

Participation unpacked: participants' perceptions of its meaning and scope

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Abstract

Purpose – The concept of “participation” has become a buzzword in contemporary public governance models. However, despite the broad and significant interest, defining participation remains a debated topic. The aim of the current study was to explore how participants perceived and interpreted the meaning and scope of participation.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is part of a four-year (2019–2022) longitudinal research project investigating stakeholder participation in the context of developing and establishing a strategic regional plan in Region Skåne in southern Sweden. The research project has a qualitative approach and uses interviews with different stakeholder groups such as municipal politicians and public officials and a survey as empirical material.

Findings – The authors developed a participation spectrum including eight types of participation: to be open, to be informed, to be listened to, to discuss, to be consulted, to give and take, to collaborate and to co-create. The authors also identified four different purposes of participation: creating a joint network, creating a joint understanding, creating a joint effort and creating a joint vision. The spectrum and the purposes were related through four characteristics of participation, i.e. involvement, interaction, influence and empowerment.

Research limitations/implications – The study rests on a single case, and so the results have limited transferability.

Originality/value – Researching participation in terms of the participants' perceptions contributes a new perspective to the existing literature, which has commonly focussed on the organizers' perceptions of participation. Moreover, in order to clarify what participation meant to the participants, the study puts emphasis on untangling this from the why question of participation.

Keywords Public participation, Stakeholder participation, Participatory governance models, Typology of participation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The concept of “participation” has become somewhat of a buzzword in today's participatory governance models embracing the public sector (Calderon, 2013; Clifford Simpican, 2019; Osborne and Strokosch, 2022). Based on ideas of democratic ideals where everyone's voice is heard, participation is promoted by public officials as an essential element of a wide variety of public initiatives and projects, and expressed in policy documents at the local, regional, and national levels (Castell, 2016). In practice, this has led to a frequent occurrence of activities where participation is communicated as a key ingredient. For example, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, which has all Swedish municipalities and regions as members, produces a variety of documents emphasising the concepts of participation, collaboration, and dialogue (SKR, 2010, 2019). Success stories of participation

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among municipalities are highlighted in magazines (Ahlqvist, 2018; FKR, 2019), and in newspapers we find different types of invitations to citizen dialogues. Despite many public officials' good intentions of being transparent and inclusive and the frequent and broad use of the term participation in the public sector, the definition of participation, and its actual meaning has come into question (Cornwall, 2008). Going to Merriam-Webster dictionary, a broad definition of the term participation without reference to a specific context is offered: "the action or state of taking part in something: as association with others in a relationship (as a partnership) or an enterprise usually on a formal basis with specified rights and obligations" (Merriam-Webster, n.d). However, in the specific context of participation in the public sector, the meaning and scope of participation is unclear and has been argued to "signify almost anything that involves people" (Cornwall, 2008, p. 269).

Participation is not only a common concept in practice but can be found in manifold approaches within the field of public governance, such as collaborative public management (Geddes, 2012), stakeholder involvement (Bryson and George, 2020; Půček and Špaček, 2014), public participation (Glimmerveen *et al.*, 2022), and network approaches (Klijn and Edelenbos, 2013; Löffler, 2009). Bryson *et al.* (2013) argue that public participation processes must be designed carefully, as they are often complex endeavours, and there have been attempts over the years to disentangle the concept of participation through creating typologies. One early contributor was Arnstein (1969), whose work was followed by other typologies of conceptual or normative nature including ideal types of participation (Bryson, 2004; Higdém and Hanssen, 2014; Martin, 2009).

Despite the broad and significant interest, participation is still in general vaguely defined in public governance literature (Castell, 2016; Uittenbroek *et al.*, 2019). Defining participation has since long been described as "a notoriously difficult and contested exercise" (Brownill and Carpenter, 2007, p. 626), and it is unclear what is meant by participation in, for example, the planning context (Kitchen and Whitney, 2004). The purpose of participation could also be considered unclear, shifting from being about increasing the quantity of participation to increasing its influence over decisions, where actively involving a wide number of stakeholders in the decision-making process appears difficult (Calderon, 2013). Moreover, a meta-analysis of how strategic planning improves organisational performance (George *et al.*, 2019) concluded that it is important to consider *how* participants are involved as this influence organisational performance. Also, Quick and Bryson (2022) stress the need for theory development related to how much participation is desirable and workable, further supporting the need to define (and differentiate) participation.

In addition to these theoretically driven calls for further research on what participation implies and how it can be designed, we experience a need to expand the empirical base. Instead of following the tradition of focussing on the organiser of participative projects (Migchelbrink and Van de Walle, 2022), research needs to acknowledge the stories of those participating in projects; that is, the participants. This is aligned with Osborne and Strokosch's (2022) proposal for a value-creation framework for participation, and their presentation of a narrative which emphasises the public service users and puts their needs, experiences, and expectations at the centre. The aim of this study was therefore to explore how participants perceive and interpret the meaning and scope of participation. By this we add to the current understanding of participation, most often described from the organiser's perspective.

We exemplify the complexity of participation by using a longitudinal case study from the Swedish strategic regional planning context. Sweden, like other Nordic countries, has been inspired by the European trend of rejuvenating planning with participatory practices, and regional planning is now stipulated by law to include "dialogue and participation" (Lexén, 2021; Mäntysalo *et al.*, 2015). The case offers a good opportunity to use diverse empirical material and acknowledge the perspective of dialogue and participation from the participants' point of view.

This article continues with the following structure. The next part positions participation in public management research, presents its benefits and shortcomings, and describes various typologies of participation. After presenting the research method and our case, we continue with the result. This section presents a typology capturing the scope of participation from the participants' own perspective, with eight types of participation clarified through four characteristics of participation, followed by a systematisation regarding the purpose of participation. The article ends with conclusions and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical framework

Participation in the public sector

The view that the public sector is the major actor that alone can influence society and the economy has long been questioned (Bovaird, 2005; Bovaird and Löffler, 2009; Edelenbos *et al.*, 2010; Klijn, 2012; Peters and Pierre, 1998). Instead, researchers in public governance and practitioners now assume a multiple stakeholder scenario where collective problems require collaboration with other players and where participation therefore is used in the strive for enhanced effectiveness and legitimacy (Bussu *et al.*, 2022). Stakeholders naturally vary from situation to situation (Bryson, 2004), but tend to include, for example, citizens, businesses, the voluntary sector, and the media (Löffler, 2009). The term “stakeholder” aligns with the definition by Freeman (1984) and refers to “any individual or group who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organizations’ objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46).

Osborne and Stokosch (2022) describe how participation in public service delivery has been a recurrent theme in major public service reform narratives since the 1960s and how narratives such as New Public Management, Public Value and New Public Governance have shaped the debate on participation. A value-creation approach to participation is suggested (Osborne and Stokosch, 2022), which would put the service users including their needs, experiences and expectations in the heart of public service delivery. As governments depend on stakeholders with different competences, experiences, and resources, stakeholder involvement and participation in both policy-making and the implementation processes are frequently highlighted as important in many sectors, disciplines, and contexts (Cornwall, 2008; Raynor *et al.*, 2017). These include place branding (e.g. Kavaratzis, 2012; Källström and Siljeklint, 2021; Lichrou *et al.*, 2018), collaborative public management (e.g. Geddes, 2012), and strategic spatial planning, where participatory planning theory and practice has developed since the mid-1960s (Fenster and Misgav, 2014; Thorpe, 2017).

Participatory planning theories stress communication and inclusive discussion as fundamental to any planning process where participants (e.g. residents, politicians, and planners) should find ways to understand and learn from each other. Ideal decisions are based on an agreed consensus, with the aim of finding the best possible solution for all actors involved (Calderon, 2012). Thus, it is stressed that effective strategic planning ought to involve communication and involvement of stakeholders (Půček and Špaček, 2014), and that *who* is involved and *how* it is organised are both important (George *et al.*, 2019). Alongside the growing interest in stakeholder involvement and participation, co-production and the closely related concept co-creation (Gebauer *et al.*, 2010; Voorberg *et al.*, 2015) have become increasingly topical for a wide range of academics (Verschuere *et al.*, 2012). Co-production can be defined as “the process through which inputs used to produce a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not ‘in’ the same organization” (Ostrom, 1996, p. 1073), while co-creation assumes an interactive and dynamic relationship where value is created at the nexus of interaction (Osborne, 2018). As different forms of participation have become an established approach to scrutinising and solving problems, it has been suggested that we have moved into a “post-collaborative era” (Brownill and Carpenter, 2007; Calderon, 2013; Castell, 2016), where participation and collaborative governance forms are obvious and the challenge of participation is recognised. In

this era, the focus has turned to reflecting on conditions, forms, and outcomes for the specific situation and context. Calderon (2013) refers to this theoretical approach to participation as “politicising participation”. Topics such as participatory policy design (Saguin and Cashore, 2022) and democratic innovations for increased opportunities for participation and influence (Bennet *et al.*, 2022) are emerging and receiving increased attention.

The benefits of participation are often stressed; for example, that it strengthens democracy (Pestoff, 2009), enhances legitimacy (Klijn, 2012; Martin, 2009), creates a sense of shared ownership (Vigar, 2006), improves the quality of policy and outcome (Bryson, 2004; Edelenbos *et al.*, 2010; Klijn, 2012; Martin, 2009), and increases the chance that services will meet users’ needs (Martin, 2009). In the planning and design of public spaces, it is stressed that participatory processes empower the public and offer an opportunity to educate the public about sustainable development while simultaneously improving communication and interaction between actors, which gives an opportunity to learn from differing viewpoints, balance different interests and values, and develop consensus (Calderon, 2013). However, engaging stakeholders can also come with downsides (e.g. Williams *et al.*, 2016); for example, stakeholders can become disappointed and decrease their trust in government when their expectations are not fulfilled (Greenwood, 2007). It has been shown that participation does not *per se* improve the legitimacy and accountability of policy-making (Abels, 2007).

Källström *et al.* (2020) introduced four governance games played by multiple actors engaged in participatory governance (political games, reputational and professional games, spectacle games, and social games), and illustrated how these dynamics and games could partly change actors’ expectations at the beginning of the process into other perceptions at the end of the involvement. Thus, participation and co-creation do not always lead to positive outcomes, as a failed interaction process may lead to value co-destruction and an actual decline in well-being (Echeverri and Skälén, 2011; Plé and Cáceres, 2010). Järvi *et al.* (2018) identified no fewer than eight reasons for value co-destruction: absence of information, insufficient level of trust, mistakes, inability to serve, inability to change, absence of clear expectations, customer misbehaviour, and blaming.

Typologies of participation

To further understand the nuances of participation and what it is actually about, several typologies of participation have been developed. A typology is a form of classification which serves the purpose of organising and simplifying complex phenomena (WeberGlencoe, Illinois, 1949). Most typologies relating to public participation include ideal types of participation, often placed on an axis from little to much or good to bad, and often from the perspective of the organiser.

One frequently referenced typology is Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969), which was developed with the aim of clarifying how powerless citizens were excluded from public decision-making processes intended to be of participative character. The ladder includes eight levels of participation, with each rung corresponding to the extent of citizens’ power in determining the end product. The two bottom rungs describe levels of non-participation, referring to an illusion of power. The next three rungs refer to “tokenism”, where citizens are listened to and have a voice, yet where those who hold power are likely to decide. The final three rungs represent higher levels of citizen power, and at the top rung citizens have the power to decide. Arnstein’s ladder has provided theoretical inspiration, for example in describing civic participation from an empowerment perspective (Rocha, 1997), but also practical inspiration in how to deal with civic participation at the local level government, albeit with the critical reflection that all rungs rarely exist in practice (Castell, 2016).

A typology by Pretty (1995) shifts the focus from Arnstein’s (1969) emphasis on the end product and power and control to a greater focus on self-initiated mobilisation which does not

necessarily challenge the distribution of wealth and power. This typology presents seven types, again on a continuum, ranging from manipulative participation to self-mobilisation. Here, the motivation of those participating is acknowledged as important for the participation process (Pretty, 1995).

These early typologies have been criticised for depicting public participation on a continuum going from “less good” forms of participation to “genuine” forms of it (Cornwall, 2008; Martin, 2009). In reality, different forms may serve different purpose and thus be beneficial (Martin, 2009). As a response to this, Martin (2009) presents a “spectrum of participation” including three forms – information, consultation, and co-production – all of which are considered valuable for the participation process (Martin, 2009). To these forms are added the level of interaction and breadth of engagement for three stakeholder groups (communities, citizens, customers) to create a more comprehensive model arguing for specific tools and techniques depending on who the participant is (Martin, 2009). Bryson (2004) also emphasises the need for better understanding of the diverse set of public stakeholders, and presents an array of techniques for identifying and analysing stakeholders in the public sector. Especially relevant is the participation planning matrix (Bryson, 2004, p. 33) which is based on the idea of a spectrum of participation, and which offers practical guidelines to planners of how to participate with stakeholders classified in any of the five forms of participation, i.e. inform – consult – involve – collaborate – empower.

A further refinement of public participation from a regional planning perspective is offered by Higdum and Hanssen (2014), who elaborates on the recently emerged conflicting discourses regarding broad versus narrow public participation. Regional planning has long been based on representative democracy and a broad model of inclusion, but this approach is now challenged by various forms of partnership models implying a narrower involvement of fewer resource-strong actors. Both approaches may benefit the participation process, yet still need to be supported by meta-governance aspects. Castell’s (2016) study on public participation at the local level approaches the topic from an interesting angle through questioning today’s practical existence of Arnstein’s ladder; it instead presents institutional framing as a concept through which local authorities can shape participation through either a more supportive or a more controlling orientation. Overall, researchers have presented different typologies aimed at capturing participation. We summarise these existing typologies in Table 1. They tend to be of conceptual character (e.g. Arnstein, 1969; Martin, 2009; Pretty, 1995), or based on the perspective of the organiser (Bryson, 2004), yet still serve as inspiration in our aim of understanding how participants perceive and interpret the meaning and scope of participation.

Author	Typology	Types of participation defined
Arnstein (1969)	Ladder of citizen participation	Manipulation, therapy, one-way informing, two-way consulting, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control
Pretty (1995)	A typology of participation: how people participate in development programmes and projects	Manipulative participation, passive participation, participation by consultation, participation for material incentives, functional participation, interactive participation and self-mobilisation
Martin (2009)	Public participation spectrum	Information, consultation and co-production
Bryson (2004)	Participation planning matrix	Inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower

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Table 1.
Summary of typologies
of participation

Methodology

In this section our research methodology is presented. It includes the overall research design, the data collection methods with focus on the interviews, the data analysis method and in the final part we present the case.

Research design

This study is part of a longitudinal case study in the field of stakeholder participation where we have followed a 4-year long process (2019–2022) of developing a strategic spatial plan for the county of Skåne. Through the process we have had rich access to different sources of empirical material, in terms of participants from different organizations and with different positions, as well as type of data collection methods where the main focus has been interviews and observations.

The aim of the present study was not a predefined research area but emerged as a critical topic as we listened to the stories of this case. On the one hand, there was the organiser perspective which strongly encouraged and used the language of “participation”, and on the other hand there were the participants and their scattered understandings of participation. As such, we used the case as a frame for formulating a researchable aim, implying a research approach of inductive character (Silverman, 2015) where we nevertheless were inspired by studies in the area of public participation (e.g. Arnstein, 1969; Martin, 2009). The research was mainly of qualitative nature, and considering the exploratory aim of the study, we set out to *interpret* and *understand* (Little, 1991) the participants’ perceptions and interpretations of participation.

Data collection methods

Overall, the research project included a variety of empirical material, giving us a good understanding of the development of the regional plan. The analysis reported in the present article was based on interviews, and we used a survey to validate the findings.

The interviews were conducted between January and May 2020, and aimed to capture stakeholders’ understanding of participation early in the project. Based on the stakeholder sub-groups predefined by the region, we interviewed a total of 40 stakeholders; however, for the present study we selected the 32 who were defined as main participants, thus excluding the stories from the management/organiser (i.e. the region in this case). This is an important distinction from prior studies of public participation where the stakeholders are commonly “the citizens”. Instead, the stakeholders in this study were people with experience and knowledge about regional planning, and the municipal officials had specific work tasks associated with the regional plan. Table 2 presents an overview of the selection of participants for the interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and used an interview guide divided into four sections, where especially one section focused on the stakeholders’ general understanding and expectation of stakeholder participation. The interviews lasted approximately 30–50 min and were recorded and transcribed.

The survey, which was mainly used to validate the analysis based on the interviews, was carried out during Summer 2021 with the aim of evaluating the stakeholders’ experiences halfway through the process. The survey was developed in collaboration with the region and was sent to 262 participants on the region’s list of contacts for the regional plan. It included a question covering 11 factors which have been identified as relevant to successful participation (e.g. Furenbäck, 2012): (1) one’s own engagement and will to participate, (2) the possibility to participate, (3) clarity concerning when and how to participate, (4) responsiveness, (5) organiser engagement, (6) organiser knowledge and competence, (7) the organiser’s understanding of the needs of the different participants, (8) communication and dialogue, (9) consensus, (10) trust, and (11) confidence and high belief. The respondents were

Stakeholder group	Stakeholder sub-group	Number of interviews	Participation unpacked	
Participants identified as important stakeholders in this project – interviewed and included in the analysis	Leaders of the thematic groups	5	7	
	Municipal politicians, also members of the regional planning council	4		
	Managers of municipal collaboration in the county's four corners	4		
	Public officials from large middle and small municipalities in diverse geographic location	7		
	National authorities	5		
	Other secondary stakeholders, e.g. the Swedish construction federation, southern Sweden water supply	6		
	Public official responsible for the citizen-perspective	1		
	Management/organizer – interviewed but not included in this analysis	Country politicians and chair of the regional development committee		1
		Manager of regional planning		1
		The project manager		1
Project management team		5		

Source(s): Table created by authors

Table 2.
Overview of interviews

asked to comment on each success factor and to mark their level of agreement or disagreement on a seven-point Likert scale. The 11 factors were captured through the same number of statements. As an example, statement 1 was formulated as: “In my organization there is engagement and a willingness to participate in the development of the regional plan”. We received 36 useable questionnaires in total.

Data analysis method

The empirical data material has been analysed using qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) focussing on participants’ words regarding dialogue and participation. After repeatedly having read the textual information, we systematically coded and categorised the transcripts from the interviews. In the first phase we identified words and expressions associated with participants’ descriptions of how they perceived participation. We here realised that we had two different types of descriptions: one oriented towards the scope of participation, giving us the *participation spectrum*, and the other focussing on the *purpose* of participation. The analysis was structured in accordance with these two aspects of participation. For each participant, we first marked keywords regarding the two aspects of participation, and the keywords were then organised into first-order codes while keeping the wordings of the informants at the centre. In the next phase, the second-order categories emerged from an iterative process conducted between the empirics and the existing literature regarding typologies of participation (Martin, 2009; Bryson, 2004; Arnstein, 1969; Higdem and Hanssen, 2014) and gave us eight types of participation, and four purposes of participation. In addition, the analysis resulted in four characteristics of participation which were more process-oriented in the sense that we noticed limited or no presence in the first types of participation but an intensified presence in the latter types. The same four characteristics of participation recurred in the analysis of the purpose of participation. The structure guiding our analysis is presented in Tables 3 and 4.

The questionnaire served the purpose of validating the scattered perceptions of participation that emerged from the interviews. The comments in the open answers on the

Quotes	First order codes	Second order categories	Characteristics
<p>"dialogue also means that we must be completely transparent in what we do and that we always should be available if there are questions "that is, be transparent at all times throughout the process and really be able to say so" "Then I also think that in that dialogue and collaboration, you have an openness to each other, and in openness you create trust" "of course it is good to have participation and dialogue, you have to have that so that everyone has the same information and by that you can start from approximately the same level of knowledge" "that you meet and hold dialogues or that you attend lectures so that you understand what is happening. Shows the current status" "participation means listening to people's points of view, both in writing and orally" "I'd say it's that you . . . from both parties . . . listen more than you talk, i.e. that you're open to other perspectives, it's just that you've talked to someone and then you kind of don't need to care very much" "so I think if we own the process, it is a little more that we listen to opinions and so" "I would say that the dialogue can be one form of a discussion: What are your prerequisites? What are your challenges and what do you want to work on? So that the Region has that communication with . . . partly with the municipalities and partly with the sub-regions" "There is a receiver and a transmitter, and you take it back and forth, and we acknowledge what is being said, kind of . . ." "Well, I guess it is the possibility to . . . give your point of view . . . so that you feel that you have participated and been asked" "Yes, but then it is more to take in the views of the public and specific stakeholders'/owners of specific issues and their points of view, then we want listen to them"</p>	<p>Transparent Approachable Available</p> <p>Continued information Updates Current picture of the project and its process</p> <p>Express one's viewpoints and opinions Listen to/in Hear what you say Reprimand</p> <p>Talk to each other Listen to you Discuss with you Talk to</p> <p>Make use of what is being communicated and discussed Influence Open for different viewpoints Adjust after viewpoints Acknowledge</p> <p>Exchange Action-oriented Compromises Reciprocity You must give and take</p>	<p>To be open</p> <p>To be informed</p> <p>To be listened to</p> <p>To discuss</p> <p>To be consulted</p> <p>To give and take</p>	<p>Involvement</p> <p>Involvement Interaction</p> <p>Involvement Interaction</p> <p>Involvement Interaction Influence</p> <p>Involvement Interaction Influence</p>
<p>"and then, participation is about . . . that we work towards the same goal and are aware about that we may not always get everything, but that sometimes you win and sometimes you lose, it's a bit like swings and carousels" "You look at a common theme and then both parties have to give and take . . . a little bit . . . then I can't just have it my way, if I am to work together I must contribute to the whole so that the whole is as good as possible"</p>			

Table 3.
Structure guiding the analysis of the participation spectrum along with quotes illustrating the empirical material

(continued)

Quotes	First order codes	Second order categories	Characteristics
“participation can also be to work together, I mean, that you sit down and work with it together”	Involvement in each other’s work Work together	To collaborate	Involvement Interaction Influence
“It is that you sort of produce material together”	Produce material together		
“Participation for me is . . . it is more about creating together”			
“meetings, consultations, early dialogues must include how to hook arm and get the respective resources and efforts to multiply, because otherwise I think lose it and then you might lose some points”	Aim and work for something together Hook arm	To co-create	Involvement Interaction Influence Empowerment
“there it’s about putting your wise heads together and sort of pulling in the same direction, I think, as an authority . . . or as various public and private actors, you need to try to see . . . to find common . . . a common direction of development and sort of work from different fronts towards that goal”			

Source(s): Table created by authors

Table 3.

First order code	Second order categories	Characteristics
Create network, enable inclusion	Joint network	Involvement
Understand each other’s different standpoints/viewpoints, consensus, have and share the same knowledge, clarify similarities/differences	Joint understanding	Involvement Interaction
Help/support each other, improve/strengthen the use of resources, stronger together, face/solve conflicts, dependent on the result, create a product	Joint effort	Involvement Interaction Influence
One way forward, agree on the development for the future	Joint vision	Involvement Interaction Influence Empowerment

Source(s): Table created by authors

Table 4.
Structure guiding the analysis regarding the purpose of participation

11 success factors were read through and matched with the eight-type spectrum. This work did not give us new information in the sense of adding more types to the participation spectrum, but it provided valuable support to the already-developed spectrum and in that way validated our analysis.

The case: stakeholder participation in strategic regional planning

A change in the Swedish Planning and Building Act in 2019 resulted in that Region Skåne became the second region in Sweden commissioned to establish a regional plan. The regional plan is intended as a strategic plan, in which the region and the municipalities coordinate physical planning *together* to create a good living environment for all inhabitants of Skåne. It should contribute to positive development in the whole of Skåne and provide a forum where coordination and collaboration in Skåne can be strengthened and joint actions can be facilitated. The process of developing the plan began in September 2019 and involved several steps, including a

consultation period and an audit period before the regional plan was decided in June 2022. The plan will be reviewed once every term of office. The municipalities in Region Skåne continues to be responsible for the comprehensive planning, while Region Skåne is responsible for the regional plan. The regional plan is indicative rather than legally binding.

Today, around 1.4 million people live in Skåne, in 33 different municipalities. The region includes both large cities and countryside, and there is a great variety between different areas. For example, the east side of Skåne has fewer resources and lower population growth and educational level compared to the west side, which is positioned near Denmark and Copenhagen. Collaborations between municipalities are traditionally strong in Skåne, and the geographical divisions within the region are encouraged to collaborate on strategic issues. Considering that the regional plan is indicative, dialogue between the municipalities and Region Skåne is crucial in ensuring that the regional plan can contribute to development. Internal stakeholders at Region Skåne include regional politicians, the director of development, the project team for the commission, and various public officials. Local politicians and public officials within the municipalities are naturally seen as important stakeholders for the regional plan, but other external stakeholders include the county administrative boards, the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, interest groups, and ultimately, the citizens of Skåne.

Region Skåne had high ambitions in terms of stakeholder participation in the process to establish the first regional plan. There were no formal requirements for dialogue with stakeholders outside the regional government before the consultation period, but the region prioritised interactions and collaborations from the beginning. The process started with a launch event to which the municipalities and other external stakeholders were invited, and several workshops and meetings followed. Describing the regional plan on their website, Region Skåne wrote: “In the regional planning process, dialogue and collaboration/participation are of particular importance. We therefore urge you to contribute . . .”

Results and discussion

The following section presents our typology of the participation spectrum, followed by the identified purposes of participation.

The participation spectrum

Based on the stakeholders’ descriptions of participation, we identified eight types of participation ranging from a view that participation was simply about having an open attitude towards participation, through to co-creation, implying participants working together towards a joint vision with joint input. The spectrum comprising these eight types is not an ordered scale on which, for example, type 6 could be considered superior to type 8, yet it is a continuum in the sense that four characteristics of participation – involvement, interaction, influence, and empowerment – emerged and became intensified throughout the spectrum. These four characteristics can also be found in previous literature on participation (Bryson, 2004; Martin, 2009). Perceptions of all stakeholder sub-groups are represented in the spectrum. Figure 1 provides a visualisation of the spectrum.

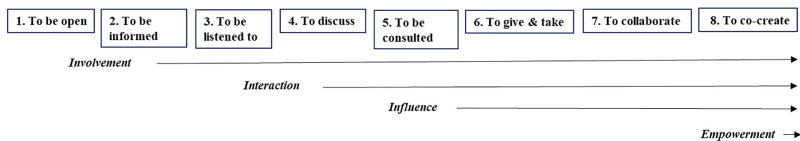


Figure 1.
The participation spectrum

Source(s): Figure created by author

The first type in the spectrum was labelled *to be open*, and here participants described participation as a general attitude, referring to an open attitude towards participation in the sense of being approachable and transparent. One respondent for example referred to the importance to “be transparent at all times throughout the process and really be able to say so.” This type of participation included no form of activity and very limited involvement among the stakeholders. The second type is labelled *to be informed* and was created based on statements such as: “of course it is good to have participation and dialogue, you have to have that so that everyone has the same information and by that you can start from approximately the same level of knowledge.” Thus, this type referred to stakeholders’ descriptions of participation as a form of one-way communication where the stakeholders expected to be continuously updated, both regarding the current state of the project and regarding more specific points. These expectations also signalled some sort of stakeholder involvement.

The third type was labelled *to be listened to*. The interest for the other part was more present and the type included descriptions associated with higher levels of involvement. As an example, one respondent talked about participation as: “participation means listening to people’s points of view, both in writing and orally”. The participants spoke about different forms of listening; for example, listening in to what the other participants were saying, but also being given the possibility to clearly give their own opinion. As such, this type included possibilities for interaction among stakeholders, but the listening aspects were more prominent than the interactive aspects. In the fourth type of participation, *to discuss*, the level of involvement appeared as more important than in the previous types, and the participants’ descriptions included aspects of more interactive character, such as talking to each other, discussing different aspects, and talking and listening in interaction. More concretely, one participant stated: “I would say that the dialogue can be one form of a discussion: What are your prerequisites? What are your challenges and what do you want to work on? So that the Region has that communication with . . . partly with the municipalities and partly with the sub-regions.”

The fifth participation type, i.e. *to be consulted*, took the interaction further, as stakeholders emphasised aspects such as acknowledging what was being said, and caring about and giving prominence to each other’s contributions. When elaborating on the meaning of participation, one respondent for example expressed: “Well, I guess it is the possibility to . . . give your point of view . . . so that you feel that you have participated and been asked”. The stakeholders also expressed expectations of having some sort of influence on the project/process.

The sixth type, labelled *to give and take*, emphasised an action-orientation where involvement in the form of interchange and reciprocity among the stakeholders was talked about as a natural ingredient. The participants described aspects related to creativity where ideas were up for discussion and where compromises were made. As an example, a participant said: “You look at a common theme and then both parties have to give and take . . . a little bit . . . then I can’t just have it my way, if I am to work together I must contribute to the whole so that the whole is as good as possible.”

In the seventh type, *to collaborate*, the stakeholders spoke about participation as something they did together and where they as stakeholders were involved in each other’s work; that is, they worked together. Statements such as “It is that you sort of produce material together” was used and thus, this type represented high levels of involvement, but also interaction and influence. The final type we labelled *to co-create* where the continued view of “togetherness” deepened as stakeholders described participation as a joint and interactive process which involved acting together for some purpose and acknowledging and making use of each other’s different strengths and weaknesses. One respondent talked about participation as: “there it’s about putting your wise heads together and sort of pulling in the same direction, I think, as an authority . . . or as various public and private actors, you need to

try to see . . . to find common . . . a common direction of development and sort of work from different fronts towards that goal.” It was not only perceived as a joint process, but also included descriptions relating to authority and being part of decision-making. Empowerment was thus an important characteristic in this final type of the participation spectrum.

Quantity in terms of participation types was not a goal, yet the understanding of participation among the stakeholders appeared as a complex phenomenon which gave us the eight types described above. It should be noted that the participants in the current study represent different stakeholder sub-groups, but the differences in perceptions cannot be explained by the belonging to specific stakeholder sub-groups. Compared to prior research such as the three-type spectrum by [Martin \(2009\)](#) and five-step matrix by [Bryson \(2004\)](#), our spectrum offers a more nuanced understanding of the concept. These nuances can be seen, for example, in relation to Martin’s second type, “consultation”, which emphasises a “two-way dialogue” among participating stakeholders ([Martin, 2009](#), p. 285). In our spectrum, the two-way dialogue is introduced in the third type, “to listen”, and intensified in the fourth type, “to discuss”, but the need to influence does not enter the picture until the sixth type. As such, tokenism, which is often addressed as an issue in participation ([Arnstein, 1969](#); [Martin, 2009](#)) would be a less obvious problem for stakeholders who understand participation as a two-way dialogue without influence but would be an issue for stakeholders who understand participation as interaction and influence but who are in a situation where that is not offered or not possible. Relating our spectrum to previous research also adds the insight that as being open for dialogue can be understood as “participation” in its simplest form, the continuum starts even earlier than has previously been suggested. Both [Bryson \(2004\)](#) and [Martin \(2009\)](#) see information, or to inform, as the simplest version of participation. In our study, there is a type of participation before *to be informed*, that we label *to be open*, which captures participation as a general attitude, referring to an open attitude towards participation in the sense of being approachable and transparent.

Our participation spectrum is also distinct in the way that the different types relate to four commonly referenced characteristics of participation. In contrast to [Bryson \(2004\)](#), who considered involvement to be a third type of participation, we have captured involvement as a characteristic present in the very first type of the participation spectrum, as some sort of involvement is required if a process is to be open and approachable. The presence of influence, or power ([Arnstein, 1969](#)), is another important characteristic of participation which first asserts itself in the fifth type. Hence, the need to have an actual influence is not included in the simpler types of participation. In the subsequent participation types, the levels of involvement, interaction, influence, and finally empowerment are intensified, and so the final type, co-creating, which entails characteristics of decision-making authority, appears as the most complex type in our participation spectrum.

The identification of this broad spectrum of participation aligns with the discussion by [Higdem and Hanssen \(2014\)](#) about conflicting principles of involvement regarding planning projects, since the wider perception of participation among participants can be related to different democratic grounds. In the first types of the participation spectrum, the traditional democratic approach of broad inclusion appears feasible. Moving towards empowerment and a more complex understanding of participation, a partnership model with narrower involvement of fewer resource-strong actors emerges as the solution. In this, the latter forms of the participation spectrum challenge basic democratic values ([Higdem and Hanssen, 2014](#)).

Purposes of participation

In the current case, the stakeholders invited to participate in the development of a regional plan for Region Skåne also elaborated on their view of the *purpose* of their participation; that is, what they wished to achieve with their participation. The literature describes participation

as both natural and important for planning processes (e.g. Calderon, 2013), and when listening to our respondents it became evident that they also saw their participation as critical. However, their view of the purpose of their participation varied greatly. One group of participants saw the main purpose of being involved in the project solely as the region taking the opportunity to create a *joint network*; that is, to develop and strengthen connections between professionals and enable inclusion. This is in line with previous research emphasising that participation improves communication and interactions between actors (Calderon, 2013). On the other hand, there were many participants who saw a deeper purpose of participation. Some of them felt that the purpose of their participation was finding a *joint understanding*. The importance of creating a common image and consensus was stressed and the importance of everyone having the same state of knowledge was emphasised. Previous research has highlighted learning from each other and balancing different interests to create consensus as important reasons for participation, particularly in the planning and design of public spaces (Calderon, 2013). This willingness to create a joint understanding can be linked to enhanced legitimacy, which is often considered one of the main benefits of participation (Klijn, 2012; Martin, 2009). We also find participants who see the purpose of participation as to create a *joint effort*, where involving a variety of stakeholder groups could create coordination opportunities, more resources, and the possibility for a greater outcome. It was also seen as a means to deal with conflicts and together remove obstacles and handle disagreements. Earlier studies have shown that joint efforts can improve the quality of both policy and outcome (Bryson, 2004; Edelenbos *et al.*, 2010; Klijn, 2012; Martin, 2009), as well as increase the chance that the outcome will meet users' needs (Martin, 2009). Finally, some of our participants believed that the purpose of participation was to create a *joint vision*. This can be linked to research such as that by Vigar (2006), which stresses that participation creates a sense of shared ownership, as participants find a common direction for development and a shared way forward.

Surprisingly, all four purposes of participation were identified among the participants in the same project, meaning that the participants had entered the project and collaboration with distinctly different aims. The purposes are not identified as building on each other. The reason behind these varied perceptions of the purpose of participation can be linked to participants having different views of what participation really is and the characteristics of participation underlying the participation spectrum introduced above. As an example, participants who mainly emphasised involvement when they described participation tended to see a joint network as the key purpose of participation, while stakeholders who described participation as a process involving all four characteristics of participation (involvement, interaction, influence, and empowerment) tended to see the purpose of participation as creating a joint vision. Thus, the identified purposes of participation seem to be related to the participation spectrum through the characteristics of participation underlying the eight types of participation.

Conclusions

As governments today depend on a variety of stakeholders with different competences, experiences, and resources, stakeholder participation is seen as an important element of contemporary public sector governance (Bennet *et al.*, 2022; Osborne and Strokosch, 2022). This is reflected in a growing academic literature on topics such as stakeholder involvement (Bryson and George, 2020; Půček and Špaček, 2014), public participation (Glimmerveen *et al.*, 2022), and collaborative public management (Geddes, 2012). Several typologies of participation can be found within this literature (e.g. Arnstein, 1969; Bryson, 2004; Higdeman and Hanssen, 2014; Martin, 2009; Pretty, 1995). Still, defining participation remains a debated topic, and what is meant by participation appears unclear even now.

In the current study, we approach participation from a new perspective. In contrast to previous studies, we capture *the participants' points of view* and their perceptions and interpretations of participation. Listening to the participants it became evident that participants invited to collaborative initiatives have very different perceptions of both what participation is and the purpose of their participation. This was true even though we can be assumed to have had a more homogenous set of stakeholders (those working with regional planning) compared to other studies of participation where the common approach is “the citizen”.

With the participants' stories as a starting point, we developed the participation spectrum including eight types of participation: to be open, to be informed, to be listened to, to discuss, to be consulted, to give and take, to collaborate and to co-create. This typology differs from previous typologies not only in having been created from participants' perceptions, but also in that its eight types of participation offer a more nuanced understanding of the concept compared to, for example, the three-type spectrum by [Martin \(2009\)](#) and the five-step matrix by [Bryson \(2004\)](#). Moreover, some of our participants understood participation as being about openness, meaning that our spectrum includes even simpler forms than other typologies ([Bryson, 2004](#); [Martin, 2009](#)). The participation spectrum is also distinct in the way it relates the eight types to four characteristics of participation: involvement, interaction, influence, and empowerment. These characteristics of participation were also related to how the participants saw the purpose of participation, with some considering the purpose to be creating a joint network, while others saw it as creating a joint understanding, a joint effort, or even a joint vision.

Researching participation from the participants' point of view contributes with a new perspective to the existing literature; that is, the participants' perspective on participation. Studying this perspective rather than the more commonly used perspective of the organizer contributes to a broader understanding of participation including the diverse perceptions of the participants. This has resulted in a more nuanced typology of how participation is perceived among participants. In addition to clarifying *what* participation is, the study highlights the need to untangle this from the *why* question of participation, and to focus on the diverse participants' understandings of the purpose of participation.

Considering that the whole participation spectrum was captured by studying one single case of participative design, it can also be concluded that stakeholders seem to have very different interpretations of what participation really is. The diversity in perceptions makes it even more meaningful to listen to and capture the stakeholders' perspective, as this in turn may lead to contradictory expectations. [Bryson et al. \(2013\)](#) highlight the importance of carefully designing participation processes, and here we contribute with the stakeholders' perspective in the form of the participation spectrum and the purposes of participation, which can be used in designing the participation process to recognise differences in stakeholders' expectations.

As the study rests on a single case, there are limitations regarding the transferability of the results ([Bell et al., 2022](#)), specifically in terms talking about eight types of participation or four purposes. However, the study contributes with the insight that the concept of participation needs to use more nuanced terms capturing what actually takes place in order to create corresponding expectations. Whether the concept of participation results in six or eight types is most likely less relevant, yet a deliberate use of a nuanced language regarding participation ought to be beneficial for other projects of participative character in the public sector.

Practical implications

A practical implication of our study is that the public sector needs to rethink its rhetoric and how it talks about participation, as routine talk about “participation” in general terms leads to

very different stakeholder interpretations and consequent expectations. Instead, we suggest that the participation spectrum could guide and offer nuances to the communication. The language can be refined, and the distinct types of participation can be used instead of the general and rather vague term “participation”. Another practical implication is the apparent need to consider and communicate not only what participation is, but why stakeholders are invited to join a process or project. This may seem self-evident; however, in the current study we have observed how these questions have been essentially left unattended. Furthermore, our study is an example of how participation as a concept is relevant beyond the scope of “the citizen”. By including other stakeholders, we broaden the perspective and contribute to making the issue of participation relevant also in other contexts.

Future research

Although the aim of this study was to describe participation from the participants’ perspective, one cannot help but question *why* we see such a scattered image of what participation really is and what it implies. This question is beyond the scope of the current article, but some of our observations suggest that the answer can be found in the study of power dynamics. Participation has long been approached from an empowerment perspective (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995), and power dynamics are a recurring topic in studies on collaborative strategies and stakeholder involvement, highlighting aspects such as power struggles between stakeholders (Kavaratzis, 2012), and how power dynamics influence the communicative processes between stakeholders (Halme, 2020). We therefore suggest three research propositions for future studies, grounded in Hardy and Phillips’s (1998) and Astley and Sachdeva’s (1984) frameworks highlighting different aspects of power, as well as in the suggestion that there is a potential relationship between power dynamics and how participants perceive and interpret the meaning and scope of participation.

Firstly, *formal authority* refers to the recognised and legitimate right to decide (Astley and Sachdeva, 1984; Hardy and Phillips, 1998). In the current case, we noted an uncertainty concerning how the formal authority was distributed, resulting in stakeholders entering the process with different views of who had the authority to influence the process and to what degree. This, together with actual differences in terms of formal authority, may have led to different perceptions of what participation implied (e.g. influence vs empowerment) as well as different interpretations of the purpose of participation. Secondly, not all stakeholders enter a process with the same *critical resources*, including personal resources such as expertise and information, and organisational resources originating from factors such as the organization’s size, geographical position, and historic collaborations. The control and dispersion of critical resources (Astley and Sachdeva, 1984; Hardy and Phillips, 1998) might also influence how participation is approached and perceived. Thirdly, a stakeholder may be able to influence the process without formal authority and critical resources if that stakeholder has the ability to generate dependencies through resource exchange. Such power is attached to a stakeholder’s position in the network, referred to as *network centrality* by Astley and Sachdeva (1984). As different patterns of power distribution tend to have profound implications for the way things evolve (Hardy and Phillips, 1998), we suggest that there can be a relationship to explore between the three aspects of power introduced above and stakeholders’ views of participation and its purpose.

Another potential avenue for future research would be to consider how the different types of participation in the participation spectrum are enacted or co-produced in stakeholder relationships. It is also likely that the different types of participation put different constraints on the public organization and require different skills and resources, which would be relevant to explore in future studies.

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