

flashMOOCs – Summary

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Video: «Democracy vs. Sustainability»

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University of Bern, https://www.ipw.unibe.ch/index_eng.html

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Democracy and Sustainability. Both are principles that can guide decision-making, be it at the level of governments, or even of individual citizens. Both seem important or wishful, but we will show you that they are in no means all the time compatible. Or said different: some decisions can be democratic but not sustainable and vice versa.

Democracy: It's nothing else than government or decision-making by the people. Representative democracy is when for example parliaments should represent different interests and stakes of diverse groups of society. In contrast, direct democracy is when people can directly vote or elect.

Sustainability: Also in the sustainability discourse, "participation by the people" is an important principle. Following the Brundtland report, one of the reference documents, all people concerned or affected by a problem should also decide about its solution.

The challenge with input legitimacy: From a sustainability angle, it is thus totally acceptable that young generations fight for their rights, or that scientific experts are consulted in political decision-making. But these representatives are neither electable nor dismissible by the people, and therefore they are neither accountable nor responsive to them.

The challenge with output legitimacy: Does this mean that there is no way to combine both sustainability and principles of democratic input legitimacy? There is. Direct democracy and deliberative decision-making are two prominent forms of participation by people interested, concerned and motivated about policymaking. This means that policies are a result of discussion and debate among citizens. One downside of such participative forms is the immense amount of time and resources they consume, and the fact that natural hierarchies lead to "government by an elite" rather than "by the people".

Furthermore, direct and negotiation democracies tend to produce policies that are smooth but are seldom radical or innovative. Most often, it is not the first, but only the second-best

solutions that gain widespread support. A consensus or compromise is therefore rarely concise, sober or coherent, but rather resembles a puzzle of different interests that were represented at the table.

Conclusion: When non-elected officials make part of decision-making, this can be sustainable, but harm democratic input legitimacy. Deliberation is one form where sustainability and input legitimacy are both performing well. But as often, when the scale swings towards input legitimacy, output legitimacy and thus policy performance might be reduced.

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17. The original wording used by Aristotle was: “democracies are benefitting the poor”. At that time, “the poor” included the majority of citizens, thus all free (in contrast to slaves) citizens (with the right to vote). Today we would probably refer to the common people or the commonality.
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