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Direct Democracy in a Participatory Society

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The Kibbutz Concept of Direct Democracy

Direct democracy as conceived and applied in the kibbutz communities and in the different organizations inside these communities is not limited to direct participation in decision making. It is a much more comprehensive conception of democracy that is strongly linked to other basic values of the kibbutz and its social and economic structure. Here are some of its basic features:

1. Kibbutz democracy is perceived as an end in itself, promoting equality in the members' influence and strengthening their commitment to the common good of the kibbutz.
2. Kibbutz democracy is not confined to the political sphere but is comprehensive as a basic principle in all areas of life, such as in economic activity and organization and in education. The implementation of this principle might be more difficult in certain areas, e.g., industrial plants in comparisons with agricultural branches, but there is a permanent effort at democratization.
3. Political activity in the kibbutz is not confined to voting in elections. In contrast to the separation between society and polity in liberal democracy, and the dominance of the polity -- the state -- in totalitarian democracy, political activity is only one aspect of social

life in the kibbutz and political participation is a part of everyday life.

4. Democratic decision-making is perceived in the kibbutz mainly as a process of problem-solving serving the common good and not as a mechanism for the distribution of scarce goods among competing permanent interest groups. Most of the interest groups that exist in the kibbutz, such as work branches, age groups, etc., are involved only occasionally with the issues that are discussed at the general assembly. Due to overlapping membership in various types of groups there are no basic splits between permanent groups.
5. Political activity is exercised not only through direct participation in the collective decision-making of the general assembly and committees but also through participation in the management of different areas of social life. Many administrative functions are not full-time jobs and are filled by committees. Managers in the economic sphere are elected for limited periods.
6. The main motivation for political activity is not an instrumental motivation aimed at the protection and promotion of individual and group rights and interests but as a mode of self-expression and commitment to the community and its values.

The patterns and mechanisms for the implementation of these theoretical assumptions are realized in the general assembly and in the network of committees, as well as in the rotation of office holders and the lack of priv-

ileges afforded them. The plebiscite, a central mechanism of pseudo-direct democracy, is contrary to the ethos of kibbutz participatory democracy, which is based on personal relations and mutual persuasion. On the other hand, decision-making is based not only on consensus but also on majority rule.

This conception of direct democracy is quite different from R. Dahl's "chinese box" conceptualization, that sees the form of democracy largely as a function of the size and complexity of the society. While size and complexity are surely important for the implementation of direct participation, there are other basic conditions that are not less important, such as the degree of communality of interest and a social structure based on feeling of solidarity and friendship. From this point of view kibbutz democracy embodies many of the principles stated by theorists of participatory democracy. Its "ideal-type" is even close to J. Mansbridge's ideal type of "unitary democracy" as opposed to "adversary democracy". The kibbutz type of democracy is strongly related to the central values of the kibbutz communal society, to its economic collective structure and to its social structure that was intentionally planned to create a modern "gemeinschaft". As a result of the "gemeinschaft" type of social relations it is not an abstract citizen that participates in the political process, but a whole person, bringing with him his personality, his status and his social relations. The decisions in the assembly are therefore in many cases substantive, directed to a particular case in a particular social

context and not to the establishing of a general rule. There are few written rules, in contradistinction to the multiplication of laws, internal ordinances and regulation in other self-managed systems.

Formal legal control is replaced by mutual trust and by informal social control through public opinion in the framework of the community and its different subgroups. Serious cases of deviation from norms are discussed by committees and by the community assembly, there are degrees of public opinion pressure related to the severity of the deviation but there is no legal system of formal sanctions beside of the ultimate sanction of expelling from the community. There is no clear-cut division between democratic decision making and professional expertise. Professional knowledge is highly-valued in the kibbutz and while there is a rather strict system of rotation in managerial roles, there is no such rotation for professional roles such as engineers, teachers, accountants, etc. (In practice there are quite flexible occupational careers and most members have passed through different occupations) the final decisions - also concerning technical matters, will be taken by democratically elected committees and in the assemblies of work-branches of the communities. Usually professionals are member of committees that prepare proposals for decisions of assemblies. In matters such as production investment and investments plans or specific investments and developments. There is not always agreement between professionals of the same kind, such as between engineers for example and even more rarely between experts from different professions. E.g. architects and economists

will judge construction plans by different criteria and is therefore not possible to decide between such contradictory arguments on the basis of professional hierarchy. It is also not sure that a young engineer lacking practical experience is more competent on technical production - problems than an experienced worker without formal degrees. The discussions in the committees and in the assemblies create opportunities for confrontation between different types of expertise and competence and the final decision will be taken through democratic procedures of persuasion and if necessary majority decision making. The connections and correlations among different components of the theories of participatory democracy, such as a high degree of value consensus and commitment to the common goal, moral and intrinsic motivation to participate and to contribute, social cohesion and a problem - solving approach to decision making have been empirically documented by research on the kibbutz, on the other hand, direct and participatory democracy in the kibbutz are so closely related to other basic values of kibbutz life such as equality, cooperation and mutual responsibility, voluntary membership, etc. and to its non-conventional institutions, that it is almost impossible to separate and isolate the political effects of direct democracy from the effects of other aspects of this very particular social system.

The Implementation of the concept and its consequences

In spite of the many changes that occurred both inside the kibbutz system and in its relationship with the environment, during the 75 years of its existence, the degree of democratic participation is outstandingly high when compared with other communities and organizations. The scope of decision making concerning the numbers of issues available for participation is almost unlimited, due to the fact that many issues that usually are decided by the individual and the family are matters of public interest.

Kibbutz members have the opportunity to participate in all the possible forms of participation - from passive assistance in assemblies to managerial responsibility for implementation of decisions and in many different settings. The main area where changes have occurred is extensivity of participation and the most problematic development is the decrease in the attendance at the weekly assembly. But while in some kibbutzim the decrease in attendance might be critical and might even lead to a decrease in the frequency of assemblies, the majority of members in the large majority of kibbutzim participate in a large number of assemblies. When we add to this the large number of members that participate in the large network of committees and the different modes of participation in the work-place the extension of participation is quite unusual, although it falls short of kibbutz expectations.

The kibbutz might offer therefore the optimal opportunity to study the effects of participation by comparing both individuals with different degrees of participation and communities and work-organizations that are more or less participatory. The high extensivity of participation arises also the question of its limits. Does the kibbutz illustrate the dangers of over-participation, when the socialist citizen is so busy with participation in meetings that he loses not only the free time needed to pursue other important interests and commitments, but also the freedom to decide himself about the use of this very important resource - time?

Concerning this last argument it is necessary to make an important qualification. This argument is based on the assumption that participation in decision making is identical with attendance at formal meetings. This is not true at least, in the kibbutz in which informal participation through interpersonal communication and discussion is both very frequent and very important in predicting outcomes. Informal interpersonal encounters that are quite effective forms of participation can occur not only in settings directly related to the issue to be decided, such as the office of the office holder and the premises of the work-place. Suggestions and initiatives related to the decision making process in the work place e.g. can be discussed informally when sitting together in the dining-room, when meeting in the children-houses, or on any other place and occasion in the small community where so many functions and areas of life are common. Participation

can therefore occur during other activities and needs not always to be on the expense of other activities.

This qualification does not contradict the assumption that participation is time-consuming, but it is a warning against exaggerations in using this argument. Because of the need to avoid exaggerated waste of time in meetings, the kibbutz in contradistinction from other organizations based on direct democracy is using majority rule. Such majority decisions are usually taken after discussions in which attempts of mutual persuasion have been made that have been limited in time.

Differences in propensity to invest the time needed for democratic participation is one of the possible explanations of the correlations found between participation in different areas of kibbutz life. It was generally found that the members that are the more active participants in the general assemblies - speaking, asking question, making suggestions - also attend such assemblies more frequently than other. They tend also to be more active in committees and in the work place. In general the majority of members participate actively in the workplace and are members in committees while only a minority are frequent speakers at assemblies and hold more central offices in the community. Another rather smaller minority participates only in the framework of the workplace and abstains both from participation in the community assembly and in committees.

Why do some members transfer participation from one setting to another, from one issue to another, from one type of participation to another, while others do not?

This is not a differentiation between 'full-time' office holders and rank and file members that have to invest their 'own' time in meetings the number of 'full-time jobs' for administrative functions is still very limited -- although it is slightly expanding with the size and complexity of the kibbutz. On the contrary, the readiness to invest 'free' after work time is one of the factor determining the readiness for office holding. But then we come back to the question how to explain the difference in propensity to invest 'free time'?

1. Competing commitments and interests are surely a part of the explanation. The rising importance of the family is one example of such competing commitments and this commitment is more strongly felt by women and especially by mothers of young children - in spite of the institution of collective education.

Other such commitments and interests are related to the type of work and work-hours, to artistical, cultural or sport interests, etc. But the factors attracting to political participation are not less important than those detracting from it. Among them the most important

seem to be the degree of commitment to the community or the relevant organization and the strength of the need for influence.

2. In the discussion of the features of kibbutz democracy we already mentioned the assumption that participation will strengthen member's commitment to the 'common good'. This assumption is based on the expectation that participation will enrich the individual's sense of community, so that he will give greater weight to interests that transcend his personal advantage. Our research findings show that this relationship between participation and commitment to the community is not uni-directional. The degree of commitment to the kibbutz is also the most important predictor of attendance in assemblies, of readiness for office-holding, etc.

It seems even that one of the most important functions of the attendance of the kibbutz assembly is a symbolic one, as expression of attachment to the community.

3. Strong correlations between office-holding, attendance and active participation in assemblies and feeling of personal influence on what is going on in the kibbutz, seems to point to the importance of personal efficacy. Those that feel that they are capable of acting effectively by influencing outcomes will be more eager to use these capacity and therefore to participate. On the other hand those that participate more frequently, in more varied forms, feel that they have more influence. We have also to distinguish between two types of influence -- and

therefore of political efficacy: individual and collective. Certain types of participation generate a feeling of one type only, while other generate both types. E.g. there is no relationship between the frequency and authority of workers assemblies in different kibbutz plants and the average measures of individual influence, while such correlations were found with measures of collective influence of the worker's as a group. On the other hand, there are strong correlations between the degree of participation in work-groups and both individual and collective influence. It seems that the main determinant of individual influence is active interpersonal participation through discussion, suggestion and initiative-taking. Such participation is possible only for few in the larger assemblies, while smaller groups offer opportunities for everyone and in them the rhetoric abilities and skills that are important in assemblies, are not required.

4. The last but not least important factor explaining differences in propensity to invest free time is the 'need for influence'. We refer to the need for influence and not for power -- understood as non-legitimated control -- since in the kibbutz there are no means for coercion. There are even no sanctions and material rewards available for the exercise of legitimate authority through office-holding. It is only through persuasion, encouragement and inducement that it is possible to affect intentionally the behavior of persons and groups in the kibbutz or of the kibbutz community as a whole. members' differ in their readiness to take part in such processes of persuasion, but also

in their self-image as to their ability to succeed in influence-attempts. In general we find that members aspire to have both more individual and collective influence than they perceive they actually have. But on the other hand their aspirations for influence are on the average lower than their aspirations for other opportunities of self-realization and actualization, such as for interesting and challenging work.

To conclude, it is quite difficult to distinguish between causes and consequences of participation in the kibbutz direct democracy, but there are strong relationships between participation, commitment to community and feeling of political efficacy.

The differences in degree of participation seems to be better explained by differences in readiness to 'invest' in participation, when time is one important but not the single investment involved than by differences in prior learning of participation. In the overall participative culture of the kibbutz, with a high level of socialization for participation from childhood, it is difficult to explain differences in actual participation by differences in the degree of socialization and prior participatory experience. On the contrary, even some saturation effects might be felt when youngsters used to intensive participation from childhood search for a "Moratorium" period also in this area. Saturation effects together with the

Increasing strength of competing commitments and interests might explain the decrease in assemblies attendance.

But while this saturation effect is felt for larger assemblies, where the individual participant can not always get a feeling of personal political efficacy, it seems less relevant for smaller work-groups and communities.

Differences between kibbutz communities assemblies and plant assemblies seems to point toward the importance of the participatory setting in conditioning effects of participation.

Contextual conditions of direct democracy

We stated above the difficulty in isolating the effects of direct democracy in the kibbutz from the effect of other non-conventional elements of the kibbutz community, such as its collective economic system, its egalitarian distributive justice and the 'gemeinschaft' like social structure. But it is possible to evaluate these effects by comparing between kibbutz communities and work-organizations that differ in the degree of implementation of the principles of kibbutz democracy. Unexpected differ-

ences have been found by comparing democracy in kibbutz communities with that in industrial plants belonging to those communities. It is a traditional assumption of participatory democracy theorists that factories are the most appropriate place to start with, in the introduction of this type of democracy. In the kibbutz, in spite of the fact that the factory is an organic part of the community, the political effects of direct democracy in the community are much more striking than those in the industrial plant. While frequency of participation in kibbutz assembly is significantly correlated with feeling of personal influence in the kibbutz and with commitment to the kibbutz, no similar relationships were found for the industrial plant.

More astonishing, while participants in kibbutz-assembly were more satisfied with the influence of the assembly, the parallel relationship in the plant is negative.

We have tried to relate these differences to more general differences between direct industrial democracy and direct community democracy while in the factory all the members of the constituency are also members of an organizational structure in which there is an ordered (usually hierarchical) unequal distribution of authority, in the community only a small part of the constituency are also members of its organizational structure.

The role of the member in the plant assembly is more ambiguous than its role in the kibbutz assembly. On the one hand, the assembly is the locus of authority and decision making and the management elected by the assembly has to implement its decisions, on the other hand, in the daily-work process most of the participants are subordinates. In the kibbutz assembly there is no such "structural division". The relationship between members is as total persons, based on diffuse and encompassing social relations while in the factory more specific role-relations such as between different hierarchical position-holders are more prevalent.

While the comparison between participation in communities and in factories points toward the existence of different types of participation, the differences between communities and between factories are more a matter of degree.

In comparing between sets of kibbutzim that were matched on size and degree of industrialization, but differed in the degree of attendance at the kibbutz assembly, it was possible to explore other factors that might influence the implementation of direct democracy. Kibbutz communities with higher average attendance on meetings seem to have an average high level of education. Their members were more strongly committed both to democratic values and to general kibbutz values. In the communities with lower attendance there was more support for some attributes of indirect or even "adversary democracy" such as transfer of authority from the assembly to

committees, the introduction of secret ballot and of more formal written regulations. This weakening of direct democracy was not related to bigger size or complexity since the kibbutzim were matched on the basis of these variables. This finding at least does not confirm the "chinese box" hypothesis. The implementation of direct democracy related to value-orientations and to social factors, such as the higher frequency of conflicts of interest in the less participative group and not to size and complexity.

While member's influence was higher in the more participatory communities, no differences in the influence of central office holder was found, leading to the conclusion that the distribution of control is non-zero-sum. The impact of participation on the distribution of control was studied more in detail in studies comparing more and less participatory kibbutz plants.

Generally, it was found that in the plants with better functioning worker assemblies (that convene more frequently and are perceived as having both a larger scope and more extensive authority) the influence of worker's is significantly greater. But always a discrepancy between the amount of influence attributed to management and that attributed to workers as a group remains and there is no 'power-equalization'. The finding conforms generally to the non-zero-sum model and the influence of management is not smaller in the plants where workers have more influence. These findings seem to illustrate the assumption that in 'unitary democracy', when office holders are elected by the members and there is confidence that they will

not misuse their authority, there is no need for power-equalization. Another finding that points into this direction is the positive correlation between the degree of direct democracy (authority of the worker assembly) and the degree of trust and confidence in management. In a situation of cooperation and commonality of interests more influence of workers will lead to more mutual trust, to better communication and therefore to a better functioning of the system while effective members participation in assemblies can lead to these effects on the system level, no similar direct effects were found on the individual level. As mentioned already the amount of personal influence perceived, as well as the strength of commitment to the organization and the readiness to contribute to its goals, were related to the degree of participation in the smaller, face to face work-groups and not in the larger assemblies. This type of participation was also positively correlated with behavioral outcomes such as lack of abstentism and with the economic effectiveness of the firms.

Conclusion

Direct democracy is a complex phenomena and in the kibbutz community it is only one component of a more comprehensive concept of participatory de-

mocracy, closely linked to the basic values of equality and cooperation and to the structures designed to implement them.

While the benefits of direct democracy cannot easily be isolated from those of other aspects of kibbutz democracy, the kibbutz experience illustrates some of its limits and problems. Problems of over participation and saturation effects might arise and not always the expected positive learning effects occur. Members differ in their readiness to use the opportunities for decision-making open in all the areas of kibbutz life and on different levels of responsibility. These differences cannot be explained by differences in class background, by differences in education or by difference in participation in the past.

Difference in readiness to participate seem to be related more to the importance of other "competing" commitments, the commitment to kibbutz values and to the community as well as to the self-image about the ability to exerce personal influence.

The opportunities for the average member to exerce personal influence are better in smaller groups than in larger assemblies. This might explain why participation in decision making in smaller groups seems to be more effective in producing the expected and desired motivational outcomes of direct democracy. Successful implementation of direct democracy in assemblies

seems on the other hand, to enhance the collective influence of members and to contribute to the mutual trust between members and office holders.

Even in the overall participatory system of the kibbutz there is a need for permanent efforts to implement direct democracy and it cannot be assured by building institutions and creating formal regulations, alone. In the kibbutz the degree of implementation seems to be related to the degree of social solidarity and commitment to the 'common good' of the community. The development of these conditions also in other societies might be an important factor in expanding such forms of direct democracy that could produce the expected and desired effects.