

# The two sides of participation in urban food policy

There can be many ways to perceive what participation is about, leading to very different processes.

Should you be steering local actors or providing space for a local network of pioneers to emerge?

Local authorities may be able to do both as policy gains maturity, providing they check on a regular basis who is involved in policy, and, even more importantly, who is not.



In many countries around the globe, urban food policies were born in an era of increased public participation in local policymaking. However, food raises specific questions when it comes to participation. Indeed, **how do you foster participation around a topic that is new to local actors?** A topic you, as a municipality, are not yet an expert in?

An article published in *Politics and Governance* analyses participation at the onset of local food policy in the city of Ede, in the Netherlands. Researchers looked at the way local civil servants in charge of developing food policy viewed both their role and that of non-governmental actors. **They unveiled a tension between two very different ways to see what participation is about.**

## Should you be steering local actors?

The first way local civil servants in Ede were perceiving participation was through a steering lens. The narrative went as follows: **“we, as a municipality, have a responsibility to take the leadership in the food policy.** We should mobilise local actors around food issues because challenges in the food system are huge, and yet insufficiently addressed. Our action is legitimate as this will enhance wealth and well-being in the city, as well as position the city as a frontrunner on food action”.

This lens has direct impacts on the way civil servants organise participation. In Ede, in 2012, as the city was launching its local food policy, this translated into **civil servants pro-actively inviting local stakeholders to participatory events to discuss food policy.** How did they decide who was invited? Civil servants invited:

- Actors they knew,
- Actors they thought were relevant to the topic: here, the objective was to mobilise them,

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Urban Food Futures would like to thank [Joëlla van de Griend](#) for her inputs and comments.

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[Van de Griend, J., Duncan, J., & Wiskerke, J. \(2019\). How Civil Servants Frame Participation: Balancing Municipal Responsibility With Citizen Initiative in Ede's Food Policy. \*Politics and Governance\*, 7\(4\), 59-67](#)

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- Actors that were considered experts: here, the objective was to gain expertise on food, which was new to civil servants.

This means that no open invitation was sent out. Local citizens, for instance, were not specifically invited, even if some actors have double roles, (they have one role and are also local citizen, which is quite typical for those involved in local food policy processes).

### When participation unveils conflicting objectives

These participation settings are a pragmatic way to kick off a policy process. However, they face several pitfalls:

- **First, participation is limited to some actors, that may not be representative of all local food stakeholders.** For instance, in Ede, citizens were not invited to take part in the conversation around food directly at the start. This can lead to food system issues that are not considered important to the local government not being integrated in policy.
- **Second, one could wonder whether such participation processes aren't more about finding support for the municipal policy rather than empowering local actors.** Are spaces of participation only open to those whose objectives align with the municipal ones?

An example of that was the picking garden that civil servants wanted to create next to the city hall. They originally had thought that inhabitants would help maintaining it, but it turned out that people were not willing to dedicate time to it. The project was therefore put on hold.

A key question, here, is **whether the participation process is designed to anticipate and deal with potential tensions between steering actors and listening to them.**

### Should you be supporting bottom-up initiatives?

Civil servants working on food policy in Ede also had another way of perceiving - and hence designing - participation processes. This second lens saw **participation as a way to empower existing sustainable food initiatives and give them space to grow.**

The narrative would go like that: "we as a municipality have a way to interpret issues in the food systems, but we are not going to force our ideas on to others. We should rather open a discussion with people who already act on the ground and support those bottom-up initiatives".

This leads to participation processes that are different from the ones described earlier. Here, the emphasis is on **creating spaces to bring local food pioneers and activists together**, and facilitating the emergence of a local network. For example, by organising events that showcase local initiatives.

On the upside, such a participation strategy can help foster a solid food activist community that will better support potential changes in local policies.

On the downside, however, **by focusing on only one category of local food actors, it does not foster dialogue between different stakeholders.**

### The good news: you may be able to do both

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This article in *Politics and Governance* helps local authorities clarify what exactly they are looking for in participation, and the benefits and limits of each strategy.

Does this mean the two strategies are incompatible? Not really. According to Joëlla van de Griend, who carried out the field research, the first one is great to start a new policy, as it helps to set the agenda, and to get started in a pragmatic way. Moreover, it is also a good way to show short-term results, which are crucial for a new policy. **As policy gains maturity, it can then expand its participation base.** In Ede, for instance, the city has now created a Food Policy Council that involves citizens. It also becomes easier for civil servants to open participation spaces without knowing what the outcomes will be.

In all cases, the researcher insists that **local authorities should check on a regular basis who is involved in policy, and, even more importantly, who is not.** They should be aware of the gaps in participation, and actively seek to fill them. This will ensure that food policy does not only focus on those issues that are important to actors that are the more vocal, or the more connected to the city.

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