

Presentation: *A Tower of Babel: distinguishing different types of participation*

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I am Leida Schuringa: coach, trainer, community worker, writer of methodology books about Project management, Handling diversity and Community Empowerment/Community Work. I am glad to be here. This focus on participation is really an innovation in the quite traditional world of social work in Czech Republic.

In this presentation I want to distinguish different meanings of the concept of Participation. Because: the many ideas and interpretations about what participation is (at least in The Netherlands), can lead to so much confusion in meetings and other situations. Interpretations like: Participation is:

- be a part of (the neighbourhood, an organisation, a group, society, ...)
- influence policy making of government and institutions like housing corporations and schools
- identity building, empowerment
- be successful at school, getting a job
- be engaged in all kinds of activities as a participant or volunteer
- active citizenship: take responsibility for your fellow citizens
- social inclusion

[\[Question to the participants: write down your own interpretation/definition of participation\].](#)

All those definitions of *participation* has created a “Tower of Babel” for policy makers, citizens and those working in the field like you. When we are talking with each other: social workers/action groups/organisations of citizens/community groups on one hand and the government/civil servants/institutions on the other: many times there is confusion and not-understanding each other. There seem to be two different worlds: the life world of people and the systems world¹. How can we create a bridge to be able to talk with each other?



Often when there is conflict, tension and misunderstanding, we have a dialogue of the deaf and we use words and concepts in different ways. I discovered that it helps me to communicate more effectively with people who have quite other views, when I can understand their perspective. So I think it helps when you are able to see the different views and meanings of the concept of Participation.

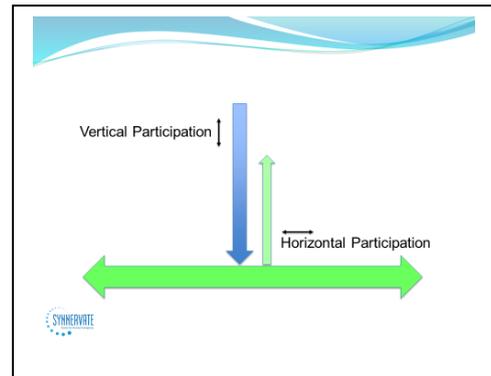
In this presentation I distinguish two main types of participation.

1. Vertical Participation = participating in Policy making processes (Public Participation)
2. Horizontal Participation = participating in civil society and in social networks (Social Inclusion)

¹ Habermas

1. **Vertical Participation = Participating in Policy Making.** Looking through the spectacles of national and local Government, civil servants, politicians or Public Administration, 'participation' is about giving the opportunity to citizens to have influence in Decision Making Processes. It is called 'Public Participation'. In general there are not so many people who participate in those procedures, because it requires many skills to do so. You can look to vertical participation from two sides: from the governmental system who organizes the opportunities for citizens to participate (= how much influence does the system gives or wants to give to citizens) or from the citizens perspective (= hoe much influence do we have or want to have).

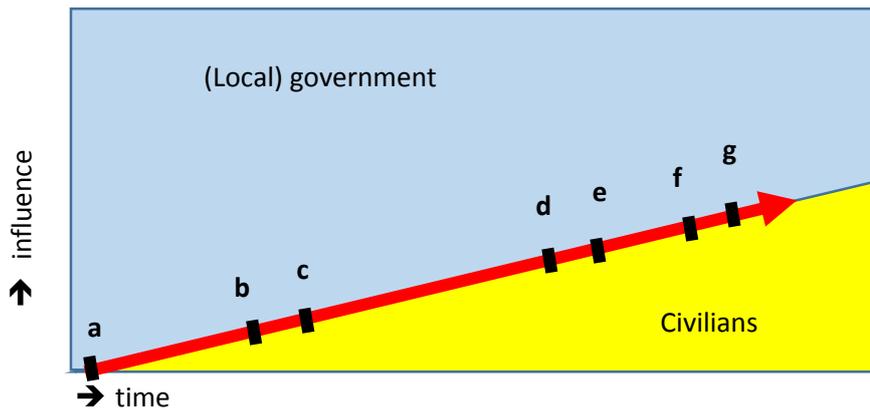
We can feel angry at government/politics about not (enough) incorporating people to have a say in what is important for them. Politics is about: your home, your job, your money, your health, your education, your value, your safety, your life. So to have influence is very important. At the same time before this will be reality, we will need time, struggle and especially more development of our democracy. It helps me to know where a country or local government is in its stage of development and so to understand better the context in which we work and live.



History shows that the views on vertical participation in our democratic countries are changing. From no influence at all towards little by little more participation, more influence given to citizens by the government/decision makers?

- a) **Voting rights**, first for the happy few, then for all citizens of 18 years and older. At first no information about policy making
- b) Being **informed** about decisions
- c) Your voice and ideas about policies are **heard, but no obligation** for the government to do something with it
- d) **Cooperation** in developing plans: various citizens, organizations and businesses are asked to give their expertise in the preparation of policies and concrete projects. Government decides. **Obligation to explain** decisions and give arguments why the voice of the involved people is not included in a decision
- e) **Delegation**: part of the project is delegated to a group of citizens or an organization: they can decide about this part within a given framework of time and money (e.g. making a common vegetable garden or renovation of a house for elderly)
- f) **Collaboration in decision making**: government, citizens, businesses and other organizations form a partnership e.g. to make a design for a neighborhood. They decide together.
- g) **Facilitation of initiatives of citizens**, e.g. a group of citizens organize a Neighborhood Care Cooperative to care for elderly and handicapped people in their neighborhood and they ask the local government to support this initiative with money and expertise.

So you can see a growing influence of civil society in processes of decision making and in taking the initiative. When we look from the citizens side to this development, we speak about the 'participation ladder': citizens getting more to say in each step of the ladder.



In the Netherlands now the focus is on developing g: facilitating initiatives of citizens and other partners. In what phase is Czech Republic in general and here in Ostrava??

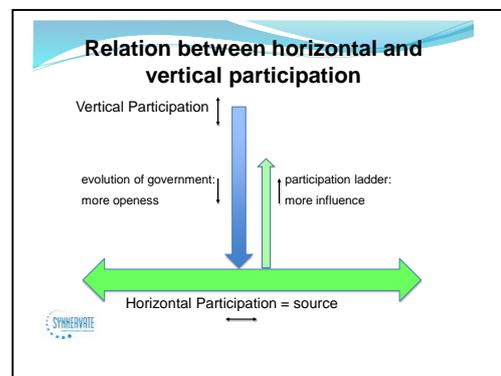
[Question to the participants: write down your first thought/guess]

Maybe an interesting question to discuss in the smaller groups.

So far about Vertical Participation. Now I want to discuss Horizontal Participation.

2. Horizontal Participation = Participating in Society

Looking through the spectacles of the Sociologist and Social worker, 'participation' is more about Social Cohesion and Social Inclusion. How are people participating in society and in social networks? How do they relate to each other? How are they organized? How can they find their way to education, information, support and care? Horizontal participation as a method is focused on involving different (groups of) residents in activities of the civil society and increasing the interaction between these groups. It also is about motivating and activating people to use their voice and take own initiatives. I suppose that the title of this conference 'participative approaches in Social work' mainly points to horizontal participation. But an important issue for us is: how to prepare people to gain more influence in the system's world, in the decision making processes, in the field of vertical participation.



This is not an easy job. You will encounter many dilemma's and obstacles. For example:

We as compassionate Social workers want to support isolated civilians and excluded communities to get a dignified and appreciated place and role in society. But we see deep ingrained processes of social exclusion and discrimination in this society. How to deal with these phenomena?

I discovered that it helps me to be able to see the stage of development where I myself and other people are. Not all people are able to feel compassion and openness to people who are not alike themselves. Not all people feel the same need to influence their environment or help other people. People have different perspectives on themselves and the world around them. Changing living conditions provoke new perspectives and people can develop new insights. There is a pattern in this

development, like you can see in how little children grow up in different developmental stages. We can see an evolution in the various perspectives people are able to embody and express. I use Spiral Dynamics to make this evolution visible. It shows the development of mankind and of each person. Time is too short to explain this in detail. But let's look to the example by Spiral glasses.

From the perspective of Compassionate Social workers the world is seen as a place for everyone. Solidarity, harmony, sharing emotions, listening to the need of others and personal growth are important values. They love harmony and don't like conflicts. Participating is here: supporting other people and make the world a better place.

But many citizens and institutions in society do not share this as their dominant perspective. They primarily value structure, procedures and order. It is all about Right or Wrong. We are right, they are wrong. Kids in primary schools are very involved in this kind of thinking: what are the rules here? Following the rules is seen as important. People are participating in traditional civil society: church, associations, self-organizations, political parties. Traditional social workers might have this same perspective.

So there is a big gap between these two perspectives. How to bridge this gap? It is not possible to convince other people to take over your perspective. They will not understand you. So you have to find other ways to connect with them and touch them in their perspective, speak their language. Might be: use stories and language from the bible that refer to solidarity and harmony.

Let us take a second example:

We want to empower people to become active and fight for their rights. We want them to develop self-confidence and more competences to function in this society. But it can be difficult to get in contact and to motivate them.

For the compassionate social worker it is clear that people can learn and develop. People who have a more traditional perspective or stay in bad living conditions, often won't share this quite individual and progressive view. They live together in their families and clans and feel safe there. They have a very traditional division of tasks and value rituals and superstition. What they do, is for their own family and own group. They mistrust the rest of the world. Participation from this perspective means caring for your own family and community. Sometimes we also see power play: who is the boss here, who is follower. Participation from this perspective is connecting with people who make you stronger and can help you. It is very important to be respected.

So again we can see a big gap between these perspectives and you have to find ways to connect with the people you want to support, understanding their way of thinking and acting. From this connection it is possible to stimulate them to take a next small step to find a new order in their life and community that is needed to be able to improve their situation. If you don't adjust your communication and style to the people you support, your good intention may be lost in the Tower of Babel... or become even counterproductive.

Understanding all these different perspectives on participation might be helpful to deal with this kind of dilemma's and obstacles.

To close:

So I think it can be very useful to be able to distinguish between Vertical and Horizontal Participation and to see the evolution/development on both sides:

- Vertical Participation: The development of thinking within the institutions/government in the direction of more openness for the voice and influence of citizens. Slowly but visible (although you probably still think it goes much too slow...)
- Horizontal Participation: The development of the different perspectives people have and how they participate in society in different ways.

When you are more aware of these different ways of dominant thinking, dominant perspectives, you can use this in your ways of communicating with people with quite other views.

I strongly believe that participation is only sustainable if we include ALL groups of people, and not just the people similar to ourselves or that we find easy to deal with. This requires bridging all kinds of apparently opposing views. I think that using an integral analysis like I gave you in this presentation, can support us in getting more clarity and finding new ways to fill the gap. I hope that this theoretical framework will be useful during this conference.