

Mikko Värttö,  
Faculty of Management and  
Business, Tampere  
University, Finland,  
mikko.vartto@tuni.fi

## Abstract

In recent years, local governments in Finland have been actively adopting participatory arrangements that provide citizens with the means to participate directly in planning and decision-making procedures. The participatory initiatives challenge the traditional representative and bureaucratic model of public governance and have reportedly created tensions, ambivalence, and inconsistency within local governments.

This paper's central research question is: what do local administrators perceive to be the main goals and challenges of public engagement? Local administrators are important gatekeepers within local government, and they have substantial authority in planning and implementing participatory arrangements. The attitudes of administrators consequently have a significant impact on participatory initiatives.

The data consists of 15 interviews with senior-level public administrators working in a Finnish municipality. The data is analysed through content analysis focusing on the main goals and challenges of public engagement. In addition, a comparison is conducted between the service sector and the planning sector.

The findings show that public administrators acknowledge the democratic value of the participatory arrangements. However, they still draw on the strong tradition of bureaucratic modes of governance in which participatory arrangements are assessed for their instrumental value. The findings also indicate that there are two participatory rationales in place in Finland, the first taking place in the service sector and the other in planning. Finally, there is a discussion on the possibility of reconciling the different motives that are driving participatory initiatives.

## Introduction

In recent years, new forms of public engagement have been introduced in public policy-making to provide citizens with alternative routes to make their voices heard in planning and decision-making procedures. Besides representative forms of political participation, people now have supplementary ways to express their opinions and participate. In Finland, municipalities make use of a large variety of instruments that give citizens the chance to participate in public policy-making (Christensen et al. 2016). Participative budgeting, citizens' juries, and assemblies are just a few of the recent participatory arrangements that have been introduced in different policy areas.

The factors driving participatory initiatives in Finnish municipalities are similar to those in other Western countries. It is believed that participatory arrangements can cure the "democratic malaise" that is characterised by low voter turnouts and mistrust in political institutions (Newton & Geissel 2012). Additionally, participatory arrangements have been introduced in public policy-making for more practical reasons (Royo et al. 2011). For local government, participatory arrangements have specific importance in incorporating a range of citizen preferences into policy-making. Engaging citizens allows governments to tap into wider sources of information, perspectives and potential solutions, and it improves the epistemic quality of the decisions reached (Michels 2012).

Despite the legal requirements, municipalities in Finland can determine their main goals and means of public engagement relatively independently (Lundell et

---

\*Mikko Värttö is a doctoral candidate in Political Sciences at Tampere University. His research focuses on public engagement and institutionalisation of democratic innovations.

Keywords:  
participation,  
public engagement,  
public administration

al. 2016). This is partly explained by the strong tradition of local government and the decentralised nature of the Finnish political system. Unlike the other Nordic countries, Finland has a single-tiered local government system in which the municipalities form the basic administrative unit. Municipalities are therefore responsible for deciding a large range of many issues including basic education, social services, healthcare and cultural and sports services, as well as technical, environmental and infrastructure services (Leino & Laine 2012).

As the municipalities are independently in charge of their participatory policies, the local administrators have a significant role in implementing participatory arrangements (Niinikoski & Setälä 2015; Agger & Sørensen 2018). Modes of participation are often formalised around the instrumental goals of the organisation and determined through the perceptions and actions of the administrators (Eckerd & Heidelberg 2020). The attitudes of the individual administrator can extensively shape the processes of public engagement. It is therefore important to understand what is motivating the arrangements for public engagement.

Thus far, there have only been a small number of empirical studies that focus on the administrative role in participatory initiatives (Agger & Sørensen 2018; Pierre et al. 2017; Røiseland & Vabo 2020). This paper contributes to the literature by investigating public administrators' attitudes towards participatory arrangements. The main data for the research consists of 15 interviews with senior-level public administrators working in central administration and various administrative branches. The data was collected in the city of Turku, which is one of the largest municipalities in Finland. The goal of the qualitative content analysis of the interviews is to study *what public administrators consider to be the main goals and challenges of public engagement*.

The paper is structured as follows. The theoretical section discusses the participatory arrangements and their origins in democratic theory. It also discusses the drivers of participatory initiatives in local administrations and the challenges related to the incorporation of participatory elements with existing planning and decision-making processes. The paper subsequently introduces the case municipality and reviews some of the research literature on Finnish public administration. The third section presents the research data and analysis methods. The final section introduces the results of the analysis and discusses the implications for research and practice. The findings show that, despite the administrative and legal regulations concerning direct citizen participation, there are difficulties in turning formal participatory policies into practice. The responses to these challenges should address the legal and cultural factors that concern different administrative branches.

## Participatory arrangements in public policy-making

The introduction of participatory arrangements in public policy-making is sometimes called the participative turn (Bherer et al. 2016). It means that citizens are directly involved in decisions that affect them. Participatory arrangements take many forms that incorporate different mechanisms. Whereas consultation and voting simply allow citizens to express their views and preferences, other forms, such as citizens' juries and forums, provide citizens

with platforms to deliberate together and find solutions to common problems. The introduction of citizens' juries and other deliberative forums have led some authors to the conclusion that we have now shifted from the participatory turn to the deliberative turn (Dryzek 2000).

It is common to assess participatory arrangements according to their different characteristics. Whereas citizens' juries and other deliberative forums draw on deliberative democracy, others, such as referendums, have their roots in participatory democracy theory. These different democracy theories differ according to their core values. The deliberative democratic theory sees public reasoning by those subject to collective decisions as the core value of the democratic process (Cohen 2009; Thompson 2008). Participative democracy theory highlights the value of public participation in involving citizens directly in decision-making processes and increasing political activity in different areas of life (Pateman 1970).

Mark Warren (2017, 39) criticises model-based approaches to democracy. According to Warren, "models of democracy" – such as deliberative and participatory democracy – tend to overgeneralise the place and functions of certain ideal-typical features of democracy. Therefore, he lists several basic democratic functions that can be defended without committing to a particular model of democracy. According to Warren (2017, 43), democratic systems need to fulfil the functions of empowered inclusion, collective will-formation, and decision-making. Inclusiveness requires that the political system and public policy-making include those citizens who are directly affected by the decisions. Collective will-formation is based on an equitable weighing of different viewpoints expressed by citizens. Finally, decision-making is considered democratic so long as it reflects inclusiveness and collective will-formation.

Participatory arrangements have many characteristics that can facilitate the realisation of democratic functions. Warren (2017) argues that common practices, such as voting in elections and taking part in a deliberative forum, should be combined in a way that maximises their strengths and minimises their weaknesses. Different forms of public participation, such as voting, deliberation, and consultation, may serve different functions in decision-making, bring in diverse kinds of knowledge, engage varying sorts of actors, and promote alternative modes of communication (Jonsson 2015). In addition, participative arrangements have "side-effects" that are positive from the democratic perspective, such as citizen education and self-realisation (Jäske & Setälä 2019).

In recent years, there has been a rising concern among scholars and practitioners on how to connect participatory arrangements, such as deliberative forums, with other more representative forms of political participation (Curato 2015; Hendriks 2016; Jonsson 2015; Setälä 2017; Warren 2017). The exploration of different solutions through which participatory arrangements could be integrated into existing decision-making processes raises concern over the institutionalisation of the participatory processes. Institutionalisation can enhance qualitative standards of participatory processes as well as promote opportunities to exert some actual influence on choices and policies (Lewanski 2013).

The incorporation of participatory and representative elements poses many challenges to the administration (Agger & Sørensen 2018). Direct public

participation challenges the dualistic nature of administration, in which political actors make value decisions and public administrators operationalise and execute them (Bäcklund & Mäntysalo 2010). In the new model, citizens can express their opinions and values directly to the administrators who mediate them into decision-making processes. Therefore, participatory arrangements challenge the old norms concerning political accountability, democracy, and legitimacy (Kestilä-Kekkonen & Korvela 2017). This can lead to institutional ambiguity, where different norms and practices prevail at the same time (Hajer 2003).

Empirical studies have highlighted the difficulties related to the incorporation of participatory arrangements into traditional forms of public policy-making. Scholars have addressed the difficulties associated with establishing a shared understanding of the norms and practices among citizens, politicians, and administrators (Hertting & Kugelberg 2017). In addition, there seem to be differences among the administrators' perceptions of participatory initiatives. Whereas administrative leaders are generally positive about participatory initiatives (Reiseland & Vabo 2020), there is more scepticism towards citizens' involvement at the lower levels of administration (Agger & Sørensen 2018).

Although participatory elements are often introduced as a means to democratise administrative practices, their motives seem to be rooted in the instrumental values of participatory governance (Eckerd & Heidelberg 2020; Reiseland & Vabo 2020). This means that the value of participation is assessed to the extent to which it can help the administration improve decision-making (Moynihan 2003). For example, governmental organisations may view the participatory arrangements as a useful means to distribute information to the public, assess public opinion, or improve public relations, and thereby community trust (Hendriks 2006).

Attempts to institutionalise the participatory elements so that they fit the instrumental administrative norms and practices put pressure on administrators. In the past, public administrators could comfortably draw on their traditional role as a "bureaucrat", whose duty is simply to provide policy advice, execute the decisions made at the political level, and report to elected officials (Gains 2009). However, now public administrators are expected to take on a "democratic" role and work as facilitators of participatory arrangements and mediators between politicians, experts, and citizens (Pierre et al. 2017). The extent to which public administrators still draw on their traditional bureaucratic role or adapt to a more democratic role needs further investigation.

## Public engagement in Finland

In Finland, local administrations have been the driving force for advancing new public engagement policies and incorporating participatory practices into decision-making processes (Kuokkanen 2016). Municipalities are involving their citizens in the development and design of services through various means of public engagement. A recent study by the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLRA 2018) shows that the most commonly used methods are consultation, public meetings, collaboration and surveys. In recent

years, more and more municipalities have also adopted innovative methods, such as participatory budgeting and citizens' juries.

In addition, many Finnish municipalities have drafted public engagement plans to set administrative guidelines and regulations concerning direct citizen participation. Public engagement plans can be seen as a strategy to incorporate participatory arrangements into public policy-making processes, while simultaneously holding on to the principles of good governance (Tahvilzadeh 2015, 240). In Finland, 25 per cent of municipalities have a public engagement plan and 61 per cent of municipalities have defined the targets of public engagement in their action and financial plan. The number of municipalities with public engagement plans almost tripled from 2017 to 2019 (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2019). Furthermore, the larger cities, in particular, have often hired professional staff, such as participation coordinators or planners, who focus on planning and organising participatory arrangements and communicating with citizens.

The adoption of participatory arrangements and policies can be viewed as a process of formal compliance with the wishes and expectations of the external environment (Royo et al. 2011). In Finland, the central government has been active in introducing fundamental changes in local democratic practices to create new opportunities for direct public participation. These programmes aim to respond to the crises of representative democracy, which are reflected in decreased turnouts in elections, declining membership rates for political parties, decreasing levels of trust towards political institutions, and problems around effectiveness in policy-making (Kuokkanen 2016). For example, in 2014, the Finnish government approved a Democracy Policy Report (Ministry of Justice 2014) that included an overview of the existing situation and set guidelines for the further development of the field.

In addition to national policy programmes, participatory initiatives are advanced through legal requirements and regulation. Finland has many laws related to the development of citizen participation at local levels of government. The new Local Government Act (410/2015) was implemented to promote citizen involvement in decision-making. According to the law, local authorities must engage the municipality's inhabitants in decision-making. However, to the disappointment of many, the law did not include any legal requirements to organise participatory arrangements. Instead, it gave local governments the power to decide how and when their citizens are involved in public policy-making.

The Land Use and Building Act was implemented in 2000. It emphasises openness and citizens' rights to participate in planning processes (Puustinen et al. 2017). It incorporates some of the communicative and collaborative planning theories that emerged in the 1990s. The communicative and collaborative planning practices abandon the comprehensive-rationalist planning theory whereby public administrators produce solutions to public policy issues (Healey 1996; Innes 1995). Instead, communicative planning theory draws on the ideals of deliberative democracy that focus on argumentation and persuasion as a means of finding common interests and comprehensive solutions to public policy issues (Bäcklund & Mäntysalo 2010).

Earlier studies of local administrations have shown that the new legal requirements have not completely altered the traditional administrator-citizen relationship. Although after the implementation of communicative planning models, citizens are now better involved in the planning procedures through public hearings and consultation, planners still hold considerable power in controlling public involvement. Planners can decide when the citizens are involved in the planning process and how their opinions, values, and needs are taken into account during the process (Leino 2006).

Some authors claim that traditional planning models are reflected in planners' attitudes towards public participation. Planners do not find it important to hear citizens but consider it an additional work task placed from above that planners have to fulfil on top of their actual planning duties (Leino 2006; Puustinen 2006). Bäcklund and Mäntysalo (2010) argue that planners' and other public administrators' attitudes towards public participation reflect Finland's strong tradition of administrative culture, in which the procedures of planning and decision-making are guided by rules and norms that rely on the tradition of comprehensive-rationalist planning ideology. Despite the implementation of participatory planning procedures, the administrators still deploy considerable political and administrative power, while the citizens are for the most part relegated to the role of administrative objects (Kuokkanen 2016, 69).

Since local administrators work within the municipal administration and take responsibility for organising planning and decision-making processes, they are key figures in introducing and implementing participatory policies. Administrators determine the extent of public participation, shape the ways citizens are involved, and decide whether or not citizens' preferences are valuable for their work (Eckerd & Heidelberg 2020). Therefore, to answer the main research question, a closer look at the local administrators' perceptions of participatory arrangements is necessary. A deeper understanding of how public administrators define the goals and outcomes of public participation can tell us what norms and practices determine the participatory processes.

## Data and methods

The study was conducted in the city of Turku, which is one of the largest cities in Finland. Like many other large cities in Finland, Turku can be characterised by high participatory activity. In addition to traditional participatory planning procedures, such as public hearings and consultation, the local citizens have the chance to participate in planning and decision-making processes by making initiatives, giving feedback, and taking part in the youth council and other councils, public meetings, and working groups. Citizens can also take part in implementation by doing voluntary work in their local neighbourhood.

The study took place during the time the city was renewing its public engagement plan. Thus, one of the goals of the interviews was to study what the local administrators thought were the main challenges of the participatory policies and how the participatory policies could be advanced. The key findings of the interviews were collected in a short report that was used as background material for the development of the city's new public engagement plan.

The main data of the research consists of semi-structured interviews with 15 senior-level public administrators. These interviewees were selected because they assess the goals and challenges of public engagement from a broad perspective. Their accounts may deepen our understanding of the relations between administrative and political processes.

The interviewees included the head of the central administration and the directors of the divisions who are in charge of running the operations of different policy sectors. Four interviewees came from planning and construction, two from recreation, and one from social services and education. Three of the interviewees represented the finance and strategy group, whose responsibilities include planning finances and setting the central goals of the city. Two of the interviewees were members of the management group that is responsible for defining the policies of the city and developing the operations and decision-making preparations of the Central Administration. To secure the anonymity of the administrators, the interviewees are referred to as public administrators (PAs) in the analysis chapter.

The interviews were conducted in September and October 2018. The length of the interviews varied from 15 minutes to one hour. The interviews followed a list of questions that covered issues ranging from the definition of public participation to its main costs and benefits. The list included the following questions:

- *Does your unit survey the opinions of the citizens, and if so, in what ways?*
- *What have you found to be the best practices in terms of citizens' involvement?*
- *What is currently the biggest problem with participation in your unit?*
- *Do you feel that the involvement of citizens and their suggestions have an impact on the decision-making in your unit?*
- *Which factors hinder the involvement of citizens in decision-making?*

The interviews were recorded and transcribed afterwards. The transcripts were analysed using thematic content analysis (Bryman 2012, 297). As a part of this method, each transcript was analysed, and relevant quotations were extracted and categorised using appropriate codes. Then, the sample of extracts was analysed and collated into coherent themes. This was followed by data interpretation.

## Results

In this section, the main goals and challenges of public participation are assessed from the administrative perspective. The first step is to study how public administrators perceive the goals and challenges of public participation in terms of their perceived value. A distinction is made between instrumental and democratic values (see Moynihan 2003). The intention of this is not to make a

clear distinction between the instrumental and democratic values of public participation, since that would be a task too difficult – if not impossible – for this paper. The goal is to separate those attitudes where the democratic value of the participative practices is subordinate to the instrumental value from those perspectives where the democratic value is considered to be an end in itself, not a tool for achieving some other ends.

### Instrumental value

The interviews show that the local administrators often assess participatory practices to the extent they can help the administration in planning and decision-making. According to the interviewees, participatory practices provide citizens with a chance to voice their needs and concerns to administrators so that they would have a better idea of which policy options would benefit the citizens most (PA8, PA10, PA12). Public input may offer administrators innovative solutions that would have not emerged from traditional modes of decision-making. In that sense, public engagement advances the inclusion of citizens' insights and ideas in decision-making processes (Wagenaar 2007, 18). One of the interviewees defines public participation as follows:

*"Participation means that those who are affected can bring their views and ideas into use. You will get the best result possible." (PA8)*

The findings show that from the administrative point of view, the main value of participatory arrangements comes from their knowledge-producing properties. In public policy-making, participatory arrangements are primarily deployed for their epistemic qualities. The goal of the public arrangements is to gain knowledge from all those citizens who are affected by the decisions. Thus, the public arrangements have the potential for extending the knowledge search from the usual group of experts to a broader group of people and discovering knowledge that would otherwise remain unknown (Aitamurto & Chen 2017).

The interviews indicate that the public administrators base their view mainly on their administrative role, which is bound by existing legislation and administrative norms. Especially in the planning sector, the motivations for public participation in the planning processes rise from the existing legislation, which provides clear legal requirements according to which the planning procedures should be conducted. One of the interviewees describe the situation as follows:

*"In the strategic land use, participation is already very strongly defined by legislation. It defines the minimum level at which public participation must take place." (PA2)*

The planning sector differs significantly from the service sectors, in which the legal requirements are much more ambiguous. For example, the different legal requirements concern the openness of planning and decision-making procedures. In the planning processes, the citizens' and other stakeholders' statements should always be included in the planning material and published to the wider audience, whereas in other policy sectors, this requirement does not exist.



*"In planning procedures that fall under the Land Use and Building Act, there is clear guidance on which materials are to be open, but in other matters, it is not that clear. For example, we receive a great many types of feedback from citizens that will not be taken further in the decision-making process because no system requires this. Therefore, people have no way to verify how their preferences are taken into account." (PA2)*

The results indicate that there is a prevailing "silo mentality" within the local administration. Interviewees argue that information is not shared within the administration, and administrators have little knowledge of participatory practices that take place outside their administrative branches (PA2, PA3, PA4), or even within their particular administrative branch (PA11). In the literature, this is explained by the greater organisational complexity that creates tensions between competing norms and practices and promotes the internal buffering of organisational subunits (Binder 2007; Bromley & Powell 2012). The silo mentality helps the organisational subunit to hold on to its traditional norms and practices despite the external pressures to change them.

*"To develop services for those who need them, we should adopt a different mindset. We should be ready to co-operate with others. It is not easy when the policy fields are kept within their silos that have their separate budgets and so on." (PA4)*

However, participatory arrangements are not constrained by legal requirements only; there are other factors in place as well. One of these factors concerns the possible costs of the administrators' time and effort in coordinating public participation. Since there can be multiple ways for citizens to express their preferences, it is an overwhelming task for a handful of administrators to process all the data that they acquire. Therefore, there is a lack of human resources to ensure that citizens are engaged in a meaningful way. As one of the interviewees argues:

*"It is not possible to present every decision at a public event. It would mean that we would have to hire a thousand new people here just to hold public events." (PA2)*

Another relevant resource is the skilled and motivated staff. The interviews indicate that inside the administration, public administrators have different levels of experience and education on participatory arrangements. Some of the administrators started their careers at a time when the involvement of citizens was not encouraged. Therefore, the older planning tradition, where public administrators define the public interest, still prevails within the administration (PA7, PA15). The interviewees state that in the case of planners, it is common for them to make the distinction between the educated planners' expert knowledge and the citizens' opinions. The planners feel that they know the main needs of the local community and therefore the citizens should not be allowed to intervene in the planning processes.

*“They (planners) may also have difficulties in accepting such thinking that they are only setting questions and finding answers to common problems without ultimately being in charge of making the decisions.” (PA15)*

The planners’ attitudes may be partly explained by their experiences. The earlier literature shows that especially frontline planners who are involved daily in face-to-face interactions with citizens and other stakeholders face several tensions that arise from the participatory policies and practices (Agger & Sørensen 2018). The frontline planners are the ones who work directly with the citizens and have to explain to them the planning decision and respond to their possible criticism. Therefore, frontline planners are often more critical toward participatory policies than those administrators who are not directly involved in the processes of public engagement.

### Democratic value

Although administrators mainly assess participatory arrangements from an administrative point of view, which highlights their value to administrative processes, they also acknowledge their value for reaching democratic goals. According to the interviewees, the direct involvement of citizens in decision-making increases its legitimacy (PA11, PA12). Especially in the planning sector, decision-making procedures often affect some neighbourhoods directly and can therefore raise serious concerns among the citizens about the safety or attractiveness of their living environment. By involving citizens in decision-making, the administration can increase the approval of its planning decisions and diminish criticism against them.

*“At least in traffic planning, it is important to listen to people, because the decisions that concern traffic usually touch citizens’ everyday lives directly. Then, of course, we should hear what people have to say before those solutions begin construction. People should have the opportunity to criticise them before everything is completed.” (PA11)*

In addition, participatory arrangements can facilitate collective will-formation in issues where different values are at stake. Some interviewees (PA2, PA13) argue that participatory processes can avoid the aggregation of preferences and outweigh narrow self-interests. When people participate in decision-making with other citizens and decision-makers, they have an opportunity to hear different opinions, meaning they can have a better understanding of positions that differ from their own. This makes them aware of viewpoints that diverge from their narrow perspectives. At its best, participation leads to consensus or at least a shared understanding.

*“That is why these public events are being organised so that people with different opinions can see what others think, and maybe they can understand others’ opinions better. At their best, they find some kind of a common vision and at least begin to understand each other’s different views.” (PA13)*

Participatory arrangements also have “side-effects” that local administrators consider to be positive. One of the interviewees argues that engaging in planning procedures in which citizens can collectively make decisions concerning their living environment may increase the sense of belonging and social inclusion. When citizens have a chance to participate in developing their living habitat and public services, they feel more attached to their surroundings.

*“The citizens’ involvement in the development of urban spaces – I want to support that. I want people to create their own spaces because then they feel better and happier. Although the result may not please someone’s aesthetic eye, it is the environment that people have chosen to live in.”*  
(PA14)

However, there are concerns among some of the interviewees over whether the participatory arrangements are capable of meeting their normative goals. For the inclusiveness of the participatory arrangements, they should involve the ideas and insights of relevant groups and individuals. However, interviewees claim that in practice, certain groups of people are often overrepresented in the participative processes (PA2, PA7, PA9, PA10), whereas others, such as immigrants and young citizens, are continually under-represented in participatory processes (PA1, PA10, PA13). The findings are in line with earlier studies that emphasise the elitist nature of participation, as significant groups, notably those who are already under-represented, are excluded from participatory processes (Sintomer & De Maillard 2007).

*“Then, of course, it should be mentioned that people who participate often have strong opinions that do not necessarily correspond with the opinion of the majority. That is why you need to recognise whether you listen to everybody or only those who scream the loudest. It is not easy to have a truly inclusive model.”* (PA9)

In addition, the interviewees argue that public arrangements are undermined by their lack of influence on actual decision-making (PA11, PA12, PA13, PA14). For public engagement to become effective, it should have some input on decision-making. However, in many cases, the public input remains limited or is ignored by the decision-makers. Especially in planning procedures that involve strong private stakeholders, such as entrepreneurs or landowners, citizens may have difficulties getting their voices heard.

*“But there are those situations in which the landowner comes with an oversized plan and claims that this needs to be carried out. Then there is not much that the citizens can do.”* (PA13)

There is variation in how the interviewees conceive relations between participatory arrangements and traditional modes of decision-making. Most of the administrators take a complementary view of participatory arrangements (PA9, PA12). It suggests that new forms of political participation may help to mitigate some of the weaknesses of the existing representative political system

(Daemen & Schaap 2012). In practice, this means that while participatory arrangements are introduced in many policy fields, the existing representative practices remain the backbone of democratic decision-making.

*“I do not see them as competing models, because participation allows those issues to emerge that do not get noticed otherwise. But when it comes to spending money, then representative democracy is inevitably the forum for prioritisation.” (PA9)*

Some of the local administrators take an incompatible view of participatory arrangements (PA2, PA8). It stresses the conflict between different models of democracy, thus indicating that participatory elements are incompatible with representative democratic practices (Daemen & Schaap 2012). The interviewees indicated that often participatory arrangements remain detached from actual decision-making. For example, sometimes the citizens are involved in the latter stage of the decision-making process, where they cannot set agendas or frame the issues according to their preferences. (PA8). This may be a sign of inauthentic public engagement, in which the participatory practices are used to build public acceptance for unpopular policy decisions (Nabatchi & Amsler 2014).

The incompatibility of participatory arrangements and traditional modes of public policy-making can be explained by the administrative traditions. As the earlier citations showed, there is a popular understanding inside the administration that views the means of public participation as a burden rather than an asset. Because of the lack of support for participatory arrangements, there is a danger that they may not be used purposefully. The interviewees indicated that sometimes participatory arrangements may be manipulated strategically to advance specific political interests. For example, the outcomes of the participative arrangements may be undermined by politicians if they realise that the results of such public arrangements are contrary to their intentions. Then, they might take actions to undermine the arrangements or just simply ignore them.

*“The citizens’ lack of influence is partly due to the fact that some of the decisions have already been made. Then it might be a little embarrassing if the citizens’ wishes turn out to be something else than what was originally anticipated. In particular, this might happen when the decisions involve political interests. Then citizens’ preferences do not really matter.” (PA8)*

## Conclusion

In this paper, the goals and challenges of the participatory arrangements were studied from the administrative point of view. The study shows that Finnish public administrators are bound by the strong tradition of bureaucratic modes of governance. The administrators refine the goals of participatory initiatives mostly from their administrative perspective. The participatory initiatives are assessed to the extent they correspond with the legal requirements and help

administrators to fulfil their professional duties. Mainly, this means that public arrangements are used to gather experience-knowledge (Aitamurto & Chen 2017) or witness evidence (Hendriks 2016; Davidson & Stark 2011).

Table 1 summarises the main findings. It shows that public administrators believe that participatory arrangements can have both instrumental and democratic value. Participatory arrangements have the potential to complement traditional modes of public policy-making. However, the value of participatory arrangements is undermined by economic, cultural, and political factors that highlight the incompatibility of participatory elements.

*Table 1: Goals and challenges of participatory arrangements.*

	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
<b>Instrumental value</b>	Inclusion of citizens' ideas and preferences Better decisions Less criticism	Loss of authority and burdens on administration and decision-making processes Variance of legal requirements between administrative branches Lack of competence and motivation among administrators
<b>Democratic value</b>	Increasing legitimacy through inclusiveness Creating shared understanding through dialogue Increasing social inclusion	Over-representation of politically active groups Manifestation of self-interest and political interests Manipulation of participatory processes

The findings are in line with earlier literature. From the administrative point of view, the participatory arrangements are mainly evaluated to the extent of their capability to fulfil instrumental values (Eckerd & Heidelberg 2020). The main importance is placed on their potential to increase the level of perceived legitimacy or to comply minimally with legal requirements, without really taking advantage of public participation to enhance decision-making processes (Royo et al. 2011). From this perspective, the participatory arrangements are evaluated to the extent they can lead to decisions that are not only better but also more broadly accepted by the citizens. Additionally, public administrators see these participatory arrangements as a fertile ground for administrative contributions (Røiseland & Vabo 2020). Participatory arrangements serve as a knowledge search mechanism that provides administrators access to a pool of knowledge that they can use for discovering innovative solutions and making the delivery of public services more efficient and cost-effective.

However, public administrators also acknowledge the democratic value of participatory arrangements. They see them as a mechanism that can involve the wider public in decision-making and bring different voices to the table. This has the potential to increase the legitimacy of public policy-making in the public's

eyes. In addition, the participatory arrangement can bring citizens face to face with other people who might not share their points of view. Dialogical methods in particular can advance collective will-formation among citizens and create a shared understanding. When involved in collective decision-making, citizens may also become more attached to their social environment and other citizens.

Because of their many assets, participatory arrangements can have complementary functions within the political system. They can mitigate some of the weaknesses of the existing representative system and thus strengthen the whole political system (Hendriks 2016). However, some public administrators feel that participatory arrangements are incompatible with the representative elements of the existing political system. The participatory arrangement may be manipulated by party politics or other powerful actors, such as private landowners. For example, many important decisions are often taken before the participatory practices have even begun (Mäntysalo & Saglie 2010). Additionally, decision-makers can use “cherry-picking” to advance only those participatory outcomes that correspond to their interests (Smith 2009, 93). In that way, the participatory policies may not lead to more democratic decision-making, but instead, create a “democratic illusion” (Fuji-Johnson 2015). This is especially worrying since it may diminish the democratic legitimacy of the political system as a whole (Lafont 2017).

Although the results reflect the earlier literature, some of the findings provide us with a more nuanced picture of the public administration and the tensions that take place within it. The results indicate that there is an ongoing cultural change within the local administration. This is expressed in the prevailing “silo mentality” where there are clear divisions between administrative branches (Hepburn 2014). The mentality can be explained by the fact that in some administrative branches, public participation is more integrated with the formal procedures. In urban planning, the legal requirement deriving from the planning act gives administrators more procedural guidelines on how participatory practices should be integrated into planning procedures. Instead, in other policy fields, such as social services, the legal requirements are more ambiguous and provide few guidelines on how participatory practices should be implemented.

The lack of clear legal requirements gives public administrators a chance to control participatory processes as they wish. For example, participatory processes can be easily “overruled” for legal or budgetary reasons. Additionally, when participatory practices are implemented, their role is limited by letting citizens only give feedback or letting them decide on rather trivial issues. In the literature, this is described as “customer democracy” (see Daemen & Schaap 2012), in which administration thrives at filling the minimum requirements deriving from the legislation. To “keep their customers happy”, the public administration formally engages citizens in shaping and developing the services that are provided to them.

The results of the study indicate that the implementation of participatory arrangements is not driven by one motive alone; several strategic and normative logics are at play simultaneously. In every setting, there are certain notions of what can be considered legitimate policy-making. These notions are sustained and reinforced by the combination of legal requirements, material resources, and

organisation cultures that shape the processes and outcomes of participatory initiatives (Connelly 2009). In addition, participatory arrangements are greatly intertwined with particular political processes and the power relations that surround them. The outcomes of the local participatory initiatives are dependent on political actors and institutions that frame the initiatives (Tahvilzadeh 2015).

## Discussion

This research has practical implications for local governments and practitioners alike. In terms of the shortcomings of participatory arrangements, the main concern is the significant differences in the administrators' perceptions of the relations between participatory methods and traditional modes of decision-making. These different perceptions often conflict and create tensions within the local administration.

There are at least two possible solutions to this conflict between the traditional representative and bureaucratic model of public governance and participatory governance. One such response is the rationalisation of public engagement by setting clear programmes and guidelines for public engagement. Rationalisation refers to attempts to clarify organisational goals, select the activities to reach these goals, and implement the standards of evaluation and measurement to evaluate the outcomes of different activities (Bromley & Powell 2012). For example, in some cases, the standards of measurement are included also in the public engagement plans (Leifso 2016).

Bromley and Powell (2012) warn against relying too heavily on setting standards of evaluation and measurement. Technical procedures of information gathering and evaluation can become ends in themselves, maintaining the perceptions of efficiency and effectiveness. Additionally, the challenge of participatory initiatives is that there are no clear standards or criteria for public participation (Nabatchi 2012). Scholars and practitioners have aimed at developing standards of evaluation and measurement, for example by setting standards for efficiency, inclusivity, or responsiveness. These measurement standards for participative values fail to grasp the various aspects of public participation and do justice to that complexity. Any such attempt would represent a rather technocratic view of public engagement and thus would simplify the different political, psychological, social, and cultural aspects that are part of the participatory processes.

To avoid trusting too much in "democratic engineering" (Blaug 2002), public engagement plans and programs should take into account the different rationales that drive participatory initiatives in different administrative branches. Weight should be placed on the legal requirements that regulate the activities of administrative branches working in different policy sectors. In addition, it is important to create a shared understanding among the public administrators of the normative values and the guiding principles of participatory policies, as well as the means of turning these policies into practice.

The shared vision of the values and goals of participatory policies should also encompass the role of public administrators and other decision-makers who hold authority over decision-making and planning procedures. The role of the decision-makers should be modified in such a way that it corresponds with the

requirements of participatory governance. For example, public administrators could take a more active role by working as mediators between representative political arenas and participatory arrangements. If the administrators are capable of adopting this new role, they have the potential to become drivers of a more active and engaged democracy.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by Participation in Long-Term Decision-Making (PALO) -project (312671/312676) and Turku Urban Research Programme. The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## References

- Agger, Annika & Sørensen, Eva (2018) Managing collaborative innovation in public bureaucracies, *Planning Theory*, 17 (1): 53–73.
- AFLRA (2018) *Kuntalaisten osallistumis- ja vaikuttamistavat Manner-Suomen kunnissa 2017*. The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities.
- Aitamurto, Tanja & Chen, Kaiping (2017) The value of crowdsourcing in public policymaking: Epistemic, democratic and economic value, *Theory and Practice of Legislation*, 5 (1): 55–72.
- Bäcklund, Pia & Mäntysalo, Raine (2010) Agonism and institutional ambiguity: Ideas on democracy and the role of participation in the development of planning theory and practice - the case of Finland, *Planning Theory*, 9 (4): 333–350.
- Bherer, Laurence, Dufour, Pascale & Montambeault, Françoise (2016) The participatory democracy turn: An introduction, *Journal of Civil Society*, 12 (3): 225–230.
- Binder, Amy (2007) For love and money: Organizations' creative responses to multiple environmental logics, *Theory and Society*, 36 (6): 547–571.
- Blaug, Ricardo (2002). Engineering democracy. *Political Studies*, 50 (1): 102–116.
- Bromley, Patricia & Powell, Walter W. (2012) From smoke and mirrors to walking the talk: Decoupling in the contemporary world, *The Academy of Management Annals*, 6 (1): 483–530.
- Bryman, Alan (2012) *Social Research Methods*, Oxford University Press.
- Christensen, Henrik Serup, Jäske, Maija, Setälä, Maija & Laitinen, Elias (2016) *Democratic innovations in Finland - Use and effects on local and national level*, Publications of the Government's analysis, assessment and research activities 56, Prime Minister's Office.
- Cohen, Joshua (2009) 'Reflections on Deliberative Democracy'. In Thomas Christiano and John Christman (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy* (pp. 247–263), Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford.



- Connelly, Stephen (2009) Deliberation in the face of power: Stakeholder planning in Egypt, *Policy and Society*, 28 (3): 185–195.
- Curato, Nicole (2015) Deliberative capacity as an indicator of democratic quality: The case of the Philippines, *International Political Science Review*, 36 (1): 99–116.
- Daemen, Harry & Schaap, Linze (2012) 'Puzzles of local democracy: Introduction'. In Linze Schaap & Harry Daemen (eds.), *Renewal in European Local Democracies: Puzzles, Dilemmas and Options* (pp. 9–26), Springer.
- Davidson, Stewart & Stark, Alastair (2011) Institutionalising public deliberation: Insights from the Scottish Parliament, *British Politics*, 6 (2): 155–186.
- Dryzek, John S. (2000) *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Eckerd, Adam & Heidelberg, Roy L. (2020) Administering public participation, *American Review of Public Administration*, 50 (2): 133–147.
- Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (2019) TEAvisari-tool for municipalities. Retrieved from: <https://teaviisari.fi/teaviisari/en/>
- Fuji-Johnson, Genevieve (2015) *Democratic Illusion*, University of Toronto Press.
- Gains, Francesca (2009) Narratives and dilemmas of local bureaucratic elites: Whitehall at the coal face? *Public Administration*, 87 (1): 50–64.
- Hajer, Maarten (2003) Policy without polity? Policy analysis and the institutional void, *Policy Sciences*, 36: 175–195.
- Healey, Patsy (1996) The communicative turn in planning theory and its implications for spatial strategy formations, *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, 23 (2): 217–234.
- Hendriks, Carolyn M. (2006) When the forum meets interest politics: Strategic uses of public deliberation. *Politics & Society*, 34 (4): 571–602.
- Hendriks, Carolyn M. (2016) Coupling citizens and elites in deliberative systems: The role of institutional design, *European Journal of Political Research*, 55 (1): 43–60.
- Hepburn, Paul (2014) Local democracy in a digital age: Lessons for local government from the Manchester Congestion Charge Referendum, *Local Government Studies*, 40 (1): 82–101.
- Hertting, Nils & Kugelberg, Clarissa (eds.) (2017) *Local Participatory Governance and Representative Democracy*, Routledge, New York.
- Innes, Judith E. (1995) Planning theory's emerging paradigm: Communicative action and interactive practice, *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 14 (3): 183–189.
- Jäske, Maija & Setälä, Maija (2019) A functionalist approach to democratic innovations, *Representation*, 56 (4): 467–483.
- Jonsson, Magnus E. (2015) Democratic innovations in deliberative systems - The case of the Estonian citizens' assembly process, *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 11 (1): 1–29.
- Kestilä-Kekkonen, Elina & Korvela, Paul-Erik (2017) 'Vaali- ja puolueosallistumisesta demokraatiainnovaatioihin: syventyykö vai

- heikentykö demokratia?’, In Elina Kestilä-Kekkonen & Paul-Erik Korvela (eds.), *Poliittinen osallistuminen. Vanhan ja uuden osallistumisen jännitteitä* (pp. 8–29) University of Jyväskylä.
- Kuokkanen, Kanerva (2016) *Developing Participation through Projects? A Case Study from the Helsinki Metropolitan Area*, University of Helsinki.
- Lafont, Cristina (2017) Can democracy be deliberative & participatory? The democratic case for political uses of mini-publics, *Daedalus*, 146 (3): 85–105.
- Leifso, Justin (2016) *Public engagement frameworks. Cross-jurisdictional review*, Centre for Public Involvement.
- Leino, Helena (2006) *Kansalaisosallistuminen ja kaupunkisuunnittelun dynamiikka: Tutkimus Tampereen Vuoreksesta*, University of Tampere.
- Leino, Helena & Laine, Markus (2012) Do matters of concern matter? bringing issues back to participation, *Planning Theory*, 11 (1): 89–103.
- Lewanski, Rodolfo (2013) Institutionalizing deliberative democracy: The ‘Tuscany laboratory’, *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 9 (1): 1–16.
- Lundell, Krister, Karjalainen, Maija & Christensen, Henrik Serup (2016) After the merger: Do citizens want democratic innovations? *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*, 20 (3): 3–31.
- Mäntysalo, Raine & Saglie, Inger Lise (2010) Private influence preceding public involvement: Strategies for legitimizing preliminary partnership arrangements in urban housing planning in Norway and Finland, *Planning Theory and Practice*, 11 (3): 317–338.
- Michels, Ank (2012) Citizen participation in local policy making: Design and democracy, *International Journal of Public Administration*, 35 (4): 285–292.
- Ministry of Justice (2014) *Avoin ja yhdenvertainen osallistuminen. Valtioneuvoston demokratiapoliittinen selonteko 2014 (Democracy Policy Report)*, Ministry of Justice.
- Moynihan, Donald (2003) Normative and instrumental perspectives on public participation: Citizen summits in Washington, D.C. *American Review of Public Administration*, 33 (2): 164–188.
- Nabatchi, Tina (2012) *A Manager’s Guide to Evaluating Citizen Participation*. In *Fostering Transparency and Democracy Series*. IBM Center for The Business of Government
- Nabatchi, Tina & Amsler, Lisa Blomgren (2014) Direct public engagement in local government, *The American Review of Public Administration*, 44 (4): 63–88.
- Newton, Kenneth & Geissel, Brigitte (eds.) (2012) *Evaluating Democratic Innovations: Curing the Democratic Malaise?* Routledge.
- Niinikoski, Marja-Liisa & Setälä, Maija (2015) ‘Deliberative Mini-Publics and User-Driven Innovation in the Public Sector: Comparing Underpinnings, Procedures and Outcomes’, In Annika Agger, Bodel Damgaard, Andreas Hagedorn Krogh, & Eva Sørensen (eds.), *Collaborative Governance and Public Innovation in Northern Europe* (pp. 23–45) Bentham Science Publishers.

- Pateman, Carole (1970) *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Cambridge University Press.
- Pierre, Jon, Røiseland, Asbjørn, Peters, B. Guy & Gustavsen, Annelin (2017) Comparing local politicians' and bureaucrats' assessments of democratic participation: The cases of Norway and Sweden, *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 83 (4): 658–675.
- Puustinen, Sari (2006) *Suomalainen kaavoittajaprofessio ja suunnittelun kommunikatiivinen käänne*, Helsinki University of Technology.
- Puustinen, Sari, Mäntyselä, Raine, Hytönen, Jonne & Jarenko, Karoliina (2017) The 'deliberative bureaucrat': Deliberative democracy and institutional trust in the jurisdiction of the Finnish planner, *Planning Theory and Practice*, 18 (1): 71–88.
- Røiseland, Asbjørn & Vabo, Signy Irene (2020) Administrators as drivers of democratic innovations, *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, 25 (1): 1–20
- Royo, Sonia, Yetano, Ana & Acerete, Basilio (2011) Citizen participation in German and Spanish local governments: A comparative study, *International Journal of Public Administration*, 34 (3): 139–150.
- Setälä, Maija (2017) Connecting deliberative mini-publics to representative decision making, *European Journal of Political Research*, 56 (4): 846–863.
- Sintomer, Yves & De Maillard, Jacques (2007) The limits to local participation and deliberation in the French 'politique de la ville,' *European Journal of Political Research*, 46 (4): 503–529
- Smith, Graham (2009) *Democratic Innovations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Tahvilzadeh, Nazem (2015) Understanding participatory governance arrangements in urban politics: idealist and cynical perspectives on the politics of citizen dialogues in Göteborg, Sweden, *Urban Research and Practice* 8, (2): 238–254.
- Thompson, Dennis F. (2008) Deliberative democratic theory and empirical political science, *The Annual Review of Political Science*, 11: 497–520.
- Wagenaar, Hendrik (2007) Governance, complexity, and democratic participation: How citizens and public officials harness the complexities of neighborhood decline, *American Review of Public Administration*, 37 (1): 17–50.
- Warren, Mark E. (2017) A problem-based approach to democratic theory, *American Political Science Review*, 111 (1): 39–53.