

## Tilburg University

### Examining citizens participation from a citizen's perspective

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*Publication date:*  
2009

*Document Version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
de Graaf, L. J., & Michels, A. M. B. (2009). *Examining citizens participation from a citizen's perspective*. Tilburgse School voor Politiek en Bestuur (TSPB).

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# **Examining citizen participation and democracy from a citizens' perspective**

**Paper for the panel**

**Interactive Governance and Deliberative Democracy**

**(Conference section on Interactive Governance and Policymaking)**

**ECPR General Conference 10-12 September 2009, Potsdam, Germany**

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## **Keywords**

Citizen participation, local democracy, participatory policy making, neighbourhood

## **Abstract**

Citizen participation is usually seen as a vital aspect of democracy. Many theorists claim that citizen participation has positive effects on the quality of democracy. This article examines the probability of these claims for local participatory policy making projects in two municipalities in the Netherlands. The findings show that the role of citizens in these projects is limited, serving mainly to provide information, on the basis of which the government then makes decisions. Nevertheless, the article argues that citizen involvement has a number of positive effects on democracy: it helps people take more interest in public matters, increases their understanding of decision-making processes, encourages people to listen to a diversity of opinions, and contributes to a higher degree of legitimacy of decisions. One negative effect is that not all relevant groups and interests are represented. The article concludes that for a healthy democracy at the local level, it is more important that citizens have the opportunity to discuss neighbourhood issues and problems and to make suggestions for solutions, than to have a direct say in decision-making.

## **Introduction**

Over the past decades, citizens in most West European countries have gained influence in policy making. Many countries have gained experience with collaborative governance, citizens' advisory committees, and participatory budgeting (Cain a.o., 2006). From a democratic perspective, citizen participation is considered a valuable element of democratic citizenship and democratic decision-making. Participatory and deliberative democrats, in particular, argue that citizen participation has positive effects on the quality of democracy. But how true are these claims for local participatory policy making projects?

The aim of this article is twofold. First, we seek to gain a better understanding of the role of citizens vis-à-vis government in local participatory policy making. Does citizen participation in policy making imply a new division of roles and power between citizens and politicians? Currently, we know very little about the actual role of citizens in participatory policy making processes (Forester, 1999). Many studies on participatory policy making take an administrative and management perspective and focus on how to improve or design the management of these type of processes (Lowndes & Sullivan 2004; Edelenbos, 2000; Kickert a.o., 1997). Other, more descriptive studies, put emphasis on the beliefs and role of politicians and administrators (Nyholm & Haveri, 2009; De Vries, 2008). The present article aims to provide some empirical insights into the relation between citizens and governments from a citizens' perspective. It does so by presenting the findings of two case studies of municipalities in the Netherlands.

Secondly, this article is an attempt to assess the contribution of citizen involvement in policy making to democracy. Does citizen involvement have positive effects on democracy? One of the key objectives of participation is to create a healthier and more active democracy (Barnes, 1999: 67). In order to evaluate the impact of citizen participation on democracy for the two municipalities studied, we developed a framework for studying the relation between citizen participation and democracy. In contrast to other studies where the focus is on various aspects of democracy, such as for example, on the deliberative democratic character of participation (see: Hendriks, 2007; Gastil & Levine,

2005; Barnes, 1999), our framework contains elements from different theories on citizen participation and democracy.

The article starts out by discussing the theoretical claim that citizen participation in policy making has positive effects on democracy. Different arguments are presented, deriving from different theoretical perspectives. This section concludes with a framework for analysing the relation between citizen participation and democracy. The second section presents the two cases and the concept of participatory policy making as this took form in the Netherlands. The third section subsequently examines the role of citizens in policy making and the division of roles between citizens and politicians in participatory processes in the two cities, after which, in the fourth section, our framework is used to analyse the implications of participatory policy making for democratic citizenship and democratic decision-making. The article concludes with some reflections on the meaning of the major findings for the debate on local democracy.

### **Citizen participation and democracy**

The development of complex mass societies in the twentieth century made direct citizen rule an unrealistic option. Western democracies, therefore, became representative democracies in which the elected representatives decide. Representative democracy has also been defended by many political theorists as the most realistic option for modern democracies. According to Schumpeter, democracy is a 'method', and its most essential feature is the competition for leadership. The role of the people is merely to produce a government (Schumpeter, 1976: 269). This view is shared by Sartori, who feared that massive participation of the people could even lead to totalitarianism (Sartori, 1987). And, although the democratic ideal of populist democracy is clearly present in Dahls *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (1956), Dahl also argues that we need to be realistic, which means that the best we can do is to try to realize a set of conditions that would be necessary and sufficient for maximizing democracy in the real world (Dahl, 1956: 51). In his view, elections are essential to maximizing democracy. On the other hand, social choice theorists have shown that it is impossible to define the will of the majority (Riker,

1982; Rae & Daudt, 1976; Ostrogorski, 1964). As voters vote for party programmes containing opinions on all types of issues, elections rarely reveal the preferences of the voters on specific issues.

Representative democracy is also being questioned. Complex decision-making structures, in which many actors interact, and the decline of the representation function of political parties foster the discussion of the legitimacy of democracy and have raised demands for additional forms of citizen participation (Cain a.o., 2006). Theoretically, the role of citizen participation to democracy is discussed by participatory and deliberative democrats in particular.

Participatory democrats have argued that delegation of decision-making power leads to citizens' alienation from politics. They regard citizen participation as vital to democracy. The roots of this view go back to Rousseau, whose view that the participation of each citizen in political decision-making is vitally important to the functioning of the state, laid the foundation for theories on participatory democracy. Modern theorists on participatory democracy do not want to limit participation to political decision-making, but stress that participation should encompass such areas as the workplace and local communities as well (Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984). Barber argues that an excess of liberalism has undermined our democratic institutions and brought about cynicism about voting and alienation among citizens. He calls democracy in the United States a 'thin' democracy, because large groups of citizens never vote, while those citizens who are politically active mainly participate by electing persons who then do the actual work.

Participatory democrats believe that participation has several functions in democracy. The first is the educative function: citizens may become more competent if they participate in public decision-making. As a consequence, they may also feel more responsible personally for public decisions. A second function of participatory democracy is the integrative function. Participation contributes to citizens' feeling that they belong to their community. And thirdly, participatory democracy contributes to a greater legitimacy of decisions. As Rousseau argued, participation plays an important role in producing rules that are acceptable to all.

Similar views can be found in the work on social capital by the American sociologist Robert Putnam. In his famous book *Bowling Alone* (2000), he shows in detail how

Americans have increasingly become disconnected from social structures, such as the church, cultural organisations, sports clubs, or political organisations. Putnam considers participating in social networks and voluntary organisations important to life satisfaction and, more importantly in this context, to democracy (Putnam, 2000: 338-340). Citizen engagement in social networks allows individuals to express their interests and demands on government. It makes their individual and otherwise quiet voices heard. Networks of civic engagement also make citizens more competent. Those voluntary associations are schools for democracy where civic skills and civic duties are learned. Participants learn how to debate public issues and how to speak in public or to run a meeting. And, they become acquainted with civic virtues, such as active participation in public life, trustworthiness, and reciprocity (giving and taking).

In addition to these arguments, deliberative democrats argue that the essence of democratic legitimacy is the capacity of those affected by a collective decision to deliberate in the production of that decision (Dryzek & List, 2003). According to theories of deliberative democracy, deliberation rather than voting should be regarded as the central mechanism for political decision-making (see for example: Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Fishkin & Laslett, 2002; Elster, 1998). Deliberation involves discussion and the exchange of arguments in which individuals justify their opinions and show themselves willing to change their preferences. Participants discuss problems and the proposed solutions to these problems. A deliberative process assumes free public reasoning, equality, inclusion of different interests, and mutual respect. Deliberative democrats believe that deliberation yields rational collective outcomes. Moreover, as each individual has an equal voice and the opportunity to persuade other participants, deliberation also allows minority and individual voices to be heard.

To sum up, theories of participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, and social capital assert that citizen involvement has positive effects on democracy: it contributes to the inclusion of individual citizens in the policy process, it encourages civic skills and civic duties, it leads to rational decisions based on public reasoning, and it increases the legitimacy of the process and the outcome. These aspects are summarized in table 1.

**Table 1:** Aspects of citizen participation and democracy: a framework for analysis

Inclusion	Inclusion of all; Representation of relevant groups and interests
Civic skills and virtues	Civic skills (debating public issues, speaking in public, running a meeting) and civic virtues (public engagement, responsibility; connectedness)
Deliberation	Rational decisions based on public reasoning
Legitimacy	Legitimacy of process and outcome

### **Two Dutch cases: the cities of Eindhoven and Groningen**

The Netherlands has broad experience with various forms of participatory policy making at the local level (Denters & Klok, 2005:79-82, De Vries, 2008; Michels, 2006).

Participatory projects often focus on the development of city centres, the revitalization of old neighbourhoods, and the construction of public works. Participatory policy making operates under the premise that citizens and other stakeholders take an active role in the policy process at an early stage. Although Denters (2005) argues that, where participation is concerned, citizens should not merely be ‘followers’, but also initiators, in most cases it is the local government that takes the initiative and leads the process.

Local governments may have various motives for introducing participatory policy making. The main argument is that involving stakeholders and (groups of) citizens at an early stage of the policy process rather than consulting them immediately before the implementation phase, can create a broader support for policy decisions and, therefore, make government policy more effective and legitimate (De Graaf, 2007). However, other arguments are also heard. Engaging citizens in policy making allows governments to tap into wider sources of information, perspectives and potential solutions, and improves the quality of the decisions reached. It also contributes to building public trust in government, raising the quality of democracy and strengthening civic capacity (OECD, 2001:11). In short, participatory policy making is expected to increase democratic legitimacy, narrow the gap between citizens and government, enlarge the problem-

solving capacity, increase the support for policy, and improve the quality of policy (Edelenbos, 2000).

In order to examine the role of citizens in participatory policy making and to assess the contribution of citizen involvement to democracy, we present the results of two case studies in the Dutch municipalities of Eindhoven and Groningen. These cases were selected as in both municipalities an extensive programme has been set up by the local authorities to promote citizen involvement. A second reason is that the cases represent two different forms of participatory policy making, which fits the explorative character of this study: in Eindhoven, policy decisions are prepared via a process of collaborative governance, and in Groningen, citizens and other stakeholders are involved through participatory budgeting.

The city of Eindhoven has 210,000 residents and is situated in the south of The Netherlands. It is the country's fifth largest city and is commonly known as 'the Brainport', due to the presence of the prestigious Technical University, Royal Philips Electronics, and its various partnerships with regional cities and companies. Eindhoven was the (Netherlands) Design Capital of 2006, and the Eindhoven region promotes itself as the most innovative region of The Netherlands.

Since its inauguration in 2006, Eindhoven's current city council has made participation through participatory policy making a high priority (Gemeente Eindhoven, 2008a). Since 2006, the local government of Eindhoven has initiated 38 interactive projects of policy making in which citizens, social organisations, and entrepreneurs have been involved. These projects vary from the revitalization of neighbourhoods and the reconstruction of a square or shopping centre, to projects that are aimed at improving neighbourhood community safety and quality of life.

With 180,000 inhabitants, the city of Groningen is the eighth city in the Netherlands. Situated in the north of the country, Groningen is a typical university city with a large population of students; half of the population is under 35. For this reason, Groningen also likes to call itself the 'City of Talent'.

In 2006, the municipality of Groningen decided to give citizens a greater say in local affairs by allocating a budget directly to neighbourhood residents and local organisations who had formulated concrete proposals for improving their particular neighbourhood.



The Groningen approach is founded on a report by the *Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid* (2005), a governmental advisory body, which recommended that the needs, wishes and expertise of citizens be taken as the starting point of policy making.

In Eindhoven, the experiences of the main participants of all 38 participatory projects were examined and presented in a report in Dutch for the municipality of Eindhoven (Bodd & De Graaf, 2007; see also Michels & De Graaf, 2009). The data comprised documents and plans produced by the municipality of Eindhoven, professional organisations and citizens' organisations, an internet survey among 272 participants of various participatory projects, and eight in-depth interviews. The internet survey, consisting of 36 questions, asked for the participants' own experiences with participatory projects in Eindhoven as well as for the experiences with other participants. The response to the survey was 49 per cent (N=133). The in-depth interviews enabled an even more complete picture to be gained of the story behind the quantitative data.

The study in Groningen focused on the experiences with participatory policy making through the allocation of neighbourhood budgets. The first results were presented in a report for the municipality of Groningen (Wijdeveen & De Graaf, 2008; see also Michels & De Graaf, 2009). Relevant (web)documents were analyzed and 10 in-depth interviews were carried out with key figures representing the major participants (citizens, civil servants, social workers and representatives from housing associations). The main findings were then discussed in an expert panel of fifty residents and professionals who had been active in one or more projects.

## **Citizens and their role in participatory policy making**

### *Eindhoven*

In the 2006 government programme on citizen involvement, the city of Eindhoven gave priority to participatory policy making projects in seven neighbourhoods, varying from the reconstruction of a square or shopping centre to projects aimed at improving neighbourhood community safety and quality of life. Citizens, often organized in residents' associations, were involved, as were various professional organisations, such

as housing associations and welfare services, and (organisations of) entrepreneurs and civil servants. A major aim of the various projects was not only to solve particular problems in a specific neighbourhood, but also to boost participation to a higher level (Gemeente Eindhoven, 2006b).

Although participation of citizens has a high priority, in daily practice the role of individual citizens is limited to considering policy problems and intended policy decisions. One of the instruments used for this purpose is the so-called *digipanel*: a citizens' panel on the internet, which allows a permanent group of citizens to be regularly consulted on different policy issues ([www.dse.nl](http://www.dse.nl)). This panel consists of 3,200 potential participants, and reflects the composition of the Eindhoven population. In addition, citizens and their organisations participate in the various projects. For most citizens, the main reason to take part was to defend their own interests or the interests of those whom they represent. Citizens further consider it one of their primary tasks to provide information and to make suggestions to local government and to the other participants. Some participants have expressed scepticism about the contribution of citizens to the process. A majority of the entrepreneurs (73.6 per cent) believe that citizens lack the necessary knowledge to participate, and civil servants are highly critical about the value of the information and suggestions provided.

Whereas citizens see themselves mainly as providers of information and ideas, the professional organisations (housing associations, welfare services, but also the police) and the entrepreneurs participating in the various projects see themselves as co-producers of policy making (Bodd & De Graaf, 2007:11). Compared to citizens, they work together more actively with the local government in finding solutions to policy problems in neighbourhoods. It is further interesting to see that local politicians, i.e. aldermen and councillors, barely become involved in the projects. While ultimately they make the decisions, it is unclear to many participants how the local authorities use the input of the participants.

According to the interviewees, the major actors in the policy making process are the civil servants; they take the main decisions. They are responsible for coordinating the planning and for deciding which project plans are to be implemented, and how.

Participants also complain about the contribution of civil servants: project follow up is often delayed due to changes in staff or to unclear arrangements between departments.

### *Groningen*

In order to implement the policy change through which neighbourhood budgets could be instituted, the city of Groningen entered into an agreement with five housing associations in Groningen. The main aim of this so-called 'New Local Accord' (*Nieuw Lokaal Akkoord*) was to instil the principle of self government at the neighbourhood level, based on the idea that citizens and professional workers have the knowledge, the experience, and the skills to handle problems and to improve the quality of life and the safety in their own specific neighbourhood (Gemeente Groningen, 2008). The municipality and the housing associations decided to allocate an extra twenty million Euros over four years to fourteen neighbourhoods in the form of neighbourhood budgets. Every neighbourhood boasts a community team that is responsible for developing plans, together with citizens, on how to spend the budget. Although the composition of these community teams varies, housing associations, civil servants and social workers are always represented. In addition, juvenile and senior citizens' services, the police, schools and residents are also represented in many community teams. Their job is to collect the ideas provided by residents and subsequently to decide on the allocation of the budget.

As a consequence of this design, both the decision-making power and the resources are in the hands of the community teams. However, the local authorities set the terms within which the community teams may formulate their plans, the most important of which being that community teams are expected to give priority to projects according an active role to citizens in their neighbourhood. Moreover, each community team is accountable to the city council with respect to the allocation of the budget.

How, exactly, citizens are involved in the decision-making process is up to the community teams. In six neighbourhoods, individual citizens participate in the community teams, although it is worth noting that citizens have indicated that they often feel insecure about their role. Furthermore, every community team is explicitly tasked with gathering input via consultations with citizens for decisions on how to spend the budget. Some teams have regular consultations with residents, organisations, and

politicians. Other teams make regular visits to the neighbourhood in order to meet citizens and hear their needs and wishes.

According to the interviewees, representatives of the housing associations and the social workers are the major actors in making decisions on neighbourhood plans, for a number of reasons. First of all, community teams consist mainly of representatives from professional organisations. Secondly, many projects still are in the developmental phase, and, it is generally felt by both citizens and other participants, that citizens tend to lack the overall knowledge and expertise required to assess the usefulness and feasibility of the projects.

To conclude, neither in Eindhoven, nor in Groningen has citizen participation in policy making led to a fundamental new division of roles between citizens and politicians. Politicians consult citizens. The role of citizens is mainly to provide information and ideas. Other actors are more important in the policy making process itself. In Eindhoven, social organisations and entrepreneurs act as partners of government, or in terms of Arnstein's participation ladder (1969), as partnerships of policy making. But the decisive actors in the policy making process are the civil servants. In Groningen, community teams play an important role in budgetary decision-making. However, individual citizens play only a minor role. Community teams consist mainly of representatives from professional organisations, with citizens playing, just as in Eindhoven, mainly a consultative role.

### **Implications for democracy**

Different as the approach to citizen involvement is in Eindhoven and Groningen, in both municipalities, citizen participation is considered an important aspect of policy making at the neighbourhood level. But as we have seen, in actual policy making, civil servants and professional organisations, rather than citizens, play a vital role. Hence whether or not citizen participation contributes to democratic citizenship and democratic decision-making remains questionable. Earlier, we defined a number of aspects of citizen

participation and democracy: citizen participation was said to promote the inclusion of individual citizens in the policy process, civic skills and civic duties, to bolster rational decisions based on public reasoning, and to enhance the legitimacy of the process and the outcome. These aspects are discussed below for the two cases referred to in the above. Both individual citizens and organized citizens in residents' organisations or other interest groups are included in the analysis.

### *Inclusion*

Inclusion refers to the openness of the forum to individual citizens and to the representation of the relevant groups or interests. Both in Eindhoven and Groningen, citizens were invited to deliver ideas. Although both municipalities took much trouble to reach many citizens and to hear a diversity of opinions (for example, community teams in Groningen visited parts of the neighbourhood and inserted notices in local newspapers inviting citizens to take part), the citizens that chose to take on an active role were, generally speaking, above the age of 50 and, for the most part, highly educated men. This is far from unique - women, ethnic minorities, young people and people with a low educational attainment are often underrepresented in these types of projects (see also: Van Stokkom, 2006; Wille, 2001).

In Eindhoven, 72 per cent of all the participants were male and 71 per cent had completed university or some other type of higher education. Participants above the age of 50 were overrepresented. Similar findings can be found for the Groningen case. Again, most of the active citizens participating in the community teams were over 55 years old, and most had been active for a long time. As one representative of a housing association in Groningen stated: 'Generally, we don't really see new faces. Often we only see professionals and people who have been involved for a long time in these processes'. Moreover, community teams seem to have difficulties coming into contact with (new) groups. As one district manager put it: 'Senior citizens, young people and people who are originally from the Dutch Antilles; these are the groups that are underrepresented and they are hard to find'. The problem with these groups is that they are not represented in any of the neighbourhood organisations.

### *Skills and virtues*

Citizens may become more competent if they participate in policy making. They may learn about policy issues and may acquire civic skills, such as debating public issues or running a meeting. By participating, citizens may also become more engaged in public affairs and thus feel more responsible.

Evidence of positive effects could be noted in both Eindhoven and Groningen. On being interviewed, citizens in Eindhoven indicated that they felt more confident about their organizational capabilities. In Groningen, citizens reported that participation had increased their understanding of decision-making processes, and taught them the skills required to deal with bureaucratic processes and procedures. Furthermore, public engagement appeared to be on the rise. Asked whether their attitude towards the municipality had changed in any way, a vast majority in Eindhoven stated that they now had a more positive view. Interviewees also indicated that they would certainly take part in similar projects in the future. In Groningen, citizens even referred to a 'new elan': Also citizens reported that they felt more responsible for their neighbourhood and more willing to address other residents on the issue of their also taking more responsibility.

### *Deliberation*

Deliberative democrats, in particular, claim that citizen participation in deliberative settings may contribute to more rational decisions based on public reasoning. Deliberation, therefore, refers to the openness to exchange and willingness to listen to each other's arguments and to shift preferences.

The findings in our study show a positive, albeit ambiguous, picture. In Eindhoven, citizens reported that they felt free to express their opinions and that they felt positive about the atmosphere. But they also indicated that the reason to participate was driven by self-interest alone, which might suggest some doubts about their willingness to shift preferences. In Groningen, citizens stressed the willingness to listen to each other in order to reach mutual understanding. However, many citizens also indicated that they felt insecure about their role and about the expectations with regard to their contribution to the process. Other citizens were more at ease because of earlier experiences in similar projects. These so-called 'professional citizens' were seen to be driven by self-interest or,

very much like other professional organisations, to be acting for a specific group which, again, raises doubts about their willingness to shift preferences. Hence, the projects partly meet the criterion of a deliberative setting, although in the design of the process this has never been a major issue.

### *Legitimacy*

Legitimacy is the extent to which participants and other key actors support the procedures and its outcomes. The general picture is that those who participated were positive about the process and the outcome. In Groningen, citizens were positive about the projects. One of the residents said that he really appreciated the chance to contribute to the realisation of plans in his own neighbourhood. On the other hand, expectations were also high, which, in time, could lead to less positive attitudes.

In Eindhoven, citizens felt that they were being taken seriously and were satisfied with the process. But they were also critical about the outcomes of the project. Although most citizens (44 per cent) were satisfied with the outcome, a large group was more critical (35 per cent), in particular about the excessively dominant role of the civil servants in defining the outcome.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

The findings in this study show that citizen participation in policy making in both cities did not lead to a new division of roles between government and citizens. The role of citizens is mainly to provide information on the basis of which government, sometimes in cooperation with other actors, can make decisions. Participatory policy making, therefore, leaves vertical government decision-making intact, while at the same time creating more space for suggestions and ideas provided by citizens.

Our study provides evidence that citizen involvement nevertheless has positive effects on certain aspects of democracy and, therefore, must be assessed as a positive contribution to Dutch representative democracy. Citizen involvement in policy making makes people feel more interested in public matters and increases their understanding of

decision-making processes. A second positive effect of participatory policy making is that it encourages people to listen to a diversity of opinions and thus promotes mutual understanding, which, however, does not automatically imply that they are also willing to shift preferences. Thirdly, it contributes to a greater legitimacy of decisions. Although citizens in Eindhoven expressed a more critical attitude towards the outcome, most citizens were satisfied with the process and the outcome. A clearly negative aspect is that not all relevant groups and interests are represented. Minority groups and young people, in particular, were conspicuously absent from active participation, making it difficult to get into touch with these groups.

In short, the results from our cases, largely support the theoretical claims that citizen participation contributes to the quality of democracy. But they also show an interesting paradox: although citizens do not play a vital role in policy making processes, citizen involvement nevertheless positively contributes to democracy. This has implications both for the academic and the administrative debate on local democracy.

The most important aspect for a healthy democracy would appear to be not to have real power and a say in decision-making, but to have opportunities to meet other people in the neighbourhood, to discuss neighbourhood issues and problems, and to make suggestions for solutions. The interviewed citizens in our study emphasize positive effects on democratic citizenship and democratic decision-making.

However, in a sense participatory projects are also vulnerable. A major issue that remains to be dealt with is how to involve citizens from groups that are underrepresented and as such, difficult to get into touch with. The consequence of the exclusion of certain groups is that some quiet voices are never heard, which may eventually contribute to less public trust in government and a diminishing quality of democracy. A second issue refers to expectations. Most citizens take part in participatory policy making projects with enthusiasm, buoyed by the feeling that they can contribute to improvement in their neighbourhood. A common pitfall is the disappointment that can ensue, due to excessively high expectations on the part of the participants, leading to citizens giving up during the process or deciding not to take part in future projects. A continuing involvement of citizens in participatory projects requires governments to be crystal clear



about the contribution expected from citizens and how the input provided by citizens will be used.

Hence, citizen involvement in participatory projects has many potential positive effects on democracy, but requires special attention to be paid to the inclusion of all groups of citizens and to the management of their expectations.

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