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## Urban Debates and Deliberative Democracy

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### Abstract

Interactive policy-making became trendy in the 1990s. It is a diffuse phenomenon, covering a wide variety of practices, goals and settings. Rather than trying to capture the phenomenon in all its aspects, the focus here will be on examples of interactive policy-making that primarily and explicitly set out to foster public debate in a face-to-face setting, the so-called urban debates. The aim of this article is to evaluate the democratic potential of these public debates. Drawing from theories of deliberative democracy I will focus on three criteria: inclusiveness, trust and decision-making authority.

### 1 Interactive policy-making in the 1990s

Interactive policy-making became trendy in the 1990s. The trend involves an enormous variety of projects in small and large municipalities all over the country (Edelenbos & Munnikhof 1998; Hendriks & Tops 1997; Tops et al. 1999; Teisman 1998). There is more than one reason why interactive policies have become popular, however, the increase has to be seen above all against the background of a declining legitimacy of local and national politics. There have been intermittent pessimistic accounts of a growing gap between voters and politicians on all political levels, but empirical indications that political relations were changing date from the end of the 1980s. Since then voter turnout and party membership have shown a steady decline. Interest in politics has been more or less steady among the majority of citizens, but among the youngest generation a significant decrease in interest has been observed (Thomassen et al. 2000).

In local politics at least three developments have contributed to the awareness of vested parties that declining legitimacy was something to worry about. First, the voter turnout of the local elections of 1990 alarmed local political elites. The turnout at these elections reached a historical low – an all-time low since the abolition of compulsory attendance in 1970. Various local committees were established to analyze the problem of an apparently widening

'gap' between voters and politics (Gilsing 1994). Second, local politics saw the emergence of new political parties with a local agenda. These parties were successful enough to become a serious threat. Finally, the experiments with interactive policy-making coincided with the discussion on the possible introduction of the referendum in local politics. Several municipalities experimented with different forms of (consultative) referendums during the 1990s and a substantial number of municipalities have officially introduced the referendum since then. This development in local politics signifies a break with a long Dutch tradition in which there has been hardly any room for direct democracy. After all, the Netherlands is the only West European democracy that has never held a national referendum (Holsteyn 1996). Initially, the idea of a local referendum met with broad political support. The real turning point came when negative results arose from two important referendums in Amsterdam and Rotterdam concerning decisions that had been unanimously accepted by the respective city councils. Those who had prepared these decisions, investing much time and money, were completely taken by surprise by the fact that their policies lacked all public support (Van Praag 2000). This experience contributed to an understanding that public involvement in the early stages of local policy-making makes sense. Interactive policies have become the most promising way to address the problems that became manifest in the 1990s.

Interactive policy-making has also been pushed on by reforms of local bureaucracies. It has particularly been embraced as a way to meet the new demands of public management. Tilburg has been a front-runner in this respect, but in the meantime the bureaucratic organization has been or is being reformed in many cities. The organization should be modelled according to the demands of the citizen as a client. In this context initiatives to gather information about citizens' preferences have become more important. Initially these preferences were discovered using urban surveys, but nowadays many methods are used including all kinds of interactive practices (Zouridis & Tops 2000).

Considering this complex background, it is not surprising that interactive policy-making evokes both scepticism and enthusiasm. Sceptics argue, for instance, that such projects are a clever kind of consensus engineering, used to prevent forms of protest that are difficult to handle. Interactive policy-making has also been characterized, for instance, as a technocratic approach initiated by officials (Hartman 1998). Optimists, on the other hand, argue that these initiatives can potentially develop into new forms of direct democracy, allowing citizens not only to vent their opinions but also to share in decision-making authority (Edelenbos & Monnikhof 1998: 29).

## 2 Interactive policy-making and urban debates

The label 'interactive policy-making' is applied to various kinds of projects. Goals, settings and procedures vary widely. Generally, the label refers to local and national political practices that involve consultation, negotiation and/or deliberation between (representatives of) government, civil society and citizens. To be more precise, interactive policies can be distinguished from earlier forms of public involvement such as neo-corporatist consultation and the social movements model of policy influencing in the following respects.

- In contrast to neo-corporatist consultations, interactive policy is an informal and ad hoc form of policy-making.
- In contrast to the social movements model of policy-influencing, interactive policy-making is mainly a top-down initiative. Common local practice is that the initiative for interactive projects comes from the town hall or district boards. However, the projects are often designed and managed by private consultancy firms.
- In contrast to both neo-corporatist forms and the social movements model, interactive policy-making does not restrict participation to representatives of groups, but also involves participation on an individual basis.

Interactive policy projects can have various goals. In this article I will focus on those projects that aim to increase political responsiveness by investigating public opinion. In this respect, interactive policy-making differs from traditional methods of public inquiry.

In contrast to traditional methods of public inquiry, such as voting or opinion polling, interactive policy-making involves the *formation* of public opinion.

Urban debates have become the most popular interactive method to investigate public opinion with respect to future developments in local politics. Rotterdam 2005, Arnhem 2015, Amsterdam 2002, Amersfoort 2015 are but a few examples. These debates have been initiated by the town or city councils. They involve big and festive public meetings, with a couple of hundred participants. Furthermore, citizens are invited to take part in developing and discussing future plans in a round of workshops. Sometimes the discussion is also organized on the internet, as an alternative or as a supplement to the workbenches. The agenda for future development is especially to be developed around the larger themes of urban planning, such as the future role of shopping centres, the value of green space or the potential of traffic routes. Sometimes the agenda is extended to concrete issues in particular neighbourhoods, such as care for the elderly or educational facilities.

### 3 The advantages of public debate

Public debates have distinct advantages above traditional inquiries into public opinion. Voter participation through public surveys or focus groups on the one hand and public debates on the other are quite different experiences. In the latter respondents have the opportunity to talk back and to ask questions. Moreover, public debates offer the opportunity to amend one's views, to reflect upon trade-offs or to test various perspectives. By contrast, traditional methods of inquiry aim at aggregating individual preferences. These methods have distinct shortcomings. For one thing, they cannot provide knowledge about the intensity of the preferences that citizens have. Neither can they provide information about the trade-offs that could be at stake. Finally, it is not possible to ascertain from voting or opinion polling how well informed the choices of respondents are (Herbst 1998).

For these reasons public debate is central to democracy (cf. Van Kersbergen & Pröpper 1995). According to deliberative democrats, democratic decision-making should involve a deliberative dimension. Deliberation involves a dynamic process of *forming* opinions and *testing* arguments, a process that should improve the quality of decision-making. In this respect, deliberation is preferable to aggregative methods such as voting and polling. One of the advantages is that the exchange of information will increase and public opinion will become more informed. For this reason, James Fishkin experimented with deliberative polling. For the experiments a representative sample of citizens was brought together to discuss a particular issue during several days. Other researchers have developed similar projects under the labels of 'citizens' juries' or 'planning cells' (Fishkin 1995; Renn et al. 1995; Stewart et al. 1994; Delap 1998; Font 1999). The aim is to improve on public opinion polls by making preferences more informed through face-to-face debate. Deliberative polling can help to overcome the 'rational ignorance' of citizens by providing strong incentives to form well-considered opinions on policy issues (Fishkin 1995). Deliberation makes decisions more informed for several reasons. It offers the opportunity to lessen or overcome the bounded rationality of individual policy-makers by involving various groups in policy-making. By drawing on each other's knowledge, actors can widen their limited perspectives and generate new perspectives (Manin 1997). Moreover, deliberating publicly also promotes wider accessibility of private information through mechanisms such as 'negative advertising'. Although the parties to the debates will avoid drawing attention to the negative consequences of their own proposals, they will point to the flaws in those of their adversaries.

Apart from the role of information, there is another potential advantage of deliberation. Under certain conditions deliberation can contribute to sustaining a public morality, even when participants are mainly motivated by

self-interest. Some deliberative democrats believe that deliberation promotes cooperation and trust others are more sceptical. Nevertheless, the sceptics admit that deliberation increases the chance to promote the common interest, even if it is only because of the "civilizing force of hypocrisy" that forces participants to present their arguments in terms of common interest (Elster 1998: 12).

These advantages of deliberation are potential advantages. Deliberative democrats do not agree upon practical issues. Under which conditions these advantages can be realized is still up for debate. The urban debates can be regarded as practical experiments in deliberative democracy. An evaluation of these debates can help to bring to light the conditions that are more or less favourable for the advancement of the ideal of deliberation.

### 4 Criteria

Deliberative democracy has been developed as a rather abstract body of thought, but recently a more practical approach has gained in importance (Bohman 1998: 401). To date, the question how specific projects should be managed to create the best conditions for deliberative democracy has been addressed in various ways (Benhabib 1996; Elster 1998; Dryzek 1990; Fishkin 1995; Smith & Wales 2000). A more practical approach includes taking account of the real world contexts of local politics, in order to develop feasible criteria for the urban debates.

To clarify what is at stake, let me begin with a story that presents a public debate in an ideal world, a world that is simple and neatly arranged. It is the story of *Pale Rider*, a western made by Clint Eastwood. This western proceeds as follows:

A small settlement of gold miners is harassed by a powerful owner of a mining company, because they have staked a claim to some land downstream which the mine-owner covets. After unsuccessfully trying to threaten the gold miners into giving up their stakes by using violent means such as destroying their buildings and killing their animals, the powerful mine-owner switches from stick to carrot. He offers each member a considerable sum of money, on the condition that every miner sell his stake. The destitute miners are seriously tempted while their efforts to exploit the land have not been very successful. It seems to be very rational, considering their self-interest, to agree, the more so because otherwise they can expect further violence. However, while they have to make a collective decision, they have to take part in a public discussion about how to proceed. Moreover, while each miner has to defend his standpoint publicly, the logic of an individual rationality based on self-interest is met by collective arguments. While a majority agrees that the offer is highly favorable, in the end no one wants to accept it. Social norms are now coming into play and tend to weigh more heavily. They agree that it would be cowardice to bow to the will of a

bullying mine-owner, that it would be unjust and a betrayal of their ideals of freedom. They decide to take the risk of losing the fight with the mine-owner and stay and fight (Rothstein 1998: 116-7).

The story of *Pale Rider* depicts politics according to the ideal world of Hollywood films. The prominent features of this ideal debate are:

1. Inclusiveness: everyone participates.
3. Loyalty and trust: the miners deliberate face-to-face.
4. Direct democracy: everyone is included in the decisions.

*Ad. 1 Inclusiveness.* In the Hollywood case, the common interest is fairly simple to establish. The conflict is set in a small community with obvious good and bad guys. In the real world of urban-local politics, even in small settings such as neighbourhood projects, the unit of review is not so easy to identify. The involved interests often extend beyond those of the local community, there are often concerns that tend to be ignored because people lack effective organization and most local communities are nowadays pluralistic in various senses – cultural, religious, ethnic, class, gender and other identities have proliferated. In practice, it often appears to be very difficult to define and realize an ideal of inclusiveness. Moreover, even when a fairly pluralist presence has been realized, it is even more difficult to assure that this plurality will also be given a voice.

*Ad 2. Loyalty and trust.* Loyalty is an important factor in public debates. In Hirschman's classic distinction between exit, voice and loyalty, a delicate balance between these options is regarded as being essential (Hirschman 1970). An unrestricted right to exit will reduce people's commitment to voicing their views and searching for creative solutions. Loyalty needs to be cultivated, but too much loyalty will also lessen the attraction of voice. It can reduce public debate to mere affirmations of unity. In the Hollywood case the debate is held under conditions that create too much loyalty and too few exit options. It is taking place in a small and well-integrated community, in which every member is known. There are hardly any exit and veto options. In these communities, which are united against the outside world, too much loyalty is cultivated. Distrust of non-members is a cementing factor, which controls members' loyalty and prevents 'betrayal' of the community (Misztal 1996: 216-7). Loyalty is also fostered by the fact that the debate is face-to-face. As the pressure to conform to the male camaraderie of a small community of miners is strong, those who disagree do not regard voice as a very attractive option. In this type of community face-to-face debates can easily become undemocratic, because of the risks of conformism and coercive agreement.

In real world cases, however, the problem is rather the other way around. Anonymity and the availability of abundant exit and veto options reduce the danger of conformity, but they increase the risk of free riders. Urban debates

often do not have too many mechanisms that can generate trust but rather too few. Problems such as free riders and shifting involvements are the most pressing problems of real world cases. Personal contact, regular meetings and reputation are positive incentives in the real world to create loyalty. Therefore, face-to-face debate is an important condition to provide social pressure against defecting. Internet as a medium has its advantages, but is also problematic as long as participants can remain fairly anonymous and are free to join or quit at any time. The anonymity of internet can be reduced by developing security measures, but it cannot be eliminated completely (Sztompka 1999: 82). Even though internet has increasingly been used to support the urban debates, it can only supplement and not replace face-to-face discussion. The fact that face-to-face exchange of views is so central is a valuable dimension of urban debates.

*Ad.3 Direct democracy.* In *Pale Rider*, the setting is a wild-west 'state of nature'. There is hardly an institutional context that frames decision-making. In the real world of local urban politics, the formal power of representative institutions should be taken into account (cf. Nelson 2000). Therefore, it is important to analyse the ways in which the debates are linked to the formal power of decision-making. It is, for instance, important to know if local politicians are committed to act upon the outcomes of the debates. The goal of the debates may be simply to consult the public, but citizens often expect local government to respect the outcomes of such debates. In the real world of local politics, the tension between intensive and direct participation of citizens in future planning on the one hand and the formal authority of local government in decision-making on the other is a source of continuous concern.

In sum, we have three criteria that merit discussion here: inclusiveness, loyalty and decision-making authority. In the following, I will discuss to what extent these criteria have been realized in the urban debates, and how they could be met more fully.

## 5 Inclusiveness

Urban debates are more or less organized according to the principle of inclusiveness. The general idea is that public meetings and workshops should be open to all citizens or to those affected by the political consequences of political decisions. To make this happen, publicity and door-to-door invitations are regularly used in urban debates. These means are not sufficient, however, to avoid self-selection. Self-selection will play a prominent role when nothing else is done. This is problematic, because it tends to work in favour of a participating elite. Only the most motivated will take up the invitation to join an urban debate. When nothing is done to compensate for this, under

representation of ethnic minorities, the low skilled, young and old people and women will probably be the result (De Paus 1998a, 1998b). It is now common practice to employ initiatives to involve ethnic minorities. In North Amsterdam, for instance, ethnic minority organizations have become important mediators for involving their grassroots support. Furthermore, personal networks were used to organize a women's group. These methods were successful as far as they considerably increased the participation of citizens from some ethnic minority groups. However, they are less suitable for realizing representativeness, because those who are not organized are hardly reached. Random sampling in combination with a personal approach is a better method, but it is also an extremely time-consuming method.

It is not altogether obvious why one should take so much trouble to meet the principle of inclusiveness. Moreover, it is not quite clear when and why this principle should have priority. It is a central tenet of deliberative democracy that all those affected by the consequences of political decisions should have the chance to initiate debate, to question the assigned topics under debate and to contribute arguments concerning the rules of the procedure to be followed, but why and when should this have priority over all kinds of other goals (Benhabib 1996)? One such goal is the improvement of public opinion by providing and exchanging information. Participants will be expected to take in a great deal of specialized knowledge. Specialized knowledge plays an important role in political debates, so the best way to assure the quality of the debate may seem to select participants who are experienced in a field or who have professional knowledge, rather than trying to involve every citizen.

The ideal of inclusiveness is based on the notion of political equality. Although political equality is one of the basic principles of democracy, it is not so easy to defend it against claims that democratic decision-making demands specialized knowledge. Plato democrats have had hard times defending the principle of equal participation against elitist objections (cf. Weale 1999; Saward 1998; Akkerman 1997). The best way to defend the principle of inclusiveness is to acknowledge that claims to superior knowledge are legitimate in the realm of specialized knowledge. However, this acknowledgment should be supplemented by the assumption of fallibility, the belief that no one occupies a privileged position with respect to political judgment. The claim to superior knowledge is acceptable in the realm of technical or specialized knowledge, but it is not legitimate when moral choices are at stake. Experts cannot claim a privileged position when the wider interests of the community are at stake. In other words, when political decisions are at stake, individuals must be regarded as the best judges of their own interests (Saward 1998: 21-47). Deliberative democrats emphasize that judging one's own interests should be based on information. They also argue that inclusion can ensure that assumptions will be challenged and that all the information to develop feasible strategies will be

available. It can even be argued that diversity is essential to generate the creativity that can come from trying to find solutions that can respond to a wide set of competing interests (cf. Innes & Booher 2000).

Therefore, it is important that specialized knowledge is made accessible to participants of urban debates in order to ensure that equal participation can be combined with qualitatively acceptable outputs of the debate. Participants who do not have the necessary training or resources to gather and evaluate particular data should have the opportunity to consult technical experts they trust or to commission counter studies. In the urban debates, the goal of exchanging information is generally underrated. In this respect, the initiators are not ambitious enough. Compare, for instance, the way in which deliberative polls and citizen's juries have been organized. In these projects various means are deployed to improve the exchange of information, such as systematic inventories of participants' needs regarding information, regular provision of information, and opportunities for participants to invite experts.

Sometimes the role of specialized knowledge has to prevail over the principle of equal participation. In the course of the urban debates, the debates about future plans become more detailed, and expertise became more important. In the North Amsterdam debate, for example, the workshops were followed by a round of 'expeditions', in which experts had a prominent role. In such cases it is legitimate to select individuals or groups who have important knowledge to contribute. However, it is also paramount to deploy mechanisms that can assure the accountability of these experts. For this reason, in North Amsterdam delegates from the workshops were included in the expeditions as 'watchdogs'. In sum, inclusiveness can be combined with the role of specialized knowledge, but urban debates could be more ambitious in providing information and in stimulating the exchange of information between experts and citizens.

There is a second question that arises regarding the priority of equal participation. At first sight, it seems difficult to meet both criteria of inclusiveness and trust. In order to create trust, it is recommendable to restrict the size of interactive projects. The larger the group, the less likely are its members to cooperate. Studies both of collective action and experiments of social psychologists have born out the observation that size inhibits cooperation. Small groups are preferred as this helps overcome anonymity and enables participants to learn the views of other participants and to find ways to earn and grant respect. That is why Montesquieu and Tocqueville, among others, emphasized the importance of federalism or local government, to counter the problems of large republics (Dagger 1997: 113). However, in order to meet the principle of inclusiveness, a large review group should be preferred. In order to explain how these two criteria can be combined, let me begin by clarifying the role of loyalty and trust.

## 6 Loyalty and trust

At the heart of the theoretical debates about the concepts of trust and legitimacy has been the distinction between a Weberian concept and a Lockean concept of trust (Misztal 1996: 245-254). Both Locke and Weber regarded trust as being essential to government, but their conceptions of trust differed. Locke's notion of trust can be designated as personal trust, while Weber's concept can be labelled public trust (cf. Hardin 2000).

In Locke's view, trust is not only based on rational considerations but also on shared beliefs. His concept of trust was deeply moral in character. Locke concluded, for instance, that those who did not believe in God were not to be trusted. In his view, toleration should not be extended to atheists, if they do not share the foundational beliefs of government and society (cf. Dunn 1984; Akkerman 1997). Locke's concept of personal trust presupposes a homogeneous society. In our contemporary, pluralistic societies personal trust remains essential, but in a less demanding form. Personal trust cannot be based on shared moral beliefs anymore, but character and reputation can still be gradators.

Weber's concept of trust, on the other hand, is based on the idea that in modern societies political trust should be mainly based on legal procedures. Weber was an elitist, who thought that political participation of the masses should be restricted to the election of political elites. In his perception personal trust was only relevant with respect to charismatic leadership; aside from that formal procedures such as elections should do. Weber's perception of formal trust is important, but should be supplemented by a less elitist notion of personal trust.

In the urban debates trust can be fostered by formal rules clarifying what participants can expect regarding the commitment of public officials. Neutral and independent fulfilling of functions such as chairs and mediators also generates trust. Procedures regarding selection, participation, conflict resolution and decision-making authority should be outlined and explicitly agreed upon by all participants at the beginning of the process. Apart from these requirements, urban debates should also provide conditions for personal forms of trust.

Urban debates often start with rather open agendas, but as plans take shape, conflicting interests among (groups of) participants often appear. To find creative solutions, the debates then become very demanding in terms of collaboration. At such a stage personal forms of trust become more important. Otherwise participants might easily drop out of the debate or veto further debate in other ways. To create commitment, it can be helpful to organize regular meetings, including more informal meetings, which can provide the opportunity to discover personal backgrounds. When participants have well

defined, competing interests, this demanding form of trust can create understanding and respect for each other's views (Innes & Booher 2000). Trust in this sense can only develop in fairly small and intimate settings, with continuous meetings over relatively longer periods of time.

It seems difficult to combine the conditions that generate personal trust with the criterion of inclusiveness. The scale of the urban debates is too large for the direct participation of all citizens in face-to-face meetings. One solution might be to invite representatives of groups rather than individual citizens to participate in the urban debates. Representation of groups can be a good way to guarantee inclusiveness. In such cases, selection can be based on an associative model of democracy. Associative inclusiveness demands specific guarantees, such as securing accountability of groups' delegations to their associations, checks against sclerosis, and balancing functional and regional representation (cf. Cohen & Rogers 1995). However, representation of groups has some serious disadvantages. The urban debates initially concern agenda setting, in other words, trying to find out which issues should have a prominent place on the political agenda for the coming years. It is therefore often difficult to identify stakeholders beforehand. Moreover, the urban debates open up new channels for participation by providing opportunities for non-organized citizens to participate. This is an achievement that should be cherished. In order to maintain this opportunity, the best solution would be to select individuals rather than groups. The problem then is how to select a small number of citizens in such a way that they are representative of the whole body of citizens?

The value of small size and the goal of inclusiveness have been combined in experiments with deliberative polls and citizens' juries. Three strategies can be identified to meet the criterion of inclusiveness for face-to-face meetings of individual citizens: substitution, seriality and emaciation (Goodin 2000). Substitution is a strategy based on 'synecdoche', taking a part for the whole. A subset of all citizens can be selected randomly to represent all citizens. Choosing political representatives is one way to apply this principle. Selection by lot is an alternative way to realize substitution. Deliberative polls, citizen's juries and planning cells have been organized on this basis (Fishkin 1995; Renn et al. 1995; Stewart et al. 1994; Delap 1998). The principle of substitution can be combined with those of seriality and emaciation to involve high numbers of citizens. Seriality is based on the principle of deliberating by turns. Many randomly selected groups are organized in parallel. Emaciation is based on the idea of division of labour. Each citizen who participates in the process of policy-making constrains his or her involvement to a single issue at a given time (Dienel & Renn 1995: 121). Combining these three principles provides the way for meetings of a relatively large size, while maintaining the possibility to organize small face-to-face meetings. Selection methods such as contacting arbitrarily chosen citizens by phone or visiting them at home, providing

meeting places that have low barriers of entrance, etc., may help to minimize the non-response of those who do not have much trust in politics.

The principles of substitution, seriality and emaciation are essential when combining inclusiveness with small size. Extended participation can be combined with small meetings in this way. In deliberative polling projects, for instance, about three hundred citizens have been brought together to deliberate in small meetings (Fishkin 1995).

Large public meetings nevertheless remain important. Urban debates can only become public in the real sense of the word, when the public at large is informed. Justification of the results to those who did not participate can be provided with public meetings, media coverage and/or referendums.

When asked to evaluate the public meetings that have been part of the urban debates, citizens appear to be rather ambivalent. They appreciate the interactive dimension, but are sceptical about the outcomes. They doubt that their contributions will be taken seriously (Dimmendaal & De Kroon 1998). One gets the impression that the organizers often find the number of participants more important than the quality of the public debate. A lot of creativity is invested to find attractive forms for massive participation. In Arnhem, for instance, the future of the town was discussed in a series of thematic meetings in the local music hall. Some 200 citizens attended every meeting. The meetings were staged with a theatrical setting, and were presented as a kind of match. Experts' presentations were interrupted by umpires who were sitting in a row high up in the hall and who could switch off the expert's microphone with the push of a button, much to the amusement of the audience (Akkerman et al. 2000). Theatrical means can of course be very functional to stimulate participation. In Amersfoort, for instance, theatrical forms were developed, such as an Exchange, a Convention, a Lawsuit, a Fence of Horrors, which successfully enlivened the public meetings. Although participants often appreciate these efforts – including the offer of drinks or meals –, they tend to be uncomfortable with the idea that political participation is equated to harmless entertainment.

Amusement is an important dimension of democratic governance today. It is part of what has been called 'audience' democracy, a type of democracy in which mass media and popular culture dominate public opinion (Manin 1997). Within this type of democracy there is a wide gap between politics as a serious matter and politics as fun. If citizens are expected to have fun, while policy-makers are expected to do the serious part, emancipated and responsible citizens will surely feel disparaged politically. They want to be taken seriously. Of course, politics can be fun, and theatrical means can be very functional, as the example of the urban debate in Amersfoort has indicated. However, 'Disneyfication' in order to draw a large public tends to generate scepticism rather than trust.

## 7 Shared decision-making

The urban debates cannot be regarded as experiments in direct democracy. Formally, the decision-making authority will remain in the hands of elected politicians. This often requires a delicate balancing act between the outcomes of deliberation within formal decision-making bodies and the outcomes of interactive deliberation among citizens. The scales often turn in favour of the elected representative bodies.

To restore the balance, one option is to ensure that politicians are closely involved in the urban debates from the beginning. In most urban debates, politicians have played a marginal role, if they were involved at all. The fear that party interests will tend to dominate the debate precluded politicians from occupying an important place. Giving them more detached roles, such as chairing, might be one solution. An exceptional line has been followed in the urban debate that has been recently held in Amersfoort. Thirteen council members initiated this debate and they have continuously played a supervising role.

As well as this commitment of local politicians, it is also imperative that citizens share in decision-making authority. Commitment of the local council to give serious consideration to the outcomes of interactive projects is important, but as long as it is informal it can be withdrawn easily. Interactive policy-making can increase distrust in government instead of contributing to its legitimacy when decision-making authority is not shared. A maximized share in decision-making among all participants can be a very powerful incentive to guarantee that the interests of all parties are respected and taken seriously. Participants will then be motivated to reach an agreement and to make concessions before taking a vote (Hunold & Young 1998). To provide such incentives, it is recommendable to combine interactive practices with voting procedures such as referendums or local elections. Referendums are possibly the best way to ensure that not only the select group involved in the workshops will have the opportunity to share in decision-making. Apart from maximizing accountability to the public at large through large public meetings and media coverage, referendums also provide an opportunity for all citizens to evaluate the outcomes of the debate.

## 8 Conclusions

My overall assessment of the urban debates is based on the criteria inclusiveness, trust and shared decision-making authority. These criteria give a somewhat mixed picture. On the positive side, the urban debates provide opportunities for face-to-face discussion in fairly small settings. This is a

condition that is essential for the generation of loyalty and trust. On the other hand, the commitment could be increased by providing longer, continuous workshops, for instance taking two or three days. Of course, raising the participation costs for citizens in this manner means that it becomes necessary to compensate them, financially or otherwise. This is a procedure followed in the so-called deliberative polls and citizens' juries. Longer lasting workshops also have the advantage that a much more ambitious exchange of information can be realized. In these projects participants are provided with all general information necessary and they invite experts or interest groups of their choice to provide specialized knowledge or to test conflicting arguments. In these respects the urban debates could be more ambitious, following the lead of deliberative polls or citizens' juries.

Inclusiveness is regularly acknowledged as an important goal, and in the urban debates much effort is often devoted to involve citizens who tend to be underrepresented in electoral politics. In this way, the debates open up new channels for participation. This is an extremely valuable practice. However, the selection of citizens could be done more consistently, for instance, by following the strategies of substitution, seriality and emaciation. These strategies can be used to extend participation, while maintaining the idea of small face-to-face meetings.

Finally, with respect to decision-making, the most important conclusion is that shared decision-making authority can only be realized by combining interactive policy-making with voting procedures such as referendums. This can amend one of the most serious problems of the urban debates, the danger that in the end local governments will not take the outcomes seriously. Combining the urban debates with referendums can be a powerful incentive to guarantee that the outcomes of the debates are respected and taken seriously.

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#### Notes

1. However, it should be noted that it is a contested issue whether deliberation is by definition the superior mode of decision-making. There is some disagreement among deliberative democrats about the respective merits and pathologies of voting, bargaining and deliberation.

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