

## Book Review

### **Felix Dodds (2019) *Stakeholder Democracy: Represented Democracy in a Time of Fear*. New York: Routledge. 262 pages.**

The interconnectedness of democracy and sustainability has been widely discussed in the academic literature since the 1990s (Goodin, 1992). Research on environmental issues was found to be fertile ground in political sciences when the relevance of the notions of citizenship, grassroots organizations, and green political parties were discovered (Bomberg, 1998; Burchell, 2002; Frankland et al., 2008; Mitchell, 2016).

This is also true the other way around. Political science and political theory have started to benefit from the experiences of sustainability research. Democracy, a continuously contested research topic, has been the subject of several studies that demonstrated how the contemporary challenges of sustainable development can help conceptualize this established but always renewable term (Morrison, 1995; Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 1996; Mason, 1999; Doherty et al., 2003). Most recently, and responding to the latest trends in the discussion about stakeholder involvement, new research articles have been published about the interrelation of sustainability and stakeholder democracy (Pickering et al., 2020). The book *Stakeholder Democracy* fits this agenda. The authors introduce it as follows: it is a book 'about democracy in the context of sustainability' (p. 1). As argued, this topic is now more important as ever, since 'the liberal democratic order is in crisis and has lost legitimacy' (p. 126).

Felix Dodds examines stakeholder engagement by relying on decades of experience. Stakeholder democracy is the focus of this discussion, since the authors, in trusting their own experiences in the field, are convinced that as far as policy development related to sustainability is concerned, multi-stakeholder partnerships provide the solution. The book relies on the knowledge of numerous practitioners and scholars who have been and are now continuously involved in different programs involving the environment and sustainability, ranging from cooperation with local NGOs to long-standing expertise with global UN organizations. The book is about multi-stakeholder policy engagement and multi-stakeholder partnerships. The conceptual framework attempts to illuminate the space between them with the help of theories about participatory democracy.

The book informs the reader about the theoretical foundations of stakeholder democracy (Chapters I, II, IV, and V), provides an overview of stakeholder engagement in relation to the globalization of environmental issues (chapters III and VI), and finally, in a 'trilogy' involving the last three chapters, offers a guideline for successful multi-stakeholder partnerships. The argument targets the global scale, while national, sub-national, and local examples are also

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introduced. The authors unfold the lessons they have learnt about creating meaningful multi-stakeholder policies and partnerships.

Major parts of the book are authored by Felix Dodds (chapters II, III, IV, and VI), but the complex overall picture is framed by several authors. Dodds was the executive director of the Stakeholder Forum for Sustainable Future for 20 years, but he has had further diverse experience in the field of environmental studies that has been channeled into the book. The main concepts and definitions are introduced by Jan Gustav Strandenaes (Chapter I), who has long-standing experience working for the UN and NGOs, while also being an independent researcher. Strandenaes shares his views about successful multi-stakeholder partnerships (Chapter VII). Caroline Duque Chopitea provides a literature review of the most important concepts that are being transformed by stakeholder democracy: namely, legitimacy, representation, and accountability (Chapter V). Minu Hemmati, a clinical psychologist, helps with understanding the principles for multi-stakeholder processes (Chapter VIII). Finally, a guideline is provided by Susanne Salz, Bernd Lakemeier, Laura Schmitz, and Jana Borkenhagen about how to design multi-stakeholder partnerships (Chapter IX). The book ends with a concluding chapter (Chapter X) by Dodds that identifies the challenges stakeholder democracy could tackle in the upcoming few years.

However, the book offers more than the advice of practitioners. The individual chapters can even be read independently. Students of political science could benefit from the reinvention of the vocabulary therein, and practitioners involved in sustainability programs could profit from its theoretical foundations. The theoretical basis of the book relies on classical academic literature that discusses the historical roots of democracy, while the empirical basis builds on the field experiences of the scholars.

As Dodds claims, the story of sustainability is being told. Storytelling remains characteristic of the entire book. If the narrative is stakeholder democracy, the plot is the sequence of events that have led to different stakeholders becoming involved in sustainability programs, and the characters are the stakeholders who are being engaged in this plot.

The first chapter lays down the foundations; the context of the story. In the train of thought of the authors, multi-stakeholder democracy covers two key elements: 'that of the engagement of stakeholders in policy development and that of engaging them in delivering global agreements in partnerships' (p. 8). Throughout the book, these policy-related measures are introduced, and how these and other global agreements can be fulfilled through relying on stakeholders is discussed. The latter are defined as follows: '[those] who have an interest in a particular decision, either as individuals or representatives of a group. This includes people who influence a decision, or can influence it, as well as those affected by it' (p. 7). Strandenaes provides in this section a glossary, which is useful, since the book is generally packed with technical terms and the unique language of international organizations. These terms might not be new to the reader, but, since the context is sustainability and focuses on multi-level linkages,

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their application may be different (for example, different forms of participation and partnership are defined on p. 17).

Further theoretical grounding for the book is provided by the second chapter, which is designed to present a short history of democracy. Admittedly, this is a nearly impossible task, but what can be done is give an introduction to the path to representative democracy; here, the author perceives it to be most appropriate to listen 'to voices in a more inclusive, transparent and accountable way [, which] can only be beneficial and can address some of the risks we are now observing' (p. 22). As argued, democratic society 'has a shared social contract on issues such as truth, justice and free speech. If this is undermined, then justice will suffer as well as democracy' (p. 23). The author introduces the different obstacles that could undermine this social contract (such as the arbitrary use of big data), and suggests that well-functioning – namely, transparent – stakeholder engagement could address these issues.

The emergence of stakeholder democracy in the next chapter is closely associated with the global level. Here, the development of stakeholder engagement is introduced particularly in the area of sustainable development. The role of globalization is unpacked by showing how the UN is growing into more than an organization of member states. This chapter is rich in information from primary sources, reports, and interview excerpts. By relying on these documents, the author is able to exhibit the genuine face of this development.

Chapter Four broadens the framework and introduces another character to the story: civil society. Here, how power relations have changed, and how the devolution of power has made space for local stakeholders is investigated. Important contemporary political dilemmas are addressed, such as whether civil society actors and advocates have consistent values, or if the 'civil society actors, advocates and academics in the northern hemisphere [are] dictating the terms of global discourse' (p. 99). The chapter offers a framework that might be useful for understanding what representation in a stakeholder democracy should look like. It is argued that civil society is of vital importance, but in 'developing and implementing policy, it has proved to be limiting' (p. 119).

The literature review in Chapter Five will be a helpful part of this book for people who are not familiar with the vocabulary. It offers a clear understanding of the key terms. Legitimacy, representation, and accountability are familiar terms to readers of political theory, but in this chapter they are located in the specific context of sustainability. Through this, the reader becomes familiar with the literature on sustainable development, multi-stakeholder governance, and partnerships. Only this specific portion of the literature is introduced, although the scope could have been extended to the representation of legitimacy – a broader component of discussions in political science (see Benhabib, 1994; Mansbridge, 2011).

Building on the international arena introduced in Chapter Three, Chapter Six informs us about the successful methods of developing a dialogue that could contribute to policy developments. Global, national, sub-national, and local levels are introduced. Relying on the experiences of the UN Conference on Human

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Settlement (Habitat II), a new design for meaningful dialogue was developed. This process is introduced in depth, starting with the preparations and focusing on the outcomes. By providing this information, the reader is given a comprehensive overview about the functioning of multi-stakeholder dialogues. The operation of national-level committees, as well as the activities of sub-national and local-level governments, are presented.

The final three chapters (labeled a 'trilogy') basically form a handbook (within a book) for practitioners. Chapter Seven illustrates how multi-stakeholder partnerships were first created. It argues that 'successful partnerships bring each partner's core competence and experience to the table, building synergies to co-create new and impactful strategies for achieving sustainable development' (p. 166). This quotation might also be seen as the plot for these three chapters, since it is discussed here how such multi-stakeholder partnerships that are instrumental for stakeholder democracy to function can be established and maneuvered. Chapter Eight moves on to discuss how such partnerships are created, and even provides a list of the most important books on the topic, while manuals and websites are also catalogued. By sharing their advice, the practitioners here provide a user manual for anyone who wishes to design their own partnership.

Chapter Ten concludes by asserting why similar books are of crucial relevance today. Dodds reemphasizes the relevance of stakeholders in strengthening representative democracy so that it can move towards participatory democracy. The author neatly addresses the reader: 'If you are only interested in understanding how to engage in multi-stakeholder partnerships, there are ideas here on how to do that while improving the work that you already do. If you are interested in how stakeholders have helped develop policy, we have tried to share some examples that you might build from' (p. 226).

In one single page, Dodds lists the crucial challenges that different governments will face in the coming years. In this book, a strategy is offered regarding how these challenges can be dealt with in the policy arena, while the authors have also attempted to conceptualize how such a strategy may impact well-known democratic institutions.

The book covers a topic that is subject to rapid change and advances. It was published in 2018, but the work the authors started could be reiterated repeatedly since change never ceases, and the continuous reevaluation of democratic institutions would be beneficial. The book is conscientious in the way that it increases transparency in relation to the organizations involved in policymaking by discussing not only success stories, but also the lessons that we can learn from pitfalls.

The story that is introduced is diverse, and the authors attempt to colligate diverging threads. This means it would be worth reading by anyone interested in the involvement of stakeholders in different global sustainability programs.

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