

ARTICLE

The Democratic Potential of Community-based Initiatives

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Abstract

As governments in Western Europe have retreated from providing public services over the past decades, they have stimulated communities to take over many of these services. This has resulted in, among other things, a plethora of community-based initiatives (CBIs). CBIs are heralded by some for their innovative potential: they would address new problems. CBIs are also criticised for being undemocratic, as their activities can marginalise or overrule elected politicians and the citizens active in CBIs are not representative of the population. We argue that these different praises and criticisms implicitly depart from different democratic perspectives, specifically the representative and do-democratic perspectives. These different perspectives need to be explicated and compared in order to judge in what ways CBIs can and cannot be said to have democratic legitimacy, when assessed from different perspectives on democracy.

Keywords: community initiatives, democracy, participation, do-democracy, legitimacy.

1 Introduction

One of the more prominent pushes towards innovation in welfare states often takes the form of community-based initiatives (CBIs), local initiatives of community members to provide goods or services for the community, without commercial interests (Blok et al., 2022; Igalla et al., 2019; Ubels, 2020). We define CBIs as a form of self-organisation from communities to provide a public service where members of the community control the aims, means and actual implementation of services, based on the definition by Igalla, Edelenbos and Van Meerkerk (2020: 603). The democratic legitimacy of these initiatives can be questioned, because of, among other reasons, their supposed lack of representativeness and sustainability

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(Binnema & Michels, 2022; Dekker, 2019; Uittenbroek et al., 2019; Staatscommissie Parlementair Stelsel [Government Committee on Parliamentary Democracy], 2018).

But as Hendriks and Dzur (2021: 2-3) recently stated, the debate between the proponents and critics of CBIs has grown predictable. The proponents, the ‘neo-tocquevillians’, argue that these initiatives are a “testament to the capacity of communities to self-organize and solve collective problems outside of the formal political process” (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021: 3). The neo-tocquevillians emphasise that participating in these initiatives might increase social capital, representational capacity and trust in society: in a word, that these initiatives are beneficial for democracy. The opponents, the sceptical ‘critics of neoliberalism’, view these initiatives “as symptomatic of how states and markets off-load collective responsibilities” (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021: 3). These critics point to risks of increasing inequality, increased competition between groups in society and the lack of representation these initiatives tend to display. With this article, we want to move beyond these back-and-forth of well-trodden arguments, by investigating how these initiatives can be assessed as (un)democratic, depending on different conceptions of democracy. We will discuss the democratic promises and pitfalls of CBIs from the perspectives of representative democracy and do-democracy.

The practical and scientific value of this article are inherently interwoven: trying to understand in what ways people with differing conceptions of democracy view various aspects of CBIs differently, gives an impulse to the academic debate and provides clarity in public policy. If governments keep retreating from public and create increasing budgets for these citizens, being able to think through the implications for the democratic system is no longer a purely academic pursuit (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau, 2019; Tjeenk Willink, 2018).

In this article, we present an analytical framework for understanding and differentiating democratic legitimisation from the perspectives of representative democracy and do-democracy. Our focus is on representative democracy and do-democracy because these fit best with the conceptions of democracy held by the relevant actors surrounding CBIs: the participants, who often hold a do-democratic conception (Dzur, 2019), and the civil servants, who work within a representative framework (Barber, 2003). Representative democracy is the perspective that underlies modern democracies, and therefore useful to understand the behaviour of civil servants and politicians (Dahl, 1989; Røiseland, 2022: 1501). Even if an individual civil servant is sympathetic to a different conception, the municipal government as an institution is founded on a representative democratic conception of democracy.

Among active citizens, however, democracy gains a different meaning. Instead of a focus on deliberation (or talk), clear procedures and carefully weighed interests, democracy is about freedom (Dalton et al., 2007), collective problem-solving (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021: 9) and knowing what problems to solve through proximity, rather than complex procedures (Dzur, 2019: 6). This fits well with the conception of “do-democracy” most commonly held by participants in CBIs, according to Dzur (2019: 6). While other conceptions of democracy are potentially interesting, representative and do-democracy are the most urgent and the most fitting to

contrast in regard to the legitimacy of CBIs. Deliberative democracy, for example, is more relevant when discussing the legitimacy of democratic innovation more focused on talking, rather than doing, which is the core of CBIs.

Our article is a theoretical exercise, based on the existing literature. Our framework demonstrates how representative democracy and do-democracy provide different perspectives on key aspects of the democratic legitimacy of CBIs. In addition, we provide a synthesised account of clashing conceptions of democracy, to guide readers through our analytical framework and to emphasise the practical use of this analytical device. We argue that political and societal reliance on CBIs necessitates the reintroduction of a seldom expressed function of democracy: democratisation of the *implementation* of collective decisions. Thinking on “democratizing the executive” has had an impulse in the past few years, all be it particularly from the perspective of the liberal strand of representative democracy and the important role of civil service as a bulwark against populism (Zacka, 2022: 27). We want to now draw attention to democratising the executive from a more radical democratic perspective, the do-democracy.

Our aims are to show that 1) CBIs can be understood and legitimised from the representative and do-democratic conceptions of democracy and 2) public tensions can be mitigated by communicating clearly about one’s conception of democracy. Conceptions of democracy are abstract and complex academic constructions, but they do have consequences. Trying to hold CBIs to an ideal that the members do not share, will lead to frustration for both civil servants and active citizens. Just as holding a CBI to varying conceptions of democracy at once is a recipe for conflict. By adding to the understanding of CBIs, we hope to overcome this. Our data and analysis stem from a Dutch background, but the implications are relevant for twenty-first century welfare states in general (Smits, 2022; Soares da Silva et al., 2018). In many modern democracies, democratic innovations, such as CBIs, are being used to give a democratising impulse to the representative systems that are often considered lacking in democratic merits or appeal.

2 Defining CBIs

CBIs are a varied genus of local initiatives, which can range from informal, semi-structured initiatives to nearly professional and highly formalised organisations. These initiatives often take the form of an association or foundation, with a board, statutes and a bank account, though sometimes they have only a few or none of these formal elements (Igalla et al., 2020: 604). Many different terms are used for these kinds of initiatives. The term most closely related is citizens’ initiative, which implies the exclusion of non-citizens, where community-based implies that any member of the community can be part of the initiative. Two other related concepts that we want to discuss are output-based co-creation as used by Røiseland (2022) and citizens’ governance spaces as coined by Hendriks and Dzur (2021). We want to respond to their recent articles on the topic of the democratic legitimacy of this type of initiative, as both take interesting steps forward in this field. However, the articles also point to each other’s weaknesses, without

mentioning each other by name. The similarities and differences between CBIs and their concepts are discussed here, as we will turn to both Røiseland, and Hendriks and Dzur for our analysis on the democratic legitimacy of CBIs.

Røiseland sees CBIs as part of ‘output-based co-creation’: which concerns participation in service delivery itself, for example “where citizens do create value for other citizens through voluntary work carried out in close cooperation with public professionals and leaders” (Røiseland, 2022: 1500). Røiseland defines co-creation as

the process through which public and private/civil actors attempt to solve a shared problem, challenge, or task through a constructive exchange of different kinds of knowledge, resources, competences and ideas (Røiseland, 2022: 1497).

Røiseland contrasts this with more policy-oriented co-creation, input-based co-creation, but these are more comparable to neighbourhood councils. CBIs focus on the implementation of policy, and on shaping policy through this implementation, rather than policy formation through conversation.

Hendriks and Dzur use the term ‘citizens’ governed spaces’ for their discussion of democratic innovation. Citizens’ governed spaces are a specific subset of CBIs: they are led and driven by citizens, who “form a group, project or organization to undertake a practical initiative” (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021: 4), independently from market and government, often in response to a gap in public services as provided by these institutions (Hendriks & Dzur, 2022: 5-6). Citizens’ governed spaces define the problem, form feasible plans, implement solutions and make evaluations and refinements (Hendriks & Dzur, 2022: 6). They are typically innovative, experimental and disruptive; they can work so far out of the box that they clash with established government programmes, or even challenge vested ideas and power structures.

We look at CBIs as local initiatives that spring from the community and are for the community, sometimes with help from the government, to *do* something: provide a service or a public good. We therefore consider the ways in which CBIs can be democratically legitimated from the representative perspective (the perspective that underpins the government) and do-democracy (which centres doing as a core democratic activity). We will outline first the existing debate on the democratic legitimacy of CBIs, and introduce the ways in which Hendriks and Dzur, and Røiseland try to move the debate forward. We show which parts of their work we find useful and where we see room for improvement.

3 Debating Democratic Legitimacy

Expectations of the democratic, innovative character of CBIs are generally high. Already in 2011, Fung and Warren maintained that CBIs

tend to evoke the language of participation and citizen engagement, often in response to specific kinds of resistance or veto. They tend to be single-issue focused or single problem focused rather than broadly programmatic or general-purpose. They are often innovative in design and utilize a variety of techniques such as random selection of participants, facilitation, deliberation, and new communication technologies. They tend to be respectful of the everyday knowledge of interested people. They sometimes provide venues for inclusion of people who have little if any voice in standard political processes. Finally, they are often highly pragmatic, focused on results (Fung & Warren, 2011: 344).

Apparently, CBIs know what is going on in their neighbourhood, and know how to translate this into action.

This optimism is echoed in Ianniello et al. (2019: 21) more recent argument that

CBIs enhance the quality and legitimacy of policy decisions, thus overcoming the problems faced by representative democracy, especially when dealing with wicked problems, multi-faceted issues, and fragmented policy environments.

Similarly, Hendriks and Dzur (2021) maintain that CBIs create democratic innovations by allowing average people to participate in politics on a local level and thus bridge the gap between citizens and politics (see also de Graaf et al., 2015; Häikiö 2012; Nikkhah & Redzuan, 2009; Warren, 2017).

Another strong voice that lauds the democratic merits of CBIs is Dzur (2019). Dzur (2019: 16) argues that academics and politicians can and do debate the democratic legitimacy of different conceptions of democracy and of different democratic practices, but that laypeople – active citizens, neighbourhood councils, teachers and caretakers – do not care about these cerebral discussions. They just want to foster democratic values by ‘doing democracy’: working together, helping each other, fostering a sense of community and (re)empowering laypeople in an increasingly complex and professionalised world. Dzur points to CBIs as spaces where this doing occurs (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021).

However, there is also reason to be sceptical about the democratic contribution of CBIs. As Verhoeven, Wijdeven and Hetze (2014: 8) state:

Time and again the democratic legitimacy of do-ocracy is challenged: it is not transparent, representative, there are no checks and balances, the actions are not serving the public good but merely a small local group of people, what is the public good is not defined in a struggle of interests but determined by a group of outspoken citizens (Tonkens, 2013).

The most common criticism is that they exacerbate inequality between communities (e.g. Almond & Verba, 1980; Mees et al., 2019; Visser et al., 2021) because most citizens active in CBIs are white, upper class, well-educated, older people, while young people and citizens with an immigrant background are underrepresented

(van Schelven et al., 2021; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2018). Only representative democratic institutions would be able to ensure equal and fair distribution of public goods (de Souza Briggs, 2008; Martinelli, 2013).

However, as we shall show in this article, this criticism stems from a representative perspective on democracy, and does not necessarily sit well with Dzur's laypeople who also consider their actions to be democratic. It is striking that both academics and political actors often fail to make their perspective on democracy explicit, and instead presuppose that everybody acts from their own (often implicit) view on democracy (Hoskins, 2013; Hurenkamp & Tonkens, 2020).

In this article, we juxtapose representative and do-democratic views on the (lack of) democratic legitimation of CBIs. We do not intend to promote a single, normative point of view, but instead aim to explicate different views and concomitant criteria for democratic legitimation and hence further the debate. We demonstrate how conflicts (between CBIs and other citizens, local civil servants or politicians) occur because people do not mean the same thing when they say that a CBI is (not) 'democratic'.

We build on Warren (2017) by looking at how these two views of democracy indeed focus on different aspects of CBIs. Warren claims that democracies have three main functions: 1) empowered inclusion, 2) collective agenda and will formation and 3) collective decision-making (Warren, 2017: 44-46). We argue that CBIs can only be understood by introducing a fourth function of democracy: the *implementation* of collective decisions. This fourth function of democracies might be understood as democratising the executive branch of the *trias politica*. So where voting for parliament democratises the legislative, and jury-duty democratises the judicial, empowering people to shape their environment democratises the executive branch of the *trias politica*. Where first a civil servant provided a service, the active community member now takes over. This has long been an under-researched aspect of democracies, with a few exceptions (Fung, 2004; Verhoeven et al., 2014).

In the last few years, implementation has received more attention, specifically from U.S.-based scholars, who were interested in the role the executive branch could play by "serv[ing] as a bulwark against populism ..." (Zacka, 2022: 24). Literature discussing public administration from the perspective of democratic theory either implicitly or explicitly uses a representative democratic perspective (e.g.: Heath, 2020; Zacka, 2022), or an output-based claim to legitimacy, by explaining that "governance-driven democratization can harness the potentials of civil society for knowledge, organization, energy and creativity for government policymaking and decision" (Warren, 2014: 41). We will return to the notion of democratising the executive over the course of the article.

4 Responding to the Debate

As Connelly, Bryant and Sharp (2020: 396, emphasis theirs) point out: "what counts as democratic legitimacy depends very much on the theory of democracy in use". Røiseland (2022) also takes the impossibility of evaluating democratic legitimacy without explicating one's democratic perspective as a starting point. He

develops a schematic approach to understanding the potentials and pitfalls of “co-creation for democratic legitimacy”. He looks at the democratic legitimacy of output-based co-creation from the perspectives of three distinct conceptions of democracy: deliberative, participative and representative democracy (Røiseland, 2022: 1502). Røiseland explains both the potential and pitfalls of output-based co-creation from these perspectives, by looking at co-creation from these perspectives.

Røiseland sees the legitimacy of output-based co-creation as mostly existing as output-based legitimacy, rather than input-based legitimacy (2022: 1502). He finds the legitimisation of this co-creation by arguing that it will lead to better services and reduced burdens on the budget from a liberal representative perspective, and similarly that it will lead to more accurate help through micro-deliberation from the deliberative perspective. From the participatory perspective, co-creation is almost obviously legitimate, as it allows both more people to participate and allows people to participate more directly in policy (1506). While Røiseland creates a clear analytical model to consider democratic legitimacy from different perspectives, he does so from the perspectives of democracy that are most strongly embedded in the literature (2022: 1501), rather by considering the legitimacy that could be gained from democratising the executive. Røiseland necessarily limits the legitimacy of CBIs, because he does not consider their unique democratising aspect.

This is precisely what Hendriks and Dzur warn against in their 2022 article. They argue that most scholarly literature on initiatives of citizens fundamentally misses what makes ‘citizens’ governed spaces’ different from other democratic innovations and provide an analysis of the potential and pitfalls based on an empirical account of these spaces (Hendriks & Dzur, 2022). Hendriks and Dzur (2022: 9-12) see five potential (overlapping) democratic benefits of citizens’ governed spaces, namely: 1) fostering civic agency, 2) reframing political structures, 3) gaining experiences with politics, 4) enacting inclusion, advocacy and representation and 5) strengthening vital connections between citizens and the democratic systems they live in. However, the democratic perspective behind these choices, why the benefits are benefits, is not explicated. Hendriks and Dzur (2022) thus fall into the pit that both Røiseland (2022) and Connolly et al. (2020) warn against: evaluating the democratic merits of an innovation without discussing from which democratic perspective this is done and how it relates to other democratic perspectives.

In what follows, we create an analytical framework like that of Røiseland, in which we compare the representative and do-democratic perspectives on the democratic legitimacy of CBIs. We thus follow Røiseland in his attempt to make a structured theoretical model, which Hendriks and Dzur forgo. We do so while considering a democratic perspective that is developed explicitly to correspond to how active community members understand themselves and their actions (Van de Wijdeven, 2012: 13), thus following Hendriks and Dzur in their emphasis on the unique democratising nature of CBIs. Finally, we do so while explicating the perspectives of democracy, following Røiseland and Connolly et al. But first we will

provide an example narrative to illustrate how these two perspectives on CBIs can clash in practice.

5 Example Narrative

Before getting to the theoretical analysis, we find it helpful to provide the reader with an example narrative, as inspired by Jeanette Pols (2015). An example narrative is a collated ideal-typical narrative that demonstrates how our theoretical concepts look in a synthesised case study. While we base our example narrative on 20 interviews with active community members and 5 interviews with civil servants and social workers from 2 cities in the Netherlands, we mostly want to provide an ideal-typical example of the different conceptions of democracy in action. In “Towards an empirical ethics in care”, Pols similarly collated “the stories and practices of many into two narratives”, in order to “bring the cases to life for the reader, at the cost of particular nuances and perspectives, and at the favour of others” (2015, 84). Likewise, the aim of our example narrative is to enliven a theoretical analysis, but also to synthesise various experiences and stories into a single coherent narrative to illustrate a theoretical issue without hopping from example to example.

K's garden

A mid-sized municipal government has been trying to get more community initiatives off the ground. It offers subsidies for community initiatives and employs a social worker ('participation broker'), to connect local communities and civil servants. Inhabitant K. wants to start a communal vegetable garden. His goals are to give vulnerable people access to meaningful and healthy activities and to improve a barren lot of land between high-rises and train tracks, that as of now is only in use at night by youth at risk. K. has brought together a group of likeminded people with various skills who want to help. K. contacts the participation broker, who is helpful and enthusiastic: the land is indeed not in use, and K.'s plan fits within the municipal goals for community and landscape improvement. K. is now one happy 'do-democrat'.

However, the participation broker points out two potential roadblocks. Firstly, K. needs to show there is no resistance against the plans, by polling the neighbourhood, to show he speaks for his community, that is, to show that his plan is representative of a need in the populace. K. sends out a poll via a local WhatsApp-group and gets a few positive responses, and no criticism. Secondly, he needs to organize the permits himself. So, K. asks the permission from the Office for Public Zoning, that requests a business plan, as it will be held accountable by the city council.

K. does not have a business plan yet. He was counting on literal seed money: a small subsidy to buy equipment and seeds for the garden. Now he must come up with a sketch of the garden, the expected runtime of the project, the expected number of volunteers, the permit for use of heavy equipment to clear the barren

lot, and so on. Luckily, K.'s neighbour used to be an engineer, so she can lend a hand with the technical parts. If not for her, K. wouldn't have been able to get through this procedure.

Finally, K. needs to show proof that he has the right to exploit the land. This is impossible, as the land is not theirs yet ... The permit-system is made for people cultivating their own land and land owned by corporations. K. is the first person who tries to cultivate government land with government funds. The broker spends the next weeks going between the different offices of the municipality, as the civil servants want to respect the rules. In the end, the alderman breaks this bureaucratic deadlock, by making himself responsible if the city council asks will hold someone accountable. With that, the civil servants can give out the permits. While K. feels supported by the alderman, he is also increasingly disappointed with the municipal civil service.

Having received the subsidy and the permits, the initiative starts. The enthusiastic alderman comes by to cut a ribbon, and the initiative is featured in promotional material for the participation agenda of the municipality. After the predetermined amount of time, the initiative must reapply for its permit. In the meantime, however, the enthusiastic alderman has been replaced, and some of the civil servants as well. This results in new demands of local government.

The new alderman has a focus on innovative initiatives. K. is not too sure his initiative is innovative. After all he has already been doing this for some years. The Office of Public Zoning explains that public money is meant for the entire municipality, or at least for all inhabitants of a neighbourhood. So, the initiative needs to be able to show it is not just for a limited group of people in the neighbourhood where it sits, and the volunteers should be representative of the neighbourhood, and the initiative is asked to show that visitors come from all over the city. This is a new request, that is different from what K. was told at the start. K.'s ambitions now begin to wane.

6 Do-Democracy and Representative Democracy

In this section, we want to provide an analytical lens to look at CBIs from two distinct conceptions of democracy. The first is representative democracy, which Røiseland (2022, 1501-1502) calls liberal democracy. The second conception of democracy we will use is what Van de Wijdeven and Hendriks called do-democracy, which has a specific focus on acting by 'doing' rather than 'talking' (Van de Wijdeven & Hendriks, 2010). Citizens act by creating an activity or a service and, in that sense, take control over public issues. This is similar to the idea of output-based co-creation, but with an emphasis on the larger policy implication, rather than the individual welfare examples that Røiseland discusses (Røiseland, 2022: 1500).

We ask four questions to map the different evaluations of the democratic legitimacy of CBIs. First: *whose interests are to be considered?* This question is central to pluralism (Dahl, 1998). Second, we ask *who is actively and substantially involved in the decision-making process.* Who is involved in political will formation is key to

understanding any democratic perspective (Warren, 2017). Third, we ask *how decisions are translated into action*. Any political system is a method of deciding what to do and doing that, or as the saying goes, politics is who gets what, when and how (Laswell, 1936). Most writing on democracy is about the decision-making process, and not about how these decisions are translated into action. Our fourth question is: *how do people account for those actions?* A crucial aspect in any democratic process is accountability (Landa & Pevnick, 2021).

These choices will be explored further in the next paragraph. Over this next paragraph, we will fill out Table 1 to have a good overview of the differences between the representative and do-democratic perspectives on CBIs.

Table 1 *The framework we will use to differentiate between representative democracy and do-democracy.*

Frame	The people 'for whom?'	Inclusivity 'by whom?'	Action 'how?'	Accountability 'who checks whom?'
Representative				
Do-democracy				

6.1 Representative Democracy

Representative democracy has been the standard for modern nation states since the early nineteenth century. It underpins the municipal institutions and is based on elections, where citizens vote for politicians who will make policy (Manin, 1997: 116-117 and 236-238). Representative democracy is used in this article as a shorthand for the entire complex web of institutions that together form our modern democracy: 'representation' (Bobbio, 1987; Hayward, 1996; Taggart, 2004), 'constitutionalism' (Canovan, 1999; 2002; Habermas, 1998; Mény & Surel, 2002), 'bureaucracy' (Magalhães, 2021) and 'liberalism' (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Mounk, 2018). Since the eighteenth century, representative democracy has been criticised for not being democratic enough, by radical democrats such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1923 [1762]; Manin, 1997). Radical democrats criticise exactly that feature that makes representative democracy durable: the lack of participation by most people in the political process.

Representative democracy is the framework that comes natural to civil servants and municipal politicians when determining the legitimacy of CBIs (Røiseland, 2022: 1501). In our narrative example, the civil servants working in the Office of Public Zoning and the Office of Finance are the most prominent actors using this conception of democracy, as well as the municipal council. How are the four crucial questions concerning legitimacy – *for whom, by whom, how is it done and who checks whom* – answered from this perspective?

For whom? From the perspective of representative democracy, 'the people' is manyfold and pluralistic, meaning that it is built up from several overlapping groups (Chambers & Carver, 2007; Dahl, 1998; Lefort, 1988: 18-19). These groups are in constant flux, and they compete non-violently for power (Mouffe, 2005). This means that from a representative perspective, CBIs are in competition with

other initiatives, corporations or the government itself, for resources from the municipality. This is often explicitly the case, for instance when a municipality works with neighbourhood budgets (e.g. Ouden, 2018; Wijdeven & Hendriks, 2010). To claim resources from the municipality, the organisers must be representative for the population, and their activities must represent what the population wants and needs. The population is not just the neighbourhood but also the municipality, because citizens as taxpayers fill governments' pockets. We saw the representative understanding of the populace in the final interaction between K. and the Office of Public Zoning, where K. is told that subsidies are dependent on people from other neighbourhoods coming to the initiative, too. From this representative perspective, if an initiative fails to make a convincing claim to representation, the government cannot legitimise spending money on it.

By whom? Representative democracy is nominally inclusive, but its inclusivity is non-committal: people are free to participate, but not forced to do so (Walzer, 1989). Everyone can vote once every few years, but only the representatives and government wield a relevant measure of power. Hence the power is distributed among a large population, but only in a limited capacity. The populace at large transfers the actual political power to a small group of representatives and civil servants that are charged with the day-to-day decision-making. In a representative democratic framework, citizens have a right to vote, but are not usually obligated to partake in public office.¹ So, to be included in the democratic process in representative democracy means to participate in political decision-making. The voluntary nature of participation is in fact one of the main criticisms levelled at representative democracy by other democratic perspectives, as it encourages political passivity amongst its citizens (Kymlicka & Norman, 2016). The rise of this complaint in the Netherlands and other countries inspired much of the push for more active citizenship, specifically CBIs (Actieprogramma Lokaal Bestuur, 2014: 15; Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2013, 15; Coalitieakkoord, 2021).

The initiative in our narrative example is strictly voluntary: it is run by volunteers. However, K. is asked to show support from the neighbourhood, because from the representative notion of inclusivity, the people who wield actual power do so at the behest of a larger body of people. They must be representative of these people in some way and must be able to account for this representativeness. K. could not easily do so, as there are no procedures in place for a CBI to show representativeness.

Action: how? Representative democracy is mainly focused on the process of coming to a decision, based on gathering different perspectives and weighing the different interests fairly. Implementation of decisions is left to civil servants. While in practice, this means that there is room for professional discretion for civil servants (for example: Lipsky, 1980), in the ideal type of representative democracy, civil servants are considered neutral and apolitical (for example: Weber, 1919, translated Waters, 2015).

Active community members are not neutral, but have clear interests in the goods or services their initiative provides, either because they benefit from

providing them, or because they also receive their own services. Thus, representative democracy inherently tends to be sceptical of CBIs.

Who checks whom? Accountability is especially important for representative democracy, as it fundamentally is a system made for holding those in power accountable for their actions (Landa & Pevnick, 2021: 4). Accountability must be clearly established. Politicians enact certain policies, and they are held accountable by the populace (e.g. the electorate) in the next election: if they are judged to have acted well, they will be rechosen and if not, they will be ousted for a different set of politicians. This is the basis of an electoral, representative system.

This mechanism cannot work directly for CBIs, as they are not elected, so this electoral accountability is moved from the CBIs to the municipal government: K. is held accountable by the alderperson, who is held accountable by the municipal council. This means that K. must act within certain bounds, that the alderperson has good reason to make these explicit, so she can refer to them if the council holds them accountable. One way this often happens in practice is by asking a CBI to show it has neighbourhood support, to pre-emptively establish that what it does is relevant. In the case of our example narrative, this is done through polling the neighbourhood. However, there is always the chance that the council shifts its focus to something else and tries to hold the alderperson accountable for that. This puts CBIs in a precarious position of never knowing whether they fulfil their obligations in this accountability structure.

6.2 *Do-Democracy*

Do-democracy “refers to the people governing by ‘doing’, through concrete action” (Verhoeven et al., 2014: 3). It was coined by van de Wijdeven and Hendriks (2010), and “adds a fourth mode to the three dominant modes of decision-making as distinguished by Elster (1998) – voting, deliberating and negotiating. That fourth mode is ‘doing’” (Verhoeven et al., 2014: 2).

The concept of do-ocracy [sic] refers to active citizens who wish to contribute to the public domain by simply doing things instead of voting, deliberating or negotiating. (Van de Wijdeven, 2012: 295-296).

Do-democracy is the conception of democracy that Dzur argues is most common amongst active citizens and what he calls democratic professionals (Dzur, 2019). According to Verhoeven et al., (2014) do-democracy is focused on the act of ‘doing’ as democratic, where representative democracy is focused on voting and decision-making. Do-democrats are averse to long processes of verifying if everyone is on board as well as to accounting for actions afterwards.

Democratic theory is mostly focused on the decision-making process as the space for democracy. And most literature that does discuss the democratic potential of the executive branch considers democratising from the perspective of checks and balances (Heath, 2020). As Zacka states (2022: 27): “These are values [minority rights and checks and balances] that are central to the liberal democratic order but that remain largely beyond the scope of democratic contestation.” That leaves something to wish for, from the perspective of active community members that

want to be seen as democratic. Do-democracy can be understood as democratising the executive branch of the *trias politica*. Not just the decision-making process can be democratic, according to this perspective, but acting on the decisions (made by elected politicians) can also be more, or less, democratic.

CBIs do not per definition have the innovative, experimental and disruptive qualities that Hendriks and Dzur (2022) attach to them. Their approach can be innovative, but the goals of their initiatives must be in line with local policy. That does not need to be a problem: most CBIs are indeed not revolutionary or disruptive, but instead give shape to policy ideals of local policy such as improving social cohesion, combating loneliness or greening the neighbourhood (McAdam et al., 2005; Verhoeven & Tonkens 2018). Most CBIs have a concrete, non-disruptive goal, as in our example narrative: to improve the barren lot in the neighbourhood. In our narrative example, both K., the active community member and the participation broker from the municipality use this do-democratic conception of democracy.

For whom? From a do-democracy perspective, the populace consists of the people affected by a CBI in a broad, abstract sense: a CBI must be 'good for the neighbourhood' (van de Wijdeven, 2012: 286). The populace from a do-democratic perspective can be limited to a neighbourhood, a block or even a single street, or a particular group like young people or the elderly. This is a much stricter definition of the affected than is used in representative democracy. However, simultaneously, the populace from a do-democratic perspective has little other qualifications and therefore can be broader than in representative democracy where only eligible citizens constitute the populace. In do-democracy, groups who are formally excluded from the populace in representative democracy, like children, undocumented people, and migrants without voting rights, are – often actively so – included in the populace. So are people that do have voting rights but lack the competences to exercise these rights, like people with dementia.

Of course, do-democrats have to make efforts to reach these groups and find out what their needs are and how their initiatives can respond to these needs. If K. does indeed include his whole neighbourhood in this way, regardless of the status of his neighbours, we could say his initiative lives up to the do-democratic norms of a properly democratic interpretation of the populace. Should K. restrict his efforts to recruit members and poll his neighbours on only one side of the street, thereby excluding the social housing project or housing for asylum seekers from the populace, he would not live up to the democratic norms do-democracy imposes.

By whom? Do-democracy focuses on the average people who act in the public sphere, as do-democracy aims to stay close to the lived experience of the people (Levelt & Metze, 2013; Sørensen & Torfing, 2005: 197-198). While do-democracy could drastically increase the number of people actually and substantively involved in the political process, in practice, this is not the case. CBIs are often led by a small core group of volunteers, who hold strong sway over the proceedings and run the initiative day by day. This core group of doers is formally open to all inhabitants, but in practice, it is accessed mostly through informal connections (Verhoeven et al., 2014). Just like in representative democracy, in do-democracy, a small group can act on behalf of the populace. The crucial difference is that in representative

democracy, 'acting on behalf of' is formalised through elections, whereas in do-democracy, doers are legitimised by their active community-membership. In do-democracy – just like in representative democracy – participation is voluntary: if people want to be included in the activities, they must make themselves heard. This is expected to happen through informal rather than formalised channels.

A CBI that does indeed manage to get the whole populace involved is closer to the ideal of do-democratic democratising potential. K. creates the possibility for democratic action where there was none, by taking the execution of landscape maintenance out of the hands of the government. The more neighbours get involved in the actual maintenance, the better, even if K. is the overseer of the plans. However, K. should be receptive to community feedback, otherwise he does not live up to the do-democratic ideal.

Action: how? Doing is the core tenet of do-democracy (van de Wijdeven & Hendriks, 2010). From the do-democratic perspective, doing is inherently political: doing becomes a fourth mode of political decision-making, as doing inevitably means deciding how the public space is given shape: through action instead of through speech (van de Wijdeven & Hendriks, 2010). Action is key: do-democrats want people to participate as much as possible in shaping their own living spaces by actively improving them, as opposed to talking about improvement (Elster, 1998). Therefore, CBIs that are in fact dormant or merely talk about activities rather than perform them, lack democratic legitimacy.

As explained above, the existence of a core group that steers the initiative is not undemocratic from a do-democratic perspective. However, participation in the activities that a CBI organises must be open to any member of the populace, of course depending on the activities. For example: children may help in K's garden but are not allowed to wield the chainsaws to cut down trees. Participants of course differ in competences, but all should be able to participate at what level they can.

This is a major democratising force when compared to representative democracy, where only specific people are allowed to participate in the actual implementation of policy. So, to enhance the democratic legitimacy of his initiative, K. should actively think of tasks that can be done by neighbourhood children or contemplate ways to involve neighbours who do not (yet) speak the native language of K's country. If K. starts gatekeeping who can and cannot work in the garden, without trying to think of ways to get them involved, K. is no longer operating in accordance with do-democratic norms.

Who checks whom? Establishing what do-democratic accountability looks like is no easy feat. Wijdeven (2012) suggest that do-democracy might work with a pre-emptive form of accountability. The people who want to start an initiative must show to the populace and the government what the problem is and how they will fix it. When CBIs want to obtain support from the government, they additionally need to show that their plans are supported by their community.

Do-democracy is mainly based on performance and results, less on process (Verhoeven et al., 2014: 8). Concerning process, community members are supposed to give feedback through social interaction, so accountability is not formalised but instead takes place through informal conversations (Verhoeven et al., 2014). This means that the size of the populace must remain limited, so that social interaction

rather than institutional channels suffices as method of accountability for do-democracy. In our example narrative, K. considered the interests of the neighbourhood and was asked to show that people from outside the neighbourhood also participated by a civil servant using the representative conception. K. is not against participation from inhabitants of other neighbourhoods, but he had never considered them relevant for his project. From a do-democratic perspective, participation from inhabitants of other neighbourhoods is not relevant for democratic legitimacy, as these people are not part of the populace. It must be noted that do-democracy does not leave much room for dissensus and conflicting views: from a do-democratic perspective, CBIs are legitimate when they find support from ‘the people’. In that sense, their legitimation overlaps with a populist view of democracy (Dekker, 2019: 83).

In representative democracy, accountability is formalised through rules and elections. This method does not sit well with the informal accountability of do-democracy. In our example narrative, K. is legitimised much more by his neighbours deciding to help, than by the formal poll the municipality asks him to take. The fact that his neighbours want to spend actual time and effort maintaining the garden with K. is proof that his initiative fulfils an important role. Accountability thus becomes an ongoing concern, where substantive input from the populace is used to measure contentment and legitimacy. This means that K. can no longer claim access to municipal funds if he has no more volunteers.

Our juxtaposition between the representative and do-democratic perspectives on these four key questions can be summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 *Representative democracy and do-democracy defined along four core questions.*

Frame	The people ‘for whom?’	Inclusivity ‘by whom?’	Action ‘how?’	Accountability ‘who checks whom?’
Representative democracy	The entire municipality: spending of tax money affects the whole municipality	Open-ended: participation is voluntary, citizens are rational actors able to decide whether they want to participate or not	The executive branch of government and civil servants: doing is made neutral and moved away from the political	Retroactively: holding the representatives accountable
Do-democracy	A spatially defined and limited community, with no other barriers (e.g. citizenship status)	A core group that is open to community feedback; more participants are preferred	As many people as possible should be able to participate in the doing; doing is the core democratising action of CBIs	Pre-emptively and continuous: citizens show what they aim to do and how to; the initiative is legitimised through constant substantive involvement from the neighbourhood

6.3 *What Does This Solve?*

In the example narrative, K. starts with a sense of agency but over time, cracks start to form in K.'s enthusiasm. More and more seemingly unnecessary hurdles show up. These experiences make K. increasingly likely to stop his activities. What we demonstrated is that this is the result of a clash in the do-democratic perspective on the legitimacy of K.'s activities that K. himself holds, and the representative perspective held by many of the civil servants he interacts with. In providing a conceptual analysis of both perspectives on democracy, we have shown where the perspectives differ (fundamentally) on the question of democratic legitimacy. This knowledge can be used as a map of sorts that shows (and names) the potentially dangerous reefs that lie just below the surface of the water. Neither K. nor the municipality has a wrong perspective on the democratic legitimacy of his initiative, but by being aware of the difference of opinion, both can more easily navigate together. They have, in the end, the same goal: improving a stretch of barren land for the benefit of the neighbourhood. As governments actively encourage communities to take initiatives, the onus is on the government to help smooth the process for community members that take up the challenge.

7 Discussion

There are limits to this study, of course. We work with a narrative, and the proof of the pudding is in the eating. To what degree the issues of legitimacy play out in practice among both active and average citizens needs to be investigated in more detail (Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2021). But by distinguishing different types of democratic legitimation, we hope to contribute in three ways. First, to improve the quality of the debate about the value of CBIs. Second, to prevent misunderstandings and feelings of misrecognition that could shorten the lives of CBIs. Third, to elaborate more systematically than has been done so far, how to assess what is democratic about do-democracy.

We show that expanding the reach of direct civic influence can be democratic. It is correct that CBIs provide a boon to the working of representative democratic policy decisions as Røiseland (2022) explains, by providing policy makers with the knowledge and skills of civil society. But CBIs can, in the words of Mark Warren (2014: 40) “engage constituencies of those affected by issues or policies, thus expanding democracy beyond electoral constituencies”. If one considers the lack of involvement of citizens in the political process a short-coming of representative democracy, CBIs could provide a relevant tool to mend this. K. wanted to improve his neighbourhood, and he got together with his neighbours and did just that. Doing can often be more effective than voting, to paraphrase Warren (2014: 40).

Insisting on the representative democratic framework and stressing the penchant for inequality in CBIs imply overlooking the democratising potential of these initiatives. This by no means absolves CBIs from reinforcing inequalities, but it does imply that we should also be willing to look at their democratising potential beyond the issue of who is represented. If policy makers need to determine if CBIs are democratically legitimate, they need to distinguish these democratic

legitimations, and clearly communicate which of these they want to apply, where and when. No one – not the policy makers, nor the active citizens, nor the community at large – benefits from confusion on this point. Shifting goalposts is demoralising and frustrating for all alike.

8 Conclusion

We create and apply an analytical framework to an example narrative, to compare the representative democratic and do-democratic perspectives on the democratic legitimacy of CBIs. This comparison indicates how CBIs are assessed differently from the two perspectives and how clashes arise when these perspectives are not made explicit. Both perspectives have their own criteria for democratic legitimacy, but they are largely incompatible.

As *for whom*, for representative democracy, CBIs must at least find out what the different wishes of their entire (legal) community are. If they claim any resources from that community, they must prove they do not actively exclude people, do not waste money from a public perspective and that they represent the relevant groups in society. For do-democracy, CBIs are sufficiently democratic when they are open to those who are directly affected by an initiative. Do-democracy does not distinguish between citizens and non-citizens. Instead, what matters is that someone is part of the community. From a do-democratic perspective, CBIs should show support for their suggested activity as a form of pre-emptive accountability.

For representative democracy, *inclusivity – by whom* – depends on how representatives manage to properly represent the populace, in terms of having a mandate by way of voting and representing the identities and views of (some section of) the populace. But from a do-democratic perspective, what his neighbours want and the fact that there are people willing to help, is all the legitimacy that K. needs: if the barren lot was not an issue, people would not spend their free Saturdays helping to fix it.

The representative understanding of inclusion collides with the do-democratic understanding when K. is chastised for not having a representative body of volunteers from their neighbourhood. As CBIs do not use elections, representative democrats try to look for representation in a different way, for instance, by asking: are all groups in the neighbourhood involved in this project? From the do-democratic perspective, this question makes little sense. The do-democratic perspective is that since K. lives in the neighbourhood, he will know (and if not, find out) what people want and need.

The question of *how action is taken* is core to the difference between representative democracy and do-democracy. Representative democracy is much more concerned with coming to the decision and holding people in power accountable, while for do-democracy, the *how* is crucial: the idea that the people can take over the executive is core to its democratic legitimacy. So, where K. feels that he acts democratically by taking actions that benefit his community, the civil servants from the Office of Public Zoning assess that (representative) democratic

legitimacy is lacking and refuse the permits. This only changes when the aldermen (implicitly operating from a do-democratic perspective) intervenes. K. might feel that his ability to act is frustrated, but from the representative perspective, civil servants are not supposed to act on their own volition.

Finally, for representative democrats, *accountability* is something retroactive: after the allotted amount of time, the alderperson must account for the resources spent on this CBI to the municipal council, by showing results on the one hand, and proper conduct on the other. For K., this indicates unpredictability because of shifting goal posts. From a do-democratic perspective, active citizens do not *need* to be accountable to the government, because they consider themselves to be closer to citizens. But to the degree that they accept accountability towards the government, they conceive of it as something pre-emptive: they have made their case and received the resources they needed by showing what they were planning to do. The much more relevant form of accountability is whether K.'s neighbours keep volunteering.

For this article, we voiced two aims. We wanted to show that 1) *CBIs can be understood and legitimised from the representative and do-democratic conceptions of democracy* and 2) *public tensions can be mitigated by communicating clearly about one's conception of democracy*. The first aim can be seen to be completed in Table 2, where we show how representative democracy and do-democracy can legitimise CBIs in different ways. Do-democracy can be viewed as a concrete, coherent, alternative conception of democracy, at least to understand CBIs. As for the second aim, we have shown how tensions between active members and civil servants might rise due to unspoken assumptions about democracy. We have provided a vocabulary to prevent these tensions from rising.

For politicians and policy makers, the conclusion is that clarity of mutual expectations is more useful for the sustainability of CBIs than a non-specific commitment to democracy and citizen action from the government. Moreover, there are ways to assess the quality of CBIs on their own merit, by developing criteria for how a do-democracy can be (more or less) democratic. We hope that this article contributes to developing these.

Note

- 1 With some exceptions: mandatory voting in for example Belgium and jury duty in the USA. The latter is not really an exception to the representative democratic inclusivity, as it is a remnant of a republican conception of citizenship that is actually closer aligned to do-democracy. It also provides an interesting analogy to community-based initiatives, as both are an example of democratising powers other than the legislative in the classic *trias politica* model: jury duty democratises the judiciary, while CBIs can (and will) be argued to democratise the executive branch of government.

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