Workshop 1
Limits to participation: a retrospective

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Point of departure of the NCR Workshop “Limits to participation” was the current water policy in the Netherlands. The Dutch government is faced with a water problem among others due to changes in the discharges of the main rivers. For the flood security measures need to be taken that often affect residents. Since a long time, the government used a top down approach in which she presented a river plan for a certain area without a real involvement of the local stakeholders. During the last decade opposition of residents has led to reflection on the government’s side whether this approach has to be adjusted. In the scope of the Room for the River programme the government chooses more and more to set the frame for reaching objectives for flood security. She gives room to provinces and municipalities to take the lead in preparing and implementing river plans on regional and local level. Various governments are now experimenting within their new role. They use different participation methods to involve residents and organisations in the planning process. As a consequence the task of the officials has changed to steer on process and work with uncertainty. This gave rise to the following questions: What can we learn from these exercises of participation and how can participation be designed effectively?

What is participation?
The title of the workshop refers to the ICES KIS project ‘Grenzen aan publieke participatie’. This project addresses questions such as what are the limits of participation from the point of view of politicians, policy makers, water managers, social organisations and citizens and what are the reasons for these limits? In the workshop we analysed the limits of participation from the same five perspectives. To focus the workshop on the conditions of effective participation, we presented at the start a simple working definition: Participation is the active involvement of social actors in the implementation of social desirable developments in an area.

Limits of participation experienced by participants themselves
The topic was introduced in the plenary session by Jan van Tatenhove of Wageningen University and Research Centre. In the workshop Erna Ovaa of RIZA introduced the ICES KIS project, after which a case of the project was presented by Bonne van der Veen (also RIZA) in which some limits of participation became clear. Afterwards we started a role play in order to let the participants experience themselves what the various limits in practice are.

In a short introductory note the players learned that in a small imaginary village along the river Waal a water level decrease of 5 cm has to be realised. The main arguments were listed as well as the time period in which this problem had to be solved (before 2015). The river manager has delegated the project to the province. The task for the province is to study three alternatives: a dike relocation, a by pass and restoration of an old river channel. The inhabitants of the village and the farmers are not informed. The national nature organisation has raised the question to the province that in the same area an ecological corridor has to be realised. Each player had a specific assignment to fill in his or her role. It was remarkable that everyone was very enthusiastic to take a hat or cap and fill in their role. Depending on the role the participants played, some experienced more limits than others in the beginning of the process. During their play the role players asked people from the public to take a hat and contribute in the play. Some people from the audience were asked to be an observer of a specific player. After the role play a discussion started which experiences the role players had in their role and how they came across. Researchers who had no experience in practice realised that participatory processes are more complicated than they imagined before. How to deal with limited knowledge of the area, limited expertise, a limited idea of which stakeholders need to be involved, a limited time schedule and budget?
In the play, some roles turned out to be easier than others. The project leader proved to be a key player in a participatory process. Which other essential points for participation were put forward? The participants listed diverse key points, among others official administrative relations, the role of knowledge and expertise, aspects of dramaturgy (i.e. timing and impression management) and the role of trust. The participants emphasized the importance of a participatory approach, but recognized that there are many difficulties to overcome. With this the objective of the workshop – giving insight in the conditions for effective participation – was met.