

Participatory advisory panels

how democratic are they?

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CENTRE FOR DEMOCRATIC NETWORK GOVERNANCE

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Participatory advisory panels: how democratic are they?

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Abstract

Following the search for novel ways of reinvigorating local democracy, participatory advisory panels have been widely used in many countries. Less attention, if any, has been paid to actually assess how democratic they really are. This paper compares, based on a theoretical framework for democratically assessing local democracy, two Danish case studies of new participatory advisory panels in local public policy. The two cases are based on two different institutional approaches to these panels. The first one represents a more traditional mode of citizens involvement organised through local neighbourhood councils and a decoupling between the different levels. The second, which is much more radical, is based on coupling with existing representative institutions, as well as with local public service providers. The chief question asked in this paper is both how ‘successful’ they are in terms of approximating certain democratic criteria, and subsequently, whether these two different approaches raise certain normative issues. The study is based on qualitative studies of the two Danish local councils of Holbæk and Silkeborg.

1. Introduction

To what extent are participatory advisory panels democratic? This special form of citizen involvement differs from other forms of deliberative realms as:

...they do not stop after creating the ideal deliberative conditions [...]. They also develop linkages to economic or state decision-makers to transmit preferences after they have been appropriately articulated and combined into social choice. Participatory advisory panels have often resulted from partnerships between non-profit organisations devoted to public discourse and government offices seeking to solicit citizen input and enhance their legitimacy (Fung, 2007, p. 161)

It would be a red rag to a bull to suggest that there is a lack of research in these new forms of more inclusive local participatory advisory panels with the explicit aim of aligning public policy with the considered preferences of the affected stakeholders of a local community or neighbourhood. However, what characterises much of the literature is the tendency of presenting individual single case studies embedded in specific institutional settings, preferably analysed from an ‘anti-representative’ democratic account, without actually reflecting over democratic legitimacy. Equally, the lack of consistent theoretical democratic frameworks for analysing new modes of local democracy does not exactly further comparative studies. The plethora of new ‘post-liberal’ theories (cf. Barber, 1984; Dryzek, 2000; Bohman, 1997) might be of value to philosophical and normative discussions but have, on the whole, little to do with democratic practice.

This aim of this paper is to democratically assess two new contemporary modes of participatory democracy in two Danish local governments. The analytical point of departure is a criteria-based framework for assessing the democratic effects of citizen involvement in networks (Agger & Löfgren, 2008) which, in turn, is based on a synthesis of modern democratic theory (including Dahl, 1998; March & Olsen, 1995), and on some of the thoughts embedded in the collaborative planning tradition (Healey, 1997). This perspective also entails a number of conceptual and methodological premises on how to democratically assess new modes of participatory democracy.

The remainder of this article is organised into the following sections. The next section, section two, will discuss the methodological premises for our assessment, and is structured around three criteria: *public access to political influence, public deliberation, and accountability*. Based on these three criteria, we generate a number of general questions, which we employ for assessing two Danish empirical cases of new participatory advisory panels in the local municipalities of Holbæk and Silkeborg. Section three briefly discusses the background for two Danish cases including both the overarching Danish governmental amalgamation reform of local and regional governments, as well as the local background for the new modes of local democracy in the two investigated local governments. Section four is the analytical part in which we employ our methodology on the two cases. In the final section, we discuss our analysis and suggest some roads to future research. Empirically, this paper is a comparative case study, primarily based on interviews with politicians, civil servants and chairs of the (new) neighbourhood councils in the two municipalities. In addition, we have made use of various internal local government policy documents; information obtained from the sections on local democracy on the two municipal websites; and newsletters from the two councils.

2. Conceptual and methodological premises

Our framework for assessing democracy is based on a methodological work on democratic assessments of collaborative planning processes (Agger & Löfgren, 2008). Theoretically, this framework is a criteria-based framework for assessing the democratic effects of citizen involvement in networks based on a synthesis of modern democratic theory (including Dahl, 1998; March & Olsen, 1995), which is, in the original version, structured around five criteria for democratic assessment: public access to political influence, public deliberation, development of adaptiveness, accountability, and finally, the development of political identities and capabilities. We have in this article, for practical reasons, omitted the criteria on the development of adaptiveness and the one of development of political identities and capabilities. Notwithstanding their importance in democratic assessments, our empirical data was not sufficient to make any conclusions regarding these two criteria.

In terms of the methodological premises there is a reason to point out a couple of underlying thoughts behind this research strategy on democratic assessment (from Agger & Löfgren, 2008, *pp.* 147- 149). First, the purpose of a democratic assessment is to identify the extent to which certain democratic values are either enhanced, or undermined, by certain institutions or practices. Second, democratic assessments should be criteria-based since it makes the assessments more transparent and replicable, and enables comparative assessments between organisations and over time. Moreover, democratic assessments are, not simply a question of judging whether something is 'democratic' versus 'non-democratic'. Third, while there are several different ways of describing these new participatory advisory panels, and their underpinning rationale, we suggest that in terms of governance and organisational form they can best be described as a form of 'network governance' whereas a central aspect of democratic assessment is that the choice of criteria exploited for the assessment should entail a dialectical relation to the object studied. Finally, democratic assessments should encompass the whole (policy) process. There is a tendency in many general judgements about the state of democracy, that certain stages are omitted. For example, political science scholars puts too much emphasis on the input side of a policy process (e.g. elections, campaigns etc), while, for

example, the collaborative planning literature is mainly focused on the output (and outcome) side of the policy process.

When it comes to identifying those cornerstones considered as legitimate among democratic theorists, Dahl's five criteria for evaluating democratic processes have been widely accepted, at least among students of democracy (Dahl, 1979; 1998; cf. Saward, 2001, p.3; Habermas, 1996, p. 315). The five criteria are: *effective participation*, *voting equality*, *enlightened understanding*, *control of the agenda*, and *inclusion of all adults* (Dahl, 1998, pp.37-8). They are 'criteria that a process for governing an association would have to meet in order to satisfy the requirement that all the members are equally entitled to participate in the association's decisions about its policies' (Dahl, 1998, p.37). Political equality is thus the underlying rationale behind the choice of these five. The search then becomes one of identifying the institutions that can embody them, and the necessary requisites for safeguarding the existence of these institutions. One can naturally criticise these norms for being too rigid, and chiefly connected to a liberal conception of the institutions of the nation-state. We have therefore chosen to rephrase them as three different criteria, and also to include some thoughts from other, and more local democratic, thinking:

- Access to political processes
- Development of public deliberation
- Development of accountability

As mentioned before, the choice of these criteria (and underlying democratic norms) do not exclude other norms. We go on to describe the different criteria, and add some specific research questions which have risen in order to enable a democratic assessment of local participatory advisory panels.

2.1 Access to political processes

The democratic ideal of access (and inclusion) is one of the major motives for establishing new more participatory forms of local democracy (Dahl, 1998, pp. 85-86). Ideally, by establishing 'extra-parliamentary realms', a group of involved citizens larger than the normal group of representatives elected for certain posts, should acquire access to political decision-making. The main argument is that the institutions should ideally be accessible to all those concerned. The criterion on access should, however, manifest itself through endeavour for a high level of inclusion. Moreover, the work of the participatory advisory panels should be transparent to those who do not actively participate, but would still like to be informed. Two questions are relevant in this context:

Q 1 To what extent are the new participatory advisory panels open to participation by the affected stakeholders?

Q 2 To what extent is the work of the new participatory advisory panels transparent to the wider public?

The second question primarily refers to both the range and extent of the new participatory realms, i.e. to the investigation of how many of those who could participate, actually do so. While a great part of the participatory literature mainly refers to networks as elitist phenomena, participatory advisory panels are supposed to expand the number of involved stakeholders. Although access is imperative from a democratic perspective, the range of participation is equally important (Agger and Löfgren 2008, pp. 151-153). A high (and

equally distributed) degree of political participation within a political system is normally considered to be beneficial. The ambition is therefore to identify the extent of citizen participation in the participatory advisory panels. Our research on this issue could be framed as follows:

Q 3 To what extent are those concerned actively participating, or being represented, in the new participatory advisory panels?

Another requirement of participation is a principle about equality of opportunities of access to the new participatory forms of local governances. One of the main points of criticism to participatory processes is that they tend to exclude members of ethnic minorities; include more men than women ; and that they often suffer from an age bias. Consequently, these realms tend to be composed of a majority of white middle class men (Young, 2000). Structural inequalities make it more difficult for certain groups to participate, and favours citizens and representatives with resources (Fung, 2004, p. 49). Therefore we are interested in investigating whether or not the distribution of those politically active are representative of their communities which also include the passive, marginalised or excluded citizens. One can say that this question aligns with the classical debate whether representation should be based on ideas and interests (Pitkin, 1967), or also should embody 'politics of presence', i.e. that disadvantaged groups in society should also be represented by 'peers', e.g. that women should be represented by other women, etc (Phillips, 1995).

Q 4 To what extent do the participatory advisory panels embrace a high level of both 'ideational' and descriptive representation?

2.2 The development of public deliberation

This norm primarily concerns the opportunity for those affected by a planning process to put items on the political agenda and discuss them in an open and tolerant manner, prior to the decisive stage of a decision-making process (Agger and Löfgren, 2008, p. 154-155). Two aspects are relevant for appraising the qualitative aspects of dialogues within the participatory advisory boards. First, the openness, tolerance and interactivity of public debates, and secondly, the efficiency of the dialogues. With inspiration from the work of Habermas (1996), democratic debates should entail a degree of 'reciprocity' and 'respect' among the involved participants (cf. Hillier, 1998; Bächtiger, et al. 2007). In terms of participatory advisory panels, these two concepts are important in relation to actual deliberation processes for chiefly three reasons. First, it embodies that the process should not function as a prejudiced realm for top-down dissemination of information, in which participants holding authoritative posts or roles (such as civil servants, politicians, experts) directly, or indirectly, prevent representatives of the public from taking part in the actual deliberation prior to decision-making. Second, the ideal of deliberative respect presumes that *all* participants show respect towards both demands and counterarguments to one's own position. Moreover, this rule implies that certain citizen voices should not be granted special privileges based on, for example, the duration of residency in the area, or the value of certain property. Third, the dialogue, at least initially, should be free from coercive arguments in which, for example, threats of legal action(s) underpin the deliberative argument. Coercive instruments might be necessary in certain deadlock situations, but the deliberative process should not initially be embraced by coercion. The question arising from this norm is:

Q 5 To what extent do the debates within participatory advisory panels approximate standards of reciprocity and tolerance?

The last dimension we want to address is regarding the outcome of public deliberation. By and large, this is a question of whether, or not, the involved participants believe that their voices are included in the decisions made by the panels (or conveyed to other decision-making bodies). According to Agger and Löfgren (2008, p. 155), the outcomes of deliberations should not set consensus as an ultimate goal (as often is mentioned in relation to Habermas' work), but instead, and in accordance with Mouffe (2000) and Pløger (2004) perceive conflicts as something productive.. Conflicts are inevitable, and striving for consensus might in fact undermine the quality of the deliberation process, as it may set up certain 'frames' for the dialogue too early in the process, thereby suppressing other views and assertions. Instead, the deliberation process should actually produce something that leaves foot-prints in the further decision-making process, rather than being an idle talk realm with no other purpose than the purely symbolic. This leads us to ask:

Q 6 To what extent do the debates produce something perceived by the participants as essential to the decision-making process?

2.3 Development of accountability

One basic premise of modern democracy is that citizens should have the capacity to hold policy-makers, in general, accountable for their actions (Agger and Löfgren 2008: 157-158). This principle is exercised through regular elections where citizens have the prerogative to sanction those politicians who have acted against the citizens' will, and civil servants are held accountable for their performance by rules and regulations. The traditional understanding of accountability demonstrates the problems of upholding this classical chain of accountability as participatory governance networks, (among other political actors) albeit actively engaged in policy-making, are not always accountable to the citizenry for their performance. Therefore the Agger and Löfgren adopt two important aspects of accountability from March & Olsen: *information* and *sanctions* (March & Olsen, 1995:162ff). Information relates to how transparent the processes appear. Sanctions can be both formal and official, and exercised through rules and democratic competition, or they can be derived from internalised personal obligations of the policy-maker. Since the participatory advisory panels we are discussing here, are set up, and usually 'meta-governed' by public authorities, there are in fact bodies which have a reference to accountable actors, i.e. politicians and civil servants. The point is that it should ideally be possible to identify some chain of accountability which can mean that sanctions can be imposed. A participatory advisory panel for citizen involvement operating in an accountability void is not favourable for democracy. Another aspect which is vital for securing a high level of accountability is that the representation of the (local) government becomes not only limited to civil servants. The question that arises here is:

Q 7 To what extent can the participatory advisory panels be held accountable for their actions through sanctions?

In the next section we will apply these questions on two local models for participatory democracy that were established in the form of participatory advisory panels in relation to the selected two Danish cases.

3. The Citizen Participatory Advisory Panels – New Models for Local Democracy in Denmark

Denmark has, together with the other Nordic countries, witnessed several experiments of democratic procedural forms. These experiments have in the first decade of the 21st century in Denmark accentuated as a result of the 2007 amalgamation reform (‘the Structural Reform’) in which 275 local municipalities were reduced to 98. The reform has publicly been accompanied by an immense fear for a loss of democratic avenues with increasing distances between the citizens and local politicians in the new enlarged municipalities. The government itself, together with the national municipal associations (e.g. Local Government Denmark), has also set up a Think Tank with the objective of presenting ‘good examples’ of new, and innovative, ways of reinventing local democracy. Their main output has so far been a short report with ten ‘good examples’ from various local governments across Denmark which should be used as inspiration to others (The Ministry of Interior and Health, 2005). Based on these thoughts there have been a growing number of new participatory advisory panels in many Danish local governments. We have in this article chosen to focus on two, *Silkeborg* and *Holbæk*, which both have been publicly announced as innovative in terms of testing new modes of involving citizens and local stakeholders in local democracy. Table 1 describes some of the main differences in terms of institutional design of the participatory advisory panels.

Tabel 1. Overview of the two models

Foundation	Silkeborg Territorial	Holbæk Territorial
Purpose	Input to the municipal council	Input to the municipal council
Institutional settings	Non-formalised	Formalised
Channels to the political System	Ad-hoc	Open and voluntary arena Fixed two meetings a year
Representation	- elected members - self appointed members	- self appointed members - participation of representatives from public local service delivery organisations
Role of public servants	Unclear	Facilitate local meetings
Rights	<i>Voluntary</i> for the municipal council and administration to consult the local councils in matters of their concern.	The Municipal council are <i>obliged</i> to hear the local forums in matters of their concern
Duties	None	Obliged to give response in matters of their concern No formal responsibility over implementing public services.

Silkeborg is a new municipality based on the amalgamation of three small rural and one large urban municipality. The council began already the reform to create an ambitious policy

on enhancing local democracy. In terms of participatory advisory panels, the democracy policy of Silkeborg encompasses the organisation of, and the interaction with, so-called 'neighbourhood panels' at the local level. There are (at the time of writing) 22 panels based and constituted on various geographical principles (e.g. villages, areas, neighbourhoods). Whilst many of the small rural villages already since years back have had village communities [*lokalråd*] which have become neighbourhood panels, others are solely the product of the new active municipal democracy policy. The new panels are, however, all purely based on voluntary attendance, and in many cases self-appointed memberships. Some of them have tried to become more formal in the sense that their members have been elected by vote, but this has never been a requirement. Thus, the organisational models for citizen involvement at a local level vary a great deal in Silkeborg. In order to produce more transparency, and also to uniform the formal settings for local participation, the selected local council committee for democracy suggested in 2007 a new model in which the neighbourhood panels were to become formal hearing partners with both rights and duties. However, the panels expressed themselves doubts about the proposal, and it was shortly after taken off the local agenda. So there are at present no formalised rules about the rights and duties of these new panels.

Holbæk is another of the new Danish municipalities which is based on the amalgamation reform and is composed of five smaller rural municipalities with a small market town. Holbæk, like Silkeborg, has promoted the building of a completely new local institutional arena for participation. Based on 17 local districts the municipal council formed the same number of local committees [*lokaludvalg*]. These local committees are officially characterised by an 'open' and mutually respectful atmosphere of collaboration. The committees are open for the individual residents of the neighbourhoods, but also for local associations and business interests etc, whereas all stakeholders should be treated as equal partners. Coordination groups have been established in several of the local neighbourhoods which role is to initiate and facilitate local public meetings and hearings. However, the municipality emphasises that the coordination groups should not obtain a monopoly on representing the local neighbourhood. The underlying idea of the local committee is that shall function as a platform for establishing ad-hoc and self-organised groups for solving smaller local problems, and as an arena capable of coordinating local activities and networks. Compared to similar panels in Denmark (and abroad) are there two innovative, aspects in the Holbæk model of advisory panels. First, the panels also include representatives (i.e. managers) from the public local service organisations, e.g. primary schools and nursing homes, whereas these institutions are obliged to participate. The explicit aim is to integrate local public service delivery with the private and voluntary sector. Second, the local committees maintain a close contact with the political level in the municipality council and the institutional set up is neither based on tokenism nor devolution. This integrated model has in fact become institutionalised in the political (i.e. representative) life of Holbæk. The municipality is now obliged to consult the local committees in matters which relate to a specific neighbourhood. At the centre of the communication between the municipal council and the local committees is the so-called 'dialogue meeting' where smaller groups of council politicians meet with the local coordination group twice a year to a public meeting. Issues raised by the committees at these meetings are noticed in so-called 'diaries', and have to be taken into account by the different municipal departments. The issues are then assessed from a professional point of view (which might include amendments or changes), after which it is presented to the municipal local council. Finally, the issues are hereafter discussed at a

regular municipal council meeting which result in a position from the council. Using the metaphor of a traffic light the proposals are either given a 'green'; a 'yellow'; or a 'red' colour as a response. The green colour indicates an acceptance of the proposed project, the yellow colour symbolises that more preparation of the issue is required, and finally, the red colour signify that the proposal is either not a local government issue, or that the proposal cannot be accomplished (because of e.g. financial reasons). Holbæk uses the web actively and each local committee have a 'diary' on a homepage, with meetings, minutes and notification of events.

4. Access to political processes

We have in both cases studied access in relation to a) access of the local neighbourhood councils in to the political level of the municipality, b) access of citizens to the neighbourhood councils.

In **Silkeborg** there are, as described above, no formal agreements on the interaction between the neighbourhood panels and the municipal council. It is up to the specific municipal departments if, and to what extent, they want to consult the neighbourhood councils in certain matters. The municipal departments have in practice different traditions for collaborating with the neighbourhood councils and for how they perceive the role of the citizens. As expressed by members of the local administration, the unit for urban planning has a tradition for consulting the neighbourhood councils in physical planning processes, while the local social department regard citizens as 'clients', or 'users', of public services and thereby conceive a more passive role for citizens. So the channels for participation diverge. The question about access and inclusion at the local level can be discussed in two ways. First, there is the question about access to become a member of the neighbourhood councils. Second, there is the question about access to the events and meetings initiated by the local councils.

In relation to the first question, we have in Silkeborg been able to identify two different basic models among the different panels. One with elected members where all the local residents in principle can stand for election, and one with more or less self-appointed and volunteered members, typically selected on territorial principles (all the small populated areas of a neighbourhood have their own representative). From our interviews we can see that the respondents characterise the 'typical' members as resourceful and active members of the local community with a base in either civil society associations and/or local public organisations. We find it noteworthy that a considerable proportion of the members of those neighbourhood panels we encountered were middle-managers from the public sector (e.g. heads of social service offices, headmasters of local schools etc). A different observation is that those of our respondents those who had been felt a stronger and a more solid mandate to act. This should perhaps not come as a surprise as some of the panels have witnessed turnovers of more than 75 per cent. However, the majority of the 'board meetings' of the local panels were closed, especially those where the neighbourhood panel members had been elected. Otherwise there are, at the local neighbourhood level many different ways to arrange awareness, and local arenas, for public debate, and there are several examples of local public meetings which also are conveyed to a broader public through the local free media (typically small articles in the newsletters from the local sport associations). Moreover, many of the neighbourhood councils use web pages and email newsletters to communicate with the local

residents thereby trying to create transparency. Also, all the neighbourhood councils cater for annual public meetings with open agendas. In terms of inclusion there is a general problem across all the councils with mobilising and recruiting the youth and also households with small children. However, many of the local areas adhere to old traditions of an active civil society where sports, and in particular the struggle for better sports facilities, has been a mobilising factor among the local residents. So even though representatives from families with small children and youth were difficult to mobilise in general, they were keen to participate in matters of their own concern. One specific issue that clearly managed to mobilise whole communities across the municipality, was impending threats of shutting down the local primary school or the library. Many of the village communities, which now had become neighbourhood panels, were actually the result of protest movements against cutting down on public service.

In **Holbæk** municipality there are, as mentioned above, formal rules on the interaction between municipal council and the new local committees. So the channels for participation are transparent and clear in the sense that the municipality is obliged to hear the local councils in matters of their concern. Moreover, there are two annual meetings with politicians from the local council. As the local committees are open for everyone, nobody can claim a privileged role. In terms of who participates, our respondents talk about the ‘usual suspects’ which, at least among the civil servants, is considered to be a problem. The same civil servants identify the excluded, or non-active, as the youth, the residents from ethnic communities, and people other than those with a party political background. As expressed by one of the local civil servants:

It's the 'Veterans' Club' who attends the meetings - 'the usual suspects'. And there is a risk that it becomes a traditional municipal project which is not the aim. We want change.

In addition, the Holbæk democracy scheme is based on the premise that the managers of the local public service deliveries attend the meetings, which has not been the case in all the committees. A point of critique raised from some of the school headmasters is that attending the meetings is time consuming and that the former model with a selected political committee on certain policy fields e.g. schools or youth with elected politicians, provided a more direct access to the political level. A headmaster we interviewed expresses her views in the following quote:

Personally, I do not think it's fair that time resources are taken from the school in order to support issues of local interests, for example, activities to restore the local village pond, and other issues that has nothing to do with the school. We haven't got any extra resources to attend all the meetings.

When the model of the local committees was first presented there were no integrated imperatives regarding public sector institutions managers' attendance. Today the job descriptions stipulate that the local leaders should actively support the local committees and participate in the meetings. In terms of transparency, the public meetings of the committees are announced in advance in local media, on message boards in local shops, as well as on homepages and through electronic mailing lists. According to some of our respondents, the local committees have contributed to establish a common platform for local action that has brought together local stakeholders that previously did not interact.

Summing up this section on access and participation, we conclude that the question of who participates, to begin with, demonstrate similarities between our two cases. We can conclude that those who participate as active members in the neighbourhood councils in Silkeborg, as well as in the local committees in Holbæk, belong to a rather narrow group of citizens. They are people with resources, in form of knowledge, time and access to networks. They are often active in several local associations, or are members of user boards of public service organisations. Actually, the institutional structures in both the new local democratic models perpetuate the familiar pattern of contemporary political participation. Those who participate are those with time to participate at meetings, familiarity with standard meeting procedures, knowledge of local political matters, and access to like-minded citizens and networks. This also naturally creates a bias in terms of representation although this does not necessarily represent a problem as long as these collectives do not exclude the non-active. However, our study demonstrates that even though a variety of initiatives were set off with the objective of creating transparency through e.g. informing local media, electronic mailing lists, pamphlets, posters in the local shops or institutions etc., we only noticed a few signs that the local panels/committees in the two municipalities actively tried include the non-active by e.g. actively seeking to encounter the non-active. Our study does not reveal if certain voices felt they were excluded or not represented in the local advisory panels. In both Silkeborg and Holbæk we found evidence that some citizens had had other anticipations to the actual role of the advisory panels than the members of the neighbourhood councils or steering committees whereas they had had hope that these new realms for deliberation could support their personal cases interests. A noteworthy difference between the two models in relation to access is the principle about 'openness' where all meeting in the Holbæk model are required to be open for all that are interested, and even the small working group meetings. According to our informants this has a symbolic value signalling that 'all are welcome' and no person can claim to be more affected or privileged than others.

5. Public deliberation

As mentioned above, our questions referring to the criterion on public deliberation refer to both the openness of including various viewpoints and assertions in the debate realms, as well as to what extent these debates actually produce anything which is considered by the actors to be essential for the political decision-making process.

Our empirical material from **Silkeborg** reveals very few negative examples of the dialogue processes internally within the coordination committees of the neighbourhood panels. Instead there seem to be a general consensus that the deliberation processes within the neighbourhood panels are functioning with respect to the process standards of reciprocity and tolerance. In particular, the members of the neighbourhood councils are praising the level of discussion and deliberation in the panels. However, and with respect to what has already been mentioned above, many of these meetings are closed and restricted to only the board members of the local panels. Our informants state that over time the panel members have developed a high degree of trust and reciprocity despite divergent interests. The fact that many of the meetings were held in the homes of the members contributed to a 'friendly atmosphere'. Just to quote some voices from the neighbourhood councils:

*Our debates are just fantastic.
The discussions are harsh, but good.*

Also, the dialogues during the public meetings, which are open for all the members of the local community, seem to work well, and there are examples that good initiatives are nourished during these meetings, and conveyed to other levels. Even though the respondents mention cases of more cantankerous single-issue assertions during the open debates, this is not considered to be a significant problem. However, the road from the local deliberation processes to the actual local government decision-making process in the council is far from straight. First, the respondents from the neighbourhood councils indicate that politicians, and also the local government administration, have been difficult to communicate with, and there is only one example of an actual meeting between the neighbourhood panels and the elected politicians. This is, according to the politicians and civil servants we interviewed, not the result of ignorance, but is by and large an effect of the increased work-load caused by the reform and a new political landscape. One of the politicians we interviewed also confirms that the politicians are still suffering from the repercussions of the reform in which, for example, former mayors from the old municipalities have been reduced to 'ordinary' councillors. Consequently, it does not come as a surprise that it has been difficult to mobilise any attraction for the new channels of citizen involvement. Second, the lack of clarity regarding how to elevate local deliberation to the municipal council level (and in particular the unclear status of a so-called selected local democracy committee) has meant that more substantial demands from the neighbourhood panels have not been raised at the municipal council meetings. This being said, there are also testimonies that the contacts between the neighbourhood councils and the local government administration are functioning well, and that smaller technical issues ('parish pump issues') are easily resolved.

The initiative of the two annual meetings between the local committees and the politicians in **Holbæk** is very much based on an underpinning idea of dialogue and deliberation. As expressed by one of the employed 'facilitators' of the dialogue meetings:

The essence [of the two annual dialogue meetings] is the dialogue and the identification of the thoughts and ideas in the local communities. There's no political decision-making process involved, and the committees are not entrusted with any decision-making competencies, so the essence is dialogue.

Furthermore, like Silkeborg there seem to be a general perception among the involved that the realm for deliberation is characterised by reciprocity and tolerance, with the inclusion of different types of knowledge. However, unlike Silkeborg there has been discussion about how to improve the standard of the meetings between the neighbourhood councils and the politicians. Many of the politicians are not accustomed to these types of public deliberations, and many feel a need to prepare fixed and considered replies to various inquiries. But the idea of the model is to create a genuine public deliberation at the local level which albeit linked to the political level should not replicate local electoral meetings with unilateral information. How to de facto convey this to the politicians has also been a prioritised issue. Regarding the question of conveying deliberation processes to the municipal council decision-making processes, the whole institutional set up of the Holbæk scheme is based on the active participation of politicians and the principle of diaries. As such we can clearly say that the

deliberation processes is coupled to the actual decision-making (although the municipal council does not always follow the proposals). However, the new procedures also means that local communities have directed all inquiries to the dialogue committees, which effectually means that it has become more difficult to contact local public administration.

Summing up, our empirical study reveals in both case that the internal dialogues in the neighbourhood councils or local committees are functioning in accordance with the norms on respect mentioned above, and that the dialogues (despite some initial problems) are moving in the right direction. However, there are significant differences between the participants' perception of the outcome of the dialogues. In the Silkeborg model several of our informants emphasised the lack of attention, or linkage, to the political level, while there in Holbæk seem to be positive attitudes to the dialogue between the local and the political level. The set-up in Holbæk with the two annual dialogue meetings, and the immediate feed-back mechanism, created a high degree of efficacy and faith on the responsiveness of the municipality towards the local voices.

6. Democratic accountability

The question of democratic accountability in the context of participatory advisory panels is first and foremost a question about a clear mandate from the political level, as well as transparency of the processes. Moreover, it also includes the possibility of identifying accountability when implementing the output of the deliberation processes. As both the new participatory schemes we have studied here are initiated from above, and thus ultimately, include the possibility of holding the politicians of the council(s) responsible, there are some minor, albeit significant, differences between the two cases.

The neighbourhood councils of **Silkeborg** demonstrate perhaps the most indistinguishable chain of accountability of the two cases. On the one hand, among those neighbourhood councils which are popularly elected, there is clear political mandate from the local residents in the area. In particular in those councils where the turnover had been high and the councils had strived to present the electorate with real possibilities of candidates. This was naturally not the case in those councils in which the members were more or less self-appointed or, at least, put there through the silent consent of the residents. Still, there seem to be subtle chains of accountability through these members' role in the local civil society. As expressed by one of the citizens we interviewed:

We are not there [in the councils] because we know how to raise our voices and we are not completely detached from the local civil society. Me and others are members of various boards for local associations, have a pretty good feeling with community life, and are respected for it.

That being said, it is difficult in the Silkeborg case to actually find any accountability chain between the local neighbourhood panel and the municipality. Our material shows that the unclear mandate to the councils give demarcation conflicts vis-à-vis the user-boards of e.g. local day-care institutions (nurseries), where the users cannot figure out who to hold accountable for certain decisions and who is actually in charge. The fact that the administration has not got a clear policy on who to actually collaborate with, but chose from case to case has not really made it easier.

The **Holbæk** case differs from Silkeborg in terms of accountability as the chains are both more visible and tangible here. As all proposals from the local committees have to go through a group of elected politicians, the citizens can easily hold someone accountable.

One aspect which is important to bear in mind in both cases is that those people who are in the councils and committees in the two municipalities have to confront the fellow communities almost every day. So even though there are no formal mechanisms for holding representatives accountable in Silkeborg, the members of the councils are not exactly operating beyond any mechanisms of sanctions from their support base, or community.

9. Conclusions

The objective with this paper has been to assess the democratic performance of two specific models for reinvigorating local democracy through participatory advisory panels, based on selected criteria on *access*, *public deliberation* and *accountability*. In terms of *access*, our assessment demonstrates that both cases of local democracy are primarily based on face-to-face deliberation, and thereby favours resourceful individuals. This is perhaps not a surprising finding given previous studies on political participation (cf. Cook et al 2007). However, we observed a difference in the two models with respect to the transparency of the process. In the Holbæk case there were clear and articulated rules for the collaboration between the local and municipal level, whereas the two annual dialogue meetings with the politicians have created a direct channel of communication for the local stakeholders to the political level. Meanwhile, the access for citizens to the political level in Silkeborg was less clear and based on irregular ad-hoc meetings in certain policy fields. The majority of our respondents in Silkeborg also expressed that the politicians were invisible in the local policy processes.

Our assessment of the criteria of *public deliberation* shows that the dialogues within the coordination committees of the neighbourhood panels and local committees to a large extent are characterised by reciprocity and tolerance. Again, these deliberations take place among mainly resourceful actors of whom there seem to be respect and an understanding of disagreements in interests. Our study demonstrates that all our respondents make an effort to create awareness about the local meetings and debates. A variety of methods were used: writings in local newspapers; electronic mailing lists; minutes and announcements on websites, and posters on notice boards in local institutions and supermarkets. However, several of our respondents, in both municipalities, claim that it was a challenge to extend the local residents' knowledge about the local neighbourhood councils/ local committees. Based on our study we can conclude that the public deliberation have been improved at the local level in the two neighbourhoods by the neighbourhood panels and local committees, or at least, produce neutral effects.

The criterion of *accountability* is the one where we most easily can identify differences between the two municipalities. In relation to the political mandate, our cases show that the Holbæk case has got explicit rules of operations. Moreover, the close contact between the politicians and local residents at the dialogue meetings twice a year, provide a sense of visibility, and also make the politicians truly accountable for their decisions in the municipal council. The level of transparency is thus high in the Holbæk model. In Silkeborg is the

contact with the politicians much more blurred since there are no formal rules and solely intentions based on the 'good will' of the municipality to deliberate with the advisory panels.

The findings discussed in this paper illustrates that the Silkeborg model demonstrate a perhaps more traditional approach on how to organise local democracy. It is based on ad-hoc contacts with flexible open agendas, and with few rights and duties. This is in one sense positive, since the approach may encapsulate a variety of local organisations and settings. However, we can based on our criteria see that this model misses some of the potential coupling mechanisms that could bring the municipal level more closely to the local level, thereby integrating and mobilising many of the local resources. The Holbæk model shows many innovative modes of organising local democracy. By having a clear, transparent and repetitive structure there has been established a direct access to the political channel between the advisory panels in the neighbourhoods to the municipal representative system in the council. So, based on our democratic criteria, and the tentative results of our study of two distinct models of new forms of participatory advisory panels, we can conclude that the self-organising, autonomous and bottom-up model of democracy, not necessarily mean a better democracy.

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