



SUMMARY

Public Participation

Lessons from the Netherlands

Why and how does public participation lead to the creation of public value? Finding the answers to these questions was our mission in *Leren in Participatieland* [Learning in the land of Participation]. This mission led to inspiring stories, useful information, but mostly to so many questions and needs by local governments and citizens.

How did Leren in Participatieland come about?

In 2019/2020 we researched roughly 24 cases of public participation in the Netherlands. Eight different local governments (municipal, provincial and water authorities) participated in the research. Based on almost 100 interviews, 10 learning-assemblies and extensive desk research we created this book that was published in June 2021.

We observed that despite all the knowledge and experience available, there is still little or no systematic understanding of the critical success factors to (public) participation. We know all the lists of *dos and don'ts*, but there have only been modest systematic analyses of public participation processes, what works and what doesn't work.¹ How does participation help to create public value? The purpose of this book is to find answers to this question.

Participation: what is it and how does it work?

"Try it for yourself. Participation is something you learn by doing." That was the advice we gave in our previous book *Pionieren in Participatieland* [Pioneering in the land of Participation], based on the belief that public participation will be a permanent feature in our system of public administration. The idea was that if you want to form an opinion on public participation and be able to steer it, you first need to gain experience with it. And that's what's happened; three years later the level of experience with public participation in the Netherlands has grown considerably. Not because of our advice, of course (although perhaps just a little), but because various factors have led to more public participation which, in turn, has made it part of 'the new normal'. Our previous advice: "Try it for yourself", is as pertinent today as it ever was.

But we would now like to make an important addition to that message: viewing public participation as a series of 'learning processes' is the key to even greater success.

The importance of learning together from participation

We saw it in the cases we looked at: participants reach agreement more quickly on an issue and on solutions if they learn together (and want to learn together) during the process and from the experience. Learning helps to achieve broadly-based public support and therefore creates value. Learning also helps to pave the way for future participation trajectories. It is therefore important to ensure that the learning aspect is given sufficient weight and attention. Not just during the trajectory itself but also beyond that. Continuing to learn is one of the pre-conditions for improving participation processes.

The next step: direct and indirect learning

Direct and indirect learning

If you view your public participation trajectories as an learning processes², they will become easier to understand and you will more easily develop successful trajectories. To us, learning is: being able to change norms, values, emotions and insights (taken together as: 'orientation') on the basis of experience and reflection which, in turn, leads to a change in behaviour. Learning operates at two levels in participation:

- **Direct learning** takes place during the participation trajectory. During such a trajectory you 'learn' to find solutions to an issue together. By talking to each other and learning from one another, hopefully, you reach a shared problem definition with appropriate solutions. In learning theory this is referred to as: changing the orientation of the participants (i.e. their norms, values, emotions and understanding) to a narrative which is sufficiently shared and with an action agenda on what and how public value can be created. Or rather: getting more people onto the same page, so to speak, which is necessary to create public value together.

That is the ideal scenario, of course, but participation can also fail miserably. Those involved cannot reach agreement, positions harden and you find yourself drifting further and further away from a broadly-supported solution. We call that 'reverse participation' and is something from which you can also learn a great deal. How you design the learning process depends on the type of issue involved. 'Task driven participation' is what we call that. Elsewhere in this book we describe what forms this can take.

2 By learning process we mean, more specifically, processes more generally known as social learning or policy learning. These processes describe how orientations of collectives, policies and governments change. Some authors that we used for this perspective are:

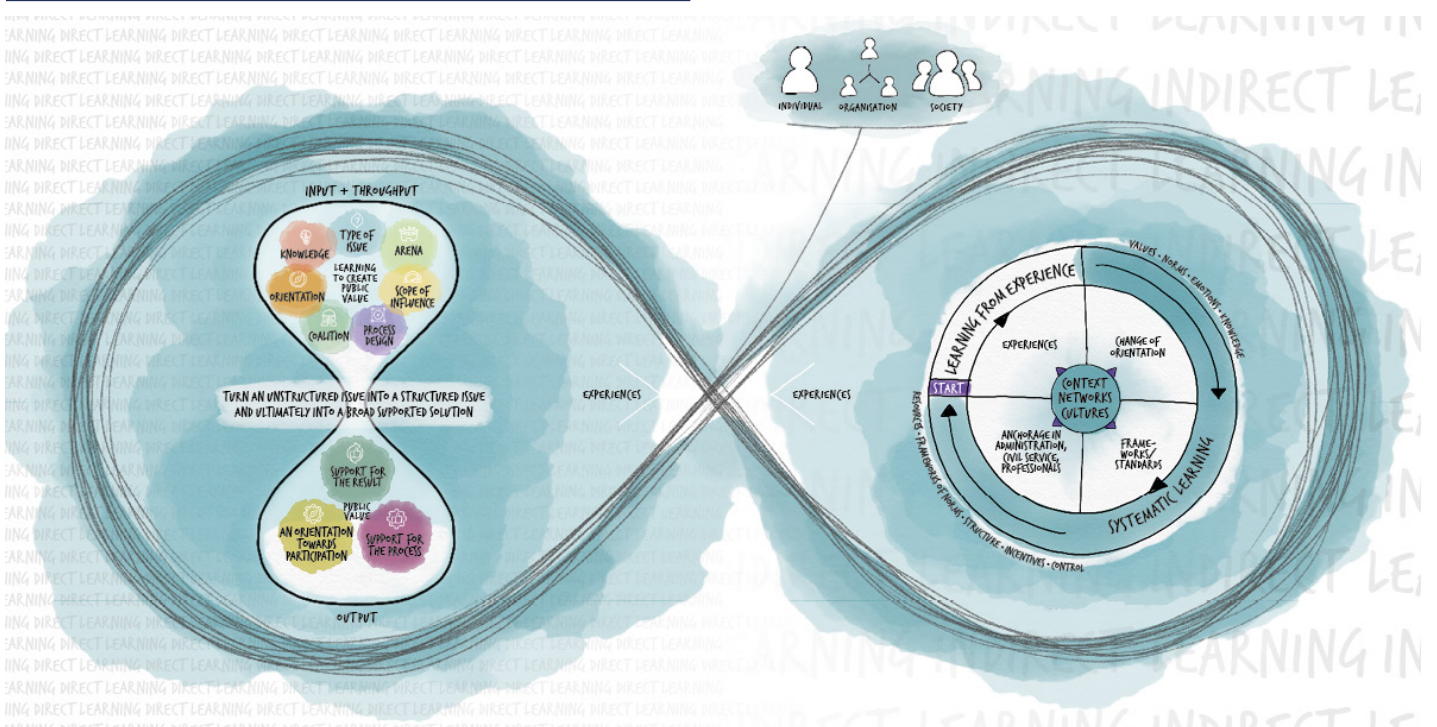
- Elias, N., & Schröter, M. (1989). *Studien über die Deutschen: Machtkämpfe und Habitusentwicklung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Suhrkamp.
- Elias, N., (1983). *Engagement und Distanzierung* (p. 271). Suhrkamp.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *Structures, habitus, practices*. Polity. (Chapter 5: The logic of practice).
- Sabatier, P. A. (1988). An advocacy coalition framework of policy change and the role of policy-oriented learning therein. *Policy sciences*, 21(2), 129-168.
- Bateson, G. (2000). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Termeer, C. J., Dewulf, A., Breeman, G., & Stiller, S. J. (2015). Governance capabilities for dealing wisely with wicked problems. *Administration & Society*, 47(6), 680-710.

1 Visser, V., van Popering-Verkerk, J. & van Buuren, A. (2019). Onderbouwd ontwerpen aan participatieprocessen: Kennisbasis participatie in de fysieke leefomgeving. GovernEUR, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam.

- Indirect learning** is more of an umbrella or overarching process and takes place on various scales: the group involved in a case, an organisation, or society as a whole. Anyone with experience knows that organising an effective participation trajectory is far from easy. It is therefore important to invest in more general and structured learning alongside the direct learning in participation trajectories. How did the participation work when you look at multiple experiences and what could you improve? We refer to that as 'indirect learning'. Ideally, all the stakeholders will be involved in this: residents, local government officials, local politicians and public servants. The ultimate goal is to improve the orientation (position adopted) of all those involved in the participation process. In other words, the basic attitude to participation becomes more positive. NB: a community that is successful in the indirect learning, will also be better in the direct learning.

Direct and indirect learning go together and influence each other

The figure below shows the essence of what this book is about: it sets out the relationship between the direct and indirect learning processes. You can clearly see that the interrelated processes are those that influence the individual, the organisation, or society. These influences lead to changes in orientation, i.e. changes in the norms, values, emotions and insights which drive behaviour. These changes are brought about by both the direct and indirect learning experiences. The figure shows how the direct and indirect learning processes take place (in an ideal world). *Leren in Participatieland* looks at these processes of direct and indirect learning in detail.



Prevent a false start: first, consider what *type* of issue is involved

Making a good start is half the battle when designing a participation trajectory. In our view for every participation process (direct learning) the place to start, will always be to determine the nature of the issue. That may seem obvious but often both those initiating such a process and those taking part in it do not investigate the nature of the issue thoroughly enough beforehand. To put it bluntly: they take steps without actually knowing precisely what it is (i.e. what type of issue), they want to solve.

Structured and unstructured issues

There is a lot that could be said about types of issues but, in our view, essentially there are just two types of issues: structured and unstructured. We sometimes also refer to more of less complex issues. Structured issues can be 'solved'. With unstructured issues it is still insufficiently clear what needs to be done to arrive at a solution. Both types of issues require a distinct participation strategy; for structured issues this will be more of a steerable strategy (to be achieved together), while for unstructured issues more of an explorative strategy (searching together) will be required. The aim is always to make an issue more structured and therefore solvable.

In a participation trajectory the art is to work together to turn an unstructured issue into a structured one. The participation strategy will change as result, from explorative to steerable, from discovery to solving the puzzle together.

Wrong approach has a major impact

If you misjudge the type of issue or it was not correctly defined in advance, then the participation trajectory will require considerable correction (steering) if it is to stay on track. Below we explain the differences between these two types of issues and what type of strategy is most suited to each of them. This is important reading to ensure an effective participation trajectory, as well as to be able to usefully apply the information and tools provided in this book. Below, we explain some of the terms we commonly use in the book and that are important to 'get right' in public participation processes.

What do we mean by: arena, scope of influence room, process design and coalition?

In the section, below, about issues and participation strategies we introduce the terms 'arena', 'scope of influence', 'process design' and 'coalition'. We will briefly explain these here.

Arena: the framework within which the participants take part in the process. You decide who will enter the arena. In the arena you formulate the rules of the 'game', i.e. the way in which people will work together, and you determine what happens on the 'game board'. Who are the participants? How are the roles distributed between the various actors and what authority and scope of influence will they have? What resources are available and how open or closed will the process be?

Scope of influence: how much scope the participants have to take part in the decision-making process. This is about how much influence they have over the problem definition, possible solutions, the process, the pre-conditions and the decision making. Often the political body (municipal council/governing body/Provincial Council) will have to approve the allocation of influence.

Process design: a detailed document which set outs the proposed participation trajectory and strategy. Not cast in stone, but a clear description of the starting point, the route to be taken and the purpose of the participation trajectory. Learning also forms part of the process design.

You draw up a process design together with the participants. This helps you to steer the participation process in the right direction and provides a jointly drawn up and shared frame of reference.

Coalition: a group of participants who are in alignment about the purpose of the participation trajectory (the public value at stake) and how to get there. A participation trajectory will only be successful if a (substantial) majority of the participants - i.e. a dominant coalition - is behind the goal and the path towards it (or, to put it in less simple terms but also more precisely: when they have a shared outlook on how to act and what public value they wish to achieve, which supports the final decision or result of the participation trajectory). Sometimes there will be several, opposing coalitions in one trajectory. This is difficult to deal with. It is then necessary to identify where there is support and where the resistance lies to be able to get enough people on the same page, eventually.

Types of issues and their associated participation strategies

The first step in any participation trajectory is to determine what type of issue is at stake. We distinguish between two types, each with its own participation strategy. In part 3 on direct learning we use examples to illustrate just how important it is to make deliberate choices.

Unstructured issue > requires explorative participation

The main features of a more unstructured issue are that there are often many participants involved, with possibly major conflicts of interest or divergences in the values they hold. Little is known about the topic and there is no shared view of the problem or desirable solutions to it. On these types of issues you will have to put considerable effort into reaching a consensus on values, insights, interests and solutions. This therefore requires a more explorative form of participation.

Structured issue > requires a more steerable form of participation

The most important features of a more structured issue are that it usually involves a smaller number of participants, with similar values and few opposing interests among the participants. There is often already a broadly shared view of the nature of the problem (and whether there actually is a problem) and what solutions it may require. The required knowledge is already available or considered not necessary. Steerable participation is more suitable for a structured issue.

The table below provides a more detailed overview of the differences between issues and strategies.³

Type of issue	Participation strategy
<p>Features of an unstructured issue</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Participants are generally not in agreement about the problem definition for the issue and areas where solutions may be found 2. Widely divergent norms and values 3. Little shared knowledge on the topic 4. Opposing interests 5. Unclear who is involved and why; changing coalitions 6. Great time pressure (external deadlines), urgency (huge expected impact) or major interests at stake (risks, loss, profit) 7. Participants not in agreement about the process to be followed 	<p>Features of explorative participation (investigating together)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The process design provides enough scope for a rough plan 2. Working together to develop problem definitions and areas where solutions may be found. Also working together to find a common 'language' 3. Additional use of necessary knowledge and expertise 4. Dynamic arena (participants come and go, search for coalitions and representative stakeholders) 5. Participants have a lot of influence over 'what'. Influence over 'how' comes later 6. Flexible approach, phased and working with interim results 7. Timely and flexible use of resources (funds, involvement of third parties, knowledge) 8. Transition during the trajectory from less to more structured issue with steerable participation
<p>Features of a structured issue</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Participants are generally in agreement about the problem definition for the issue and areas where solutions may be found 2. Few, if any, competing values or opposing interests 3. Sufficient knowledge available on the subject 4. Little time pressure, urgency or few interests at stake 5. Everyone's involvement is clear; the road towards finding a broadly-supported solution is expected to be smooth 6. Participants are reasonably in agreement about the process itself 	<p>Features of steerable participation (solving the puzzle together)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The process design has a relatively short turnaround time 2. Rapid agreement on the purpose and the trajectory to be taken 3. Knowledge and expertise supplemented where necessary; specific use of participant expertise 4. Arena clearly and carefully defined 5. Little scope to influence the 'what' of the issue (on which agreement has already been reached); participants are given more or plenty of scope to contribute to finding a way to arrive at a public value. Time frames and the process itself are clear 6. The necessary resources (funds, involvement of third parties, knowledge) have been well organised by experts

Most issues occur somewhere across the spectrum between structured and unstructured and vary in complexity. The challenge is to turn a more explorative issue into a more steerable one. That is more likely to succeed if the orientation towards participation has become more positive.

Leren in Participatieland pleads, on the one hand, for integrating the perspective of learning within public participation processes. If these processes are more designed to create mutual learning, we believe these processes to create more value. On the other hand, it pleads for more ways of systematic learning about participation processes.

In the research we've done, we found that governments showed only modest efforts to *learn about* public participation processes. More systematic reflection, evaluation and collective learning *about* processes that one has done, is absolutely necessary to take the next steps in the field of public participation and self-organisation.

Participatory work is an art. It requires flexibility, thinking in phases and interim results, and reflection once each phase has been completed. Learning from experiences gained during the process is essential. In fact, progress is only possible if participants are willing to learn. With each other, and from the knowledge and insights they gain during the process. Learning leads to the intended changes in orientation that are needed to reach agreements.