

Lost or found in translation? Translating innovative forms of participation into formal decision making

Toril Ringholm, UiT The Arctic University of Norway

toril.m.ringholm@uit.no

Tel: +47 77645591/+47 99155137

Abstract

The theme of this paper is the impact of new and expressive forms of participation on policy decisions. Over the last 5-10 years, we note that some of the new initiatives in planning participation are characterised by the use of expressive and art based forms, like exhibitions, theatre, music, gatherings and various forms of installations. Sometimes these are initiated by the citizens, in order to gain attention to a place or a planning issue. Other times, the local planning authorities orchestrate them, for much the same reasons. Social innovation and urban transformation are often the core motivations behind these, in many cases, rather informal forms of participation.

At the same time, the planning system – the legal and procedural arrangements for decision making – remains unchanged, meaning that the input that is gathered from the various arenas needs to be translated into a language that works in the more bureaucratic settings that otherwise characterise the planning process. We have little knowledge of this translation process in terms of what elements that are being channelled into the decision making and what is left out. In this paper, I ask the question of how this process of translation take place.

1 Introduction: translating innovative participation

Participation has been a core element in planning theory and practice for decades. Over the years, a multitude of forms of participation has developed, and a well-stocked menu of techniques is at hand. It varies from hearing procedures and traditional public meetings, to workshops, digitally based participation and the use of different creative techniques. New issues, along with the recognition of new groups of citizens as important in different planning contexts, calls for expanding the scope of perspectives and knowledge that are channelled into the planning process (Fung, 2015; Nyseth, Ringholm & Agger, 2019). With widening the perspectives and the notion of what knowledge that should be considered relevant, comes increased diversity in the forms of participation. We want to hear the voices of children, of the elderly, of those not familiar with formal meetings, of the passers-by, of the not-the-usual-suspects, and therefore innovative practices are employed in order to record those voices.

The Innovative practices come in many shapes and it seems like neither the formal processes nor the research has actually kept track with much of the new and sometimes “untidy” participation practices, in Norway as well as in other countries (Ringholm, Nyseth and Hanssen, 2018). They can have the form of gatherings and events, and also appear as creative and expressive uses of an area (Sim, 2016). Both planning and development authorities and citizens initiate such events. They are for example known from the type of processes that are often labelled “City-lab” (Evans et al., 2017; . Smas et al., 2016) In a recent survey to all municipalities concerning the evaluation of the Norwegian Planning and Building Act from 2008, the response to the following statement: “Local politicians

participate in open arrangements that includes creative inputs” was more than 55% who confirmed that this had been the case in the spatial plan, and 38% in the masterplan (Ringholm & Nyseth, 2018). The survey, alas, tell nothing of how the politicians, or other participants conceive of their experiences from these settings, or how they use them in the decision making. Such questions are interesting and important, firstly, because they can produce insight into what impact these forms of participation have on the decisions. Secondly, because they can shed light on the compatibility between the innovative participation and the formal framework of the decision making process. On the one hand, the innovative participation practices have the potential to be acknowledged as conveyors of really new and useful insights, that are activated in the decision making. On the other, they may be regarded as the “icing on the cake” of an otherwise traditional and not-so-innovative planning process. Or, to use Arnsteins terms, as “therapy” (Arnstein, 1969). Research indicate that the more open and informal participation initiatives may have more of an advisory function, and that it can be difficult to trace whether they have an impact (Nyseth, Ringholm and Agger, 2019)

It should be noted, though, that a situation close to the latter need not be the result of deliberate strategies from the authorities. The motivation for the less formal forms of participation could be a genuine wish from the planners, the politicians, or both, to bring in new voices and gather new knowledge and viewpoints. However, the tools that are at hand for the bureaucracy, may be less sufficient for conveying the voices and insights into the process of decision making, or that the connections between the specific forms of participation and the decision making is vague or lacking (Nyseth, 2011). To a great degree, this can be connected to the question of *how the knowledge, experiences and ideas that are generated at the innovative participation arenas is framed and translated in a way that is recognized by the decision makers in the planning process*. What capacity is available for doing this, and what considerations are being made in the process? Who are the “translators”? Does the translation vary with regard to the type of actors that are involved? Are there elements that are in fact impossible to translate? Innovative participation, like more traditional participation, has a democratic anchorage. In a broader view, the questions regarding the translation mechanisms and capacity are important also in order to position an assess democracy aspects of the innovative forms of participation.

These questions will be discussed in the paper, through the development of a theoretical approach, and by the analysis of a case study of a city-lab process in a small Norwegian city. Section 2 contains a short introduction to relevant aspects of the Norwegian Planning and building Act, and section 3 presents the analytical approach, which is anchored in an institutional logic perspective and a translation perspective. In section 4, the method is presented, and section 5 and 6 contains the analysis and tentative conclusions of the case of innovative methods of participation.

2 Requirements and performance of participation in Norwegian, municipal planning

Participation is mandatory in public planning in Norway, and is enshrined in the Planning and Building Act (PBA). The requirement is stated as follows (my translation):

§5.1

Anyone who puts forward a planning proposition shall facilitate participation. The municipality shall make sure that this requirement is fulfilled in planning processes carried out by other public or private actors.

The municipality has a particular responsibility to ensure active participation from groups that require special facilitation, including children and youth. Groups and interests that are not able to participate directly shall be offered good possibilities for participation in other ways.

The PBA, thus, gives the citizens rights as legitimate actors in planning. The local authorities have to a large degree been delegated the task of defining and deciding who should be included in the participation, and in what way. However, after a revision of the PBA, carried out in 2008, *groups in need of particular facilitation*, such as children, people with foreign or indigenous backgrounds and disabled people, are especially mentioned.

The mandatory requirements of the PBA are *information and consultation*. Information is stated by the requirements for *advertising the establishment of the planning process*. It is required that the municipal planning strategy is made public 30 days prior to political consideration. To make the plan available for public inspection in a way that gives everyone access and a possibility to provide feedback, the use of electronic media is an option. The time frame for hearings is six weeks, extended from 30 days in the 2008 revision.

The PBA also require consultation. A plan proposal should be sent to those regarded as affected by the plan, and from whom feedback is required. The PBA also contain new rules for presenting comments on plan proposals. For both municipal plans (§11–14) and detailed zoning plans (§12–12), the legal preparation is required to make explicit how the comments received in the hearings have been considered, and whether they have been assigned any impact on the output.

Those are the minimum requirements of participation, stated by the law, and in general they follow the rules (Ringholm & Nyseth, 2018). This gives the municipalities a great deal of freedom to decide what form of participation they should employ, as the law does not pose any limitations, only the minimum requirements. Also, the local authorities are encouraged by the ministry to employ an extended menu of participation. A survey carried out in 2017 show that the municipalities in general do more than they are required to. Around 72% answers that they arrange public meetings, more than 50% carry out workshops or similar methods of participation, and there are also the small percentage of 7 who make use of creative techniques and expressions (Ringholm and Nyseth, 2018).

The percentages mentioned above present an overview, but have their limitations when it comes to presenting a picture of how different forms of participation is combined, over time or with regard to the type of planning process. We do not have aggregated research data on the scope and form of this, thus the research based knowledge basically stems from case studies (ref...). However, an impression that arises from those, from search on the Internet and from conversations with planners in different professional settings, is that there is at least an ambition, and possibly also a trend, among the municipalities to widen the scope of participation, and of combining the more traditional and the expressive forms. One reason is that many of the planning actors?

3 A three-dimensional theoretical approach

The theoretical approach of the analysis is based on three strands of theory. Firstly, that of democratic innovation, which has become an increasingly hot topic in the trail of the more overarching debate on public innovation. A particular dimension of this discussion is related to aspects of participation, which has, of course been a topic in planning and democracy theory since long before the public innovation debate gained momentum. The analysis is, thus, inspired by old as well as more recent contributions to the participation discussion. Lastly, since the core question of the paper is about how experiences from innovative participation is translated into the decision

making, what is generally known as translation theory will be an important part of the theoretical background.

3.1 Democratic innovation

As one main ambition with the innovative forms of participation is to contribute to democratic renewal and policy making, there is a need to clarify what the innovative aspects are in terms of democracy. The debate on democratic innovation has to a large extent been connected with the logics and dynamics of participative and communicative democracy. Significant contributions have been made in order to evaluate participative innovations, based on criteria that go beyond the democratic institutions and identify democratic values (Agger & Löfgren 2008; Smith 2009; Michels, 2012; Geissel, 2013). The evaluations contribute with concepts of democratic goods such as inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement, transparency, efficiency, transferability, meaningfulness, improvement of legitimacy, quality of deliberation, improvement of effectiveness and enlightenment of citizens.

The approach that this paper take in order to analysing the democratic potential of the innovative approaches, is to dig into the process of translating the inputs that in particular the less formalised participative actions provide, into the more formal decision making. On a general level, one can expect *democratic tensions* to emerge when new practices meet existing practices. This is well known from earlier and ongoing discussions on democratic goods, such as the question of representativeness and accountability in contexts of governance and collaboration (Behn 2001, Sørensen 2012). Experimentation and improvising will sometimes take place as a process with a very limited and handpicked selection of participants. These features may cause shortcomings in terms of democratic legitimacy. On the other side we have open gatherings, social media and events, where it is difficult for the initiating authorities to know who the participants are, and to assess and interpret the type of knowledge and opinions that are distributed among them, and the expressions that are displayed. Recent studies show that such tensions are certainly present in local politicians' considerations regarding innovative participation (Røiseland, 2019; Sønderskov, 2019). On the one hand, they are sympathetic to the idea of a closer and possibly less formal interaction between the citizens and the politicians, while on the other, they are reluctant to it because of the risk of jeopardising institutionalised values of representation.

'Creative experimentation' is one label that planning theory offer to some of the innovative participative practices. Experiments are speculative methods of knowing, working with doubts and uncertainty (Hillier, 2007:76). The label has been put on performative practices characterised by a situational openness and fluidity (Hillier, 2008). The task is to move from "what is" to "what if", and make planning practice a process of "becoming" rather than of fixing. Hillier emphasises the organising of "good encounters, or of constructing assemblages (social, political, artistic) in which powers of acting and the active affects that follow from them, are increased." (Hillier, 2008: 230). She argues for a planning that is a more inclusive, open and creative imagination of the past-present-future, and collaborative, critical discussion of potential consequences.

As with all forms of participation, the well known as well as the new and innovative, it is important to ask questions of what their impact is in the process, and possibly on the planning decisions. How can they be described with regard to important dimensions, and how are the innovative activities perceived by the decision makers of the planning authorities?

3.2 Dimensions of participation

Archon Fung (2006) introduces three dimensions that create the variation in participation: who participates, how communication and decision making take place and the degree of authority and power..



Fig. 1: The Democratic cube (Source: Fung, 2006)

The dimensions also have a relationship with the distinction between invited and invented spaces of citizenship (Miraftab, 2009). *Invited* spaces refer to the formal processes of participation initiated, organized and orchestrated by local governments, like formal hearings in a planning process. *Invented* spaces refer to collective actions that confront the authorities and challenge the status quo. As the ByLab-process is initiated and organised by the planning authorities, all the activities place themselves in the category of invited space. The process did, however, take place over a time-span of approximately a year and a half, and consisted of several occasions of participation (see presentation below). The participants entered the process in different ways. Some of the gatherings were workshops with individually invited citizens and correspond with Fung's categories of 'professional stakeholders' or 'lay stakeholders' (Fig.1). Other workshops were arranged by an open invitation, and the participants were 'randomly selected'. Other occasions again were of a nature that put them barely within the frame of the cube, in the 'open, self selected' and also possibly just on the outside – in the 'diffuse public sphere/everyone'. Invited spaces are often, but not always orchestrated events. Many of the new and innovative developments in participation seem to be characterised by a low degree of directing and formalising from the planning authorities' side (Nyseth, Ringholm & Agger, 2019). As planning is generally a policy process that is framed by rather formal arrangements, one can sometimes wonder what position the participation that happen in the outskirts of the formalities actually take in the planning process. What degree of power and authority is connected with it, and how does it place itself in terms of communication and decision mode? One way of finding out more about this, is to investigate how the input from the participation is brought into the further process of decision making. Since the innovative forms of participation we are dealing with here, are of a rather different nature than that of public bureaucracy, one way of shedding light on the issue is to ask questions of whether the experiences from participation in the outskirts of the cube are being translated into a form that corresponds with the general framing of the planning process.

3.3 A translation perspective

Innovations do by nature represent a challenge to established ways of thinking and acting. Sometimes, the innovation is meant as a full replacement of an existing service or practice, other times the intention is to “fill in the gap” between existing, institutionalised practices. In the latter case, however, the existing practices are not likely to proceed unchanged, as long as there are activities that connects the old and the new practices. On the other hand, the new ideas, when put into practice, could also undergo a certain degree of change in the meeting with the institutionalised practices (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012; Holmen & Ringholm, 2019). There is, in other words, reason to expect a certain degree of reflexivity between the established system and the new ideas and practices.

3.3.1 Translation in theory

One way to understand the journey of a new idea or practice into an established, institutionalised system, is in terms of translation. The translation perspective has developed within public management theory, mainly in order to understand how new ideas travel and are transformed from one context to another (Czarniawska & Jorges, 1996; Røvik, 2016; Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). The perspective is less, if at all, applied in planning studies. I believe, however, that it can be a fruitful approach to understanding how new participative developments are received by planning institutions. By applying a translation perspective, one recognises that even if practices origin from the same idea, and are applied in organisations that apparently have much in common, they can display a considerable degree of diversity when put into practice. Such differences can be explained by several factors that contribute to embed the new practice, such as differences in institutionalised values, different power relations, varying degrees of enthusiasm for the idea and differences in the competence that is put into realising the idea. Implementing innovative ideas into existing institutions and practices is, thus, a process that several researchers label “the translation process” (Czarniawska & Jorges, 1996; Røvik, 2016; Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). In this perspective, the introduction of an idea, and the process of transforming the idea into practices is; *“... a complex process of negotiation during which meanings, claims and interests change and gain ground.”* (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016:237). In other words, it is a process where factors such as competence, power and negotiating skills could be activated, factors that are likely to vary between organisations, localities and the actual problem context). Hence, we should not be surprised if innovative forms of participation that origin from a common body of ideas and ambitions, are received in different ways by different municipalities.

There are different perspectives on translation, and O’Maloney presents us with what he calls four ‘archetypes’: Diffusion, Actor-network theory (ANT), Scandinavian institutionalism and Organisational boundaries (O’Maloney, 2016). I will not elaborate on the relation between the perspectives here, other than argue that they may all have something to offer in terms of understanding how innovative participation as an idea and as practice is introduced in public planning.

The translation perspective underlines the unpredictability connected with the output – and outcome – of the process of introducing a new policy of participation. There are different forms of changes, and Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012) suggest two main categories: Transformational change and developmental change. In transformational change one institutional logic replaces another, though possibly with some modifications (blending, segregation). Developmental change is a concept used in order to describe a situation where the existing institutional logic is not replaced, but where it to some degree could be influenced by the new idea. The question that researchers on

participative planning and planning authorities alike need to ask is to what degree the innovative, experimental forms of participation are able to shift institutionalised understandings of what participation should be.

3.3.2 Translation in practice

Like with other social phenomena, there are several ways of studying translation. In a review article, O'Mahoney shows how different perspectives, 'archetypes', tend to attract different methodological preferences. While the diffusion perspective most often seems to be operationalised by quantitative methods, the more intensive, qualitative methods characterise the other three perspectives.

The aim of this study is to gain insight into how actors that are important for bringing the insights from the innovative practices into the decision making, perceive of the participative arenas. Innovative participation has the potential to turn the course of action through powerful narratives. It may also just be an easily forgotten occasion – the icing on an otherwise entirely tidy planning process. How should one explore the mediators' way into the policy-making process and is it possible to identify their impact on policy-making?

The decision making system, the bureaucracy, is strongly characterised by text based presentations – preparatory works, reports, minutes and so on. However, the decision makers who took part in the new arenas, or those who have heard from others who have participated, the practical experiences and the impressions that are conveyed from other participants, will bring these with them into the considerations that are made. In other words, the translation will happen both 'by text' and 'by memories' or 'by stories'. As innovative practices do by nature challenge existing practices, one needs to ask if the existing practices for conveying impressions from participative arenas are sufficient for the new forms of participation. Or is it possible that the innovative forms demand other tools for translation than the traditional, formal forms?

3.4 Innovation in participative planning in a translation perspective

4 Data

The data is gathered by a mixed methods approach, consisting of a document analysis and interviews.

The documents that are included in the analysis are five reports from the whole strategy process: Report from youth workshop, report from the business workshop, report from the citizens workshop, report from ByLab, Report from the ByLab workshops, summing up of the ByLab

The interviews with 7 municipal actors were carried out in the spring of 2019 – one year and nine months after the strategy was decided upon by the local council. The actors had different roles in the strategy process, and also in the ByLab arenas. Four of the interviewees are politicians, one is a planner, one is head of department with responsibility for societal development and planning and one is the leader of the board for the local organisation for business and town development. The interview guide is enclosed (App. 1)

5 The Case: CityLab in a medium sized town

The CityLab in was carried out in a town of approximately 15.000 inhabitants. The process was spurred by a need for transport planning in the area of the city and its surroundings, which was linked to a city development process. The aim was a development strategy for the city area. Such

strategies are not mandatory by the Planning and building Act, but are often used in order to make the strategic choices visible and to. The problem situation can be summarised into three factors: firstly, the general idea of compact city, urging new ways of thinking, both with regard to the built environment and with regard to transport. Secondly, an ageing population, which made the municipality take measures to inspire young people to participate. Thirdly, the desire of the municipality to bring new life into the city centre, in particular in order to attract young people. A broad set of participatory efforts was therefore decided on.

5.1 The process summarised

The whole planning process was carried out in the period from autumn 2015 to winter 2017. The activities and meetings during the process were initiated in a collaboration between the municipality, the county authorities, the national road authorities, and a network organisation open to business actors, organisations, and individuals, that advocates for activity in the city.

The methods for citizen involvement included: 1) In-house preparatory work and a start-up conference focusing on everyday experiences from different parts of the city. 2) Three workshops were carried out in 2015/2016, namely the Youth Workshop with the youth council, the Business Workshop with business actors and the City Seminar which included a broader spectre of citizens. The workshops took place as group discussions. Each group then summed up their inputs in a document that they submitted to the planning committee. Later, a ‘Future Workshop’ and a public meeting was instigated, which both included a diverse set of citizens. The most innovative form in this context, was the CityLab, ByLab in Norwegian. This lasted one week and was the final part of the participatory process. A CityLab had not been carried out in this municipality before, and the purpose of it was to gather insight in less formal ways, for shaping future images and concept development. ByLab combined meetings that were held in new arenas, politicians’ lunch in the pedestrian street, politicians’ sofa, visits to different workplaces, collecting of written suggestions from the citizens in the form of short statements by the thumbs up or down, citizens’ photos of important places. Children and young people were deliberately involved, along with citizens of all ages. As one can see, the arenas were set up not only in order to engage the citizens, but also with the purpose of facilitating direct contact between the politicians and the citizens. People from the administration were also present in all the arenas.

The participants of the varying invited spaces fall into different categories, and below I have listed them according to the categorisation of participants developed by Fung (2006).

Table 1: types of participation and arenas in the process

Participation arena	Participants	Type of invited space
Start-up conference		Indoor meeting/formal
Youth workshop	Professional stakeholders, invited	Indoor meeting/formal
Business workshop	Professional stakeholders, invited	Indoor meeting/formal
City Seminar	Open, self-selected	Indoor meeting/formal
Public meeting	Open, self-selected	Indoor meeting/formal
<i>ByLab: Politicians’ lunch in the pedestrian area</i>	Open, self-selected/diffuse public sphere	Outdoor moving/informal

<i>ByLab: Meeting people in the shopping centre</i>	Open, self-selected	Indoor, informal
<i>ByLab: Politicians' sofa at the city hall</i>	Open, self-selected	Indoor, informal
<i>ByLab: Walking with young parents out rolling with the babies in prams</i>	Semi-open, self-selected	Outdoor, moving/informal
<i>ByLab: Visit to workplaces</i>	Semi-open, self-selected	Indoor meeting/semi-formal
<i>ByLab: Visits to schools</i>		
<i>ByLab: Thumbs up/thumbs down at various places in the town</i>	Open, self-selected	Outdoor, informal, expressive
<i>ByLab: Citizens' photos of important places at the town hall and the schools</i>	Open, self-selected	Outdoor/indoor, informal, expressive

Among all these invited spaces, it is in particular the informal and semi-formal forms that were organised as part of the ByLab process, that are of interest to this paper, since these are the innovative ones. In defining what innovation is, I will lean heavily on Schumpeters contextualised definition, later adopted by a multitude of scholars (Schumpeter,). The municipality had previous experiences with using workshops as a participative arena, but the informal ways described above were new in this context.

5.2 Translation by text: gathering inputs into documents

How is the input, the knowledge and viewpoints that are generated by innovative, informal participation framed when they are conveyed into the formal decision making process? One way of looking into this question, is to ask what capacity, in the form of knowledge/skill and time resources, that are available for doing this. Another question is in what form the input is presented.

A team was set up for processing the input from the different participation arenas. The team consisted of one person from the municipality, one from the regional authorities, one from the road authorities, one from the town network organisation and one from the consultant agency. The practical job with was mainly carried out by the hired consultants.

The inputs from all the arenas, the workshops and the ByLab arenas, were summed up in altogether five reports. All the documents were made accessible on a designated homepage for the project. This homepage also enabled responses. The responses, however, have not been saved after the policy document was presented.

One of the reports contained the summing up of the ByLab part of the process. The report also contain an overview of how many participated in the different arenas that the citizens were invited to. The overview (table 2) is rather semi-detailed, as it does not separate between the different occasions at the city hall.

Table 2: Number of people that the politicians/planners have had a dialogue with during the ByLab

Visits to the city hall	Workplace visits (6)	School visits (4)	Workshop and public meeting	City talk at shopping mall/young parents	Sum
163	88	252	70	80	653

Source: Report on the ByLab, retrieved from the municipality's webpage

The inputs that were put forward by the citizens on these occasions were carefully noted by the representatives from the municipal administration who were present at the different arenas. These are also listed in the report. They are presented in a rather short form, and listed according to the respective arenas where they were put forward. Below is an example of the form, gathered from the city talk in the shopping mall (my translation):

- Positive to development and densifying
- [name of town] can take tall houses
- Yes to more residential houses in the town centre
- We are ready for densifying
- Important to take care of the old things
- Thumbs up for development of the station area
- Wants small houses in the town centre, not tall houses

From this particular event, 34 bullet points are listed, filling one whole page. Altogether, the bullet points from the different arenas fill nine pages of the report.

The report also contains some photos, five from the school visits and four thumbs up/thumbs down. The photos from the school visits show where the students have put red and green pins on a map of the town centre, in order to express an opinion of this particular spot. These photos are, however, not accompanied by much explain text. The reader is not oriented of what the exact purpose of the pins is, or if the color has a particular meaning – though it is close at hand to assume that red means something bad and green something good. Under each of these photos some statements are referred, and one gets the impression that they must be uttered by some of those that the visitors from the municipality met at the schools. One example: one of the photos display a section of the town map that show the railway and bus station area, including a pedestrian area. On this photo, 75 pins can be counted. Under the photo, we find the following three statements (my translation):

- The station should be renovated
- It is not nice to stay here
- The pedestrian street is dilapidated and has little to offer the youth

The three text points are probably the essence of the opinions that were made on this particular area of the town in school meetings. However, the reader is not informed of whether these are the opinions from one school in particular or of whether there are variations of any significance.

The photos of the thumbs up/thumbs down show these placed in different places of the town, and an opinion of the particular location written on each of them. Altogether ten thumbs (6 with an up and 4 with a down) are displayed on the photos. Of the ten, the text is readable in three or four. On the other photos the text is blurred due to lack of sharpness of the photo.

'Future pictures' (my translation) is a document that were developed by the project team and presented in the policy documents that were prepared for the business and city development committee. 'Future pictures' to a certain degree sums up the input from the different arenas. However, the composition of the text is such that it is difficult to trace the particular viewpoints to one or more arena and stage of the process. The process as a whole is referred to in general terms, and the document is short (...pages). The formal arenas, the workshops and the meetings that have

a formalised character, are to a greater degree possible to identify in the documents than the informal ones. Arenas like the politicians' lunch and the thumbs up/thumbs down, are more or less invisible. They are not referred to explicitly in the way that the input from some of the formal arenas are.

As we can see, the summing up of the input has not undergone an editorial work apart from the listing that is partly referred above. If exchanges of viewpoints or heated discussions occurred, they do not protrude from the documentation. In that respect, the documentation appear as somewhat "clinical", even if different viewpoints can be read from at least some of the listings.

New arenas were established by the ByLab, and some of the people who are generally absent from municipal planning were engaged. In particular that goes for children, youth and people who are members of organised interests that are tend to engage in planning issues. It is, however, fairly easy to map the arenas, while getting a comprehensive picture of who the participants on the arenas were, is more of a challenge. Also, it is not easy to detect what kind of person that is behind the viewpoints. Of course, to a certain extent, some are possible to guess. The school visits gathered pupils and teachers, the workplace visits gathered employees at the respective workplaces. Nevertheless, the reports give the readers little to go by in terms of putting faces to the inputs.

When asked about the challenges with presenting the experiences from the ByLab arenas in a written form, the people I interviewed had varying opinions. Some, and in particular the administration, are of the opinion that the form that they are presented in is good and meticulous – that they wrote down everything that was being said, and that is can be found in in the documents that are referred to above. Others, and especially one of the politicians who was present at all types of arenas, emphasise that a lot of what was being said and discussed in the arenas is not necessarily written down, (my translation): *"But then there is all these small discussion that have occurred. They are not documented.... They are something that the politicians perhaps have brought into the political processes."*

5.3 Translation by memories: the municipal actors' impressions

All the interviewees agree that the ByLab process as a whole was interesting and worthwhile, and that it is vivid in the memory of the participants. They do, however, have different opinions on what was the most rewarding or interesting arenas, and what purposes that were fulfilled by the process.

The process as a whole

When asked about the process as a whole, the general impression is that the interviewees think it was useful and interesting. Two of the interviewees did only participate in one of the workshops, the City seminar, which was an open workshop for anyone to attend. The enthusiasm seems to rise with the number of arenas they attended, as those who were present at all or at least several types of arenas, express their opinion on the usefulness and relevance more strongly than those who only participated once. Only two of the informants had only participated in one single arena, and one from the administration had been present in all of them. The others had taken part in all the different types of arenas, however not inn each and every one of them – not all the workplace and school visits, for instance, but at least one of each.

A part of the enthusiasm is connected to the multitude of forms and arenas that were set up, and the fact that they could meet people in different ways, both in informal and more formal settings. Those who participated in different forms of arenas, express that it is precisely the combination of arenas that contribute to give a more comprehensive picture of the citizens' opinions. In addition, the fact that they process was quite "compact", as it was carried out during a time span of three weeks. It

made them keep up the energy and concentration on the theme, and one describes it as an aspect that made them more receptive to the inputs they gathered from the citizens.

The intensity of the process and the many arenas that they attended is likely to be an important reason why the process and the strategy that was developed on the bases of it, was still vivid in the informants' memory more than two years after the ByLab was conducted, and a year and a half after the strategy was decided on by the local council. In addition, this was the most extensive participation process that the municipality had carried out, and with several elements that were innovative to the context, which probably contribute to the general enthusiasm. They describe it as a new and very energising experience. The positive attitude to the innovative participation was also confirmed by their opinions on whether arenas such as those in the ByLab process should be employed in other planning context. On this question, the agreement was unison among the interviewees. This also goes for those who only attended one of the workshops, and not the ByLab arenas. Their positivity stems largely from what they have heard from others who participated, both politicians and citizens, and from observing that the process and the strategy is actually being referred to in discussions both in the local council, the committees and in the social media.

It should be noted, though, that when asked if these forms of participation should be used more frequently, they people I interviewed are aware of the fact that the process as a whole was time consuming and resource demanding, and the whole apparatus cannot be activated for any small detail zoning plan. However, they agree that the experiences have opened new paths into participation, and that elements from the process should be applied more often. Especially, they point to the work place- and school-visits, and the informal meetings they had with the citizens in for instance the shopping centre and in town. One also mentions that in such arenas the politicians are to a certain extent "freed" from party politics, and speak more openly and with another attitude with the citizens. From the informant, this is meant as a positive feature.

What was the most important experiences of the process?

While there is a general agreement that the process as a whole was good and useful, the people I interviewed display more variety with regard to what the most important, interesting and useful aspects and arenas of the process were.

From the preparatory document, and from the town centre strategy, the process is described as a participative process: *"... a process with active and broad participation from politicians, business actors, citizens and public sector actors."* (Town centre strategy: 9, (my translation)). The importance of the input they got from the citizens in new and innovative ways, was emphasised by all the informants. It is no doubt that one main aim of the process was to gain insight into people's images of their town in the future. The workplace and school visits and the city talks (shopping centre, politicians' lunch, parents with prams) were often mentioned as good arenas for getting new knowledge of people's viewpoints and their reasons for acting as they do. The all connected this to the informality of the arenas, and that they got to talk with other people than those that usually turn up at meetings and other, more formal occasions. As one of the politicians put it (my translation): *"As politicians we often meet people with strong interests. More seldom do we meet 'the silent majority'. In the shopping centre we met some of them."*

The other experience that all the interviewees emphasise, was that the process was important for anchoring the town-centre strategy. This is in particular expressed with regard to anchoring among the politicians, but also with regard to the citizens and the business actors. When asked about what they mean with "anchoring", they give elaborations that fall into two main categories. Firstly, it is about anchoring the new ideas of city development that is connected to the challenges of reducing

the use of fossil energy and enhancing public health, which among other lead into the path of densification and motivating people to use collective transport, cycle and walk, rather than private, fossil driven transport. Though many embrace these thoughts, there is certainly also a significant degree of resistance to them. Much of the residential areas in the town centre, consist of detached houses with gardens around them, and people in general tend to use their car a lot, and to a great degree on short trips, such as going to a shop or visiting a service just a few hundred metres away. It was reported in the interviews that much of the discussions and inputs were related to these topics. From the interviews one can see that anchoring these overarching ideas of city planning and development is directed both towards the citizens and the politicians. The politicians that attended the different participative arenas felt obliged to be well prepared for the possible discussions with the citizens, and had made more effort than they usually would do in connection with a planning process, to obtain knowledge of the ideas and what the implementation of them would lead to for their town and citizens. Participating was voluntary for the politicians, but altogether many more than was usual in for example a public meeting, took part in the ByLab. The engagement from the politicians' side brings us to the other important perception of anchoring that is emphasised in almost all the interviews.

The process was deliberately designed in order to anchor the strategy among the politicians. Generally, many municipalities experience that their politicians do not engage much, neither in planning nor in strategy processes (Ringholm & Nyseth, 2018; Kvalvik, 2018). In the committee that prepared the process, the importance of engaging the politicians was agreed upon, both by the administrators and the politicians. This idea got few, if any, objections when the process plan was presented to the politicians. Since participation was voluntary, those who could not or did not want to attend, were free to do so.

In other words, anchoring was, firstly, a question of making both citizens and politicians, familiar with the overarching ideas and thoughts that framed the strategy, and which the strategy document would need to recognise and give a local direction. Secondly, the ambition of anchoring also meant that the politicians should gain ownership to the strategy document, because this was meant as a platform for the further planning exercises of the municipality, among other the spatial plan that was going to be developed shortly after the strategy document was decided on.

In the interviews, the anchoring of the framing ideas and the strategy document among the politicians were pointed to as an important achievement of the process. That such a large proportion of the politicians actually turned up at the arenas, the debates they engaged in and the new knowledge they gained from this, was regarded as very valuable by both politicians and administrators. The following quote from one of the administrators is illustrative for the general opinion that I registered (my translation): *“The fact that all the important politicians have participated, has given them such an ownership to it [the strategy document] and that they speak positively about it.”* Another administrator put it like this (my translation): *“Now they [the politicians] have got it “drip-wise” in several rounds. Then it is easier to get a large plan.”*

The anchoring and ownership of the framing ideas and the strategy document was, however, not the only output, in terms of experiences, that the interviewees thought of as important. The meetings and conversations with the citizens had also given new knowledge and a certain shift regarding how the ideas of a vivid and dense town centre could be developed. Both administrators and politicians say that they would have to think again about the cars and parking facilities, about the height of new buildings, and about how to deal with the existing green areas in and around the town centre. They connect this directly to inputs that they got from the citizens in the ByLab process. Since the process was connected to a strategy, and not a legally binding plan, some of the interviewees emphasise that

the knowledge that was gained will present itself on different future occasions when particular plans are being decided upon. Nevertheless, they all say that some of opinions of the citizens that were mapped in the ByLab arenas, have been embedded in the strategy document. It is, however, impossible, they say, to follow the trace from the particular arena and into the strategy. One has to look at the process as a whole and consider the inputs in light of the editorial work done by the administration.

Lost or found?

The issue that this paper discuss is the question of *how the knowledge, experiences and ideas that are generated at the innovative arenas of participation is framed and translated in a way that is recognized by the decision makers in the planning process*. The question is important in order to assess the democratic value of the new participative initiatives that are made by both planning authorities and the citizens. They seem to become more and more popular, and there can be several reasons for that. On the one side, they could be really useful for gaining insight in the citizens' opinions and experiences. On the other, they could be "the icing on the cake" – a happening with no real impact on the decision or other feature that makes them meaningful.

The presentation in the previous chapter show that the ByLab- process served more than one purpose. It also show that the input form the arenas was translated in more than one way. These experiences can in short be summarized into the following points:

- A main purpose of the process was both to get a broad picture of the citizens' ideas and viewpoints on the development of the town center, and to anchor the overall framing – the new ideas of city development, with the citizens and the politicians.
- Another main purpose was to enhance the politicians' ownership to the strategy and its framing ideas.
- The translation of the inputs from the innovative arenas are presented as unedited lists of utterances in the reports, sorted by arena, whereas in the strategy document viewpoints are not referred to different arenas.
- Small talk and discussions that politicians and administrators engaged in at the arenas are not referred in the reports.

There are, of course, good reasons why not all of the inputs were being referred. It is very time consuming and would demand more manpower than was made available for carrying out the process. Capacity limits is surely one explanation. The findings also indicate others explanations. One is that that the administrators found this way of referring a good and thorough one, and in line with what one could expect – well within the standards that is applied by the planning organization. Another explanation could be that the mixed purposes of the process – of embedding the framework of ideas for city development among the citizens and the politicians – has had an impact on the efforts that are put into the presentation of the input. It could also be that the framing has had an impact on how the inputs are sorted, in the way that it has colored the lenses of the translators. In this case, the translators from the administration that was responsible for summing up and preparing the written output from the process. One of them have been thinking a bit in terms of the administrators' impact on the final document, and formulates this as aquestion: *"Is it so that because the process has been so large and wide spanning, then it has become an even more professional product?"* In a way, this administrator questions the whole rationale of the innovative participation arenas. The quote also show that even if you have been at the core of the process, you do not know the answer.

Even more untraceable are the stories that the process form in the heads of the participants, and which are shaped by the meetings with people and the conversations that take place in the arenas. These are probably important vehicles, the “good encounters” in moving from “what is” to “what if”, and make planning practice a process of “becoming” rather than of fixing (Hillier, 2008). Would it be a good idea to write them down or record them and put them on the municipality’s homepage for the public to see and learn? This is a lengthy discussion, that involves the consideration of factors such as a possible loss of spontaneity and the informality that the participants obviously value up against the transparency dimension of the representative democratic system.

More traceable is the underlying story of the informal arenas as a way to go forward in future planning processes. Both the politicians and the administrators express a great enthusiasm about them, and are positive to institutionalizing them. If this is a development that gains weight, not only in this municipality, the questions regarding mechanisms for translation are likely to be more outspoken. The participants of the open and informal arenas place themselves in the outskirts of Fung’s democratic cube (Fung, 2006), and it is a question of translation capacity and skills whether we are able to detect where they are to be placed in terms of communication mode and possibly of authority.

It is also possible that a process like this contains elements that are in fact impossible to translate into the known practices of the planning system. The enthusiasm or heatedness of a certain situation, the mutual understandings that can suddenly occur, the experience of being part of a meaningful conversation, or the complete opposite. Such experiences protrude from the interviews, but are not made explicit in any of the documents. The strategy documents’ sober description is (my translation): *“The strategy is the result of a process with active and broad participation from politicians, business sector, citizens and public sector actors. This has been important in order to ensure a good product with a solid ownership to the project.”*

All in all, the ByLab seems to have played a role in creating a new story, or new stories, about the town. It has become a point of reference for subsequent political discussions and planning projects, first and foremost among the political actors, but to some extent also among other actors. Some of the story, one version, is in the documents, other parts are in the heads of the participants, and can only be revealed by following the issues that are brought up in connection to town development.

Appendix 1: Interview guide

- 1 What are your experiences with the ByLab process?
- 2 What experiences are conveyed to you from others who participated in other parts of the process than yourself?
- 3 Is this way of designing participation useful for the planning and development work in the municipality?
- 4 Do you think the presentation of the process and the experiences from it, as it appears in the documents, is in accordance with your impressions from participating in the process?

- 5 Was the discussion in the local council different from discussions that you have experience from, regarding other planning contexts. If so, in what way?
- 6 Do you see any limitations or disadvantages with these forms of participation?
- 7 Do you have thoughts or ideas of other, new forms of participation?
- 8 Concluding remarks



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