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New models of local democracies – a comparative assessment of democratic citizen advisory panels

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Abstract

Following the search for novel ways of reinvigorating local democracy, there has been a mushrooming literature based on descriptive single case studies, in which pros and cons of the specific case has been presented. Less attention, if any, has been paid to actually comparing the institutional settings of the different models for bringing citizens (back) in local policy-making. This paper compares three Danish case studies of new modes of integrating citizens' views in local public policy. The three cases are based on different institutional network approaches to reinvigorating local democracy following the amalgamation reform of municipalities in 2007. The first model is based on coupling with existing representative institutions as well as with local public service providers, while the second and third models represent more traditional modes of citizens involvement through local neighbourhood councils. The chief question asked in the paper is both how 'successful' they are in terms of approximating certain democratic criteria, and subsequently, whether these three different approaches raise certain normative issues. The study is based on qualitative studies of the three Danish local councils of Holbæk, Vordingborg and Silkeborg.

Keywords: local democracy, institutional settings for public deliberation, citizen participation

1. Introduction

How does the institutional design of new modes of local democracy affect issues as *access* to policy processes, the character of *public deliberation* and questions of *accountability*? In recent decades most industrialised democracies has experienced an increase in new forms of local democratic institutions designed to directly involve citizens in policymaking (: 286). At present public participation has become an integral part of public service-delivery in many European countries as governments are seeking to involve citizens in public policymaking through processes of consultation and engagement (Carpenter & Brownill 2008). An underlying argument for these initiatives is that modern public policy-making needs to incorporate the perspectives, ideas and resources of affected stakeholders in order to generate more innovative policies, and dislocate from the technocratic red-tape (Dente 2005). However, there is a contradiction between on the one hand the enhanced interest in political participation among the decision-makers, and on the other hand an increased public dissatisfaction with politics (Beresford 2002). The representative, and essentially party-based, modes of democracy with formal avenues for how citizens are consulted have been criticised for being insufficient as a means to reconnect citizens with governing institutions and processes. Empirical studies demonstrate an increasing loss of peoples' trust in, and sense of affiliation with, our systems of politics and governance resulting in declining interest in party politics; in particular with respect to active party memberships (Carpini *et al.* 2004; Stoker 2006; Rosenberg 2007). Consequently, there has been a growing interest, among both academics, public servants and local politicians in identifying novel avenues of engaging citizens in the political decision making process (Smith 2009a). Since the end of the 1990s there has been an explosion in small-scale experiments with new modes of institutionalised forms of democratic participation. Participation is being organised using a variety of more or less deliberative mechanisms (Fung 2003; Fung 2007). The institutional designs stretch from more formal sub-councils, committees, user panels and advisory boards, on the one hand to more short-term events and venues in the shape of single public hearings, taskforces, workshops, 'charettes', consensus-building processes, and deliberation days (Gastil & Levine 2005; Laurian & Shaw 2008). A common denominator is that they are all based on participatory and deliberative processes aiming to increase the number of individuals and groups who participate in local policymaking.

While there is no shortage of studies on these new institutional forms, less attention has actually been given to the assessment of their democratic qualities, and the field of democratic assessment and evaluation is still at an embryonic stage(Chess 2000; Carr & Halvorsen 2001; Abelson & Gauvin 2006; Laurian & Shaw 2008; Smith 2009a). Many studies on new forms of local democracy seem to be characterised by single case studies embedded in specific institutional settings; preferably analysed from an 'anti-representative' democratic account; and without actually reflecting over the democratic legitimacy. Equally, the lack of consistent theoretical democratic frameworks for analysing new modes of local democracy has not exactly furthered comparative studies. The

plethora of new 'post-liberal' and deliberative theories (cf. Boham 1998; Dryzek & 2000; cf. Barber 2004) might be of value to philosophical and normative discussions. But they have, on the whole, little to do with democratic practice in modern industrialised democracies whereas less attention has been paid to systematic and empirical evaluation of democratic innovations (with some few exceptions, cf. (Fung 2003; Sørensen & Torfing 2005; Lowndes *et al.* 2006; Mathur & Skelcher 2007; Agger & Löfgren 2008; Smith 2009a). Furthermore, there is also a general call from scholars, practitioners and policy-makers for more empirical and comparative accounts that assess the interactive qualities and democratic effects of deliberative processes (Collaborative Democracy Network 2005).

The aim of this article is to offer an evaluation of the democratic potential of some of these new and more deliberative institutional designs. Our focus is oriented at democratic innovations, with a particular attention on institutions that are designed to directly engage citizens as lay persons (as opposed to experts or representatives of organised interests). To be more specific, we are interested in the institutionalised forms of citizen participation in local political decision-making where the citizens are given a recognised role in policymaking. The empirical foundation for the article is a study of three *advisory citizen panels* that, following the Danish Municipal Amalgamation reform, were established in three different local governments in 2007. The analytical point of departure is a criteria-based framework for assessing the democratic effects of citizen involvement in networks which we have presented elsewhere (Agger & Löfgren 2007; Agger & Löfgren 2008). This framework 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). In this article, we aim to take the model one step ahead and demonstrate how our assessment criteria can be applied in an empirical study. The remainder of this article is organised into the following sections. The next section, section two, will present the background for our democratic assessment framework and the analytical issues we are addressing. The section ends by presenting the three criteria which we employ in this article for assessing our cases: public *access* to political influence, *public deliberation*, and *accountability*. Section three briefly discusses the background for the three Danish cases – Holbæk, Silkeborg and Vordingborg - including the overarching Danish governmental amalgamation reform of local and regional governments. Section four to sex is the analytical part in which we employ our three criteria on the three cases. In the final section, we discuss our analysis and suggest some roads to future research. The paper is primarily based on qualitative interviews (approx. 20) with politicians, civil servants and chairs of the citizen advisory panels in the three local governments. In addition, we have made use of various internal local government policy documents, newsletters from the advisory panels, and other forms of written sources.

2. Developing audit tools for democratic assessments

The literature on public participation is approached by scholars from a variety of disciplines, and is thus heterogeneous at present. By reviewing the literature on participation we can conclude that there is a plethora of evaluation criteria for assessing democratic effects, but only few which are aimed at apprising the democratic effects at a local level (Rosener 1978; Chess 2000; Rowe & Frewer 2004; Abelson & Gauvin 2006). The subject is, however, addressed more explicit in the political science tradition where in particular the comparative politics tradition has focussed on the existence of certain institutions around the world (cf. Catt 1999). At present, the democratic assessment literature is according to a number of scholars divided between normative theory and empirical policy analysis (Beetham 1999; Smith 2009b); a regrettable and non-productive divide. As Shapiro points out: 'This [divide] is unfortunate, partly because speculation what about ought to be, is likely to be more useful when informed by relevant knowledge of what is feasible (Shapiro 2003: 2) taken from Smith (2009a:9).

Our framework for assessing democracy is based on a previous work on democratic assessment of collaborative planning processes (Agger & Löfgren, 2008). We have here been guided by some of the ideas embedded in the UK Democratic Audit tradition (cf. Beetham 1994; Weir & Beetham 1998; Beetham 1999; Lord 2004), but also by newer frameworks for evaluating democratic performance in network governance (Schelcer *et al.* 2005; Leach 2006; Mathur & Skelcher 2007). Our framework is theoretically a criteria-based framework for assessing the democratic effects of citizen involvement in networks based on a synthesis of modern democratic theory (including March & Olsen 1995; including Dahl 1998), which is 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.* Based on these five criteria, we generate a number of general questions, in order to increase the understanding in research and practitioner communities, and provide a framework for assessing the democratic consequences of collaborative processes in a comparative perspective. In terms of the methodological premises there is a reason to point out a couple of underlying thoughts behind our research strategy on democratic assessment. First, democratic assessments are different from normal policy process evaluations where policy is measured against predefined goals or strategies, and the reasons for success or failure are analysed (cf. Vedung 1997). 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 (a point also mentioned by Smith, 2009a).

Second, we believe that democratic assessments only can be criteria-based. Here, we partly diverge from the perspective of Mathur & Skelcher (2007). They propose a dual methodology that involves both a criteria-based assessment, including what they call 'the democratic hardware' referring to the formal constitutional arrangement, along side with an interpretive analysis of the 'democratic

software'. By this they refer to those subjective factors that provide insights into the practices of public administrators, citizens and other actors around these bodies. The democratic hardware assesses the formal constitutional attributes of a governmental entity against certain democratic principles. The democratic software is measured by using an interpretative approach including research methods such as e.g. narrative analysis, qualitative interviews or q-methodology. Whilst the latter part of this analytical strategy may very well generate fruitful studies of, for example, how various actors perceive the state of democracy, or how they understand their role as citizens; it is from our and perhaps more normative, perspective a concealed hazard in surrendering the whole notion and conceptualisation of democracy to the actors' own self-reflection. Thirdly, 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. While there are several different ways of describing these new modes of local democratic governance, 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'(Torfing 2005). Broadly speaking, the new modes of local democracy which we see across the world often takes shape in the form of 'networks', or 'partnerships', composed of representatives of local governments, business and associations of the civil society, as well as ordinary citizens. Even though they are usually initiated by local authorities, they are fairly autonomous *vis-à-vis* public authorities and traditional representative institutions.

Our framework is thus developed for autonomous local networks that: a) are formally initiated by a public agent, b) which include both citizens and stakeholders as active members, and c) where there is a clear objective to solve local policy issues. In this context many of the classical political science approaches (see, Catt 1999* for a review) fail as they only consider formal and representative institutions as valid study objects for democratic appraisals. 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. In general, traditional political science puts too much emphasis on the input side of a policy process (e.g. elections, campaigns etc), while, for example, the collaborative planning literature (cf. Healey et al. 1999) is mainly focused on the output side of the policy process including the building of community identities and democratic learning (cf. Innes & Booher 1999; cf. Connick & Innes 2003). The criteria we are applying are based on a number of democratic norms which unify traditional democratic norms (as described by Dahl, 1998), the more deliberative tradition of March & Olsen, 1995, and to a lesser extent the rich literature on communicative and collaborative planning especially where it relates to criteria for processes and outcomes. In our original version we also include democratic adaptivness and the development of democratic identities and capabilities. Unfortunately, for the benefit of the space, we present a down-sized assessment in which we have been forced to leave out the more demanding criteria of adaptivness and the development of democratic identities (which we hope we will be able to return to later).

Access and participation

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)). The chief argument is that these new institutions (ideally) should be accessible to all those concerned. The criterion on access should, however, manifest itself through endeavour for a high level of inclusion. A second question 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 & Löfgren 2008, pp. 151-153). A high (and equally distributed) degree of political participation within a political system is normally considered to be beneficial. 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 2004:49). 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.

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 & Löfgren, 2008, pp. 154-155). Two aspects are relevant for appraising the qualitative aspects of dialogues within the local advisory panels; a) the openness, tolerance and interactivity of public debates, and b) 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). In terms of local 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 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. 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

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. 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.

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: 155*f*). 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. March & Olsen suggest that accountability primarily concerns *information* and *sanctions* (March & Olsen, 1995:162*ff*). Information relates to how transparent the processes appear. Consequently, the work of the participatory advisory panels should be transparent to those who do not actively participate, but still would like to be informed. 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 there should ideally be possible to identify some chain of accountability meaning that sanctions can be imposed. 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.

3. New institutional arenas for public deliberation

In the Scandinavian countries there has been a discussion about how to develop institutional forms of empowered participation within the last two decades. Local governments frequently use and experiment with user surveys, public consultations, citizens juries, and institutional mechanisms of co-governance in order to reinforce the link between government and civil society (Agger *et al.* 2008: 161). Denmark has, together with the other Nordic countries, witnessed several experiments with new 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 merged into 98. The reform has been accompanied by an immense fear for a loss of democratic avenues with increasing distances

between the citizens and local politicians in the new expanded municipalities. The central government itself, together with the national municipal association *Local Government Denmark*, 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 became a short report which presents ten 'good examples' from various local governments across Denmark as inspiration to others (The Ministry of Interior and Health, 2005a). Based on these thoughts local governments across the country have been experimenting and launched innovative forms of new institutional arenas for public participation in decision-making using a variety of more deliberative mechanisms. According to a government source 36 per cent of the municipalities have formulated a '*Strategy for local democracy* (Velfærdsministeriet 2009*) and have implemented different forms of *local participatory advisory panels* (Hansen 2009). These differ in various ways in relation to how they are constituted (self – selected/geographically), in terms of the level of devolved power competences, and the level of financial and manpower support.

Our three case councils have partly chosen because they all have been publicly been proclaimed 'innovative' in their work of testing new modes of citizen- and local stakeholder involvement. Moreover, they are all characterised by before the reform being rural municipalities with one champion provincial town surrounded by suburbs and smaller villages. The institutional settings for participation vary in terms of the degree of formality and rules for interaction between the political-administrative level and the 'community'. But the common factor is that all three municipalities have created some new local institutions for local democracy at a neighbourhood scale called: neighbourhood board/committee or council. [in Danish: *lokalfora*, *lokalråd* and *lokaludvalg*]. For pure practical reasons we will in the remainder of the article address them all as *local advisory panels*. The local advisory boards in the three municipalities are constituted for two mainly reasons. First, they have the aim of serving as a local platform for deliberation among the citizens and other stakeholders in the local communities. Second, they are meant to serve as a platform for dialogue between the representatively elected municipal politicians and local government administration and the local communities. None of the models are granted the rights of formal decision-making and fully devolved rights to exercise power, but it is clearly stated in all the statutory documents of the three models, that they have the right to be heard in matters of their concern. While this is a common feature, there are some substantial differences in the institutional design, which we will describe below.

Silkeborg is a new municipality based on the amalgamation of three small rural and one large urban municipality. The council began already prior to the amalgamation reform the work with an impressive policy aiming on enhancing local democracy. In terms of participatory advisory panels, this '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 something similar in the past [*lokalråd*] which were simply transferred to neighbourhood panels as a result of the reform, others are the sole product of the new active municipal democracy policy. Still, the new panels are 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 (from the local government). Thus, the organisational models for citizen involvement at a local level diverge a lot from each other 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 themselves expressed doubts about the proposal (as they did not want to overwhelmed by issues concerning general local government issues), and it was taken off the local agenda. A less formalised agreement was made accepted in 2008.

Holbæk is another of the new Danish municipalities which is based on the amalgamation reform and is composed of five smaller rural municipalities surrounding 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 advisory panels [*lokaludvalg*]. These local advisory panels are officially characterised by an 'open', and mutually respectful, atmosphere of collaboration. The panels 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 panel is that it 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) there are three innovative, aspects in the Holbæk model of advisory panels. First, the panels also include representatives (i.e. managers) from public service organisations, e.g. primary schools and nursing homes, and the managers from 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 specific neighbourhoods. 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 facilitated by a public servant. Issues raised by the committees at these meetings are noticed in so-called 'local area

books', 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, for example, financial reasons). Holbæk uses the web actively and each local committee have a 'local area book' on a homepage, with meetings, minutes and notification of events. Third, all issues concerning the neighbourhood has to go through the local advisory panel and be debated with the small group of council politicians. Previously, the local school board, as an example, could make direct contact to the selected local government committee on 'youth and schools'. This is no longer possible as all inquires and questions first must pass (the filter of) the local advisory panel.

The new **Vordingborg local** government are like the abovementioned local councils the result of the amalgamation reform and is composed of three minor rural municipalities with one large urban municipality. The model for local advisory panels in Vordingborg is inspired by the Holbæk model but is not a pure copy. The municipality suggested that there should be 17 local advisory panels. The intention was to obtain some entities of a considerable size, typically centred on a local public service institution (in practice: a local primary school). The local areas where then supposed to internally coordinate and create a local advisory panel. However, these plans were not without protests around the geographical borders and there is currently one geographical area that has not wanted/been able to come to an agreement and created a local advisory panel. The Vordingborg model of local democracy is formulated as an additional 'offer' (or opportunity) for the citizens to enter a dialogue with the elected politicians. The local advisory panels meet once a year with a committee of council politicians. The meetings are explicitly without the presence of public servants and there are no formal rules of the agenda or procedures of the meetings. It is stated as an intention that the municipal departments should consult the local advisory panels, but there are no formal requirements about it.

The following table will provide an overview of the differences of the content of the three democratic models.

Table 1 describes some of the main differences in terms of institutional design of the local advisory panels.

	SILKEBORG	VORDINGBORG	HOLBÆK
FACTS ABOUT THE MUNICIPALITY	Amalgamation of **5** former municipalities	Amalgamation of **5** former municipalities	Amalgamation of **4** former municipalities
	Seize 865 km²	Seize 621 km²	Seize 579 km²
	Pop. 87,371	Pop. 46,615	Pop. 69,010
PURPOSE	Input to the municipal council	Input to the municipal council	Input to the municipal council
			Local coordination of activities
FORMAL ORGANISATION OF THE ADVISORY PANELS	23 geographically based self selected advisory panels	17 geographically based self selected advisory panels	17 geographically based self selected advisory panels
	No rules for the constitution of the panels	Some rules for the constitution of the panels	Rules for the constitution of the panels
	Some panels are constituted by local elections	Criteria for being a advisory panel in form of size, and with some public service institutions	Compulsory participation of leaders of local public service delivery e.g. head masters of local schools or elderly homes
LINKS TO POLITICIANS	No regular meetings	1 annual meeting	2 annual meetings in spring and autumn
		The meetings are not facilitated	The meetings are facilitated by public servants
LINKS TO THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION	Collaboration agreement	Collaboration agreement	Collaboration agreement
	Declaration of intent to consult the panels – but few formal procedures	Declaration of intent to consult the panels – but few formal procedures	Formal requirement to consult the advisory panels
	Local memorandum list		Local area 'book' on the net – with political response on the different proposed projects

3. Access, inclusion and participation

A central question often raised in assessments of local democracy processes is the question of 'who' participates, and if the institutional settings favour certain groups of citizens? (cf. Petts 2001). In this section we, firstly, study the access of actors by the formal channels for participation from the municipal level towards the local level. Second, we study the channels for participation in the three local 'realms for participation'.

In **Silkeborg** municipality there are no formal agreements on the interaction between the local advisory panels and the local council. It is up to the separate municipal departments if, and to what extent, they want to consult the local advisory panels in certain matters. The municipal departments have in practice different traditions for collaborating with the local advisory panels, 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 predecessors to the local advisory panels in issues regarding physical planning processes, while the local social department still regard citizens as 'clients' (or 'users') of public services and thus are less inclined to assign them an active role. 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 becoming a member of the advisory panel, and secondly, there is also the question about the access to the events and meetings initiated by these panels. In relation to the first question we were able to identify two different formal models for selecting this 'micro-level political leadership'. First, one with elected members in which all local residents can stand for an election in conjunction with the 'real' local government election. Second, a couple of less formalised models based on voluntarily principles, and with self-appointed members selected on e.g. territorial principles (e.g. all the parts of a neighbourhood should have at least one representative) or the selection of people based on their status in the local community (e.g. managers of certain public institutions such the headmaster of the school, the head of the local sport club, the vicar etc). When asked, our respondents characterise the 'typical' members of these councils 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 share of the members of those local advisory panels we encountered were middle-managers from the public sector (e.g. heads of social service offices, headmasters of local schools etc). Those of our respondents that came from elected advisory panels noticed that the fact that they were elected provided them with a more solid mandate to act on behalf of the community. Some of the council elections had also witnessed turnovers above 75 per cent. However, the majority of the meetings of the local councils were closed, especially those where the local advisory panel members had been elected. At the local neighbourhood level there are many different ways to arrange awareness, and local arenas, for public debate. The instruments for participation are local public meetings which are announced in advance, and reported about afterwards, in local free media (typically small articles in the newsletters from the local sport associations or the parish). Moreover, many of the

local advisory panels use web pages and email newsletters to communicate with the local residents thereby trying to create transparency. Also, all the local advisory panels arrange annual open meetings with open agendas. In terms of inclusion there seems to be a general problem across all the councils to mobilise the youth and households with children, although at least sports have been able to mobilise these groups. One specific issue that clearly managed to mobilise whole communities across the municipality, was the pending threat of shutting down the local primary school or the library. Many of the village communities, which now had become local advisory panels, were actually a result of protest movements against cutting down on public service.

In **Holbæk** municipality there are 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 the politicians. As the local committees are open for all nobody can claim a privileged role. However, 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. Consequently, the civil servants can quite easily identify the non-active among young people, other ethnic groups than Danish, and in general citizens who are not active in party politics. As expressed by one of the local civil servants:

> *It's the 'Veterans' Club' or 'the usual suspects' who attends the meetings. And there is an imminent risk that it becomes a traditional municipal project which wasn't the objective with these new committees. We want to see something different than the old system.*

In addition, it is supposed that the managers of the local public service deliveries should attend the meetings which have not been the case in all the committees. The idea behind their participation in the local advisory panels is to create a close link and collaboration between the diverse public resources in the local area. One point of criticism raised from some of the school leaders is that attending the meetings is both time consuming and that the former model with a selected political committee with elected politicians provided a more direct access to the political level. A headmaster of a primary school 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 are not allocated any extra resources to attend all these meetings.*

When the model of the local committees first was presented there were no built-in imperatives regarding public sector institutions managers' attendance. At present, it is part of the job descriptions that the local managers should support and participate in the meetings of the committees. According to our respondents, the local advisory boards have contributed to establish

a common platform for local action that has brought together local stakeholders that previously did not interact.

Concerning the channels for accessing the representative system through the local advisory panels in **Vordingborg**, this is still under development. Some parts of the local government administration seem to be responsive *vis-à-vis* the new advisory panels, whereas others just neglect inquires and wishes from them. We have also among our respondents seen examples that the advisory panels have been neglected by the politicians.

> *And already now we experience that they [the politicians and the administration] forget the new local democracy when it comes to important issues. [Local chairman for one committee (Præstø) on his blog]*

This statement is based on an actual case where the location of a new nursing home where the local advisory panel was not heard during the planning process but merely notified afterwards. One of the problems seems to be that there are no institutionalised feed-back mechanisms from the politicians. Both the politicians as well as the local advisory panels can start a dialogue, but how it ensues is an open question. The local advisory panels in Vordingborg also replicate the tendency in the two other councils concerning the bias in political participation. The model is, as mentioned above, considered to be an 'offer' to those citizens who wish to engage in local issues, rather than something imposed by the local council. Consequently, senior citizens and community members who are previously politically active seem to dominate the local meetings and the new committees' work. However, as one active member of a local committee has noticed, and also exploited, to put certain controversial issues on the agenda seems to be useful way of mobilising the local community. The citizen has himself put the establishment of wind turbines on the island (where he lived) as an item on the agenda which has had very positive effect on mobilising the local residents. On top of that, we have some testimonies from the local advisory panels that at least some of local committees have tried to canvass all the local residents in the district in order to make them attend the meetings.

4. Public deliberation

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

Our empirical material from **Silkeborg** reveals very few negative examples of the dialogue

processes internally within the local advisory panels *per se*. Instead there seems to be a general consensus that the deliberation processes within the local advisory panels are functioning well according to the process standards of reciprocity and tolerance. In particular, the members of the local advisory panels are praising the level of discussion and deliberation in their internal meetings. Just to quote some voices from the local advisory panels.

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

Also, the general meetings, which are open to 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 higher levels. Even though there are examples of more cantankerous single-issue assertions during the open debates with the members of local community, 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 municipal council is far from straight. First, the respondents from the local advisory panels indicate that both politicians, and the local administration, for various reasons have been difficult to communicate with, and there is only one example of an actual meeting between the local advisory panels and elected politicians. This is not the result of ignorance, but is by and large an effect of the increased work-load caused by the reform with a new political landscape (at least according to the civil servants we talked to). One of the politicians we interviewed also confirms that the politicians are still suffering from the aftermaths of the reform in which, for example, former mayors from the old municipalities have been reduced to 'plain' councillors. Consequently, it is perhaps no 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 deliberation processes in the local advisory boards to the municipal council level has to a large extent meant that more substantial demands from the local advisory panels have not been raised at the municipal council meetings. This being said, there are also signs that the contacts between the local advisory panels and the local government administration are functioning well, and that 'parish pump issues' usually are resolved without any reluctance.

The initiative of local advisory panels in **Holbæk** is, like the Silkeborg equivalent, very much based around an underpinning idea of dialogue and deliberation. As expressed by one of the employed 'facilitators' of the committees:

> *The essence [of the local advisory panels] is the dialogue and to identify 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, and with the inclusion of different types of knowledge. However, unlike Silkeborg there has been discussion about how to enhance the meetings between the local advisory panels and the politicians. The problem is that the politicians are not really prepared for some of the questions which are raised among the committees at the meetings, and there is thus less chance for creating 'good realms of dialogue'. We have also encountered several examples among our respondents, and in the written material, that improving the methods for deliberation is a prioritised issue. Regarding the question of conveying the 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 'local area books'. As such we can clearly conclude that the deliberation processes is coupled to the actual decision-making (although the municipal council does not always follow the desires). However, the new procedures also means that the local communities have directed all inquiries to the local advisory panels, which means that it has become more difficult to contact the local administration.

Judging by our interviews with people in **Vordingborg**, the open debate-meetings organised by the local committees seem to be 'civilised' as one politician expresses it. Still, many of the respondents point out that there are always one or two 'cantankerous' citizens attending the meetings who are dissatisfied with a council decision or feel that some individual request to the council has got stuck in the red-tape. Instead of seeing the meetings as a realm for public deliberation, some politician has experienced that citizen use the meeting as a complaint board concerning 'technical issues'.

> *Some citizens want to know why 'we' haven't fixed the hole in the road in their village. Sometimes I feel that my role is a bit awkward. The citizen wants us to deal with their individual cases whereas I see my role as something more politically overarching. Consequently, I can't give the citizens what they demand. [Politician]*

This also affects the believed impression of whether the dialogue meetings have any effects or not. However, both positive and negative assertions during the meetings seem to be taken seriously (both politicians and members of the local committees claim so), and even though the politicians themselves cannot handle them, they are conveyed to the responsible body (usually the technical department). The big issue, from the politicians' perspective, is that is difficult to discuss money and spending as the local government budget is the result of often complicated negotiations between the political parties represented in the local council. So it is difficult to make promises which involve new and expensive investments.

5. Democratic accountability

The question of democratic accountability is about a clear mandate from the politicians, as well as the transparency of the processes. It also includes the possibility of identifying accountability when implementing the outcomes of the deliberation processes. As both the democracy 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 cases.

The local advisory panels of **Silkeborg** demonstrate perhaps the most indistinguishable chain of accountability of the three cases. One the one hand, among those local advisory panels which are popularly elected, there is clear political mandate from the local residents in the area, and in particular those advisory panels where the turnover has been high and where the advisory panels have strived to present the electorate with real possibilities of choice. This is naturally not the case in the advisory panels where the members are, 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. One of our citizen informants comments his role in the following way:

> *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 of local associations, have a pretty good feeling with our communities, and are respected for it.*

That being said, it is in the Silkeborg case difficult to actually find any accountability chain between the local advisory panel and the municipality. Our material shows that the unclear mandate to the advisory panels give demarcation conflicts *vis-à-vis* the user-boards of e.g. local day-care institutions (nurseries), where the users cannot figure out who should be hold accountable for certain decisions and who is actually in charge. The fact that the administration has not got a clear policy on whom to actually collaborate with and chose from case to case has not exactly made it easier. In terms of transparency, it is very dependent on the tradition of local action and activity of the community. Some advisory panels have got their own local newsletters (and local electronic homepages) whereas others have none but announce their meetings in the local institutions or sport facilities others make an effort make use of mobilising personal contacts.

The **Holbæk** case is also different in terms of accountability than Silkeborg and Vordingborg, whereas here the chains are both more visible and tangible. As all the proposals from the local advisory panels have to go through a group of elected politicians, the citizens can easily hold the elected politicians in the local council accountable. The two annual meetings with the politicians serve as an arena for deliberation where local requests raised at the spring meetings are responded

to by the politicians at the autumn meetings. In terms of transparency, the public meetings of the committees are announced in advance on message boards in local shops, as well as on web pages and electronic mailing lists. All the local advisory boards have got their own homepages with common entry point on the municipal homepage. The local homepages contains a variety of information: minutes from previous meetings, announcements for upcoming events as well as information about how to contact members of local community organisations. Moreover, the homepage is used by the municipal departments to make calls for comments on diverse policy proposals.

In **Vordingborg** the mandate from the politicians' side has been quite clear in so far the initial idea of sending out the politicians direct to confront these new committees without the filters of the bureaucracy and/or mass media has been implemented. But this does not automatically mean that they have lowered their guard *vis-à-vis* the local advisory panels. Those people we have interviewed say that the politicians are difficult to work with, and likewise, the politicians claim, as mentioned above, that the citizens have not understood the underlying rationale between the advisory panels and the dialogue between citizens and politicians. Since there are neither formal rules for the collaboration between the municipal and local advisory panel level, nor procedures for the annual meeting between the local politicians and advisory panels, there had been several meetings where the participants could not agree about the purpose of the meeting. The politicians we talked described the local advisory panels as an offer – or opportunity for local citizens to have a dialogue with the politicians. They described their role as 'listeners' or as communicators of the overall local government political visions, whereas the citizens in many cases were confused to whether it was their or the politicians' role to set the agenda. Since there was no link to the administrative plans or policies in the municipalities it is our impression that the output of the meetings often resulted in being 'boards of complaints'. In terms of transparency there is (at present) no joint website for the local advisory panels. However, seven out of 16 of the local committees have got their own websites, and the council actually post some minutes from meetings in some of the committees. This does, however, appear as temporary problem as there are plans for a one-stop-entry to the local committee work as part of the local council website.

One aspect which is important to bear in mind in all the three cases is that those people who are in the advisory panels in the three municipalities have to confront the fellow communities almost every day. So even though there are no formal mechanisms for holding the members of the local advisory panels in Silkeborg accountable, the members of the panels are not exactly operating beyond any mechanisms of sanctions from their support base, or community. This, however, does not mean that the politicians' accountability in any of the three cases as such has been eroded. All the politicians we talked to still feel that they are in command and ultimately accountable for all political decisions.

6. Conclusion

The objective with this paper has been to assess the democratic performance of three 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 all three 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 three 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. Also in Vordingborg there were one annual meeting with the local and municipal level, but with no clear rules for interactions. Evidence was given that in many cases there were misunderstanding and different expectation to the content and purpose of the meeting. 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 where 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 advisory boards. Based on our study we can conclude that the public deliberation have been improved at the local level in the three municipalities, or at least, produce neutral effects.

The criterion of *accountability* is the one where we most easily can identify differences between the three 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. In Vordingborg we found that the fact that

there were no formal rules for the interaction of the political and local level resulted in different expectations and thereby also conflict over the idea of the meetings.

The findings discussed in this paper illustrates that the Silkeborg and Vordingborg models 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 three distinct models of new forms of participatory advisory panels, we can conclude that the self-organising, autonomous and bottom-up model of democracy, do not necessarily mean a better democracy.

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