How Municipalities Can Enhance Citizen Participation? – Exploring the Views of Participants and Non-Participants

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Abstract

In this study, we scrutinise how municipalities can enhance citizen participation as arenas for local democracy. We combine the aspects of institutional structures with citizens' expectations and viewpoints by analysing citizens' views on the barriers to and catalysts for participation. We outline the possibilities and map the role of municipalities in enhancing citizen participation. This qualitative study utilises empirical data consisting of 160 essays written by university students. In their essays, students reflect on their roles as participants and think about possible obstacles to participation. The data is analysed using inductive qualitative content analysis. In the analysis, three categories were identified to illustrate and interpret the societal, personal and instrumental-processual factors that affect citizens' willingness and abilities to participate at the local level. Municipalities can easily address the instrumental-processual factors, whereas affecting societal and personal factors is more difficult. The role of municipalities in enhancing citizen participation is thus restricted, yet important.

Introduction

This study aims to produce new knowledge on the role of municipalities as the locus of local democracy. We focus on how municipalities can enhance local democracy by creating and supporting the possibilities residents have to participate in and influence local decision-making processes. The research entails building on previous research and analysing university students' experiences and views on citizen participation at the local level. Our purpose is thus to understand different kinds of factors that are related to citizen participation. Reflecting on these experiences and views on the possibilities of local government enables us to explore how municipalities can enhance citizen participation. The two research questions are:

1. *Which factors are related to residents' willingness to engage in citizen participation?*

And, based on these factors:

2. *How can municipalities enhance citizen participation?*

We observe citizen participation from a wide institutional perspective as the possibilities that citizens have to participate in public discussion and decision-making (see e.g., Birch 2002, 80). It is more than simply the delegation of power in an election (Nabatchi & Amsler 2014). From a practical and local viewpoint, Nabatchi and Amsler (2014, 655) describe citizen participation as "both in-person and online methods for bringing people together to address issues of importance". The institutional perspective of participation concentrates on the design of citizen participation in institutions, such as municipalities (Smith 2009). In principle, it excludes citizen-oriented participation such as boycotts and protests. Even though the institutional perspective has been criticised for

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viewing the value of participation mainly as instrumental, Smith (2009) argues that it makes it possible to observe abstract and ideal-based democratic values in practice because institutions are often arenas for multiple democratic actions. This study does not regard institutional forms of participation as more valuable than non-institutional forms. However, the institutional perspective is logical and justified, since the idea is to describe the role of municipalities as arenas for citizen participation and their possibilities to enable participation. The non-institutional forms of citizen participation, such as protests and do-it-yourself participation, take place in civil society where municipalities have little to say.

Initiatives to develop citizen participation illustrate the idea of new public governance (NPG), which, in short, entails collaboration between actors inside and outside the organisation, new tools for including different stakeholders and multiple forms of accountability. In addition, it highlights networks and partnerships (Torfing & Triatafillou 2013; Osborne 2010). These initiatives to engage people in public sector action can be seen as a consequence of dissatisfaction and decreasing trust towards traditional forms of representative democracy in Western countries, manifesting as lower election turnout both in local and national elections and, for example, a rise in populism (see Gherghina 2017). However, digitalisation and new channels of digital interaction can also create possibilities.

Increasing trust and inclusiveness are among the main arguments for enhancing citizen participation at the local level. Participation may increase citizens' trust towards municipalities, public sector governance, public decision-makers and the decision-making processes (see e.g., Welch 2012; Irvin & Stansbury 2004). In addition, citizen participation may improve decision-making by broadening its knowledge base. The role of residents in a smart-city context, for example, is thus focal (Castelnovo et al. 2016). From the viewpoint of inclusiveness, participation means reaching those who are traditionally excluded from the government processes so they can participate in these processes (see e.g., Arnstein 1969).

The question of structures is connected to institutional design that is needed to facilitate collaboration between different actors, to overcome bureaucratic silos and to enable cross-sector cooperation and interaction between municipalities and their residents (Torfing et al. 2019). The structures are also connected to the efficiency of participation in the decision-making processes (Font et al. 2018; Fung 2006) and understanding the command chains and traditional roles of different actors in a new light (Pedersen &Johannsen. 2016).

In citizen participation research, citizen viewpoint often emphasises the meaning of learning and developing skills of active citizenship (see e.g., Pateman 1970). Also, the focus is often on the genuine possibilities of citizens to produce information and influence in decision-making processes, which have traditionally been the exclusive remit of civil servants and experts (Irvin & Stansbury 2004). The aim of inclusiveness is discussed in several studies showing that not all groups are heard equally, with discussion potentially dominated by well-off people or strong interest groups (see e.g., Fiorina 1999a; Fung 2004, 6; Fung 2006; Irvin & Stansbury 2004; Michels & de Graaf 2017).

Citizen participation is frequently studied from the viewpoint of institutional structures that enable participation. Citizens' expectations and viewpoints are

also studied (see e.g., Lowndes, Pratchett & Stoker 2001; Smith & McDonough 2001; Christensen, Karjalainen & Lundell 2016). In this study, we aim to combine these aspects and fill the gap between them. We analyse citizens' views on the barriers and catalysts for participation and outline the possibilities and the role of municipalities in enhancing citizen participation.

Using empirical qualitative data, in this article we focus on analysing perceptions and views in relation to citizen participation. We are interested in discovering how accessible and of interest municipalities seem to be as a platform for participation, and what aspects are related to citizens' willingness and possibilities to participate at the local level. In shedding light on these factors, we aim to outline the possibilities and the role of municipalities in enhancing citizen participation.

We start the paper by placing citizen participation in the context of local government, describing its meaning and function. This is followed by an overview of the Finnish local government system, including citizen participation. We then present the methodology of the study by describing our data and its analysis methods. We subsequently present the results of our analysis. The paper concludes by discussing the findings and drawing conclusions on the role of municipalities in enhancing citizen participation. Finally, we suggest areas of future research for this topic.

Citizen Participation at the Local Level

Local government, as the primary locus of local democracy, has a key role in devising opportunities to participate in and influence local decision-making. Local democracy offers residents the possibility of expressing their views about the decisions that affect their immediate environment. Local institutions of democracy are the most accessible locations to practice and develop political skills. The meaning of local participation is thus also to reinforce active democratic citizenship (see e.g., Pratchett 2004; Stoker 2004). Local citizen participation affects not only the local level but also the overall democratic culture in society (Weir & Beetham 1999, 243).

From the viewpoint of participatory democracy, citizen engagement is argued to have three very focal functions. First, educative function means the development of civic skills through participation (e.g., Pateman 1970; Michels & de Graaf 2010). Second, participation has a function of integration, so it may increase the feeling of belonging to a community and, further, also a feeling of responsibility for public decisions (Cook & Morgan 1971; Michels & de Graaf 2010). Third, participation has a function of increasing legitimacy by creating more acceptable solutions (Cook & Morgan 1971; Michels & de Graaf 2010). Greater legitimacy for decisions and decision-making is an important incentive for citizen participation at the local level.

From the perspective of local government, more inclusive citizen participation is argued with the challenges and inadequacy of representative democracy (see e.g., Christensen et al. 2016). Also, some argue that participation may increase the quality, acceptability and legitimacy of decisions and decision-making (see e.g., Fung 2015). In addition, citizen participation may increase

citizens' feeling of responsibility, engagement and trust towards government and participation and even prevent deadlocked situations and protests (Nabatchi & Amsler 2014; Head, 2007; Michels & de Graaf, 2010). Trust is not insignificant with citizen participation, as high trust towards the government tends to have a positive impact on citizen participation (Lee & Schacter 2019). However, citizen participation can be enhanced for wrong reasons: For example, occasionally, new channels are introduced simply because of professional discussion, where participation is a trendy and current issue (Kübler et. al 2019).

Legitimacy is stressed, because often the possibilities to participate are not equal. Often the participants are well-educated and politically active people with enough resources (Cooper, Bryer & Meek, 2006; Turnhout et al. 2010; Yang & Pandey, 2011; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Michels & de Graaf, 2017) or who belong to strong interest groups (Fiorina, 1999; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). The key question is how to make citizen participation inclusive by engaging people from different age groups and different socio-economic backgrounds. From the viewpoint of inclusion, the concern often is that the hard-to-reach groups are excluded from the public discussion, which is dominated by well-of people. (see e.g. Fung 2004, 2006).

Especially the participation of children and young people is often underlined. It is a question of well-being of young people and future democracy and also, there is a concern of low participation level among younger citizens (see e.g. Bäcklund et. al. 2014; Bakker & De Vreese 2011). From administration's viewpoint it is often a question of getting their voices heard (Stenvall 2018). The discussion highlights the role of children and young people as equal citizens with participation rights (see e.g. Hart 2009).

Also, from the viewpoint of trust and satisfaction, the question of real possibilities to influence is focal. Therefore, it is important that participation is linked to organisational processes and has an influence on final decisions, at least to some extent (Font et al. 2018; Fung 2006). This highlights the importance of the thorough designing of participatory processes. If the proposals of citizens are not heard and citizen participation does not affect the policies and practices, it may frustrate the participants and also decrease citizens' trust towards local government (see e.g., Arnstein 1969). It may also weaken the legitimacy of local decision-making and governance (see e.g., Font et al.). Along with good process planning, attention should thus be paid to the truthfulness of real possibilities to influence (Arnstein 1969) and whether the expectations of citizens would meet the reality (Julian et al. 1997; Michels & de Graaf, 2017).

Citizen Participation in Finnish Local Government

The Finnish local government system was created in 1865 as the first law about local government in Finland was enacted. Finland has a one-tier local government: municipalities are the only local self-governmental organisations. From the very beginning of the history of Finnish local government, the guiding principles have been independence from the state and local democracy (Aaltonen 1934, 228–229).

In Finland, municipalities have a strong position in society, which is typical for Nordic welfare states. Municipalities are responsible for arranging most

public services based on legislation and local self-government. Municipalities also form a grand proportion of public expenditure (see also e.g., Page & Goldsmith 1987; Lidström 1998; Rose & Ståhlberg 2005; Loughlin, Hendriks & Lidström 2011, Vakkala, Jäntti & Sinervo 2020.)

Besides having a representative democracy, Finnish municipalities have increased the diverse ways of participatory democracy during the last decades. Municipalities offer thus many possibilities for residents to participate in and influence local decision-making, which is also a legal obligation for municipalities (Local Government Act 410/2015). Besides obligatory participation methods, municipalities have increasingly introduced new democratic innovations, such as participatory budgeting voluntarily.

As we have described, the local government is the venue where the ideals of democracy and participation are materialised. Municipalities play a key role in creating structures and possibilities for participation and nurture a culture of participation. By doing so, municipalities may have a positive impact on trust towards local government, decisions may gain greater legitimacy and participation processes may become more inclusive with real possibilities to influence the outcome. To see what kinds of possibilities municipalities have in this sense, there needs to be an understanding of the viewpoints and standpoints of citizens about the motivation to participate at the local level. This study aims to shed light on these issues by analysing the viewpoints of university students.

Methods

This qualitative study utilises empirical data consisting of 160 essays (appr. 160 pages altogether) written by university students. In their essays, students reflect their role as participants and think about possible obstacles for participation. The data was collected in the autumn of 2018 at Tampere University, Finland, as a part of an introductory course on local and regional governance. As part of the course tasks, students were asked to write a one-page essay describing their participation history and the ways they have participated in and influenced their local government activities and/or decision-making. They were also asked to reflect on possible obstacles and incentives to participation by describing their reasons for participation or non-participation.

The essay task was one of the six course tasks that were a prerequisite for passing the course. The purpose of the tasks was to stimulate learning by encouraging students to ponder the issues on a personal level and to scrutinise their own views and experiences. The tasks were designed so that they did not require any previous knowledge and it was made clear that there were no wrong answers to the questions. This can be seen on the data where most of the respondents ponder their citizen participation experiences and views on a very personal and open manner reflecting their experienced strengths and weaknesses and knowledge on citizen participation possibilities. The tasks had to be submitted but they did not affect the course grade that was determined solely by the exam result. Students were asked for permission to use anonymised essays as research data and they had the possibility to refuse the research use. 6 % of the students prohibited the research use.

Data collection was solely focused on the essays as we wanted to gain a deeper understanding of how local government is seen in terms of citizen participation. Thus, we collected no background data. In retrospect, it would have been useful to also collect some information on the respondents, such as age and sex in order to shed light on the versatility of the respondents. The aim of this qualitative study is not to present a representative sample of residents nor of students, but instead to gain understanding on the different dimensions that are related to the experiences and views concerning citizen participation. Even though the data consists of essays written on a university course, the writers do not form a homogenous group of students. Most of the students who wrote the essays are quite young but the data show that among them there are also many adult students in versatile life situations. Some of them have already previous degrees and working life experience for already dozens of years. In addition, the data are produced by not only local government students but by students from almost all faculties in Tampere University attended the course. Even though many of the respondents currently live in Tampere city region, it can be found in the data that the respondents originally come from all over Finland. As majority of them were first year students at the time and thus many had just recently moved to Tampere city region, the data show they built their essays on experiences concerning mainly their former home municipalities and some compared the differences they had noticed between their former and current home municipalities.

In the data, participation was interpreted in a broad sense: both participatory and representative democracy methods as well as institutional and non-institutional methods were mentioned, such as initiatives, petitions, hearings, participatory budgeting, voting and referenda but also e.g., demonstrations and volunteering. We limited our analysis to institutional participation because of the focus of this study, in which we aim to gain deeper understanding about the possibilities of the municipalities in enhancing participation (this is described more accurately in the introduction of this article).

Based on previous research, it is known that participation is more common among those who have higher education level (see e.g., Irvin & Stansbury 2004, Michels & de Graaf 2010). It can thus be assumed that university students would be well aware of participation possibilities and that they would be actively participating. However, the data showed interestingly great differences in how familiar participation was to students and how widely they were aware of and had used different channels to participate in and influence their local government. This raises questions on why citizen participation at the local level does not seem to be so familiar and attractive even to citizens that could be assumed to be aware of their participation possibilities.

What makes this data particularly interesting and rich is that through this data collection, it was possible to reach not only those who actively participate but also the so-called non-participants who do not participate at all. To gain qualitative data like this is usually extremely difficult. Data that reaches also non-participants can be usually retrieved through surveys and is mainly quantitative, but we could collect qualitative, narrative data that can help to determine different aspects of and reasoning behind participation and non-participation. Using this kind of rich data can face some challenges. For

example, it might be challenging to capture the richness and large variety of views. Therefore, it was focal to understand the qualitative inductive content analysis as a research method and to plan and conduct the analysis carefully. The data were analysed using inductive, qualitative content analysis by focusing on recognising structures and practices that either enhance or hinder citizen participation (see also Ravensbergen & VanderPlaat, 2009; de Graaf, Van Hulst & Michels, 2015; Fung, 2015, Pedersen & Johannsen, 2016).

To strengthen the reliability of the analysis, researcher triangulation was used in the study. The analysis was started by reading the data carefully. After that the data were coded by marking and naming the parts of the data that contained text on the barriers to or catalysts for citizen participation. In the analysis process the coding was conducted independently by two researchers so that one researcher looked for barriers to participation while the other researcher looked for factors that seemed to increase participation (see Krippendorff 2013). Atlas.ti-software was used for the coding. Barriers and enhancing factors were observed, because the aim was to take into account and understand the positive and negative factors affecting participation. This double-analysis also was helpful to strengthen the quality and reliability of the analysis. After this first phase of the actual analysis there were 536 quotations linked to 63 codes.

After the coding the barriers and incentives were classified into seven sub-categories and, finally, into main categories (see figure 1). In the analysis, three main categories were identified to illustrate and interpret the factors that affect citizens' willingness and ability to participate at the local level. The categories are: 1) societal, 2) personal and 3) instrumental-processual factors. The categories (discussed in detail in the next section) are intertwined so that the factors all affect the willingness and ability of a resident to participate in local government decision-making and action.

Results

In the analysis, we created three main categories that illustrate the factors affecting citizen participation at the local level. The categories show that willingness and ability to participate at the local level are affected by both societal, personal and instrumental-processual factors (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Factors affecting residents' willingness and ability to participate.
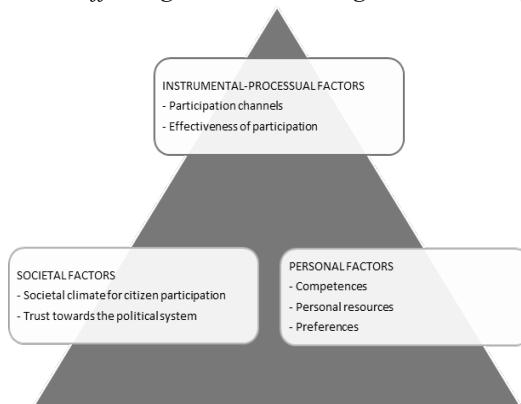
Societal factors

The first category from the data is societal factors. These factors are connected to the overall societal climate, trust and satisfaction towards the political system. The societal factors affecting citizen participation are also familiar from previous research (see also Lee & Schachter 2019; Alford 2001; Christensen et. al. 2016). These factors are complex and wide, and municipalities have only limited possibilities to influence these.

Societal climate for citizen participation

In this data, the societal climate for participation means the general support, culture and encouragement for participation both at a societal and at the local level. It is also connected to the ideals of democracy and democratic governance.

The right to participate and the intrinsic value of democracy seem to be highly appreciated by many. The appreciation can be seen also as leading to responsibility towards the democratic system and society. This is especially clearly connected to the responsibility to vote during elections.

Citizen participation can increase the trust towards society and democracy, but it can also affect personal wellbeing and empowerment, as seen in this comment:

> *"Citizen participation increases trust towards society and towards democracy. Probably it is like a wheel because participation creates positive effects on your own quality of life and to democracy, which increases participation also in other themes."*

At the local level, the encouraging climate is more than only particular channels of participation. According to the data, it can be described as a culture, which aims to involve citizens, also the passive ones, into decision-making by listening to their opinions and by supporting citizen-driven initiatives.

However, the societal climate for citizen participation can be hostile, which can make participating off-putting. A hostile climate may affect citizens' willingness to participate in public discussions and decision-making. Some people feel it is easier to remain silent as they do not want to expose themselves to public critique or harassment. In public discussions citizens may feel discouraged to speak out, because of hostile climate. The climate, which affects whether people participate or not is seen important from this viewpoint.

> *"Another reason, why I am not a particularly active participant is that when issues or phenomena become politized or part of public discussion, the discussion can be quite robust and can even slander people with different views. Myself, I feel that I don't want to take part in this kind of action."*

Trust towards the political system

The trust people have or not have towards the political system can either promote or hinder participation. In this data, satisfaction is connected mostly to a decrease in participation. This is due to overall satisfaction in the municipality and its services. If a person's experience of public services is good, there is no

need for change nor is there a need to complain or to participate and influence the system. The trust can also be systemic, so the representative democracy system is seen being as reliable and functioning well enough.

> *"I would just like to live my life in peace and be able to trust, that all the municipal services that I need, would be available for me and that local decision-makers would make good decisions."*

Mistrust of the system and political culture and decision-makers might also hinder participation. The trust might be low because of doubts about decision-makers. For example, there can be doubts around the misuse of power or the inability to make good decisions. Decision-making can be seen as driven more by decision-makers' own interests than by citizens' interests.

There may also be mistrust regarding the possibility to exert influence through participation. There are concerns about whether the decisions-makers even have enough power or whether citizen participation is effective. This mistrust can grow, for example, from a person's family background or their living environment, as seen in this comment:

> *"I have grown up in an environment where the confidence in one's possibilities to influence issues of own life is not big. There are opinions, but there is hardly any faith that stating your opinion would lead somewhere."*

Some doubt that all groups are equally listened to. The decision-making is seen as the dominion of elites. The prosperous and people with good capacities to participate are seen to have better possibilities to express their opinions and to participate. Local decision-making can be seen as run by those who are active year after year and sometimes, the voices of the least advantaged and those with weaker skills and less capacity to participate are not heard. This set-up might hinder the willingness to participate and so does the financial situation of residents. Citizen participation can seem exclusive even though one of its aims is to increase inclusiveness, reflected in this statement:

> *"I also believe that financial situation affects participation -- if you need to count how many bus rides you can take in a month, there might not be possibilities to do many things, even if you were interested."*

Political culture, also at the local level, can be seen in a negative light, including populism, quarrels and concentrating on meaningless issues. Participating in local-level politics can be seen as an activity of the few same people, year after year. All this decreases trust in local government and can deteriorate its legitimacy.

Personal factors

Another category is personal factors. This consists of individuals' experienced competences, resources and preferences, which affect their ability and willingness to participate in and influence local government decision-making.

Competences

The ability and willingness to participate seem strongly connected to individuals' experienced competences. Support, encouragement and role models - or lack of them - play a big role in affecting whether people feel they are able and willing to participate. If, for instance, parents, family or friends are active in politics, the whole system and practices of public participation are already familiar, which seems to make it easier to also participate.

> *"I think that the factor that has enhanced my participation activity the most comes from my home and from my nearest ones. It is the atmosphere that encourages to independent thinking and is also open for different views."*

Non-participation too can be inherited. With no example of participating in societal discussions and without support and encouragement, the interest to participate in political processes can be lacking while positive examples of active citizenship can stimulate participation. This is reflected in the following statement:

> *"I think I'm not a very active participant, and I think my family background has affected my behaviour. My parents don't vote in elections, and also in other ways, they are not active citizens at the state or at local level."*

In addition, some people consider their personality traits as hindering or enhancing their participation. Introversion or shyness are examples of such traits seen to complicate participation, while people who consider themselves to be extrovert, open and social persons see these traits well suited for many participation methods. Self-confidence seems also to play an important role in willingness to participate, as illustrated here:

> *"One of the barriers is my slightly isolating personality, which makes participation more difficult."*

These experienced competencies derive from many sources combining personal factors with societal but also instrumental-processual factors. Thus, categorising them as personal factors is a somewhat simplified interpretation, and it needs to be stressed that both societal and instrumental-processual acts have a great effect on people's willingness and abilities to participate in public decision-making.

Personal resources

Besides the competences described, personal factors also include personal resources. From our data, these resources consist of time, knowledge and experienced expertise. Participation can be time-consuming, and many feel that participation requires a lot of knowledge. Said one student:

> *"Lack of time reduces my participation because besides studying at the university I also work and, in addition, I have my hobbies, and I want to spend time with my friends and family."*

In the data, we found that time pressure is one factor that affects citizen participation. The hectic life and its manifold demands, such as work, studies, family and hobbies, take a lot of time and leave little room for active citizen participation.

Some of the participation methods are also seen as requiring a lot of effort from citizens. Citizen participation is seen as requiring special knowledge and expertise. On the one hand, there needs to be knowledge about different possibilities and channels of participation and on the other hand, there needs to be knowledge and expertise in the issues that are in the decision-making processes, as seen here:

"I feel that to participate, I should have enough knowledge about the issue so I could participate. I have always been interested in societal issues and decision-making, but I have thought that participation requires more knowledge and understanding of the issues."

Personal resources are also connected to both societal and instrumental-processual factors. For example, hesitation to participate because of a perceived lack of knowledge can derive from the societal climate and experienced requirements. It is important to develop simple and easy participation methods and to communicate sufficiently and clearly about the possibilities.

Preferences

Finally, personal factors include individual preferences. For some people, citizen participation is an interesting hobby or even a passion or way of life, while others prefer to spend their spare time in other ways.

"I can't even think of my life without influencing different issues with different methods."

Some topical, important issues may also activate participation making it more important temporarily. Overall, participation is a question of personal interests and the acts of participation require at least some interest either in the issues or in participation as such, leading one student to say:

"I have never been very interested in participating or influencing."

Also, the experienced sense of community and attachment to a home municipality can influence a person's willingness to participate, while a lack of community and attachment may hinder participation (see also Mannarini et. al. 2009). Rootlessness or feeling of being an outsider or not at home in the local community can lead to a situation where the municipality feels distant. This can hinder participation, reflected in this statement:

"Some kind of rootlessness and living in many municipalities during my life so far has caused that I have difficulties to attach myself to any municipality where I would consider voting and seeing influencing as important."

Again, preferences and interests are also connected to societal and instrumental-processual factors, as local governments can influence participation by making it interesting and effective and by giving power to the people in the issues important to them. However, it is also obvious that not everyone will participate or be interested in participating.

Instrumental-processual factors

Citizen participation is also influenced by the instruments available for enabling participation and by participation processes. These factors are concrete, and municipalities have good possibilities to influence them (see also Eckerd & Heidelberg 2020). These factors are connected to participation channels and their quality.

Participation channels

According to our data, residents appreciate proper information regarding their participation possibilities, user-friendly and easy-to-find as well as easy-to-access participation channels. Different kinds of methods for participation are needed, with the possibility of both online participation and in-person participation. One student said:

> *"Participation decreases also if it is made too difficult or too time-consuming."*

In other words, participation channels should be easily available, quick and simple to use with minimum effort. These kinds of wishes are often connected to possibilities of digitalisation and online participation. For example, voting, mobile applications, social media, surveys and giving feedback are connected to these easy-to-use channels. Easily accessible Internet platforms can help activate more people, including formerly passive citizens or younger people as one student mentioned:

> *"Easiness and quickness encourage me to participate in more versatile ways."*

Even though quick and simple internet-based opportunities are appreciated, there is a desire for face-to-face participation and open dialogue, for example, the interaction between citizens and civil servants. There are certain requirements for the quality of this interaction, however. Wide, respectful and deliberative dialogue can increase the understanding between different actor groups. Platforms such as workshops, citizen juries and open discussion fora were mentioned as examples.

The critique can be directed to the lack of proper participation platforms or lack of information regarding different possibilities. The existing platforms are old fashioned and not suitable for quick participation. Citizen participation and finding the channels take time and require concentration on issues that are being decided, which may feel laborious. Also, the blur picture of the matters and the channels of participation can make participation difficult.

Effectivity of participation

To enhance citizen participation, the data emphasises the importance of real possibilities to influence. If citizens are not aware of the effects of their involvement (see also Arnstein 1969; Font et. al 2017; Mannarini et. al. 2009), participation is not motivating but, instead, it might be frustrating.

In the data, trust towards the system, and more precisely towards the possibilities to influence, is an important incentive for participation. Also, seeing the concrete results of the participation processes and how the opinions of citizens are processed is a stimulating factor. Seeing the results of one's involvement can be very motivating and can enhance further participation and therefore informing participants about the participation process and its outcomes is vital.

> *"I would find it very encouraging if the results of residents' involvement would be highlighted. For example, when municipality publishes a certain decision, the influence of residents should be brought out. The residents would feel then that they are being listened to and this would encourage them to influence in the future as well."*

The critique towards poor possibilities to influence is connected to the passivity of the municipality to organise participation. Also, mistrust concerning the effectivity of citizen participation and its possibilities to change the situation can lead to an unwillingness to participate. For example, citizens might feel they are not listened to:

> *"It feels that the final decisions are made somewhere else and that the possibilities to influence are minimal for a normal resident."*

The critique can also be addressed to an overall passivity of a municipality and its slow and rigid processes. The activity of municipalities is understood in this data as a support for citizens' own activities: proper, diverse, effective platforms of participation, openness and active informing about current affairs and possibilities to participate and influence. Also, there is a wish for a more open discussion of important political issues in the municipality.

Citizen participation is expected also to be personally meaningful. This is connected to the feeling of being heard and appreciated, feeling of satisfaction and meaningfulness and overall empowerment.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, we focused on citizen participation at the local level. The first question of the study was which factors are related to residents' willingness for citizen participation. Our data show that both societal, personal and instrumental-processual factors affect residents' willingness and possibilities to participate.

First, our study showed multiple appealing forms and channels of participation. Municipalities do have opportunities to enhance citizen

participation in various ways. Creating and developing easy-to-access and easy-to-use participation methods and channels that are effective aids in an increase in participation. Easy participation channels such as interactive mobile applications, map-based surveys or neighbourhood workshops can be useful in increasing participation. Also, wider forms of participation, such as participatory budgeting and citizen juries are often seen as rewarding channels of participation. At their best, the channels can develop the culture of participation in the municipality but also in society. Participation at the local level can, for example, educate residents about democratic participation and enhance the culture of citizen engagement within the organisation (Pateman 1970; Michels & de Graaf 2010). These instrumental-processual factors are those that municipalities can easily effect on. However, this alone is not enough as there are also societal and personal factors affecting participation possibilities and willingness.

Second, according to our study personal factors do also greatly affect citizens' possibilities and willingness to participate. People may feel they are not competent enough for participating or they do not have enough resources, such as time and money to participate (see also Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002). In addition, this is a question of preferences. Participation may not be one priority or interest, but people instead prefer to spend their time otherwise. Affecting these factors is not very easy for municipalities. However, municipalities have some possibilities to tackle these challenges by developing such participation methods that are easy and quick to use and do not require specific skills or knowledge.

Third, our study showed, that societal factors also effect on willingness to participate. Societal climate might be supportive or discouraging for participation. In addition, if the level of trust towards a political system is low, it may negatively affect the willingness to participate. A big issue is also the socio-economic factors behind participation possibilities (see e.g., Callahan 2007; Docherty, Goodlad & Paddison 2001). For example, participation is more common among those well off when looking at differences in income or education level (see e.g., Irvin & Stansbury 2004, Michels & de Graaf 2010). Thus, these factors are a broad societal question that municipalities alone cannot take care of which highlights the need for inter-governmental cooperation is needed to tackle these challenges. However partly, municipalities can affect these factors e.g. by focusing on building trust between residents and local government.

To sum up, based on our study, we argue, that citizen participation cannot be treated as a solely processual-instrumental issue as fundamentally it is not about mechanisms but a broader societal question that is also affected by personal factors. A systemic, holistic view is thus needed to understand the whole of citizen participation.

The second question of this study focused on how municipalities can enhance citizen participation. Our results show that municipalities can promote citizen participation by developing participation channels, but this is only a small part of the whole sphere of citizen participation. Municipalities have an important but restricted role in citizen participation, as they alone cannot take on this task. Municipalities have only limited possibilities for affecting societal and

personal factors. However, some of these factors can be partly tackled by developing participation channels and processes that are easy-to-access, easy-to-use, inclusive and effective.

Results of our study highlight that participation is a broader, societal question than simply a question of participation methods and channels. The experiences and views concerning citizen participation are combined with personal and societal factors whereas municipality specific instrumental-processual factors are only a small part affecting these experiences (see also Eckerd & Heidelberg 2020). Many social policy questions play a role, including education, socio-economic status and family background. Thus, enhancing citizen participation requires a broad outlook and intra- and inter-governmental cooperation between different actors in society.

Even though it is known that participation is more common among those who have higher education level (see e.g., Irvin & Stansbury 2004, Michels & de Graaf 2010), our study shows that also higher education students are not very aware of different citizen participation possibilities at local level and some of them are very insecure about their capacity to participate. This raises an important question on how aware e.g. citizens with lower education level or people from marginalised groups are of these possibilities and how capable they feel themselves of participating. Thus, this highlights the need to focus on the inclusivity and accessibility of citizen participation. A lot needs still to be done in municipalities to make them more easily approachable when even the advantaged do not feel themselves capable of participating.

According to our observations, one of the main questions in enhancing citizen participation is how to tackle inequalities in society to support equal possibilities for citizen participation. What is also vital is to mould the mindsets, attitudes and culture in public sector organisations and more broadly in the society to support citizen participation.

One of our key findings from this study is the importance of trust as a cross-cutting factor affecting citizen participation at many levels. Trust relates to local participation processes and instruments and local decision-making and governance. Besides, trust is also a broader question related to the society and governance system. Well-functioning, easy-to-use participation methods and channels and effective and inclusive participation processes can increase trust towards local government and its decision-making. This can also lead to higher trust towards society in general. Also, social policy actions can help in increasing societal and systemic trust which can enhance citizen participation (see e.g., Alford 2001, Lee & Schacter 2019).

Participation channels can thus be seen not only as instrumental methods but also as broader mechanisms that can strengthen both trust, local democracy and local government legitimacy in the long term. However, this requires good quality channels and processes as malfunctioning processes can instead weaken citizens' trust towards local government and its decision-making (e.g., Mannarini, Fedi & Trippetti 2010).

Instrumental-processual factors, such as various democratic innovations can partly improve societal and personal possibilities for citizen participation. Easy-to-access and easy-to-use participation methods can help reach wider audiences

to participate and attract also those groups that usually are excluded or more silent in the decision-making processes. However, there is also a risk that democratic innovations can be too difficult for users or that they may seem to require special skills or knowledge. This may, in turn, lead to a situation where people are left out of the participation processes and participation can become even more exclusive, strengthening the voices of those who already have good possibilities to participate and influence (see e.g., Fung 2015; Wilkinson, Briggs, Salt, Vines & Flynn 2019).

Even though the role of municipalities in enhancing citizen participation is restricted, it is important, and municipalities can enhance citizen participation in many ways as we have described. The importance of municipalities in enhancing citizen participation is connected to the task repertoire of municipalities and their role in public service distribution. For instance, in Finland, where municipalities arrange most public services, there are plenty of opportunities for encounters between the residents and local government organisations. In service situations such as in libraries, health care or schools, municipalities can provide service-users with possibilities to have their say about the services important to their lives. In this sense, municipalities can serve as user interfaces for citizen participation through the service system. Municipalities thus have an important role not only in providing participation possibilities but also in what kind of image comprises public participation and its effectivity in society.

Future research

This study has focused on local government possibilities to enhance citizen participation. The data used in this study creates some restrictions that are good to remember. First, the data is collected in Finland only. The Finnish local government system differs from that of many other countries as it illustrates a one-tier local government system in a Nordic welfare state context. Second, the informants behind the data are university students, which makes the data somewhat restricted. However, it can be seen from the data that the informants have diverse backgrounds regarding age, sex or socio-economic factors. Even though university students are a group that might already be quite aware of participation possibilities the data shows that many are still unaware, insecure and consider their abilities inadequate to participate. Being qualitative by its nature, this study does not show the frequencies of the factors affecting participation willingness.

Being aware of these restrictions, this study has produced new knowledge and understanding of the factors that affect participation. In addition, this study has produced new knowledge on the restricted role that municipalities have in enhancing citizen participation.

Even though there is a great deal of studies that observe the citizen view (see e.g Michels & De Graaf 2010; Mannarini et. al. 2010) the research concerning citizen participation would benefit from more qualitative studies that scrutinise a more heterogenous and larger groups, covering people from different education levels, age groups and socio-economic backgrounds and also observing the views of non-participants. Previous research on this topic is mainly quantitative. Through qualitative approach it would be possible to gain more understanding on the topic we have raised in this article. However, this could also be done

quantitatively by utilising the understanding gained in this study and operationalising this to a survey that could help discover how common different factors are, and which variables affect views about participation. This would help in understanding the frequency and intensity of the phenomenon and help municipalities to develop participation channels and processes. Comparative, international research on the issue would also be needed to find differences between countries and cultures.

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