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ABSTRACT

Participatory processes in spatial planning are not always taken serious by participants, since they are not seen as a leverage for decision-making. This article aims to unfold the relationship between long-term participation processes typical for spatial planning and decision-making. In our desk research we particularly explore the possibility that publicly debating participatory processes could re-emphasise this relationship. During a Participatory Design (PD) process in the Belgian village Godsheide we put this idea into practice via ‘scripting’ public debate on a participatory process using a newspaper.

Author Keywords

Participation, decision-making spatial planning, scripting, public debate

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

“I do not want to be heard, I want to be included in decision making”. This quote expresses the disappointment of a citizen in the impact of ten years participatory activities in Godsheide on decision-making. He is part of the citizen collective *the Unie Godsheide*, who contacted our research group to participate in creating a transparent participatory decision-making process between different groups in spatial planning. They were regularly heard when discussing so-called ‘facts’ about their spatial context that were derived from spatial studies. However, they lost track of how and by whom (e.g. decisions by the different authorities and designers) their contributions got concretely implemented in the spatial context.

Spatial planning is dependent on decisions by many

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participants, such as policy makers, planners, designers, citizens or property developers. Since the 1960 this idea of participative democracy in spatial planning became more prominent, foregrounding planning as a process of producing knowledge through a collaborative or communicative learning process [1]. Enhancing citizen participation in decision-making has many benefits: increasing citizen’s skills and competency, a feeling of being part of their local community and being personally responsible for decisions and a tendency to give legitimacy to decisions [2], [3]. However, the Godsheide case illustrates that citizens, but also policy makers, designers etc. still perceive a gap between the participatory process and decision-making. This perception is partly rooted in the fact that long-term participation processes - often also reaching outside the frame of the participatory process - consist of a great variety of participants, whose relations with the different decisions taken in the process are difficult to trace. Moreover, the success of the idea of participative democracy has led to participation becoming an industry in itself; sometimes creating a de-politicised island that does not address and include other voices (policy, architecture etc.) and the everyday context in the decision-making processes [4]. In Latourian [5] terms this results in participants being easily involved in reflecting on ‘far away’ matter of facts, while there is a great need for them to take part in assembling with human (e.g. policy makers) and non-human actors (e.g. a playground) to address matters of concern through concrete actions (policy or design decisions, neighbourhood collaborations etc.). The idea of a matter of concern –instead of matter of fact - stresses that people gather because of different concerns to come to a kind of (dis)agreement.

In our desk research we will discuss how the relationship between long-term participatory processes and decision-making can be re-emphasised by paying more attention to public debate on the decisions made in the participatory process. Then, we will describe how we put these insights into practice in a PD process wherein the participants scripted public debate on the participatory process in Godsheide. We discuss briefly how this scripting process allowed them to publicly share decisions and to trace how they are reflected and acted upon by others.

PUBLICLY DEBATING DECISION-MAKING IN PD

When exploring literature, it becomes clear that public debate can play an interesting role in re-emphasising the relationship between long-term participatory processes and decision-making. First of all, public debate contributes to decision-making [17] by enhancing the attention for what is debated. The argument is that enhancing attention for participatory processes in spatial planning is needed, since participation is not taken seriously by the involved participants (ironically, because of its difficult relation with decision-making) [18]. Second, documenting a participatory process, its decisions and results invites society and its actors to publicly advocate it and take up a more active role [19]. Literature points to the fact that publicly documenting long-term participatory processes is a means to share decision-making, creating traces of previous decisions which enables people to continue the process in their own ways and at their own time. In PD, documentation to enable public debate is a process that can take place by everyone, everyday and everywhere in order to share resources and tackle problems. Diverse media, supported by different frameworks of participation, have been used to share decisions in participatory processes (e.g. interactive media [11] or board games [20]). There lies a challenge in designing infrastructures and frameworks that also support making these processes public [21] [22]. More insight into how decision-making is part of what we define as participation and clearly situating decisions in the participatory process, could allow us to be more precise about how to tackle this challenge.

Decision-making in definitions of participation

Arnstein described participation with a clear relation to decision-making [6]: *“The redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future”*. Participation and decision-making are also closely related in how PD researchers in the 1970s defined participation, aimed at including workers in deciding upon the design and use of workplace computer applications. One of PD’s early researchers Ehn [7] defines participation as meeting points between language ‘games’ among specific languages, ways and rules of speaking that are associated with certain participant groups (e.g. how citizens use a workspace or how designers create models to discuss this space). In participatory processes, meeting points between different language games are more or less deliberately organised, functioning on the one hand as parliaments wherein decision-making processes are negotiated and shared between participants and on the other hand as laboratories in which concepts are tried out [8].

While PD was initially focused on the workspace and on information technologies, it – and with it the definition of participation [9] – has expanded to other domains, such as product design, interactive arts or spatial planning [10] [11]. In today’s definitions of participation, authors often stress the instruments and procedures that allow sharing decision-

making in participation [4]. However, given our specific attention to long-term participatory processes, these instruments and procedures need to do more than mediating sharing. They also need to support participants and designers in building capabilities [12] in playing a role in and continuing decision-making in participatory processes. In spatial planning literature this is often referred to as capacity building, arguing that to achieve sustainable participatory processes, PD researchers [13] and participants [14] should develop capabilities in (1) developing insights in and reflecting on matters of concern (e.g. who has responsibilities/uses a space; what are the conditions and context for change), (2) developing trust in their ability to act on these reflections (concretely assembling around the matters of concern to share decisions e.g. on common use of a garden). From the perspective of long-term participation, participation is thus a process wherein participatory instruments and frameworks are created and used, supporting participants to share processes of making decisions and experiments. At the same time, participation should enable participants to develop capabilities to take the process of sharing decisions and experimenting (on the level of reflections and actions) into their own hands.

Situation decision-making in participation

To be able to publicly debate decisions in participatory processes, it is important to know when and where the decisions are to be debated and shared. Early PD’s democratic ideal was – inspired by Marxist rhetoric – to emancipate workers from the oppression by structures and technologies introduced by management. Studying (the more politically neutral) PD discourse today, Ertnér, Kragelund and Malmberg [15] give an insight in *where* democratic participation in decision-making takes place. They notice a great attention for the development of systems, resources and communication platforms that liberate participants from individual limitations (e.g. age) to participate or that enable participants to work together and influence political and social matters. Next to that, they point to a body of research that problematises participation by creating alternative frameworks, enhancing peoples’ possibilities to influence decision-making. Finally, they observe a focus on reinforcing researchers’ abilities to ‘sell’ participatory approaches to the world and to conduct a reflexive analysis of how the processes they set up, allow actors to equally participate.

Bratteteig and Wagner [16] provide insights in *when* decisions are shared in PD processes. They frame PD as a process of making choices among alternatives with participants, taking place in uncertain situations, requiring the imagination of the implications of a particular choice for future action. ‘Decisions’ are then selection processes among these choices, taking place in different ‘design moves’: in creating choices via exploring alternative futures, selecting choices, concretising choices, evaluating choices and the participatory design result. In creation and

selection process of choices decision-making is more easily shared; in concretising choices designers have a dominant role since they are trained in materialising ideas.

Summarising, literature points to where we share decisions in PD, namely via creating participatory infrastructures, frameworks and reflexive practices, but that – certainly in long-term participation processes - it also needs to pay attention to enhancing participants' capabilities to share decisions themselves. Also, we learned that this sharing process in PD takes place in various design moves, but most unequally in the concretising phase.

FIELDWORK: SCRIPTING PUBLIC DEBATE

In our fieldwork we experimented with giving the situations (infrastructures, frameworks and reflexive practices) wherein we share decisions a more public character. At the same time, we paid attention to build capabilities with participants in (publicly) sharing decisions. More specifically, we experimented with newspapers' (see other PD research addressing newspapers [23]) role in forming an infrastructure to shape and publicly debate decisions in participatory processes, via exploring the participatory potential of the framework of 'dramatic scriptings', as described by Goffman. These scriptings refer to the ways in which mass media very explicitly and carefully construct mock-ups of everyday and imagined life to create public debate, using different forms of technology (newspapers, social networks etc.), scheduling and dramaturgy [24]. Mass media's scriptings are 'hyper-ritualised' [25] (standardised, exaggerated or simplified), because they want to compensate for the fact that the interpretations of what they publicly share by the 'hyper-critical' audience are difficult to control [26]. We did not just apply mass media's ways of scripting, but rather experimented with what it means to script public debate on a long-term participatory process. This leads to the question: *"How does making and sharing a newspaper support participants in 'scripting' the participatory process and the surrounding public debate? And how does this re-emphasise the relationship with decision-making?"*

We started a PD process in Godsheide, taking the form of an Action Research wherein a collaborative relationship with citizens, policy representatives and property developers was built [27], interwoven with co-design workshops, guiding collective creativity towards a newspaper narrating about spatial proposals in 2024 [28]. All participants (including the researchers) scripted a set of newspaper articles and images about how they imagine Godsheide in 2024 and spread the resulting newspaper publicly. In a scenario workshop, participants told small stories in newspaper headings and texts. They then used these as input for producing matching images or tableau vivants, depicting the participants who performed and embodied the stories in the village- space.

The two main participating researchers independently made qualitative analyses of the process documentation:

scenarios, articles, images, reports by other media on the process, posts on social networks, reports from follow-up meetings, interviews with the participants. They regularly brought these analyses together to cluster ways in which participants publicly script the participatory process and how this produces traces in decision-making, using knowledge on how traditional newspapers script content as a handlebar [29]. This paper is based on a clustering in February 2015, resulting in five scripting categories. Making and spreading the newspapers enabled participants to publicly share decisions by (1) creating spatial proposals as sources of public debate and engaging people in this debate, (2) reflecting and acting on their own roles and responsibilities in relation to others in the participatory process, (3) reflecting and acting on their roles as opinion makers and mobilisers in spatial planning, (4) creating critical proposals for public space, without neglecting their own private responsibilities, (5) giving form to their spatial proposals as matters of concern that invite other peoples' reflections and actions, rather than facts or statements. Although the length of this paper inhibits discussing this for every category, we noticed that the different scripting approaches encouraged both reflexive attitudes by participants and researchers and steps towards more equally concretising spatial proposals. For instance, the first category of scripting stimulated reflection on and identification of the own role – in relation to designers or policy makers - in making a spatial proposal concrete. This also left traces in later decisions by stimulating citizens taking responsibilities for the proposals during and after the newspaper was co-designed and making it easier for researchers and policy to trace and involve them in deciding on next steps.

CONCLUSION

We discussed the potential of publicly debating decision-making in participatory processes for re-emphasising the relations between participation and decision-making. We saw that sharing decisions in PD takes place in several design moves in the PD process, via creating participatory infrastructures, frameworks and reflexive practices, being situations wherein decision-making can be made public. We also addressed the issue that in long-term participation it is not enough to create public situations, since participants also need to develop capabilities in sharing decisions themselves. In our fieldwork we used a newspaper as an infrastructure for participants to give form to and script the public debate on a participatory process and - at the same time - increase their capabilities in sharing decisions. During the workshop we will unfold the challenges and opportunities of this process for long-term participation.

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