

## Participation arrangements in Ghent

### “Searching for the underlying stories: a dynamic approach”

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#### Introduction

There are two dominant but seemingly contradictory narratives about the reasons for the functioning of local participation arrangements. With participation arrangement we refer to the tools and trajectories initiated and implemented by local government in order to organize citizen participation. Both these stories can be heard in town halls, city councils, the media and academia when evaluating the local efforts for stimulating citizen's participation. On the one hand, we have the traditional perspective focusing on the link between psychological characteristics and participation on the one side and on the other side on the barriers to participation (Hooghe 1999; Verba, Scholzman & Brady 1995). On the other hand we have the studies that examine participation arrangements from a sociological point of view: they point out that institutions have an impact on the participation arrangements (see for example Lowndes et al. 2001, 2006).

What is interesting in the relation to these narratives is that one does not exclude the other. The second trend does not reject the relevance of personal characteristics but criticizes the traditional studies for their too individualistic character and emphasizes that the participation of individuals cannot be seen separately of the social and institutional context in which it takes place. Another interesting fact is that most studies on the success and failure of participation trajectories and tools focus or on the psychological characteristics or on the institutional surrounding. However, in how far are these two stories compatible at the Flemish local level? If not, which one is more correct? Probably the reality lies between the two poles. We develop an answer to these questions by means

of an extensive literature review and a longitudinal case analysis of the participation arrangements in Ghent. Most researches on participation have a rather static view. The impact of variables on one instrument is researched at a certain point in time. However, participation arrangements evolve over time and a dynamic approach is more fitting. The aim of our research is to conduct a longitudinal analysis, with attention to the changes of influencing variables on participation arrangements over time.

This paper begins by reviewing the international literature on local participation. The aim of this exploratory research is to detect a number of underlying individual and sociological variables that influence the participation arrangements. Next, the historical case study of the participation arrangement in city-region Ghent is presented. This case study is brought in to develop our understanding of what factors play a role in participation arrangements over time in practice. Furthermore, we discern which types of participation arrangements have taken place at the local level. Finally we bring the findings from the literature research and the case analysis together to get a clearer view on what kind of ‘story’ is dominant in participation arrangements in Flemish cities over time.

## **Two stories in one participation arrangement**

Before starting our literature analysis, we first want to conceptualize the dependent and independent variables: personal characteristics; institutions and the functioning of participation arrangements.

### ***Conceptual clarifications***

With psychological characteristics we refer to the ‘individual qualities of a person’. Whereas resources and individual characteristics like gender and age are not factors that can be changed with any great ease at the local level, the institutional determinants of participation are more malleable (Lowndes 2001, 2006). For our purposes, institutions are not the same as organizations. Instead institutions are

understood as the ‘rules of the game’. Institutions are stable, valued and recurring patterns of behaviour (Huntington, 1968). We can identify local government ‘rules’ that are consciously designed and clearly specified. We can also recognize the importance of rules that take the form of unwritten customs and codes (Lowndes 2006).

Furthermore, the dependent variable in this research is ‘the dynamics of participation arrangements’. When researching local participation most studies focus on political participation as a joint concept covering activities like voting, nomination, representation in the public. Judging from a number of key sources within the field, this also appears to be the most common view. However, others argue that confining ‘political participation’ within these limits excludes a wide variety of activities that certainly must be seen as political participation. We want to hold on a broad view during our explorative case analysis. As a consequence we define participation arrangements as all the tools and trajectories which aim is to influence local government’s policy and that are initiated and implemented by local government in order to organize citizen participation. A longitudinal analysis of the impact of individual and institutional variables on participation arrangements is conducted.

### *Literature review*

Twelve recent, empirical studies on local participation from four countries (The Netherlands, the UK, the US and France) have been selected and analysed. Special attention was drawn on the variables that were possibly affecting the local participation arrangements.

### *Individual factors*

There are considerable differences in the use of participation arrangements among several categories of citizens. Most of the times the participators are male, middle aged, educated and they have a rather high income (Denters 2005, Pröpper & Steenbeek 2006, Wang 2001). Citizens with memberships in (voluntary) associations are eager to participate than people who have no further engagements in societal organizations

(Lowndes et. al. 2001). Further on, the research of Denters (2005) shows that the turnout of immigrants at the election of the municipality council is lower than the turnout of the non-immigrants. Third, competencies play a role for active citizenship. Competencies are social skills, the capacity to listen and to express yourself, your ideas and feeling, self-knowledge, being able to assess different situations, handle uncertainties, being able to understand another person but knowing your own limits (Van Gunsteren 1992, Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Fourth, if citizens feel and know that their participation matters or has an impact, they will be eager to get engaged (Pröpper & Steenbeek 2006; Wagenaar 2005). People are also unlikely to get involved in politics if they believe that their participation would probably be ineffectual (Markus 2001). Fifth, if people have a negative view on the local government and its elected members, they are not willing to participate. Sixth, Markus (2001) points out that ‘attitudes matter’ – especially trust in other people. People who trust others, get quicker engaged in participation arrangements. Finally, it appears that self-interest can be satisfied, at least in part, by the intangible benefits of participation – new skills and knowledge, greater self-respect or stronger community identity- and does not require that citizens ‘succeed’ in protecting their individual material interests (Markus 2001).

### *Institutional factors*

Based on the literature analysis, we found out that in the context of local government, three sets of institutional (f)actors have a key influencing role: political parties, because they run much of what happens in local politics and public officials, because they are responsible for the daily delivery of a number of public services. Also the local civic infrastructure, the network of public and voluntary associations in a community, plays a role because they have the capacity to stimulate the available social capital in a locality.

A number of political factors play a role. First of all the change of coalitions may stimulate the set up of participation arrangements. If the political life in a local entity is ‘stable’ then this stability is an impediment for change. In this climate there is little incentive for politicians to develop more open or engaged forms of political participation.

In the contrast, if the politics has been characterized by episodic shifts of control within the party of between the (opposing) parties, then there are incentives to actively seek support within wider community (Lowndes et al. 2006). Second, an open style of politics vis-à-vis participation is important for the success of the participation process (Lowndes et al. 2006, Copus 2007). Third, the existence of an ‘interesting agenda for participation’ is also an important variable. If there is a theme whereon the local politician can ‘score’, he will be eager to set up a participation initiative (Wang 2001).

The variables on public administration are the day-to-day behavior of the local public officials (culture), the personal attitudes vis-à-vis the citizens, the existence of formal structure for participation, the size of government and the availability of resources for the local government (time & money). First of all, the day-to-day behavior of local public officials makes can be stimulating or hindering participation arrangements. Although the rhetoric on public participation seems be the same in all local entities (Verhelst 2009), the day-to-day behavior of public officials appears to differ greatly (Pröpper & Steenbeek 1999, Lowndes 2006). Second, the residents of cities with formal structures for involving citizens in governance have small but significantly higher probabilities of participation across a number of political activities than do people who live in cities without them (Wang 2001, Pröpper & Steenbeek 2006). Third, the size of government influences participation arrangements. Larger governments have more participants in their participation arrangements. This result is subject to different explanations. First, it may indicate that the public tends to participate more in large governments because citizens fear losing personal contact or being alienated by the complexity of bureaucratic operations. Or, it could indicate that large governments have more resources and capacities to organize participation trajectories for their citizens. Linked to this previous point, Lowndes et al. (2001) found out that the budget and the time of local authorities is important in their choice for participation and types of participation arrangements

The authors stress several variables that are linked with the civic infrastructure of a local entity: the presence of organisations, the presence of natural leaders in a neighborhood and the media. The presence of organizations stimulates the set up of participation

arrangements. First, they provide a vehicle for initiating and sustaining collective action. Politics is essentially a public activity, something that is conducted in the company of others. Second, organizations not only provide a vehicle through which citizens may act upon their political interests, but they provide the space and occasions within which ordinary people can discover what their political interests are in the first place, and how their interests relate to those of others around them. Third, organizations actively recruit participants. Finally, organizations build the capacity of citizens to accomplish public-oriented work effectively. A second factor is the presence of natural leaders in a neighborhood as a key factor in the functioning of participation arrangements. Civic leadership that succeeds over the long haul entails a process of motivating, facilitating, mentoring, and collaborating in productive work involving diverse groups and interests (Markus 2001). A third influencing factor is the media. Their primary responsibility is to serve as an effective and reliable communication channel between citizens and governments, one that promotes collaboration and partnership in participation arrangements.

### *Concluding*

Understanding the dynamics of participation arrangements at the local level is an important issue, especially in the light of fears about declining levels of involvement in participation arrangements. As a consequence it is important to identify the factors that are underlying to the functioning of participation arrangements. In the conducted literature analysis, we found on the one hand a number of individual factors like age, gender, ethnicity, educational level, competencies, skills... On the other hand we came to three sets of institutional factors: factors on public administration, politics and civic infrastructure. These institutional factors are more malleable in the context of a local authority. Do these factors pop up in the Flemish case? What story is dominant?

### **One city, a number of arrangements**

This section selects and discusses the case study that will enable us to identify the participation arrangements and the institutions and to see to what extent these institutions played a role in the participation processes. First, we discuss some methodological notes. Secondly, we introduce the case and identify the participation arrangements. Thirdly, we link them to the findings of the literature review mentioned in the previous part of this paper.

### ***Methodological notes***

This explorative case study is part of a doctoral study (Dezeure forthcoming) that is focusing on citizen participation in Flemish cities and the functioning of politicians and civil servants in participation arrangements. The research includes a historical analysis: different participation arrangements from 1977 onwards were reconstructed with insights on differences and similarities between the stages. The longitudinal research is conducted in 2008-2009. The case study is based on extensive document analysis and a series of in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with key actors in the participation field of Ghent (public administrators, politicians and active citizens). For the purpose of this paper, a secondary analysis of the case study data was carried out. It should be noted that this is the first explorative step in the research. In order to have a better insight in the dynamics of participation arrangements, further qualitative research is necessary.

### ***Participation arrangements in Ghent: a historical case analysis***

This case analyses the long-term evolution of participation arrangements in Ghent, a Flemish city in Belgium. Belgium's federal structure influences the way urban policy is structured. Where other countries must cope with barriers between the various policy areas coming together in the city, in Belgium urban issues are also considered at the various political levels. Belgium in fact has a political and administrative structure based on the recognition of three Communities (Dutch-speaking, French-speaking and German-speaking) and three Regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels Capital), to which the federal state has devolved wide-ranging powers. These include housing, urban planning,

urban renewal (including structural funds), economic development or environment issues for the regions, or education and culture for the communities. The federal urban policy ensures that specific urban issues are considered in various federal policy areas: fiscal, sustainable development, security, employment, social integration... Ghent is the capital and biggest city of the East Flanders province. With almost 240 000 inhabitants, Ghent is Belgium's second largest municipality.

We started the analysis in 1977<sup>1</sup> and studied the participation arrangements in six legislative periods (1977-1982, 1982-1988, 1988-1994, 1994-2000, 2000-2006, 2006- ). As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, we have a broad definition of participation arrangements: 'all the tools and trajectories which aim is to influence local government's policy and that are initiated and implemented by local government in order to organize citizen participation'. In this study, the notion of 'political participation' goes through a slight conceptual change. From a rather unequivocal notion focused on voting, joining interest groups, joining political parties and contacting a local government official towards a somewhat more complex notion that includes more vital elements of current day political and civic participation.

This definition gives us a broad range of activities, organized by the local government with the explicit aim to stimulate citizen's participation. Based on these findings, we made up a typology of participation arrangements over the years. As a consequence, our dependent variable is more operational. This categorization is still crude and a case can easily be made for including some forms within a different category. For the purposes of analysis however, it displays some important distinctions between some forms of participation arrangements. The first category of participation arrangements is 'communication'. These arrangements are set up in order to inform the citizens of Ghent on all kinds of topics, for example by establishing an information office where every citizen can come with its questions concerning the local administration. There is no

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<sup>1</sup> 1977 is the year of the fusions of municipalities in Belgium. Since then the municipality comprises the city of Ghent proper and the towns of Afsnee, Desteldonk, Drongen, Gentbrugge, Ledeborg, Mariakerke, Mendonk, Oostakker, Sint-Amandsberg, Sint-Denijs-Westrem, Sint-Kruis-Winkel, Wondelgem and Zwijnaarde.



reciprocity and real exchange. The citizen is perceived as a client that receives information. The second category is labeled ‘talking together’. These are the arrangements where politicians, public administrators, citizens and organized groups meet each other in order to discuss several local policy themes. A dialogue is set up and there is reciprocity. However, these arrangements are mostly organized by a certain department. A third category is ‘living together’. It covers all the arrangements that stimulate the social cohesion and civic participation among people. The purpose of these arrangements is mostly on improving ‘social cohesion’ and these arrangements are mostly established at the neighbourhood level as it is the closest level for the citizen. The last category is ‘city renewal’. These are the arrangements that are set up to discuss the infrastructural renewals in a certain region of the city with all the key actors. In the table there is an oversight of the evolution of participation arrangements in Ghent.

Table: Evolution of the participation arrangements in Ghent (1977-2009)

<b>Legislative period</b>	<b>Communication</b>	<b>Talking together</b>	<b>Living together</b>	<b>City renewal</b>
1977-1982 Maire De Paepe	Establishing an information office	Cultural advisory board	establishing neighbourhood centres	
1982-1988 Maire Monsaert	Establishing an information office and a press centre	Town meetings, information meetings		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Information centre on city renewal</li> <li>- Establishments of working groups (with citizens) in areas that will be renewed</li> </ul>
1988-1994 Maire Temmerman	information office and a press centre	Increasing number of town meetings and information meetings	Increasing number of neighbourhood projects with means of central funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Information centre on city renewal</li> </ul>

1994-2000 Maire Beke	Information office and press centre	Increasing number of town meetings and information meetings	- An increase of the neighbourhood projects with regional funding  -Establishment of 'Actie Samenspraak' – public administrators are responsible for participation of citizens in a certain area.	Urban renewal plans
2000-2006 Beke	Information office and press centre	-Advisory councils on sports, youth, ..  - Neighbourhood forums	-	Urban renewal projects
2004: establishment of a new entity in government: 'local area based entity'				
2006 – Maire Termont	Information office and press centre	City debate (2009)		Urban renewal projects with explicit attention for citizen participation

It is clear that over the last years the number and range of participation arrangements in Ghent has expanded greatly, offering citizens wide opportunities to take part in local affairs. During the first legislative period (1977-1982), the government was confronted with upraises of unsatisfied citizens. The government was not prepared for handling the upraises as there were no 'arrangements' to canalize the dissatisfaction. The only available arrangements were set up in order to give information and to guide the people through the local administration. During following legislative periods, a number of arrangements were set up in order to bring local governors and citizens together: advisory boards, town meetings, information meetings, working groups... In the period 1988-1994 there was an increase of number of neighbourhood arrangements. These were set up to

bring people together and to stimulate them to participate. Participation arrangements in city renewal programmes are a rather recent phenomenon.

### ***The impact of individual and institutional factors***

The sharp growth in many forms of participation arrangements over the years raises the question about the main factors stimulating the establishment and the development of participation arrangements. Based on the documentary research, we could distill three sets of individual and institutional factors that stimulate the establishment and the functioning of the participation arrangements. In the interviews, respondents are asked to identify key influencing variables.

First of all, the documentary analysis and the respondents indicate the growing financial impulses of the central government as a very important stimulator in establishing participation arrangements. Already in the '80s; the Flemish government gave funding to the cities on the condition that they established participation arrangements bringing public administrators, politicians and citizens together. The working groups in areas that are subject of change and renewal (1982-1988) are established by the impulse of the Flemish Government. Together with the cities, the Flemish urban policy is aiming for active citizenship, by introducing a dynamic approach to the city, and by encouraging the inhabitants, users and the social organizations to become involved. Citizens and users should be involved more and more effectively in the decision-making process, both in the development of the urban visions, programmes and projects and in the small and large choices and district management. In the past few years Flanders has done some catching up with regard to urban renewal. On the proposal of the Flemish urban policy, the Flemish Government is funding cities projects for innovative urban renewal projects. The urban renewal projects are being established in consultation with local inhabitants and local social partners. However, also the federal and European level have 'participation funding'. In a way, Flemish cities are subject to the pressures of the central governments to 'modernize' their arrangements. As a result of the funding, more participation arrangements are created. This has a huge impact on the local level government.

Amongst others it requires 'new' public officials getting 'new' tasks and responsibilities in the participation arrangements. The documentary analysis gives evidence for that increasing number of frontline professionals working in the participation arrangements. Much of the responsibility for engaging citizens in local decision-making falls upon public officials. Respondents stress the importance of a motivated public administrator that represents the participation arrangement. It seems that the presence of an open public administrator affected and still affects people's perception of the accessibility and responsiveness of the local authority more generally. Although 'pro-participation' management needs not go alongside an open style of politics (Lowndes 2006), it is the case in Ghent. Respondents point out that since 1994 (Maire Beke) the openness of the city government in Ghent for setting up and developing participation arrangements has been growing. Public administrators are given a lot of autonomy for organizing the participation arrangements. The government is nowadays also open for discussions with the citizens. It is rather striking that the local council seems invisible in participation arrangements. Especially local executive politicians are nowadays active when it comes to engaging themselves in participation arrangements. As a result of the efforts of administrators and politicians, consultation and engagement become more deeply embedded in the political culture of the city. This also has an impact on the organization or the structure of the local government by establishing new policy entities. In 2004 there is the establishment of area based policy ('gebiedsgerichte werking'). Since that period, Ghent is divided into 24 neighbourhoods. Several frontline officers are responsible for the communication and participation in their region and are considered as the bridge between politicians and citizens. In 2009 the city of Ghent organized an urban debate on the future of the city. The city of Ghent wanted people to dream, talk, write, make videos and drawings about the Ghent of tomorrow. All comments and ideas from individuals and organized groups are gathered to create an ambitious and creative interpretation of the city mission. This debate is a participation arrangement that focuses on the city as a whole.

Third, it is striking that about every legislative period a number of respondents point to certain key actors that are facilitating the functioning of participation arrangements. In literature these key actors are labeled as ‘local leaders’. American research suggests that perhaps the most important factor in initiating effective participation arrangements is leadership (Markus 2001). Respondents refer to the mairs Beke and Termont who are in favor of citizen participation. They also refer to the role of citizen leaders in certain neighbourhoods in Ghent. These civic leaders are mostly embedded in local organized groups (‘civic infrastructure’) and have a number of civic skills – in any case, these people are trusted. They also refer to public administrators that play a role in urban renewal.

Based on the findings of this longitudinal explorative case analysis, it is clear that the participation arrangements change over time. It is clear that a dynamic research approach is required. Over the several legislative periods, participation arrangements in Ghent seem to be very much dependent on the central funding. It is also clear that the roles that are played by the public administrators, politicians and citizens make a difference. These roles and attitudes are a mix of institutional and individual characteristics and change over time. In the further steps of research it would be interesting to concentrate on the interplay between institutional and individual characteristics in participation arrangements and to see in how far one influences the other.

### **Concluding remarks**

There are two dominant but seemingly contradictory narratives about the reasons for the dynamics of local participation arrangements. On the one hand, we have the traditional perspective focusing on the link between psychological characteristics and participation on the one side and on the other side on the barriers to participation (Hooghe 1999; Verba, Scholzman & Brady 1995). On the other hand we have the studies that examine participation arrangements from a sociological point of view: they point out that institutions have an impact on the participation arrangements (see for example Lowndes

et al. 2001, 2006). In this paper we wanted to keep a dynamic view and look in how far are these two stories compatible at the local level? If not, which one is more correct?

This paper started by reviewing the international literature on local participation. We found on the one hand a number of individual factors like age, gender, ethnicity, educational level, competencies, skills... On the other hand we came to three sets of institutional factors: factors on public administration, politics and civic infrastructure. Do these institutions pop up in the Flemish case over time? In order to answer this question we conducted a historical longitudinal analysis in the Flemish city Ghent. We started the analysis in 1977 and identified the participation arrangements in six legislative periods. On the basis of the document analysis and the interviews we came to three sets of factors that were influencing the functioning of participation arrangements.

Based on the findings of this longitudinal explorative case analysis, over the several legislative periods, participation arrangements in Ghent seem to be very much dependent on the central funding. It is also clear that the roles that are played by the public administrators, politicians and citizens make a difference. These roles and attitudes are a mix of institutional and individual characteristics and change over time. Based on this first explorative research, the truth is somewhere between the two narratives. These are still early findings that require further development. How do public administrators and politicians interact in these arrangements? In how far are the institutional factors dominant on the individual characteristics of the key actors in these arrangements? Or can we reverse this question?

Our aim is not to generalize findings from the case to a wider population of local authorities. Any investigation into 'locality' has to tread carefully regarding the potential for generalization. Each city provides a unique arena for studying the individual and institutional factors upon local participation arrangements. Our research was designed to detect a number of relevant variables that influence participation arrangements over time. However, it should be developed further. A first task is to develop further the notion of participation arrangements. We believe this broad notion reflects better the reality than

the narrow definition. Secondly, we would further build on the role typology and we would test to what degree these roles are present in the participation arrangements over time. Thirdly, it would be interesting to find out what the impact is of these individual and institutional variables on the participation arrangements over time and to what extent the participation arrangements have an impact on the (changes of) structure of the city government.

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