

Who are the active citizens?

Characterizations of citizens in participatory urban planning processes

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CENTER FOR DEMOKRATISK NETVÆRKSSTYRING

WORKING PAPER SERIES

Who are the active citizens?

- Characterizations of citizens in participatory urban planning processes

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Abstract

This article presents the variety of different active citizens and participants involved in a collaborative and participatory planning process within an urban regeneration project in Denmark. In much of the literature on planning and citizen participation citizens are often regarded as a homogenous group. This article argues that there are no 'ordinary' citizens, and claims that citizens are very different and participate in various ways. A criticism raised in relation to participatory processes is that these often tend to favour certain modes of communication based on an implicit ideal of the citizen as being resourceful, mastering political skills and know-how and time. However, many citizens do not 'fit' this stereotype, and thus there is a risk that many citizens are biased by the way the institutional settings for participation are designed. A characterization of active citizens in participatory processes could be useful for practitioners in order to be aware that their choices of techniques and involvement are part of shaping the nature of the participatory process and their overall inclusiveness and representativeness.

1. Introduction

Who are the active citizens in participatory processes? How can we get a better idea of who are included and excluded in participatory processes? Integrating citizens into policy and decision making processes has become an important method of governance in many Western European countries within the last decade (McGrath 2005). Public participation in local planning, including urban design and regeneration, through the use of deliberative processes is currently widely promoted as the means of enhancing institutional legitimacy, citizen influence and social responsibility and learning (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003). This article focuses on how we can generate hypotheses concerning *'who is involved'* in many of these deliberative approaches, where citizens and local stakeholders are mobilised into formal networks to address policy issues (Marcussen and Torfing 2007: 84). These new arenas of involvement differ from more traditional modes of governance in that they encourage the active participation of citizens and other stakeholders. Moreover they contain sustained periods of deliberation and focus on civic learning and empowerment (Fung 2006). The institutional settings for integrating citizens into public policy making vary, but often they take the form of formal networks set up by a public agent, and are composed of representatives of local governments, business and civil society associations as well as 'ordinary' citizens (Agger and Löfgren 2007). These networks may be referred to as public private partnerships, strategic alliances, think tanks, deliberative forums, citizen panels or public boards, committees or councils (Agger, Sørensen & Torfing 2007). A common denominator of these arenas is that they are based on deliberative processes aiming to increase the number of individuals and groups to reflect on, and get engaged in discussing, public issues (Williamson and Fung 2004). The idea is to supplement the role of citizens as voters (Gaventa 2007) and to transform citizens from demanding consumers of public services to responsible co-producers of public governance involving citizens in the design, implementation and enforcement of public policies. The underlying argument is that public policies need the perspectives, ideas and resources of affected stakeholders in order to generate innovative policies and not to get stuck in diverse policy problems (Dente 2005).

Many of these initiatives are based on positive anticipations that deliberations among citizens can contribute to producing many important benefits such as learning; empowerment and enhanced trust among the involved actors (Innes, J. E. and Booher 2004: 422). A central tenet of participatory processes based on deliberative participation is that an informed citizenry, given the chance to discuss and debate with one another in a mutually respectful manner, will lead to more informed judgements about an issue and change its opinions (Abelson et al. 2004). By contrast, criticism has been raised both among scholars as well as among practitioners that few citizens participate in these types of deliberative arenas. Empirical studies of participation in participatory deliberative processes demonstrate that a small number of ordinary lay people participate, and it is more often the consolidation of intermediary bodies of sub-elites in between lay people and public authorities that are the active participants (Agger, Sørensen & Torfing 2007). Some scholars argue that public participation processes are in risk of becoming enclaves of 'gated democracy' or practices reserved for the same type of people that are already well – endowed with political resources (Carpini et al. 2004:321). The question at hand is: Are the participants in participatory processes 'look alike' with the same type of knowledge and resources? Although much is written about new, and more deliberative modes of public participation based on participatory processes, *empirical accounts* of *'who'* participates in these new arenas for deliberation have apart from some few exceptions (Bang 2001, 2005, Bang and Sørensen 1999; Li and Marsh

2008) been notably overlooked in the literature (Abelson and Gauvin 2006). Scholars, practitioners and policy makers all call for more critical evaluation frameworks for assessing the interactive qualities of participatory processes (Collaborative Democracy Network 2006). If we want to mobilise different groups of affected citizens and stakeholders, and bring their resources and knowledge into policy making, it will be helpful to have a better notion of citizens' diverse modes of participating.

The objective of this article is to offer a first step in learning more about *'who'* participate and *'how'* they participate by presenting an outline over active participants in participatory processes. This type of knowledge can help public administrators in designing special measurements in order to address those groups that are typically not represented in participatory processes. This can contribute to a broader representation of different types of citizens and thereby secure more diversity and innovation in the policy process. The empirical foundation for the article is a qualitative study of 49 of active citizens participating in a participatory planning process in an urban regeneration programme in Denmark dealing with improvement of deprived urban neighbourhoods by means of mobilising networks for participation. The citizens were interviewed over a period of three years, at the beginning of the Kvarterløft programme and then again two or three years later. The interviews were used to generate hypotheses about outlines of citizens in participatory processes. The article presents a description of the way the citizen participate and on how they perceive themselves and their role as political actors (Sørensen & Torfing 2003).

The following sections set out a theoretical perspective on how the concept of citizens has been articulated in different strands of the research literature. Then, an empirical account of *'who'* participated in the Danish urban regeneration programme is presented. This is followed by a final discussion of the necessity to reflect on how we address *'citizens'* in participatory processes.

2. Citizens, consumers, clients, residents, stakeholders?

Reviewing the literature on participation within planning theories (Campbell and Marshall 2000; Day 1997; Innes, J. E. and Booher 2004) it appears that more specific characterizations of citizens, and their mode of participating, is notably overlooked. Even in the more theoretical accounts within planning theories there is rarely a clear definition of citizens and their role in relation to planning understood as collective decision making (Cooper et al. 2006:84). Citizens are generally referred to by the use of broad categories e.g. as *residents; users; costumers; stakeholders; interest; partners; voters* or as *fellow citizens: community; neighbourhoods* and *public*. Every term carries different expectations about the role of citizens in relation to collective decision making (Cambell and Marshall 2000). The term of citizens as *voters* is mainly used in relation to notions of representative democracy. The introduction of New Public Management theories within the public sector in many European countries have led to the labelling of citizens as *consumers, or customers*, of public services (Agger et al. 2007). Also the term *stakeholder* is now widely used to describe those who actively choose to involve themselves in a particular issue. Stakeholders include both private and public actors who do not necessarily represent constituencies beyond themselves (Creighton 2005), but it is also sometimes applied to more diffuse societal categories defined by geography, gender, age, ethnicity or culture (Leach 2006). In many empirical studies citizens are referred to as homogeneous groups (Beierle and Cayford 2002), and distinctions about their mode of participating are seldom made.

Across Europe there is an increased attention to the need of strengthening citizen participation in policy making (EU-commission 2006). It is assumed that bringing in citizens and their communities in policy making will result in better outcomes in terms of social cohesion and improved service delivery. According to Mendes (2002), many policy developments build on an uncritical use of the term community, and community participation, as a guarantee for legitimacy and efficiency in public policies. He reminds us that local communities rarely are united or homogeneous, but rather are divided by class, ethnicity, race, and other significant social and economic barriers. In line with these perspectives, Cameron and Smith (2005) find that those citizens that participate in participatory processes do not belong to homogeneous groups, but are composed of many small “publics”. They advise planners and policy makers to reflect on the ways their participatory practices either implicitly, or explicitly, exclude certain groups, while privileging others.

2.1 Participatory processes favour certain groups

One of the main criticisms raised in relation to participatory processes is that these often tend to exclude members of ethnic minorities; involve fewer women than men; and that they are often age biased (Fung 2004). In spite of the fact that public meetings are open to all who wish to attend, those who participate are, in reality, those who have resources in the form of political know-how information, time and professional knowledge (DeSanties and Hill 2004; Innes, J and Booher 1999; 2000). Many of the deliberative forums related to urban regeneration projects tend to favour certain modes of communication based on assertive, reason – giving dialogue (Burgers and Vranken 2004). Consequently, other modes of communicating such as storytelling, the expression of feelings and needs are easily devalued (Fung 2004:123). Thereby the participation processes are often biased and there is a risk that the more powerful and organised actors can tend to dominate other voices (Innes, J. E. and Booher 2004).

Public planners and policy makers should therefore be aware that participatory processes as such do not take place in a socio-political void, but are already premised on existing power relations (Pattison 2001). Even though many of the participatory processes seek to include all those affected by a certain decision, they often have difficulties overcoming some of the structural inequalities that make it easier for some groups to take advantage of formal opportunities for participation than others (Young 1996). According to Young (2000), two types of exclusion take place in participatory processes. The first one she calls *external exclusion* which refers to more structural inequalities that make it more difficult for certain groups to participate, and favour citizens and representatives with resources (Fung 2004:49). The other type she refers to as *internal exclusion* which describes the way that some peoples’ ideas and social perspectives are likely to dominate discussions and the outcome of the deliberations even when a forum has diversity in the room (Fung 2004: 49). Young’s conclusion is that in order to create inclusive deliberative processes, it is simply not enough to put members of different groups in the same room, since the problem is that certain groups are simply not being heard. The point of Young’s argument is that there are some practical norms about “*how to act and conduct*” in the participatory processes, and people who do not speak the dominant language and know the tacit rules of the game are easily excluded.

Public administrators play an important role in setting the rules for the participation processes and in defining the problems and the agendas about what is discussed thereby creating or

ruling out alternatives (Atkinson 1999; Pløger 2001:227). By stipulating fair procedures for public processes, meaning for example that the processes are open to everyone, there is anticipation in many planning processes that the outcome of citizen participation in public decision-making will be seen as more legitimate because it is supposed to be the result of an inclusive, voluntary and reasoned dialogue. But these rules can, consciously or unconsciously, encourage participation for certain groups, and discourage, or even prohibit, participation by others (Hillier 1998:208; Mathur and Skelcher 2007). It is therefore important to be conscious of the institutional settings for deliberations since the choices of techniques are instrumental in shaping the nature of the participatory process and their overall inclusiveness and representativity (Gastil and Levine 2005).

3. Characteristic of participants in participatory processes

The empirical foundation for the characterization of citizens in participatory processes is an integrated urban regeneration programme in Denmark called 'Kvarterløft' (which means Area lift) that runs for a 5-7 year period. Kvarterløft can be described as an integrated and area based planning approach built on the active involvement of citizens and local stakeholders. It has been called a bottom-up network process because it aims to empower the involved stakeholders and to improve social cohesion in chosen areas. The Kvarterløft project contains many of the characteristics that the collaborative planning literature has stressed as important for deliberative dialogues (Dryzek and 2000; Healey 1997; Innes, J.E. and Booher 2003). It focuses on creating local arenas for dialogue through the use of a number of different participatory methods for involvement: community study groups, social events and meetings.

One of the central questions in the study was "*Who participates in the formal networks created as a result of the Kvarterløft strategy? How can they be characterized in relation to resources and modes of participation?*" The results of the study clearly demonstrated that the Kvarterløft by its organization and methods of citizen involvement had an implicit selection mechanism, and thereby favoured citizens with resources for participation. These resources could be: *relational* resources, *knowledge* resources or *time* resources (Larsen 1999). Relational resources can be defined as network capabilities that enable citizens to act. Knowledge resources refer to the ability to read and write large amounts of text and the tacit rules relate to meetings and decision procedures. So the active citizens who participate in Kvarterløft can be characterised as being able to put their resources to good use, meaning that the formal networks that are established in the Kvarterløft process provide them with certain institutional settings in which they can use and develop their resources for participation. The interviews show that the motives for people's participation vary according to which ideals of democracy citizens subscribe to, as well as which organisational experiences they have from previous experiences. In the following, I identify two different types of active citizens: that is the *expert activists* and the *everyday makers*, both denominations are inspired by the work of the Danish researchers Bang (2003) and Sørensen (1999, 2001). In addition, two other "categories" are discussed, namely the local *professionals* that played an important role in the process, and the *non-participants*. The following box sums up the active participants in the Kvarterløftproject.

Type of active participants in participatory processes	
Expert activists	<i>City papas/mammas</i> – local patriot approach
	<i>Member of an organisation</i> – local political party approach
Everyday makers	<i>Local hobby</i>
	<i>Interest based</i>
Professionals	Representatives from local institutions

Box 1: Type of participants in the Kvarterløft programme

3.1 Expert activists

Expert activists make up the majority of the respondents of the interviews with the active citizens in the study. They can be called experts in local participation, and they are characterized by their long time involvement in the community. They often participate in the Kvarterløft as representatives of local civic associations or organisations. Expert activists are often middle-aged members of several associations, i.e. school boards, sports groups, local cultural initiatives, local churches or local political parties. They are all strongly engaged in their communities and involved in local politics. It is a lifestyle for them, so to speak. One of the respondents, characterized as an expert activist, expresses her participation in the following way:

‘We grow up with politics and work in associations, and have tasted the sense of holding power’. (Informant 32, Kvarterløft).

It is possible to distinguish between those expert activists that participate on the basis of a *local political party approach* and those who express *local patriotic sentiments*. Apart from their membership in a local organisation several of the interviewed citizens were also cardholding members of a political party. Membership of a political party is a resource because it provides access to networks involving contacts with decision makers and local authorities. Some of the local party political controversies, and prejudices, among the members of the local political parties were transferred to the Kvarterløft process. But there seemed to be a tendency towards trying to achieve common understandings and suppress potential conflicts. The way these types of expert activists participate is more formal as they way to formal procedures and dialogue with their constituencies. This sometimes leads to conflicts with other types of citizens who were critical that the consultation of the constituencies slowed down the process.

The departure for the participation of the *local patriot approach* is typically a membership of one of the local housing or community associations. Their style of participation is often more “grassroot-like”, less formal, and more individualistic, even though they participate as members of an association. They are often the “initiators” and “drivers” in many local projects. Larsen (1999) describes this type of participant as “city mamas or neighbourhood

fathers”. They have often initiated successful local projects in the neighbourhood and know how to act politically, and strategically, when it comes to realising projects.

The expert activists in the Kvarterløft process have often developed distrust towards the local authorities due to their long-time experience with political participation. So in many cases they were more reluctant towards the urban regeneration plans and visions than the other participants. The majority of the *expert activists* are inspired by an ideal of direct democracy. This was demonstrated through their demand to be delegated decision-making competences from the elected politicians. According to the expert activists, a participatory process should also involve the real delegation of power, and many of them were discontented with the actual influence they were given during the process. Several of the expert activists found it unsatisfactory that they had achieved responsibility, but no real decision-making powers. They felt they were held accountable for decisions without ‘real power’ to make a difference. Expert activists are, nevertheless a resource for the Kvarterløft project because they initiate a lot of local projects, they know how to fundraise and lobby for those projects, and attract resources to the neighbourhood. But they are sometimes sceptical towards new and alternative modes of participation, and thereby act as gatekeepers. Consequently, citizens who do not have access to these networks, or who do not know the styles and habits of discussions and debate, can easily be excluded from efforts aimed at enhancing cooperation and negotiation between interested parties and local authorities.

3.2 Everyday makers

Another group of active citizens can be characterized as everyday makers. The term everyday maker derives from Bang and Sørensen’s (1998) study of political participation in Nørrebro in Denmark. An everyday maker can be described as a person whose political participation relates to particular issues. They are not members of any association and have no support base which can hold them accountable. They have no previous experience with participation, and are therefore often more open towards the participatory process. Their style of participation is characterized by part time, or ad hoc activities in projects that are close to their everyday life.

The respondents in the study were categorised as everyday makers were often young women, some with children and some students. Their main incentive for participating was a particular interest in e.g. improving the traffic conditions around their children’s school or the sports facilities close to their home. The empirical study illustrates that everyday makers can be divided into those who participate on the basis of a out of a *concrete case* in order to obtain *physical improvements* in their community in relation to their everyday life, and those who participate *professionally* or *academically cause* because they find they can develop skills which they can then use in their studies or working life. One of the informants expresses her purpose of participation as follows:

For me it is pure selfishness with the purpose of giving me contacts and knowledge (Interview person 23, Kvarterløft)

The everyday makers differ from the expert activists in many ways. Their rationale for participation in the Kvarterløft process is firstly often formulated with reference to their individual needs, professionally, or with a wish to physically improve the neighbourhood. Secondly, their mode of participating is often more oriented towards acting here and now in order to create visible results and performed ‘con amore’. In opposition to the expert activists,

the everyday makers demonstrated more trust towards the administrators from the Kvarterløftprogramme, as well as the civil servants from the municipalities. The everyday makers in the study were more inspired by an ideal of representative democracy, which could be seen in their reluctance to question the role of the elected politicians as the decision-makers. They express that they have been positively surprised by the influence that they actually got. They feel that they have got sufficient resources to participate in the process, and they have faith in their own capabilities, as well as the responsiveness from the municipality.

3.3 Local professionals

A third group of active participants in the Kvarterløft process were representatives of local institutions in the neighbourhood, e.g. schools, day-care institutions and major sports or interest associations in the community. These people do usually not live in the neighbourhood, but work there and participate while they are at work. Often they have contacts to administrators in the municipality and know the code of conduct or language that facilitates communication with other professionals. Citizens interviewed for the study perceived the participation of representatives from local institutions in the Kvarterløft process as an advantage because their participation contributed to a continuation of the process, especially after the first year when many citizens dropped out. This is explained by one of the interviewed citizens in the following way:

Nowadays people are not so damned volunteers and are not doing all kind of things for each other. So in that way I personally find it an advantage that some representatives from the local institutions join in as they participate on a continual basis. And those people are employed to handle these kinds of things professionally, and they know the language and have contacts to the public administrators. (Informant 34, Kvarterløft)

However, some of the respondents saw it as a disadvantage that representatives from the local institutions did not reside in the community. They found that there could be a risk that the interests of the municipality and the local institutions coincided, since the institutions often were organised as an integrated part of the municipality.

3.4 The non-participants

The characteristics of non-participants are based on the interviews with the active citizens in the Kvarterløft project. This is important to bear in mind because a group that is often missing in the Kvarterløft project is e.g. the *busy ones* or those groups with many resources who choose not to participate because of lack of time. Another group that was mentioned was those people without resources but who do not know that there are possibilities to participate. One of the respondents describes her view of the participants who drop out of the process in the following way:

Those beer types stopped appearing after a short period. In the beginning they came to the meetings, but they were unsuccessful, because they came with a carrier-bag full of beer. As they did not contribute anything vital, we were not inclined to keep them. Those with few resources are not so much part of the process (Informant 23, Kvarterløft)

Based on the interviews with the active citizens, those who do not participate in the Kvarterløft, or similar projects, are typically *ethnic minorities*; *young people* and those with few personal, or material, resources. Even though it is a democratic right not to participate,

the question is whether certain groups consciously choose not to participate, or if their non-participation is caused by structural power relations.

The empirical material illustrates that many of those citizens who at the beginning showed interest in the process dropped out during the first year. One of the conclusions of the study is that it requires political resources to participate in processes running over a prolonged period of time. Those citizens who do not have knowledge resources and positive experiences from previous projects have a tendency to stop participating after a short period. The professionals in the local Kvarterløft secretariat have been attentive to this and have sought to create “small visible projects” during the first year, in order to show the citizens that their participation matters. But it has been difficult to maintain the participation of groups that do not have resources for participation (time; political know-how; access to networks) over longer periods of time.

4. Concluding remarks

The involvement of citizens and local stakeholders in participatory processes is now being promoted by governments across many western countries. Based on the review of literature on citizen participation and a large number of planning and policy documents, I find it doubtful that “*citizens*” are often regarded or described as a homogeneous group. As I have demonstrated in my study of the Danish Kvarterløft programme, citizens cannot be defined in terms of a unified category. On the contrary, they are very different and participate in various ways. This is important to take into account when participatory processes are planned. My conclusion is that the institutional design of the process plays a decisive and important role concerning “*who*” participates. The Danish Kvarterløft programme, as well as many other participatory projects, is often implicitly based on an idea of the “engaged citizens” who have the resources to participate. They have time for meetings and for participating in local study groups; and resources enable them to understand the legal and technical language. This perspective of the ‘citizens’ has consequences for how the meetings are arranged and designed, and thereby indirectly on ‘who’ chooses to participate.

Most of the participatory activities that took place in the Kvarterløft programme were meetings in the afternoon or evenings. The citizens who had the best chances to attend were typically elderly, or people without small children. Those groups of citizens that are not accustomed to meetings based on face to face dialogues are easily left out. These groups are typically: the busy, those without political resources, ethnic minorities, and young people. Ethnic groups were especially difficult to mobilize in this mode of participating. It is decisive for the success of many of the projects in urban programmes that they are able to reach those target groups for the projects. The lessons from the Danish Kvarterløft programme are that special measures need to be taken to reach those groups, and that the local professionals need to reach out directly to those groups, at the places where they are already.

The empirical study presented in this article demonstrates that citizens have different perceptions of the kind of support they need from local government depending on their experience with participation. This difference can be related to different notions of democracy and participation. For everyday makers, for example, it is more important that there are visible concrete projects during the process, and that the meetings are supplemented with alternative modes of participation. When dealing with the expert activists it is more helpful for planners to initiate processes with some techniques that create an arena where some of the frustrations of the expert activists from previous projects can be articulated. As one

experienced planner stated then the “blackboard is clean” and a new start can be made! The planners and public administrators play a decisive role in holding some of the energetic but also dominating, expert activists in check, but equally acknowledge them for their skills and capabilities while still restraining them a bit to leave space for other types of citizens to come forward.

If we have a vision that affected citizens should have the right to have a say in decisions that affect their lives, public administrators should pay attention to the consequences of applying different participatory techniques and institutional settings. It is imperative to have a differentiated perception of the concept of ‘citizens’ thereby developing more distinguished strategies for involvement, and employ a variety of participatory tools and settings that can attract different types of citizens. This may anchor local policies better, and enhance skills for participation.

The qualitative study of citizens and their experiences with participating in the Kvarterløft project provided an opportunity to get an insight into the subjective, lived experience of citizens uncovering their mode of participating and their political identity. This article presents the first step towards an outline of active citizens and has thereby expanded the concept of citizens. This type of analysis could be followed up by using Q-methodology an approach used by Dryzek and Berejikian’s (1993) to reconstruct how individuals conceptualize democracy and their roles within it. We could thereby get some significant insights into the democratic discourses to which the informants subscribe to and thereby get some valuable information in order to design the institutional settings for democratic performance (Mathur and Skelcher 2007)

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