How to "save" citizen participation? Democratising and pluralising public policies through an ethnographic and experimental approach?

Key messages

1 Institutional participation processes generate criticism, disappointment and frustration, both for the public authorities and for the participants.

2 "Saving" participation and contributing to the updating of its formats and issues requires taking a few steps back.

3 The tumultuous pedestrianisation of the city centre was an opportunity for the p-lab project to study and experiment with an expanded form of participation, which we call "lateral participation".

Key messages

4

The p-lab project has therefore detected and creatively amplified both innovative approaches through which public authorities try to involve or rally citizens around a project or common issue, and the very diverse ways in which the people of Brussels take part in the life of the city on their own: mobilisation in the public space, contribution to economic life, hijacking of developments, expression on social networks, tagging, etc.

5

As a result of these observations and experiments, p-lab advocates participatory actions that are responsible (capable of gathering the voices expressed in the field in order to respond to them), plural (capable of multiplying the registers and forms of communication), field-based (go to where the public is), inventive (arouse curiosity, open up the imagination and readapt to each situation) and sustainable (attentive to the consequences of what is put in place).

Introduction

Involving citizens in matters that concern them is at the heart of many of Brussels' public policies. However, participation processes often lead to disappointment, frustration and even disinterest for everyone involved. Citizens do not feel heard or do not see their opinions and contributions being acted upon; public authorities feel trapped by sometimes contradictory injunctions and needs that are impossible to take into account. In light of this widespread complexity and disenchantment, the p-lab project aimed to give "participation" a better chance of unleashing its democratic and practical potential.

The tumultuous pedestrianisation of the city centre has been a fertile ground for observing both the new ways in which public authorities attempt to involve or rally citizens around a project, and the more diverse ways in which citizens (and even more-than-human entities - trees, concrete, viruses, etc.) take part in and contribute to the progressive composition of a part of the city. As a field for investigation and experimentation, pedestrianisation has not only made it possible to identify, amplify and bring out more inclusive and emancipatory forms of participation, it has also drawn out lessons for other places and cases in the Brussels-Capital Region, under the formula of "Learning from pedestrianisation".

Methods, approaches and results

p-lab is action research, at the crossroads between fundamental and operational research. It combines:

1.   an ethnographic dimension, attentive to diverse ways of participating in the life of the city, which emanate from institutions as well as from different public groups, including more-than-human entities (animals, plants, or other entities concerned by political choices as much as human inhabitants);

2. an experimental dimension, focused on the fabrication and deployment of physical and playful systems to probe and amplify some of these forms of participation in the streets of Brussels (fig. 1 and fig. 2);

3. the operational testing of the results, where the systems, tools and recommendations resulting from the research were tested, integrated or recreated within the framework of real cases, in collaboration with institutional (fig. 3) and civil society (fig. 4) stakeholders in the field;

4. all this within an analytical and critical perspective, trying to highlight not only the possible solutions, but also the limits, pitfalls and reservations as much with regard to our own proposals, as to what we have observed.

The approach is pluralistic, diplomatic and "responsible".

Pluralist, insofar as it increases the perspectives on participation, both in terms of form (by multiplying registers, styles, audiences and places of participation) and in terms of content (by taking into account the issues, concerns and aspirations of different entities, both human and more-than-human).

Diplomatic[1], in the sense that we try to highlight and build points of crossing, translation and linkage between these different perspectives. Lastly, "responsible"[2], which means cultivating the ability to respond to a multitude of entities involved but also caring about the consequences of both the means and the ends of participation.

1.   Stengers, Isabelle. Cosmopolitiques. Paris: La Découverte, 2003.

2.   Barad, Karen. Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning. Second Printing edition. Durham: Duke university Press, 2007.

Methods, approaches and results

Fig 1. The «wild participation office»: a set of mobile devices, combining seriousness and humour, placed on Place de la Bourse during the 2019 elections. These «investigation and participation» devices invited passers-by to give an account of their daily commitments, as well as what, for them, was «political».

Methods, approaches and results

Fig 2. Dévogramme: a mobile robot that wanders around the street proclaiming all sorts of messages taken from photographs of pedestrianisation. With Dévogramme, the idea was to question the potential of the public space as an alternative space for interaction, expression and enticement, open to a diverse range of stakeholders, including the more-than-human entities.

Methods, approaches and results

Fig 3. MA/PA: a committed and reflexive brainstorming tool for any person or group wanting to set up participatory processes in the framework of urban projects. MA/PA was developed with perspective.brussels and underwent user tests and critical feedback from various Brussels stakeholders.

Methods, approaches and results

Fig 4. Wave New World/Le Meilleur des Ondes: a set of speculative mobile devices that invited passers-by to express their fears or aspirations regarding the deployment of 5G in Brussels. This intervention took place in collaboration with various associations and movements concerned by these questions and wanting to open up the debate to as many people as possible

Methods, approaches and results

The result:

1. a vast repertoire of ways of participating in the life of the city, as well as issues and aspirations that emanate from different fields and can inform public policies[3];

2. a series of tools, devices, methods and «principles» that are creatively inspired by certain elements of this repertoire and can be (re)used or adapted, in whole or in part[4];

3. a work on the possibility and benefit of replicating tools, methods and participation issues in other contexts or arenas than those in which they emerged[5].

3   A selection of these can be viewed at https://urbanspecies.org/en/logs

4   See: https://urbanspecies.org/en/blog?category=984 and https://urbanspecies.org/en/blog?category=986

5   Notably through two working sessions, the first more experimental and artistic, called Amplificathon
     https://urbanspecies.org/en/amplificathon, the other more reflective and programmatic
     «Copy Paste Participation: On the transferability of methods, toolkits and other «good» participatory practices»
     https://urbanspecies.org/en/copy-paste_participation; see also our next publication,
     the guide on «lateral participation»
     https://urbanspecies.org/en/blog?category=985

Conclusions

p-lab is at the intersection between, on the one hand, the consideration of new institutional participation devices (citizen budgets, smartphone applications, festive events, contests, etc.) and, on the other hand, the recognition of forms of action and expression not requested by institutions (mobilisation in the public space, contributions to economic life, hijacking of developments, posts on social networks, tags, fanzines, festivals, etc.). Although they are not very connected or linked, some have common features, such as anchoring in ordinary experience, importance given to play, aesthetics, etc. They open up new opportunities for participation that is «lateral»[6], i.e. not directly political, but whose indirect effect can be political (legitimisation, empowerment, activation). In addition, certain events (accentuation of the environmental crisis, pandemic, etc.)

mean that stakeholders and forms of action that are normally separate or sometimes even opposed find themselves faced with common challenges and demands where there were none before. This in turn generates the need - shared by quite heterogeneous stakeholders - to find or create new frames of reference and understanding, as well as different tools and methodologies[7] which allow these links. The theoretical, experimental and operational proposals of p-lab, including the recommendations below, are in line with this.

6   Nicolas-Le Strat, Pascal. 'Faire politique latéralement, Lateralizing Politics. Storytelling as Intermediation'. *Multitudes*, no. 45 (16 May 2011): 192–97., Espèces Urbaines/Urban Species, *Participation latérale*, to be published.

7   Marres, Noortje, Michael Guggenheim, and Alex Wilkie, eds. Inventing the Social. Manchester: Mattering Press, 2018. Dowling, Robyn, Kate Lloyd, and Sandra Suchet-Pearson. 'Qualitative Methods II: «More-than-Human» Methodologies and/in Praxis'. Progress in Human Geography 41, no. 6 (December 2017): 823–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132516664439.

Policy recommendations[8]

1   Detecting and taking into account what is expressed in the field

Inviting citizens to participate in various city projects is a laudable goal, but it should not be forgotten that citizens and the other entities that make up the city do not wait for public authorities to make their voices heard, express their needs and contribute to urban life. This is because participation is not only played out in institutional arenas and settings. A first recommendation from our research is to develop attention to forms of participation and expression that exist outside, below or alongside institutions. These can be citizen mobilisations and initiatives, which overlap with the places and issues that are or will be subject to a participatory process. They may be dissenting and opposing voices. They may also involve marginal uses or practices, which although not very visible, inform those who take the time to observe them about the needs or aspirations of the field. The appropriations, presences and uses that took place during the pedestrianisation test phase, for example, could have served as a basis for revising or refining the related redevelopment project[9]. This attention could have made it possible to detect stakeholders - including non-human ones, interests and needs that the authors of the project had not thought of, but that they could/should - have taken into consideration.

Furthermore, when groups or entities are likely to be adversely affected by or opposed to a project, the need to involve them in a participatory process to take their demands into account is all the more important, and could sometimes avoid having to deal with blocks later on. Similarly, if citizen initiatives already exist, the participatory process can be designed to amplify and equip them on their terms, rather than adding to them, often without taking them into account. In any case, a minimum knowledge of the interests of those at whom the participatory process is aimed should allow for the introduction of participatory mechanisms that are more in line with them and better situated.

2   Multiplying the invitations, formats, places and occasions for participation

One of the recurring criticisms of participatory processes concerns the lack of diversity in the present audiences, or even the absence of audiences at all. While it is true that you can never get «everyone» to participate, it is important to recognise that the choice of issues and the format and type of interactions used will attract certain audiences rather than others. Indeed, not everyone speaks the same language, has the same interests, the same knowledge or the same skills, the

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8   All these recommendations are integrated into the functioning of the MA/PA brainstorming tool, which we developed as part of this research so it can be made available to any person, body or administration wanting to set up a participatory process. See: https://urbanspecies.org/en/mapa

9   Cf. our article «La participation urbaine en ses objets : Pour une « respons-abilité » accrue».

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same availability, and the same schedules. To diversify audiences or mobilise hard-to-reach audiences, it is important to take into account the different ways in which participants are concerned with or affected by an issue, be ready to welcome other issues - political, as well as economic, identity, practical - brought to light by these people and entities, and diversify the ways in which people participate. For example, it is possible to increase the number of languages in which participation is made possible, including non-verbal forms of communication (fig. 1, 2 and 4). It is also interesting to vary the registers of participation (not only discursive and deliberative but also playful, aesthetic, practical) as much as the knowledge and skills necessary to access the devices (through arguing but also imagining and making) and the forms of commitment, from the weakest to the most constrictive, expected from the participants... Finally, it is important to vary the spaces and temporalities of participation to adapt to the places and times of the people we want to reach (and not the other way around). In our research, for example, we invested a great deal in the public space; we went out into the street with what we called «investigation and participation devices» to meet various audiences, some of whom would not necessarily set foot in traditional[10] participative arenas.

3   Deploy and preserve the democratic potential of participation

To maximise the benefits of participation (adherence to the project, empowerment, adaptation to the field) and minimise the perverse effects (participation fatigue, cynicism, «it's useless, they will do as they want anyway», etc.), it is essential to:

•   think about the means of participation in relation to its ends and consequences. One frequent criticism concerns what is known as «front-end participation». In other words, many participatory processes only serve to «sweeten the pill» for projects already decided elsewhere. Beyond these criticisms, it is true that the organisation of a participatory process is often the result of a legal constraint[11], or based on «ready-to-use» tools and methods. In p-lab, we have observed a great deal of interest on the part of various public authorities in toolboxes and other participatory «best practices», as well as in benchmarking processes. We have also seen a proliferation of tools and devices that have a reputation for success: from the fishbowl to the online questionnaire, the suggestion box and citizen budgets. Although this inflation of participatory tools is to be welcomed, it focuses attention on the format and framing of participation, rather than on its purpose, aims and consequences. However, we cannot

10   See Fig. 1, 2 and 4 as well as our article: ''Des Dispositifs d'enquête et de Participation : Susciter l'intérêt, accueillir ce qui importe».

11   This is the case, for example, with urban development projects, which since the 1970s have had to be accompanied by «special

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decide «how» to involve people without knowing what and why. Even if a participatory process is organised, what improvements and transformations can it really bring about? What does it mean in concrete terms to invite audiences to participate? How can we ensure that the participatory process has real effects and consequences for the ownership of the issue or problem it addresses?

• **attempt to link different issues.** Participatory processes often operate based on forms of hierarchisation of certain interests considered more legitimate, noble, or related to the public interest, to the detriment of others, which are considered private, identity-based, futile… This can create frustrations among those who do not feel heard, understood or taken into account, but also lead to conflicts, and pit certain public groups against each other. How can personal or group-specific interests be linked to the interests of the many? How can complex issues (climate change, mobility, school system) be linked to the ordinary experience of the concerned audiences? If participation does not always lead to consensus, what are the compatible differences and frictions? How can we recognise the «victims»[12] and admit what we have not been able to resolve or take into account? How do we include the common in the plural?

• **link the constraints of reality to real potential for transformation.** Too often, many of the project elements that are the subject of a participatory process are already locked in. Some of the participants' proposals are therefore discredited because they do not meet certain technical, legal or budgetary criteria. While the constraints of reality must be taken into account, it is important to allow participants and organisers to speculate, dream, and think «outside the box». So it is as much a matter of setting the framework of what is feasible as of equipping the imagination to open up possibilities. Who knows, with a little creativity, some constraints may turn out to be resources for real change.

• **monitor participatory processes.** When there are too many requests, when participants feel that they have to repeat the same things over and over again, that they have to answer the same questions, or that all the work they have done has no follow-up, it is understandable that they may become weary. We therefore have to ensure continuity and consideration of what has been done before, including by other bodies and authorities and in other types of cases (e.g. cultural institutions operating within the same scope), and ensure the subsequent follow-up, in relation to the consideration of what was expressed or produced during the participatory process. Ensuring the

12 Stengers, Isabelle. Cosmopolitiques. Paris: La Découverte, 2003

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subsequent management of projects that have been carried out in a participatory manner (and therefore devoting real resources to them) prevents the efforts made by the participants from being lost.

NB: A final recommendation might be to never follow recommendations automatically or to the letter. Trusting each other also means taking responsibility. Disagreeing with the recommendations of a team of researchers is a perfectly valid option. In all cases, the methods, diagnoses and solutions tested by others must be adapted to the specific context in which we find ourselves. In this research, we have tackled the question of the replicability and transferability of participatory experiences head-on; we are therefore interested in all experiences that contribute to or challenge the avenues identified, so do not hesitate to share them with us.

12   Stengers, Isabelle. Cosmopolitiques. Paris: La Découverte, 2003

List of publications

Houlstan-Hasaerts, Rafaella, Giulietta Laki, Guillaume Slizewicz, Greg Nijs and Thomas Laureyssens. ''*Des Dispositifs d'enquête et de Participation : Susciter l'intérêt, accueillir ce qui importe*'' (NL: Instrumenten voor Inspraak en Participatie: Interesse wekken, open staan voor wat ertoe doet') In Au-delà du Pentagone. Le centre-ville métropolitain de Bruxelles, by Aniss Mezoued, Sofie Vermeulen and Jean-Philippe De Visscher. Université Libre de Bruxelles, VUB Press and Brussels Studies Institute, 2020, pp. 190-202.

Laki, Giulietta, Rafaella Houlstan-Hasaerts, Guillaume Slizewicz, Greg Nijs and Thomas Laureyssens. «*La participation urbaine en ses objets : Pour une « respons-abilité » accrue*». Revue Internationale d'Urbanisme, 9, 2021.

link

Rosa, Elisabetta, Rafaella Houlstan-Hasaerts, Giulietta Laki et al. «*Right(s) to Brussels's City Centre and the Urban Project: What Possibilities Exist for Future Transformations?*» In Towards a Metropolitan City Centre for Brussels, by Sofie Vermeulen, Jean-Philippe De Visscher, and Aniss Mezoued. Université Libre de Bruxelles, VUB Press, 2020, pp. 81-111

About

The author & project

The authors of this policy brief are part of the multidisciplinary research-action collective Espèces Urbaines/Urban Species, linked to the ULB (LoUIsE and Grap) and to Luca School of Arts (Intermedia). The collective brings together researchers in social sciences, design and urban development and is interested in participation in all its forms, including the contributions of more-than-human entities, from living entities to objects, including «electronic species». Urban Species has developed expertise in inventive and collaborative research methods.

https://urbanspecies.org/en

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Through the Prospective Research programme, the Brussels-Capital Region is hoping to fund research projects from a dual perspective: to provide a solid regional prospective vision; to build solutions to the specific challenges it will face in the years to come. The solutions proposed by the funded projects must take into account Brussels' urban complexity as well as the Region's environmental, social and economic transition objectives. The programme targets researchers in human science as much as researchers in exact or applied science.

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