In search of Inclusive Participatory City-Making

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Abstract:
Participatory methods have been widely explored in the public sector to democratize city-making projects and foster civic engagement. Although well-intentioned, participatory processes still too often exclude citizens. The current study looks for elements enabling city makers to articulate an inclusive Participatory City Making process. Starting from a review of participatory methods, we distilled the conditions necessary to consider a participatory process *inclusive*. In order to understand inclusiveness in practice, we performed interviews with a diverse group of city makers in an ongoing local participation process. The result is a framework that offers eight moments of reflection for public sector city makers to articulate more inclusive Participatory City-Making processes.

Keywords: Citizen Engagement; Inclusiveness; Participation; Reflection.

1. Introduction

Participatory methods have gained popularity from a human rights perspective, as a way to include people in projects that affect their lives, and from a methodological perspective, to support active involvement of professionals in knowledge construction (Somekh, 1998; Cargo & Mercer, 2008). These include investigating, understanding, establishing, developing, and supporting mutual learning between diverse participants in a collective 'reflection-in-action' (Robertson and Simonsen, 2012) to imagine possible futures (Hansen et al., 2019).

Participation in the public realm can be considered a balancing act between citizens and public servants that could advance to a more democratic construction of citizenship and public engagement (Götsch et al., 2012; Burgess, 2014; Blomkamp, 2018). For example, to promote citizens' empowerment (Hussain, 2010) though mainly focusing on vulnerable groups' involvement (Blomkamp, 2018). Effective integration of diverse social groups into political and policy frameworks becomes critical to enabling change (Stren, 2001; Uitermark et al., 2012). Stuedahl (2002) argues that the challenge lies in its performative and spatial nature, where *inclusiveness* is one of the pillars to ensure proper involvement of diverse actors and communities (Stren, 2001; Concilio et al., 2019; Slingerland et al., 2020). Emerging civic movements are questioning current approaches that often rely on a small group of people, not representative of a diverse and plural population, and consequently, accent the power interplay negatively challenging the inclusive aim (DiSalvo & Le Dantec, 2017). Over

the years, 'who needs to be involved and how' has been questioned without clearly stating the conditions to make processes inclusive.

The current work refers to *Participatory City-Making* (PCM) for collaborative processes, where government, entrepreneurs, and citizens find new ways of dealing with sustainability challenges. This type of sustainability front-runners' coalitions has been called city-makers (De Koning et al., 2017, 2018). In response to the active civic push towards transition, Delft Municipality developed in alignment with the Dutch government's Environmental and Planning Act, which mandates every local municipality to involve diverse actors in policy-making and planning, the participatory policy framework 'Delft Doen' (Gemeente Delft, n.d.) that distinguishes nine steps: Start the process, Visualize, Conversate, Agreements, Share, Work Out, Test, Capture, and Submit Request, to plan projects and support participatory decision-making. Although the framework provides a preliminary path of participatory policy design, the level of abstraction does not guide the policy implementation; it *"lacks the support of concrete and actionable tools that can guide the municipality to use it"* (Shah et al., 2020, p.83). That, in turn, becomes a barrier to achieving the inclusiveness aim of PCM, especially when considering the complexity of the actors' interactions (Bødker & Iversen, 2002).

The current work elaborates upon this participatory policy framework to ensure participation is equitable, representative, and inclusive, addressing inequalities, pluralities of value, and allowing for a sense of ownership. As such, the aim of the current article is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to understand participation's dynamic nature, including the inequalities and the pluralities of value at play, to contribute to an equitable, representative, and inclusive PCM. On the other hand, it delivers practical guidance for reflecting on the identified conditions. The following section details the corresponding methodology. Section 3 reports the findings of the literature review conceptualizing inclusive participation, whereas Section 4 introduces the resulting framework elaborating upon eight moments of reflection to articulate more inclusive PCM processes. We conclude by reflecting on the main findings and limitations of the proposed framework.

2. Method

Due to the twofold goal, our method has a theoretical and empirical component. A Theoretical Literature Review (Turner et al., 2018) was kept deliberately broad to capture aspects emerging in the interaction space of participation, where power dynamics appear (Innes & Booher, 2004; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008) and considers a wide range of participatory methods originating from Participatory Research, Action Research, Participatory Design, and Participatory Learning Research. The concepts of 'representative,' 'diverse,' 'marginalized populations,' 'vulnerable populations,' and 'inclusion' were used as selection criteria.

A series of interviews were conducted to explore inclusion in practice. We selected five public servants of the Delft municipality, whose positions included planning and strategic development, and consequently, were tasked to implement new participation policies, and five engaged citizens selected for citizen participation's broadness ensuring a plurality of voices (Table 1). The interviews aimed to unravel a public servant's actual process when implementing participation policies and understanding the relationship and interactions between the city-makers experiences. The interviewees were informed about data use for academic purposes through a consent form. A preliminary version of the results was delivered and shared in a seminar where interviewees were invited.

Table 1. Interviewed city-makers profiles: a group of public servants and a group of engaged citizens.

	Public servants	Engaged citizens
1	Senior communication advisor at the Delft Municipality internal communication, involved in the development of 'Delft Doen' framework.	Artist and activist belonging to the Tiny Houses movement, actively involved in the sustainability transition project of Delft Municipality.
2	Delft Municipality Project Manager and Participatory City Making expert in charge of the 'Delft Doen' framework.	Computer Engineer and activist of the Tiny Houses movement; actively involved in the sustainability transition project of Delft Municipality.
3	Delft Municipality sustainable transition Project Leader, involved in the implementation of the participatory policy.	Citizen belonging to the private sector and board member of a citizen initiative protecting local civil interests.
4	Strategic Planner involved in implementing participatory policies of Delft Municipality in several city-making projects.	Member of citizen initiative, entrepreneur, and part of an artisans group displaced by the central station development project in Delft.
5	Urban Planner and Senior Project Manager of several city making projects involved in the implementation of the participatory policy.	Academic Professor, active citizen, and chair of a volunteering welfare organization, from a neighboring community.

Table 2 shows the developed sensitizing booklet to support interviews. The first section aims to make interviewees reflect upon their perspective and role, and the second part addresses their understanding of participation and needs.

Table 2. Sensitizing booklet used to guide the interviews with the city makers.

	An impression of the booklet sections	Description
1		These sections allow interviewees to express themselves and reflect upon their perspective and role in a PCM project.
2		The latter sections aimed to unveil interviewees' view on the PCM process and reflect on the needs of citizens' needs when participating.

The next section introduces the literature review results following an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Larking & Thompson, 2012). Interview data were used to distil the participation process, and to identify moments of reflection. These moments are discussed in Section 4.

3. Inclusion and Participation

Following an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Larking & Thompson, 2012), three guiding concepts emerged that make a process inclusive: *Nurturing*, *Reassuring* and *Empowering*. The concept of *Empowering Participation* is conditional to enable an equal design process with diffused hierarchies and collective contributions (Kozak et al., 2020). One of the challenging aspects of participatory collaborations is the possible presence of competencies gaps. To overcome those differences, several authors mention the need for constant self-reflection and reflective dialogue (Marshall & Reason, 2007; Lopera-Molano & Lopera-Molano, 2020) to allow an ethical, multi-perspective, and multivocality practice (von Unger, 2012) while questioning the power dynamics (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). When knowledge exchange allows all participants to articulate, justify, and assert their interests, participation turns into space to develop self-confidence, self-assurance, and a feeling of belonging (Fals-Borda et al., 1991).

Nurturing participation happens when new perspectives are encouraged by taking the everyday knowledge of participants as a starting point. Russo (2012) refers to participatory processes as the *"enlightenment and awakening of common peoples"* that is nurturing when participants can express their interests and get involved in the decisions by building bonds of reciprocity, exchange, and shared responsibility (Dreessen et al., 2020). Then, participation becomes a space of reciprocity and growth (Nascimento, 2014) where it is possible to develop a sense of genuine connection and ownership (Darrell et al., 2016). Moreover, emotional involvement allows the development of relationships based on closeness, empathy, and trust (Rath, 2012).

To ensure safe spaces, it is key that participants feel valued and listened to (Darrell et al., 2016; Bustamante et al., 2018; 2019; Slingerland et al., 2019), as participant's emotional reactions become crucial to promote an atmosphere of trust and openness and avoid the emergence of anxiety, distrust, fear, and detachment (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Moreover, flexibility and adaptability can motivate participants to disclose their personal views, opinions, and experiences (Gergen, 1985) and foster the development of mutual commitment and reciprocity (Diver and Higgins, 2014). A *Reassuring Participation* enables transparency by considering the effects of every decision made, taking everyone along by sharing and evaluating decisions, and holding on accountability (Frauenberger et al., 2015). It refers to clarifying how everyone and everything involved considers agreements such as norms, rules, and ways of doing (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) to promote mutual benefits and validation (Diver & Higgins, 2014).

4. An action repertoire for Inclusive PCM

Informed by the interviews, the resulting framework highlights eight moments of reflection relevant for an inclusive and participatory policy process. These moments can be understood as critical design moments in which the decisions made will affect diversity, plurality, and representation of the outcome. In other words, these moments can be seen as the practitioner's action repertoire guiding

the process flow, which is non-linear and does not depend on a specific order. Figure 1 shows the identified moments, which are elucidated in the remainder of this section.
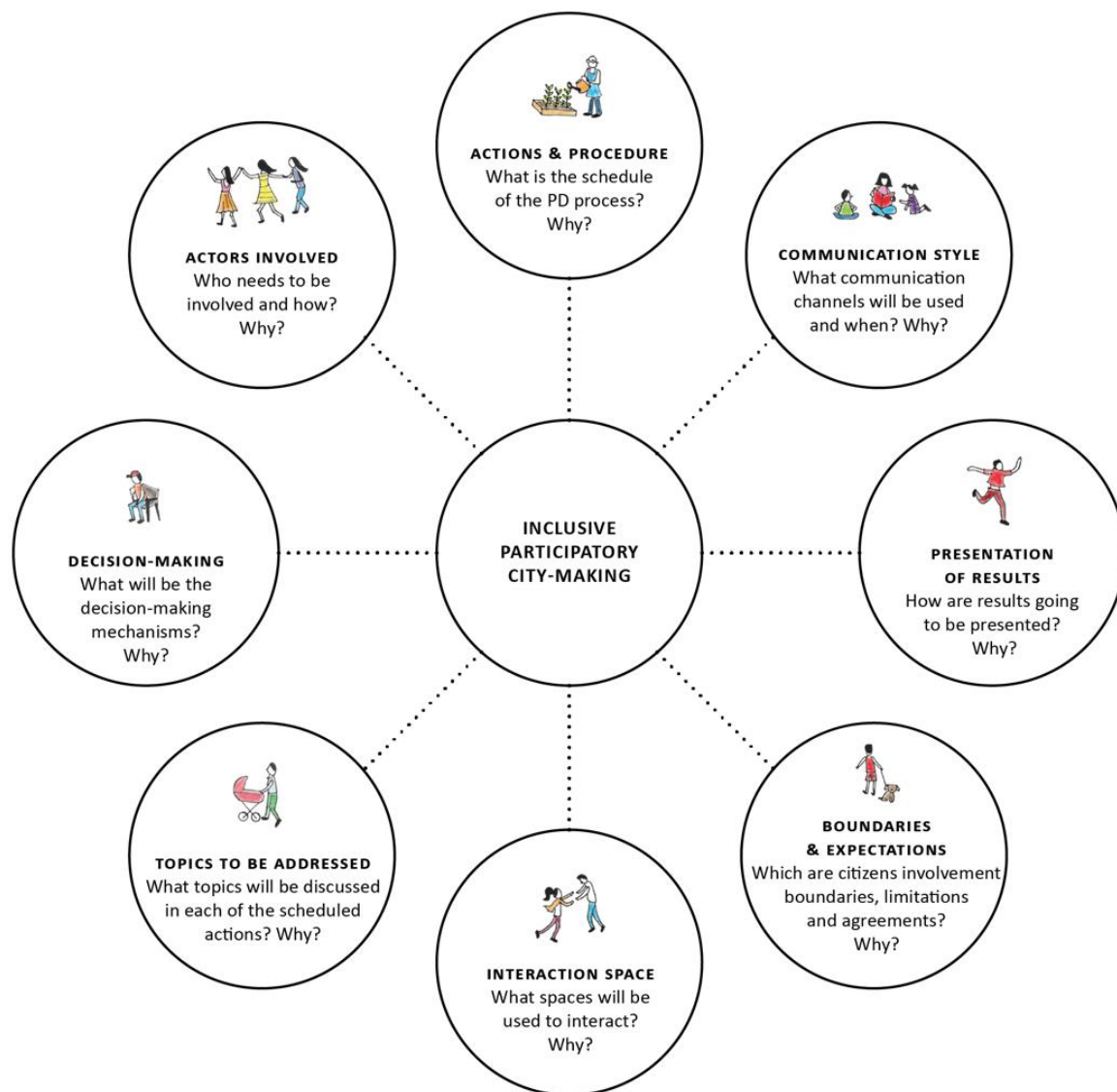

Figure 1. A Framework for inclusive PCM processes.

4.1 Actions and Procedure

One of the most significant pain points for citizens refers to the clarity of the process. As an example, citizen #2 (following the numbering in Table 1) expressed: *"I have done two initiative projects with the municipality, and it's a very frustrating process … I think next time, I'll set a condition that they publish something; about the process."* Interviewees also mentioned a need for more flexibility on the rules enabling modification of procedures more efficiently. Citizen #1 illustrated that once a tiny decision turned out to be important, since it was not allowed according to the permits and plans. Consequently, initiative became more extensive, delayed, and demanding more citizen's time investment. Having an *"open floor"* to define corresponding actions would be essential to make plans more inclusive.

4.2 Communication Style

Results show that every decision made by government are rational, while citizens' choices are emotional, as it affects their lives. Therefore, appropriate communication channels, tone of voice, and the right moment to transmit any message need to be considered, as well as the reasons behind these decisions. According to Scheuerman et al. (2018), communication needs to be fluid and contextual to ensure a reassuring process. It depends upon individual's identity or multiple identities, historical context, and geographical location (Kenney, 2001). For example, public servant #3 mentioned that, it is welcome to *"make an effort to talk with the groups that are difficult to reach, think really hard on how to talk to them, and go where they are."* The analysis also shows that open and transparent communication allows trust; public servant #2 expressed that by *"inviting participants and get them along during the process,"* it is possible to avoid that *"people get used to the idea that the government makes a plan … and then do anything with what citizens said."*

4.3 Presentation of Results

Presentation of Results refers to the format and time chosen to inform citizens of the results, the procedure, and the next steps. An important requirement is to allow an open, transparent, and reassuring PCM. In this regard, public servant #2 said that the local government *"must be much more transparent in explaining things so that people can relate to each other,"* and that the process is constant *"... you have to check whether what is done is on the right track and if you are getting the results you want, and if not make a new plan."* Public servant #1 highlighted that, constant communication of results likely contributes to citizens' feeling of being taken seriously; referring to an often-heard citizens' complaint that *"governments don't do anything I'm saying, why should I participate? – If you (as city maker) demonstrate what you do, the result, and the process, you can have a positive experience, but it takes time."*

4.4 Boundaries and Expectations

Boundaries and expectations refer to the reach and limitations of citizens' involvement. As public servant #4 mentioned, governments *"need to work on explaining better why sometimes people can talk with them from the start, and sometimes they do not."* If these boundaries are not clear from start, it can lead to conflict or loss of trust. For example, citizen #2 expressed being hesitant in participating *"when everybody is taking, and the only thing we (citizens) gain is that we do not have any energy left."* Then, it is key to clarify expectations from both sides, ensuring nobody feels undervalued by promoting recognition or a record of the efforts.

4.5 Interaction Space

Concerning the best space for PCM, the requirement to go where citizens are is often referred to as the physical or digital space; however, to develop projects that create meaning, it is critical to understand their context and experiences. Public servant #1 stressed the relevance not to create a project that "stands on itself," but one that "can also mean something to other city areas." The start to making a project inclusive is to "ask people what they would like to see in a certain area, what are they missing, or what will be the trigger to go to that place." Additionally, citizen #1 mentioned that one could not expect that everything is perfect for the municipality to initiate it; if there is "a void where the municipality is not putting money, there is an opportunity to take the initiative and make things differently" since "a city is not a city if people are not participating."

4.6 Agenda Setting

Agenda setting refers to the discussion topics that need to be transparent to unravel the interests and power interplay throughout the process. It positions public servants as mediators; citizen #3 emphasize that *"public servants are judged if they make mistakes,"* leading them to follow a particular interest or agenda when making decisions. In this sense, it is helpful to promote self-reflection and include evaluation mechanisms. Moreover, practicing deep listening and maintaining curiosity serves to avoid judgment; public servants must be aware of not assuming the role of *"the expert, or I know better,"* since *"... it is not about telling their story, but about listening to citizen's stories" (*public servant #1).

4.7 Decision-making

Appropriate decision-making mechanisms become particularly relevant when complexity depend on group size and diverse perspectives. Public servant #5 mentioned *"... during a PCM process, it is widespread to have twenty different groups, and they all have opinions."* Public servant #3 pointed out that the objective is *"not to make so many people happy with the plan, but rather making better plans together."* Consequently, choosing the right moments for decision-making becomes crucial to allow equality. It is also essential to clarify the expected result, be it a consensus or a dissent; this will clarify the level of participation contemplated. In this process, the role of government professionals shifts towards that of *"intermediaries,"* being in charge to *"making every voice heard and trying to get people to talk to each other so that they can understand each other"* (public servant #4).

4.8 Actors Involved

Results help understand how the meaning of inclusiveness can change according the actors' perspective. For some of them, the inclusive aim relates to diversity. For example, public servant #2 illustrated that PCM is *"about making it possible for everyone who is important and who wants to talk, to allow doing so."* The difficulty lies in the decision of who is important; it can become problematic if city makers come to think that it is enough *"if government talk with the population who wants to talk with them," "...then, you're creating a society where just a small group of people finds comfort,"* and this would be the opposite of inclusion.

5. Conclusions

The current work presents a guiding framework for an inclusive PCM process by considering eight reflection moments to encourage its articulation. A literature review followed by an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Larking & Thompson, 2012) and a qualitative study with a diverse group of city makers considers PCM as an empowering, nurturing, and reassuring collaboration between public servants making decisions and citizens experiencing the decisions. Results contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics, needs, barriers, and requirements a local government might face during PCM. The main findings indicate that city makers might face rigid policy frameworks, lack of follow-up processes, unclear boundaries, and expectations. Defining who should be involved before coming to agreements with diverse people appears as essential requirements for city makers where clarity, flexibility, and fluid, open, transparent, and contextual communication might help develop meaningful projects. Trust, constant feedback, a record of evidence, and open listening are elements that might help achieve inclusiveness during a PCM process.

The proposed framework and moments of reflection are promising for understanding how to enable citizen's action while achieving inclusiveness. Recognizing PCM as a dynamic process that is multi-perspective, non-linear, and context-dependent is the first step towards finding new ways of an *inclusive* practice. Overall, the current work contributes to the debate on participatory policy design and implementation by elaborating upon an inclusive citizen participation process, where citizens are empowered to change their city and develop new forms of ownership as one of the main challenges is *"to get people interested in a whole development and get the right input" (public servant #3).* Further research is recommended to understand if deliberate reflection during the identified moments positively affects citizens' engagement and perception of inclusiveness, and contributes to safe spaces.

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