

# **Closing the gap between water boards and citizens.**

Frans Coenen, CSTM, Faculty of Management and Governance, University of Twente

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## **1. Introduction**

Participation practices are used in many different contexts, and this paper relates participation to the context of regional water management and specific Dutch water boards. The water board is a government body of functional decentralized administration with its own governing bodies and financing structure, and is solely concerned with the execution of tasks in the field of water management. Among citizens the interest in this form of representative democracy and their turn out in water board assembly elections is very low. Water board elections are held via the so-called 'person voting system', but till November 2008 the turn out only amounts to an average between 25 and 30 per cent. Some stakeholders (agriculture, nature) are strongly involved in this form of regional water management because they have particular interest in water management.

The existing of water boards has been under tension were some political parties wanted to abolish the water board's representative democracy system and make them implementing agencies of the province. There were doubts about the legitimacy of a functional democratic system that represented specific interests, like agriculture more than interest like ecology.

We can clearly speak about a gap between citizens and the water board politics, were not directly affected stakeholders and citizens do not take in interest in their work and in their elections. In the past, the function and value of water boards for the protection of their inhabitants for floodings were very clear. The water boards would have close ties with the inhabitants they served. The political water board landscape is changing. At the one hand there has been a process of merge, which means that the new and bigger water boards cover bigger areas, which means a growing gap between the politicians of the water boards and local stakeholders, citizens and municipalities. At the other hand changes in the way the water board

elections from 2008 onwards, which are now based on list-voting instead of interest-pay-say-representation, are organized may awake interest among citizens.

But there is also the issue of the way of policy making. Water boards got the reputation of being technocratic, closed organizations. Many of their tasks were seen as technical implementation of European, national and provincial policies. But this picture is changing due to the discussions on water quantity problems and climate change. Water boards have taken over the largest part of urban water management in cities which brings them much closer to the interests of many citizens and stakeholders. And finally the implementation of the water Framework directive gave new attention to water quality problems and the role of water boards.

In this paper we discuss attempts by one water board, Rijn en IJssel, to raise their legitimacy and the support for their policies by addressing the gap between politicians and citizens and by improving the use of area-based local knowledge and gaining a better insight in the needs and opinions of their inhabitants. The water board tries to develop a so-called 'area-near' approach. An important element is establishing closer ties between the water board assembly members and their voters and local partners.

1. *What did the chosen way of working (experimenting with the 'area-near' approach) contribute to the process and the outcome of the cases?*
2. *What is the added value of the new way of working for the water board government itself?*
3. *In how far can such a new form of working contribute to closing the gap between citizen and water board?*

The theoretical framework to assess this chosen way of working is based on literature about the added value of the functional perspective in participation. We will first discuss the existing representative democratic system in the water boards. Then we will discuss the new way of working in water board Rijn en IJssel and confront this with arguments for functional participation. On the basis of criteria taken from the arguments for functional participation we will assess the experiments. We will compare the cases with similar experiences elsewhere and focus on the 'representative' role of assembly members. Finally we draw some conclusions what this new approach can contribute to closing the gap between citizens and the water board.

## 2. Water boards and democracy

Water boards are among the oldest democratic institutions in the Netherlands. From the 13th century onwards they were established in the lower-lying parts of the country. Nowadays the water boards encompass the whole of the country. The Constitution and the Water boards Act (1992) established the water boards as decentralized functional government authorities. This means they have a dedicated task regarding local and regional water management. They are operationally independent to a high degree and supervised by the provinces. Their tasks include:

- Flood protection:
- Surface water quantity management:
- Water quality management
  - surface water quality:
  - treatment of urban wastewater

Since the last century there has been a decline in the numbers of boards from numerous small local water boards to much larger, regional boards; from 3,500 in 1850 and 2,500 in the late 1940s there are now in total 25 water boards. A water board has two governing body, a (general) assembly (about 30 seats) and a executive assembly (about 5 seats), which is elected from the general assembly, and a chairman. The chairman is not elected, but appointed by the Crown.

The assembly is elected by the inhabitants of the water board in a specific system of elections. Till November 2008 this system was based on the representation of various categories of stakeholders in the governing bodies of water boards. Representatives of the various categories are elected to their positions on the assembly. Elections to the water board assemblies differ on a number of points from the elections held for Parliament or town councils, for example. This is because of the relation between elections and the specified tasks of water boards and the adage of 'interest-pay-say' resulting from it. The major difference between water board elections and, for example, town council elections lies in the meaning of the elections. With the election of a town council a fixed number of seats are divided among the various political parties, on the basis of the number of votes for the candidates. Town council elections are held by means of the so-called 'list voting system'.

The water boards representative democracy system was based on the 'interest-pay-say' triplet. Those who benefit from the activities of the water board have to pay a tax for its services, but receive a proportionate say in the assembly in return. Stakeholders pay for the execution of certain activities

and the associated infrastructure. Those who have an interest in the activities bear the costs and have influence on the running of the water board, via elected representatives. Proportionate to his interest, a stakeholder pays a water board tax. For many years farmers were the only recognized stakeholders. Later residential and business property owners were also recognized as having an interest in water management and from the 1950s households and industries were introduced as stakeholders. Various interests have to be secured in the water board assembly. There are five categories of stakeholders according to the Water Boards Act. All categories have a fixed number of seats in the assembly, which corresponds with the balance of interests (and tax payments) concerned in the activities of the water board.

The stakeholders categories are:

- \* households (including residents)
- \* landowners
- \* tenants (optional)
- \* owners of buildings
- \* industry.

In the regulations for each water board the number of seats by which the various categories are represented in the water board assembly are laid down by the provinces. Here the nature and size of the interest of a particular category in the execution of the tasks of the water board are taken into account, as well as the contribution to the costs to be paid by this category. If a water board is located in a densely populated urban area with a lot of industrial activity, the residents and business buildings categories have a larger share in the water board assembly than in a water board in a thinly populated area with a lot of agricultural activity. The average water board assembly consists of 30 members.

In addition to the limitative listing of stakeholder categories, the Water Boards Act stipulates that, under the regulations, the provincial council can assign to certain stakeholders the authority to nominate one or more representatives of their categories onto the water board assembly, without the need for byelections; these places are referred to as 'quality seats'. A number of provinces have made use of this possibility, albeit sporadically. The category 'industry' is elected indirectly by Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

From the new elections in 2008 onwards the water board assembly elections is based on list voting; which means that the 'one person-one vote' system is based on voting for lists of candidates from political parties and registered interest groups.

### 3. The cases; experimenting with an ‘area-near’ approach

The water board Rijn en IJssel is the last water board that still has so-called sub regional assemblies (afdelingsbesturen). With the upcoming water board elections and the new Dutch law on water boards these sub regional councils will disappear, and the lines to local stakeholders will be much longer. Therefore the water board is searching for new approaches to ‘close the gap’ with actors in their area.

The water board Rijn en IJssel defines the ‘area near approach’ (gebiedsnabij werken) as creating administrative and societal support for their policies and receiving societal input for projects and area policy. The water board is testing this new approach in three so-called ‘administrative experiments’ (bestuursexperimenten).

- *Waterplan Zutphen*: This experiment is a municipal water planning process were (regional) water board council members, municipal council members and stakeholders, including citizens, work together.
- *Water quality track Rheden*: This is experiment were water board, municipality and stakeholders , including citizens cooperate in activities to improve surface water quality.
- *Vision Baakse Beek-Veengoot*: This experiment concerns a development of a vision for the Baakse Beek-Veengoot rive basin area, aiming at creating support for the vision in the area.

### 4. The concept of ‘area-near’ working

‘Area-near’ working is defined by the water board Rijn and IJssel as the on the spot creating of a societal and receive administrative support and receiving societal input for a certain project or area. Condition for area based work is that all relevant parties are involved in the process.

The ideas for near work resulted from the evaluation of the governing board structure of the water board Rijn and IJssel (Berenschot, 2005). The water board created after the merge of three original water boards, a structure with a general assembly and three regional district assemblies. The district assemblies had mainly an advising task. Members of the regional districts assemblies that were not also in the general assembly were named substitute assemblies members.

From a survey under these substitutes and general assembly members (Berenschot, 2005) as strong points of the district management structure came forward:

- the involvement of the area in the water board governing;
- the way in which regional knowledge is taken into account in the policymaking;
- the small distance between citizen and water board the narrow link between policy and implementation;
- area bound water management and the use of regional expertise

Further the survey concluded that the members of the general assembly had only few external contacts with stakeholders, citizens and municipalities. The external contacts of the water board were mainly dealt with by the executive board and for the rest left to the individual initiatives of the individual council members. External contacts of the general assembly would contribute to the ties with the region and the visibility of the council in the region. This was important for the water board because image research in 2005 showed that civil society organizations and farmers are well informed concerning the tasks and activities of the water board, but business and citizens much less.

A generally recognized point to improve was the visibility and the position of the general assembly. Berenschot concluded that this visibility and positioning asks not so much for adaptation in the structure as well as for adaptations in culture. Concrete suggestions were area consultations, area visits, publicity campaign, etc. Berenschot also expected a positive influence of the new water board elections and the new general assembly composition. They suggested investing in internal and external visibility of the general assembly and daily governing board. And to invest in ties with the area, which best could be done by close ties to the area in the organization by means of informal information transfer. Several ideas were formulated to create this informal information transfer, like setting up ad-hoc commissions for projects or specific area commissions.

The idea for the area based policy is also influenced by the problem of democratic legitimacy of water boards and by the fundamental discussions about the existence of water boards. Solutions were found in strengthening representative democracy by reforming the election system. Representative democracy can also be strengthening by another, more open style of working. Strengthening representative democracy is complemented by strengthening participatory democracy. 'Area-near' working is a form of instrumental use participation. Participation is a means to raise legitimacy, support and the quality of decision making.

We use the umbrella term 'public participation' here to encompass citizen, stakeholder, and community participation. 'Public participation'

covers a broad range of interactions between government and civil society to design, implement, and evaluate policies (compare Renn, Webler and Wiedemann, 1995). This is narrower than political participation, since the latter includes all activities by citizens and stakeholders that influence government decision-making such as voting and lobbying.

Participants, as perceived in this paper, can be both individual and collective actors. Individuals can be affected and/or involved laypeople, or citizens that are spokespeople or advocates of affected unorganised interests such as neighbourhoods. Stakeholders we can define as: “socially organised groups that are or perceive themselves as being affected by a decision” (Renn et al., 1993: 190). Stakeholders defined in this way encompass communities that can range from geographically defined ones to population and risk groups.

Stakeholders can be collective actors such as neighbourhood initiatives, social movements, or local network enterprises that are composite actors whose purposes “are dependent on and guided by the preferences of their members” (Scharpf, 1997: 54). Or they can be corporate actors such as unions, chambers of commerce, employer organisations, who are composite actors with a high degree of autonomy in defining their purposes from the participating actors. Collective actors are often represented by individuals linked to the collective actor.

## **5. The instrumental functions of public participation**

The instrumental perspective stresses the functional role of participation as an instrumental tool. A difficulty with the instrumental function of participation is that it can be functional for quite different reasons for politicians, for administrators, for stakeholders, for citizens, and for experts.

An important instrumental function of public participation that would increase the legitimacy of the water board is the function of improving decisions or ‘quality of decision making’ (Coenen, Huitema and O’Toole, 1998). There are differences in how to view ‘better decisions’. The criteria for what we see as a ‘good’ decision depends on underlying assumptions about what is a good decision in relation to participation. Broadly speaking, one can place the emphasis on participation as a means to create decisions that are fair, or stress that participation should lead to more competent decisions (Webler, 1995).

Fairness is connected to the idea of equity: does everyone have a fair say in the decision-making process, is equal access guaranteed, and are the outcomes distributed equitably? Competence relates to the use of information that is available at the time the decision is made.

Here, we operationalise a competent decision as one that does not ignore relevant information that is in the possession of certain groups. Coenen, Huitema, and O'Toole (1998) emphasise the link between the participatory content of certain decision-making processes and the rationality of their outcomes by stressing competent decisions. In this way, they connected the operationalisation of competent decisions to the prominent debate about rational decision-making among academics such as Etzioni (1967), Dror (1964), Lindblom (1959), and Simon (1957). They accepted Faludi's (1986, 1987) interpretation of rational decision-making as a rule for testing decisions, rather than as a prescription for how to act in reality. Faludi has argued that rationality is not an objective criterion of quality but a subjective one relative to the definition of the decision situation. A decision is rational if it is the best of all the possible alternatives, taking into account all their consequences weighed in the light of a set of values that includes, where relevant, equity. All alternative actions and their consequences have to be assessed within the definition of the decision situation. This decision situation can be compared with a verdict in court. In justifying a decision the question is: was it reasonable for the planner/defendant to know what they were doing, to be expected to find out, and so forth. Decision-making improves in quality as additional relevant information is considered, in particular information distributed across many groups (Coenen, Huitema, and O'Toole, 1998). A decision should not ignore relevant information that is held by certain groups.

The idea is that to achieve better decisions, through the instrumental function of public participation, this requires involving people in the identification of needs, in the analysis of problems, in planning, and in taking action. In essence, decisions become more creative through using ideas and knowledge from the public, or more responsive and more appropriate to the needs and wishes of the public.

From the instrumental perspective, there are two lines of reasoning for the instrumental involvement of the public in environmental decision-making. In the first place, finding and implementing sound solutions to environmental problems may necessarily require continuing and broadened participation far beyond the 'usual' experts and political elites. This demands knowledge be added by the public to the decision process, including contributing to analyses and the assessment of alternatives. Secondly, environmental decision-making often requires a shift of resources and opportunities from some groups to others, thus raising inherently political questions. Consequently, a decision is seen as better if it builds on increased public support and the decision leaves less potential for conflict. Neglecting information from the public leads to legitimacy questions and potential conflicts.



If one sees a decision as better if all the alternative actions and their consequences have been assessed within the definition of the decision situation, in other words that the decision does not ignore relevant information in the possession of certain groups, then public participation can be instrumental in all phases of the decision-making process. In terms of decision-making from an instrumental perspective, public participation will improve:

- the information available for the decisions (such as a broader range of alternatives, or a view from the public on the consequences);
- the assessment of the alternatives (additional monitoring, appraisal, and judgement by the participants);
- the potential for action and implementation (through support-building and conflict reduction).

In instrumental terms, participatory decision-making processes potentially have some considerable advantages over other decision-making processes. The instrumental arguments for public participation stress efficiency and effectiveness criteria. Public participation may provide, at least, a partial cure for problems in non-participatory processes. Examples of such problems are that policymakers inadequately consider public values and preferences, innovative solutions go unexplored, and policy implementation is confronted with public mistrust or even a culture of conflict (Beierle, 1998).

There is a perceived downside to enhancing the analysis, judgement, and potential for action and implementation in terms of the cost-effectiveness of the decision-making process. From a government perspective, complaints against participatory decision-making are often that it leads to time delays, that there is a bias towards certain vested interests and therefore information is incomplete or distorted, and that there is the problem that the public does not have sufficient knowledge to participate usefully in decision-making. Participation as a panacea for governmental problems is opposed by some citizens. From the public's perspective there are normative objections, such as the non-representative input to decision-making, but also very instrumental objections, such as the costs of participating and the difficulty in protecting one's own interests.

The promise that public participation apparently holds for the quality of decision-making has to be weighed against the limitations of public participation in terms of the quality of decision-making and the interests of citizens.

Despite these limitations in relation to the typical efficiency arguments formulated above and we can argue that:

- Public participation raises the substantive quality of the decision itself: by adding knowledge to the decision-making process in a way that incorporates relevant knowledge (such as good ideas and lay expertise by participants).
  - Public participation can add to the quality of the analysis: by engaging participants in the assessment and monitoring of alternatives.
  - Public participation will broaden public support for environment-related decisions and this will lead to a time gain (shorter decision-making processes in the longer term) and co-implementation.
  - Reducing the level of conflict will facilitate action and implementation.
- In the table below the different arguments and motives for public participation are summarised.

Table 1 Arguments and motives for public participation  
(Coenen, 2009, see also Coenen, Woltjer, and Van de Peppel, 2001)

Normative arguments		Instrumental arguments	
For government	For participants	For government authority	For participants
Functioning of democracy	Emancipation, particularly of certain groups	Additional source of ideas and information	Protection of stakeholders' interests
Creating 'shared responsibility' in, and legitimacy of, water-related decisions	Empowerment and learning about the water problems facing society	Monitoring and appraisal by participants Broadening of public support for water-related decisions Reducing the level of conflict	

## 6. Ex-post analysis of the cases

With cases we mean here the (municipal) processes within which water board experiment with area-near 'way of working' has been carried out. Two cases, the water plan in the municipality Zutphen and the Water quality track in the municipality of Rheden were evaluated ex-post, this means after the full experiment ended.

The first question of this paper is: *what did the chosen way of working (experimenting with the area-near approach) contribute to the process and the outcome of the cases?*

This first question was difficult to separate in the research from the second question about the added value of the water board experiments for the water board itself. It is not simple to separate the value of the way of working from the value for process and the outcome of the case. Where the experiment is positive for the process and the outcome of the case it has also a positive value for the water board's way of working.

Nevertheless we can draw a number of conclusions concerning the relation between the experimenting and the used cases:

- Experimenting has had a stimulating function for both the start and course of the plan process in Zutphen. Because it was an experiment the plan process started quicker and got more priority
- The water quality track in Rheden was the first time a municipality worked on such a track and the case was also the first time the new scenario method was used. This stapling of pilots in the water quality track Rheden and additional uncertainties and activities led to the feeling among internal and external project leaders of the case that the experiment was extra ballast in the case process. On the other hand governing board experimenting led to larger attention to the water quality track and contributed in that sense positive to the case outcome and process.
- The experiments have contributed to a more intensive cooperation between the municipal alderman board and the executive board of the water boards and led to direct contacts between involved AB-leden and stakeholders, citizens and municipal council members. The exact contribution of this intensified cooperation to the process and outcome of each case is difficult to prove.
- In processes like the drawing up of water quality tracks and municipal water plans there will generally be of some input of stakeholders and citizens. The experiments have led to an intensification of this input. The exact contribution in terms of nature and scope of this to participation compared with a situation where the case would not have been an experiment with less involvement of the water board, is unclear.
- It is unclear in how far the fact that the case were experiments has had a positive influence on participations of citizens. For some citizens who have regular contact with the water board possibly, however many participants have difficulties in seeing the distinction between the government layer municipality and the government layer water board. For them there is just one government.

- It is not yet clear is the fact that the cases are an experiment, has led to more substantive priority, for example to the more earlier adoption of measures or larger measures.
- Council members mentioned in the interviews that the experiments led to more emphasize of water topics municipal on the municipal political agenda, with the result that water problems and solutions that were taken for granted now explicitly appear on the municipal political agenda.
- Organizing new forms of deliberation besides existing traditional meetings led to pulling out the municipality council members and AB-leden.

## **7. The added value for water board itself**

The second question is: *what is the added value of the new way of working for the water board government itself?* In the research we formulated on the basis of insights from participation literature, evaluation criteria for the added value of the 'area near approach'. Thereby the objectives of the 'area-near' approach have been compared with general functions of participation

The main classification of arguments for participation is in the so-called normative and functional arguments for participation. The added value of the near area approach is related here both to the participation of stakeholders and citizens and on participation of the partners in the experiments

The normative arguments for participation concern the argumentation that participation is important because `stakeholders (including municipalities) should have the possibility to take part because in the decision-making, because this would lead to:

- a better functioning (functional) democracy;
- a greater legitimacy of the decision-making process;
- more awareness of water problems.

In both experiments the 'area-near' approach has contributed to a better functioning functional democracy because the involved assembly and executive board members have heard the voice of stakeholders and citizens directly. This contributed for assembly-members, to their own saying, to a better understanding how citizens and stakeholders think about issues concerning water problems and solutions. Moreover there was an intensified contact with municipal council members. This led to more understanding for the functioning of each other's type of administration. Besides reinforcing (informal) contacts of assembly-members, there was a more intensive contact between executive board members and municipal aldermen then usual would be the case in such projects.

It is unclear to what the water board experiments have contributed that citizens and stakeholders *see the processes are as more legitimate*. On the one hand we can talk of an increase of the legitimacy, because according to their own opinion stakeholders and citizens appreciated it to be able to discuss municipal water policy. On the other hand the average citizens have difficulties in seeing the difference between water board and municipality. Moreover the visibility was and recognisability of the water board in the two processes was rather limited.

Both experiments have by generating extra activities and contacts in the case processes, and led to more awareness among citizens, stakeholders and municipal council members of the role water problems play in the municipalities. Though the chosen area-near way of working this awareness was stronger forward than in cases that were not experiments. For the municipal council members the experiments put water more clearly on the municipal political agenda.

Functional arguments concern the argumentation for participation as a means for both government and stakeholders (also municipalities) to fulfill their needs, because the experiments should lead to:

- new ideas for the policy;
- strengthening public and societal support for the policies;
- the prevention of implementation problems;
- the possibility to articulate stakeholder interests and the possibility to protect these interests by the stakeholders.

Were the experiments a source of new ideas for the policies? In both experiments the workshops produced traceable input. In the water plan Zutphen it can be clearly indicated what has happened with the input from the process. In the water quality track in Rheden the input of the citizen and stakeholders have been used to verify the own ideas of the project team on future municipal scenarios. This scenario development concerned a technical process where one converted goals and aims with particular parts of the municipal water into scenarios with associated measures.

Several respondents indicated that in their opinion the support for water policy had increased. Many parties have sat down at the table to discuss water problems, such as neighborhood associations and housing, which probably without the area approach would not have reflected on these issues.

It is still unclear to what extent the experiments have contributed to the prevention of implementation problems, because the water quality track measures and the water plan have been not yet implemented. The nature of the water plan and the technical character of the water quality track measures do not seem give much reason to expect big objections or resistance of the

population against the measures. Working with the future scenarios contributes to the understanding of the need of measures.

Before we can judge if stakeholder and citizens interests are articulated and protected through the area-near approach, we first have to verify that the conditions have been satisfied that these interests are represented and that all relevant parties have been involved in the process. In the workshops the traditional interests have been represented but also ordinary citizens. For example in their role as neighbors of a pond, or as a member of a neighborhood association. There were no big political disputes in both cases, and a large consensus concerning the future scenarios. However, it appears difficult to keep the ordinary citizens a board during the process.

## **8. Ex-ante evaluation of the case Baakse beek Veengoot**

The conclusions above were all based on the two ex-post evaluated experiments in the urban areas. The third experiment, which concerns consensus building over a vision for a river basin area, was quite different. This experiment can at this moment only for a large part only be evaluated ex-ante, because the process will run many years.

In the two urban processes the municipality had the initiative in the process. Particular in the water plan case the municipality was more an owner of the process than the water board. This had everything to do with harmonization and integration of water policy and other municipal policies. In the area process Baakse Beek-Veengoot the water board is, in mutual consultation with the province, been designated as the leading actor.

The area process Baakse Beek-Veengoot stretches over a much longer period than two urban experiments. There is at the case Baakse Beek-Veengoot not only a policy-making process for the river basin but especially a process of creating consensus in the development of a river basin vision. A partial vision has already been developed with some (formal) participation, but this is not a fully integrated vision. Particular agriculture is missing in this vision. This current vision therefore still has the status of a starting document. The river basin vision will have to be developed within outlines, determined by the general assembly. These outlines concern hard goals concerning the water board's water management tasks and more soft wishes for the area.

The case Baakse Beek-Veengoot concerns large investments in contrast to the two other urban cases. And in contrast to the two other experiments this process will have direct consequences for inhabitants concerned, such as the (forced) sale of agricultural farms.

In the two other experiments the new way of working was more about obtaining area-specific knowledge and getting insight in the opinions of

citizens and stakeholders. In the area process Baakse Beek-Veengoot it is more about building consensus between several interests in the area

Characteristic of the content of this project is that outlines of what goals the water boards wants to reach in the area with respect to their water task are laid down in the form of hard and soft goals. But these water goals must be balanced with other interests in the area, such as agriculture. Because the water board has the leading role in the integrated process, the water board also has committed itself to realize a number of other tasks for the area particularly in the field of nature and agriculture such as the realization of new nature.

Characteristic of the process is that this process lays large responsibility at a number of stakeholders (farmers, estate owner) in the area, and intermediate organizations or representatives of these stakeholders, to formulate and introduce their own interests in the development of the vision. This makes them co-producers and co-implementers of the vision.

The process organization exists of a steering group, a project group and an implementing task force. In the project group a representative of the farmer's organization LTO has been incorporated. The implementing task force is very widely been set up, with involvement of civil servants from water board and province but also from other organizations from the area. In this way area-near working shapes already the process organization. In two previous discussed experiments this only applied to the municipalities. Also there the intention to make maximum use of the existing structures in the area.

A main point in the development of the vision is the input in the agriculture paragraph in the vision. There has been chosen for a model where the actual situation of agriculture and the desired future situation of the agriculture in the area, are developed in close cooperation with agriculture representatives (LTO). Together with the water board the agricultural stakeholders analyze and examine how the developments in agriculture can be coordinated with the water task and other interests in the area. By taking along the agriculture stakeholders in this analysis, the basis for the vision will increase, the more so if the fact can be confirmed that there are win-win situations in the area. The members of LTO are not homogeneous. The one farmer will be glad to end his farm, the other with pain in its heart. This analysis also must happen for and with the other interests (recreation, nature, the social agenda, etc.)

The implementation needs input in the form of local knowledge and opinions of all stakeholders in the area. Therefore not only input is needed from stakeholders and partners such as municipalities, LTO, land-managing organizations, but also input from intermediate organizations (for example.

rural Councils, agrarian nature associations, foundation church roads, et cetera) and inhabitants of the area.

Area near working means that contacts between assembly members and stakeholders, partners and citizens in the area are intensified, so assembly members and executive board members can take as much as possible directly local knowledge into account as well as opinions of all involved in the area.

This can not only be accomplished with traditional (formal) participation. Formal traditional participation means that the participants react to prepared plans of water board and province. Participation must be much more interactively must. The new way of working with the agriculture stakeholders is a good example. New forms of working can be for example forming panels of inhabitants from the area.

## **9. Comparing with other participation experiences**

The water boards had already experience with participation. The water plan of the municipality Arnhem of 2003 municipality was financed (nearly) entirely by the municipality, but was realized in close cooperation with the water board. Remarkably for this municipal water plan process was that the meetings that had been set up in the beginning got large attention. The first meeting for to inventory of main points in the Gelredome stadium drew 300 participants. This was continued with an information evening with 150 people present.

In follow up meetings the number of participants not only declined, but became also became less and less representative for the Arnhem population (65-plus). The longer the process took, more and more externals (companies, nature/environment organizations) pulled out. From participation literature this pulls out of certain groups during the process is a well know phenomenon. A lesson which is drawn for this reason from the plan process in Arnhem for the set-up of the process in Zutphen, is that a planning process should not be too long. Another lesson has been the importance to give in advance the necessary good information to externals and create realistic expectations.

More interesting than comparing with traditional participation processes is comparing with other municipal experiment of the changing institutional context of local democracy and one of the means to bridge the gap between politicians and citizens. The low turn-out of the Dutch local elections in the seventies and eighties caused serious doubts about local democracy being in a crisis. They key motives for the so called political renewal ('bestuurlijke vernieuwing') were the low local election turn-out in combination with the disinterest of the voters with municipal polices. This disinterest was shown from voting behaviour, dominated by national issues and national parties'



voters' preference and satisfaction with local government together with a lack of interest to get involved in local politics (Coenen, 1998).

In particular the low turn-out at the 1990 local elections (at 62 per cent) led to many activities in the field of 'political renewal'. Almost 96 per cent of Dutch municipalities took up initiatives under this flag of political and administrative renewal (Gilsing, 1995). A general diagnosis of the problem was that the 'policy style' of municipalities was too formal and too closed, with public administration directed inwards onto the organisation itself. The policy style was seen as no longer being in line with more general changes in the relationship between municipalities and their citizens. Instruments were introduced to find out what citizens think, mean and want, such as a referendum or some form of opinion research. The solution was sought in new ways of policy-making which (presumably) are better accommodated to the demands of citizens. In general this meant that local administrators and politicians aimed to change modes of interaction with the citizenry. Social scientists refer to these modes as 'interactive policy-making', 'coproduction of policy', or strategic 'bottom-up' policy-making. Through a more communicative approach of policy-making citizens are brought in at the outset of the policy-making process instead of involving them after draft plans have been completed.

There is a great resemblance between these type of solutions and the area-near approach but also some important differences. In the first place the crisis in municipal local democracy was not about the existence of municipalities. In contrary, research showed that Dutch citizens were quite satisfied with the services municipalities offered and considered the local authorities as reasonable useful, legitimate and important. But they didn't consider the municipal politics as an important political arena where citizens should get involved (Tops, 1991). Secondly, citizens do have an opinion on many problems on the local level although many of these issues are taken up by national political parties. In municipal elections these nationalized issues dominate the local elections. In water board elections it is much less clear for citizens why and about what they vote.

The main resemblances are of course the feeling of the politicians that they lost contacts with their inhabitants and the criticism on the way of closed policy making. The main new element in the area-near approach is the role of general assembly members.

## **10. The role of general assembly members**

Water boards have already close ties with their area in the sense that they do use of local knowledge in the policymaking. There are already regular

contacts between municipality and water board civil servants and regular contact between alderman of municipalities and water board. The most important new element in the experiments is the involvement of the assembly members which directly touches upon the underlying ideas of area-near working: make the water board visible and recognizable and develop closer ties informal contacts with stakeholders, citizens and municipalities in the area of the water board.

We can image several roles for assembly members in 'area-near' processes, with an incurring involvement of assembly members.

1. Participatory observation
2. Actively presenting
3. Joining the discussion
4. Integrated contribution in the discussion.

Ad 1. In this role an assembly member plays an active listening role. The role exists especially of listening and observing. There is difference with 'solely witnessing on distance', in the sense that the other participants are aware that an information transfer takes place. The assembly member is not actively searching an informative or discussing role, but can on request give information.

Ad 2. In this role the assembly member not only has an active listening role, but also actively gives information on for example the aim of experiment or the water board policies.

Ad 3. In this role an assembly-member mix himself in discussions, give their opinion and share arguments.

Ad 4. In this role the assembly-member tries to contribute actively to the objectives of the water board, by for example lobbying with partners.

A lesson from the experiments is that in a minimal and unclear role assembly-member pull out. But a larger role brings some specific problems, particular capacity problems both in terms of time consumption and in terms of necessary knowledge to play a role. Assembly-members themselves indicated that they need to have some form of administrative support. The necessary knowledge follows from the role which one is considered play in the process. On the other hand the role to play can follow the knowledge an assembly-member has. There is also the problem of responsibilities of assembly members versus the executive board.

The culture within water board till now is that especially the executive board ensures the external contacts. Contacts of assembly members with externals have been based informally and ad-hoc based on the coincidental geographical and social context of assembly members. Playing an external role as a representative of the water board or if (functional) 'representative' is for many current assembly-members a new and unusual situation.

Where one sees in the experiments that municipal council members play the role of ‘representative’ (like a member of parliament) automatically. Municipal council members are socialized in their parties and through courses to play their role as ‘representative’. Contacts with the municipal population are intensive. In the municipalities in the area of Rijn and IJssel the municipal council members know the population of their municipality and have a large network. Municipal council members spend much time on their council work and have frequent contacts with their executive board of aldermen. Assembly-members of the water board on the other hand have a much lower meeting frequency and less frequent contacts with their executive board.

## **11. An analysis and some conclusions**

This brings us to the last question: *In how far can such a new form of working contribute to closing the gap between citizen and water board?*

We have to consider that the added value of this new approach can only be assessed on a case by case basis. The success and failure of the experiments can be explained by the implementation of the chosen ‘area-near’ approach or by the ideas underlying itself. Simplistic put it can be that area near has work no been implemented well, or that the approach would not work in any situation.

The underlying ideas of area-near working, to make the water board visible and recognizable and develop closer ties informal contacts with stakeholders, citizens and municipalities in the area of the water board, will be important for all water boards.

The experiments did not change so much in the quality and outcome of the process. But there was a clear cultural change. It made municipal council members and citizens clear that water boards are there, and that they have important tasks.

Given the nature of their tasks many water board policies will be relatively closed, technocratic implementation. The central government provides a national legal framework and a strategic policy and the water board has the authority to employ executive coercion. But the water board does have legislative power in the formulations of by-laws and can make decisions with respect to budget, annual accounts, taxes, control, water level, licensing and water management plans. Due to climate change water management starts playing a much larger role in spatial planning and has to compete with other interest for room in both urban areas and rural areas. This brings the water board tasks closer to the stakeholders and citizens. Water boards start taken new roles as process managers in river basin areas, balancing interests that go beyond their traditional tasks.

Crucial for this new way of working is the role of the water board's representative democracy. Water boards are very professional organizations. In the last years they all focused very much on a new business like way of working. Their self control function was based on business cycles and clear planning and performance measuring. Inhabitants were defined as customers and not as voters. The performance of the water boards were measured in terms of customer's satisfaction.

It is questionable if citizens are really interested in water board benchmarking among each other, and that the legitimacy of the water boards is proofed by their performances in number of licenses and quality controls. The self-financing system of regional taxes makes the water boards financially highly independent from national politics but also very vulnerable for criticism on spending. This can only be taken away by being visible and recognizable as a separate public authority on the one hand. And by obtaining local input and keeping up close ties with inhabitants on the other hand.

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