

Turning the tables: Citizens take the lead

The Amsterdam approach of Inverted Participation

May 2025

Contact: <https://www.munex.eu/>

Carla Huisman (c.j.huisman@uva.nl) & Justus Uitermark
(j.l.uitermark@uva.nl)

Grant 438.21.449 funded by the European Union
NextGenerationEU.

Index

Abstract	2
Recommendations	4
Introduction	6
Methodology	7
Results	10
General references	11

Abstract

Even when municipalities have serious aspirations to strengthen democratisation processes through empowering disadvantaged citizens, the reality can be rather rough. In practice, many participatory experiments fail to reach their self-proclaimed goals. Inverted participation seeks to address this issue. By letting citizens organise meetings themselves, and offering them ample resources to do so, we can ensure that citizens really get centre stage.



Figure 1. Residents, housing corporations’ representatives and civil servants during an inverted participation session in Amsterdam’s Northern district (2023). Photo credit: www.rodinl/amsterdam-noord/nieuws/340297/aanpak-noord-wonen-hoogste-tijd

Recommendations

Citizens, **especially those who are disadvantaged, can be empowered** through inverted participation, an experience that carries weight beyond this process. Furthermore, **institutional partners are forced to listen** to the lived experience of citizens, which otherwise are easy to ignore.

The idea of inverted participation can motivate groups of citizens struggling with participation in their locality. By sharing the idea with citizens, policy makers and politicians, **struggling citizens can become aware that experiments are possible, and legitimise such interventions to their local institutions**. Inverted participation might be transferable to situations with governmental participation schemes that do not deliver on their promised outcomes. The possibility of inversion depends on the form of the contested participation scheme.

Inverted participation is firstly an idea, a discursive intervention. Institutional stakeholders often respond by arguing why inverted participation is not feasible or desirable. This forces local governments and others involved in participation processes to reflect on the issues with current models, and challenges them to make explicit their preconceived ideas, their instinctive resistance in legal and political forms. **The approach exposes problems with traditional participation.**

Recognition of the inherent capabilities of ‘normal’ citizens needs to be combined with offering sufficient resources for citizens to not be overruled by government and other institutional actors. A commitment of political power holders as well as civil servants to continue this way of working for an extended period can greatly improve the approach.

Conditions for this approach to work

Allow for **large discretion for citizens in how they organise inverted participation**: the citizens should be empowered to choose the venue, the intervals of meeting, set the agenda, chair or appoint a chair, and be in charge of the minutes.

Professional actors such as civil servants, local politicians and other stakeholders, for instance local welfare or public housing organisations, **should be prevented from falling into patronising habits**.

The feasibility and success of the approach relies on **the durable strength of the political mobilisation of citizens, which can be emboldened by the long-term institutional support**. The risk is that when implemented half-heartedly, the reverse effect from what is desired might be accomplished: disempowering people through another empty participation process.

The legitimacy of the approach needs to be defended: In how far is a meeting organised by (a number of) citizens undemocratic or unrepresentative? **There always exist a tension between democratically elected political representatives and the participation of local citizens**. However, given the problem with many current participation processes, the concern that this way of working might be undemocratic, and that some people will obtain undue power is all the more reason to do it, since we will then get to the core of the problem.

Introduction

As part of the MUNEX project, researchers from the University of Amsterdam studied the municipality of Amsterdam's innovative governance approach for the Northern district (Aanpak Noord). The research focused on local collaborations in marginalized communities.

Amsterdam's Northern approach comprises a new way of local government working together with citizens and other local stakeholders, to achieve structural change in democratic processes as well as substantive outcomes, geared towards increasing social justice. The approach resulted from the actions of several organised groups of residents, that were dissatisfied with existing participation processes. These citizens decided to invert the normal participation model. Rather than local government inviting citizens to participate, in **inverted participation citizens invite local government and other stakeholders to participate on their terms**. As such, inverted participation can be understood as a part that represents the whole Northern Approach.

Methodology

– Inverted participation in housing

In 2023, the citizen mobilisation succeeded to organise a series of meetings with the directors of the local housing corporations. These own the majority of housing in the Northern district. These homes are often badly maintained, leading for instance to mould on internal walls.

The meetings were prepared through internal encounters of the housing working group of the citizens mobilisation, supported by high-ranking civil servants that could also delegate tasks to lower ranking civil servants. Information requests, for instance on the number of social homes sold in the last five years, could be put with these civil servants, as well as administrative tasks such as reserving a meeting venue and sending official invites.

“I find it really valuable to attend meetings organised by residents”

–Martin, civil servant

The citizens were furthermore supported by an independent process facilitator from a tenant support organisation. A budget was available to recompense these professionals for their time. The meetings were chaired by another high-ranking civil servant, that was selected by the citizens. The agenda for the meetings was prepared by the citizens.

The inversion creates a different power balance. The playing field becomes leveler, and citizens are accommodated to focus on problems that they experience in their neighbourhoods. This is especially important for disadvantaged citizens in poorer neighbourhoods that often lack resources to successfully draw attention to the problems that are their priorities to resolve.

Since citizens grab the initiative of organising participation on their terms, the approach works primarily bottom up. However, for this to work, structural institutional support expressed through recognition and resources must be made available by local government. **The approach collaborates with the local ecosystem through mirroring existing**

structures, offering a known format, that involves relevant actors in a novel way.

Inverted participation builds upon earlier initiatives, such as Amsterdam's K-neighbourhood's ***participation strike***. Here, citizens became so fed up with the local municipality inviting them to participate yet not taking their input serious, that they decided to strike. The citizens refused to turn up on any participation event and communicated their grievances clearly.

The approach evolves from this, since citizens decide they want to organise the form and content of participation. When, where and with who citizens meet, what is on the agenda is decided by citizens. Meetings are chaired by citizens, and facilitated by civil servants, to carry out secretarial support, such as arranging a minute taker, and sending invites, as well as sharing of tactical and content expertise. **The primary organising power always remains with the citizens**, for instance because they get to look at and correct the minutes first.



Figure 2. Northern district's council chair, residents and housing corporations' representatives (2023).
Photo credit: www.rodinl/amsterdam-noord/nieuws/340297/aanpak-noord-wonen-hoogste-tijd

Results

Highlights the **deficits of many current participation schemes**

Focuses on **interventions that citizens disenchant** with local government's participation schemes **can undertake** themselves

Stresses the importance of **recognition for citizens**

Emphasizes the need for substantial support **to make citizens participation worthwhile**

General references

Hilbrandt, H. (2016) 'Insurgent participation: consensus and contestation in planning the redevelopment of Berlin-Tempelhof airport'. Urban Geography 38(4) 537–556.

Huisman, C. (2014) 'Displacement Through Participation'. TEG 105(2) 161-174.

Verloo, N. (2023) 'Ignoring people: The micro-politics of misrecognition in participatory governance'. Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space 41(7) 1474-1491.