

Dialogues and citizen initiatives in stigmatized urban areas: reflections on the development of participatory planning principles in Gothenburg¹

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Abstract: A policy for citizen participation in planning is currently under development in Gothenburg, with parallels in many other Swedish municipalities. Current local changes can also be connected to a more long-term national and international policy formation, as well as planning practice and theoretical discourses promoting a more deliberative governance model where citizens and other stakeholders take active part in urban development and management processes. The leading question in this paper is how current transformations in planning policy and practice in Gothenburg may affect the possibilities for empowerment of citizens and community capacity building in stigmatized urban areas. Drawing from theory and ongoing case studies, a series of issues are identified and discussed. One central problem is the confusion between two potentially conflicting ideas of the citizen's role in society. It is argued that the currently developing principles of participatory planning focus on inviting individuals to formalized dialogues in the reign of the authorities, rather than enhancing citizens' own collective initiatives and capability of mobilization and self-organization.

Keywords: citizen participation; citizen initiatives; dialogue; urban governance; democracy models

Old and new spinach

“The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach”. The phrase introduces Sherry Arnstein's classical article ‘A ladder of citizen participation’ (Arnstein, 1969). It suggests that this is something we do not really like, although we know should be good for us. It was almost a half century ago, but exactly the same kind of ladders is still reproduced and, indeed, a

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typical feeling about citizen participation remains the same: it's a bit tacky and bitter but we're commanded to have it and, well, it's supposed to be nutritious².

If we look twenty years back, public participation was recognized by the UN Conference on Environment and Development as one of the key principles for solving the social and environmental crises of the world (UNCED, 1992). Looking at this year's sequel of the Rio conference in 1992, the statements about participation offer no more sense of progress than do statements in other fields. However, judging from current policy development and multitudes of initiatives on different levels in the Swedish planning system, the call for involving the public and excluded groups in the processes seems more topical than ever. Today's wave of interest in citizen participation can perhaps be seen as an implementation of earlier commitments such as Agenda 21, the Habitat Agenda and the Aalborg Commitments (UNCED, 1992; UN-Habitat, 1996; Aalborg Commitments Secretariat, 2004).

Meanwhile, within the academic world, there has been a constant debate on participatory planning (see, e.g., Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002). In the 1990s, several influential scholars suggested the emergence of a new direction in planning theory and practice, often referred to as 'communicative' or 'collaborative' planning (Healey, 1992; 1997). Drawing from different strands of postmodernist criticism, it promoted core principles such as that knowledge is socially constructed; that each planning situation is unique and contextually bound; and that authoritarian expert planning should be replaced by participative governance based on deliberative reasoning where multiple stakeholders meet on equal basis. Although critics have questioned the validity of such a 'communicative turn', its originality, its usefulness as analytical framework, and its virtues as a guideline in planning practice (Fainstein, 2000; Huxley & Yiftachel, 2000; Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002), it cannot be denied that it connects rather well with some of the current trends in policy development.

For example, the Commission on Democracy, set up by the Swedish Government around the year 2000, promoted a development of a "participant democracy with reinforced elements of the deliberative democracy theory [which] means that each citizen must be given greater possibilities to participation, influence and involvement" (SOU, 2000, p.243). Similarly, new guidelines for how to increase public involvement in planning are developed on municipal level around Sweden (see, e.g., SKL, 2008).

² It should be noted here, though, that the view on spinach, both regarding its taste and nutritiousness, is multi-fold: many actually like it, and some may think that it is not good for your health having too much of it. The same goes for the view on public participation.

As a last reference in this little introduction, another conceptualization of a more participatory alternative to conventional planning has been envisaged by Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright as ‘Empowered Participatory Governance’ (2003). This notion has been developed through analyses of a number of experimental democracy initiatives in different parts of the world, which had inspired the authors; it derives from practice rather than theory. In terms of definition, empowered participatory governance is openly based on the principles of: (a) focus on concrete public concerns, (b) grassroots participation, and (c) use of deliberative reasoning. Moreover, the authors suggest that (d) devolution of power to local units should be combined with (e) coordination and supervision of superordinate bodies and (f) institutionalization of grassroots initiatives aiming at integrating them into the formal governmental system; all enabled only if there is (g) a ‘rough equality of power’ between the participants.

A way to empowerment and community capacity building?

While the main ethical imperative for Arnstein’s call for participation in the 1960s concerned democratic citizen rights and inclusion of the poor, later calls are also underpinned by a series of additional incentives, connected to challenges such as environmental problems, economic globalization and commercialization (compare with Khakee, 2006; Abrahamsson, 2012). But the classical issues of urban poverty and social exclusion never lost their significance and connected to increasing spatial segregation, they constitute what many see as the most urgent urban challenge. Therefore, a leading question should be if and how participation can improve the situation for all those who are usually denoted ‘excluded’ – who lack sufficient income, perhaps also education and long-term secure housing; who feel disconnected from any possibility to influence decisions in society; to whom society’s institutions seem abstract and distant or even threatening. And, as noted above, this kind of exclusion is not only something attributed to individuals, but to whole housing areas or even city districts (see, e.g., Andersson *et al.*, 2009).

The failure of the current system to deliver welfare to many geographical areas is apparent and many describe the situation as alarming: schools have severe difficulties to reach educational goals; health facilities, community centres, youth clubs, etc. are closed; also commercial services disappear. Such changes contribute negatively to the image of the area, which in turn diminish the possibilities of revitalization. Many grassroots initiatives are explicitly a response to such perceived vicious circles of decay where they aim to trigger a broad move-

ment of resistance and stand up for alternative visions (see, e.g., Olsson, 2008; Castell, 2010; Kings, 2011).

Within the Interplace³ project, a transdisciplinary research team has studied a number of local citizen initiatives and local authorities' invited participation processes in stigmatized housing areas. The methods have been a combination of interviews, participant observation, reference group seminars and action research where research group members have been personally involved in some of the processes supporting their development. Key informant interviews have been performed with officials and local residents. The study is not yet finalized, and as it involves only temporary sequences in the life spans of studied processes, the more long-term effects cannot be foreseen yet. Anyhow, some tentative results can be presented, and the theme of this paper is to discuss how the task to develop participative approaches in urban governance may take form in the meeting between citizen initiatives and local authorities.

Transformations in Gothenburg

In Gothenburg, second largest city in Sweden, the terms 'participation' and 'citizen dialogue' is heard everywhere at the moment, associated with hope, fear, belief and mistrust. Citizens may hope it will give them a say in decisions about their city's development, or they will mistrust it as a false show. Planners and politicians may believe in its importance, but also fear the confrontations it involves and its uncertain consequences. Some years ago, in connection to the plans of regenerating a large former traffic and harbour area in the city centre, a partly experimental, large citizen dialogue process was carried out: Dialog Södra Älvstranden. Although it was ambitious in many regards, the democratic commitment was questioned and participating citizens felt deceived at the end when the process was taken over by others (see, e.g., Thörn, 2008; Johannesson & Töllborg, 2010). Citizen dialogues are also frequently used locally, e.g. in connection to plans of infill development or reorganizations of schools, sometimes with contested results (e.g. Hansson & Hallberg, 2011; De Bourg & Larsson, 2012).

Another important background of the current policy development on public participation in Gothenburg is a greater organizational reform – the formerly twenty-one city district councils were merged into ten new ones in January 2011, and they also got new responsibilities in the field of urban planning (Gothenburg City Council, 2010). The main reason for the reorganization was economic efficiency, but a special task was also formulated to investigate

³ "The interplay between citizen initiatives and invited participation in urban planning: and interaction research project", financed by Formas 2011-2013, see mellanplats.wordpress.com

how democracy can be deepened and how citizen participation can be increased and improved. As a part of this, a document with guidelines for how to work with citizen dialogue and participation will be proposed for the city council this autumn, and a common set of concepts and tools are already being implemented among politicians and public servants through meetings and seminars.

In this work, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (a national association known as *SKL* in Swedish) has been influential. Through series of studies, reports, and conferences, SKL have developed and spread ideas and references (e.g. SKL, 2008; SKL, 2009; 2011). One of the models which is particularly wide-spread is a ‘participation stairs’ with five steps, developed from Arnstein’s classical ladder mentioned above. The five steps partly correspond to level 3-7 in Arnstein’s original model, ranging from the level where participatory techniques are used to give the citizens information about ongoing planning processes, to a level where citizens actually get a direct role in the actual decision-making (see Figure 1).

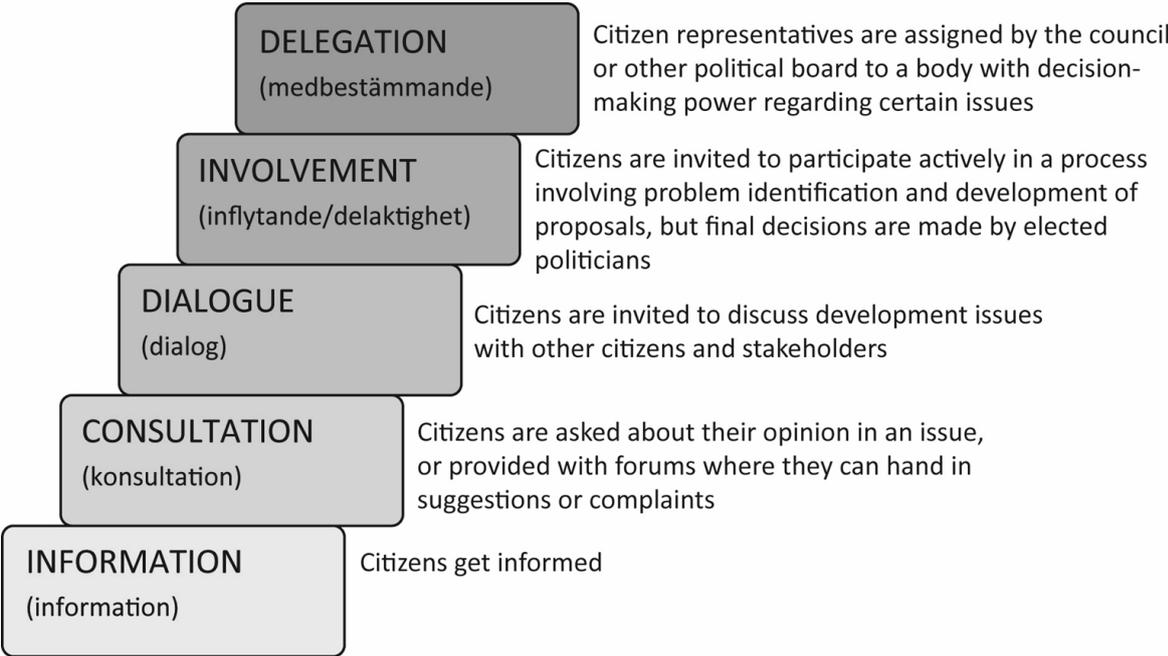


Figure 1. Widely spread five-step model of citizen participation (redrawn from, e.g., Lindholm & Moritz, 2007; SKL, 2011).

The same type of five-step model will be found in the proposal of guidelines for citizen participation in Gothenburg, as well as in similar policies around the country (e.g. Haninge, 2010; Bjuv, 2012; Värmdö, 2012).

Six reflections

In the following, a number of issues will be raised concerning the formation of a new policy on public participation in Gothenburg. As the policy itself is yet only on a draft stage and the research project framing the study still not finalized, this is no evaluation. The aim here is instead to introduce a discussion around certain themes which may become important to follow up during the continuous research and policy implementation processes. The themes have arisen from analyses of texts as well key informant interviews, participant observations and transdisciplinary knowledge workshops. The studies have been carried out in disadvantaged housing areas and one important perspective is how to achieve local community capacity building and empowerment in such areas.

First, some differences between Arnstein's original ladder and SKL's remodelled stairs are worth reflecting upon. Arnstein's two lowest levels, that she called nonparticipation, are not included in the SKL model carried out in Gothenburg and other Swedish municipalities, and neither is her highest level: 'citizen control'. This is natural, as Arnstein's ladder was presented to support a discussion rather than providing a tool for planners which is the case with the current model; Arnstein actually indicated that 'citizen control' could be seen as a slightly metaphorical notion. However, she also denoted the levels of 'information', 'consultation' and 'placation' as degrees of 'tokenism', which she disqualifies for not essentially changing the power positions. When looking at the definitions of the levels in the stairs, it could actually be suggested that all the five would count as tokenism in Arnstein's vocabulary: SKL's 'dialogue' suits best as a kind of consultation, while the two top levels in the stairs appear to match what Arnstein calls 'placation', i.e. when citizens are invited to committees or boards where they have no final decision-making rights, or 'hand-picked' into a body with limited mandates. To avoid the 'placation' label, Arnstein emphasizes the importance of legitimacy of citizen representatives, through connection to a bottom-up community organization.

Second, a related reflection concerns a plausible shift in the way the model is comprehended as it has turned from a ladder to a stairs. Arnstein's ladder clearly points at a direction of progress: it is to be climbed. At least the mid-section is described almost as an evolutionary trajectory, as 'steps towards legitimate participation' further up. This metaphor is absent in the matrix graph designed by Lindholm and Moritz (2007), which is the prequel to the five-step stairs. Although there is a hierarchy between the levels in terms of citizens' degree of influence, all levels constitute similarly relevant fields of action. And the same goes for the stairs:

The goal is not to step away from the lower levels, but to use participation on the level which suits the situation. It suggests that participation should be promoted on all levels parallel: In some types of planning processes, or stages in a process, information can be a sufficient level, while we may go for involvement or delegation in other situations. However, when discussing public participation practices with representatives from the municipality, the focus is mainly on different consultation forms and ‘dialogue’; the level of ‘delegation’ is rarely mentioned.

Third, the ‘scope’ of the process to participate around is an essential parameter. Among the examples mentioned in Arnstein’s article, many concern approval and design of new development projects, but there are also more comprehensive processes regarding neighbourhood regeneration and management. In discussions interviews with officials, a tendency can be traced that well-defined and concrete projects are preferable for dialogue processes, rather than complex and large scopes with many uncertainties. Of course, limited tasks are easier handled and the outcomes will proceed more smoothly through the formal planning and decision-making processes. Experiences from attempts with public dialogues on large and complex issues are often associated with conflicts or even failures. In many recent policy documents, a distinction is made between ‘citizen dialogue’ and ‘user dialogue’, where the latter concerns evaluation and improvement of one municipal service provider (e.g. a school), while the former concerns planning or development projects not limited to a certain user group but to all residents within a geographical area. A common suggestion is that politicians should be responsible for citizen dialogues, while user dialogues can be handled by servants in the public administration. However, independent of this categorization, the point here is that there is a significant difference in getting influence over the choice of paint colour and taking part in the planning that identify repainting as a good priority. This discussion thus connects to timing: at what stage in a process are citizens involved and for how long? There has been much talking about the benefits in involving citizens in very early stages of the planning process when the direction of the project is still very open. It could also start prior to any specific development ideas at all (e.g. with the question ‘how can we achieve sustainable development in this neighbourhood’). However, the studies indicate a general disbelief about the feasibility of such open and broad approaches. It seems that the focus ahead will be more on ‘user dialogues’ and limited scopes for citizen dialogues.

Forth, the current discussions on participation are highly focused on ‘invited participation’ rather than initiatives from citizen groups or other stakeholders outside the formal planning system. In an international comparison, Sweden has a tradition of a very strong planning sys-

tem, but it has also been argued that much of the power of initiative is lost (see, e.g., Blücher & Graninger, 2006). Not least when it comes to stigmatized suburban areas, a general feeling is that too little planning is carried out and even less being implemented⁴. In interviews with planners, one of the most strongly conveyed ideas about participation is that any process involving citizens should be avoided if there is no means to implement the project. It would be rather depressing if the only thing to participate around in areas with lack of development interests is how to solve further welfare cuts. However, in lack of public and private development investments, there may be initiatives in civil society. Many seem to underestimate the amount of grassroots initiatives of different kinds in stigmatized areas and a key question is thus if and how these can get a more active role in planning and development (compare to Kings, 2011). The studies indicate that even groups which are acknowledged for important contributions may have very little contact with representatives from the municipality. The role of such groups as representatives for the inhabitants and also as resources and agents for change could obviously be developed (see also Stenberg, 2004). And perhaps not only in processes initiated by politicians and planners. For example, there could also be procedures for how a group of local residents can summon the city district council for a dialogue on issues they want to discuss.

Fifth, and in connection to the previous issue, the current policy development on public participation appears firmly anchored in the representative democracy system, where the ultimate responsibility always falls on the politicians. Potential conflicts between representative and attempts of direct democracy are sometimes mentioned in policy texts and interviews, but more rarely developed. The Commission on Democracy notes that the relationship between direct and indirect democracy “is complex and full of contradictions” (SOU, 2000, p.245), but it also argues that the representative political system has more to gain than lose by letting more people into political involvement. More critical concerns have been raised e.g. by Mikael Gilljam (2006), who sees an obvious risk in that only already privileged groups will be benefitted through more participant democracy, on the benefit of the already excluded. Although the studied citizen initiatives emphasize broad community development rather than particularistic interests, the potential dilemma should not be ignored. Each time public servants or politicians meet the claims from one group who raised their voice, there will be a

⁴ A governmental commission recently suggested temporary tax subsidies for employers in disadvantaged urban areas, hoping this will attract investments from private companies there and more jobs. This can be seen as a sign of the lack of public development initiatives, in particular since public employers are continuously moved away from these areas.

question of which other groups there could be. Several interviewees have questioned the accuracy of letting grassroots groups become too influential and set the agenda. To a certain level, citizen participation is doubtless a means to bring in new voices and potentially strengthen the legitimacy of the representative system. However, higher levels of participation, if control is transferred to citizen groups, could of course threaten the system. Each step towards participant or direct democracy, may also be a step away from representative democracy. There seems to be contradictive messages, where the general policy is supporting and encouraging grassroots initiatives, while at the same time never renouncing from the principle of fair and objective treatment. Concretely, this may cause mis-communication, frustration and distrust, as has also been seen in the case study.

Sixth, one type of comments from interviewed officials concerns the importance of clarification of roles and responsibilities, which also seems to be one important part of the current policy development. From a formalistic point of view, this is of course essential to make the representative democracy trustworthy. Maybe, a number of recent bribery and deception scandals within the public administration of Gothenburg have contributed to increased caution about informal arrangements (Erlingsson & Linde, 2011; Sveriges Radio, 2012). However, as has been discussed on research seminars in the project, the roles of politicians, public servants and citizens are naturally intertwined and cannot easily be discerned without risking also losing added values imbedded in the connections. Concretely, several of the successful local development initiatives brought up in interviews are results from processes started jointly by engaged officials and citizens, often also thanks to personal support from individual politicians. It has been suggested that such kind of ‘partnerships’, partly based on personal ties and informal commitments, are accepted and even commended regarding inner city developments, but viewed with suspicion and deprecated when it comes to housing areas of the economic underclass.

Crossroads

There is a vivid discussion in Gothenburg on how the city should be governed in collaboration with its citizens, and new guidelines are currently under development. We are at some kind of crossroads. Our representative democracy and welfare system, backed up by a capable municipal planning tradition and a corporative culture with tight relations to civil movements and private companies, provided a reliable and stable road so far. But a number of new challenges

have arisen, calling for consideration of alternative directions. There is a great uncertainty of which pathways are passable and whereto they eventually may lead.

Altogether, the reflections above would suggest that the policy and practice development currently undertaken in the city of Gothenburg (and connected to similar movements in other Swedish municipalities) does not represent a particularly radical shift of the kind envisioned as, e.g., Fung and Wright's (2003) 'Empowered Participatory Governance', or for that sake Arnstein's 'Citizen Control'. Rather, it seems to develop as a more pragmatic step-by-step transformation of the traditional representative democracy system where methods for invited participation are refined, especially regarding the levels of consultation and dialogue. However, already the fact that there seems to be a common ground among interviewed officials that more citizen participation is the right way to go indicates that some kind of communicative turn (or perhaps twist is a better word) takes place.

That forecast is of course a bit assumptive at this early stage, but sketching up simplified ideas of such as 'crossroads' and 'turns' may fulfil the purpose of facilitating a constructive discussion. At a reference group seminar, one official working for the municipality as process facilitator urged for changing the idea of planning as a machine towards seeing it as a living organism. It remains to establish exactly what that shift would involve, but it can easily be connected to the idea of the turn at the crossroads: leaving a government system where the ideal is frictionless exchange between collaterally independent actors who have given roles and clearly defined mandates and who follow the formal rules with instrumental and foreseeable rationality; entering a governance system focused on handling confusion, complexity and conflicts in adaptive, transgressive and partly informal processes encompassing deliberation, negotiation and mobilization of resources along the way. As Gilljam (2006) points out, such a vision would be attractive for people of different political ideologies who see the current system as oppressive, but there are also risks in turning away from representative democracy. When there is no longer faith in that the current system is able to deliver what people need, though, measurement to reform it must be taken.

Anyhow, a deep radical shift seems distant and so far the representative democracy seems to be safeguarded in the policy development. It is more likely that disappointment with spread among advocates of citizen power, as there are signals indicating that the current focus on participatory planning concerns inviting individual citizens to formalized dialogues in the reign of the authorities, rather than enhancing citizens' own collective initiatives and capabil-

ity of mobilization and self-organization. It will be a question for the future to answer which effects the current transformations will have regarding empowerment and local capacity building in areas which are stigmatized and disadvantaged in the competition on urban resources. The integration of collective grassroots action and politically controlled institutions in line with the empowered participatory governance principles could provide inspiration for a continuous discussion on the issue.

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