

23rd IOPD Conference

Populist Threats: Building Democratic Resilience with Participatory Communities

Valongo Declaration: Participatory processes build true ecosystems of democratic resilience. Therefore, they are effective barriers to exclusionary and opportunistic populisms.

At the 23rd Conference of the International Observatory of Participatory Democracy (OIDP), held in Valongo, Portugal, from October 17 to 19, 2024, it was concluded that the rules, methods, and democratic dynamics of participatory processes—in which elected politicians transparently align their decisions with the choices of involved citizens—lead to more developed, sustainable, better-informed, and inclusive communities.

In a broad discussion involving local and regional elected officials, civic movements, international organizations, academics, and activists, it became clear that democratic participation processes build true ecosystems of democratic resilience. As such, they are effective barriers against exclusionary and opportunistic populisms.

The specific dynamics of participatory processes bring together two forms of democratic legitimacy—voting and citizen participation—and naturally give rise to politically informed strategies for change that are tailored to the needs and available resources in each city or region. Participatory processes tend to synthesize the different sensitivities of the social fabric through their cross-class and intergenerational nature, promoting communication between these groups and fostering freedom of expression.

Therefore, participatory practices are increasingly becoming central pillars of 21st-century democracies. They promote balance, tolerance, sustainability, and moderation, as well as civic consensus and commitment. They are essential tools to ensure the effectiveness and enforceability of social, political, economic, and cultural rights. Finally, participatory practices also provide an opportunity to implement the necessary transformations to meet global agendas, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The best way to implement reforms that improve communities and institutions in a transversal, inclusive, and sustainable manner is through participatory processes.

Challenges for the Future

The sessions and debates of the 23rd IOPD Conference were organized around six themes:

- **Artificial Intelligence and Disinformation**
- **Civic Technologies**
- **Ecological Transition and Environment**

- **Inclusion and Diversity**
- **Participation, Transparency, and Open Governance**
- **Populisms**

The Challenge of Participatory Democracy for Artificial Intelligence and Disinformation

Technology, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), is a tool with enormous but controversial potential to democratize access to more elements of reality and the complex ways they interact. AI can increase access to information and citizens' informed understanding of public affairs, but it can also be used to completely obscure important information.

By gathering reliable information and articulating it in sophisticated and innovative ways, Artificial Intelligence can decisively contribute to public policy innovation, rationalize resource distribution, scrutinize elected officials and candidates, and objectively assess the real impacts of political decisions. Properly applied, AI can enhance the rationality of options, thus valuing the convergence of different viewpoints, favoring deliberation, and moderating extremes—an exercise that can be highly innovative.

Since "good application" will always depend on how access to AI is provided and managed, not on a "neutral" impartiality, monitoring and controlling how governments do this will be one of the most important missions of independent social institutions and, precisely, of participatory democracy mechanisms.

The worrying role of social networks in spreading fake news and disinformation reveals the enormous malicious potential of technology through the manipulation of information, images, and human behavior using AI. The entire society—and local and regional governments in particular—must be prepared to face the risks AI represents: security risks, election risks, risks to the functioning of democracies, and overall, for a clean and objective understanding and evaluation of reality.

AI may also pose a disruptive challenge to participatory democracy by suggesting local governments adopt measures based on blind criteria of efficiency or economic rationality, leading to unjust solutions and imposing obligations that hollow out consultative and democratic participation institutions.

Therefore, it is imperative that the use of AI considers the human rights ratified by States, particularly in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and keeps the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11—"Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable"—in mind, preserving participatory democracy from the ethical irresponsibility of AI and safeguarding redistributive social policies, participatory budgets, and the right to housing and the city.

For these reasons, Participatory Democracy must seek to handle the technological development of AI with increased accountability, risk management, public supervision, and transparency, particularly in terms of mandatory access to the algorithms used by AI platforms in public participation processes, in addition to citizen empowerment policies,

through reinforced education and information that promotes demanding, conscious, autonomous voters with critical capacity to analyze reality and distinguish reliable information from disinformation. Only with robust citizenship reinforcement and regulatory strategies will states be able to keep AI as a tool serving democratic resilience in communities while preserving its enormous potential for innovation consistent with Participatory Democracy.

Civic Technologies

The dematerialization of consultation and popular participation tools, including electronic voting, is a process that local and regional governments should adopt as political options, allocating resources and promoting public debates on the topic to attract more citizens to democratic participation.

The transition to digital formats, whether for records (such as electoral rolls) or the monitoring of consultative or deliberative assemblies, can be an invaluable tool to ensure greater citizen participation in choices that concern them. This potential is particularly relevant to younger generations, who are digital natives, or communities residing in areas far from public bodies or assemblies.

For technologies to be placed at the service of citizen participation, significant investments are needed in the development of solutions and in the acquisition of computer equipment and technological infrastructure, as well as in hiring and training competent technicians. Networks with central nodes on secure servers and reliable connections that support two-way data exchange without congestion are necessary. Technological evolutions must be supported by developer communities committed to democratic intensification, and networks of local and regional authorities should come together to facilitate this shared evolution, increasing results and reducing inefficiencies.

If banks, hospitals, courts, video streaming platforms, industrial equipment networks, and transport systems are examples of secure and highly operational digitalization worldwide, the truth is that electoral or public consultation processes are as delicate or even more so for the functioning of democracy, and therefore, extremely sensitive: failures in these domains will always have large political, legal, and media proportions. Therefore, it is crucial to provide local and regional authorities with the means to offer free public access to the benefits of these technologies, ensuring their security.

The 23rd ODP Conference calls on all democratic local and regional governments to consistently invest over the coming years in accessible technological tools and cybersecurity, ensuring universal access to systems and adequate means to prevent and detect errors, software failures, network coverage issues—or even "bugs." Building user-friendly and intuitive civic technologies, resistant to hacking, data breaches, and other cyber threats, is essential.

Ecological Transition and Environment

Three conclusions stood out in a conference that brought together representatives from 43 different countries, with 16 from Europe, 15 from Africa, 7 from the Americas, and 5 from Asia:

- A just ecological transition can only be achieved with the involvement and participation of populations in all decisions, the only way to avoid populist reactions against climate change policies. It is essential to combat denialism, which seeks to weaken the Green Deal agenda, by committing local governments and public opinion to progress on this issue.
- Countries whose development impacts the environment the most, namely Europe, the United States, and Japan, must intensify their pollution control policies to meet the Paris Agreement targets.
- Rapidly developing countries, particularly China and India, must stop increasing their emissions.

The higher "per capita" index recorded by Western countries should not overshadow one fact: part of the planet is reducing emissions, while another part is increasing them. This imbalance must be addressed.

There are two ways to do so. The first is a general reduction in consumption and the promotion of healthier and more sustainable lifestyles in all territories, the only way to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050.

The second way, which does justice to history, should consist of support policies from richer countries to developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America so that these states and their communities accelerate their energy transition and begin to reduce their environmental footprint as soon as possible.

In this process, it is crucial to introduce participatory mechanisms focused on green solutions. Green Participatory Budgets and Citizens' Climate Assemblies, along with other innovative forms of public consultation to find solutions to mitigate climate change, are essential contributions to achieving desired goals in a timely manner. Participatory democracy offers, from the local scale, essential spaces for educating the entire population and their leaders on the challenges of the ecological transition, understanding the complex interactions between behaviors, habits, and public policies. Participatory democracy can also help strengthen public support for important measures, such as those of the European Green Deal, which local governments should pursue to rebuild harmony in human-nature relations.

Inclusion and Diversity

Participatory processes are key to overcoming the widespread feeling of political crisis in democracies, both in terms of the legitimacy of representative systems and the effective civic involvement of communities in the life of their territories. Although populist discourses often incorporate unsatisfied demands and the people's desire to approach decision-makers, many of them promote a set of exclusive and demagogic practices. The reality is that populisms are not friends of democracy!

It is necessary to stop these drifts, which endanger pluralism and the individual and collective freedoms gained through many struggles. This is the case for women's rights, ethnic minorities, racialized citizens, and LGBTQ+ communities. Public space must be defended as the place to promote equal opportunities, where diversity meets, knows, and dialogues.

Moreover, the electronic platforms and portals supporting participatory processes need to be seen as more than just tools for interaction between citizens and institutions. They need to be envisioned as the face in which the communities called to use them reflect. They must, therefore, be welcoming spaces that, through their functions, language, and images, make each user feel welcome, especially the most vulnerable people and those with special needs.

Participation, Transparency, and Open Governance

The issues participatory processes introduce into the political practice of communities are central elements for the informed public debate necessary on institutional reforms and the protection of local elected officials from external pressures and threats.

The way citizens' participation and will are aligned with the political decisions made by elected officials and executed by public services must be transparent and easily accessible to public scrutiny. Similarly, municipal and regional bodies must build new, regular, and transparent accountability systems that are also accessible and understandable to citizens. Finally, rules must be developed that favor methodological and timing alignment between participatory and administrative processes to prevent the dialogue with citizens from being undermined by procedures that continue in parallel and involve decisions that anticipate the final results emerging from the sharing of ideas and decisions between inhabitants and institutions.

Participation, transparency, accountability, and results evaluation are central elements for recreating trust in institutions and substantive citizenship during this 2020–2030 decade, decisively contributing to strengthening democratic resilience.

Populisms

It is vital for the survival of democratic societies to combat, through citizen participation, transparency mechanisms, and accountability, how exclusionary populisms mix truth with lies in distorted information flows.

These dynamics—often synthesized as "fake news"—raise anxiety levels in women, men, young people, and the elderly, who are easily manipulated by populist acts and discourses. The mobilization of negative emotions such as fear, paranoia, or a sense of permanent aggression has promoted hate speech, pushing citizens into increasingly tribal and destructive behaviors, identifying as enemies those who are different or think differently.

Combatting this phenomenon must be done by intensifying democratic participation mechanisms, through the intrinsic value of their processes that respect differences, promote plural thinking, and encourage the sharing and discussion of reliable information before decisions are made. The openness and transparency of participatory mechanisms, as well as their inclusive and transversal nature, are the best antidote to manipulation and lies, promoting trust in institutions and the democratic system and contributing to social peace.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the IOPD 2024 Conference, its participants note that participatory democracy mechanisms improve political choices, a contribution that will be placed on the agenda of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), contributing to deepening the fundamental principles of proximity, decentralization, and democratic political leadership.

The exercise of power represented by participatory practices enables the more inclusive, plural, informed, and transparent development of communities.

The exercise of sovereignty by the people does not call into question the legitimacy that elected politicians receive through voting. On the contrary, it complements and enriches it, elevating democratic life.

Participatory processes are allies of local and regional authorities in building resilient communities that are resistant to exclusionary and opportunistic populisms.

Valongo, October 19, 2024