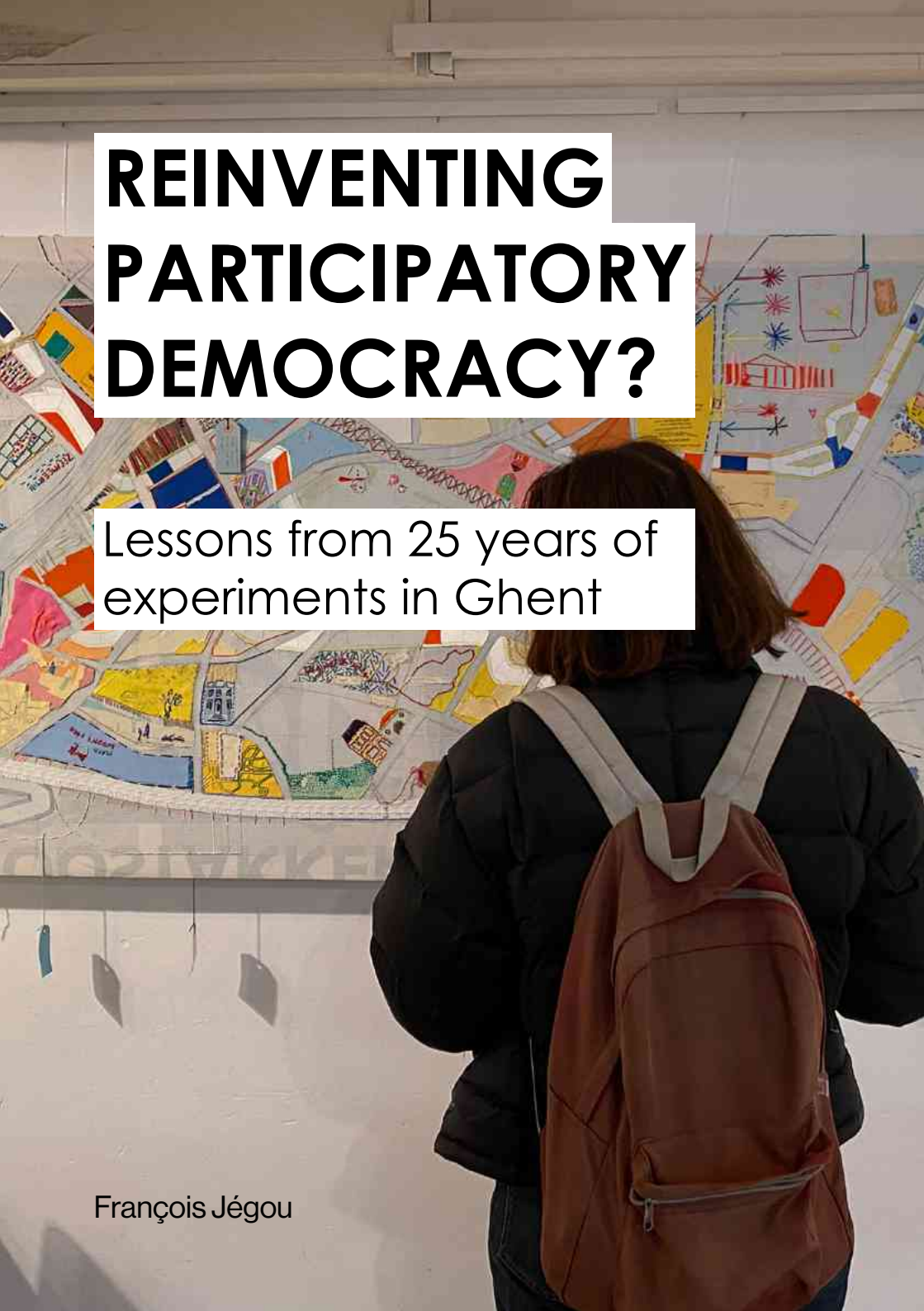

REINVENTING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY?

Lessons from 25 years of experiments in Ghent

François Jégou

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Introduction

A REFLECTION ON PRACTICES IN THE CITY OF GHENT **FOR THE DEBATE ON PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY**

Why this book ?

The city of Ghent stands out for its progressive governance and, in particular, its long experience of participation. Its numerous national and international awards1 are all based on processes of citizen participation, co-construction with departments and politicians. It is for its deeply contributory DNA, for the qualities of the co-sponsored projects that emerge from it, for its reputation as a collaborative city that it has been recognized to this day...

So, when the opportunity arose in 2023 for us to work with the city of Ghent, which was wondering how to celebrate 25 years of its Policy Participation Service the following year, to accompany it in a process that was both reflective (what have we done over the past 25 years? where are we now?...) and projective (where are we going in terms of policy participation? What areas progress do we have to cover over the next 25 years?), we felt that this was an opportunity to be seized, first and foremost by the city of Ghent, of course, but also by all other cities and territories reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of participatory democracy, to capitalize on Ghent's experience and ambition and put it up for debate!

1 - European Youth Capital 2024, European Heritage/Europa Nostra Awards 2024, Athena price on local civil participation 2024, UserCentriCities award 2023, Eurocities 'From Fark to Fork' Award 2021, UN SDG Action Award 2018, URBACT REFILL The City Action Planning Network 2017, etc.

Immersion in *policy participation*...

We co-constructed a year-long work program with the city, listened to the Policy Participation Service, in line with our user-centric principles of action, immersed ourselves in the field to listen to these disgruntled, happy or indifferent citizens, the butcher and the informal Mayor of the Gentbrugge district, the reactions to the Mobility Plan or the Participatory Budget of the residents of Zwijnaarde, the practices of the social service of the football team or the Neighborhood Managers of Nieuw Gent, Etc. We followed the pilot experiments carried out by the Policy Participation Service, shared our analyses of what we heard, and together we imagined avenues for improvement, alternative scenarios, new visions. Here are the lessons learned and, above all, the prospects...

...contributing to the debate on participatory democracy

The opportunity is all the more important in the storm of populism blowing over democracies in Europe and around the world, to explore the situation from the point of view of an advanced player in terms of participatory democracy. The motivations that triggered this year-long reflexive and projective process are based on a paradox: even as Ghent is recognized as one of the major players in terms of participation, more and more disgruntled voices were raised in 2023 to protest against the fact that they feel unheard by local government. How does one of the Rolls-Royces of participation react to the climate of widespread political mistrust? What can we learn from its experience, but, above all, how does it propose to face the future? Does it conclude that participatory democracy is empty, as many observers are tempted to think nowadays? Or does it take an open and constructive look, recognizing its shortcomings and mistakes, outlining areas for improvement, pointing to promising avenues of solution and starting to experiment with them? This is what we have tried to bring together in this book, to make it available to local players and to put it up for debate with as many people as possible...

Great achievements and huge challenges...

"In Ghent, we box above our weight class." For the director of the KAA Gent Foundation, the famous social service of the Ghent soccer team, Ghent is internationally recognized in terms of citizen participation. All the people we interviewed can testify to these skills and advances. For a city prevention and security officer, "Ghent has invested in community relations, in 'reaching out' to support people in having the courage to give their opinion on their neighborhood".

The same is true for a Gentbrugge citizen who appreciates participatory initiatives: "At first, the application form for funds for Samen aan Zet, the fund for neighborhood initiatives, was a bit complicated, as you had to describe precisely in advance everything you wanted to do with the grant... But now it's much better!" Or from the point of view of an academic like Filip de Rynck, Professor of Public Administration at Ghent University, who chaired the Chamber of Dialogue for Ghent's participatory budget: "The Policy Participation Service is very well equipped, with professionally committed people, whereas in other cities in the country, citizen participation is not organized at such a level."

So, what's worrying ?

The concerns of Ghent's Policy Participation Service could be summed up in the following formula: great achievements and immense challenges?
First of all, to make even more progress: how to connect all people, reach the most disadvantaged? How do we work with those who are dissatisfied with participation, those who don't feel heard? How can we break out of the isolation of committed citizens? Etc.

But we also need to anticipate future challenges: how can we meet all the social, environmental, ethical and economic challenges we face, and still do more with less? How do we deal with the violent criticism of the lack of consultation voiced by opponents of the new traffic plans? For one of the Policy Participation Service staff, the prospect of the challenges ahead "has made us a little uncertain, less sure...". For her colleague, after the instrumentalization of citizen participation in the legal battle over mobility plans, "we're afraid of making mistakes."

The Policy Participation Service, with its staff of around 30, is nevertheless stepping up its initiatives, such as a pilot project involving door-to-door dialogue with anthropologist Ruth Soenen. "The results are interesting, but we can't ring every doorbell in the city...", says Filip de Rynck.

Filip de Rynck recalls with hindsight: "without tension, there can be no citizen participation." This work at the frontier of participation is necessarily a work of tension between the citizens themselves, with city services and politicians, between micro and macro scales, between people's everyday lives and the long-term fabric of the city.

The Director of the Policy Participation Service concludes optimistically: "There are certainly problems, but we're still making progress!"

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SAMEN NAAR TENTO

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- COLLAGEBOEKEN -

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

WORKSHOPS MET KUNSTENAAR
KRISTOF VAN GESTEL

@CAMPUS atelier

WOE 22 NOV
WOE 29 NOV
WOE 6 DEC
→ VERHALEN MAKEN 14u TOT 16u

VRIJ 8 DEC → TEKENEN 13u TOT 15u

VRIJ 15 DEC → ZEEFDRUKKEN 13u TOT 15u

WOE 8 NOV
AFSCHEIDSFEEST
AANKOMSTTOREN
WATERSPORTBAAN
12u TOT 20u

MA 13 NOV
BORDSPEL
PUBLIEK PLAN
LANCEREN

Research questions

BETWEEN IDEAL AND REALITY: **THE CHALLENGES OF THE POLICY PARTICIPATION SERVICE**

In 1999 the city of Ghent started taking on a series of initiatives, projects, and experiments which aimed to increase citizen participation. Today, 25 years later, with all the changes faced by Ghent, all the other territories in Europe, and the world more generally, the city has launched a reflextive process on the past 25 years of participation in order to project and prepare for the decade to come.

What do we want for the future of participatory democracy?

This question frames the lens through which the various actors working for the Policy Participation Service in the city of Ghent look back at the successes but also the failures of their projects and experiments.

We had the pleasure of accompanying the city for just over a year, enriching the ongoing reflection on citizen participation with an external viewpoint, providing a diagnosis of participatory democracy in Ghent enriched with inspiring cases and possible new practices.

This is accompanied by an experimental approach that will enable new approaches and tools to be piloted.

This publication is based on these 2 parallel tracks of collective diagnosis and innovation experimentation. Its aim is both to feed back the action-research process with and for the stakeholders in the city and to share the experience, practices and perspective of Ghent with other cities recognizing similar issues and challenges across Europe.

Policy Participation...

What do we mean by policy participation, the translation of the Dutch expression *beleidsparticipatie*?

The term *policy participation* seems to cover a complex notion, meaning both *participatory democracy* (i.e. all the mechanisms which, in a democratic system, organize the involvement of citizens in the political decision-making process) and *citizen participation* (i.e. the processes of engagement of ordinary citizens, acting alone or collectively, to influence the life of their community). But unlike the expression *citizen participation*, which emphasizes the means and leaves the objective vague, the notion of policy participation emphasizes the end: participation in urban policy, rather than the means to realize it. This difference may seem like a nuance, but it could also carry more weight than we think in the current debate on the effects of participatory democracy!

Discussion of the meaning of the term *beleidsparticipatie* would require further research. As a working hypothesis for this publication, the term *policy participation* will refer to both the posture of governance and the process of engagement. Capitalized Policy Participation will refer to the specific department of the city of Ghent that carries out this process.

Research questions...

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AS A SERVICE?

OR AS A FORM OF GOVERNANCE?

Citizen participation has emerged in local governance over the last decades at the crossroads of the crisis of representative democracy, the rise of citizens' willingness to have their say in local decisions, the recognition of the efficiency of user-centered policy design, etc. Specific competences (such as organizing citizen consultations, recruiting panels of inhabitants, facilitating online participation by civic tech...) are made available by the new *Service of Policy Participation* to all the other services of the city administration.

Will citizen participation remain a specific municipal service more or less disconnected from administrative silos?

Will it become an integrated and advanced form of governance in the city, where all public policies will be citizen-based?

The primary role of citizen participation is to connect citizens with the life of the city. However, people in urban and rural territories seem to feel disconnected or unheard by local governments.

Will citizen participation, with its excessive promises of renewed governance, find it increasingly difficult to fulfil this connecting role and will disappoint a growing section of the population?

Facing more and more social, economic and environmental crises to which local government will not be able to respond, will citizens feel less and less heard?

Research questions...

FACILITATING INTEGRATED GOVERNANCE?

OR MAKING IT MORE DIFFICULT?

Citizen participation is based on the idea of bottom-up forms of governance.
Multilevel/multi-sectorial crisis assumes a systemic dimension and requires more coordination between the levels/sectors in which people experience problems (food poverty, energy crisis, global insecurity, etc.)

Will bottom-up citizen participation reveal to be a good tool to ensure synergies and coherence in city governance?

Or will a more top-down management be necessary to adress the lack of coordination in the action of the local government?

Participatory democracy assumes forms of collective dialogues around local policies, direct sharing of decisions with citizens and in general enlarging governance to include a larger number of stakeholders. On the contrary, multilevel crises, shrinking public budgets, drop of political trust, etc. are pulling towards a form of *zero-sum society* prompting the emergence of new individualism, selfishness, radicality and political loneliness rather than collectiveness.

Within this tension, will citizen participation be perceived as a way to make governance more efficient, relevant, up-to-date...?

Or on the contrary, will participation remain perceived as an extra burden for city administration? Another time-consuming practice to reach out to every citizen? A way to create more problems that a city governance can afford to deal with when it is under multiple crisis pressure...?

OR A PROCESS BLURRING GOVERNANCE?

A CLEAR GAME?

Participatory democracy intends to engage citizens in taking part in the life of their city, or at least to have their say in local policy. To do this, it tends to use incentive rhetoric and promises that everyone will be listened to...

Are these messages and approaches delivering to the population a clear project of citizen participation?

Shouldn't participation be more explicit and promise less, giving less visibility to its own process and more to its articulation as being only an ingredient in the democratic decision-making ?

A CONNECTION WITH ALL CITIZENS?

OR WITH USUAL SUSPECTS ONLY?

Citizen participation is being criticized for always involving the same usual suspects and making efforts to attract others with no clear idea of who they are and why they are not taking part.
In another sector, such as business, we know that it's much easier to reach your 'customers' than to investigate your 'non-customers'.

Who are the non-participants ? People who don't care about the issues of policy participation? Who don't know about its processes?

Then, what are the many reasons for not participating?

Should citizen participation engage in a form of *market investigation* to meet, investigate, and better understand its *potential clients?*

OR SEARCH FOR QUANTITY?

AN IDEAL OF QUALITY?

Citizen participation is working on connecting/engaging citizens to take part in the life and decisions of the city. Consequently, it is aiming at engaging more and more people in the participative processes it is organizing until an ideal where all citizens are taking part. The success of citizen participation tends then to be appreciated (and often preferentially evaluated by quantitative assessment approaches) according to the growing number of inhabitants answering to public consultations, taking part in the participatory budget or answering a local online referendum.

Is citizen participation's apparent ideal of *everybody participating* an achievable goal or a misleading utopia?

Isn't citizen participation trapping itself by giving value to quantitative assessments and accepting to be judged by the number of participants?

AN ENGAGEMENT DOABLE FOR CITIZENS?

OR A PART TIME JOB?

The intensification of participation policies intends to involve more systematic and more frequent consultations of the population. It covers all aspects of community life and local politics and offers a multitude of ways of getting involved, taking part, and contributing.

What is the ideal vision of a participative citizen: a person who is multi-involved at different levels of governance, from the micro-local to the city, region, nation or world?
Citizen participation takes time, lots of time: is this quasi-part-time job compatible with professional and family life?

Aren't the famous *always the same people*, the citizens involved in citizen participation, inevitably those who have the time (retired, inactive, those willing to sacrifice their personal time, etc.)? How can participation be offered to those who have little or no time to devote to it?

AN EFFORT TO REACH OUT?

OR A FOCUS ON ONE-SELF?

Participation policies intend to make it easy for citizens to get involved in all areas of life in their neighborhoods and towns. They aimed towards all profiles of residents, young or old, active or inactive, giving access to a wide range of areas of city life in which to get involved.

But isn't citizen participation aimed above all at those who are already participating?

Doesn't it speak mainly to those who are already convinced? What is it doing to appeal to the others?

case study

AN IMMERSION INTO POLICY PARTICIPATION IN GHENT **TENTATIVE WORK DIRECTIONS**

Organization of the discussion

According to the 25 interviews conducted but the literature analyzing the participation processes, the population of the city seems to fall into 3 main categories.

The engaged group, characterized by their active involvement in policy participation initiatives proposed by public authorities, and their constructive and inclusive contribution.

The group of dissatisfied, on the other hand, is also characterized by their active participation, but this time mobilized against public authorities as detractors or disappointed by participation initiatives.

Beyond, those 2 first groups of population who are involved in the public debate on local policies, the so-called *usual suspects* or the *always the same*, lies a third group:

The silent mass. Between these two extremes, often in the minority, lies a majority who are absent from participation. This *silent mass*, often defined as a *soft underbelly* for its lack of interest in participation initiatives, or even its apathy and followership, appears to be poorly understood by the Policy Participation Service.

This division of the population with regard to participation, seems to be shared by the people we met, and seems appropriate for organizing the lessons presented hereafter:

- The dissatisfied and the critics of policy participation
- The silent mass and the progress that can be made
- The committed and the assets for the future

For each of the 16 participatory democracy key points developed in this book, some field remarks are first introduced, systematically followed by work directions that intend to give an answer to it.

The dissatisfied and the critics of participation
The silent mass and the progress that can be made
The committed and the assets for the future

#1 The dissatisfied and the critics of participation

Understanding people who feel unheard or angry about participation

#1 The dissatisfied and the critics of participation

Who are the discontents with participation in Ghent? Or more precisely, what are the reasons for dissatisfaction among the voices that the Policy Participation Service perceives as critical of its actions? Difficult to say without an in-depth study... From this Field Visit, different profiles seem to emerge...

"I'm very angry, I take part in workshops, I say what's wrong but it doesn't change anything..."

"I'm dead-angry, I'd like to see things in a more positive light but I can't," says a resident of Zwijnaarde who is angry about the new mobility plan, which he feels threatens the tranquility of his surroundings. Here, the mechanism leading to discontent seems to be a form of disappointment in the face of the promise to listen from participation. Citizens are getting involved to make their voices heard, but the city's mobility or urban planning services would not take them into account, the decisions would have already been taken beforehand, giving the impression that the city is doing *participation washing*.

"It's very few people, always the same people who are very active on social networks..." comments another Zwijnaarde resident, who is very active in her neighborhood, notably through the Participatory Budget, which has enabled the renovation and animation of Chalaise, a small unoccupied house belonging to the city located on Prelaatsdreef. Here, the mechanism leading to discontent seems to be rather a disagreement over the values reinforced by participatory processes. A process such as the Participatory Budget is intended to be inclusive, open to multiculturalism, geared towards the most disadvantaged and, ultimately, to reinforce the political values held by the city's ruling party, but not shared by all.

Who are the voices raised against participation ?

Citizens who take part, who are disappointed that their voice is heard but not by city services, or that decisions have already been taken before the participation process is launched?

Citizens who have a conflict of values with the policy pursued by the city and who are reinforced by the actions undertaken through participation?

These 2 categories that emerged from the field visit show that those dissatisfied with participation do not form a coherent block.

PARTICIPATION WASHING

No participation rather than fake participation?

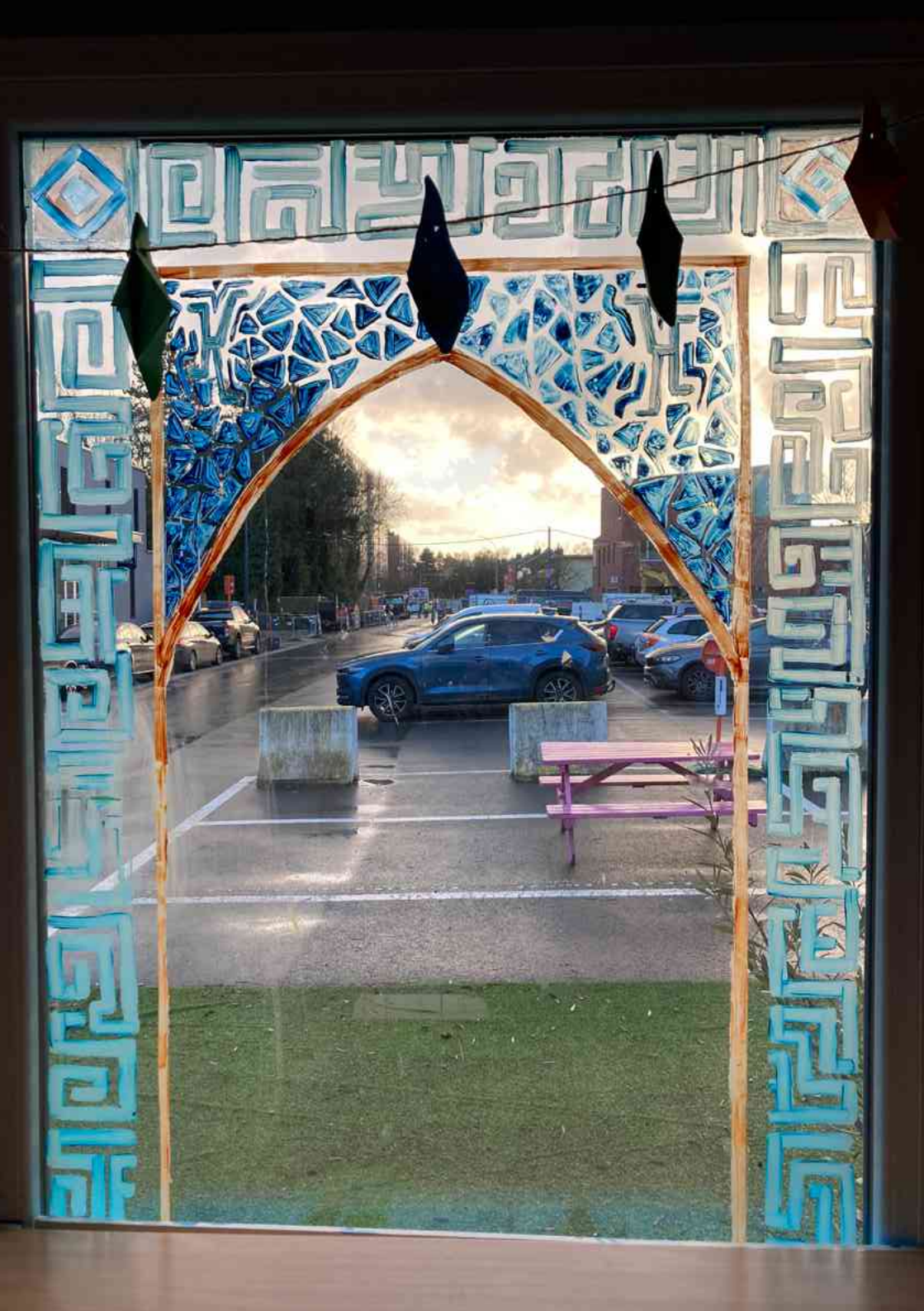
No concertation if there is no space for bending the decision?

OVERPROMISING PARTICIPATION

Careful that the promise of being listened to doesn't lead to disappointment?
Can we make it clearer that participating only means contributing?

VALUES SUPPORTED BY PARTICIPATION ARE GIVEN FOR GRANTED

Can participation include the discussion of values promoted by it ?



Better managements of expectations and promises

#1 The dissatisfied and the critics of participation

"If you're considered, you can take a 'no' from the city administration."

"People have good ideas, for example about redeveloping a small park, but it's not so simple to put them into practice: it's a long process involving public procurement processes, feasibility studies, official validation stages, etc." For a civil servant from the city's Green Spaces service, we need better *management of expectations* when it comes to participation.

In a climate of generally declining trust in the public sector, participatory democracy processes seem to suffer from a certain lack of clarity and excessive promises.

"People are asking for a sports ground. The city doesn't have the money for buildng one, but the city doesn't give the citizens any answers or state this clearly..." For a man from the city's Prevention and Safety service, this is wrong! " An alderman has to come and explain...". The participatory processes listen to the population, but sometimes seem to lack formal feedback, from an appointment made with the people consulted to give them an answer, especially when that answer is negative. "If you feel involved, comments the city's General Manager, you can accept a 'no' from the city services". In addition to sincere and transparent explanations, a form of dialogue and exchange is needed with the populations concerned so that they feel considered.

In addition to these necessary conditions for a good dialogue with citizens, there are a series of cognitive biases that make this participatory dialogue more difficult.

Participatory processes promise to listen to everyone's opinions, but being listened to doesn't mean being heard and, above all, fulfilled ... " All opinions are important; if you don't participate, your point of view won't be taken into account!" To encourage citizens to give their opinions, participatory processes emphasize the importance of taking everyone's voice into account, reinforcing the confusion with the promise that this voice will actually weigh in the decision. Sometimes, they even promote a form of bonus for those who participate: in a participatory budget, for example, only the ideas of those who contribute are likely to be realized...

To avoid this easy slippage between contributing and deciding, participatory processes must ensure that the contract they propose is well understood and accepted: listening to everyone's voice so that all are included in the great process of democratic deliberation that will follow the participatory process, a promise perhaps less enticing because each singular voice tends to be diluted in a collective negotiation...

How to ensure a better *management of expectations*

On the one hand, a participatory process is a process of dialogue in which requests are listened to, but there is also a commitment to give formal feedback, an appointment with the people consulted to explain the decision that has been taken in a sincere and transparent way, especially when it is a refusal.

On the other hand, a participatory process must ensure that the implicit contract is understood and accepted: everyone's voice will be taken into account in a collective deliberation without any commitment that their proposals will be realized and with very little chance that it will be...

CAN WE BETTER EXPLAIN THE *PARTICIPATION CONTRACT?*

Not taking part means no chance to influence decision

Contributing doesn't mean deciding

Individual voices will be integrated in a collective democratic negotiation

Feedback will be given even if negative

CAN WE ENSURE THAT THE *PARTICIPATION CONTRACT* IS WELL UNDERSTOOD AND ACCEPTED?

Differentiating participation actions according to neighborhood profiles

#1 The dissatisfied and the critics of participation

"Are participation efforts neglecting neighborhoods that are not considered a priority?"

In each district, a Neighborhood Manager liaises between residents and local elected officials. Faced with budget restrictions, the city is considering keeping Neighborhood Managers only in difficult neighborhoods. Conversely, the Policy Participation Service insists on the importance of retaining them in all neighborhoods.
Behind this negotiation lies a thorny issue of equity, which is often criticized in relation to citizen participation: do Participation Services target their actions to the whole city or just the most needy populations?

On the one hand, it seems natural that city renewal projects should focus on the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, which are often the most underprivileged areas and where people have the least power to act.

On the other hand, there is criticism of the fact that the city's actions are always focused on the same population groups, giving the impression that other neighborhoods are also neglected by efforts to involve citizens, or that the dynamics are unbalanced across the city.

Rather than a gradual distribution of participation actions along a single rich-poor axis, the actions supported by citizen participation could vary according to a more detailed analysis of profiles and needs. This means analyzing what are the needs of each area of the city and design policy participation strategies accordingly. For instance: making neighborhoods that are a bit dead more lively, improving social cohesion where there is friction between communities, undertaking participative beautification actions in areas that need it, maintaining dynamics where they exist, etc.

Citizen participation is often criticized for being almost non-existent in lower-priority areas of the city.

People complain about citizen participation policies focusing too much on the same difficult neighborhoods and benefiting only the most disadvantaged.

Participation initiatives could be differentiated according to neighborhood profile, with the aim of making the neighborhood more lively, enhancing its appearance, strengthening social cohesion or facilitating community living... They could also be structured on a scale closer to citizens (the street, the nearby sub-neighborhood, etc.).

FOCUS ON THE STREET SCALE RATHER THAN *ADMINISTRATIVE NEIGHBOURHOOD* SCALE, WHICH DOES NOT RESONATE WITH CITIZENS

DESIGN CITIZEN PARTICIPATION STRATEGIES BASED ON THE NEEDS OF EACH URBAN AREA

Revitalizing somewhat dead neighborhoods.

Improving social cohesion where there is friction between communities.

Maintaining dynamics where they already exist, etc.

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Asserting the efforts of participation

#1 The dissatisfied and the critics of participation

"It's strange to hear that nothing is organized for children in the neighborhood, given everything the city does here!"

"It's strange to hear that nothing is organized for children in the neighborhood with everything the city does here!"

Without taking this case as a generalization, this exchange noted during the Field visit deserves to be explored further: why do all the actions undertaken for children in this neighborhood not seem to be perceived by these two residents, who are otherwise very involved in local life? Is this a flaw in the participation process?

Does the Policy Participation Service suffer from too much modesty? Are participation initiatives well-received, especially by those who are far removed from them? Are the efforts in terms of manpower and budget devoted to supporting citizens' initiatives, animating neighborhood life, etc. sufficiently highlighted? Are citizens aware of the efforts made by the city through its Policy Participation Service?

Another, more delicate hypothesis: Could excessive participation initiatives inadvertently create an ever-increasing sense of expectation among participants?

Has *reaching out* from services now become the norm? Do regular participants expect these initiatives to organize things on their behalf? This raises a parallel with critiques of the Welfare State—a fundamentally virtuous system that might paradoxically risk making its beneficiaries passive?

Do participation initiatives need to go beyond a certain modesty and do more to highlight the efforts made, report on the budgets committed per neighborhood (a form of neighborhood budgeting, for example), assess the effects produced and promote them, particularly among people who are far removed from policy participation, but also among those who are *used to participation*, who take it for granted and tend to lose sight of the efforts made?

Finally, the question of the visibility of participatory actions cannot be reduced to questions of communication. It even has little to do with the effectiveness of the city's communications, which neither requires nor complements. The Policy Participation Service must seek to design its actions in such a way that they are self-explanatory, that they include a dimension that is clearly visible to the whole population - in short, that they communicate themselves without the need for communication media!

Are the benefits of participation visible enough?

Are the participation initiatives undertaken by the city to support residents' initiatives and improve life in the neighborhoods effectively perceived by the population?

In order to be more visible to those who are furthest removed from participation, who are unaware of the actions being taken, but also to those who are more accustomed to participation, who sometimes no longer see all that is being done to enable them to participate, the Policy Participation Service should perhaps be less reserved or modest in highlighting the efforts made by the city, the budgets committed, the evaluation of the effects of the actions taken, etc.

WHY DO ALL THE ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN SEEM NOT TO BE PERCEIVED ?

Does the Policy Participation Service suffer from too much modesty?

Are the efforts in terms of manpower and budget sufficiently highlighted?

DO TOO MANY PARTICIPATION INITIATIVES LEAVE BENEFICIARIES EXPECTING MORE AND MORE?

Is the intensification of city actions becoming the norm and rendering beneficiaries passive?

HOW TO DESIGN SELF-EXPLANATORY ACTIONS WITH THEIR OWN VISIBILITY?

What about participation that communicates itself without the need for communication media?

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1 oktober
29 oktober
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instagram:
od3.collectief
BD DU CHATEAU
CHEMIN DE FER
AVENUE DU CHEMIN DE FER
AVENUE DE LA PAIX
AVENUE DE LA
RUE DES 4 SAISONS
gesting?
WELKOM!
geen gesting?
nok welkom!

How to test participation in advance ?

#1 The dissatisfied and the critics of participation

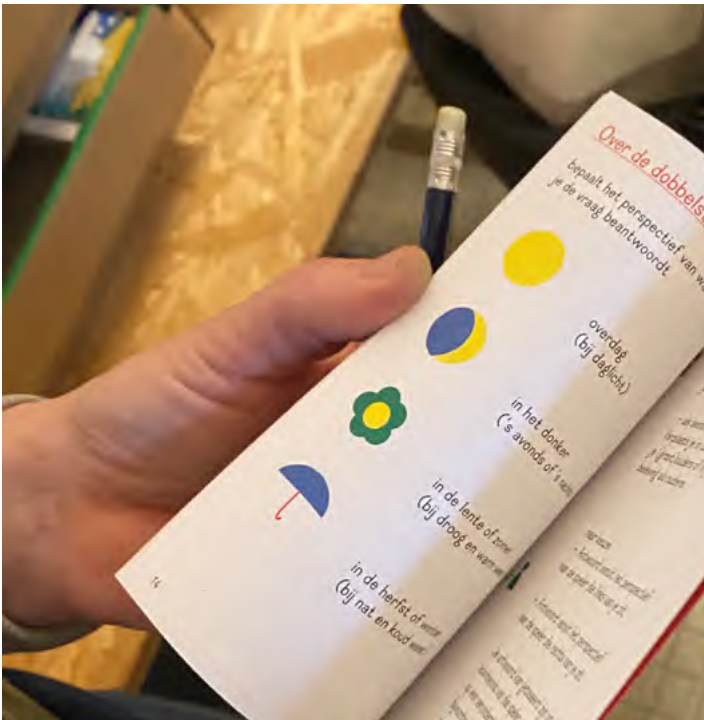
"Participation never starts early enough but citizens struggle to feel involved if we consult them too early"

In a city like Ghent, which has long been a forerunner in participation, systematic consultation of residents before major decisions are taken in the neighborhood is now the default. One of the civil servants of the Policy Participation Service, recalls a series of wooden animal sculptures installed in a city park without involving local residents: "It caused a big scandal, mostly, it seems, because people discovered them overnight than because they were against the sculptures..." The city transformed the park behind their backs!

"Participation never starts early enough but it's difficult to get citizens to take part at the beginning..," says a resident of Nieuw Gent, who is active in the district where he lives and is a critic of the participation initiatives. When participation starts too early, there is no issue at stake and it's very difficult to mobilize citizens, and when it starts after an issue has arisen, then citizens have the impression that something has started before they were consulted...

How do you start the participation process early enough, but not too early? How can we prevent too much fuss being made about a non-issue, which could turn it into a problem? How can we identify issues that are of concern to the public but which do not appear to pose a problem?

In certain cases, could participation test whether or not there is an issue for the population? If participation of people is low, perhaps it's not that there's a lack of commitment on the part of the public, but that the question posed does not (yet) represent an issue? Would such a *test* (proposing and discussing contrasting scenarios, identifying the limits of acceptability, etc.) have made it possible to detect and anticipate the explosive situation triggered by the new mobility plans? This *participation test* could consist of a form of consultation on participation itself: is it needed? If so, when and in what form? It would make it possible to assess the level of the issues at stake, to discuss whether some form of public consultation is necessary, and to deliberate collectively on what form it should take and when it should be launched. This test would make it possible to set a precedent well before an issue becomes tense, and before defusing legal procedures incriminating failures of participation...



When should citizen participation processes begin?

When should participation begin? If it starts too early, the subject may not be perceived as an issue for the population, which will be difficult to mobilize, and may even create the problem where there isn't one. If it starts too late, there's a big risk that the public will see it as a form of manipulation to pass decisions that have already been taken...

Could participation test in advance whether the city's forthcoming projects represent issues and determine collectively whether there are grounds for launching a consultation process, of what nature and when to launch it?

CHECK IN ADVANCE IF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IS NEEDED

Set a precedent well before an issue may becomes tense

Test whether or not there is an issue for the population

Detect and anticipate any possible explosive situation

Deliberate collectively on what form consultation should take and when it should be launched

Increase capacity to participate

#1 The dissatisfied and the critics of participation

" First, you have to know and understand a bit, and then you can give your opinion! "

"People don't listen, they give their opinion", says a pensioner who wanders around the Gentbrugge district happily talking to everyone. Participation processes raise the question of the capacity of citizens to deliberate. Urban development projects, social policies and transition issues are often complex. They combine multiple issues and call on technical, administrative and legal skills of which citizens are often unaware and which they do not master sufficiently to be able to discuss them.

A citizen active in the Zwijnaarde Residents' Committee gives an example: "People say that all that has to be done is install a camera to regulate traffic, but just because it's technically simple doesn't mean that it can be done without asking questions: under what conditions are we going to use a camera How are we going to buy it? Who will manage it? Etc."

Tension is increasing. Citizens have the impression that the public authorities are hiding behind procedures to impose their solutions. The departments feel that they are wasting their time talking to incompetent citizens... "It's becoming difficult to mediate, he adds. Citizens become bitter and blame the city for everything...".

Setting up deliberative processes often requires the participants to be empowered so that they can be genuine interlocutors. In this respect, this active Zwijnaarde citizen has initiated a series of citizen empowerment initiatives. Toekomst van Zwijnaarde: 6 times a year he leads meetings at which he explains the future of Zwijnaarde. He also often helps neighbors sort out planning issues. Finally, he runs a Facebook group in which he posts summaries of the main documents published by the local authority. "I try to be neutral, he comments. The group has around 1,000 followers: 2/3 are committed residents and 1/3 are journalists and politicians who tell me it's reliable and quicker than consulting the original administrative documents!"

But not all of the city's neighborhoods have someone like this active citizen who is competent, sufficiently impartial and generous with his personal time, and who takes pleasure in untangling administrative imbroglios. The Policy Participation Service should therefore ensure that citizens develop their skills before engaging them in participation, so that they are better equipped to take part in deliberative processes. This active Zwijnaarde citizen concludes: "First you have to know and understand, and then you have to give your opinion!"

Are citizens always able to participate?

Participatory consultation processes raise questions about the capacity of citizens to interact constructively on complex issues involving town planning, sustainable development, social policies, etc.

The Policy Participation Service must ensure that participants are sufficiently informed, that they have the necessary skills to interact with the city and, if necessary, that they have received a minimum level of training before launching a participation process...

IS THERE A *CAPACITY TO PARTICIPATE CHECK-UP* BEFORE ANY PARTICIPATORY PROCESS?

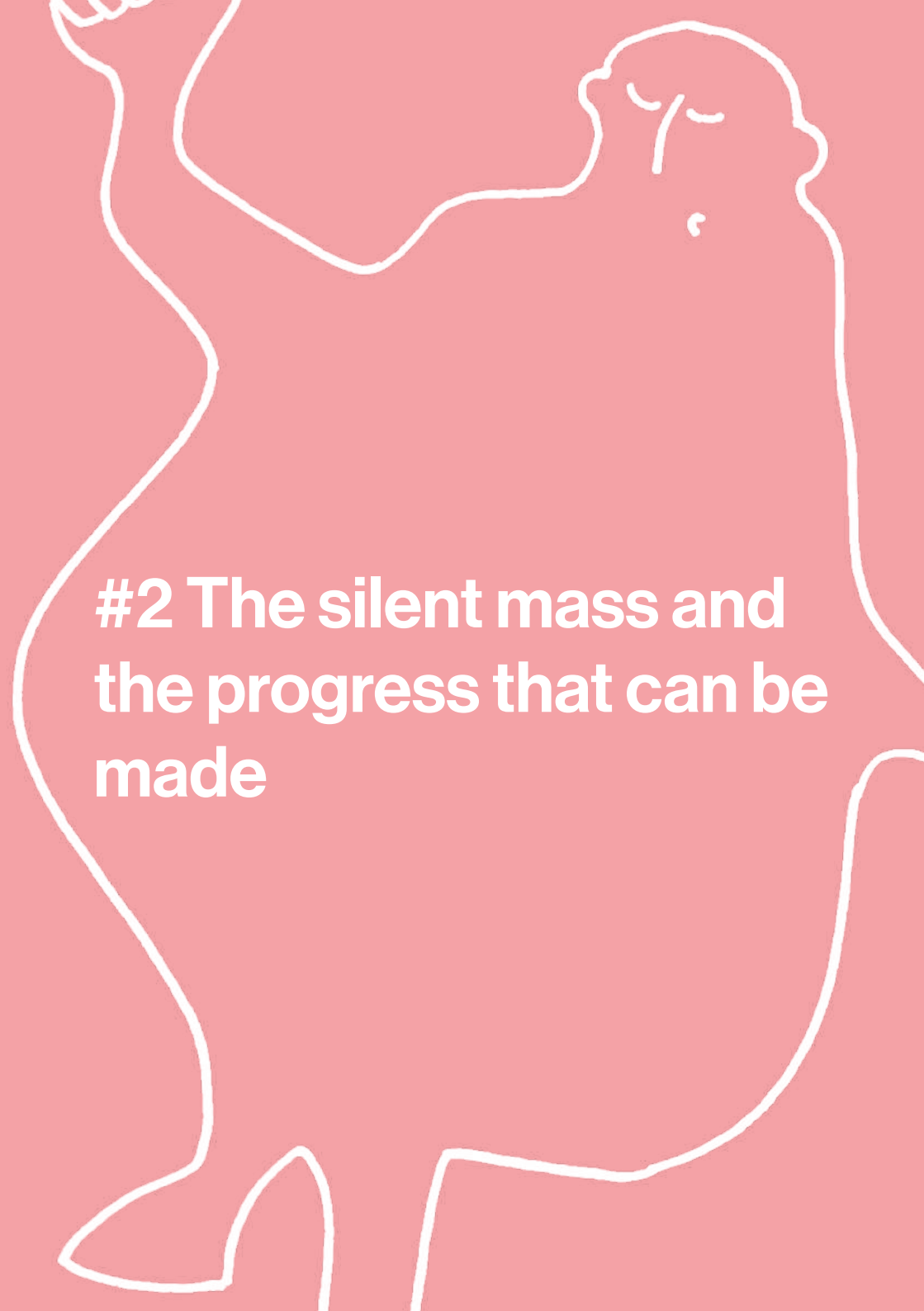
SHOULD A PROCESS BE ORGANIZED TO EMPOWER CITIZENS BEFORE INVOLVING THEM?

Are citizens sufficiently informed?

Are they comfortable with citizen participation processes?

Do they have sufficient skills to interact with city departments?

Do they need a minimum of training in technical, administrative or legal aspects?



#2 The silent mass and the progress that can be made

Objectifying the silent mass

#2 The silent mass and the progress that can be made

"Certainly, 60-70% of the city's population feels disconnected from the local government"

How can we improve the relationship between the Policy Participation Service and the *silent mass* that participates little or not at all? How can we better understand what this silent mass is asking for (and not asking for) in an attempt to get away from the feeling of having missed out on something?

And first of all, could we roughly estimate what proportion of the population of the city of Ghent is made up of people who are not involved in participation initiatives? This question came up again and again during the field visit and seemed to leave all the players we met wondering as if they hadn't asked it before. The Silent Mass is a preoccupation of the Policy Participation Service, but it seems rather vague and undefined...

An agent from the Policy Participation Service from the city objects: "To be able to make an estimate, we'd need to better define what we mean by those who are far removed from participation". One of the aims of the reflexive approach, of which the field visits are a part, is to find methods and *approaches that re-establish the connection* between citizens and the city. If the criterion is to be *connected*, what proportion of the population would then feel *disconnected* from local public authorities?

Certainly 60-70%, ventured another agent from the Policy Participation Service. Only a third of the population connected to the city's affairs - participating or protesting - seems to be a credible estimate, confirmed the other players we met.

As listed in the briefing for this reflective study, "Over the past 25 years, many interesting and successful practices, methodologies and experiments have been implemented at all levels of the participation ladder: temporary installations, digital participation platforms, neighborhood subsidies and citizen budgets, panels of neighborhood elected officials, local currencies, neighborhood programs, storytelling of citizen experiences, Neighborhood Managers, city-wide Solidarity Participation Point-relays, voluntarist participation policies, etc." How many people each initiative in this rich panorama affects - directly and indirectly - is a question that certainly deserves to be asked. And estimating it more systematically should become a reflex for every citizen participation initiative. For example, we asked a volunteer co-host of Le Chalaise, a small, unoccupied house in Zwijnaarde that has been converted into a citizens' space, how many people this initiative *touches*? "Around 30 people are actively involved in organizing activities that directly benefit around 400 people and certainly as many who pass by on their way to Prelaatsdreef and stop for a moment..."? As this volunteer did for Chalaise, every participation initiative should assess and reflect on the number of people reached...

How many citizens feel connected to the life of the city ?

The panorama of participation initiatives deployed by Ghent is broad and rich compared to many other European cities, but it seems difficult to say how many citizens feel connected (or not connected) to the life of the city as a result.

A systematic effort to estimate the number of people *touched* by each initiative would make it possible to objectify the share represented by the *silent mass* that concerns the Policy Participation Service.

SYSTEMATIC ESTIMATION OF THE NUMBER OF PERSONS *TOUCHED* BY CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

People who are:
- organizing
- actively involved
- benefiting regularly
- enjoying occasionally
- aware but not taking part

KAFFIE

Make policy participation visible to passive participants

#2 The silent mass and the progress that can be made

"The Policy Participation Service struggles to identify people who belong to this silent mass"

"To build the program for these field visit days, we asked our colleagues to identify people belonging to this *silent mass*, reports an agent from the City Policy Participation Service, "many remained questioning because they couldn't see who we were talking about".

Citizen participation seems to see this silent mass through its own participation point of view, by the fact that it doesn't express itself, doesn't ask for anything, doesn't respond to any of its solicitations...

But although this mass is silent, it nonetheless covers very different profiles of citizens with very different motivations... Better understanding and differentiating this *silent mass* allows us to move away from the ideal of achieving 100% of residents being connected to the life of the city: undoubtedly, some citizens are not interested in taking part in deliberations on the future of the neighborhood or in cultivating a collective vegetable garden. But that doesn't mean they're bad citizens. They certainly have other, perfectly respectable interests. They write poems or let time pass. They're not insensitive to local quality of life or urban agriculture, but they may not want to take part. And if we want to remain in the vocabulary of participation, we could say that they are *passive participants.* They're happy for others to take up these issues of street beautification, neighborhood dynamics or family gardening workshops. They benefit from it and appreciate it without cynicism. The aim of citizen participation should not be so much to convince or convert them as to keep them informed of all the great things happening in their neighborhood.

The question is how to give visibility to actions supported by citizen participation to those who are not interested in participating. "We communicate that our project has been financed by the subsidy for citizen initiatives, it's compulsory, says a volunteer citizen who runs Chalaise, but many people don't know that it's thanks to the city that we've been able to develop this space and offer all these activities...".

Informing people about participation, highlighting its actions and the resulting effects, is not the same thing as encouraging them to participate. Nor is it simply a matter of communicating and multiplying messages in the city's newspaper or on the social networks it runs. It's more a question of finding a change of posture: showing the actions of participation and their effects without proselytizing, proposing without judging, coming to terms with the fact that part of the *silent mass* remains silent, *passive participants* who are satisfied to be so!

Better understanding the different profiles that make up *the silent mass*

Better understanding the *silent mass*, differentiating its profiles and understanding their motivations will enable to move away from an ideal of 100% of the participating population.

There is certainly a part of the population that does not wish to actively take part in the life of the neighborhood they live in, but they appreciate that others do.

The Policy Participation Service must report on its actions and their effects without proselytizing and learn to live with these *passive participants*.

SOME CITIZENS ARE *PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS*

They're not interested in taking part in civic deliberations, neighborhood life, etc. But they can appreciate without cynicism that others are involved in street beautification, neighborhood dynamics or family gardening workshops.

But they can appreciate, without cynicism, that others get involved in workshops on street beautification, neighborhood dynamics or family gardening...

CAN THE POLICY PARTICIPATION SERVICE LIVE WITH *PASSIVE PARTICIPANTS* WITHOUT PUSHING THEM TO GET INVOLVED?

Can they show them the benefits of citizen participation without judging their passivity?

Can they engage them as *followers* without trying to convert them?

Accept those who do a little but no more

#2 The silent mass and the progress that can be made

" I don't have the time to do more... and I don't want to, either! "

"It's fine like this, once a year, the street party, but no more than that". For a resident of Gentbruggekouterstraat and her husband, it's been a tradition for 15 years to organize a big neighbors' party on the last Saturday in January. The Gentbruggekouterstraat is more than a kilometer long, and now more than 125 neighbors come to eat and drink together. This initiative receives a small grant as part of the support for social cohesion in the neighborhood (Samen aan Zet).

Does the organizer of the Gentbruggekouterstraat's parties have any other projects for her neighborhood, any new ideas to submit to *Samen aan Zet,* the fund for citizen's Initiatives or to the other support mechanisms for local activities offered by the Policy Participation Service?

"No!" The answer is firm and unequivocal. "We have 5 children and 8 grandchildren, a big garden, a walking club... explains Sabine, I don't have the time to do more... and I don't want to either!"

The case of this Gentbruggekouterstraat's couple, beyond its specificities, is interesting to analyze here because it clearly marks the limits of civic engagement as an activity among other personal, domestic or family projects...

Unlike someone like the co-host of the Chalaise above, who seems to want to develop her commitment to managing and running the Chalaise citizens' center in Zwijnaarde while juggling her family life and her job at the City of Ghent, the organizer of Gentbruggekouterstraat's parties does not want to do more...

The annual Gentbruggekouterstraat party is a meeting point between the couple organizer's project and the objectives of the Policy Participation Service, but no more than that. They seem motivated by maintaining a good neighborhood atmosphere. She doesn't hesitate to give more of her time to pursue her objective: "There are new residents in our street and I want to go and ring the doorbell. You have to ring the doorbell. Email and letters aren't enough". But she's not interested in getting involved in another project that doesn't fit her criteria. And we feel that insisting on offering her other commitments could be taken as criticism: she already does a lot compared to her neighbors, whom she sometimes finds difficult to involve in helping organized party. She wonders whether other neighbors will take over when she and her husband will be older. Her expectations are to mobilize, renew and perpetuate... not to commit to anything else.

Don’t over-solicit those who are already committed and active...

On the fringes of this silent mass, we find profiles of citizens who are involved in a neighborhood activity that they support enthusiastically because it corresponds to their motivations, but they do not wish to do more or take on other projects.

The Policy Participation Service should be fine with, accept and understand these limits, know how to also listen to these occasionally committed citizens, take an interest in what they are doing, consolidate it and perpetuate what is already working without overstretching them and risking exhausting them...

UNDERSTAND AND ACCEPT THE DIFFERENT LIMITS OF INVESTMENT IN CITIZEN PARTICIPATION WITHIN THE POPULATION

Insisting that they get more involved can be misinterpreted as criticism.

Over-soliciting them risks exhausting them and leading to participation fatigue.

SUPPORT THE SCALING-UP OR SCALABILITY OF PROJECTS OR OTHER FORMS OF DEVELOPMENT

Help consolidate existing projects.

Contribute to their renewal, and to the sustainability of mobilization.

Supporting those who do not dare to participate

#2 The silent mass and the progress that can be made

"It's still too often the middle class that participates and not the people who suffer from social injustice or economic insecurity"

"We must dare to say that certain weaker groups of citizens do not feel able to participate...". For a civil servant of the city's Prevention and Security service, who is the radicalization referent for the city of Ghent, part of the silent mass does not participate because it does not feel able to do so.

But why don't these people dare to take part when everything seems to be organized by the Policy Participation Service so that they can get involved? There are many reasons that cannot be all explored here. For a retired man from the Gentbrugge district, "people my age are intimidated to discuss things because they have the impression that the city decides for them". For a butcher in the same Gentbrugge district, "it's true that we wasted a lot of time discussing the mobility plan, but perhaps we also needed that time to understand that things had changed and to accept the need for a new plan...". For Filip de Rynck, academic and analyst of citizen participation in the country, "it is still too often the middle class that participates and not the people who suffer from social injustice or economic insecurity".

Feeling that they lack the legitimacy, skills or availability to get involved in the issues raised by neighborhood life or the future of the city... for this group of the population, taking part requires a form of maturation. As the Neighborhood Manager of the Nieuw Gent district, points out, "this citizens' center is called De Serre (the greenhouse), literally because it's a protected place where people can grow...".

A great deal of preparatory work is needed to enable people who suffer from various forms of precarity to take part in policy participation: recovering their place as legitimate citizens, convincing themselves that their opinion can contribute to a better understanding of the problems, gaining confidence in their own ability to interact with others, overcoming their own problems and finding the place to take care of the public interest.

Help people in *participatory insecurity*

A large part of this silent mass does not dare to take part in participation because they do not feel legitimate, capable or available.

Citizen participation must create the conditions to enable these people, who might be described as *participation precarity*, to blossom, to (re) gain confidence in themselves, to feel that they are full citizens with the right to contribute to the life of the city and to nurture public interest.

STRIVE AGAINST THE VARIOUS FORMS OF PARTICIPATORY INSECURITY:

Ensuring that everyone is able and willing to contribute

Show that their contribution is worthwhile

Build confidence in their own ability to interact with others

Help them find their own space and time to contribute

Show that their opinion can contribute to a better understanding of issues

Help them move beyond their own point of view and find room to address the public interest

Help them find their place and convince them that they are legitimate citizens.

DE SERRE
DE SERRE
ATELIER

Revealing the unaware participative people

#2 The silent mass and the progress that can be made

" It's not enough to ask them what they want to do, you have to help them imagine it..."

After distinguishing between those who do not wish to participate, those who participate only a little and those who do not feel able to participate - and without claiming to be exhaustive - the silent mass certainly also contains a profile of participative people who are unaware of it... But how do you reveal their latent desire to participate?

"It's quite simple: you ask people what they want to do!" replies the Director of KAA Gent Foundation, community services for the Ghent football team.

He explains how a survey of young people in the Nieuw Gent neighborhood led to the organization of multi-sport and dance activities, but no football. "We try to be an emancipating organization that is not paternalistic", concludes the Director, pointing out one of the classic biases of participation supported by public authorities: steering citizen action more or less in the direction of what is considered favorable to life in the neighborhood and in line with the policy pursued by the city. Organizing Neighbors' Day, beautifying the neighborhood, putting flowers in the street, collecting rubbish... the actions encouraged sometimes closely resemble the activities of the city's Green Spaces, Streets & mobility or Culture services... either complementing them or replacing them.

Even though it does not appear to be any oriented or utilitarian participation in Ghent, this bias raises two interesting questions.
The first question concerns the limit of acceptability of citizens' requests: how far can we follow people in their requests, provided of course that they do not contravene laws and regulations? A few examples from the Temporary Use Fund show that asking people what they want to do requires mediation and arbitration. Finding a venue for noisy open-air concerts (DOK), helping to soundproof a temporary auditorium in the middle of town (Government), etc. are all examples where getting people involved means finding solutions between divergent projects, resolving conflicts of interest, balancing inclusion for some and living together for all...

The second question concerns the ability of participation initiatives to reach out to silent groups of citizens who ask for nothing: "We organize a lot of inclusive activities for our own audiences, remarks one of the civil servant of the Policy Participation Service, but we sometimes struggle to imagine activities that reach out to other profiles". It's certainly not enough to ask the profiles of people who apparently don't want or need anything about what they want to do, we have to help them imagine it...

Revealing the *potential participants* who don't even know they're there

Finally, among the silent mass, there are profiles of *potential participants* who are unaware of what they are doing, and who need to be revealed.

Citizen participation initiatives need to help people who have not yet made up their minds to imagine what they could get involved in, but which they are not yet aware of... They need to do this openly, without seeking to steer them or reclaim their action, to mediate between citizens and find compromises between conflicting demands.

HELP RESOLVING POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST BETWEEN CITIZENS' ACTIONS OR PROJECTS

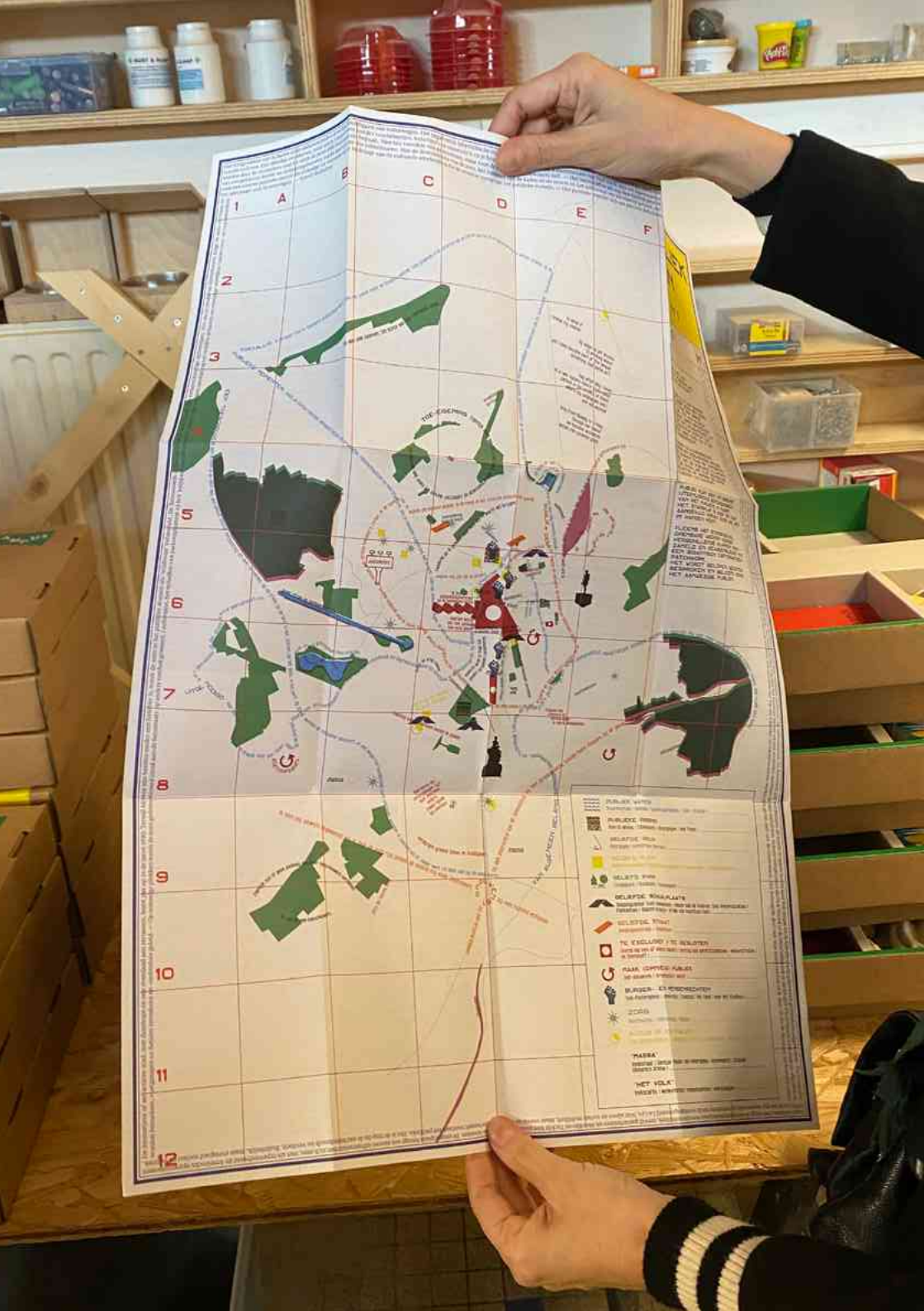
Seek to make them compatible rather than limit their scope

SUPPORT CREATIVE PROCESSES TO BROADEN THE RANGE AND SCOPE OF PARTICIPATORY ACTIONS

Avoid the classic bias of directing citizens' actions to facilitate the tasks of city services

Help unaware citizens find their participatory vocation

#3 The committed and the assets for the future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Acculturate city services to work in a more participative way

#3 The committed and the assets for the future

"All city departments need to put on their participation goggles"

"All city departments need to put on their participation goggles" For a resident, who is both involved in organizing activities in her neighborhood of Zwijnaarde and an employee of the City of Ghent, one of the challenges is to ensure that participation is mainstreamed as an integrated practice in all the city's services. The city's General Manager confirms: "The culture of our organization is open and constantly evolving, but it is still paternalistic and centralized. Taking the step towards participation remains difficult...".For their part, staff complain that the injunction to participate puts them in difficult positions when faced with angry citizens or with exaggerated expectations that they are unable to meet...

Why does it seem so difficult to acculturate the city's various departments to participation practices? The town of Amersfoort in the Netherlands, faced with similar problems (1), wondered whether the town's departments perceived using a participation process as more or less work. If some of the tasks, such as reporting road problems or contributing to the upkeep of green spaces, are carried out by citizens, this should, in theory, lighten the workload of the respective services. A successful consultation process means fewer disputes and fewer changes to be made... In reality, things are not so easy. Services often have the feeling that they know what needs to be done for the city, the neighborhood, the good of the citizens, and that asking their opinion only complicates and lengthens things... However, considering participation as a contribution by residents to the production of public action is a promising strategy for, as this same resident involved in organizing activities in her neighborhood puts it so well, "reconnecting public action with the aims of public services".

1 - Social Innovation in City, URBACT III Capitalization Process 2014

For participation to become an ally of the services and not an additional burden, they must be able to conduct participation processes. This was the purpose of the Participation Point, a comprehensive and flexible training program that the Policy Participation Service provided to other city departments in addition to its help in familiarizing them with the methods and tools of participation. This Participation Point has had to be suspended as a result of recent financial restrictions. However, not only does it seem necessary, but it certainly needs to be developed further so that, in addition to teaching people about policy participation, it can work with them to develop forms of participation that are appropriate to their sector and that will facilitate their work. Once again, it is less a question of asking the Roads, Mobility or Green Spaces services to conduct participation processes in addition to their work than of inventing ways in which citizens can contribute, help or facilitate their work. The town of Amersfoort gave as an example a development plan for a park in the center of the town *made by citizens* with a minimal contribution from 2 of the town's landscape architects. The city services also need to let go of their responsibilities in order to train citizens to i.e. understand the mechanisms of urban planning, to think about mobility plans or to manage green spaces in a way that preserves biodiversity. It's in the interests of the city's services to empower citizens so that they become fully-fledged interlocutors, able to contribute constructively!

Training city services to collaborate with citizens

Further developing the practice of participation in Ghent means training city departments to master the methods and tools of participation so that they reap the benefits rather than the additional burdens or inconvenience.

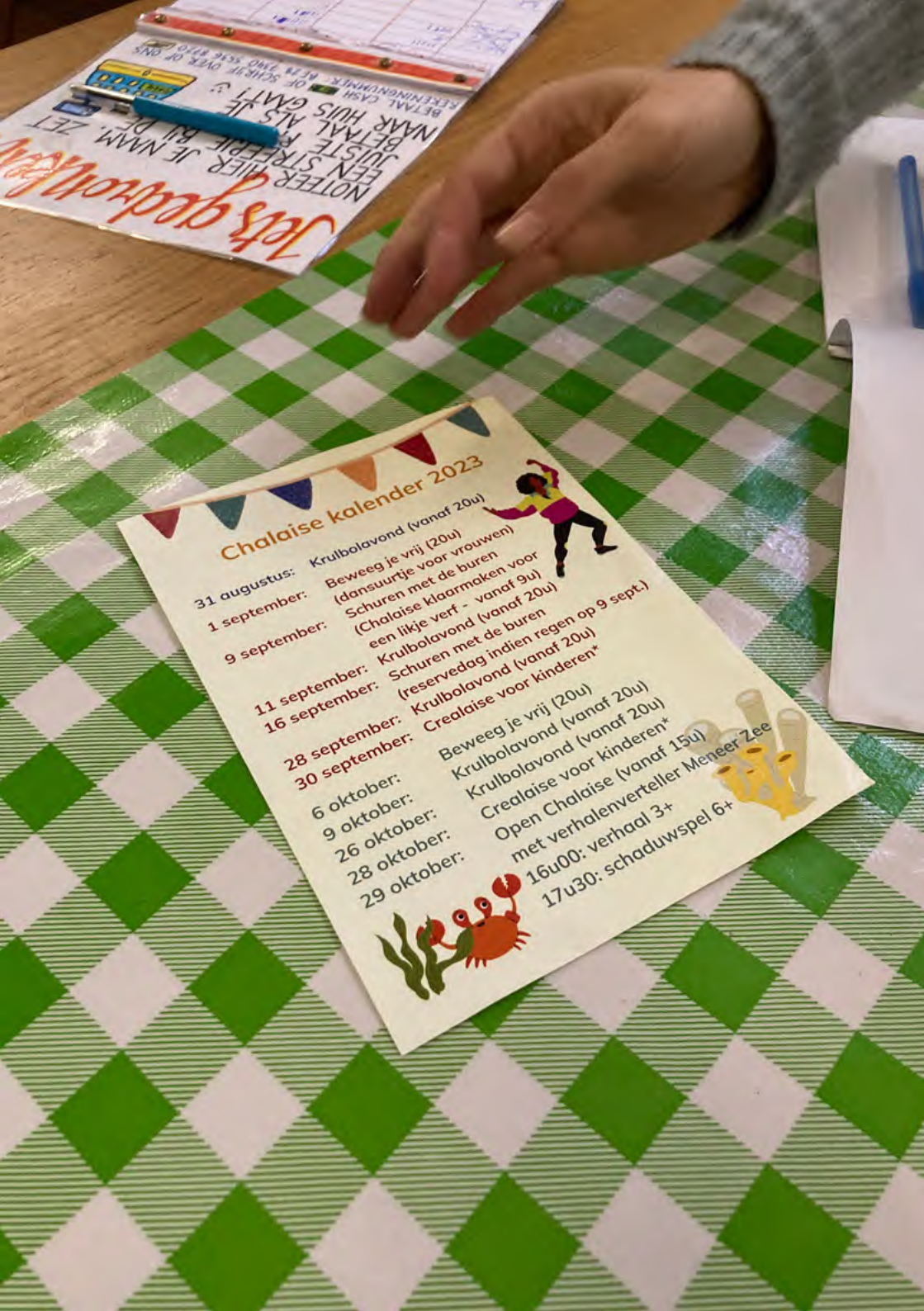
Above all, the Policy Participation Service must work with each city service to develop ways in which citizens' participation can contribute to their work without representing an additional burden, help them without hindering them, or even enable them to share part of their work with organized citizen groups.

SUPPORT PUBLIC SERVICES BY INVENTING WAYS FOR CITIZENS TO CONTRIBUTE TO, HELP OR FACILITATE THEIR WORK

CO-DEVELOP WITH CITY DEPARTMENTS PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES SPECIFIC TO THEIR NEEDS:

Train citizens to become fully-fledged interlocutors, capable of contributing constructively to public action.

Contribute to the success of the consultation process, with fewer disputes and fewer modifications to be made.


Chalaise kalender 2023
31 augustus: Krulbolavond (vanaf 20u)
1 september: Beweeg je vrij (20u)
(dansuurtje voor vrouwen)
9 september: Schuren met de buren
(Chalaise klaarmaken voor
een likje verf - vanaf 9u)
11 september: Krulbolavond (vanaf 20u)
16 september: Schuren met de buren
(reservedag indien regen op 9 sept.)
28 september: Krulbolavond (vanaf 20u)
30 september: Crealaise voor kinderen*
6 oktober: Beweeg je vrij (20u)
9 oktober: Krulbolavond (vanaf 20u)
26 oktober: Krulbolavond (vanaf 20u)
28 oktober: Crealaise voor kinderen*
29 oktober: Open Chalaise (vanaf 15u)
met verhalenverteller Meneer Zee
16u00: verhaal 3+
17u30: schaduwspel 6+

Making citizens participation relays

#3 The committed and the assets for the future

"Letting go and supporting a consultation process managed by the citizens concerned themselves"

The door-to-door dialogue pilot project *Het andere huisbezoek* engaged by the Policy Participation Service seems to be a good way of reaching and listening to more people who are far removed from participation, but it requires more staff to do this for the whole city scale of Ghent. The question is how this level of granularity can be achieved with the same team and in a period of budget restrictions?

Some of the residents we met during the field visit are ambassadors for participation.
A couple of residents who organize an annual street party, also plans to go and ring the doorbells of new arrivals "because it's not enough to send a letter or an email...". This same woman, whose work is subsidized by *samen en sat*, the fund for citizens' initiatives, is indirectly relaying the scheme to her neighbors.
Through information sessions and an online group, an involved resident of Zwijnaarde engages his neighbors in discussing the future of their neighborhood. By summarizing and explaining the city's strategic plans, urban development projects and technical documents, he also relays the information and consultation activities of the Policy Participation Service.
A pensioner who walks the streets of Gentbrugge collects questions from his fellow residents, forwards them to the Neighborhood Manager, and comes back the next day to provide the answers she has come up with. He also relays the work of the Policy Participation Service in connecting the city and its citizens, which is why he is nicknamed "the informal Mayor of Gentbrugge"!

Those 3citizens and the many others met during the 4-day Field Visit acted as *relays for citizen participation*, suggesting that we move on from engaging citizens to get involved to engaging them to get other citizens involved...

Here is a concrete example thought up with a resident of Zwijnaarde: one of his neighbors, complains about the noise made by the speed breaker installed in front of her house, which the city services do nothing about despite her repeated requests... Can the city carry out a citizen consultation action for each speed bump to be installed? Couldn't it instead support a consultation process managed by the citizens concerned themselves? For example, the residents of a street complain about the excessive speed of motorists. The town offers to install a speed breaker, but asks the applicants to discuss with their neighbors where the speed breaker should be installed, given the noise pollution it could cause. It supports the process by providing advice and consultation tools, but leaves it up to the applicants to discuss among themselves whether the request is really justified, who among them is less sensitive to noise or lives in a home that is less prone to noise pollution, and so on.

Investing in *citizen participation relays* involves identifying actions that offer opportunities for dissemination, identifying citizens who have a wide network of local contacts and who offer guarantees of neutrality, delegating consultation actions by accompanying them, etc. As Filip De Rynck, an academic and analyst of citizen participation processes, points out, "it's also a good test of politicians' ability to let go to the citizens!"

Invest more in forms of *citizen participation relay*

Reaching more citizens who are far remote from participation without additional resources and staff may mean that the Policy Participation Service invests more in forms of *participation relays*, i.e. citizens who ensure that participation is relayed: identifying sufficiently neutral and reliable information relays who have a wide network or are involved in actions with a high dissemination potential, or even investing in these citizens to carry out participation actions themselves.

INVESTING IN *CITIZEN PARTICIPATION RELAYS* MEANS:

Scouting for citizens able to become relays for citizen participation

Connecting citizens who have a wide network of local contacts

Identifying citizens who offer guarantees of reasonable neutrality

Identifying actions that offer opportunities for dissemination

Delegating consultation actions by accompanying them

#1
#2
#3
#3
...focus op de schaal van de burger?
...acties instellen op basis van de behoeften van de plaats?
#1 UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE WHO FEEL NOT HEARD OR ANGRY ABOUT PARTICIPATION...
Who are the voices raised against participation?
Citizens who take part, who are disappointed that their voice is heard but not by city services, or that decisions have already been taken before the participation process is launched?
Citizens who have a conflict of values with the policy pursued by the city and who are reinforced by the actions undertaken through participation?
These 2 categories that emerged from the field visit show that those dissatisfied with participation do not form a coherent block.

Strengthening Neighborhood Managers

#3 The committed and the assets for the future

" Neighborhood Managers are kinds of neighborhood activists employed by the city "

Neighborhood Managers appear to be one of the keystones of citizen participation. More than *connectors* between citizens and the city, they are seen as representatives of the administration in the neighborhoods. For a resident of Gentbrugge, his Neighborhood Manager is the *gateway to the city administration*. In contrast to neutral intermed-iaries, citizens emphasize the fact that the Neighborhood Managers intervene. One of the residents of Gentbrugge says she appreciates the relationship with her Neighborhood Manager "because she gives us advice to help us organize the annual street party". Describing her role as Neighborhood Manager in the operation of *samen en sat*, the fund for citizens' initiatives says: "We assess whether residents intend to carry out their projects themselves. We help them to strengthen their ideas. Sometimes we put similar projects in touch with each other and encourage them to work together. We connect volunteers who could help, we widen their network...". The Neighborhood Managers don't just connect, they make it work! This *constructive interventionism* complements a participation that would be too literal and neutral.

An academic observer of participation processes, confirms the delicate position of what the scientific literature calls "frontier workers. They are faced with the same dilemma as neighborhood activists employed by the city. They push citizens' ideas, put pressure on policies and services, while at the same time being part of the administration themselves...".

This role of Neighborhood Manager certainly needs to be strengthened. The points that emerge include :

- Better support them in their relations with their colleagues in other departments, who appreciate their local expertise and knowledge of residents, but who sometimes also perceive them as troublemakers.
- Strengthen their position as *Managers* by giving them the distance they need to maintain a global approach to the neighborhood while remaining close to the people, assuming their role as *Managers* to orchestrate local participation.
- Recruit people with different profiles but with broad skills and proven experience.
- Reinforce their responsibility, their power to act locally and to take a certain level of decisions in relative autonomy.
- Value the heterogeneity of Neighborhood Managers by facilitating circles for analyzing practices, peer-to-peer reflection and self-regulation of their power to act.
- Help Neighborhood Managers to protect themselves through priority monitoring, individual coaching or group supervision.
- Take care of Neighborhood Managers so that they remain deeply committed, connectors between residents and the city, but connectors who are involved and driving...

Empowering *constructive interventionism* of Neighborhood Managers

Neighborhood Managers are proving to be a fundamental figure in citizen participation. Their role needs to be strengthened, not only as connectors between citizens and the city, but also in terms of the positions they take, the advice they give and the action they take to strengthen citizens' projects, their orchestration role (manager) in local life and the lobbying they do on behalf of their neighborhoods with the city's policies and administration services.

PROMOTE THE LOCAL *CONSTRUCTIVE INTERVENTIONISM* OF NEIGHBORHOOD MANAGERS

Develop their role as connectors between citizens and the city

Facilitate their interaction with various city departments

Promote their own positions, relative autonomy and responsibility for the neighborhood

Promote the lobbying they do for their neighborhood with politicians and city departments

Reinforce their power to act locally and take a certain level of decisions with relative autonomy.

Involving citizens in post-participation work

#3 The committed and the assets for the future

"Let people draw the consequences of participation rather than imposing conclusions on them."

"People are in favor of change, but not on their street, notes an agent from the city's Mobility Department, 'and what's difficult in a city-wide plan is that there are inevitably winners and losers".

The difficulty with citizen participation seems to lie not only in listening to each other's opinions, but also in synthesizing them in a way that satisfies everyone (or rather, dissatisfies as few people as possible).

The question raised here is who makes this synthesis between contradictory voices. This difficult task is usually carried out by the city's departments, which examine the dossier, and the politicians, who arbitrate the choices. The departments and politicians must then take full responsibility for the decisions made, for their partiality and for the inequity between winners and losers...

Another approach to participation is to ensure that citizens experience the complexity of this synthesis work, realizing that there is no optimum solution and that compromises will inevitably be made. To achieve this, we need to enable citizens to work themselves through complex issues such as urban planning and mobility schemes:

- not to assume that people's ideas are by nature simplistic or unrealistic, but to allow themselves to be surprised by what their points of view as users might allow them to imagine.
- spend enough time co-constructing a good understanding of the problem, taking the measure of all its complexity and contradictions
- have them explore the construction of scenarios, rather than giving them ready-made ones to criticize.
- allow them to experiment (on models or in the form of temporary urban planning) with solutions they believe in, even if it means letting them see for themselves that they don't work as well as they thought.

This implies :

- a smaller project scale: the street, the square, a portion of a neighborhood... participation seems more actionable on a smaller territorial scale: a limited number of stakeholders who can meet to debate, more circumscribed issues, a reasonable number of points of view to integrate...
- complete transparency on the part of departments, who must make their technical skills available to citizens, enabling them to carry out, or at least explore themselves, the work of project synthesis on their behalf. On the part of politicians, this also presupposes a genuine willingness to let go, not to anticipate or direct the solution, and to have the courage to tackle an issue free of prejudice.

Sharing synthesis work after participation

Citizen participation is often limited to collecting opposing opinions and handing them over to city services and politicians, who then sort them out and arbitrate.

A more advanced approach to participation aims to put citizens in a position to do at least part of the synthesis work that comes after the consultation: to confront the complexity of the problem to be solved, to experiment hypothesis, to make mistakes, to generate ideas and build scenarios and, ultimately, to assume the necessary trade-offs...

ENABLE CITIZENS TO WORK BY THEMSELVES ON COMPLEX ISSUES AND TO FACE-UP TO TRADE-OFFS

GIVE CITIZENS ACCESS TO POST-PARTICIPATIVE SYNTHESIS WORK

Assume that people's ideas are not simplistic or unrealistic

Be surprised by what users' points of view might allow them to imagine

Build a shared understanding of the problem, taking in all its complexity and contradictions

Explore the construction of scenarios rather than giving them ready-made scenarios to criticize

Allow them to experiment (on models or in the form of temporary urban planning) with solutions in which they believe and let them check by themself if they work or not

Highlighting participation assets

#3 The committed and the assets for the future

"To show, in negative light, what the relationship between citizens and the city would be without participation!"

"Let them talk about what they want to talk about, advises the anthropologist accompanying the door-to-door dialogue pilot project, say you're from the city of Ghent and you want to talk about what it's like to live there at the moment...".

There are a lot of problems in the neighborhoods, and more and more of them, and the Policy Participation Service's actions are geared towards solving these problems, just like all the other city services.

"We solve problems, notes one of the managers of the Policy Participation Service with a sense of humor, we are a bunch of problem solvers!" And she quotes her colleague Mark Verheirstraeten, who is in the habit of asking "...but is there really a problem?"

Far from denying the accumulation of problems that are weighing more and more heavily on disadvantaged neighborhoods and people, the aim here is to question the posture of the Policy Participation Service, which maybe sees things too much in terms of problems, perhaps obscuring the opportunities. This is the basis of approaches like the ABCD (Assets Based Community Development) method, which recommends that, when faced with a critical situation such as an impoverished neighborhood with high levels of unemployment, delinquency and insecurity, the first thing to look for is the neighborhood's *assets*: what is going well (or not so badly), what people know how to do, what they want to do...

This positive and constructive approach is widely adopted by participation initiatives in Ghent, in the way that *semen en sat*, the fund for citizen initiatives or the *fund for temporary use* encourages local players, their ideas and their projects.

Perhaps there is still a particular sensitivity to problems, a tendency to see the glass as half-empty, to see the actions of citizen participation in terms of everything that could be done rather than in terms of what has been done, to see everything that hasn't worked rather than (also) highlighting what has worked. The current economic, environmental and geopolitical situation is not conducive to a more serene attitude, to making the most of the achievements of the last few decades, which have made Ghent's international reputation in terms of participation. This 25th anniversary of the Policy Participation Service should be an opportunity to "do better" (i.e. reach out to more citizens, initiate more projects, etc.) but also to show what has been achieved... and perhaps to take pride in it. In other words, we mustn't let *doing better* consume all our energy, some of which should also be used to invent ways of making what has already been done more attractive and more visible to everyone.

Favoring an asset-based approach to citizen participation

Citizen participation initiatives are focused on listening to citizens and their expectations, which quite often leads to thinking mainly in terms of problems to be solved. The accumulation of difficulties, precariousness, impoverishment and fragility makes it more difficult to balance an approach based on problems with an approach based on *assets*, on the potential of citizens, on what is going well in the neighborhoods, etc.

This is particularly true when it comes to making the most of what has already been achieved through citizen participation initiatives, making them attractive and visible to all...

IS THE LISTENING POSTURE OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION MORE PERMEABLE TO PEOPLE'S PROBLEMS THAN TO THEIR ASSETS?

Alternate pessimistic diagnoses and optimistic outlooks

Systematically seek out the good news, what's going well, what's improved...

APPRECIATE THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION.

Avoid letting what wasn't done overshadow what has been.

Highlight what has worked, not just look at what hasn't.

Imagine what the city would be like in the absence of citizen participation...

looking ahead...

LESSONS FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF GHENT **FOR THE FUTURE OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY**

Synthesis of the lessons learned...

Beyond the 16 areas for improvement devised by and for the Policy Participation Service in Ghent, what generic contributions can be drawn from them to fuel the debate on participatory democracy?

The tradition of participation in Ghent is robust and long-established. Citizen dynamics are numerous and strong. Initiatives and experiments abound. And yet the problems encountered by the Policy Participation Service remain numerous and critical. But these problems do not invalidate the participatory democracy.

This year's critical, retrospective and forward-looking reflection outlines ways of improving the mechanisms of participation and the processes for disseminating interaction between citizens and public authorities, which are likely to inspire participatory democracy and its application in terms of participation as a whole. Four points seem to emerge...

#1 A change in the nature of participation

An **evolution in the roles** of participation services, which must move from implementing participation processes to supporting and disseminating bottom-up governance as a whole. The aim of these projects is to mature **and increase the capacity of participation practices.** Greater professionalization and tools for collaboration between residents and the city.

The co-development of tools and **approaches specific to the various city departments,** which need to (re)invent their different professions to better collaborate with citizens, to invent how to do things *with* people, how to gain in efficiency by letting them do things *by* themselves. **Putting citizens in a position to participate** means, in particular, restoring the confidence of those who do not feel legitimate because they are in a form of *participatory precariousness.*

This change of nature also marks the transition from participation-legitimation in the face of growing abstention and the loss of legitimacy of representative democracy, to **participation-contribution geared towards direct citizen action.** The challenge is not to mobilize battalions of volunteers to implement public action at the lowest possible cost, but to think in terms of **synergy between citizen contribution and public services.**

#2 Optimizing policy participation efforts

In a context of limited or even reduced means of action for participatory democracy, we need to optimize the processes in place.

First of all, we need to avoid participation mechanisms that generate **over-promises** to listen, and a feeling of disappointment if everyone's wishes are not met. We also need to avoid **over-participation,** where too many incentives tend to make citizens passive, waiting for more and more initiatives from the public player, and where citizens no longer see participation as a way of contributing to public policy, but who *consume* the efforts of participation services.

Secondly, we need to **capitalize** more effectively on participatory actions, **mapping the city's social fabric** and moving on from tactical, ad hoc, piecemeal participation to **strategic, integrated** participatory action based on capitalized lessons (see for instance the example of *sensitive mapping of participation* in the last chapter). It's a form of participation that takes place over the long term, where the challenge is no longer to start early enough or to continue long enough after the consultation period, because it's **continuous**. Participation that evaluates in itinere its action, and the scope and quality of its impact.

Finally, we'd like to encourage **collaborative public services,** i.e. citizen action that goes beyond the posture of sharing decisions to open up a different kind of participation, more in synergy with public services, a genuine sharing of public action in the spirit of what would be a *citizen Delegation of Public Service.*

#3 Extending our reach to reach more citizens

Finally, many people - a majority, even in a city like Ghent - have no form of interaction with the city's governance outside election times, unless they abstain.

To reach more citizens, we need to **let go** and move away from a form of participation that is often overly framing or maternal, which too often seeks to listen to citizens arises, better master or even control their reactions, towards an increase in the capacity of **diffuse participation** through *neighborhood managers*, citizen participation relays, and public support for *self-managed citizen participation.*

A gradation of different levels of participation (initiative carriers, active supporters, interested followers, passive partisans, etc.) is needed to move away from the naïve and unattainable ideal of total participation by all. Reverse participation would ensure that everyone is in regular contact with governance (i.e. once a year?), and not just when a problem arises, or a consultation takes place.

In general, reciprocal participation initiatives would benefit from being designed to be more **visible, meaningful and explicit,** as signs of collaborative efforts between citizens and public players.

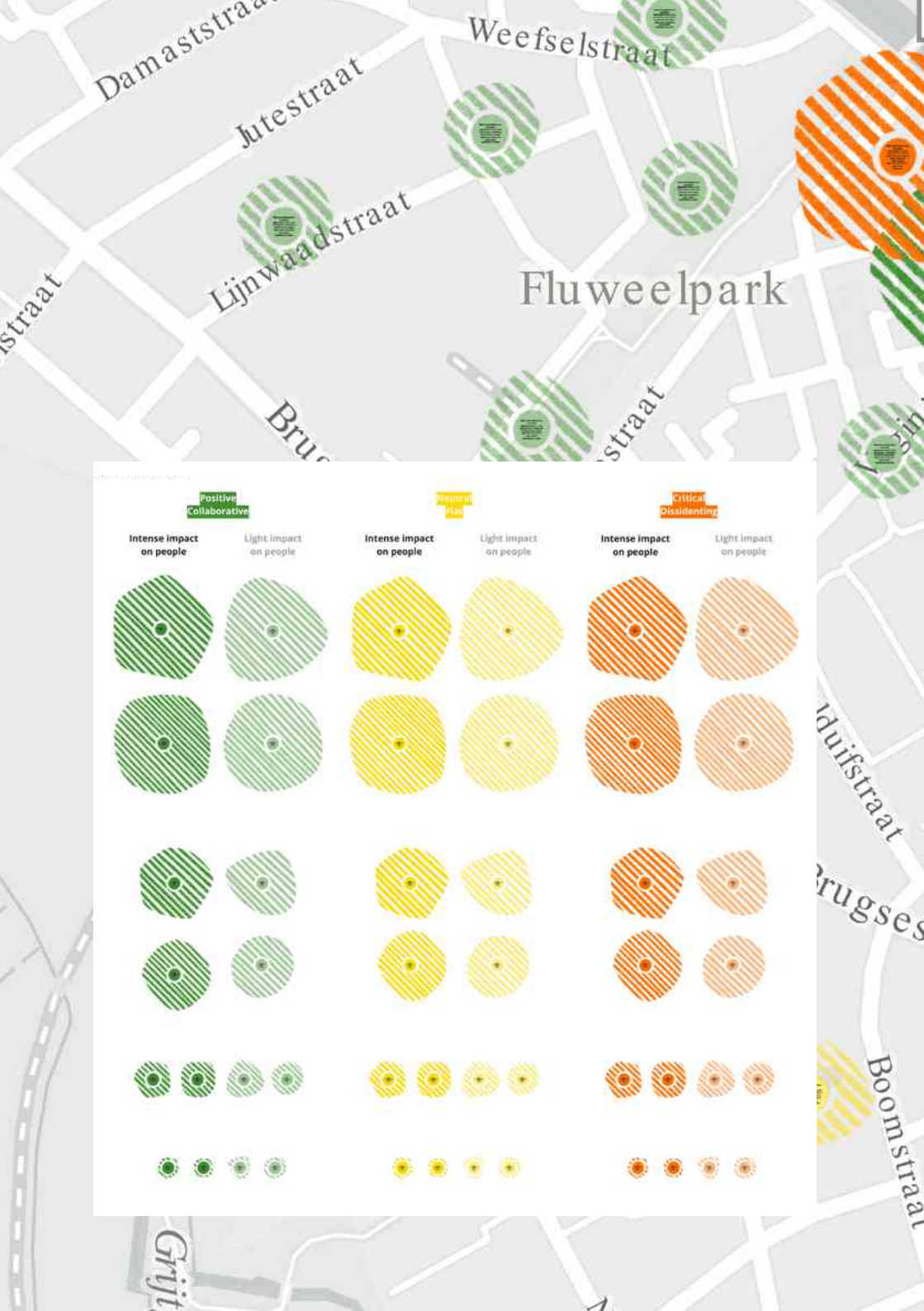
#4 The desirability of policy participation

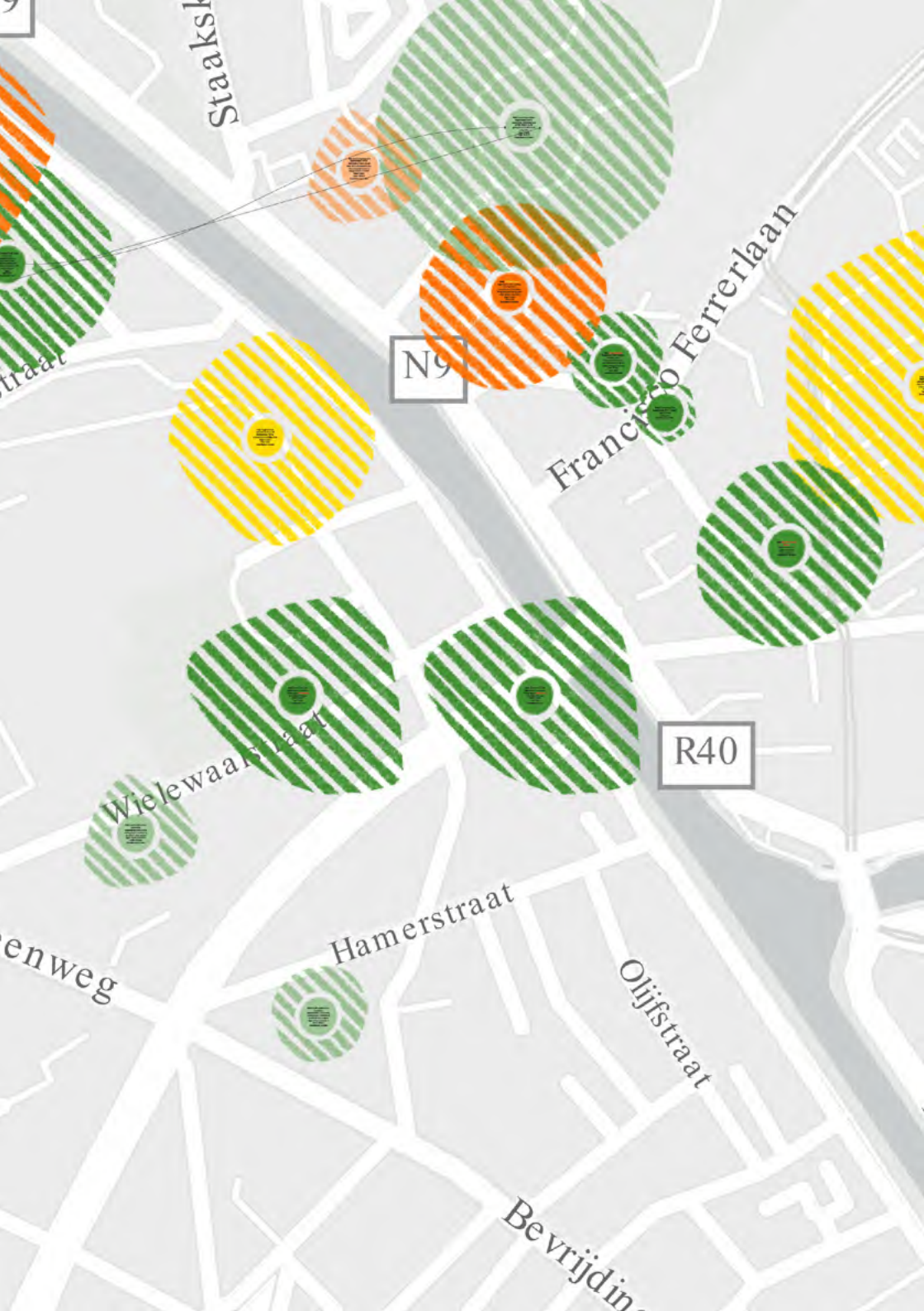
Finally, let's return to the terminology of *beleidsparticipatie* introduced by the Dutch translation, and the importance of the words used.

Political participation calls for a **reciprocal and more balanced** contribution between citizens and public authorities. Rather than pitting them against each other, blaming the former for being reluctant to commit their time as citizens to contributing, or the latter for failing to meet their legal obligations to consult or *reach out*, policy participation focuses on the challenge of political co-construction rather than on the means of citizen participation. It helps to remove the vagueness that undermines citizen participation, where people tend to be summoned to give their time and opinions, often losing sight of the political objective. It omits to offer them a clear, understood and accepted ***participation contract*** that specifies the tenants and commits to the outcomes.

 # experimentation

AN EXAMPLE OF PILOT EXPLORATION **SENSITIVE MAPPING OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION**


Weefselstraat
Jutestraat
Lijnwaadstraat
Fluweelpark
Positive Collaborative
Critical Dissidenting
Intense impact on people
Light impact on people
Intense impact on people
Light impact on people
Intense impact on people
Light impact on people


Staaks
N9
Francisco Ferrerlaan
R40
Wielewaalstraat
Hamerstraat
Olijfstraat
enweg
Bevrijdin

Mapping/capitalizing citizen participation initiatives...

Of the 16 areas of work that emerged from the field immersion, 7 orientations were selected for further experimentation:

- Show the strengths of citizen participation: what works well...
- Improving participation: what doesn't work so well...
- Exploring uninvolved profiles and trying to involve them...
- Better integrate citizen participation into city governance and representative democracy...
- Establish the preconditions for citizen participation to work...
- Enable citizens to become city ambassadors and contributors...
- Reinforce what already works, support citizens who take action...

We present below an example of pilot experimentation developed by the West Sector team, one of the sub-groups of the Policy Participation Service , and based on the following ideas:

- Identify the *holes in the racket* (areas of the city little touched by participation actions, areas where the climate of citizen participation is deleterious, etc.)
- Define the strategic deployment of participation actions (stimulating less active areas of the city, calming boiling areas, listening to silent areas, etc.).
- Inverse the process of soliciting residents when the city needs it: *touch* every resident with a citizen participation action at least once a year.

Palinghuizen
Jozef Guislainstraat
Francis
Olijfstraat
Groendreef
Hamerstraat
Kiekenstraat
Wielewaalstraat
Goudvinkstraat
Lijsterstraat
Manilastraat
Textielstraat
Kempstraat
Tonelstraat
Brugsesteenweg
Werkstraat
Weefselstraat
Lucienne Herman-Michielsensstraat
Network to involve for future projects/actions
BLIND SPOT? FIX?

 # motivations for the experimentation

Citizen participation, not only when you need it !

"What if every resident of the city were in contact with the Policy Participation Service at least once a year?"

This is one of the visions that emerged from the Field Visit immersion in policy participation in Ghent in December 2023 leading to neighborhoods: How can we explore the *coverage* of neighborhoods in terms of participation and identify the gaps? How can we capitalize on the actions of the Policy Participation Service and make them available to other city services? How can we deduce a strategy for deploying participation and plan actions based on the needs of the neighborhoods?

Asking these questions reverses the usual process of mobilizing participation at local level: if, as the city of Ghent defends, the role of the Policy Participation Service is to ensure the connection between citizens and the governance of the city, then this participation cannot be reduced to occasional solicitations. As well as *reaching out* to citizens, its processes must ensure that all citizens feel well connected to local governance, that they are listened to regularly and not just when public authorities need their opinion to deliberate on a project or reflect on the city's future... In short, all the city's residents should have the opportunity to participate at least once every 6 months or every year! While the pace is a matter for discussion between what is feasible for the city's services and what is desirable for citizens, the challenge for the Policy Participation Service is to make a diametric shift from the posture of calling on some people to address specific issues to leading an ongoing conversation with everyone...
If this is the intention, the question is how do we go about achieving it?

 # working hypothesis

Mapping participation coverage

Could we create a sort of *participation barometer* on every street corner? How can we take stock of the actions carried out by the Policy Participation Service? How can we show on a map the interactions between residents and city governance in each neighborhood?

This map would firstly be a simple sedimentation of the actions of the Policy Participation Service over time, a sort of Participation Coverage Plan, i.e. an inventory of the coverage of the territory in terms of participation… It would make it possible to see first of all the areas of the city where there are many participation initiatives, where consultations are carried out, events organized and projects proposed, and other areas where not much is happening, because it is less practical to set up tables for an event, because people react less or because the Policy Participation Service, that is over-solicited elsewhere, perhaps tends to forget them a little…

Over and above the density of participatory coverage, this map would also be a barometer, a sort of Neighborhood Mood Map: where is it easy to talk to local residents? Where can city services *take the temperature* on a thorny issue, and start a dialogue without risking inflaming protests? And where is it more difficult, if previous actions by the Policy Participation Service have not been satisfactory or have not left a positive impression? Where do we need to redouble our efforts to listen better and more, to rebuild trust before launching a new project?

On a city-wide scale, this map would make it possible to interact with the various government services, to take account of human factors and not just technical parameters when planning roadworks or green spaces, to make intangibles more concrete, such as the spirit of the community of residents, whether they are open to the transformation of the neighborhood or, on the contrary, already subject to a great deal of tension and the risk of procedures is high.

Finally, this participation map would serve as a Participation Strategic Plan, a support for planning the deployment strategy of the Policy Participation Service in the various neighborhoods: where do residents feel rather neglected and disconnected from the city and the decisions that are taken there, and is it important to encourage contact with them, to organize listening, to detect the silent voices who are never heard? In which areas are residents rather passive and would appreciate more events or the launch of a project dynamic? Which areas seem a little dead or neglected and would benefit from being able to organize activities and events?

This idea of a participation map in the neighborhood echoes, for example, the work of Marthe van Gils at the Veldacademie1, which aims to map citizen networks in the Bospolder and Tussenwijke neighborhoods of Rotterdam in order to measure not only the community resilience of these neighborhoods, but also to stimulate and deepen the formation of citizen networks.

But, as the delegation from Ghent's Policy Participation Service asked during their visit to Rotterdam, "how can such maps be produced on a city-wide scale? How do you keep them up to date and operational when you don't have 5 years ahead of you and a doctoral thesis?"

As everyone knows, all good ideas tend to degenerate into extra work! How can we co-produce our hypothesis of map with the already overstretched Policy Participation Service? Where is the balance between the time they need to produce and update the map and the benefits, they can derive from it in their day-to-day work?

1 - Programme Resilient BoTu2028 https://www.veldacademie.nl/veerkracht-monitor-botu

MAPPING
BREAKFAST
Nº 2
Who: STEFAAN
Name: BUURTCONSULTATIE
POLITIE SITE
Explanation: ONLINE VOORSTELLING
HAALBAARHEIDSSTUDIE
Type:
Year: 2022

 # experimental design

Mapping Breakfast

Let's give it a try and see what we come up with if we limit ourselves to one hour of time for each participant in the Policy Participation Service.

Here are the main features of the experimental design:

A map of Neighborhood Managers...

To design a process that would make it easy to place on a base map even just all the knowledge accumulated by the Gentse wijkregisseur, the 25 Neighborhood Managers who are the key figures in coordinating everything that happens in each of Ghent's neighborhoods between the residents and the city's governance. A quick and simple process. One hour of group work to be repeated every 6 months or every year. Sufficiently easy to use to be updated as the Neighborhood Managers interact with their teams, neighborhood stakeholders and residents on a daily basis...

Not everything! Just what falls within the remit of the Policy Participation Service...

Prioritize mapping actions that residents feel have a direct interaction/connection with city government (e.g. consultations, surveys, door-to-door listening, neighborhood budget, citizens' panels, neighborhood committees, local governance think tanks, etc.).
Secondly, the indirect benefits of the actions of the Policy Participation Service that are not necessarily perceived as having a link with the governance of the city can be included without making the map too heavy (for example: neighborhood events, fairs, street parties, neighborhood houses, social cafés, meeting places, residents' associations, non-profit organizations, informal citizens' groups, local actions such as a collective street cleaning, a repair café, cultural or sporting activities for children, etc.).

A non-exhaustive list! Maximum use with minimum effort...

A subjective map is inherently imprecise and vague. The 25 Neighborhood Managers are individuals with their own personalities, professional practices, interests and appreciation of what's going on in their neighborhoods, and so on. The affinity of the Neighborhood Managers with the map, and the uses they make of it (or don't make of it) will result in a map that is uneven, imperfect and always unfinished ... and that's fine! But that doesn't mean we can't use the map.

The risk in aiming an exhaustive map is that it may require too much work and end up abandoning the tool because it's not worth the effort, because trying to make a map that's too perfect confuses the ends with the means...

A map that says it's subjective...

Putting the knowledge of Neighborhood Managers on a map aims for an *in-between*: to be sufficiently like a map, i.e. a technical description, a precise tool that speaks to the city's planners and engineers on the one hand, and on the other hand to reflect subjective knowledge, i.e. a map that reflects human factors, that remains debatable and must encourage conversation, that does not risk being taken for more precise than it is, etc. The graphic design of the map must therefore reflect this in-between situation, being sufficiently *map-like* to be a tool worthy of interest to the technical services, but sufficiently *Subjective* not to betray the caution required when using the information it contains...

Drapierstraat
Linnenstraat
Groendreef
Palinghuizen
Welvaartstraat
Fluweelstraat
Kempstraat
Zijdestraat
Textielstraat
Virginiastraat
Wielewaalstraat
Kiekenstraat
Tortelduifstraat
N° 6
Who: FRANGIS
Name: DOOR-TO-DOOR VISITS
Explanation: LOOKING FOR THE NON-PARTICIPATIVE CITIZENS + HEARING THEM
Type:
X Consult
☐ Celebration
☐ Project
☐ Other:
Year: 2024
Impact on people:
Intense Medium Light impact
N° 4
Who: FIONA
Name: NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH
Explanation: LOCAL ACTION GROUP FOR SAFETY IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD
Type:
☐ Consult
☐ Celebration
X Project
☐ Other:
Year: 2022
Impact on people:
Intense Medium Light impact

A mapping breakfast every 6 months

A one-hour breakfast between the Neighborhood Managers, no more than twice a year. It should be a fun way to exchange views, build a new map layer and reflect together on the resulting image.

There are 3 parts to this mapping breakfast:

A **preparatory time** over coffee to adjust everyone's subjectivity. Like the techniques of sensory analysis, it's a good idea to get everyone on the same wavelength to avoid excessive differences in subjectivity: calibrate what we mean by the *scale* of a participatory action (between reaching a family by knocking on their door and a neighborhood event involving 50 or 100 people), agree on what is meant by the notion of *impact on people* (between a fairly long and significant participatory action and a light participation limited to a quick verbal exchange or an opinion).

A second time to feed the map, **to identify all the significant things that have happened in the neighborhood** in terms of participation in the last 6 months, placing on the map for each action a small circle of plastic which indicates approximately the extent by the size and the mood by the color: green for an action which results rather positive, constructive for the inhabitants, yellow for a neutral or flat action and orange for an action of contestation or which left a bitter taste... and filling in a micro identity card of the action, its nature, its impact.

Finally, time to **digest** both the breakfast and the map that has been produced: how are the actions distributed? Which sectors are full (or over-solicited) and which are empty (and need more attention)? Who should be contacted and involved among the social workers and field workers to complete the map (or confirm the imbalances)? What is the strategy for deploying participation over the next 6 months (in the light of the past 6 months)?

 # lessons learned

Mirror map

What are the main effects observed by the participants and what lessons can be drawn from them for what appears to be a *mirror map* of the activities of the Policy Participation Service?

An internal capitalization map

"It's useful for taking stock of your own practice".

Opinions are widely shared on the usefulness of the exercise as a reflexive process. Even in the context of an experiment, with a map that has not yet been fully developed and without any hindsight over several years, the conversations between the Neighborhood Managers immediately questioned the blank areas on the map, discussed the reasons why policy participation seems absent there, and wonder from their teams, players in the field, residents, etc. who should be invited to take part in the exercise in order to deepen this process of self-diagnosis.

An external mediation card

"A conversation starter with other city services"

As well as being a tool for dialogue with the teams, the map was seen as a pretext and a means of initiating a dialogue with the other city's services, taking a step towards them and showing that participation is not just extra work but contributes to their work. The participants see its usefulness more as a means of giving an initial opinion on small-scale issues or projects that are not the subject of a systematic consultation process, of providing a quick initial response without having to wait for the result of a lengthy public consultation, of whetting the appetite for what the Policy Participation Service can provide (or help to avoid).

Taking the risk of a subjective diagnosis

The choice between the small plastic circles, their size and color, gave rise to hesitation and discussion. How can we judge the *mood* of one street or another in relation to the city's governance? The choice of an orange, yellow or green circle objectifies the latent expertise of the Neighborhood Managers. Like a doctor who diagnoses a patient's health, these experts in human factors in neighborhoods, the Neighborhood Managers, feel that they are taking a risk. This feeling of risk-taking is accentuated by the fact that they are filling in the card for the first time. Judging the mood of a neighborhood is more part of a dynamic: *"in that area, things weren't going well before. Today there are positives and negatives. How people's moods evolve will depend on how city policies respond to the question…".*

Personal notes status

"I would first like to share it with my field team before showing it to other services…".

As a map, the participants are tempted to share it and disseminate it to improve cooperation with other city services. But the map contains sensitive data that is open to interpretation, and the same participants are uncomfortable with the idea of opening up their subjective data without precautions. They agreed that the map should have a status similar to the personal notes they make as they go about their day in their notebook or on their computer: the map cannot be used on its own. Its content requires mediation, interpretation and moderation by the Neighborhood Manager who produced it. Just as when he takes notes on a blank sheet of paper, the Neighborhood Managers will restart from a blank map to collect the views of third parties. They will add contributions collected to the map of the neighborhoods and they will keep them more (or less) confidential.

 # perspectives

Mix of maps ?

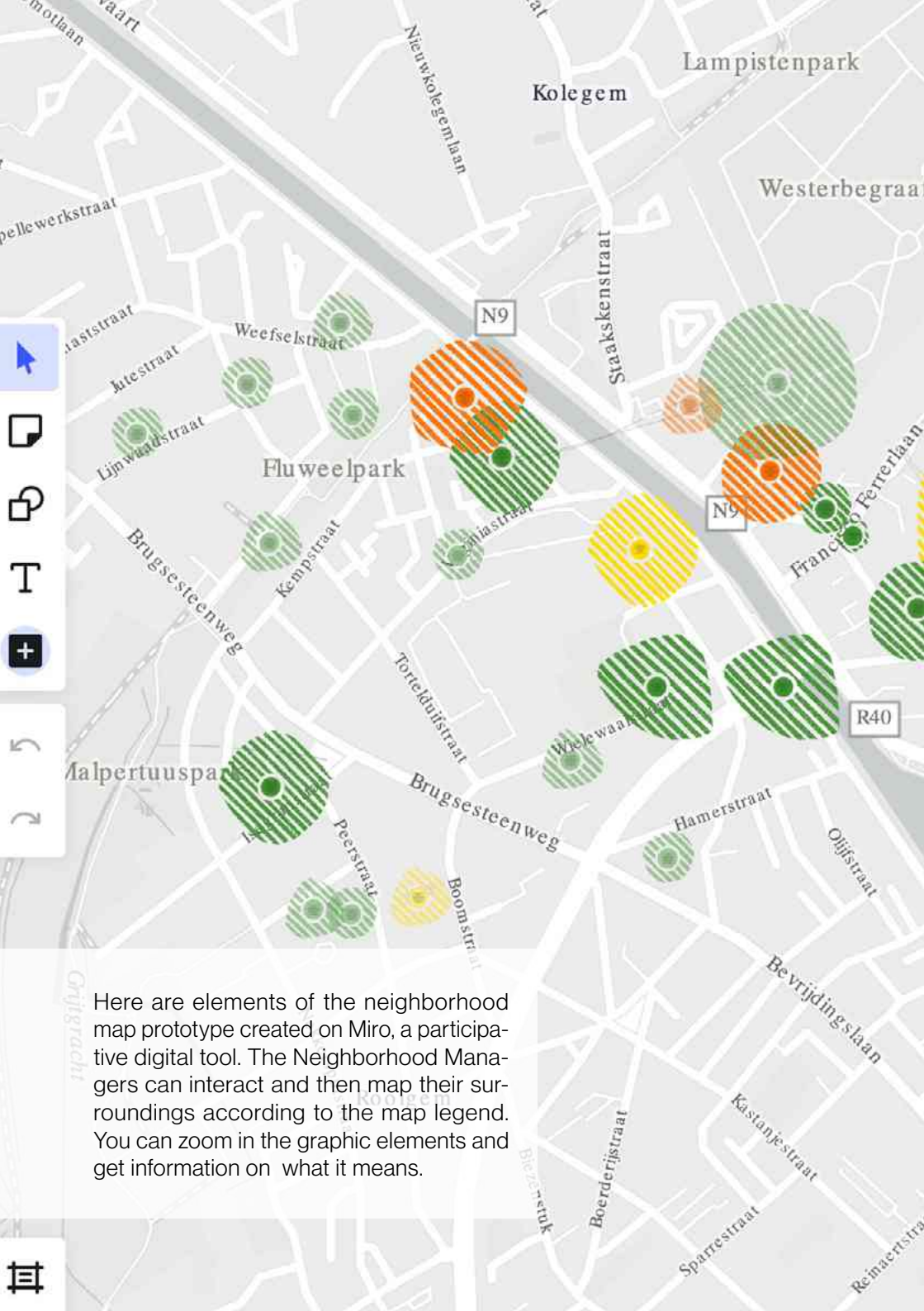
"Another way of discussing the neighborhood"

Continued experimentation with this mirror map of the Policy Participation Service will include a simple digital version on an electronic board shared between the 25 Neighborhood Managers. This will enable them to work on each neighborhood, compare them and observe their boundaries in a spirit of cooperation and emulation between Neighborhood Managers.

The right balance between too much and too little...

What status will this online map have in relation to the many other digital maps produced by the city? Wouldn't it be interesting to superimpose detailed socio-demographic GIS data to give a better interpretation of the neighborhoods and the many networks that intersect there with whom we can work? A subjective map drawn up by the children of a school on how they experience their neighborhood or localized digitized cultural data from the city's archives and museums2 would also find their place and their interest in varying the points of view and nuancing the subjectivity...

This may make the map more cumbersome to use and update, but all these ideas are certainly worth a try. And as this is a subjective map, whether it should be enriched should certainly be left to the free will and subjectivity of each Neighborhood Manager who pro-



Here are elements of the neighborhood map prototype created on Miro, a participative digital tool. The Neighborhood Managers can interact and then map their surroundings according to the map legend. You can zoom in the graphic elements and get information on what it means.

Title: Door-to-doors visits
Explanation: Looking for the non-participative citizens and hearing them
Type: Consult
Year: 2024
Contributor: Fiona

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In 1998 the city of Ghent started taking on a series of initiatives, projects, and experiments which aimed to develop policy participation. Today, 25 years later, with all the challenges faced by Ghent, as many other territories in the world, the city intends to start a reflection on the past 25 years of Policy Participation in order to project and prepare for the decade to come. What do we want the future of policy participation to look like? This question frames the lens through which the various actors working with Policy Participation in the city of Ghent intends to look back at the successes but also the failures of their projects and experiments. To celebrate the 25 years of policy participation the city of Ghent and its partners have embarked on a reflective journey to look inwards and then project outwards into the next phase of participation. This publication has been made possible by half a year of collective investigation, field study, exchanges, reflections and experimentations with the Policy Participation team of the city of Ghent.

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REINVENTING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCARCY?

Lessons from 25 years of experiments in Ghent

Why look to Ghent to rethink participatory democracy?

Because this city is a reference point in Europe: progressive governance, 25 years of experience, and international recognition in citizen participation.

At the end of 2023, Ghent set itself a challenge: to draw lessons from 25 years of participatory practices in order to reinvent the future of participation.
The goal? An unfiltered review of successes and failures to imagine the next decade:

· Better understand those who feel excluded,
· Make the impact tangible for everyone,
· Define a clear *participation contract*,
· Strengthen a capacity for action among citizens and public services
· Map engagement neighborhood by neighborhood,
· Etc.

The result of a year of collective assessment and experimentation, this publication goes beyond a simple overview: it offers concrete proposals to strengthen participation, on the side of both citizens and institutions. An inspiring book for any city seeking a more inclusive and effective democratic model.