Harnessing Collective Intelligence to Strengthen Democracy in the Nordic Region

Mikko Rask, Centre for Consumer Society Research, University of Helsinki, Finland
Peter Baeck, Nesta, UK
Christopher Edgar, Nesta, UK
Jacqueline Floch, Sintef, Norway
Pekka Tuominen, University of Helsinki, Finland
Bokyoung Shin, University of Helsinki, Finland

This policy brief presents recommendations from the COLDIGIT project on how to mainstream the use of democratic innovations such as participatory budgeting and citizens assemblies in the Nordic countries.

Digital technologies have revolutionised the way we live, work, and interact with each other. They pose both a risk and an opportunity for our democracies. On the one hand, digital technology has fuelled misinformation and the misuse of data which risks undermining trust and participation; on the other hand, technology provides innovative approaches to the deepening and scaling up of our ability to collaborate, deliberate and make decisions together as a society.[1] As policymakers in the Nordic Region aim to achieve their vision of a green, competitive, and socially sustainable society by 2030, deepening participation from citizens is more relevant than ever.

Although the Nordic countries are often viewed as strong examples of well-functioning democracies, they still face several democratic challenges.[2] These include increasing voter turnout, especially for younger generations less engaged in traditional political activities, and addressing rising income disparities that undermine social trust and erode the Nordic welfare model. Similarly rises in populism and extremism challenge democratic norms, create divisions within society, and potentially undermine trust in democratic institutions.

Working with the cities of Helsinki, Trondheim and Gothenburg the *Collective Intelligence through Digital Tools project* (COLDIGIT) explores how we can mainstream the methods used to transform how public institutions tackle complex societal issues and use digital tools to involve citizens in decision making, such as citizen assemblies and participatory budgeting (PB), and how to improve the quality and legitimacy of democratic governance in the Nordic Region. We have combined work with cities with analyses of global best practices, from Taiwan to Paris, to develop tools and methods for cities and municipalities to identify barriers to democratic innovation and how to address these.

The need for democratic innovations

Our current political systems are struggling to provide the scale and speed of decision-making required to tackle the crises facing our democracies. A study across 17 advanced global economies found that a median of 56% of people surveyed and 34% in Sweden believe there should be major or complete reform of their political systems.[3] In the Nordics Region, this appetite for change is fuelling a growing demand for increased citizen power in political decision-making. A recent survey found that 700,000 Finns would like to participate in decision-making more than they do now, if only it were easier – while at the same time, less than 20 per cent of elected representatives and public officials thought the public had an adequate capacity to participate in discussions concerning complex decisions.[4]

Governments and municipalities have sought to address these challenges, particularly the increasing need for participation, by introducing democratic innovations that deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation, and influence.[5] Democratic innovations go beyond traditional forms of engagement such as town hall meetings and enables citizens to directly influence final decisions – for instance, through PB, deliberative polls, and citizens' panels.

The use of these innovative approaches has seen rapid growth over the last five years.

Citizen Assemblies – where a representative group of citizens (typically 50–200 people) are asked to learn about, deliberate upon, and make recommendations regarding a particular issue or set of issues, such as legalising same-sex marriage or adapting to climate change – is now used by all levels of government, from the EU and national governments to cities and municipalities. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has noted that "citizens' panels should become part of the way we make policy."[6] Similarly, PB – where citizens are given the mandate to decide how to allocate part of a municipal or public budget through democratic deliberation and decision-making – was used in over 14,000 places by 2021.[7] The popularity of PB can be explained by the fact that both the World Bank and the United Nations have recommended it as a good practice to use in order to develop better governance practices and enhance the health and well-being of the population.[8] Ten countries have even mandated it by national law.

Lessons from COLDIGIT

To understand the opportunities in the application of collective intelligence methods and tools to better engage citizens in solving public problems and how better to mainstream these, the COLDIGIT (2020–2023) project has focused on four core activities:

- **Creating a platform**[9] for cities and public institutions which contains 150 digital democracy tools and real-life cases illustrating their use in public sector processes ranging from decision-making and planning to examples of co-creation, crowdsourcing, and crowdfunding.

- **Reviewing the evidence** on main barriers and enablers of democratic innovation and digital participation, based on both a review of academic literature and the analysis of global best practice examples, such as the g0v project in Taiwan, the world's largest Participatory PB in Paris and the Decide Madrid platform in Madrid.[10]

- **Learning from citizen participation experiments** designed together with our project partners in three Nordic cities. A city-wide PB process in Helsinki, PB processes run by a housing company in Gothenburg, and a citizens' assembly on a municipal master plan in Trondheim. To evaluate the quality and impacts of democratic innovations more comprehensively, we have applied an innovative *Co-Creation Radar* evaluation framework[11], to which Business Finland awarded major funding to develop it into an international evaluation service.

- **Developing the Deliver–Expand–Embed framework and toolkit** (Figure 1), to advance better adoption of democratic innovations in the Nordic Region. The framework identifies typical barriers to using and mainstreaming democratic innovations in the public sector, such as inequality and access to poorly designed technological solutions, lack of trust and concerns over privacy and entrenched power structures, and the challenge of balancing competing interests in decision-making processes.

- **Leadership** is needed to overcome these barriers and ensure resources and skills needed to overcome them. The framework and accompanying toolkit for public institutions has already been used by municipalities in Sweden, Norway, Finland and the UK to design and develop new approaches to addressing barriers and scaling democratic innovations.
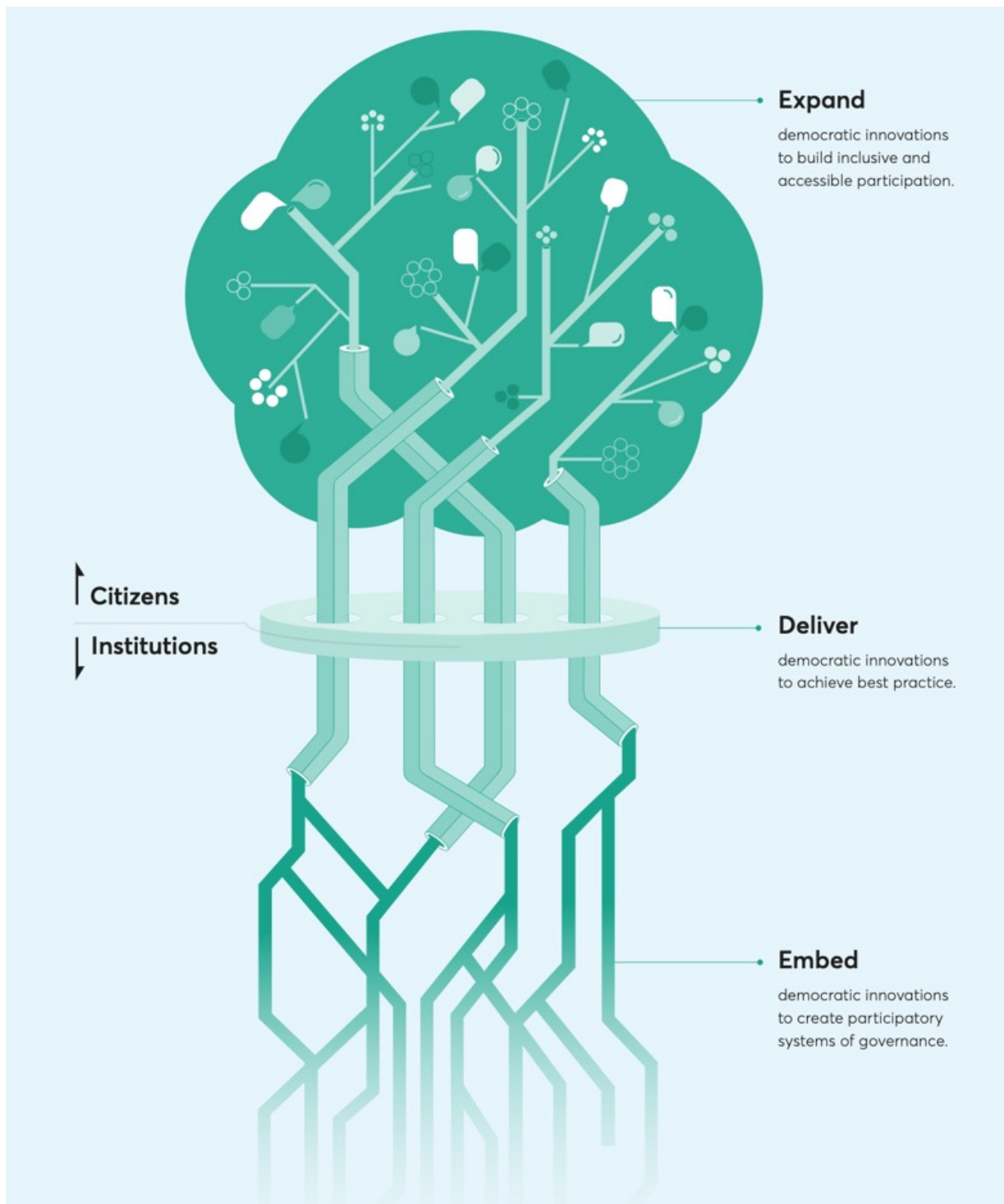
Figure 1. Deliver–Expand–Embed Framework

Recommendations

The Nordic Council of Ministers' Vision 2030 presents an ambitious plan for the Nordic Region to emerge as the most sustainable and integrated area globally. To realise this vision, we must leverage the potential of digital solutions and foster citizen participation in policy-making processes, tapping into the collective intelligence of our communities. This paired with high levels of digital literacy and strong democratic traditions could help make the Nordic countries a test bed for systemic democratic innovation. As we strive to reach these goals, we propose the following recommendations to strengthen the path forward:

1. **Enhance digital infrastructure and develop inclusive participatory tools tailored to local needs:** Invest in research and development to create and improve digital tools for citizen participation, such as online voting platforms, virtual town hall meetings, and interactive maps. Tailor these tools to the specific needs of each municipality, ensuring they are accessible, user-friendly, and integrated with existing city digital innovation and R&D initiatives, such as smart city projects. Enable learning and collaboration on the use of democratic innovations across municipalities in the Nordic Region.

2. **Establish dedicated teams and institutions for digital citizen participation:** Create new teams and institutions responsible for managing and maintaining digital participation initiatives at the municipal level. These teams should work closely with decision-makers to ensure that citizen input is incorporated into policy-making processes and has a measurable impact. Additionally, they should facilitate knowledge sharing and capacity building within and beyond core teams to promote the widespread adoption of democratic innovations.

3. **Foster inclusivity and diversity in citizen participatory processes:** Develop strategies for recruiting diverse, representative panels of citizens to participate in digital democratic processes. Ensure that individuals from various backgrounds, ages, genders, ethnicities, and socio-economic statuses are included, to reflect the full spectrum of perspectives and experiences within the community.

4. **Implement capacity-building and skills-development programmes:** Design and offer capacity-building programmes to equip municipal experts with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively participate in digital democratic processes. Provide training, education, and resources that cover both general digital literacy and specific participatory methods, such as crowdsourcing, deliberative democracy, PB, and citizen juries.

5. **Secure long-term funding and integrate democratic innovations into existing processes:** Move away from funding short term democracy pilots. Ensure that financing for digital democratic innovations is embedded in core municipal funding and not treated as tokenistic or temporary. Integrate democratic innovations into existing decision-making processes, such as city planning, budgeting, and policy-making. Establish binding commitments to participation and consider shifting power to citizens through increased engagement, transparency, and accountability.

6. **Invest in R&D and AI for democracy and new technologies:** Continue to invest in the development and usability of digital tools for democracy and make the Nordic Region a leader in this field. Align this with investments in Artificial Intelligence to explore how AI could be used to foster larger and higher quality forms of participation and deliberation online.

References

1   Council of Europe 2021. Study on the Impact of Digital Transformation on Democracy and Good Governance. European Committee on Democracy and Governance.

2   Quirico M. 2020. Democracy in the Shadow of Populism – A Nordic Way Out? In Nordics info, Aarhus University.

3   Wike R, Fetterolf J. 2021. Global Public Opinion in an Era of Democratic Anxiety, Pew Research Center.

4   Jämsen P, Kaartinen J, Westinen J, Turja T. 2022. Demokraattiset osallistumismahdollisuudet Suomessa, Sitra. Finnish.

5   Elstub S, Escobar O. (Eds.) 2019. Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance. Edward Elgar Publishing.

6   https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1523631444165562370

7   Dias N, Enríquez S, Cardita R, Júlio S. 2021. Participatory Budgeting World Atlas 2020-2021. Oficina

8   Campbell M, Escobar O, Fenton C, Craig P. The impact of participatory budgeting on health and wellbeing: a scoping review of evaluations. BMC public health. 2018;18(1):1-11.

9   https://coldigitkp.pory.app

10 Whittington O. 2022. Democratic Innovation and Digital Participation – Harnessing Collective Intelligence for 21st Century Decision-Making

11 Rask M, Ertiö T, Tuominen P, Ahonen V. 2021. Final Evaluation of the City of Helsinki's Participatory Budgeting. OmaStadi 2018–2020. Publications of the Ministry of Justice.