

INCLUSIVENESS OF NEW FORMS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING IN TERMS OF GENDER

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Introduction

Regardless of the level of decision-making, political body or political post under consideration, many people these days challenge the legitimacy, fairness, democratic character, transparency and accountability of European politics. Politics and politicians have a bad image and there is a general lack of involvement of European citizens in politics. Electoral turnout is decreasing in all European countries and membership of political parties is also declining. Explanations offered for these phenomena include, among others, increasing individualism and a growing lack of collective orientation. In addition, it is also argued that the Europeanization of politics hasn't helped the image of politics, since decision-making has become more complex and opaque. For many European citizens, the processes and outcomes of political decision-making have come to seem remote and alienating. It is increasingly common for national politicians to defend the introduction of unpopular policies by referring to European agreements.

These trends and developments, in their turn, called for a reaction. Politicians, policymakers and also academic researchers have been coming up with alternatives for political institutions, procedures and methods of decision-making. The debate on institutional reform is clearly having a revival, stimulated not only by the crisis of politics but also by new technologies for improving communication between decision-makers and citizens. Governments and parliaments as well as the European Parliament have initiated changes, for example, in the electoral system, or by introducing the referendum as a way of deciding unpleasant political questions. Parties have in turn changed their selection criteria for candidates for political office, in order to increase the representativeness of their parliamentary party. Especially at the local level, experiments with new forms of decision-making, such as citizens' juries and interactive policymaking have been introduced.

Reforming political institutions offers a unique opportunity for the greater political participation of women and migrants, since at the heart of the crisis there is the perceived exclusiveness of political decision-making. Only a few participate in the decision-making process and political selection mechanisms tend to be biased in favour of those who belong to the same networks as those who are already in power. The effect of this is that the institutions of representative democracy make it much easier for some citizens to participate in decision-making than others. One way to make political decision-making more inclusive is to adapt the relevant political institutions to enable equal power sharing by men and women. The question is now whether the 'crisis of politics' of the 1990s and 2000s can be viewed as a window of opportunity for women.

In this paper I will analyze ten cases of new forms of local political decision-making in the Netherlands with regard to their impact on the participation of women.¹ But first I turn to a brief description of the crisis of politics in Europe: What are the developments that have contributed to the crisis? How is it manifested? The second paragraph contains an overview of

¹ This study was carried out for the Department for the Co-ordination of Emancipation Policy of the Ministry of Social Affairs. The fieldwork was carried out in 2002. See also *Lokale Beleidsbeïnvloeding in 2003: een gender analyse van de participatie van burgers*. Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, Werkdocumenten no. 297, Voorburg, 2003.

institutional arrangements that may help political institutions to regain the trust of citizens. I discuss new forms of policymaking such as referenda, interactive decision-making and citizens' juries. The third paragraph deals with the effect of these new institutional arrangements on women's participation. In the fourth paragraph I report the findings of the empirical study of new forms of local decision-making.

Crisis of Representative (Party) Politics

In most European countries, citizens seem to be less and less willing to play according to the rules of representative democracy. The traditional political parties, the classic intermediaries between government and citizens, find themselves in rough water at the beginning of a new century. Many scholars have described the dysfunction of representative democracy, pointing to an increasing lack of involvement of citizens in parties and elections, an erratic voting behavior, the declining structuring function of traditional political parties and the growing support for new parties (Gallagher, Laver and Mair, 2005:283-293).

Criticism on the institutions of representative democracy can be summarized under the headings of *representation*, *participation*, *information* and *deliberation*. With regard to the representativeness of the elected bodies in terms of descriptive criteria such as gender, ethnicity and age there is ample evidence of the vast under representation of these groups (Leyenaar, 2004; Pennix a.o., 2004). Concerning the congruence in opinion between representatives and the represented or the responsiveness of the elected politicians there seems to be an ever-widening gap. The latest 'proof' of the gap was the outcome of the 2005 referendum on the Constitutional Treaty for the European Union. While 85 percent of the Members of Parliament were in favour of accepting the Constitutional Treaty, 62 percent of the voters (turnout 63%) voted no. An assessment of the quality of participation should take into account not only the number of people participating in political decision-making, but also the kind of people that participate. This relates also to the concept of representation. When certain groups of citizens are consistently excluded from any form of participation and decision-making, their voice is systematically unheard and it is unlikely that those who make the decisions will take their interests into account. (Lijphart, 1996). In practically all European countries not only turnout at elections is declining, but also the participation rate at other conventional types of participation (Gray and Caul, 2000).

The third aspect that is criticized is the lack of information citizens have on political issues, parties' positions and, more in general, about political processes. Citizens should be qualified to participate in decision making processes, which means that they should be well informed about the pros and cons of the addressed policy measures or of alternatives. The fourth aspect is the need for more deliberation among citizens. Given people's greater ability to express them verbally, the quality of decision-making can be improved by introducing deliberative procedures.

Democratic decision-making should score high on all four accounts if it is going to be inclusive.

The lack of inclusiveness of representative democracy has resulted in a negative image most people have of politics and politicians. Although most European countries in general score well on the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI) measuring perceptions in each country of the degree of corruption that exist among public officials and politicians ², on a smaller scale citizens are often confronted with news stories of payoffs, nepotism and personal greed. It is possible to come up with examples in almost every European country. Apart from actual fraud and corruption by politicians, citizens are fed up with the arrogance of many politicians who have been in the job for ages and who no longer seem to speak the same language as their electors. The electoral success of relatively newcomers in politics such as Silvio Berlusconi and Pim Fortuyn tells us that many citizens would like to see different types of politicians.

In search for a more inclusive political system

The protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s already attacked the elitist character of politics. Then too the lack of transparency and the exclusiveness of decision-making were heavily criticized. All over Europe, there was a lot of pressure for more direct say in decision-making, for example through referendums or through direct election of the prime minister. Many citizens joined interest groups, such as environmental and peace organizations and demanded government attention for these issues through large protest meetings and demonstrations. But their protests did not result in structural reforms of the political system. What happened in the Netherlands, for example, was that parliamentary and government committees were established to *study* possible institutional reform, but that in the end not one proposal survived parliamentary debate.

In the 1990s, due to the developments discussed above, we saw a revival of the debate on institutional reform, but this time these debates often resulted in institutional changes and in the introduction of new policies to improve dialogue and cooperation between citizens and representatives, mostly at the local level.

Examples of institutional reforms can be found in Italy, where discontent of citizens with politics turned into a crisis of the party system in the early 1990s. The dominance of the traditional parties suddenly collapsed. Lega Nord, a party that did not fit into the traditional party system, gained a lot of support in the elections of 1992 at the expense of the Christian Democratic Party. At the same time a thorough judicial investigation exposed a widespread pattern of corruption among the political elite. As a result the traditional party system fell apart and many of its parties were replaced. At the parliamentary elections of 1994, all the parties that had governed between 1945 and 1992 entered the election with a new name (Guadagnini, 2005); Morlino, 1996:..5-30). Other examples of institutional reform are the

² 133 countries are ranked on the CPI index. European countries received the following ranking scores: Finland, 1; Denmark 3; Sweden 6; Netherlands 7; Luxembourg / UK 11; Austria 14; Germany 16; Belgium 17; Ireland 18; France / Spain 23; Portugal 25; Italy 35; Greece 50.

devolution of political power in the United Kingdom, the changing of electoral rules in Belgium and the introduction of deliberative forums in the Netherlands. With regard to reforms in the UK, the wish for a certain degree of political autonomy was granted to the people of Wales and Scotland and, in 1999, legislatures were established in the two countries. In Belgium, again in order to increase involvement of citizens with politics, the electoral rules on preferential voting were changed. In the Netherlands in January 2006, the Dutch Minister for Government Reform announced the establishment of a Citizens Forum, consisting of 140 randomly elected citizens, which main task would be to advise the government on the reform of the electoral system. After 40 years of debate in parliament it was time, according to the Minister, to leave the issue to laypersons. In addition to the Citizens Forum the Minister founded the National Convention, a 14-member body of educated laypersons, with a similar task of advising the government on possible reforms of the political system. The Convention focuses on government-parliament relations, including the question whether the prime minister should be an elected functionary; on the issue of regaining the trust of citizens in the European Union; on the role of political parties and on the content and status of the Constitution.

These newly created political institutions are exemplarily to the much-felt need for adjusting the machinery of representative democracy with elements of direct and deliberative democracy.

Apart from institutional reforms at national level, many examples can be provided of reforms at local level: old forms of 'command and control' have been replaced by so-called 'new politics' of inclusion and participation. An ever-developing infrastructure for telecommunications contributed to these 'new politics'. Let me discuss briefly two 'new' trends for strengthening democracy: the use of information and communications technology (ICT) and face-to-face deliberation in small groups.

The widespread use of mobile phones and of internet access has triggered several experiments in democratic decision-making. Public access to political decision-making is greatly enhanced by providing all relevant information such as political documents and data underpinning political decisions. Local governments daily post all relevant information on the internet so that everyone is capable of familiarizing themselves with the issues. Apart from providing the necessary information, ICT also makes it possible for citizens to offer their views on political issues. For example, in the Netherlands, regular polling through computers has been in practice since the beginning of the 1990s. The city of Delft surveys a representative sample of 1000 citizens each month with all kinds of questions that are useful for decision-making and implementation. More recently, there are possibilities for citizens to communicate directly with (local) politicians through electronic interfaces set up for the public and for companies. Websites offer now electronic conferences where people can conduct a dialogue with other citizens or with political representatives. There are examples in Sweden where local authorities have enabled citizens to follow the council debates live via computers and submit comments and proposals to the councilors by e-mail while the debate is ongoing (L. Ilshammar, 2000). The internet seems to be a new forum for an informed dialogue with local

people on decisions that have to be taken, such as the plans for a major new airport in the region or the restructuring of the marketplace.³ The next step in using ICT as a decision-making tool will be electronic voting from home at general elections via the internet. Teams of experts are now trying to solve problems of voters' identification (Schmitter and Trechsel, 2004).

A second trend can be seen in the new types of policy making that involve consultation, negotiation and/or deliberation between representatives of government, civil society and citizens. The objection to the use of polling and surveys via computers and the internet is that they only register opinions without giving people the opportunity to think through the issues and form an opinion while 'deliberating' with other people. In contrast to traditional methods of public inquiry, such as voting or opinion polling, interactive policy-making involves the formation of public opinion (Akkerman, 2001, p.73). Interactive policy-making is an informal and *ad-hoc* form of policy-making, including as many citizens as possible. However it is still mainly a top-down initiative. Common local practice is that the initiative for interactive projects comes from the town hall or district boards. In the Netherlands these practices became trendy in the 1990s and since in many of the 450 communities in the Netherlands you can find types of decision making that involve citizens in an active way (Edelenbos and Monnikhof, 1998; Hendriks and Tops, 1997; Van de Peppel, 2001; Edelenbos, 2005). The issues that are dealt with through interactive processes range from very concrete (the restructuring of a market place or the closing of one of three open air swimming pools due to lack of funds) to more abstract issues, such as the future structuring of the whole community. The format used in the policy making process also varies widely; sometimes a small planning group consisting of citizens, civil servants and representatives from, for example, a housing corporation or a shopkeepers' organization is involved in intensive consultation, but in other cases the process is open to all citizens, who, for example through the use of internet, can join by commenting alternative plans (Leyenaar and Niemöller, 2003).

More recent is the increase in the application of deliberative processes both at the national and local level (Rosenberg, 2005). Interest in deliberative democracy can be traced to Habermas (1984), through the influential work of Dahl (1989), to Elster (1998), the essays in Bohman and Rehg (1997). Deliberative democratic decision-making goes beyond the mere aggregation of individual preferences that characterizes institutions such as elections and referendums. Reasoned discussion, dialogue and debate allow a range of options to be developed, examined, challenged and evaluated. Several benefits are claimed to result from involving in this debate the very people who are subject to its outcomes, such as an improvement in the levels of interest, awareness, information and analytical capacity among citizens; an increased sense of efficacy and involvement; a general increase in the willingness of citizens to take account of the arguments of others, leading to a broadening of the social consensus around the

³ The Civil Aviation Administration in Sweden set up this forum in order to democratise planning and decision-making on a major new airport in the Stockholm region. The local government of the city of Delft in the Netherlands asked citizens by using scale models for the restructuring of the city center (the Marketplace) to cooperate in the developments of the plans.

eventual decision and an increase in the legitimacy of decisions eventually taken, even among those who disagree with them. The main idea however, is that informed debate can generate democratic consensus over controversial issues.

There are several kinds of organized deliberate forums such as planning cells, citizen's jury's, consensus conferences and deliberative polling.⁴ These forums are inspired by ancient Athenian town meetings using direct democracy to decide upon political issues, and often use sampling methods to recruit citizen panels of manageable size for interpersonal deliberation. In a citizens jury, for example, citizens who have been randomly selected are invited for a period of time (weekend or one whole day) to deliberate on a particular problem. They are given carefully balanced briefing material, have the chance to interact with competing sets of experts and are given extensive opportunities for discussion and debate, moderated by trained moderators. Citizens' Juries, Citizens' Polls or Citizens' Assemblies have been conducted for example in Denmark on the Euro (Moller Hansen and Andersen, 2004), in Italy on the restriction of the city center for cars (Gianetti and Lewanski, 2006), in Dublin on the building of a waste incinerator (French, 2005) and in the Netherlands on Water Management (Huitema, 2004) and on the Electoral System (Leyenaar, 2006).

Inclusiveness in terms of gender

What is the significance of gender representation in these new institutional arrangements and forms of citizens' participation at the local level. Has the building of new institutions created opportunities for women and other newcomers on the political scene? And if so, is this because of strategic behaviour of women activists in and outside political parties or because of a change in attitude of the selectors? Now that women inside parties and at universities are much more aware and knowledgeable about the biases in institutions and selection procedures, influencing institution building in a positive way for women can be done more effectively. Another question is whether party leaders and other selectors are now more willing to share power because they view this as a way to improve the image of politics. Women are still newcomers to politics, often communicating differently with citizens and the media and thus sending out a less traditional image. Shaping new political institutions with a large share of women representatives may be way to introduce a new sort of politics.

In Italy, for example, political parties were forced to reform given people's total lack of trust in party politics. Women involved in the 'old' Communist Party (PCI) took advantage of this and demanded numerical and substantive representation in the new party to be formed. By giving their support to the formation of a new party, the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), women were in turn backed by the new party leadership in their demands for quotas and for the integration of women's issues in the party programme (Guadagnini, 2005). According to Guadagnini support for the women's demands was because these party leaders and officials were convinced that this would help to

⁴ J. Fishkin has registered 'Deliberative Poll' and 'Deliberative Polling' as trademarks. The Jefferson Center of the University of Minnesota did the same for 'Citizens' Jury'.

“consolidate a new image of the party in contrast with the old PCI, both in terms of its political elite and in its ideological content and programmes. Many thought that reform would help increase the appeal of the party to women voters who, in Italy, had always tended to vote for centre parties, especially for the Christian Democratic Party” (ibid).

Something similar happened with the debate on electoral reforms in Italy. Before the 1990s, gender was not an issue in the debates on political representation within parliament and parties. Until the second half of the 1980s, the feminist movement was not bothered to discuss the under-representation of women in politics. The discussion on the electoral laws created the opportunity to gender mainstream the debate on representation and led to the acceptance by parliament of the quota laws of 1993, albeit the effect was only short-term, since the laws were declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in 1995 (ibid).

Another intriguing example is the constitutional reform in Britain, introducing devolution and creating new legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Mackay and Brown have written extensively on how the devolution process in Scotland has resulted in a distribution of power between the sexes (Mackay, Myers and Brown, 2003, p.84-98). In 1989, the Scottish Constitutional Convention was established to discuss the future government of Scotland. When only 10 percent women found themselves appointed in this Convention, a broad coalition of women’s organisations, both partisan and non-partisan, was created, the Scottish Women’s Coordination Group (SWGG), who lobbied the Convention and other political players constantly in order to guarantee a fair women’s representation in the future institutions. They pleaded for an electoral system of proportional representation instead of the SMP-system used in the British elections and they convinced the Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish Liberal Democrats to accept the principle of gender balance in winnable seats. The first Scottish legislature consisted of 37 percent women MPs and five out of 22 cabinet ministers were women. Apart from the discussion on numerical representation the SWGG was able to demand attention for women’s interests and had the parliament adopt a gender mainstreaming approach (Brown et al, 2002, p.75,76). Although it has taken place within a total different context, the case of Northern Ireland is also part of the British devolution process. Here too all kinds of women’s groups realised in time that joint action was necessary in order to be guaranteed inclusion in the institutions. The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (NIWC) was founded and they succeeded through elections to gain two seats in the forum of political parties where the debate on the constitutional changes was going to take place. In the end, however, only 13 percent women were elected in the Northern Ireland Assembly, because the parties had placed the majority of women candidates in unwinnable seats (ibid, p.78,79). However, the NIWC played a substantial role, according to the memoirs of Mo Mowlam, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at that time, in the Good Friday agreement. Given their cross-party character, they were often able to pull the talks out of stalemate situations (Mowlam, 2002, p.233). Another interesting example is the establishment of the Civic Forum in Northern Ireland. The previously mentioned Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition proposed the formation of the Civic Forum “as a way of bringing

civil society into the political arena to ensure that the new arrangements were participatory and inclusive” (Meehan, 2001, p.3). The Civic Forum was to be a consultative body for the new government institutions. It consists of 60 members of which six are nominated by the Cabinet and the other 54 by extra-Assembly bodies for example from business, agriculture, trade unions, churches, arts and sports and education. It was finally established in 2001 and it included 37 percent women (in contrast to the 13 percent women appointed in the Northern Ireland Assembly) (ibid, p.7,8).

Finally, turning to direct democracy, referendums are open to all voters and therefore are not as gender biased, as are selection procedures of candidates for election lists. Nor are citizens’ juries, since the selection of the jury should always be done through random sampling. To be able to carry the decision to a much larger public, the representativeness of the sample is extremely important. Random sampling means that women and men have equal chances to be selected for the jury. A systematic observation in the deliberation groups in the Citizens Jury on Waste Incineration in Ireland in November 2003 did not show any significant gender differences in attendance as well in behaviour: in each group a few men and women dominated the discussion and the moderator took care for the others to join in as well (French, 2004).

These examples teach us that reforming *national* political institutions can create a window of opportunity for newcomers to politics. In the case of women we have seen that the goal of fairer representation for women forms a basis for women to cross party lines and form coalitions. In Italy, Scotland and Northern Ireland women from different political backgrounds and organisations joined each other in pursuit of a common goal. Another similarity is the strategic and self-confidence approach. Not only are the women involved very knowledgeable of the pitfalls of particular electoral systems, selection and nomination procedures, and do they share this knowledge with the architects of the new political institutions, but they are also more than ever convinced of their own capacities to stand for political office. Let us now turn to the local level.

Gender representation in new forms of interactive policy making

As mentioned before, especially at the local level in the Netherlands many new forms of local policy making have been established in the 1990s and 2000s. Whether these new arrangements meant a greater participation of women, was the focus of a study carried out in 2003/2004.

Research shows that in general women score lower on participation indicators than men do (Leyenaar, 1989:61-89). When we distinguish amongst the different types of participation such as electoral participation, conventional participation (membership of a party, involved in campaigning, contacting a politician or civil servant or the media), protest participation (taking part in a demonstration or sign a petition) and ad-hoc participation (less formal and institutionalized), we find that women compared to men have lower levels of conventional

participation and protest participation, vote as often as men do and are equally (or more) involved in ad-hoc activities. Table 1 shows recent participation figures for men and women.

Table 1: Political participation of men and women (percentages, 2002)

| Type of participation | % Women | % Men |
|--|----------------|--------------|
| Electoral | | |
| Voted in the 2002 elections | 97 | 97 |
| Conventional | | |
| Adherent of a political party | 38 | 42 |
| Party member | 6 | 9 |
| Displayed campaign poster | 3 | 4 |
| Convincing others to vote for a party | 11 | 14 |
| Donation to a party | 2 | 4 |
| Participated in an election meeting | 1 | 3 |
| Contacted | | |
| Politician or civil servant | 10 | 18 |
| Political party or organization | 5 | 12 |
| Radio/TV | 11 | 15 |
| Protest – Ad hoc | | |
| Participated in an ad-hoc political interest group | 8 | 6 |
| Took part in a demonstration | 9 | 10 |

Source: National Election Survey 2002

Another type of participation is the participation in (local) interest groups (table 2). Here too we find gender differences with women participating more often in Third World organizations, women's organisations and in housing associations. This difference according to type of organizations is even more apparent when we look at the voluntary sector (table 3).

Table 2: Membership of an interest group (percentages, 2002)

| Interest group (NGO) | % Women who are members | % Men who are members |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Third World | 25 | 21 |
| Trade Union | 24 | 30 |
| Professional Organization | 11 | 16 |
| Women's Organization | 12 | 2 |
| District Councils | 21 | 21 |
| Sport Associations | 35 | 37 |
| Environment | 44 | 44 |
| Housing Associations | 21 | 19 |

Source: National Election Survey, 2002

Table 3: *Voluntary work of women and men older than 18 years(percentages, 2003).*

| Type of voluntary work | Total % of people involved in voluntary work | Share of women % |
|------------------------|--|------------------|
| All | 42 | 51 |
| Youth Organization | 4 | 46 |
| Schools | 8 | 69 |
| (Health)care | 7 | 76 |
| Sport Club | 14 | 36 |
| Hobby Club | 5 | 41 |
| Cultural Association | 5 | 52 |
| Religious Association | 8 | 55 |
| Labour Associations | 2 | 29 |
| Other | 8 | 47 |

Source: SCP/CBS, 2004:195

Just as many women as men are involved in some kind of voluntary activity. Women, however, are clearly in the majority when it concerns voluntary participation in schools, in churches and in healthcare organizations. Fewer women than men are active in labour associations, in hobby and sport clubs.

I mentioned previously that the fast development of ICT has created new opportunities for political participation. Local governments bring in many different ICT-tools in order to enhance citizens' participation. The question here is whether the use of ICT enhances or diminishes the opportunities for women to participate. Analysing existing data on the use of computers we find that women still lag behind men with regard to interest in and use of computers. Women, between the ages of 18 and 44, use, on average, the computer 10 hours a week and internet 3 hours a week. Men do this respectively for 19 and 5 hours. However, computers and internet are no longer seen as novelties for a large majority of women and as such the use of ICT in local participation is not a real obstacle (SCP/CBS, 2002:221-223).

From earlier research on gender and political participation, it is further known that women tend to participate more often in less institutional and more informal processes of decision-making than in institutionalized processes (Lovenduski,1998:18). More informal ways of decision-making are often more accessible for people with little organizational experience and who have few contacts as well. It is also true that many women view these more informal and less institutional ways of decision-making as being more effective. A third reason is that, since these initiatives happen at the local level, they concern more often concrete subject matters to which women feel more attracted (Lovenduski, 1986; Leyenaar, 1989; Nelson and Chowdhury, 1994).

Based on these research findings one could expect women to participate more frequently in new forms of local decision making than in the more traditional ways of representative democracy. This expectation is based on the following characteristics of interactive policymaking:

- Issues to be decided upon are concrete and identifiable;
- Participation is open and accessible;
- The use of ICT enhances the accessibility;
- The initiative to participate comes from local government (top-down) and as such it takes less effort than bottom-up initiatives;
- Interaction is more informal;
- (Political) party interests are not on the foreground;
- Participation is effective;
- The impact of participation is tangible, i.e. a decision by the local council.

It is possible to formulate several expectations with regard to the impact of new forms of local political decision making on the participation of women. For example it is to be expected that the participation of women is dependent on the concreteness of the issue, on the level of access of the decision making process (inclusiveness, transparency of recruitment), on the efficacy of the participation and on the use of ICT.

However, these expectations are not sustained nor dismissed by reports evaluating experiments with interactive policy- or decision-making (Edelenbos, a.o, 2001:67-83). If concrete references are made to type and extent of participation, it provides often a contradictory picture: not more citizens participate and surely no newcomers address the political scene. Wille (2001) concludes after having examined projects in five different local communities: “Women, youth, ethnic minorities and the lower educated are often strongly underrepresented in interactive policy-making”.⁵

The main reason for initiating an in-depth study of ten cases of local policy making was the overall observation that there is indeed very little empirical data available on the actual participation of citizens and on the characteristics of those who participate.

Ten Cases of Local Decision- and Policy Making

In order to test the hypotheses on gender participation and interactive policy-making, several cases of new forms of decision-making have been analyzed. They took place in ten different communities ranging from large cities to small villages. They also differed in the use of communication technology, in the format (seminars, public debates, tele-panels etc), as well as in the policy arena.⁶

The following criteria for selection of the cases were used: it had to be an example of interactive policy-making with citizens; the process had to be completed, it had to be recent; half of the cases had to have used ICT and the cases had to differ with regard to the subject matter. The cases were selected by studying relevant literature, websites and by contacting local civil servants and politicians. In the appendix the ten cases are summarized.

⁵ Translation by the author.

⁶ For an extensive description of these ten cases I refer to Leyenaar, 2005.

All the cases were researched similar. First, a short case description was written, mentioning the initiators, the objective, the process and the number of citizens involved in each stage. Secondly, we calculated (by using available minutes of meetings) or estimated (by questioning those involved) the number of women and men involved in the policy making process. The sources were written information and interviews with the project manager (often the civil servant in charge of the project) and two women participants.

Findings

All case reports and interviews with the project-managers confirm that the main reason to initiate new forms of local decision-making is to involve as many citizens in the process as possible in order to increase the legitimacy of political decision-making. However, exact figures on the number and kind of participants are not easily available. There is no culture of monitoring systematically the involvement of citizens. With the exception of one case (Delft), participation figures were very difficult to obtain and often had to be calculated from attendance records or from the recollections of those present. So despite the intention of local governments to involve as many citizens as possible in these new forms of political decision making in order to increase their legitimacy, there has been hardly any monitoring of the qualitative and quantitative involvement of citizens.

The actual level of participation of citizens is relatively low. Although the plans were widely announced through the local government website, the dissemination of leaflets, announcements in local newspapers, levels of attendance at seminars and public gatherings are rather low. Whether a small number of participants is problematic, is of course dependant on the population one wants to reach. Often the process of decision-making is geared to a specific district or street. Legitimacy is not only determined by quantity, also by representativeness. When the population consists of different groups of citizens, the participants should reflect these groups. Again, background characteristics of participants have not been monitored. In nine of the ten cases no attention was paid to these aspects.

In five of the cases studied, ICT was used in one way or another. Participation in ICT-related activities is relatively small. Often the initiators (local government) put forward on the website of the city some statements concerning the decision at stake and ask citizens to react to these statements. Even in large cities (Amsterdam, The Hague) not more than 20 people took part in these exchanges on a regular basis. An exception is Delft where they used ICT to let citizens decide on the restructuring of the Marketplace (with scale models). Here around 1000 citizens made use of this opportunity. An additional problem is the registration of participants using ICT. Often people use nicknames and this makes it impossible to trace their background characteristics – or even to know whether the same person is participating under different names.

In four of the ten cases, the main participants were members or delegates from interest groups. Local organizations, such as the shopkeepers organization, the employers organization, the

farmers organization, were explicitly invited by the local government to send delegates to participate in the decision making process. Interestingly enough, in these four cases the subject was rather abstract: future structuring of the local community. The other six cases relate to a more concrete subject like the decision to close down swimming pools or the planning process around the restructuring of an industrial area.

With regard to gender representation, in all ten cases women (or men) were not specifically targeted. Everybody (individuals or delegates from interest groups) could put him or herself forward and participate in the process. Fewer women tended to be present at meetings (workshops / focus groups) with experts and delegates from interest organizations. In the latter case, the presence of women is dependent on the professional group concerned: in Tilburg, where the decision making process was about the relationship with chronically unemployed, half of the participants were women, since many women work in welfare. So women participate more in decision-making processes when individual citizens are targeted and not interest groups.

Both in Wieringen and in Texel, relatively few women participated in the decision-making process on the future structuring of the community. Here again this involved mainly representatives of local interest organizations and these were typically men. Women tend to get more often involved when concrete issues are being discussed, especially issues related to improving the living space.

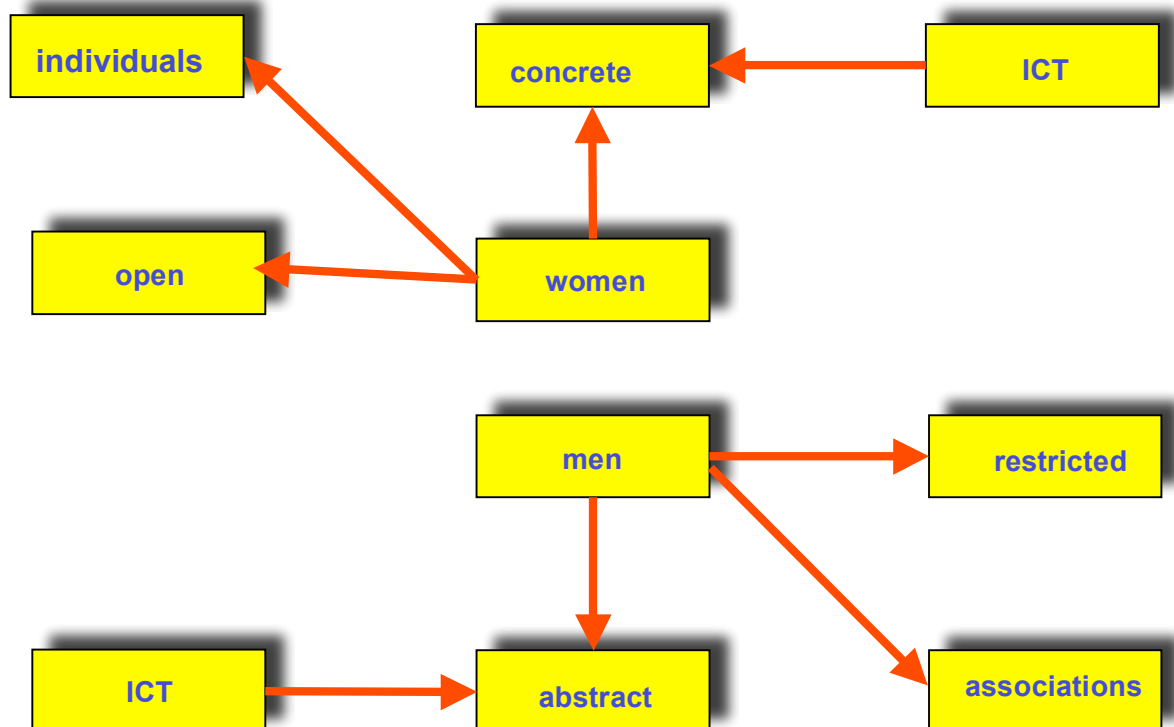
Public hearings are often part of the process of decision-making. At a first meeting citizens, are informed about the initiative of the local government to involve as many citizens in the process of decision making and they are asked to join the process. In a second and third meeting, further discussions are held until, in a final meeting, the citizens' preference is decided upon. Local councils make the formal decision of course, but in most cases they decide in favor of the outcome of the open process. Public meetings are well attended by women: in most cases half of the participants were women. When participation is decided upon through selection, than the number of women reduces. Especially in the more institutionalized forms of citizens' participation, such as in the village councils in Texel and in Oss, less than 30 percent are women. It seems that more women participate when participation is public and accessible to everybody. Fewer women are present in the more institutionalized forms of decision making, such as district or village councils.

What about gender representation in ICT-enabled activities? In three cases we find a participation of one-third women and two-thirds men. In Delft, 36 percent of participants in the Internet discussion on the restructuring of the Marketplace were women. In Amsterdam 34 percent of participants in Stadionline were women and in the Hague, the website of ReVa again about 33 percent of those who visited the site regularly to discuss the statements were women. It looks like women participate less than men in ICT-activities, regardless of the subject matter.

5. Gender model of citizens' participation

This study of the impact of new forms of local policy making on the participation of women results in a gender model of citizens' participation (figure 1).

Figure 1: Gendermodel of citizens' participation:



Based on this model it can be concluded that a more balanced participation of men and women can be encouraged by:

Subject: the more concrete the subject matter and the more focused the process is on improvement of the living space the higher the participation of women.

Targetgroup: in general more women will participate in **interactive** policymaking targeting non-associated, individual, citizens than processes that target representative of local interests.

Degree of institutionalisation: the more open the invitation policy and the more accessible the participation, the more women

ICT: in general the use of ICT results in fewer women participants. A gender balance should be reached by extra efforts to encourage women.

Important conditions are:

Importance attached to gender balance: part of the planning of an interactive process should be an inventory of those citizens touched by the policy under consideration. The

quality (and thus legitimacy) of the decision will improve when the participants are somewhat of a reflection of those involved.

Monitoring: knowledge about the actual participation in terms of numbers and in terms of differentiation between groups of citizens is essential for achieving the ultimate goal of organizing interactive policy making processes, increasing legitimacy for the decisions taken.

Concluding remarks

Politics is in need of a thorough cleansing. Citizens are making this clear by not playing according to the rules of representative party democracy. Long-standing political parties are especially in trouble, also because some of their own leaders have been seen as corrupt and have lost the trust of many adherents. The public image of party politics is bad and citizens' interest in political decision-making is low. In the past decade governments and political parties have introduced many different reforms in order to stem this tide of disillusionment. In some countries, radical change of institutional arrangements has taken place, and efforts have been made to introduce new ways of involving as many citizens as possible in political decision-making. Changing the institutions is one way to address the crisis; another way is to replace the kind of people who have been in charge in politics for over decades.

Not only are governments and parties convinced of the need to improve the image of politics, amongst other ways by widening their recruitment pool, but women activists in and outside parties also perceive the opportunities created by this need for reform. Thirty years of studying the question of 'why so few' now bears fruit. Their knowledge of gender biases in recruitment, selection and nomination procedures for political jobs is used to lobby for institutions that guarantee a fair representation of women. However, as was the case in the previous century, women still need to combine their efforts to fight for this. Only when there is a broadly based women's coalition present in the debate on constitutional reforms, will success be feasible.

The need to make political decision-making more inclusive is clearly present in Europe. Local governments have been rather active in initiating procedures to involve more citizens in decision-making. It is a positive development that local governments invest creativity, money, time and energy in the search for new ways to involve citizens in politics. However, the in-depth study shows that the main focus is on the *organization* of these procedures and not on the questions of how many and what kinds of people participate. Local governments should become more aware of the importance of representativeness for the legitimacy of decision-making and of the importance of the collection of data on the participation of citizens in these new forms of political decision-making.

Without specific attention to the representativeness of local political participation, in terms not only of gender but also of ethnicity and age, there is a danger that only 'traditional' types of participant use new forms of policy-making. Political dissatisfaction and alienation on the part of large groups of citizens will then remain a fact of life.

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Appendix: Ten case studies:

Amsterdam, *Stadsdeelraad Amsterdam Oud Zuid (December 2001-May 2002): Stadionline: consulting citizens through internet on issues such as housing, rubbish on the streets, supply of shops, safety etc.*

Delft: *Interactive consulting with citizens through the local newspaper, the city's website and the use of the Delft Internet Panel. The issue was the restructuring of the city centre (Market Place) of Delft.*

Den Haag: *Regentessebuurt en Valkenbos (Reva): Consultancy and participation in decision making through discussing sites on internet and by involving local residents in the maintenance of the area.*

Nijmegen: *Decision making process with (representatives of) the local residents about the restructuring and future use of an industrial area.*

Oss: *Participation of men and women in the newly established village- and district-councils.*

Stadskanaal: *Decision making through surveys and participation at meetings. The issue was the closing of one of the three open air swimming pools due to lack of funds.*

Texel: *Workshops with representatives of local interests (shops, recreation, farming etc.) and with citizens about the future structuring of Texel.*

Tilburg: *Decision making through panels consisting of representatives of social partners as well as the clients (long term unemployed and home-less people). The issue was here to define the terms of an agreement (policy) between the city and the clients about work, income and care.*

Wieringen: *Consulting citizens and local interest groups through meetings, a competition and dissemination of information through local newspapers. The issue was the future structuring of Wieringen.*

Zwolle: *Aalanden. Decision-making by local residents on issues of concern for their own local area through meetings where citizens have to agree on a concrete three year-plan, including the distribution of funds meant for the development of their area.*

Summary of the case-studies findings

| City | ICT | Other methods | Organisations or individuals | Abstraction Subject matter | Type of interactivity | Participation % women - % men |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Amsterdam | Internet debate | | Individual Citizens | Concrete | Counselling | 33 - 67 |
| Delft | Interactive modelbuilding on Internet | City newspaper | Individual Citizens | Concrete | Advising | DIP: 42 - 58 Portal: 36 - 64 Paper : 50 - 50 |
| Den Haag | Propositions on website | Streetactivities Meetings | Individual Citizens | Concrete | Advising | Website: 36 - 64 Streetactivities. unknown Meetings 25 - 75 |
| Nijmegen | | Open Plan process | Individual Citizens | Concrete | Co decision making | Planninggroup 40 - 60 Residentsgroups: 50 - 50 Public Meetings 50 - 50 |
| Oss | | District~and Village councils | Individual Citizens | Abstract & Concrete | Advising | Councils 28 - 72 |
| Stadskanaal | | Meetings | Individual Citizens | Concrete | Advising | Working: 34 –66 groups |
| Texel | Internet propositions | Workshops Debate at meetings Village councils | Individual Citizens & Organizations | Abstract | Informing & Counselling | Debates: 25 - 75 Committees: 33 - 67 |
| Tilburg | Internet propositions | Panel Meetings | Organizations | Abstract | Advising | Panels: 50 - 50 |
| Wieringen | | Meetings Contest | Individual Citizens & Organizations | Abstract | Counselling | Meetings 10 - 90 Contest 50 - 50 |
| Zwolle | | District meetings | Individual Citizens & Organizations | Concrete & Abstract | Advising | Meetings: 50 - 50 |