in democratic governance. Every city is also part of a much larger urban network, a cross-border space of flows and interactions. These require agreements or even treaties that are essential to urban development and have to be integrated into the overall framework of democratic control.
- Urban democracy cannot be seriously developed without empowering cities at the national, continental and global level of governance. This is why giving cities and their mayors a decisive voice in international governing bodies and in international decision-making processes is

central to the endeavors of GPM as the majority of the world population live in urban contexts. Most planetary challenges, such as the climate, the pandemic or even war, need cities to leverage solutions. There is a dramatic democratic deficit given that global regulation is only a matter for nation-states, interstate bodies and global institutions.

2. Democratizing society

Urban society is complex and their communities mostly superdiverse and so the idea that representative democracy is good enough with elections every four, five or six years is completely inadequate. It cannot represent and express the consent of the population or the often volatile and changing views of their citizens. Everywhere and especially in cities urban government is under increasing pressure by civil society groupings, inhabitants or neighborhood councils, thematic action groups or organized oppositions. For this reason, across the world, forms of participation, deliberative forms of consultation, citizens' assemblies or direct democracy are emerging as complementary to regular governance. These take on different forms whether people are selected, elected, drawn or self-appointed, whether they advise or make decisions or proposals or are involved in participatory budgeting. They rely on transparency and accountability from elected officials and local government agencies. Because of its local scale, complexity, and diversity, urban society is uniquely positioned to foster these forms of democratic engagement. In any case well prepared processes of co-shaping and creating tend to help deliver better solutions to complex interrelated problems.

These temporary forms of participation also allow places to integrate wider audiences such as the visions of users, visitors, or commuters in choices rather than being based solely on those of inhabitants/citizens.

- To respond to the urgent transitions required, good governance needs more cross-cutting policies in order to overcome administrative silos. To be successful they need the support and collaboration of the population. Livable cities imply good public services, a redistributive economy, active citizenship and solidarity. That is why good urban governance implies integrated territorial planning that is adapted to its districts or neighborhoods and with special attention to the rights of

women, minorities, and marginalized groups. It is here that participatory democracy can be most effective.

3. Democratizing the urban spirit

Living together in a city requires a special urban mentality: a spirit of freedom, tolerance and respect of diversity and individual freedom, with the needs of inhabitants, users and visitors all in mind, as well as to the environment and to resource needs. In that sense city air sets you free. It can emancipate you from tradition and communities that close you in, it allows for there to be diversity of identity and freedom of expression. That spirit of urbanity needs to be cultivated.

- Public life is central to the urban project. The arts, culture and education are the underlay that can especially express the immaterial spirit of urban democracy. The creation of real public spaces, both material and digital, is vital to maintaining democracy. Thus, artistic or cultural policies cannot be placed at the margin of governance. They should take a central place in uniting and mobilizing the population in forming its collective identities.
- Democracy needs active citizens, willing to engage in the public good and common interest as distinct from only their individual or group interests. The 'polis' has to place special attention to forming a 'demos'. This is a form of political solidarity so all citizens can live the life of their choice. It is not only a mission for education or social work, but also for the media and press. An additional mission for governments is to realize that the force of democracy lies in how it handles minorities and protest. The spirit of democracy is not only a form of government, but above all a project for human rights, freedom, equality and solidarity.
- The challenge of Urban Democracy is not merely a formal question. It is a quest for places to have a chance to self-govern appropriate to our conditions where the majority of humanity is living. The challenge is even more vital given globalizing processes where cities are competing nodes in global markets and where the pandemic and geopolitical effects of war are causing deep stress. Cities will have to develop new economic models based more circular and foundational economy

ideas which highlight the centrality of local resources or local ecosystem services. To do that, they will need new competences and new forms of governance. This is a global agenda, with mayors and cities at the forefront and focusing on movements like the New Municipalism(2).

a) No democracy can exist without effective institutions and transparent government. Designing progress in urban democracy is not only about strengthening local governance and its institutions, but also negotiating a new relationship between the regional, the central state and the global.

b) Cities have unique capabilities to engage residents and foster transparency and accountability in government. No democracy can flourish without an active civil society. Without a better mobilization and inclusion of citizens and local inhabitants, particularly marginalized groups, effective and pluralistic democracy cannot be deepened, but also solutions to complex problems will not be adequately addressed.

c) No democracy can be nurtured without educated citizens. Democratizing is a practice. It nurtures and is nurtured by public life. It involves special attention to education, modernization, arts and culture and to the immaterial conditions of living together.

- Democracy needs the active and diverse participation of citizens from all urban realms, how have new emerging technologies enabled more educated citizens' involvement, boosted transparency, and actually shifted urban policies in your cities?
- The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated cities' leadership in dealing with the world's most pressing issues, how have the relationship and political tensions between local and national governments changed in the aftermath of the pandemic?
- A globalized world and the fragile supply chain we experienced during the pandemic and currently facing because of the war in Ukraine has made us rethink new economic models, can you please share how your cities are approaching this new reality?

- Mayors are international actors in their own right, and we need to empower cities at the international level, in your view which are the major advancements cities have attained in the international arena, and to which issue does more attention need to be paid?
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1). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_Index;

2). <https://democracycollaborative.org/learn/publication/whats-so-new-about-new-municipalism>,
<https://scholar.google.be/scholar?>

[q=New+municipalism+definition&hl=nl&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholar](https://scholar.google.be/scholar?q=New+municipalism+definition&hl=nl&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholar)

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