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From Competition and Collusion to Consent-Based Collaboration: A Case Study of Local Democracy

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ABSTRACT

The high distrust in political institutions and a growing sense of powerlessness among many citizens suggest that prevailing democratic governance systems lack a capability for collective dialogue and learning. The key thesis here is that public governance systems can benefit from organizational arrangements informed by circular design. A case study conducted at a Dutch municipality illustrates how principles of circular design served to enhance the city council's role of orchestrator of civil participation. This case also illustrates how a local democracy, which has long suffered from majority–minority ploys and voting schemes, can be transformed into a consent-based culture of collaboration.

KEYWORDS

Political trust; local democracy; civil participation; informed consent; circular design

Introduction

In many Western democracies, trust in public institutions and politicians is decreasing and a sense of powerlessness among many citizens is growing (e.g., Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan, & Listhaug, 2005; Citrin, Levy, & Wright, 2014). Studies of trust in and support for public institutions have focused on explanations of long-term trends in trust levels (e.g., Bovens & Wille, 2008; Citrin et al., 2014). In this respect, distrust in public institutions and a growing sense of powerlessness among citizens appear to reflect a deficient democratic governance system (Ansell, 2011) that tends to generate substantial gaps between winners and losers (Dahlberg & Linde, 2016). The deficiencies of democratic governance have been attributed to a lack of systematic leadership and participatory governance as well as the limited scope and powers of participatory innovations (e.g., Ansell, 2011; Fung, 2015)

Despite the fact that decreasing levels of trust in public institutions tend to reduce the political legitimacy and stability of these institutions, the vast majority of political scientists attempts to describe and explain these phenomena, rather than engaging in actual experiments and efforts to change the (conditions of the) system itself. Several scholars have been advocating a fundamental rethink of the apolitical

character of much research in the area of political science and public governance (e.g., Gunnell, 2004; Ricci, 1984; Schram, Flyvbjerg, & Landman, 2013). In this respect, the mission of political science, envisioned by its founding fathers in the late nineteenth century, was to have science serve democracy (Gunnell, 2006). Methodological debates between positivists and interpretivists have, however, long inhibited a productive discussion about the purpose and role of political science (Al-Habil, 2011). Several authors have thus been advocating a move away from research that is primarily driven by extant theories and methods, toward research framed around pressing political issues and dilemmas in the real world (Buick, Blackman, O'Flynn, O'Donnell, & West, 2016; Schram et al., 2013; Shapiro, 2005; Smith, 2002).

In response to these calls for rethinking the science of public administration and politics, this article explores whether and how public institutions can learn from “circular design” experiments with organizational democracy and employee participation in the private sector (cf. Romme, 1999, 2004). A case study conducted at a Dutch municipality serves to explore how circular design can be used to improve public policy development and decision-making. This article therefore responds to recent calls for a revitalization of

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political science in the service of political practice, by studying a deliberate effort to renew local democracy.

This article is organized as follows. First, the theoretical background of this study is described and discussed. A key observation here is that the void between citizens and public institutions may currently be the most fundamental challenge that Western democracies are facing. Subsequently, the history and main principles of the circular design approach are outlined. The next section then presents findings obtained from a case study conducted at a Dutch municipality, in which circular design principles were used to address the void between citizens and political institutions, resulting in democratic practices that draw on decision-making by informed consent (rather than majority rule) and involve a high level of civil participation. Finally, the key findings arising from this case study as well as implications for future research are discussed.

The quest for civil participation

The quest for more participation by citizens in public governance is rather complex and challenging, also in view of the role of constitutional representative democracy—in the form of elections, political parties, and chosen representatives. The representative bodies such as city councils or national parliaments tend to be largely unable to steer and control the administrative organizations responsible for executing public policies at the local, regional, and national levels; moreover, many people have lost trust in political institutions and their policy outcomes (Ansell, 2011; Citrin et al., 2014; Fung, 2015). The remainder of this section explores these fundamental challenges in general terms as well as specifically for the Dutch case that provides the institutional context for efforts to revitalize local democracy studied in the second part of this article.

The current literature on trust in and support for public institutions largely focuses on the long-term trends in trust levels (Bovens & Wille, 2008; Citrin et al., 2014; Dalton, 2004; Hendriks, 2009). For example, the statistical evidence demonstrates that in most European countries between 20% and 40% of the population says that they have trust in their political institutions; however, a small number of countries, such as The Netherlands and Denmark, traditionally report a substantially higher level of trust in their political institutions, i.e., between 40% and 60% of the population express trust in political institutions (Hendriks, 2009). These studies do not address the question why trust in political institutions is structurally low in any Western

democracy (including The Netherlands). Moreover common sense suggests even a 60% level of support and trust is still far too low for any institution to function properly (cf. Bauer, Freitag, & Sciarini, 2013).

Accordingly, others have argued that the structurally low levels of support for politics and public institutions can, at least partly, be attributed to the void or vacuum that exists between citizens and representative bodies and public administration (Ansell, 2011). In this respect, democratic governance systems in the Western world may have been built on false assumptions about what drives voters. Some of these assumptions are that individual citizens (a) vote to influence the outcome of the election and (b) only wish to express their votes at regular intervals (e.g., every 4 years). However, empirical work in this area has demonstrated that people vote in elections because they want to express themselves about a topic and/or candidate, rather than expecting to affect the outcome; accordingly, the “act of expression has inherent value to the individual” (Copeland & Laband, 2002, p. 352). Thus, the mere opportunity to vote for and elect representatives in local municipal bodies and national parliaments (e.g., every 4 years) hardly meets the strong wish of many citizens to express their opinions, interests, and ideas on any issues they are *currently* interested in.

In response to declining participation and trust in public institutions, many local and national governments have been adopting ICT-driven strategies to reach and engage citizens and obtain their input (Dahlberg, 2010; Wright & Street, 2007; Zhang, Xu, Zhang, & Chen, 2016). Although online forums and other ICT platforms are highly interesting remedies for declining public participation (Wright & Street, 2007), they may also mask the more fundamental problems that democratic governance systems are currently facing. This article further explores a particular strategy toward filling the void between citizens and public institutions.

Circular design

The challenge of designing and developing (participative) governance structures is not unique to the public domain (Nabatchi, 2011). This section outlines the *circular design* approach in The Netherlands also known as “sociocratic circular organization.” This approach has been proved to be effective in more than 30 enterprises and other organizations in the private as well as semi-public sectors in The Netherlands and several other countries (Romme, 2016; Romme & Endenburg, 2006). The Dutch government has also accredited this approach, by exempting

all organizations that fully implement a circular design from the legal requirement to install a works council.

The word “sociocracy” is derived from the Latin “socius” (companion) and Greek “kratein” (to govern). The notion of *sociocratie* was first coined by the French philosopher Auguste Comte in 1851 (Buck & Villines, 2007). The idea of sociocracy was later adopted by the American sociologist Lester Ward (1892), who believed that a highly educated public was essential if a country was to be governed effectively, and he argued that democracy would eventually have to evolve into more advanced forms of deliberation and government, such as sociocracy.

Drawing on his training in the engineering sciences, the Dutch entrepreneur Gerard Endenburg in the late 1960s and early 1970s started experimenting with the idea of sociocracy, which ultimately resulted in the sociocratic circular organization approach (Endenburg, 1998a). He started by developing several construction principles from cybernetics, the science of steering and control (e.g., Beer, 1959). In this period, Endenburg took over his parents’ company in the Dutch electrotechnical industry, Endenburg Elektrotechniek. This company had been struggling for some time with the implementation of a works council, a consultative body required by a new Dutch law. In the first years of operating this council in combination with a conventional administrative hierarchy, participants grew increasingly dissatisfied with this consultative body. Instead of providing genuine consultation between management and workers’ representatives, it frequently produced conflict. Endenburg therefore decided to completely redesign this consultative system (Endenburg, 1998b; Romme & Endenburg, 2006).

Drawing on the notion of circularity from cybernetics, he first developed a number of principles that would have to apply to any kind of system “capable of maintaining a state of dynamic equilibrium”; in this respect, cybernetics suggested that the purpose of any circular process “is to detect the disturbance of a dynamic equilibrium and to take steps to restore it. It is a process which is unnecessary in a static equilibrium, because the factors influencing a static equilibrium are not variable” (Endenburg, 1998b, p. 65). The resulting principles then served to develop preliminary guidelines for decision making in circles by informed consent, double linking between circles, and electing managers and representatives. This initial set of guidelines was first tried out, adapted, and developed in Endenburg

Elektrotechniek, and later also applied in many other organizations.

Several key principles

It is beyond the scope of this article to describe all details of the sociocratic circular method (Endenburg, 1998a; 1998b; Romme, 2016; Romme & Endenburg, 2006). Thus, this section describes a few key notions and principles. The primary purpose of circular design is to enhance the capacity for governance, self-organizing, and learning of the incumbent organization. This is done by installing *circular processes* in which search is facilitated and promoted, boundaries for (new) policies are continually explored and set, and the implementation of policy is monitored.

Out of the broader set of design principles, two related principles are described in more detail here: informed consent and double linking. The *informed consent* principle in decision-making, also known as the “consent” principle (Kapp, 1997), essentially says that a decision is taken when there are no remaining “paramount” objections to the proposed decision. The decision principle of informed consent has a strong fundament in the literature on the Pareto criterion and unanimity rule (e.g., Chichilnisky & Heal, 1983; Sen, 1995; Sobel & Holcombe, 2001). Buchanan and Tullock (1962, p. 250) argued that “political theorists have perhaps shrugged off the unanimity requirement too early in their thinking.” They suggested that economic and political theorists tend to present and compare “false” alternatives (e.g., majority or minority rule), both at the level of the choice of a decision rule and at the level of analyzing the operation of particular rules.

As a result, the attainment of unanimity is now widely viewed to be infeasible or impossible, particularly in large groups (e.g., Nurmi, 1999). In this respect, by means of simulation modeling, Romme (2004) indeed demonstrates that the larger a group is, the more likely it is that unanimous decision-making breaks down. The sociocratic circular approach responds to this challenge in two ways. First, the “informed consent” interpretation of unanimity rule appears to be more broadly applicable than the consensus (i.e., full agreement) interpretation (Endenburg, 1998a). That is, by inviting participants to express and discuss their argued objections, all input is considered and individual participants are less likely to block a proposed decision.

Moreover, the circular approach implies that the decision-making system is decomposed into small

units (e.g., <20 people) that are *double linked* (Romme, 2004). In a corporate setting, double linking means that two policy (decision-making) levels are linked by way of a representative chosen at the lower level and a functional leader chosen at the higher level. Accordingly, decomposing the system into double-linked units facilitates dialogue and policy decisions by informed consent, by avoiding the need for plenary discussions and decisions in very large groups; moreover, it also offers the opportunity for one group to delegate or mandate a decision to another group.

The circular design approach was initially developed for organizations in the private and semi-public sectors, although Endenburg (1998a) at the time also speculated about how these principles and rules could inform solutions for the vacuum between individual citizens and administrative and representative bodies at the municipal, regional, and national levels.

Case study

This section presents findings obtained from a case study in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug (UH), a municipality with about 50,000 citizens in the middle of The Netherlands. The opportunity to experiment with circular design arose when the mayor of UH invited a group of citizens to investigate options for more effective local governance. The key objectives were to close the perceived gap between citizens and the administration of the municipality and to develop constructive collaborative ties between citizens, civil servants, and the council of mayor and aldermen. These efforts were consolidated in a report with practical advice to the administration of UH. The pilot project that was subsequently initiated has led to a new set of practices in which the city council orchestrates the process of public policy development, with a high level of civil participation. An overview of the various sources of data collected and triangulated for this case study is provided in Appendix A.

Context of the case study

UH originated in 2006 from the integration of five smaller villages. The plan for this municipal integration was initiated by the province, because the administrative power of the separate entities was believed to be too small. In the subsequent years, administrative attention mainly focused on the internal reorganization and alignment of policies, procedures, and ICT support between the former municipalities. In the same period, the city council decided to build a new city hall, as this

was believed to be more cost-effective than continuing to use the current accommodations.

This decision caused the distrust of citizens in their local public institutions and politicians to grow significantly. The distrust rose even further due to several local incidents and then culminated in a heated debate on the need and costs for the new city hall. Despite more than 5,000 citizens signing a collective letter of protest as well as public exposure via a national television program, the city council decided to pursue the new city hall. One of the aldermen had to step down and public distrust in local democracy grew to an all time high. As a result, several members of the city council struggled with the wide gap between formal decisions based on rational arguments and the perception from citizens and the press.

Bridge builders: Approach and results

In early 2012, the mayor of UH invited a group of citizens to investigate options for more effective local governance, with the objective to improve the interaction between citizens and the local administration. All citizens were invited to volunteer to participate. A group of 15 citizens was then formed, which named itself the “bridge builders” (“bruggenbouwers”). Supported by a public communication expert they went to work on their assignment.

As a first step, the bridge builders (BBs) decided to set up a number of meetings to investigate the needs of all stakeholders involved: civil servants, councillors, citizens, and aldermen. It soon became clear through these meetings that there was not just one gap to bridge, but there appeared to be a larger number of gaps, misunderstandings, and miscommunications between all stakeholders. All parties were aiming for a more effective and constructive way of working together, but all parties also seemed to be caught in the current structure, habits, and behavioral patterns.

The search for a different approach is not new. Many municipalities in The Netherlands have been experimenting with different forms of participation and decision-making. One of the key conclusions of the WRR (2012) report “Trust in Citizens” is that a variety of approaches toward public governance need to be explored and evaluated. The same report also emphasizes that there are no quick fixes or standard solutions for restoring trust in political institutions. This also demands a new, more facilitator-oriented role of government (WRR, 2012).

The BB group studied and discussed the WRR (2012) report, several other reports, and several best practices in other municipalities to define a number

of key starting points for successful participation projects. These key points included the following: collect and use all the knowledge and information that is available, at an early stage of the participation process/project (open call); involve all stakeholders, including those with huge stakes and opposing views and opinions; start from the needs of the participants, not from potential solutions; search for creative solutions that all participants can consent to; and ask participants to take collective responsibility for the solutions they agree to.

Several workshops were held where civil servants, councilors, and aldermen could jointly develop a new approach for working together. Projects conducted in other municipalities were presented in a separate “inspiration session” to demonstrate which approaches are possible. This inspiration session was generally well received. But participants also raised doubts, specifically concerning the consent principle (as an element of the sociocratic circular approach). These doubts initiated a second inspiration session, for which many other citizens, entrepreneurs, and associations were also invited. The main topic was the informed consent principle and how it can be used in public decision-making. This session served to build a broader understanding and acceptance of policy making by informed consent.

In April 2013, the BB group presented its report to the city council. The report included several recommendations for strengthening the connection between citizens and the municipal administration. The key recommendations were as follows:

- (1) Decide early on about the level of citizen participation that will be used for a specific policy issue.
- (2) The city council should set and define the boundaries (e.g., budget constraints, delivery time and other conditions) for any participation process.
- (3) Subsequently, a project group with stakeholders, interest groups and experts should get the assignment to investigate the topic and decide by consent on a solution within the boundaries set by the city council.
- (4) Every citizen who is interested can join this project group.
- (5) Once the project group has presented its solution, the city council only assesses if the solution proposed meets the boundaries defined earlier (see 2). If this is the case, the solution is validated. Any other contribution from the city councilors must be in the form of

participating in and/or providing information to the project group.

- (6) If the project group cannot make a decision by informed consent within the boundaries set, the city council again has the authority to decide on the policy issue being considered.

The recommendations of the BB group were discussed in a special City Council meeting. Consistent with the recommendations of the BB and the double linking principle in circular design, a broad variety of participants attended this meeting: city councilors, one of the aldermen, representatives of civil servants, and representatives of the BB group (i.e., citizens). Before the meeting, it was decided and announced that decision-making would be based on the informed consent principle. This provided a setting that was acceptable for all participants. An external expert was invited to chair the meeting. To ensure the connection with the members of the city council that were not participating, they formed a “second ring” that could be consulted by the “first ring” city councilors. The key outcome of the meeting, taken by informed consent of all participants, was to launch a pilot project based on the recommended approach.

Pilot project

After the elections for a new city council in March 2014, the eight political parties elected into the council decided by consent on the new policy program, which included an agreement on major budget cuts. That is, all eight parties and their (newly elected) city councilors agreed on the new policies, which is a fundamentally different approach than what is common practice in municipal politics in The Netherlands (or elsewhere). The common practice is that a majority coalition of parties exclusively defines the new policy program and then gets the city council to accept it—using the coalition’s majority position.

The new city council also formed a working group to develop a plan for a new approach toward local democracy and governance, informed by their initial experiences as well as the recommendations of the BB group. Hugo Prakke, one of the city councilors, described the objectives of this new approach as follows:

First, we want the city council to operate in ways that allow for more involvement of residents, entrepreneurs, organizations and other participants, as early as possible in the process. In addition, we would like to develop an approach that leads to more efficient decision-making and, as council, we need more opportunities to set boundaries early on in the process and

assign tasks to the mayor and aldermen. We want a much more flexible procedure in handling policy topics, in which we seek to discuss each topic following the three steps of conceptualizing/understanding the issue, forming a judgment, and decision-making.

Toward the end of 2014, the working group delivered its report to the city council, which decided to embrace all of its recommendations for the following set of practices, to be implemented as of February 2015. For one, each Thursday evening there is a meeting in which the city council (or one of its committees) meets citizens to conceptualize a particular policy issue and explore as well as form opinions on it. The location and format of these “Thursday evening” meetings is deliberately left open, to allow for maximum flexibility and adaptivity. This flexibility also allows for parallel sessions, if needed.

In addition, the city council meets every 2 weeks to make formal decisions. At these formal meetings of the city council, the city council will not engage in any debate but immediately proceed toward making a final decision by consent, if the proposal was previously explored and discussed in one or more “Thursday evening” sessions. To maintain sufficient flexibility and enhance efficiency in the decision process, the council can also decide on (e.g., minor) policy issues without any prior consultation.

This approach is meant to communicate a clear message to all citizens of UH: every Thursday evening there is an opportunity to talk with city councilors on current policy topics, or to raise new topics—with the location and other relevant information for the (upcoming) meeting being communicated via UH’s web site. For UH’s city council, the new approach provides more access to the expertise and ideas of citizens, and reinforces its role as orchestrator of civil participation and local democracy.

Experiences and findings

This new set of practices and processes has been implemented since February 2015 in the municipality of UH, so the evidence as to the (long-term) implications and results is preliminary. The initial results and experiences, however, appear to suggest that the new approach is very promising. For example, a citizen of UH reflected on her recent experiences in a “Thursday evening” meeting as follows:

I’m a parent of three kids at one of the primary schools here. I recently joined the meeting with the city council at the school’s premises, to explore the plan for the school’s new building. I’m pleased with the new approach of the council, because it provides for direct

contact with the councillors: one can more easily communicate one’s opinions and preferences. In the past, decision proposals were submitted by one of the aldermen to the city council as “this is it”, with only some opportunities for fine-tuning and minor changes. Now, the city council can in a more early stage become better informed by us, so it can develop a deeper understanding of the topic and then work toward a good decision. (...) I trust the city council will take a good, well-informed decision on the building plans of this school. Because they’ve been here at the school’s premises, we have been able to tell them everything we think they should know; everyone was able to raise questions, it was very informal, and that works quite well.

An interesting example of the orchestrator role of UH’s city council is how it shaped the city’s response to the European refugee crisis, involving a strong rise in the number of refugees and migrants making the journey to the European Union to seek asylum (as of 2015). Repeated requests from the national government to Dutch municipalities to accommodate and host large numbers of refugees have unleashed quite some turmoil and protests among citizens in many cities in The Netherlands. In the UH case, however, the aldermen and city council carefully orchestrated this process, by inviting UH’s citizens to engage in discussions with councilors and aldermen in several consultation evenings. This resulted in a high level of public support as well as broad political support within the council itself for its formal decisions on how to host and integrate so-called “newcomers.” As a result, the city of UH has been able to accept and host far more than its fair share of refugees in The Netherlands.

The mayor of UH, Frits Naafs, recently reflected on the new democratic culture emerging in his city:

In addition to the consent principle, the cyclical practice of forming ideas, judgments and decisions has also become widespread in this municipality. Citizens are engaged in the early stages of forming ideas and judgments, for example via consultation evenings. A lot of our citizens used to have an aversion against the traditional set-up of an information session, because they felt they were participating in a kind of tribunal. In our new approach, citizens can talk with councillors on equal terms. They no longer talk *to* each other, but now talk *with* each other. (Italics added by the authors)

More broadly speaking, local politics at UH is currently transforming from a political culture characterized by collusion and competition, to one characterized by collaboration. This emerging collaborative culture is perhaps most evident in the aftermath of the elections for a new city council (early 2014), as described earlier. All political parties elected into the council took a collaborative decision, by informed consent, on the new policy program of the city council. This approach

is fundamentally different than the usual “majority” approach that prevails in city councils, national parliaments, and other representative bodies. As a result, a growing number of citizens, councilors, and administrators in UH have been engaging in productive dialogues in which anyone can voice opinions and objections, to inform the search for ways to resolve these objections—rather than wasting a lot of time and resources in majority versus minority coalitions and voting schemes. This collaborative culture may be a necessary condition for the new role of UH’s city council, as the orchestrator of civil participation in public policy development. This collaborative culture does not arise without any hiccups and relapses, as mayor Naafs recently observed:

Now and then, we relapse to we-them discussions and coalition thinking, based on the traditional mindset of party politics. We then act upon the reflex of partisan politics. But in general, I observe that people listen much better to each other, and that policy decisions have become more widely accepted. The relationships between the city council and the mayor and eldermen have also changed: today, we more often submit unresolved policy issues to the council, rather than following the conventional route via commissions and back rooms.

Discussion

The UH case is about an ongoing attempt to revitalize local democratic governance. It illustrates that there are ample opportunities to apply a (circular) design perspective toward improving local democracy. Moreover, this case suggests that such an intervention may enhance active participation by citizens, support collaboration between key stakeholders, and facilitate the implementation of (local) public policy. At a theoretical level, this case illustrates how the vacuum between citizens and local administration/politicians can be filled and, in doing so, the capability for collective learning and dialogue can be enhanced (cf. Ansell, 2011).

The findings arising from the UH case study are preliminary in the sense that the transformation of UH’s democratic practices is ongoing. Moreover, there are no statistical data (e.g., on trust and support for political institutions) available at the municipal level, which would allow comparison with external benchmark data.

Nevertheless, the UH case suggests that any effort to close the perceived gap between voters/citizens, local administration, and civil servants best starts at the root of the problem: the need to respect the needs and interests of every individual citizen. In this respect, the principle of informed consent stimulates the kind of team spirit and mutual respect that has proved to be very effective in

industrial and corporate settings (Romme & Barrett, 2010; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Ragan, 1986) and, as such, tends to emerge rather spontaneously in many task-oriented groups and teams (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). In the practice of democratic governance, however, majority rule tends to promote the formation of coalitions and majority–minority ploys and, as such, undermines the natural tendency toward consent-based collaboration.

Citizens, administrators, and civil servants in the UH case engaged in a collaborative search and learning process to identify solutions for policy formulation and decision-making that would fit the needs of all stakeholders. In this collective learning process, they noticed the knowledge and opinions of each individual participant may contribute to making decisions that are socially and politically legitimate as well as (content-wise) of high quality. In many instances in local politics, the “real” experts and stakeholders are not members of the city council, but do want to participate in the policy formulation process on a particular topic. The approach developed in the city of UH appears to enable participation by all those citizens who want to directly contribute (as well as any external experts), while the city council maintains its role as orchestrator of civil participation and also holds the final authority to make policy decisions.

The circular approach to active participation by citizens in municipal politics may also serve to generate policy outcomes that are broadly accepted (cf. Romme, 1999; Romme & Endenburg, 2006). At a more theoretical level, the case study of UH suggests that efforts to renew public governance are more likely to succeed if they exploit the strong desire of many citizens to engage in other forms of “expressive” behavior (Copeland & Laband, 2002), rather than merely vote in an election every 4 years. Notably, many citizens especially want to actively voice their concerns regarding topics and issues they are highly interested in. In other words, they do not want to express their opinions on a broad range of issues, but merely on policy issues that energize and activate them to join the discussion. In all other topics, they trust (the expertise and opinions of) “others” to create effective policy solutions. Here, the key challenge for democratic governance is how the available reservoir of political interest and expertise, which is unevenly distributed across many citizens and policy issues, can be effectively exploited to the benefit of public policy making.

Future research and conclusion

The case study in this article involves an ongoing effort to renew local democratic governance. Future research will therefore need to draw on comparative studies of

multiple (longitudinal) cases in which methods other than circular design are also used.¹

Future work in this area will also need to collect and analyze survey data, for example, on trust in and support for public administration and political institutions, to be able to compare the outcomes of the UH project and similar cases to other benchmark data (e.g., Bovens & Wille, 2008). This type of research will also serve to determine whether circular design arrangements for (local) democratic governance lead to policies and decisions that are more broadly accepted by citizens. A related research question is whether circular design, by making public policy more effective as well as more legitimate, will significantly reduce the number of legal claims and appeals filed by individual citizens.

The UH case is embedded in the Dutch political system characterized by a long tradition of collaboration and consensus-seeking (Hendriks, 2009). Therefore, a key research question is whether similar transformational projects can be initiated and accomplished in institutional settings that do not have this tradition (cf. Ruijter & Meijer, 2016). This question is not merely an academic one, but also implies the need to actually engage in such projects elsewhere—informed by circular design or any other participatory design.

At a more generic level, this study responds to calls for research on democratic governance which draws on experimentation with new arrangements and solutions. Too much research in this area takes the established political institutions as a fact of life, and few scholars adopt a creative design- and intervention-oriented approach (e.g., Antonacopoulou, 2010; Gunnell, 2006; Smith, 2002). The latter type of approach is needed to try out, scrutinize, and understand how civil participation in public policy making can be restored to those levels of engagement, support, and trust that any democratic system—be it local, regional, national or supranational—will thrive on.

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¹Other approaches were used in, for example, the renewal project in Zeist (Schepers & Van der Toorn, 2012). Other relevant cases in which principles of circular design were applied to the public domain include the Pendrecht University initiative in Rotterdam, the “Gelderland Fabriek” project, and some of the local initiatives within Transition Town Nederland. In addition, the circular approach has been applied in about 30 Ecodorp housing projects in The Netherlands and elsewhere, as well as in several local community or housing projects in the USA and France. Notably, all these initiatives are largely bottom-up in nature. In the Aireys Gestel project in Eindhoven, the municipal Woonbedrijf is in the lead.

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Appendix A

For the case study of Utrechtse Heuvelrug (UH), we collected data in multiple ways. First, two authors of this article are citizens of UH, who were involved as participant-observers as well as key change agents in several key stages of the project. One of these authors was also a member of the bridge builders group. As such, we had direct access to all documents collected (by the bridge builders), meetings conducted, minutes of these meetings, and so forth. As an expert consultant, the same author subsequently supported the working group (formed by the city council) that elaborated the recommendations of the bridge builders, to develop a proposal for the city council's role as orchestrator of civil participation—embraced and implemented by the city council as of February 2015. Several other authors served as “outsiders” in the research team, following the joint insider–outsider research approach proposed by Bartunek and Louis (1996). Accordingly, in insider–outsider research partnerships “the outsider’s assumptions, language, and cognitive frames are made explicit in the insider’s questions and vice versa. The parties, in a colloquial sense, keep each other honest—or at least more conscious than a single party working alone may easily achieve” (Bartunek & Louis, 1996, p. 62).

Second, the public nature of political institutions such as UH’s city council implies that a large amount of data were and are publicly available. The detailed information on meetings of the city council (e.g., agenda, documents, minutes, formal decisions), city council members, policy program, annual reports, and related topics is available at <http://www.heuvelrug.nl/gemeenteraad>. This web site also contains texts and documents that describe how and why the new approach was adopted by the city council.

The combination of data arising from participant observation and publicly available documentation and information served to triangulate all key observations and conclusions reported in this article. In addition, we submitted a draft version of our report, for verification and validation to a sample of other participants in the transformation of democratic practices in UH (including several city councilors, other members of the bridge builders, and UH’s mayor).

Additional notes/sources:

The quote of Hugo Prakke (city councilor) is translated from <https://utrechtseheuvelrug.d66.nl/2014/12/11/eindelijk-een-nieuwe-werkwijze-raad/> (accessed at July 19, 2015).

The quote of Frits Naafs, mayor of Utrechtse Heuvelrug, is translated from an interview (in Dutch) conducted at October 22, 2015.

The quote of the citizen in the “Experiences and findings” section is taken (and translated) from a video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mw-7YSgpK-E&feature=youtu.be> (accessed at August 8, 2015)

The example of how the city council addressed the challenges arising from the European refugee crisis (reported in the “Experiences and findings” section) is based on several interviews as well as public sources and documents, including:

<http://www.heuvelrug.nl/projecten/asielzoekers47694/item/actieplan-integratie-nieuwkomers81410.html>

<http://www.rtvutrecht.nl/nieuws/1379253/gemeenten-bereid-extra-vluchtelingen-op-te-nemen.html>

<http://www.ad.nl/utrecht/toch-extra-opvangplekken-voor-utrechtse-heuvelrug~a343e629/>(all accessed June 15, 2016).