

Reflection on:
“Evaluating the Democratic Quality of Local
Democratic Practices – Sampling Seven
Frameworks”
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I have been an evaluator for a decade and have been involved in evaluation of programmes and projects with both formative and summative designs. The majority (but far from all) of the evaluations have been funded by the European Union and the stakeholders include municipal, regional and state organisations. My reflections on this article revolve around the usefulness and accessibility of the models discussed. This is because, in my experience, evaluations tend to lose their purpose if they do not meet the needs of practitioners (for example, officials or representatives for NGOs) and policymakers, but also because evaluators often find themselves struggling to put academic evaluation models into practice.

My first reflection is on the usefulness of the evaluation models discussed in the article. In my experience, models and frameworks designed to evaluate the quality of various efforts to increase democratic involvement and participation could contribute to the discussions and decision making when it comes to a broad range of issues. This could, for example, include local initiatives to increase the participation of under-represented groups, and efforts to ensure the democratic quality in different types of planning processes, such as city planning. The models discussed contribute new, and more specific, angles on how projects and programmes targeted towards initiatives to enhance democracy can be evaluated. This is the case, not least because many evaluators have a general social science knowledge base, rather than specific knowledge of issues concerning democracy. The models consequently provide guidance and can be a useful complement to more generic evaluation models (such as theory-driven evaluations). As such, they are useful for evaluators and provide more tools in the evaluator’s toolbox.

The authors suggest shortcomings and different areas that could be developed in the models discussed. In my experience, it seems to be important to address several of them. An evaluation in this particular field needs to address the importance of the local context and qualitative aspects of democratic development such as the quality of dialogue and legitimacy (aspects that it is often appropriate to investigate through qualitative data). According to the researchers, this is often achieved in the different models. On the other hand, there is also a need to accumulate knowledge in a way that allows for comparisons between projects or democratic innovations. This requirement seems less easy to address. Also, the models seem to be rigged towards investigating particular projects and initiatives. There is thus a risk that the evaluations are used in a limited (or even worse, in a ‘tokenistic’) way. Formative purposes can be met for the individual projects, but the need to accumulate aggregate knowledge concerning which methods and innovations work, for which groups and under what contextual circumstances, will be excluded. In my experience, omitting this also leaves many officials and decision-makers disappointed as they lack decision-making information when

priorities need to be set. It also makes these models less suitable for evaluating programmes where the aggregate effects and impacts of a larger number of projects have to be understood and measured.

The authors also discuss other relevant issues concerning the different models' accessibility and usefulness for evaluators and officials. One of these is that the frameworks are wide and imprecise, leaving the field open to interpretations. In my experience, wide and imprecise models often entail challenges for evaluators as they have to struggle to understand them and put them into practice. If this is the case, the challenges will be even greater for evaluators with a lack of in-depth knowledge in the fields of democracy theory or practical knowledge of issues concerning democracy.

Furthermore, a shortcoming discussed by the authors is that the majority of the models have been primarily tested in local settings where the institutions are stable and the citizens are resourceful. The opportunities to learn are consequently limited in areas where there are major challenges. Municipal, regional and state organisations in Sweden are currently taking part in discussions on how to increase the involvement of socially and economically excluded groups in democratic processes. My conclusion is that developing and elaborating models that meet these needs would be valuable for evaluators, officials, decision-makers and other stakeholders.