

# **Democratic Innovations in Dutch Local Government: Experimentation in Search of Strategy**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Many attempts to innovate local democracy focus on enhancing dialogue and fostering collaboration between citizens, local politicians and local public servants. Their architects claim, as do many academics, that these innovations have positive effects on the quality of democratic governance. But what do they actually value when they do so? We distinguish three theoretical perspectives on the contribution of local democracy innovations: (1) a problem solving perspective: democratic innovation as a precondition for more effective public policy design and delivery; (2) a democratic quality perspective: democratic innovation as a contribution to embedding process values such as inclusion, participation and empowerment into local political processes; (3) an institutional capacity perspective: democratic innovation as a means to improve the capacity of the local government organization to connect with and process the needs, aspirations and concerns of local citizens of different stripes. We present evidence from case studies of four mid-sized municipalities in the Netherlands and show that the assessment of 'democratic innovation' varies among politicians, decision-makers and civil servants involved in local democracy innovations. Democratic innovations are neither designed nor assessed according to a single, coherent and widely shared innovation philosophy.

**Key words:** local democracy; innovation; impact; policy design; politicians

### **Introduction**

Many attempts to innovate local democracy focus on enhancing dialogue and fostering collaboration between citizens, local politicians and local public servants. Many academics claim that these innovations have positive effects on the quality of democratic governance. Democratic innovations are expected to contribute to effective policy making (Edelenbos and Van Meerkerk, 2016), to the realization of democratic values (Smith, 2009a; Michels, 2011), and to novel ways of organizing local government (Gilson, Dunleavy and Tinkler, 2009; Sørensen, 2017). Yet, we know very little about what politicians, decision-makers and civil servants involved in local democracy innovations expect these to contribute to democratic governance and how they assess their impact. What do they actually value when they emphasize the contributions that such democratic innovations can make to local democracy, and what do they seek to achieve when they design and manage such innovation efforts? This brings us to the central question of this paper: what democratic gains do local authorities expect from democratic innovations and how do they value these innovations?

Our article starts with an exposition of three theoretical perspectives on the contribution of local democracy innovations: (1) a *problem solving* perspective: democratic innovation as means to make public policy design and delivery more effective, (2) a *democratic quality* perspective: democratic innovation as a conduit for key process values associated with democratic governance, such as inclusion, participation, and empowerment to

become more firmly embedded in local political processes, and (3) an *institutional capacity* perspective: democratic innovations as a means to improve the intelligence ('smartness') and learning capacity of the local polity and its key institutions, particularly their ability to grasp the needs, aspirations and concerns of local citizens of different stripes.

We then explore if and how these different perspectives are reflected in the views of council members, aldermen, mayors, council secretaries and civil servants. We draw on four case studies of forms of democratic innovation in four mid-sized municipalities in the Netherlands, that differ in scope and design. Two of these municipalities have opted for a one-time democratic 'intervention' through a deliberative forum (G1000), two other municipalities have tried to gradually enrich existing structures of policy making with participatory elements.

Based on the findings of these studies, we argue that at least in these instances both the occurrence of innovative practices and the way their contribution is being assessed does not neatly follow any of these three master scripts. Instead, growing discomfort and negative public responses to the workings and outcomes of conventional policymaking processes seem to play a far greater role in getting cultures of local democratic innovation up and running—in particular, when combined with the arrival on the scene of advocates of experimenting with 'doing things differently' (often with a very specific design or format) within the existing institutions. Even so, how local participants and stakeholders such as the mayor or council clerk interpret and assess these new democratic practices, and how much room they are willing to permit and allowed to take continues to vary widely. How widespread, well-regarded and 'settled' new democratic practices in Dutch local government are, therefore tends to be more a matter of coincidence and confluence of actors and perspectives than driven by a steady movement rooted in a coherent philosophy of democratic innovation.

## **Understanding and assessing democratic innovations in local government**

Current scholarship on the topic offers no straightforward answer to the question of how and why local governments (should) pursue forms of 'democratic innovation' (Newton and Geissel, 2012). Some authors suggest that the need to do so is urgent, and point to what they see as the widening chasm between citizens and the political institutions and processes of representative democracy. In this view, democratic innovation should be directed at countering citizen disaffection, disengagement and distrust with current democratic practices (Smith, 2009b). Others suggest that innovation is needed to counter the bias of contemporary 'diploma democracies' whose political institutions privilege the civically competent higher educated section of the citizenry (Lee, McQuarrie and Walker, 2015; see also Bovens and Wille, 2017). The democratic innovations in this study all aim to enhance dialogue and to foster collaboration.

Calls for democratic innovation can be found in normative political theory (e.g. participatory theory), public administration (e.g. collaborative governance), and public management (e.g. adaptive and learning public organizations). Below we have grouped them into three distinct perspectives that together constitute an analytical framework to investigate the perceptions and assessment of the actual contribution of democratic innovations. Here, we primarily utilize these perspectives to understand the particular rationales for fostering democratic innovation advanced by their architects and stewards. The actual practices differ, as we will see.

***Policy-analytic perspective: Innovation and local public problem solving***

A first perspective is the problem solving perspective. The rationale for this perspective is that democratic innovation is a means to an end. Enhancing dialogue and fostering collaboration between citizens, local politicians and local public servants would create broader support for policy decisions and, therefore, make government policy more effective and legitimate (Kyllönen, 2017; De Graaf, 2007). In addition to this, engaging citizens in policy making through dialogue and collaboration allows governments to tap wider sources of information, perspectives, and potential solutions (Edelenbos and Van Meerkerk, 2016; Edelenbos, van Meerkerk and Koppenjan, 2017). This is expected to enlarge problem solving capacity, and thus improve the quality of decisions reached.

Goodin and Dryzek (2006) distinguish several possible pathways for democratic innovations—such as, in their article, deliberative mini-publics—to improve public policymaking and service delivery practices. A first pathway is through ‘actually making policy’ (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006: 225). This occurs when a citizens’ forum is formally empowered as part of a decision-making process. Yet, this is rarely the case (Setälä and Smith 2018). The few examples that come to mind are the Canadian British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly in 2004 on electoral reform and the citizens’ assembly on abortion in Ireland in 2006. Moreover, these are both cases at the national level instead of the local level.

A second pathway, in which there is a more indirect effect, is through ‘being taken up in the policy process’ (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006: 225). Even though citizens do not have formal power, recommendations of a citizens’ forum sometimes find their way to decision making, implementation of concrete actions (Michels & Binnema, 2019). An example of this is that the recommendations set the agenda of the local council, that they are discussed in the local council, and that they are given follow-up in decisions or concrete actions of decision makers.

The third pathway is through ‘informing public debates’ (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006: 228). Citizen dialogues might provide information both to the larger public and to those who are involved in policy debates and take the decisions. Better information to the public and media coverage of these dialogues might raise awareness for specific issues, alter people’s opinions, and, as a consequence, also influence the decisions of policy makers.

***Democratic quality perspective: innovation and the strength of local democracy***

The second perspective emphasises the contribution of democratic innovations to the extent to which the structure and functioning of a polity reflect core democratic values and principles such equality, inclusion, and citizenship. Rather than as means to an end, democracy and participation are seen as inherently desirable regardless of their policy impacts.

Now that both the traditional actors and institutions of representative democracy and the neo-liberal era’s governance networks find themselves struggling for public trust and social legitimacy, there have been widespread demands for additional and novel forms of citizen participation (Ercan and Gagnon, 2014; Heinelt, 2018; Newton and Geissel 2012; Stoker, 2016; Torfing and Triantafyllou, 2011) to open up political processes. The clarion call is that of ‘strong democracy’ (Barber, 1984: 117) – government with and by rather than for and in the name of citizens (Meijer, van der Veer, Faber and Penning de Vries, 2017).

Deliberative democrats argue that the essence of democratic legitimacy is the capacity of those affected by a collective decision to deliberate in the production of that decision

(Setälä and Smith, 2018; Dryzek et al, 2019). In this perspective, democratic innovations such as citizen dialogues and inclusive collaborative governance practices contribute to strengthening the quality of local democracy by allowing otherwise absent or quiet voices from the local community to be heard (Smith, 2009a,b; Michels, 2011). Democratic innovations that encourage a diverse group of people to take part in dialogues and collaboration may thus contribute to more equality and inclusion.

Democratic innovations aimed at enhancing dialogue and fostering collaboration may also contribute to democratic citizenship. By participating in public decision-making, citizens increase their civic skills and become more competent (Putnam, 2000: 338-340). Second, to the extent that such innovations increase the extent and quality of public participation in local governance processes, they contribute to the development of civic virtues, citizens' feeling of being public citizens and part of their community. More citizens become acquainted with civic virtues, such as active participation in public life, trustworthiness, and reciprocity (giving and taking). As a consequence, they may also feel more responsible personally for public decisions (Putnam, 2000; Eggins, Reynolds, Oakes and Mayor 2007).

How democratic innovations foster the realization of democratic values depends on the chosen institutional arrangement, in particular the procedure of selecting participants and the decision-making procedures (Fung, 2006). Selection by sortition and other mechanisms not based on self-selection lead to a more inclusive and diverse group of people compared to an open forum allowing everyone to participate. Also, when deliberation and opinion formation instead of voting form the basis for decision-making, more considered judgements emerge, individual and minority voices can be better heard, and civic skills can be practiced.

### ***Institutional capacity perspective: innovation and local governments' social learning***

The third perspective views democratic innovation as a means to acquire and improve the institutional capacity of local government organizations to grasp the needs, aspirations and concerns of local citizens of different stripes. Here, the rationale is that democratic innovation should be part of and produce a learning organization. Although innovations aiming at improving the institutional capacity may in the end also improve the problem solving capacity, this perspective focuses on the learning process, which could also take place when more effective policy fails to appear.

Forms of dialogue and collaboration between citizens, local politicians, and local civil servants may contribute to the social learning capacity of local government organizations since, as Pahl-Wostl and Hare (2004: 193) put it:

‘...management is not a search for the optimal solution for one problem but an ongoing learning and negotiation process where a high priority is given to questions of communication, perspective sharing, and the development of adaptive group strategies for problem solving.’

With this focus on values and shared understanding, the institutional capacity perspective may in some way be closer to democratic quality than to problem solving.

McNabb (2007: 126-7) defines a learning public organization as one that is quick to identify, digest and apply the lessons learned in its interactions with its environment, developing innovative solutions to the constantly changing legal, political, economic and social environment. Central to learning is the relationship between knowledge and action. The transfer from knowledge to action is a complex process. It requires the acquisition of

knowledge, the distribution of knowledge, the interpretation of knowledge, and a way to store the acquired knowledge for future use (Gilson, Dunleavy and Tinkler, 2009; Huber, 1991). In terms of Argyris and Schön’s (1978) classic typology, it presupposes ‘deutero learning’: acquiring the institutional capacity to learn.

One way in which democratic innovations could improve such learning capacity is through experiments. As they try to engage differently with citizens and probe into new forms of design, deliberation and public value creation, local governments learn about the concerns, needs and aspirations of citizens. This might gradually lead to a more fundamental change in the organization of local government, for example when collaboration and citizen involvement become a structural part of decision-making and the attitudes and work processes of the local council and administration are adapted and become more responsive to participation and the wishes of citizens (Michels & Binnema, 2019).

A second route towards learning is to search for information about what other local governments are doing through acquiring information through consultants, professional meetings, publications, or networks of professionals. Local government organizations imitate other local government organizations which are seen to be successful, particularly the costs of doing so are relatively low compared to the perceived benefits (Shipan and Volden, 2012; Lundin, Öberg and Josefsson, 2015). Table 1 presents a summary of the main contentions of the three perspectives.

**Table 1: Three Perspectives on Local Democracy Innovations**

Perspective	Criteria
Problem solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Richness of input provided by citizens</li> <li>• Balanced decision making, with full consideration of all options</li> <li>• Broad and deep support for policy decisions</li> </ul>
Democratic quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representation of various groups in society and deliberation</li> <li>• Inclusion and empowerment of citizens</li> <li>• Acquiring and deepening civic skills and virtues</li> </ul>
Institutional capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving the learning capacity of organizations</li> <li>• Acquiring the ability to productively navigate between and align electoral and non-electoral forms of representation and deliberation</li> <li>• Learning from experiences of other municipalities and jurisdictions</li> </ul>

## **Democratic innovations in four Dutch municipalities**

In the remainder of this article we report the findings of a comparative study of four mid-sized municipalities that have developed reputations for being at the forefront of local democracy innovation in the Netherlands. Two have done so through high-profile experiments with a particular type of (mini-public, deliberative) process (‘G1000’ – see

further below), whereas the other two have engaged in a plethora of both ad-hoc and orchestrated sessions and day-to-day evolving practices.

**Research design**

Our case selection can be characterised as ‘information-oriented’ (Flyvbjerg 2006), based on our prior knowledge about these four cases and our expectations regarding the type of information that could be obtained. To gauge how different stakeholders in these four municipalities interpret and assess their city’s innovative practices, we have interviewed councillors, mayors, aldermen, council clerks, and public servants. We used semi-structured topic lists (Bryman 2012) asking for: their personal experiences and involvement in these innovations; the back story to their occurrence and uptake in the municipality; their assessment of the public contribution (public value) these innovations were making.

**Table 2: Case Characteristics of Four Municipalities**

	<i>Aelion</i>	<i>Beeville</i>	<i>Cedartown</i>	<i>Dee City</i>
Inhabitants (1 Jan 2019)	>150.000	>40.000	>150.000	>60.000
Number of parties in city council / total number of seats (1 Jan 2019)	10 / 39	9 / 27	12 / 39	9 / 33
Focus of democratic innovation studied	G1000 mini-public deliberative process	G1000 mini-public deliberative process	Range of practices, including one open planning process on urban land management	Wide range of practices, including a 2016 open competition for citizen-led initiatives to obtain the municipality’s backing and implementation
Number of active participants	Approximately 540 (including civil servants and politicians)	Approximately 270 (including civil servants and politicians)	Variable. In the open planning process: several hundred	Variable. Estimated aggregate in period studied: several thousand
Interviews	N=10	N=8	N=7	N=7

In all, 32 interviews with key local actors were held between 2015 and 2018, of which the average duration was 60 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and manually coded for the presence of ‘fit’ with the three perspectives described above. This means that our analysis is based on a number of cues and indications we derive from theory, yet is explorative and qualitative. It is not designed to ‘test theory’ but rather than help us interpret and assess the cases at hand. Given the number of interviewees, we refrain from making general statements about the relative share of each of the perspectives on innovation

introduced earlier on or about the effects of the different types of innovation on the functioning of local democracy. Yet, the diversity of interviewees in each of the municipalities does provide an interesting pattern-card of the various perspectives on innovation and the way in which they are (un)connected to representative democracy. Moreover, given the variation in both region and demographics, our findings can be considered indicative for the dealings with democratic innovations in other Dutch municipalities (cf. Steinberg 2015). No empirical generalization is based on such a sample, but since these municipalities can be considered ‘early adopters’, we can consider them prototypical cases to understand how democratic innovations are fostered and assessed.

We have used invented names for the municipalities to ensure anonymity for interviewees, which for some of them was a precondition for their cooperation. Table 2 above provides basic descriptive details of the municipalities and the kinds of initiatives studied.

### ***Dutch local democracy***

Dutch local democracy has long been characterised by consensus politics: oversized governing coalitions, taking opposition parties on board in policymaking, and an extensive concertation with civil society organisations (Hendriks and Toonen, 2001). Meanwhile growing volatility among voters has resulted in fragmentation of municipal councils which has made coalition formation less predictable and more complicated. A growing number of municipal seats is occupied by local parties (close to 30 percent of the votes). Moreover, many citizens do not feel represented by traditional peak bodies such as farmers’ associations, trade unions or employers’ organisations. They demand more direct, instead of intermediated contact with politicians and civil servants. During the 1980s and 1990s this took the shape of experiments with more grass-roots focused consultative, ‘interactive’ policy making, mainly initiated by local governments. In recent years, there has been an increase in citizen-led initiatives, leading to a patchwork of all kinds of citizen involvement: citizen fora, citizen juries, neighbourhood initiatives, citizen conferences, participatory budgeting, etc.

Local authorities and their Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) now emphasise the importance of a connection between ‘political’ and ‘societal’ democracy. The Ministry of the Interior has developed various ‘Agendas for Local Democracy’. While the previous government very much stimulated democratic innovation, e.g. through a competitive programme called ‘Democratic Challenge’ which resulted in 99 experiments with innovation all around the country, the current government emphasises the strengthening of representative democracy, e.g. making the membership of local council more attractive and stimulating the role of the council secretariat and the audit offices. The four cases we discuss below exemplify the search for local contextual solutions, the balance between tradition and innovation and the struggle of many municipal boards and councils to integrate democratic experiments.

## **Findings and Analysis**

### ***Spearhead initiatives: Two G-1000 experiments***

The G1000 is a particular type of mini-public, a citizen forum which combines selection of participants through sortition with deliberation as its mode of communication and decision making (cf. Grönlund, Bächtiger and Setälä, 2014). The term is used as a wink to the G7 or G8 summits, with 1000 referring to the number of citizens participating – instead of the heads of state of the largest countries. There are six guiding principles for a G1000, although

the extent to which they are all implemented varies from one event to another. Two core principles concern sortition (participants are selected by lot, and invitations cannot be passed on to someone else) and deliberation (participants are engaged in a dialogue based on rational argumentation, and they do so on an equal footing). Next is the absence of a predefined topic or issue, i.e. the participants develop the Agenda for the City – a set of ten proposals – during the meeting. Fourth, all relevant actors from the local community should be included: next to citizens, politicians, civil servants, employers and ‘freethinkers’ are invited. Fifth, the decision making process should be transparent, which is argued to contribute to the commitment of participants to the outcomes of the G1000s (‘ownership’), Sixth, with the help of trained facilitators, all participants should feel safe to put forward their views and ideas and have an open dialogue.

***Aelion: innovation to reduce tensions between local government and citizens***

In March 2014, Aelion was the first Dutch municipality to organize a G1000. Approximately 540 people participated in the G1000, of which 450 were lay citizens. It was initiated by a group of citizens, who felt that both politicians and civil servants in Aelion had become too much inward looking, more focused on internal party conflicts and office politics, and therefore unable to tackle important local policy issues. For that reason, the G1000 organizers opted for a meeting just one week after the municipal elections, hoping that this would influence the parties that were negotiating to form a new board of Mayor and Aldermen.

As one of the organizers argued, the G1000 needed to be bottom-up, related to concerns of citizens, instead of following the policy agenda of the local administration. Accordingly, he emphasised the importance of the practical knowledge of the participants and the feeling of ownership that should result from discussing local issues with other citizens:

‘This is the big difference with Belgium: in [Aelion], people went home convinced they had to get into action themselves. (...) It was something like: you have argued that these things are important, well, if you find this important, you need to do it yourself. (...) The philosophy behind this is creating self-managing systems which are capable of implementing the ideas they have generated.’

Many councillors, in particular those who participated themselves in March, were enthusiastic about the atmosphere and energy of the G1000. What they liked about the G1000 as compared to formal settings, like public hearings, was that it created more room to look beyond one’s own interests and to listen and talk to fellow citizens by means of a dialogue instead of a debate. Although they did not consider the proposals developed during the day to be truly new or innovative, they welcomed the willingness of so many citizens to be engaged in local policy issues and developed their civic skills in the process (*democratic quality*).

Interviewees noted that the G1000 was only of many ways in which citizens of Aelion could be involved in policy making. Reflecting on the top-ten proposals (the ‘Agenda for the City’) they were hesitant to give a special status to the G1000. As the alderwoman responsible for citizen participation put it, there could be a risk that the G1000 would be seen as ‘the only thing in town’ to the detriment of Aelion’s rich tradition of various kinds of citizen initiatives. A number of councillors also stressed that they did not share the pessimism about the functioning of local democracy that had motivated the G1000 organizers:

‘Citizens predominantly want ‘good governance’. If there is a serious problem, or in case people find something really important, they will surely mobilize.’

These councillors argued that political parties were still able to tap into the wishes and concerns of citizens, and that they managed to find their own ways of staying in touch with the electorate. Their reservations about participatory and bottom-up democratic innovations extended not only to the G1000, but to the whole spectrum of direct or deliberative democracy. The lack of diversity of the participants was the most commonly cited weakness. Other councillors stressed the urgency for the municipal council to become more open and more outward looking (*institutional capacity*). They hoped the council would change its role towards stimulating and guiding citizen initiatives and towards sharing responsibilities for policy making with citizens.

Public servant interviewees were more inclined to stress the potential value of these mechanisms in complementing the conventional mechanisms of municipal policymaking, and tried to align them accordingly (*institutional capacity*). The council secretary:

I pushed hard for the G1000 to be held right after the elections and I also thought about ways to integrate it into the budgetary cycle.

One of the senior civil servants, who was also involved in organizing the G1000, reflected on the learning effect the G1000 may have had on councillors and aldermen:

Something seems to have changed in the minds of politicians. That is, they trust citizen initiatives more than before, instead of thinking that it is better that the government takes care of everything. The civil service in Aelion had already taken this path earlier on in a trajectory of change of the bureaucratic culture.

And yet the further use of G1000 (and similar mechanisms) in Aelion was by no means a given. There was resistance from council members who felt the council secretary was moving too fast and giving too much leeway for democratic experiments. Likewise, the senior adviser met with considerable scepticism from his civil service colleagues when he tried to incorporate some of the proposals of the G1000 in ongoing policy design work. Clearly, to a considerable segment of the current local elite, democratic innovation in Aelion is perhaps more of a 'nice to have' than a 'need to do'. This was also reflected in the lukewarm response by the local administration when a second G1000 was held two years later. As compared to the previous occasions, it felt less special and innovative, which made councillors and civil less eager to participate and to take the outcomes of the G1000 into consideration. The same can be argued for the citizens of Aelion, who showed up in way smaller numbers than in 2014.

### ***Beeville: innovation as a logical consequence of a vibrant civil society***

Following the example of Aelion, Beeville was the second Dutch municipality to organize a G1000, in October 2014. In contrast with Aelion, this was an initiative by a number of council members and the council secretary. Approximately 250 lay citizens took part, next to 20 politicians. The idea for a G1000 emerged from a conference held soon after the elections by the municipal council, in which it reflected on its role vis-à-vis society. This conference was initiated by the council clerk, who had also invited the chairman of the national G1000 Platform (and co-organizer of the Aelion G1000) to speak. Like in Aelion, the issue of improving the connections between the city hall and citizens was clearly on the table, with councillors feeling that they were too much focused on internal structures and at distance from citizens (*institutional capacity*). At the same time, the G1000 was also linked to previous

citizen initiatives and the process of invitation of participants was embedded in the existing structures of civil society, like churches, sport clubs and voluntary associations.

As the mayor put it, only a small number of the nearly 400 proposals that came up during the day could be seen as ‘radical’, while most of them, and particularly those proposals that made it to the final voting round were ‘modest, realistic, and frankly, a bit predictable’. Various proposals were derived from existing citizen initiatives, like the local cooperation to stimulate sustainable energy, or would develop into new ones, like the working group on road safety. Reflecting on these initiatives, the mayor and one of the aldermen displayed a certain ambiguity: although they very much welcomed these cases of active citizenship (*democratic quality*), they also noted a growing disconnect with local politicians. As a result, many of the initiatives seemed to depend on the enthusiasm and perseverance of a small number of front runners, which made them vulnerable. Moreover, the mayor and the aldermen argued that the local council could now easily push off responsibility and take a rather passive approach toward the G1000 proposals. This institutional void could result in a gradual decline of the citizen initiatives and a continuation of non-participatory practices of the council, leaving innovation very short-lived. They considered this problematic, as they thought the council was rather indolent, with an internal focus, with policy making lacking transparency and openness to citizens.

At the same time, several proposals matched ongoing policy processes in the council quite well. In particular when compared to Aelion, the Agenda for the City of Beeville was less abstract and it also required a substantial effort from local politicians both in budget and legislation. This led some councillors to sigh that the expectations surrounding the G1000 were too high. As one council member put it:

In the weeks after, the idea arose that the G1000 leads to something that municipal politicians adopt almost unthinkingly. I suppose this was partly caused by the way in which during the opening speech of G1000 the chairman emphasised that ‘...whatever is brought up, the council will embrace it’.

As a consequence, there was an uncomfortable sense among some councillors that particular policy issues were forced on them, and that they should give priority to G1000 proposals above other ways in which citizens expressed their concerns and wishes. This was reinforced by the fact that participants were not selected by lot, but through an open invitation, which gave some councillors the idea that citizens had come to the G1000 to promote individual or group interests. In contrast, other councillors argued that the close connection between the Agenda for the City and the policy agenda actually opened new opportunities to connect with citizens and give them a role in preparing and implementing policy, like in waste processing and accessibility of the city centre for cyclists and pedestrians (*problem solving*).

The variation in responses from councillors indicates how the attitudes towards the G1000 were mixed from the start. One of the political parties decided right away that it would boycott the G1000, while several other parties were sceptical but willing to give it a chance. Only a minority of parties were truly enthusiastic, as expressed by one of the councillors:

Citizen expertise should play a much larger role, next to academic and professional knowledge. I think the G1000 is a very appropriate format to retrieve and share this kind of expertise.

All in all, the widespread hesitance led to a relatively low turnout of councillors compared to Aelion. In addition, among those councillors who showed up, there was some difference of opinion regarding the role they should take when joining the conversations at the tables: as fellow active citizens or as representatives of a party with its ideology and platform?

Despite the detachment of many councillors beforehand, those who participated were inspired by the G1000 and they looked for ways to integrate G1000 into the structures and procedures of representative democracy. These efforts had little success because councillors were soon immersed in the steady stream of policy proposals from the aldermen. There was little feedback from the G1000 organizers regarding the progress of the Agenda for the City and soon the two worlds drifted apart. This was not necessarily considered a problem by its proponents:

To me, it is about this a movement that has gotten under way. Of course, G1000 does not replace [representative] democracy, but it is just a means by which we can tap good ideas. It contributes to developing citizenship (interview with municipal CEO).

This optimism was not widely shared: a number of councillors who were involved in the organization of the G1000 lamented that change was going way too slow. In fact, they argued it was not just that the impact on policy making is limited, but that there was no learning effect of the G1000. Little has changed substantially in the way local democracy works, in their view. Other councillors argue that this type of change takes time, and that that their colleagues want too much, too fast.

Looking back at the experiences with democratic innovation in Aelion and Beeville, we can conclude that expectations were too high and too divergent. While the rationale in Aelion is more geared towards democratic quality, problem solving is more prominent in Beeville. The G1000s were somewhere between (top-down) participation organized by local government and (bottom-up) citizen initiatives – which also led to confusion among participants whether it was about influencing local politicians or getting into action themselves. It should also be remembered that this was a one-shot event, with follow-up or feedback left up to those citizens who formed their own groups around one of the proposals. The G1000 was purposefully only loosely connected to the policy agenda of the municipal council, but this had the effect of councillors being able to easily discard the outcomes or use them strategically.

### ***Ongoing endeavours: steady experimentation***

Unlike the G1000 initiatives, which have a particular format and which are one-off events, the cases of Cedartown and Dee City analysed below, have their own particular setup and they are part of a durable process of democratic innovation. Moreover, in contrast with the G1000 and its broad agenda, citizen participation in these cases is more focussed on specific policy issues.

### ***Cedartown: weaving fabrics of participation on the go***

When in 2014 the outcomes of a conventional planning process for the redevelopment of a large, partially parkland area in between the train station and the city centre were met with loud and broad opposition from the public, the city administration changed tack. It ditched the existing plan and began a new, this time pursuing an ‘open planning process’ that would do justice to the preferences, knowledge and energy of local residents. The municipality made available a sports hall in the area as a venue for an open-ended, inclusive co-design process. Active use was made of social media to publicise the initiative and its

progress. Residents, business people, developers, and other stakeholders found their way to the hall in large numbers. Levels of engagement, energy and commitment were and remained high throughout the six-month journey of exploration and common-ground that ensued.

During this time, civil society actors were at the centre of the action, municipal public servants facilitated and supported the process, and both the executive (aldermen) and legislature (councillors) took a back seat, observing but not interfering in the process. A joint proposal for an investment plan to redevelop the area was then presented to the city council, and further discussions ensued for another two and half years, eventually leading to formal adoption of the three main pieces of work discerned in the plan. A 2017 evaluation of the process observed that right at the outset of the new process the breach of trust that had existed between residents and public servants was repaired. It was one of the most important objectives of this participation process to increase trust between the city's residents and the city's policymakers (politicians and officials). It noted the highly positive assessment that participants gave the new process, and concluded that this was fundamental to cementing support for its outcomes. In particular, the fact that participants were given the space – literally and metaphorically – to share their visions, present their ideas, and obtain insight into those of others allowed them to place their own concerns and preferences in a wider perspective, and so move towards common ground and hitherto unexplored solutions for the area.

This open planning process is emblematic for Cedartown's broader effort to involve more citizens more deeply into local public policymaking. Cedartown is a fast-growing suburban municipality that emerged from a series of amalgamations and comprises more than twenty root communities of vastly different size and character. Dealing with this variety smartly and fairly, and avoiding being captured by the loudest voices in the system was one of the key drivers to set up a whole system of community boards, and in some instances neighbourhood boards beneath them (*democratic quality*). These were designed to be forums for capturing and transmitting local residents' concerns and ideas to the city council and its administration. In practice, it proves hard work for them to keep playing this role effectively and across the board. Capture by 'usual suspects' and absence of 'soft voices' were recurrent concerns, as was the dealing with the great differences in these boards was of operating and climates.

The boards were seen as potentially useful but certainly not the sole and sufficient mechanism for thickening the city's democratic fabric. The local mayor and the responsible alderman for outreach had a strong commitment and the municipal organization employed specialist staff to increase citizen engagement and foster public participation (*institutional capacity*). A clear rationale and standard of achievement (*democratic quality*) seem to underpin the effort:

We want our citizens to have a democratic experience, in that they feel not only listened to but actually heard, that their ideas are being taken up (interview with project leader).

The effort was tolled-up: a 'Participation Academy' was set up, a 'Participation Ladder' was constructed as a tool for tailor-making different forms and levels of participation in different settings.

All this suggests a great deal of planning and structure, but in practice the effort was more diffuse, ad-hoc and pragmatic. The responsible alderman explicitly preferred it to be an iterative effort:

There was nothing like a 40-page policy document. What we did have was a kind of menu of engagement modalities for public servants to choose from. We gave them license to operate, to try and see what works. Just do it, observe what happens, and provide feedback. This is how we learned, through continuous adjustment. Items were dropped from the menu, and new items added along the way. It was never formulated as a grand strategy of moving from A to B in a prescribed manner (*institutional capacity*).

Nor did the drive towards engagement enjoy universal support. One council member expressed concern about the inclusiveness and representativeness of Cedartown's 'open' participatory processes:

I always see the same faces at these consultation and participation events. A handful of people from the community board and a few interested individuals. I think we ought to do better in drafting people in. We should actively recruit particular types and numbers of inhabitants to participate. There needs to be a credible subset of people from the community or else what's the point? (*democratic quality*).

Another felt that in the case of the station area redevelopment the open planning process had fallen prey to the gravitational pull of goal displacement, in which the municipality had lost sight of its original goals – creating easier access between the station and the city centre (*problem solving*)– and had allowed itself to be captured by those who populated the meetings at the sports hall, which were overwhelmingly local residents whose focus was on improving the quality of the parkland zone rather than hearing the voices of the more difficult to recruit commuters, shoppers and business people who were to be the main beneficiaries of improved access routes:

It was all about turning 'the process' into a success, which then led to a result that the participants in the process valued but which was far removed from the original aim of the redevelopment plan.

The responsible project leader had a different view, one steeped in history. To him, it was all about what the government was trying to move away from:

The pivotal success was that pretty early on we managed to overcome the massive disconnect and distrust that had built up over the previous decade and a half. The way the open process was conducted brought back people's confidence in the integrity of the government (*democratic quality and institutional capacity*).

All in all, the Cedartown case offers somewhat of a paradox. On the one hand, there is active political leadership, sustained activity and capacity-building in the public service, and there is growing visibility and goodwill among residents. At the same time, the drive towards enhanced and novel forms of public participation in municipal policymaking remains a politically contested subject. Underneath the usual party-political posturing sit fundamentally different conceptions about the appropriate role of elected representatives in the policymaking process. As one public servant observed:

There are some that support the notion of becoming a city council that acts a board of trustees of a more self-governing community. But there are also councillors who maintain that since they got elected into the city's highest decision-making body, it is their prerogative to govern. And there are councillors who simply do not like participation because the board of mayor and alderman pushes that agenda. Yes, unfortunately participation is a highly political subject in this town.

In the absence of a broad political consensus, the future of democratic innovation in Cedartown appears to rely on the drive and energy of a few aldermen and the ability of a small group of committed public servants to continue on the path of trial and error experimentation.

***Dee City: mayoral leadership and a culture of engagement***

Dee City resembles Cedartown in that it has not committed to singular large-scale, high-profile innovations such as G1000's but instead pursues a strategy of incrementally 'normalizing' a culture of engagement and participation. Like Cedartown, the original impulse to do things differently came was in frustration with the inability of existing modes of policymaking – i.e. about handling shrinking budgets – to gain the public's trust and support. And like Cedartown, this has since spawned a broad range of initiatives designed to 'open up' the municipality's policymakers and processes to broader segments of the community, earlier in the policy cycle, and not just as input-givers but also as co-designers and co-initiators of local initiatives. High-profile, large-number efforts such as consultations about the future of the city's iconic castle and surrounding grounds and the 'DC-battle' between citizen-led bottom-up bids for municipal support and uptake co-exist with an ethos of improving the authenticity of presence and the quality of conversation between public office-holders and local citizens in day-to-day, face-to-face experiences.

Dee City differs from Cedartown in that this strategy is underpinned by an explicit, broadly supported philosophy that provides a common language and a means of socializing newcomers in the city's political and administrative structures and 'the way we do things around here.' The long-serving mayor – who also chaired an important study group about democratic renewal – is widely credited as the chief architect, sponsor and steward of the approach. He expressed his philosophy as follows:

All actors in government and civil society should facilitate the city's residents and their representatives in enabling the good life. This is successful when there is fluid interplay between them, when no groups or individuals are being overlooked and ignored, and when people can lead their lives as they want to. To me, the good life is a life lived in freedom and connectedness... Everyone has right to be there and to be treated not necessarily equally but equivalently (*democratic quality*).

Whoever we interviewed in Dee City, they echoed this basic commitment, and observed that to live up to it required breaking through the city administration's traditional institutional script. Two examples:

Empathetic listening to society. That to me is what local democracy is about, each and every day. It is important to me that we do this. And – as I have said in council, and in to my own party group in particular – this requires us to overcome our bureaucratic ways of working (alderman) (*democratic quality and institutional capacity*).

Our entire neighbourhood-focused way of working is based on the notion that we need to be near to one another to be able to do the right things... We need be able to tap into and utilize everyone's strength, the community's strength, to ensure that all can contribute their parts to the good life in this city (city manager) (*institutional capacity*).

Mutual trust, strength and proximity are the cornerstones of Dee City's governing philosophy. At the same time, as one civil servant observes, there is no top-down master plan to call them into being:

We believe strongly in working step by step, making sure we remain on the journey together, guided by the same value proposition. So we are not about this is where we stand now and that is where we want to be by time X, and here's the plan to get there.

Perhaps for that reason, several of our Dee City interviewees explicitly rejected the 'innovation' moniker as a descriptor of what drives them and how they operate. To them it is not about 'innovating' but about 'strengthening' local democracy (*democratic quality*). To achieve this strengthening, many different paths are trodden, not just eye-catching 'innovations' but also gradual cultural change efforts within the city's organization, and inculcating new office-holders and new staff with the city's value compass (*institutional capacity*). As in Cedartown, some interviewees worry about the 'coverage' of the engagement efforts, and the position of vulnerable groups in the brave new world of collaborative city governance. The council clerk:

There is a substantial risk of people who are not so vocal and less able to navigate the systems disappearing off our radar... We cannot have it that you are only being counted when you are an assertive and active engaged citizen. That is why we have a city council, which stands for the common interest. But doing so can be more complicated when in the meantime there are these intensive engagements with a particular subset of residents.

The combination of reforming zeal, an experimentalist approach of going about and yet a reflexive awareness of the precariousness of the exercise is what sets the case of Dee City apart from the other three. As one councillor observes:

We are very committed. But we are also inclined to forget the importance of maintaining the drive and capacity to do this, and how dependent it all is on the quality of our people, including our public servants. And there are still enough instances in which it goes wrong and we resort to old reflexes.

The rationale for democratic innovation in both Cedartown and Dee City rests mainly upon democratic quality and institutional capacity, which corresponds to the two G1000 cases. Like in Beeville, interviewees in Cedartown emphasise the problem solving perspective a bit more. In table 3, we have summarised the main findings in our four cases.

**Table 3: Overview of the Main Findings**

	Problem solving	Democratic quality	Institutional capacity
Aelion	Largely absent	Engagement of citizens, developing civic skills, more effective process	Council more open, more aligned with citizen preferences
Beeville	Citizen expertise, promoting specific solutions	Active citizenship, engaging civil society, more representative	More external focus of the council
Cedartown	Participation linked to projects in spatial planning	Larger number and more diverse citizen involvement	Adjustments, learning process, strategy to involve citizens
Dee City	Largely absent	Inclusion of different groups in society, equity	Combined strengths of citizens, politicians, civil servants

## **Conclusions: Democratic Innovations in Search of a Storyline**

The aim of this paper was to investigate how council members, aldermen, mayors, council secretaries and civil servants who are involved in local democracy innovations expect these to contribute to democratic governance and how they assess their impact. By using a multi-perspectivist analytical framework, we were able to reveal elements and arguments from very different perspectives. The answer to the central question of this paper, ‘what democratic gains do local authorities expect and value of democratic innovations’, does not yield a straightforward answer: there is no dominant perspective on democratic innovations within a city or within the specific categories of politicians or civil servants, nor did we find a clear theory of change to guide democratic reform in any of the cities.

The four municipalities each went about experimenting with democratic innovations in their own ways. Though Aelion and Beeville both attempted G1000 summits, they each had distinct portfolios of other mechanisms they were experimenting with. Yet, only one of four has a unifying and widely shared philosophy driving the work towards a jointly imagined desired end state (Dee City’s notion of ‘the good life’). In the other three, the drive to experiment with mostly participatory innovations appears to come first of all from what they are trying to *move away* from, a painful ‘losses of touch’ between the traditional system of government and significant parts of the local community. What they are seeking to *move toward* remained far less clear.

Two municipalities explicitly reject the need of having a roadmap to democratic reform, instead embracing a contingent (Cedarville’s ‘menu’ metaphor) and experimentalist (trial and error, learning from experience) approach. The other two invested considerable energy in the G1000 format, which generated considerable activity and citizen ‘input’ that would otherwise not have been attained at this scale and speed. That said, in both Aelion and Beeville actually integrating this input into the regular policy design and council decision-making processes met with opposition from within the council and the bureaucracy. In addition, the effect on citizen activity turned out to be limited, both in scope and durability.

Interestingly many actors across all four municipalities resisted the language ‘democratic innovation’, preferring to stress the substantive intent – ‘strengthening’ the fabric of local democracy; ‘building bridges’ to and with the local community - and not so much the novelty of what the initiatives they had adopted. Likewise, many confessed to feeling ambivalent about the juxtaposition of non-elected forms of representation such as G1000s with classical forms of representative democracy. Local councillors in particular found it hard to take up their roles vis à vis the consultative and deliberative mechanisms populated by the non-elected, or they loudly asserted their supremacy (cf. Van de Bovenkamp and Vollaard, 2019). Those local politicians who aimed to step back and give leeway to a larger role of citizens were uncertain how much could reasonably be asked from them and to what extent citizens could be held to the same standards as elected officials.

Looking at the findings through the lenses of our analytical framework, a first observation is that in none of the four municipalities did we find evidence of a single dominant ‘theory in use’ that neatly maps onto any of the three perspectives. In all of the cases, elements of all three perspectives occurred in the collective reasoning of the interviewees, and sometimes over the course of a single interview. This implies that when

people say that they support democratic innovations, they may have very different expectations about the contribution of these innovations to democratic governance. This may also complicate the discussion about introducing innovations, especially if these expectations are not expressed aloud. Our findings also give reason to think that democratic innovation, like democracy, should rather be understood as an essentially contested concept which meaning and drivers are subject to contestation.

Second, the problem-solving perspective was drawn on least by interviewees. One of the explanations might be that the drivers for democratic innovation in three of the four cases in this study were to give citizens a voice and to listen to the concerns and opinions of citizens rather than resolving specific policy issues. Moreover, all of the democratic innovations emerged from a widespread sense that something had been ‘missing’ in the fabric of local life. Some interviewees did note the tension that might occur when a broadly attended, highly engaged and highly deliberative participative process (democratic quality perspective) generates a result of modest ambition, low feasibility or skewed towards the perspective of those who participated whilst overlooking the interests of those that did not (problem-solving perspective).

Most interviewees’ accounts were mainly grounded in a combination of democratic quality and institutional capacity perspectives, whereby the former best captured *why* they were doing it and the latter *how* they went about it. Political actors (aldermen and councillors) were more inclined towards democratic quality argumentation while institutional capacity arguments were found nearly equally among political and civil service actors. Yet, some interviewees were zealots and others more sceptical towards the need to supplement classic representative democracy with non-elected participatory, deliberative and co-design focused mechanisms. This was reflected in their assessment of the balance of benefits, risks and costs that had already accrued from their city’s uptake of such mechanisms so far.

In contrast, when they were using institutional capacity arguments, interviewees tended to be on the same page in advocating an experimentalist, bricolage type of approach towards both ‘rolling out’ democratic innovations - and the acquisition of institutional competences among local politicians and public servants to productively engage with them. Most stressed that there was still a long way to go on that particular road.

Taking stock of the patterns of activity and reason-giving in the four cases studies, one is tempted to conclude that despite a Dutch tradition of problematizing and tinkering with local democracy’s institutions and practices that goes back five decades, ‘democratic innovation’ is far from an institutionalised activity. Only in Dee City does a degree of internalisation of a grounding philosophy and basic attitudes and competencies seem to have taken hold (although at the time of writing it is soon to face the test of having to survive the retirement of its chief architect, the mayor). The extent and nature of local uptake seem to depend not on strategic visions and policy frameworks but rather on the coincidental confluence of political advocates and stewards, the coming and going of energetic citizens pushing particular wheelbarrows, and the occurrence and publicising of popular frustration with traditional and ‘closed’ ways of policymaking. In that sense, then, the unfolding story of local democratic innovation in the Netherlands has been of one of ‘trial and error’ rather than of a strategically led reform movement. This has led to a kaleidoscope of democratic innovation experiments in Dutch municipalities, but equally the lack of a coherent philosophy of democratic innovation, which might hamper the further development and consolidation of innovative participatory practices.

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