

FRANCE: A STRONG STATE, TOWARDS A STRONGER LOCAL DEMOCRACY?

Arthur Edwards and Peter Hupe

In: H. Daemen & L. Schaap. *Citizen and city. Developments in fifteen local democracies in Europe*. Delft: Eburon, 2000, pp.129-144.

1. Introduction

Local government in France and its relations with the citizens are the central themes of this chapter. The system of sub-national government is discussed in section 2. In section 3 the focus is on the state tradition that underlies the position of French local government. Against this background, in section 4 we elaborate on the tasks of local government and inter-governmental relations. In section 5 the political structure of local government is delineated. In section 6 we focus on local government-citizens relations. First, we give a general characterization of these relations in the context of French local government. Since the 1980s there has been a process of decentralisation to sub-national authorities. Our case-study, Grenoble, is an example of a city in which new ways of involving citizens in urban policies are being tried out..

2. State tradition

In the political organisation of France the so-called ‘Jacobean logic’ plays an important role. The Jacobean logic owes its name to the Jacobinists, whose influence whittled away the decentralist character of the revolutionary *Constituante* after the French Revolution. The logic is best summarised by the expression ‘*L’une et indivisible République*’, ‘the one and indivisible Republic’ which stands for a tendency towards centralisation and uniformity. However, there are competing principles of logic in France, such as regionalism and federalism. The system that existed before the decentralisation reforms of 1982 has been labelled ‘tamed Jacobinism’, because of the balance between the seemingly dominant centralist state and the countervailing local forces of the *notables locaux*. Although the reforms of 1982 had a strong regionalist element, they were described in terms of Jacobean logic: the decentralisation would promote the unity and indivisibility of the Republic (Wollmann, 2000; Loughlin and Peters, 1997).

Even though the French system of government has gone through many major changes, the underlying culture has remained the same. This culture entails a broad consensus on France being a centralised nation, as laid down in the Constitution’s 20th Article; the central government decides and directs the nation’s policy. This central dominance affects the position of sub-national governments, which are considered subordinate to the centre. More in general, it affects the relations between the state and society.

The current constitution gives the state all the necessary instruments of government leadership and societal control. The French ‘Jacobean’ logic implies, amongst others,

that elected national and subnational governments must carry out 'the will of the people' directly, without mediation by other interests. The public will overrules the pressure of specific interests. Organised interests are, therefore, viewed with suspicion (even after 1901, when interest organizations were given the right of establishment without prior government authorisation), both by the government and by the population. Much more in accordance with the French model are social protest movements, which are swiftly organised and as swiftly dissolve. Confrontation is considered a legitimate, sometimes even the only, way to be heard. In most cases, the government reacts with either appeasement or repression (Schmidt, 2000).

From this state-society relationship a specific pattern of policy processes emerges. The state often formulates policies unilaterally, without first consulting groups that may be affected. Schmidt calls this 'heroic' policies (Schmidt, 2000: 143). Often, society reacts with resisting a policy. In case of resistance, the state usually is 'weak' in the implementation of the policy, adjusting it or even abandoning it in response to the protest. In some sectors, accommodating the public view starts as early as at the stage of policy formulation. The extent to which a sector is subject to 'heroic' policy-making depends on its relationship with the state. In general, sectors that have close ties with the state (such as business and agriculture) are less often faced with 'heroic' policies than those that operate at a distance (such as labour).

More than forty years after the establishment of the Fifth Republic, state and society and their relationship with each other have changed. The state is less certain of its leadership capacities, although it sometimes still tries to operate 'heroically'. Society is less willing to be led, although it is not sufficiently organised to take the lead itself. As Schmidt (2000: 141) concludes, the state has modernised its relations with society, but the technocratic nature of the state remains, with a dominant administrative elite as well as the periodic re-emergence of the old heroic policy style.

3. The system of sub-national government

In the French system, the distinction between sub-national governments and administrative districts is relevant (OECD, 1997). Administrative districts (*circonscriptions administratives*) have no legal embodiment or autonomy as opposed to sub-national governments. The administrative districts are run by state officials who are hierarchically subordinate to the Prime Minister and the ministers in Paris. Examples of these administrative districts are *arrondissements* (of which there are 337, and which are not to be confused with the sub-municipal *arrondissements* in the three largest cities), *cantons* (3838 in total, which mainly serve as electoral areas) and the Court of Appeal jurisdictions. Sub-national governments (*collectivités territoriales*) have three characteristics in common: (1) a population, (2) territorial boundaries and (3) legal bodies empowered to make decisions in the name and interest of the population, of which the elected assembly is a notable example (Norton, 1994). Three levels of administration in France have these characteristics: the municipality (*la commune*), the department (*le département*) and the region (*la région*).

The *communes* are based on a genuine historic social community (e.g. they correspond to a church parish). They were officially established in the days of the French Revolution. Nowadays, there are 36,763 municipalities in France, varying from small villages with less than a thousand inhabitants (77.1% of all municipalities) to large cities like Paris, with more than 2 million inhabitants (European Public

Administration Network, 2000). Differences in population size do not effect the rules that apply to the municipality: these are the same for all municipalities. However, differences in population size can influence the make-up of institutions. Paris is a municipality as well as a department (OECD, 1997). In 1982, another sub-national government was created in the three largest cities (Paris, Lyon and Marseille): the *arrondissements*. Legally, these institutions can be established in other cities as well, particularly in the case of amalgamations of municipalities with a total population of more than 100,000. In Paris and Marseille, the average population of the *arrondissement* is 100,000; in Lyon it is 60,000.

The *départements* were created by the State, and are not based on a natural community. In 1790, all kinds of intermediate entities, like cities and provinces, were abolished and replaced by 83 departments. There are now 100 departments, four of which are overseas territories. A department can include one (Paris) to several hundred municipalities. To all these departments the same regulations apply.

The *régions* have existed longer as administrative districts, but did not become sub-national governments until 1982. There are 26 regions. Four of them are overseas territories; these are both departments and regions and have the customary institutions. The other 22 regions can cover two to eight departments. To all regions the same regulations apply. There are some exceptions to the general application of regulations. In most cases, this concerns the overseas territories (*Départements et Territoires d'Outre-mer*) (OECD, 1997).

Table 1 shows some institutional characteristics of regions, departments and municipalities.

Table 1. Institutions of sub-national authorities

	Region	Department	Municipality
Assembly	Regional council	General council	Municipal council
Term of office assembly	6 years	6 years (half of the council up for renewal every 3 years)	6 years
Electoral system	Proportional representation, departmental lists, minimum: 5% of the total vote	Two-round vote for a single representative = 'cantonal elections'	Two-round vote from list if pop. < 3,500; Adjusted proportional representation if > pop. 3,500
Number of members assembly	Minimum: 31 Maximum: 209	Minimum: 13 Maximum: 76 Paris: 163	Minimum: 9 Maximum: 69 Paris: 163, Lyons: 73, Marseilles: 101
Chief executive	Chairman of the regional council	Chairman of the general council	Mayor
Term of office chief executive	6 years	3 years	6 years
Representative of the State	Regional prefect	Prefect	Mayor

Source: OECD, 1997: 169.

Each sub-national government has a representative assembly, which is elected for a fixed term (with the exceptions of, amongst others, Corsica and the overseas territories). The number of assembly members depends on the size of the population in the area and is determined by law. The system of election is also different, for

municipalities with more and those with less than 3,500 inhabitants. In the departments and the regions, the chief executive used to be the prefect, a national civil servant appointed by the central government, who represented the central government. Since 1982, however, the assemblies elect their own executive: the chairman of the assembly. The prefects have remained as representatives of the state. In the municipalities, the assembly elects the mayor as its chief executive. For certain functions, the mayor represents the state as well. In case of malfunctioning, the central government has the authority to dissolve assemblies or replace chief executives, but such occurrences are rare.

4. Local government tasks and intergovernmental relations

The French Constitution of 1958 says about sub-national authorities that they “administer themselves freely by means of elected councils and under the conditions provided by law”. This means that sub-national authorities have the power to decide on administrative matters and the management activities needed for implementation. Administrative actions are supposed to be a manifestation of the collective will, so formally the right to act in any way that fulfils the needs of the society of citizens is a general competence (Norton, 1994: 128-130).

As was stated earlier, France has a long history of centralisation and concentration of power, stretching from the 16th to the early 19th century. From 1830 until 1981, a gradual decentralisation took place. This was characterised by three major changes: election of local officials instead of appointment, the transformation of administrative districts into sub-national governments with jurisdiction over matters of local concern, and a transfer of powers from decentralised state services to sub-national governments. The decentralisation trend was accompanied by some deconcentration. An important instrument of state control over the sub-national authorities was the so-called ‘*tutelle*’ (*administrative, technique et financière*). The *tutelle* saw to it that decisions had to be legally approved of by the prefect before they could be brought into force.

When President Mitterand came to power in May 1981, he initiated important decentralisation reforms. An important act in which these reforms were laid down was the ‘Law on the Rights and Liberties of Communes, Departments and Regions’ of 2 March 1982, also known as the *Loi Deferre*, named after the Minister of the Interior who was responsible for it. The reforms had four main basic characteristics: 1) the region was transformed into a new sub-national government; 2) some powers were transferred from the state to sub-national governments (the principle of clusters, see below); 3) in the departments and regions, an elected official became chief executive instead of the state-appointed prefect; and 4) state control over sub-national governments was reduced, giving greater freedom to sub-national authorities. The a priori *tutelle* was replaced with an ex post facto law review. If a decision is not approved of, the matter has to be taken to the administrative tribunal or the regional court of audit (*cour de comptes*). Also, central powers over financial decisions are limited, whereas they were extensive before 1982. The reforms are still in progress, and are accompanied by a continuing shift towards deconcentration (OECD, 1997). Although the reforms were an important step towards self-government of sub-national authorities, the powers and local presence of the State are still challenging this.

Wollmann (2000: 43-44) gives three reasons for decentralisation having 'mixed' results. First, in practice only the big and middle-sized cities have the organisational and staff resources needed to fulfil the new role, which makes the gap between large and small municipalities, between rural and urban areas, between 'the France of the two speeds' even wider. Second, this gap places the problem of municipal territorial reform high on the agenda (see the next section). To cope with local territorial fragmentation, inter-municipal co-operation takes place, which leads to a maze of co-operative arrangements. Along with other arrangements, such as new metropolitan entities, this adds to the so-called 'over-institutionalisation' of the politico-administrative system in France. Finally, the move to deconcentration move that should accompany the decentralisation process, has advanced only slowly.

Because France is a unitary state, only parliament has legislative power, raises taxes and sets tax rate. The Prime Minister has regulatory power. Regulations are adopted by the central government which are called decrees or ministerial orders. In principle, these regulations apply to the whole country. Exceptions are possible, e.g. for the overseas territories. The prefects of departments and regions and mayors also have regulatory power, but their (prefectorial or municipal) orders only apply to their own area and are, of course, subject to law. When a mayor exercises his regulatory power, he acts as a representative of the state (as he does when he registers births, deaths and marriages). At this level, the functions of state's representative and elected sub-national chief executive are still fused. Furthermore, Parliament makes the decisions on the organisation of institutions, such as representative assemblies and executives. Only the central government has the competence to define its own responsibilities, organise itself and determine how to apportion its public powers. Sub-national governments do not have such powers, but they can only run their own administrative services. In this sense, there is no general competence at the sub-national level. The state determines the framework for sub-national policy-making. Local authorities are obliged to provide some services (e.g. social benefits and health care); other services are non-mandatory. Politicians from sub-national authorities often complain that the mandatory services cannot be administered from the state's financial contribution. In case of non-mandatory services, the state can only give incentives, for example, in the form of contractual planning (OECD, 1997).

In the 'Law on Division of Competences between Municipalities, Departments and Regions and the State' of 7 January 1983, the principle is laid down that each administrative level has its own responsibilities: the so-called 'clusters of responsibility'. This division is clear in theory, but in practice many responsibilities involve several levels, all concerning different aspects. Apart from the fact that the central government has not wholly respected the logic of the clusters (e.g. because the task is traditionally considered to lie with the national government, even though it involves local responsibilities), the concept of the clusters may refer to only a part of overall authority. The domain of education is an example of this: the cluster for local authorities generally relates to school buildings, while the state cluster covers all other aspects.

With this in mind, sub-national authorities can be said to have the following responsibilities: Municipalities are responsible for matters relevant to the immediate environment, such as town planning, municipal infrastructure and subsidised housing, local public services, health care and social services, education (primary school

buildings and their maintenance), cultural affairs, public safety and aid to employment and business (the latter which is subject to compliance with the principle of freedom of trade and industry and European Community Law). In larger municipalities, the material extent of most of these responsibilities is greater.

The arrondissements of Paris, Lyon and Marseille have only few rights of action. They depend very much on delegation by the municipality. The sub-municipal council of the arrondissement can intervene in all matters of interest to its area by writing to the mayor or complaining at the municipal council. The council of the arrondissement is to be consulted by the municipal council on matters like town planning, homes for the elderly, kindergartens, etc. Furthermore, some services relating to the daily life of the inhabitants, such as sport, young children and social housing, may be delegated to the arrondissements. The sub-municipal mayors have several responsibilities, amongst others in elections and town planning, but these are subject to communal regulations; the mayors are therefore dependent on the municipal administration.

Departments also have responsibilities for the management of everyday affairs, such as social benefits, health care benefits, placement assistance to the unemployed, education (building and maintenance of the *collèges*, school busses), local transport and departmental roads.

The regions' responsibilities mainly concern land-use planning and economic development: these responsibilities include vocational training, education (building, maintenance and operation of *lycées*), railway and waterway transport and economic support measures.

The state has responsibilities parallel to those of sub-national authorities. The degree of responsibility varies across sectors. Education was mentioned earlier as an example. Another example is public safety. Both the municipalities and the state are responsible for this. Regarding the guaranteed income policy, the state, the departments (prefects and chairmen of the council), the municipalities and social security bodies are all responsible.

Prefects are important for policy co-ordination. Not only do they co-ordinate the deconcentrated state services, but they also divide the (financial) resources for local development. In addition, they represent the state towards sub-national governments and handle most contacts between sub-national authorities and national government. Two informal co-ordination mechanisms exist. First, prefects have always had close contact with sub-national authorities. Sometimes they have even spoken to central ministries or the government on the behalf of sub-national authorities. Second, a central feature of the French administrative system is the so-called *cumul des mandats*. Elected officials hold a number of different offices, at different levels. This binds the levels of government together: the system is built on the acceptance of interdependencies between local 'notables' (*notables locaux*), politicians at the central level and senior government officials. In this way, the centre directs local policies, but local interests direct the policies of the central government as well (Norton, 1994).

Many mayors and members of the general and regional councils are members of parliament and sometimes of government itself. In 1985 the *cumul des mandats* was considerably limited by the enforcement of a new law. According to this law, a member of parliament (Assembly or Senate) can hold only one other important office, such as a European MP-ship, that of regional councillor, general councillor, Paris councillor, mayor of a municipality of 20,000 inhabitants or more, or deputy mayor (*adjoint*) of a municipality of more than 100,000 inhabitants.

The state has formal means to impose decisions on sub-national governments. However, several laws require consultation with sub-national authorities about public policy formulation. The *general* requirement of consultation only exists with respect to the overseas areas, this in case the central government proposes not to apply national policy to these territories (OECD, 1997).

According to French law, there is no hierarchy of sub-national levels of government. In other words, regions cannot formally impose anything on departments or municipalities. Nor can the departments do so on municipalities. There is one exception to this rule: the system of business aid, according to which the regions must initiate giving a grant before departments and municipalities can supply additional grants.

There are few legal requirements of consultation between the different levels. There are several legal possibilities of co-operation between sub-national governments. Such co-operation is particularly important for the many small municipalities with few resources. Co-operation between municipalities can occur for general purposes or in a specific domain. All departments have an inter-municipal co-operation committee to evaluate and formulate proposals on a strictly advisory basis. Finally, sub-national authorities can co-operate at different levels.

5. Political structure of local government

As already indicated in the last section, there is a large discrepancy between the large and the many small municipalities in France. The small municipalities often have trouble finding the necessary resources for the provision of services. It is especially difficult, if not impossible for these small municipalities to provide non-mandatory services (like libraries and tourist offices), but even the mandatory services may only be provided through co-operation with other municipalities. Still, attempts to amalgamate the smallest municipalities to increase the efficiency of management, which was tried in the early 1970s by means of giving financial incentives, have largely failed. This underlines the political strength of the *notables locaux*, as well as the great allegiance and sense of identity with which the French relate to and hold on to their *communes* (Wollmann, 2000).

Central to the political life of the municipality is the mayor. He is both the locally elected chief executive and the local state representative. In the latter function, he ensures the execution of laws and directives from the centre, officially registers births, deaths and marriages and carries responsibility for the collection of certain statistical data. In the function of principal executive of the municipality's wishes, he is expected to establish and represent the community's 'general view' in dealings with prefects and the central government. The mayor's status is sometimes compared to 'local presidency'. This powerful status is enhanced by the position of the council, which generally cannot exercise much control over the mayor's administrative decisions and has to follow his leadership (Hunt and Chandler, 1993).

The principal political division, at national and sub-national level, is that between right and left. However, the importance of this division varies per level. At the level of small municipalities, party loyalty is often not that important, whereas proved

performance and maintaining traditional support are. Political leaders will draw up balanced lists of candidates, who are well-known and respected people. Furthermore, mayors often ignore their partisan role; this is called *apolitisme*. The mayors' apolitical attitude has two reasons: first, they consider representing the community as a whole more important and, second, when seeking help from the central government, they want to avoid being prejudiced by their party loyalties (Norton, 1994).

In larger cities, political divisions are more important. In some cities, e.g. Grenoble, the balance between left and right is evenly weighted, and the elections are therefore real contests. In most cities, however, the right or the left is clearly dominant. Parties may co-operate when other issues than party loyalty become more relevant. In particular, local loyalties may transcend party loyalties in dealings with the central government. In order to pressure the centre for more resources, otherwise competing parties often unite (Hunt and Chandler, 1993).

The electoral system in France has often been changed since the French Revolution. Since then, almost every government has tried to develop a system that ensures greater fairness or governmental stability on the one hand and more advantageous effects in terms of its own political interest on the other. The present system is a compromise between the fairness of proportional representation and the typically French two-round elections (Norton, 1994). The French may vote from the age of 18. To be elected in municipalities, they have to fall in the same age category.

With respect to municipalities, a distinction is made between the election system in municipalities with less than 3,500 inhabitants and the system in municipalities with more than 3,500 inhabitants. In the smaller municipalities, parties and/or groups of citizens propose a list of candidates, which can subsequently be altered by the voters. Candidates the voters disapprove of can be removed from the list and substituted by others. This is known as *panachage*. A two-round election follows. In larger municipalities, listed councillors are elected in two rounds by means of proportional representation, without *panachage*. Councillors are chosen for six years. The size of the council depends on the size of the population, varying from 9 to 49 members, with exception of the largest cities (see Table 1). The arrondissemental councils in Paris, Marseille and Lyon have 20, 16 and 9 members respectively. Two-thirds of these council members are elected in the same way as in municipalities with more than 3,500 inhabitants; the remaining one-third consists of city councillors who have been elected for that area.

The mayors as well as their assistants (*adjoints*), are elected at the first meeting of the newly elected council. Normally, these are the council members who headed the successful list.

6. Local government-citizens relations

In at least one respect citizen participation in France is high. Due to the large number of municipalities, there is a substantial number of citizens who participate as elected representatives - some half a million, 200,000 of which are mayors or deputy-mayors. In a report on local government (*Vivre ensemble*, 1976), it was argued that abolishing municipalities with less than 1,000 inhabitants would mean that some 300,000 councillors positions would disappear. "The will to participate would indeed be compromised" (Norton, 1994: 143).

Many other citizens are involved in associations and consultative bodies. In some municipalities, associations assist in or are primarily responsible for the management of certain accommodations, such as cultural and sports centres, or of other provisions and facilities, like schools, social aid bureaus or housing bodies. Also, legal provisions have been made for associations to play a consultative role in municipal planning procedures (Norton, 1994).

One of the goals of the decentralisation policy of the new socialist government of 1981 was to stimulate participation. According to Norton (1994) and Negrier (2000), however, the expectations have not been met yet. The government of 1993 has continued the process of decentralisation and deconcentration. Furthermore, there has been some discussion about the introduction of direct democratic procedures. According to the *Loi Pasqua* of 1992, municipalities are allowed to hold consultative local referendums. In 1995, the possibility to do this was widened. Since then, the local population has had the right to initiate a consultative referendum.

In the next section, we will describe how in one municipality, Grenoble, the city government tries to restructure government-citizens relations.

7. Grenoble

Grenoble is situated in the centre of the region Rhones-Alpes, 100 kilometres south-east of Lyon. The city has about 160,000 inhabitants.

Grenoble's history of government-citizens relations bears the stamp of mayor Deboudout, who was in office during the 1960s and 1970s. He stimulated the involvement of associations in the control of daily affairs in the neighbourhoods and the management of facilities. Since then, decentralisation and (re-)centralisation have succeeded each other, more or less simultaneously with changes in the political signature of the ruling majority. Decentralisation also took the form of deconcentration. Between the neighbourhood level and the city level, six districts were formed with their own local government offices. In these districts, technical and administrative services are managed and provided for. Examples of services that are provided are the maintenance of roads and green spaces, the delivery of official documents and the provision of information on local matters.

Since the 1990s a new coalition of left-wing parties has again embarked on a decentralisation policy but, in pursuing this policy, the city government faces different social conditions than it did in earlier decades.

Problem definition

Apart from their role as voters, citizens are involved in public affairs through the associations. Furthermore, since the 1960s there exists a territorial infrastructure of neighbourhood unions (*Unions de quartier*), which complements the political structure at the level of the city. The members of a neighbourhood union (there is one union in each of the 23 neighbourhoods) are elected by the associations. They deal with questions of welfare and daily affairs in the neighbourhood. They discuss matters with local politicians and public officials, formulate proposals etcetera. At the city level, there is a liaison committee of all neighbourhood unions (*CLUQ: Comite de Liaison des Unions de Quartier*) to deal with matters of common interest.

In its assessment of the existing organization of government-citizens relations, the city government has judged it to be out of tune with the current conditions of modern urban life. First of all, the associations face an ageing membership. This means that

the associations are losing strength as intermediaries between individual citizens and the government. Furthermore, as in most French municipalities, the associations have been strongly involved in the management of accommodations, such as sport accommodations and cultural centres. However, new generations have different wishes and demands; their problems require a broader approach in all the sectors in which accommodations and associations are traditionally organised.

Urban problems not only require a cross-sectoral approach, they often also are of a territorial scale that goes beyond the level of neighbourhoods, districts or even the city. The same holds true for the territorial range of the orientation of the inhabitants. People are not attached that strongly anymore to a specific neighbourhood. Living, working, shopping, recreation and other activities have become territorially more and more separated.

To cope with these new challenges, the city government has to find new ways of involving citizens in urban affairs. Also, the city government tries to stimulate the associations to adapt to the conditions of modern urban life, for example, to take into account the level of the agglomeration.

Initiatives

In 1999 the municipal council decided on several initiatives to restructure government-citizens relations in Grenoble.

In May 1999 it was decided to start an experiment in one of the districts of the city, which comprises five neighbourhoods, with a new kind of consultative committee. The structure of this committee is designed with the aim of involving age groups and social classes that are underrepresented in the associations, namely young, working people (aged 20 to 40) and immigrants. In this consultative committee, two sub-committees function, each with 30 members. There is a sub-committee with representatives of the associations, and a sub-committee with individual citizens, 25 of which are randomly selected from the electoral lists; the other 5 are immigrants who have been invited as volunteers and are members in their personal capacity.

The associations that are represented in the committee are the neighbourhood associations (*unions de quartier*), social-cultural services, joint owners, tenants, parents of pupils, entrepreneurs, youth associations and sport associations. An important function of the committee is that of providing information, and discussing and formulating recommendations on projects that relate to the city as a whole or to the agglomeration and that have consequences for the neighbourhoods. The committee gathers at least twice a year; an office is provided by the city government to guarantee follow-up between two consecutive meetings. Experience indicates that the committee fulfils at least an important information function. Citizens and associations express their need for clarification on urban issues and projects.

In addition to this territorially defined initiative, two consultative committees at the city level have been established to deal with issues and interests that concern specific categories of the population. There is one consultative committee of foreign inhabitants (non EU-members), and one of elderly people.

A major initiative was the establishment in January 1999 of a consultative committee for participative democracy (*Conseil de la Democratie participative*). In this committee, city councillors, aldermen, civil servants and representatives of associations meet to define proper ways and methods to involve citizens in the major urban projects of the city government. The committee is, so to speak, 'a platform of

deliberation about deliberation' (*concertation sur la concertation*). The associations are informed about the major urban projects that are undertaken by the city government. For each specific project, the city government and associations discuss how citizen participation should be organized, for example, which territorial levels should be involved: that of the neighbourhood, district, city or the agglomeration. Furthermore, the municipality has to specify whether it aims at providing information and/or consultation only, or also at *concertation*, the latter which means that there is interaction and dialogue about problems and possible solutions. Examples of projects and themes that have been discussed are the 'Local Contract on Education', the re-design of an important square and the prevention of crime.

The committee has also an important internal function: it has to be a platform where public officials working in the territorial context of neighbourhoods and districts as well as people working along thematic lines (at the urban level) can meet and attune their work. This attunement function also bears on the associations, because the committee is a meeting place for both 'thematic associations' and neighbourhood associations.

The plenary committee meets twice a year. For complex projects that ask for an intense form of *concertation* special working groups can be formed.

8. Conclusions

In the case of Grenoble we see a city government that tries to adapt the infrastructure of citizen participation to the conditions of modern urban life. In this process of restructuring local government-citizens relations, the problem and strategies for solving it are formulated by the city government. In a sense, the problem definition is of a technical-administrative nature, but it is based on an assessment of the changing social conditions in Grenoble and the political willingness of the ruling majority to provide institutional opportunities for citizen participation. The associations, the main partners of the municipality, had to be convinced of the necessity for change. Together, and this might be a typical 'French' characteristic, the experiments bear the stamp of a more or less rational design. At least three design parameters are combined:

- different territorial levels: neighbourhood, district, city and agglomeration
- territorial versus functional categories
- deliberation about substantive issues and deliberation about ways and methods of deliberation about substantive issues

The experiments in Grenoble are taking place against the background of a continuation of the decentralisation policies of the French central government. As we noted earlier, according to some authors these policies have not yet led to enhanced participation. The case of Grenoble suggests, however, that also within French local government there are developments towards a kind of 'hybrid democracy', in which the representative political democracy is complemented by some direct democratic procedures. Whether Grenoble is an exception, a forerunner or a typical example of initiatives in other French cities has yet to be established.

The authors want to thank Marianne Vorthoren and Romain Goetschy for their assistance.