

Elisa Lewis - Democratie Ouverte - December 2015

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HACKATHON

On the 20th of November 2015, for the first time, the Council of Europe, in partnership with *Démocratie Ouverte*, organized a Hackathon on open democracy, as part of the World Forum for Democracy. It gathered 30 people: experts, researchers, elected representatives from cities, social and democratic innovators, grassroots activists and civil servants. During this collaborative workshop, participants were invited to think of the best ways to support the development of transparent, participative and collaborative democracy. For a few hours, they have been on a mission to build the “best incubator for local participatory democracy there is (they can imagine)”. An incubator is usually a physical space, linked to a community, where project leaders can have access to support, expertise, resources and services to prototype and grow their idea. The challenge was to adapt this concept to democracy, to find out what kind of ecosystem and support should be built around democratic innovations for a greater impact.

The Hackathon was moderated by Hems Zwier (Social Innovation Lab), Elisa Lewis and Romain Slitine (*Démocratie Ouverte*). This workshop has been a great opportunity to gather participants’ feedbacks on what kind of support and community they would like to join. A lot of ideas came out, pointing out the diversity of activities that would help grow collaborative democracy in cities.



Participants’ feedback

“I liked the personal contact and nature of the event. It really helped to reduce the distance between all of us working towards the same goal - but geographically spread.”

“We would probably have been even more productive if we have had more precise information beforehand on the aim and structure of the day.”

“Let the incubator (as well as a generous network of innovation) bring us collaborative solutions!”

“I would love more time to just mingle with and chat with the people at the Hackathon, I still have so many unanswered questions about other projects!”

“The Hackathon was a very interesting, interactive and fruitful exercise. What I particularly liked is the involvement of people from different professional /institutional backgrounds, who had the chance to exchange views and know-how.”



WHY A DEMOCRATIC INCUBATOR?

Innovating for democracy

Despite the great diversity of participants' institutional and professional background, as well as geographical localization, people shared the same assessment of the state of democracy. They expressed a shared feeling that the practice of democracy today, is out of sync with our time and society. Fortunately, democracy is not something static and many citizens, civic entrepreneurs, elected representatives and officials are seeking to go beyond existing tools and mechanisms for democracy to make it fit the modern age. Upgrading democracy for the 21st is both a challenge and a requirement. More than ever, there is a need to aim at a more open, active and inclusive democracy.

According to the participants what is at stake is:

- Building stronger community and society through active citizenship and connected representation
- Looking for smart solutions to today's challenges and creating better policies by taking advantage of collective intelligence in society
- Including feedback loops with citizens and co-create public goods that citizens expect with less money
- Adapting political infrastructure toward more transparency, participation and collaboration
- Answering the expectations of a fast changing society, moving away from an age where institutions were trusted, to an age of networks, movements and individualism, where citizens are used to taking part in global conversations and be active contributors
- Changing power distribution and getting closer to democratic ideals: inclusiveness, accessibility, transparency, equality

From democratic innovations to political alternative

Participatory budgets, collaborative platforms for crowdsourced policies, or citizens' assemblies are being experimented all over the world. However, politicians remain sceptical about these democratic innovations and do not always have the incentive or know-how to engage in open democracy. On the other end, grassroots democratic innovations struggle to scale up and reach out to citizens. Participants stressed out that this involves a change of attitudes, as much as new structures or policies. Specifically, participants thought that attitudes both among politicians and citizens needed to move from "finger-pointing" (blaming others for failure to engage) to a commitment to collaborative solutions.

Therefore, the incubator should help connect democratic projects, make them available for cities and help them reach out to the public, to become a credible and visible alternative for a better democracy. Participants insisted on the fact that a democratic incubator should support initiatives that aim at enriched roles for citizens and representatives, that make a significant contribution to the redistribution of political power, and to inclusion and the broadest possible participation in democracy.

The objectives of the incubator for democracy

According to the people taking part in the hackathon the incubator should help applicants to build an open infrastructure to boost democracy for smart, inclusive and innovative cities. It should be strongly goal-oriented. To do so, it should have 4 main objectives:

1. Creating an active community of democratic innovators around the world;
2. Building bridges between cities and project leaders of concrete solutions for open democracy; the incubator working as a “democracy dating service”, matching up cities and democracy innovation projects
3. Bringing support to cities, civic start-ups and non-profit to create, replicate, connect and scale up democratic projects;
4. Creating an open knowledge on the challenges, solutions and key factors for success for open democracy. It should work as a trusted international voice on the benefits of participation, arousing commitment from political leaders and institutions.

A GOAL-ORIENTED COMMUNITY

One strong idea really came out of the Hackathon. They agreed on the fact that the incubator should contribute to the creation of a trusted environment, where democratic innovators within cities and the civil society could meet and find the resources they need to engage meaningfully in open democracy. They insisted on the need for a structure where they could engage with each other, share concrete and valuable information on their project, expertise and knowledge and look for inspiration from others when implementing complicated projects in an already very busy city system. They also expressed a strong interest for building open research capacities on democratic projects so as to save resources, time and frustration.

Concretely, this active, goal-oriented peer community should thus:

1. **Facilitate peer-to-peer exchange** about the challenges, needs and solutions for citizens’s participation, open government, collaborative tools, etc.
2. **Facilitate connections and cooperation** between local governments, entrepreneurs and civil society organisations on open participation
3. **Offer professional support** and access to inspiration references, expertise and latest development on the “why? how ? what” of open democracy, to cities wishing to engage in sustained in meaningful democratic innovation
4. **Ensure a minimum level of trust and common objectives** between participants, to create a goal-oriented community

a. A peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing network



Participants expressed the need to be part of a peer-to-peer community, where they could engage with each other and share concrete and valuable information: projects material, best practices, challenges, technologies, ... This could take the form of:

- Peer-to-Peer exchange via ONLINE meetings between innovators and city representatives (e.g. via Skype, Google Hangouts etc)
- Peer-to-Peer exchange via OFFLINE meetings between innovators and city representatives (e.g. via expert meetings, city visits etc.)
- Invitations for democracy innovators to speak at city events, facilitated and sponsored by the city in collaboration with the Council of Europe.
- Annual meetings of all incubator participants at World Forum for Democracy to discuss on common agendas and shared concern (active citizenship, inclusiveness, ...)
- Materials on projects (e.g.: map of city projects with contact information, collection of videos and mini-lectures, newsletters, ...)
- Cooperation sessions: Open days for innovators in Public Authorities, speed-networking events, hackathons for designing solutions to public needs
- Citizen Engagement Hotspots: a digital space linked to cities, enabling the easy submission of proposals (voting, mapping, interactive functions, ...)
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b. A mentoring program for cities



Tools and key practices also need to be adapted to the city's needs, local context and cities existing infrastructure. Local differences, between and within communities, mean that there could not be a single platform or solution that would work for all, but there were likely to be common features or shared approaches that could be developed and then extended or tweaked for local conditions. Participants expressed the they needed hands-on expertise and professional support to challenge their democratic skills and political strategies.

- Permanent mentor at the Council of Europe, including e-mail and telephone "hotline": support and challenge on ambition, tools, techs available, business model, citizens outreach, ... and help on mapping out the ambition, needs and focus before starting
- Online and offline workshops on common issues (eg. How to include poor and less educated people in participatory projects? How to set up a randomly selected assembly of ordinary citizens on policy making?)
- Days of support from particular innovators people or experts
- ...

c. A label for the community of open democracy innovators



Participants insisted on the importance to set meaningful and ambitious goals for the community of cities and civil society innovators. They saw as a prerequisite the ability for member to share a common political agenda, as well as a shared sense of responsibilities for citizens and commitment for municipalities. The incubator could be the guardian of the participation principles, encouraging sign-up and publicizing successes.

- Consolidated “democratic city” label: defining concrete measures and advises to implement open democracy in cities. The CoE could then grant a “brand” of Participatory City after successful implementation of citizen participation structures, ...
- Benchmark on civic innovation for open cities
- Standardized measures for evaluation and participation principles such as inclusiveness, accessibility, transparency, equality (e.g. Use case Amsterdam)
- City Index on Open Democracy (e.g. http://www.democracybarometer.org/concept_en.html)
- ...

Going further and next steps

1. This active, goal-oriented community should be a first step in building the incubator. The next step in the building of this community would be to prioritize and select the main activities. There should also be a search for a proper and sustainable business model to provide for the community activities (CoE input, private and public sponsors, memberships, premium services, public-private schemes for companies to pull funds, ...). Some participants stressed out that there should also be a close attention to the governance principles of such a community which should stay open, collaborative, demanding with its participants as well as un-institutional.

The objective could be set to launch the community within the first semester of 2016 with suggested commitment opportunities for the hackathon participants (e.g. workshops, creation of map with cities projects and portfolio, ...); WFD 2016 being an occasion to report and share the work of the members.

2. Beyond the community, many participants also stressed out the importance **for the incubator to rapidly support peer groups or individuals working on particular ideas**. Indeed, it is concrete projects which will power the community in the long-run. It is thus important that the incubator rapidly engage and support people modelling and experimenting democratic initiatives on the ground.

In order to do so, participants acknowledged the importance of building open, effective and crowdsourced infrastructures to easily access knowledge, code and solutions to start experimenting with democracy (in a more community-based, service and action-oriented way than Participedia or the above mentioned community)

- *"Social GitHub"* to ensure that the multiple initiatives on participation going on around the world are not duplicating effort, and that materials created for one initiative can be shared, adapted for others, merged and forked.
- *"Civic tech market-place"* where governments and institutions will be able to find information on existing democratic apps and civic technologies and connect to communities of developers, commercial support companies and digital resources.

The incubator could sponsor and back up people engagement in physical and local hubs where they will cooperate, iterate and design adapted solutions.

- *Democratic hubs* will offer a unique ecosystem of resources, inspiration, and collaboration opportunities to grow the positive impact of open democracy initiatives for project leaders in their cities. They will entail a close collaboration between social innovators and public authorities as well as mechanisms for citizens' input.